

Parental Relationship Quality, Shyness, and College Academic Success

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to investigate how positive parental relationships and shyness affect the academic performance of college students. A total of 123 first year college students reported on the quality of their relationships with a father and mother figure and their shyness during the fall of their first year. The students' cumulative grade point average (GPA) and retention information (graduated versus not graduated) was provided by the college registrar's office five years later. Positive relationships with fathers predicted higher GPA and greater likelihood of graduation. In contrast, shyness and positive relationships with mothers did not significantly predict GPA and graduation. Positive relationship with fathers may be more impactful on students than positive relationships with mothers due to the amount of parental involvement and the type of relationship that students have with both parents while they are in college. Getting parents (particularly fathers) involved in college functions may promote academic success in college students.

Keywords: college transition, shyness, parental relationships, retention

Parental Relationship Quality, Shyness and College Academic Success

The transition to college can be a difficult time for students in general because there are a number of stressors associated with entering a new environment. Interpersonal factors, such as parental support, could help students navigate the transition. However, individual factors may also play a role in adjustment. For example, the transition may be especially challenging for shy students, who tend to be more susceptible to feelings of loneliness and lower life satisfaction in college (Shell & Absher, 2019). Although most previous research has focused on the negative impact of shyness on socioemotional well-being (Özdemir et al., 2017; Shell & Absher, 2019), shyness may also have a negative effect on academic performance. Parents may be particularly beneficial to shy students because they could provide much needed support and may even improve the academic success of these students (Chohan & Khan, 2010). For example, shy college students may be less likely to ask for help when they are struggling with class material, but their supportive parents may provide assistance when students are hesitant to utilize the services available on campus. This study will explore the influence of mother and father support, and shyness, on academic success during college.

Some evidence suggests that gender may also influence academic performance. In middle childhood and early adolescence, female students have been found to have higher grades on their report cards than their male counterparts (Altermatt & Painter, 2016). In addition, on average female undergraduate students have higher final degree grade point averages (GPAs) than male undergraduate students, and report greater academic commitment (Sheard, 2009). However, male students often perform better on standardized tests (Chee et al., 2005). Thus, gender differences are important to consider.

Parental Relationship and Academic Success

College students who maintain a positive relationship with their parents may be more successful in college. During childhood, evidence suggests that family support has a positive impact on students' academic achievement and self-concept (Chohan & Khan, 2010). Early family support helps children establish positive self-concept, which may contribute to better academic performance (Chohan & Khan, 2010). In addition, some evidence suggests that father support in particular is related to positive academic outcomes during childhood (Jeynes, 2015; Zia et al., 2015). In adolescence, father involvement is associated with higher GPA, lower course failure, lower school failure (Whitney et al., 2017), and higher self-esteem (Zia et al., 2015). Thus, families, and fathers in particular, have a significant influence on academic achievement in childhood.

Family support during emerging adulthood may provide similar benefits for college students. For example, parental autonomy support, including empathic listening and encouragement to find aspects of schoolwork that are meaningful, is associated with more positive college experiences in daughters (although not sons, Pedersen, 2017). Similarly, parental support predicts lower fear of academic success in college students (Gore et al., 2016). Although less work has been done comparing the influence of fathers versus mothers during college, there are several studies that looked exclusively at maternal support and have found that it improves academic motivation and performance (Baharudin & Zulkefly, 2009; Roth et al., 2016). In addition, Shannon and colleagues (2016) found that high quality father-child relationships promoted greater self-regulation, which lead to greater school engagement in college students. Overall, students who maintain a positive relationship with their parents appear to have better academic success. High-quality parental relationships may be

similarly related to academic success in college, although the differential roles of mothers versus fathers should be more thoroughly examined during this time period. Gender differences in parental relationships. The gender of both the parent and the child may influence parental relationship quality due to differences in interactions. Fathers are more likely to spend time and be involved with sons, versus daughters, and spend more time on mutually enjoyable activities with sons (Starrels, 1994). In contrast, fathers are more demanding of daughters (Kaur & Kaur, 2013). Daughters reported being closer to their mothers (Starrels, 1994), and mothers give their daughters more positive feedback than their sons (Kerig et al., 1993). These differences in mother and father treatment of sons and daughters may mean that maternal and paternal relationship quality could have different impacts on men and women's academic success in college.

Effects of Shyness on Academic Performance

Shyness is another factor that may impact academic performance and success. Shy college students may avoid seeking help or contacting instructors when needed, and may not be as efficient at establishing peer networks, which can provide both academic and social support. In childhood, shyness is associated with poorer teacher-rated academic performance (Hughes & Coplan, 2010; Özdemir et al., 2017) and poorer vocabulary scores (Crozier & Hostettler, 2003). Shy students also have lower school liking and higher school avoidance, possibly as a result of socioemotional difficulties such as poor peer acceptance (Özdemir et al., 2017). In addition, the negative relationship between shyness and academic achievement appears to continue into adolescence (Chishti et al., 2018). Although previous research has shown that shyness can negatively impact academic performance in childhood and adolescence, there is not a lot of research about the effect of shyness on academic performance in college. However, the increased expectations of independence in academic work

(and help-seeking) in college could exacerbate the academic disadvantages for shy students. Shy students may be less likely to seek tutoring, meet with faculty or administrative staff, request assistance in the case of emergencies, and therefore do more poorly in classes and be less likely to graduate. Thus, it is possible that shyness may continue to have a negative impact on academic performance in emerging adulthood as well.

Interaction Between Shyness and Parental Relationships

The transition into college can be hard for shy students, so they may be particularly likely to rely on their parents for support. Although shy college students in general have greater anxiety during the transition to college, parental support during the transition can significantly reduce this anxiety (Mounts et al., 2005). There may be a similar interaction between shyness and parental support with regard to academic outcomes. Because shy students may have a harder time adjusting to the academic challenges associated with the college transition (Chishti et al., 2018), they may benefit more from supportive relationships than non-shy students. For example, during the first year of college, shy students who had high quality best friendships experienced fewer internalizing symptoms and loneliness compared to shy students in low quality friendships (Shell & Absher, 2019). Likewise, shy students may have poorer academic performance if they have low quality parental relationships, but may perform just as well as their non-shy peers in the context of high quality parental relationships. Thus, shy students may benefit more from positive parental support compared to their non-shy peers.

Present Study

The current study explored the effects of first year parental relationships and shyness on academic success in college five years later.

In particular, students reported on their shyness and maternal and paternal relationship quality during their first year of college. Cumulative GPA and graduation information were recorded five years later. First, it was hypothesized that students with more positive relationships with their parents, and particularly their fathers, would have higher GPAs and be more likely to graduate within five years. Next, it was expected that shy students would have poorer academic performance and retention. Finally, it was expected that shy students would benefit more from positive parental relationships compared to non-shy students.

– METHOD –

Participants

The study was conducted on the campus of a public liberal arts college in a rural area in the southeastern United States. Following approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board, a total of 123 first-year college students, 69 female (56%), 54 male (44%) enrolled in courses for the 2015 fall semester were recruited for the study. The mean age at the start of the study 18.09 (SD = 0.29). Of these participants, 113 (92%) identified as White, 11 (9%) identified as Black or African American, 2 (2%) identified as Latinx, 4 (3%) identified as American Indian (participants were able to select more than one ethnicity). This distribution is approximately representative of ethnicity distribution for the campus as a whole.

Procedure

Participants initially completed a screening survey assessing demographics and basic peer relations during orientation sessions the summer before starting college. Then, students completed more in-

depth surveys during the fall semester of their first year of college either independently or in their freshman seminar courses. Follow-up surveys were completed in four subsequent spring semesters, however only fall first year data was used for the current analyses.

Measures

Relationship with father and mother. The Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) was used to measure the quality of participants' relationship with their father and mother. The first questions asked the participants to identify their primary father and mother figure. Out of 123 participants, 109 (89%) reported on their biological mother, 6 (5%) reported on an adoptive mother, 3 (2%) reported on a stepmother, and 5 (4%) reported on someone else. A total of 106 participants (86%) reported on biological father, 6 (5%) reported on adoptive fathers, 4 (3%) reported on stepfathers or their mother's boyfriend, and 7 (6%) reported on someone else. The questionnaire also included items about romantic relationship and friendship quality, but those items were not examined during this study.

Participants answered a series of questions about their relationship with the person they identified as their mother and father. First, several questions assessed positive parental relationship quality, including emotional support, companionship, intimate disclosure, and affection. This included items such as, "How often do you spend fun time with this person?," "How often do you share secrets and private feelings with this person?," and "How much does this person really care about you?" Negative relationship quality included conflict, antagonism, and criticism subscales. Questions that assessed negative aspects included, "How often does this person say mean or harsh things to you?," "How often do you and this person get mad at or get in fights with each other?," and "How much do you and this person get on

each other's nerves?" The answer choices ranged from 1 (little or none) and 5 (the most). To determine the overall quality of parental relationships, the mean of the negative items was subtracted from the mean of the positive items. A higher score indicated more positive parental relationship quality, while a lower score indicated poorer parental relationship quality.

Shyness. The Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (Cheek & Buss, 1981) was used to measure shyness. It is a 13-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale in which the answers range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of items included, "I am often uncomfortable at parties and other social functions" and "I feel tense when I'm with people I don't know well." The mean of all items was used to determine shyness, with higher scores indicating greater shyness.

Academic performance. After five years, the college registrar's office reported the participants' cumulative GPA, as well as the retention status of each participant (graduated, currently enrolled, left the college, etc.). Participants were coded as graduated from the college (1) or not graduated (0) at the end of their fifth year. The not graduated category included students who were no longer enrolled (either dropped out, suspended, or transferred) as well as those who were still currently enrolled in the college but had not finished their degree.

– RESULTS –

Analytic Plan

Regressions were run in order to test the separate and combined effects of parental relationships and shyness on academic performance. Gender, mother relationship quality, father relationship quality,

shyness, and the interactions between all variables were included in the initial model, and non-significant effects were dropped from the final model.

Descriptive Statistics

The mean cumulative GPA was 2.57 (SD = 1.08, which translates to a B-). Of the initial 123 participants, 61 (50%) graduated in five years, while 62 (50%) did not. Preliminary correlations indicated that students higher in shyness had lower quality relationships with both mothers and fathers (see Table 1). Students that had a positive relationship with one parent were more likely to have a positive relationship with the other. Thus, those who had supportive fathers were more likely to have supportive mothers as well. Likewise, those with a low-quality relationship with one parent were more likely to have lower relationship quality with the other parent. Students who had higher GPAs were more likely to have graduated after five years. Those with higher quality relationships with their fathers had higher GPAs and were more likely to have graduated after five years.

Grade Point Average

First, linear regressions were used to test whether shyness and high quality maternal and paternal relationships predicted GPA. After reducing non-significant effects (with the exception of gender, which was retained in all models), higher incoming paternal relationship quality predicted higher cumulative GPA, $F(121) = 3.79$, $p = .025$, $R^2 = .06$ (see Table 2). In contrast, neither shyness, maternal relationship quality, nor the interaction between any of these variables significantly predicted GPA.

Graduation

Next, binary logistic regression was used to test whether shyness and maternal and paternal relationship quality predicted whether or not students had graduated (see Table 3). Similar to results for GPA, shyness, maternal relationship quality, and interaction effects were not significant predictors of retention. Instead, students with higher quality relationships with fathers were more likely to have graduated from college five years later, $\chi^2(2) = 8.94, p = .011, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = .094$. Combined, findings suggest that father support is a unique predictor of college students' academic success, although the variance explained by each effect is relatively small.

Discussion

This study looked at the impact of positive parental relationships and shyness on college students' academic performance and retention. Positive relationships with fathers predicted higher GPA and higher five-year graduation rates. Surprisingly, positive maternal relationships did not predict academic success or retention. Finally, in contrast to expectations, shyness did not predict academic performance and retention, either independently or in combination with parental support. Paternal relationships appeared to be the most important predictor of college students' academic success over time.

Parental Relationships and Academic Success

Positive relationships with fathers are very beneficial to college students as the current findings have shown that such relationships at the beginning of college positively predicted students' academic success and graduation. This is consistent with previous evidence demonstrating that father involvement and support can improve academic success in childhood (Jeynes, 2015), adolescence (Zia et al., 2015),

and emerging adulthood (Shannon et al., 2016). Having fathers actively express confidence in their child's abilities, talk to them about problems, or help them with assignments may be particularly beneficial. High-quality relationship with fathers (which include things like disclosure and support) could be particularly important early in college because it can help set the stage for habits that students maintain through college. These positive habits may be what helps these students succeed academically over the long term.

One reason fathers, but not mothers, were significant could be the difference in the type or amount of interaction between parents and children. Early in childhood, mothers spend more time with their children because they provide much of the caregiving compared to fathers (Blakemore et al., 2013). Because mothers are typically more involved in daily caregiving tasks, this may lead to a higher quality relationship throughout childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood. High quality maternal relationships are expected and common, but while they may be important for other domains such as social and emotional well-being, they do not appear to distinguish between college students who succeed academically versus those who do not. Although previous research found adolescents who had positive relationships with their mothers had better academic performance (Baharudin & Zulkefly, 2009; Roth et al., 2015), maternal relationships may have less of an effect on academic success in emerging adulthood. In contrast, because father involvement is somewhat less common, high quality paternal relationship may distinguish students who are academically successful from those who are not. Thus, the paternal relationship quality appears to continue to be just as impactful in emerging adulthood as it is in childhood.

Shyness

This study found that shyness did not have a significant impact on college students' academic performance and retention, although this differs from previous evidence demonstrating a relationship between shyness and academic achievement in adolescence (Chishti et al., 2018). It may be that shyness impairs academic performance in younger students, but as students get older and enter emerging adulthood, they learn to better cope with their shyness so it has less effect on their grades. Although shyness did not appear to have a direct impact on academics in college, it is possible that it may still impair social or emotional adjustment during this time (e.g., Shell & Absher, 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study demonstrated that positive paternal relationships were a unique predictor of GPA and college graduation. However, there were several limitations. First, there were some weaknesses in the methodology used to identify the participants' relationship with their parents. Relationship quality was assessed through student self-report, but observations or parent-reports could have strengthened these findings. In addition, parent marital status was not assessed, and this may also impact both relationship quality and the effect that relationship quality has on the student. Another limitation was that parent-child relationships were only assessed in the first year of college. Analyzing these relationships over time could provide information about how changes in the parent-child relationship affected academic performance throughout college. Next, this study was done at a college with many first-generation college students, and this may have influenced the relationship between father support and academic success. In particular, first-generation students may benefit more from positive relationships with fathers, whereas continuing-generation stu-

dents may rely less or differently on parent support. Finally, this study focused on the impact of paternal relationships and shyness on academic success, but these may also impact social and emotional adjustment as well (e.g., Shell & Absher, 2019).

This study provides an important starting point for future research investigating the impact of paternal support on college academic success. Future studies could expand these findings by exploring in more detail exactly what types of supports fathers offer that improve academic performance, and how these supports differ from maternal support. Furthermore, it would be important to take into account how divorce or other family arrangements might influence paternal (and maternal) support in college. In addition, exploring the generalizability of these effects to larger and more urban universities would be important. Finally, identifying the longitudinal impact of paternal support from childhood into college would be important for better understanding these processes.

Contributions and Implications

This study identified that father, but not mother, relationship quality positively predicted college students' academic success and five-year graduation rates. This highlights the significance of father support, as it continued to have positive effects over five years. In addition, this study demonstrated that shyness did not affect students' academic success and retention. These findings suggest that getting parents (particularly fathers) more involved in college orientations and other school functions may promote students' academic success. High schools might consider developing classes that teach both parents about the type of support that may be beneficial as their students enter college. In addition, these findings could be useful for academic advisors or counselors, who might be more likely to encourage their college advisees to approach their parents (particularly fathers) for

support. Additionally, these advisors might identify students who may be at greater risk for academic failure because they do not have a supportive father figure, and help these students identify other sources of academic support. Although college students are no longer children, their parents still appear to have a significant impact on their lives.

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Table 1
Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among all variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>M</i>	-1.12	2.61	1.49	1.19	2.57	0.50
<i>SD</i>	1.00	0.75	1.66	1.75	1.08	0.50
1. Gender	1.00					
2. First year shyness	-0.15	1.00				
3. First year maternal relationship quality	-0.02	-0.21*	1.00			
4. First year paternal relationship quality	0.14	-0.35**	0.27**	1.00		
5. Cumulative GPA	0.13	-0.15	0.12	0.23*	1.00	0.74
6. Graduated within five years	0.73	-0.11	0.08	0.26**	0.74**	1.00

Note. *N*=142. ***p*<.01. **p*<.05

Table 2
Predictors of Cumulative GPA

	B	SE(B)	B	Sig. (p)
1. Gender	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.31
2. First year paternal relationship quality	0.13	0.06	0.22	0.02

Note. *N*=123

Table 3
Predictors of Five-year graduation rates

	OR	95% CI		Sig. (p)
		LOWER	Upper	
1. Gender	1.07	0.74	1.55	0.72
2. First year paternal relationship quality	1.39	1.10	1.76	0.01

Note. *N*=123

