Identifying Student Perceptions: The Effect of Parent-Child Relationships on Attitudes towards Academic Abilities

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Multi-Ethnic Studies

Abstract

This study expands on research that identifies the many negative effects poor parent-child relationships can have on children by examining how these disadvantages continue into children's young-adult lives and influence attitudes and confidence levels towards success. This study will focus on young-adult, college students and will specifically consider their attitudes and confidence levels towards achieving self-defined, academic success. The purpose of this research is to determine if participants with weak parent-child relationship face more academic disadvantages due to lower levels of confidence and development of derogatory attitudes towards their capability to achieve in order to identify potential educational disparities related to family background. Twenty-two face-to-face interviews were completed with college students from a Northwestern University in which questions about family background and academic attitudes were asked. Findings indicated the converse of the hypothesis to be true showing that students with the weakest parent-child relationships exhibited the highest levels of confidence in their ability to achieve academic success on their own without any outside influences.

Introduction

The first higher education institutions in the United States were founded in the 17th century emulating English objectives of educating upper-class gentlemen. It was not until two decades later in the 19th century that women and minority groups were even given consideration for admittance to institutions of higher education, but the education of this demographic was still seen by wealthy, white men as, not only unnecessary, but unwanted and threatening to societal continuity (Solomon 1986). These ideologies may have dissipated over the last two decades, but this has done little to amend educational disparities between minority and majority classes from high school graduation rates to enrollment in and graduation from universities.

Educational limitations have shifted from overt regulatory methods to more covert, economic stratification (Haycock 2006). "Today, our highest-achieving low-income students actually go directly on to college at rates about the same as our lowest-achieving students from wealthy families" (U.S. Department of Education 1992). With the astronomical rise of educational costs, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are being confronted with the greatest barriers to higher education. Statistics provided by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2006) indicate that four times more Blacks and Hispanics live below the poverty level than Whites and an overwhelming portion of all ethnicities that live below the poverty level are from single-mother homes.

The expansive research available on educational disparities makes it impossible to refute the facts that socio-economic status in the United States has come to play a detrimental role in creating higher-education opportunities and that minority groups and women in single-mother situations make up the majority of low-income households confronted with these hurdles. Statistics from 2006 show that 75 percent of students from the highest income bracket obtain a bachelor's degree by the age of 24 compared to nine percent of low-income students who will obtain the same degree by the age of 24. For that nine percent it is imperative to consider if the hurdles they have overcome then land them on a level playing field or if they continue to face disparate challenges. Research shows that as diminutive as the statistics are for low-income students to go on to college, the percentage of students who persist to graduation can drop by more than half those numbers. The reasons for this attrition are many, ranging from economic challenges to knowledge of navigating the educational and financial aid system to lack of motivation and support (Haycock 2006).

Bernard Weiner, a cognitive psychologist, has done extensive research into attitudes and motivations of college students that affect academic success. Through his studies, Weiner (1976) identified a correlation between

academic motivation and attribution of academic success to internal or external factors. The internal/external attribution is referred to by Weiner as "locus of responsibility." An internal attribution indicates association of success or failure to factors within oneself, for instance, work ethic or lack of intelligence. An external attribution is present when success or failure is attributed to factors outside of oneself, for example, hard tests or mean teachers. Both internal and external attributions can be identified as stable, remaining static throughout life changes, or unstable, shifting from external to internal attribution as life situations vary (Weiner 1972). Stable attributions have a greater effect on confidence levels than unstable attributions because they are perceived as constant. For example, if a student has an internal stable attribution that his grades are a result of his hours of long study, then every time he gets a good grade on a test his levels of confidence will increase because he believes that study and grades will always provide the same outcome (Weiner 1976).

Through Weiner's application of these theories to academic success he concludes that, "the attribution process appears to be a significant determinant of learning and performance in the classroom," (Weiner 1972: 214). In his continued research, Weiner (1996) identifies an internal, stable attribution as a characteristic possessed by the most successful students, success being identified by high grades and levels of achievement. If an internal attribution is the most indicative of academic success then it is imperative to consider what factors play foundational roles in its construction. For example, it is important to question if the type of environment children are raised in and the type family relationships they have affect what type of attribution they will display in their adult lives as they pursue higher education. Addressing these questions can provide insight into possible disadvantages between family backgrounds and attitude development that can ensure academic success.

The present study will look specifically at the construction of these academic attitudes with the goal of understanding how family backgrounds and relationships, specifically parent-child relationships, have the ability to perpetuate educational success or disadvantage. Research on the effects of parent-child relationships on children's health and well-being is extensive. Associations have been found between the strength of parent-child bonds and well-being (Bucx and Van Wel 2008), personality development (Trumpeter et al. 2008), and even levels of physical distress during invasive cancer treatments (Penner et al. 2008). Research has also shown that poor parent-child relationships are negatively correlated to physical health habits (Toda et al. 2008), mental health, healthy self-development (Trumpeter et al. 2008), and self-worth (Verschueren and Marcoen 2002).

Despite extensive research available showing the many ways poor parent-child relationships affect children negatively, there is limited information available that explores possible disadvantages children carry into adulthood due to development of lower confidence and self-esteem levels. There is even less research currently available that examines how the effects of parent-child relationships relate to the development of attitudes and characteristics that will be displayed when children move into young-adulthood. This research will explore if students from poor parent-child backgrounds are more likely to develop attitudes that work against their success, how students at this developmental stage define their relationships with their parents, and if, and how they view it affecting their educational goals and ability to attain them.

Present study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the diversity of definitions of academic success and ideal parent-child relationships across ethnicity, gender, and varying strengths of parent-child relationships and identify any correlation between expressed satisfaction with parent-child relationships and self-confidence and motivational attitudes towards abilities to achieve academic goals. This information was obtained via face-to-face interviews and questionnaires with college students between the ages of 18 and 25. This demographic was chosen because this is the developmental stage in young adults found to have the biggest shift in relationships between parents and children (Bucx and Van Wel 2008). The advantage of using an interview technique for this study was that it allowed participants to self-define academic success and ideal parent-child relationships and rate them based on their own expectations of these concepts.

The first research question addressed was how participants define college success. I hypothesized that participant's from higher socio-economic backgrounds would be more likely to take their education for granted, and in doing so, would exhibit lower academic standards by not relating college success to high grades and extremely hard work. The second research question addressed was what participants believe their parents' roles should be in their child's college education. I hypothesized that the expectations of participant's with good parent-child relationships would be higher and more demanding, based on their life experiences and what they have come to expect. The third research question addressed was if participants believe that relationships with parents can affect college success. I hypothesized that college students would not make a connection between their relationships with their parents and their ability to achieve academic success because of the autonomous stage they are at in their lives.

The fourth research question addressed was if participants believe they can achieve their definition of success if they do not have their current relationship with their parents. I hypothesized that participants with strong parent-child relationships would be more likely to attribute their success to their own abilities and show higher levels of confidence towards achieving academic success (e.g., self-efficacy), even without their relationship with their parents.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 22 undergraduate students between the ages of 18-25, (M=22.9) at a Northwestern University. Participant were 11 males and 11 females and consisted of two freshman, eight sophomores, five juniors, and seven seniors representing a diversity of majors across the university. The ethnic diversity consisted of one Romanian, one Sudanese, one Korean, one Bosnian, three Filipinos, four Latinos, and 11 Caucasians. All Caucasian and three Latino participants were born in the United States with all remaining participants born in their native countries. Out of the 22 participants, eight are first generation college students, five have one parent who obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, and nine reported that both parents have received a bachelor's degree or higher.

Materials and procedure

Participants were recruited via fliers hung up and handed out around high-traffic areas on the university campus as well as emailed to acquaintances to be passed onto interested parties. Willing participants contacted the interviewer via the university email address supplied on the fliers and upon receipt of an email, a response was sent from the interviewer requesting age, gender, and ethnicity to assure compliance to demographic guidelines after which an interview date and time was set.

Participants reported to the Psychology Research Center on campus for their interview and consent forms were obtained showing voluntary participation and permission to audio record interviews. The purpose of the study was explained as analyzing how academic motivational factors are affected by challenges in college; however, information was not given regarding the hypothesized correlation of academic attitudes to the strength of parent-child relationships to avoid bias in answers. The introduction included a brief summary explaining the challenges in the interviewer's academic background in order to create a relaxed environment in which participants would feel comfortable relating their own challenges. Interviews lasted an average of forty minutes and were followed by a short online questionnaire including demographic information. Interviews were audio recorded to be transcribed at a later date.

Interview. The interview consisted of 25 open-ended questions regarding the participant's academic paths, attitudes towards college success, relationships with parents, and the perceived effects of parent-child relationships on achieving academic success. The interview questions were presented in two categories; the first 15 questions related to participant's academic history and goals and the last 10 questions shifted to family relationships. The entire interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions about the participant's income and education levels of their parents. It also contained questions such as: Are grades a matter of luck? If I do well on a test is it because I studied hard? These questions enable identification of whether participants relate their academic abilities and success to their own efforts (internal attribution) or to the factors outside of their control (external attribution).

Data analysis

Preliminary data analyses included dividing participants into three groups based on their responses to the questions, "What is your definition of an ideal parent-child relationship?" and "How do your parents compare to that ideal?" The three groups consisted of positive parent-child relationships, neutral parent-child relationships, and negative parent-child relationships. Ten participants responded that their parents met or came close to their definition of an ideal relationship, and were placed in the group "positive parent-child relationships". Six

participants expressed pleasure with their parent's efforts, but also expressed disappointment in their failure to meet key roles in their definition of an ideal relationship, and were placed in the category "neutral parent-child relationships." Seven participants responded that their parents have in no way met their needs or filled their expectation of an ideal relationship, and were placed in the group "negative parent-child relationships." All participant responses to the first research question were taken from the data and placed into one document separated into the positive, neutral, and negative participant groups. This process was repeated for the remaining three research questions and answers were compared side by side based on participant's categories allowing the evaluation of similar ideologies within and across groups.

Results

This section presents the research findings in four categories which represent the four research questions being focused on. Examining the results individually, by research question, will afford the opportunity to focus on variance of responses between the positive, neutral, and negative parent-child relationship groups. For each research question, participant responses will be compared within and across the three groups to determine if shared attitudes are present either across and/or within the groups.

Definitions of academic success

Across the positive, neutral, and negative parent-child relationship groups no significant differences in defining academic success were found. Answers included varying combinations of several common ideologies including: efforts resulting in good grades, high grades coupled with social development, such as participation in campus activities, and a holistic view of progression towards an end goal of obtaining a successful career. A participant in the positive group stated, "You come to college to branch out find yourself and gain the knowledge you need for a future career." A participant in the neutral group stated, "Success in college is understanding yourself and where you can go from there. It's only opening the next door." A participant in the negative group stated, "If I can get through this semester and if I can actually retain what I learn and know I can use it for the rest of my life, that would be success for me, that is success… really learning." The similarities in participant responses across parent-child-relationship groups are more indicative of participation in a shared academic culture.

Expectations of parents' roles in college

The second research question examined whether college students' expectations for the role parents should play in their children's college education varied based on participants' parent-child relationship quality. Across the positive, neutral, and negative groups all participants agreed that it is the parents' responsibility to: play an active role in their child's education while still allowing them the autonomy to make their own life decisions, teach their child about the processes necessary to attend college, be a main source of encouragement and support, and provide a fall back during challenging times. A participant in the positive group stated, "Support them, give them advice as in what's going to benefit them in the future but don't really make the decision for them." A participant in the neutral group stated, "Encouraging… turn someone to not only get education but to find education and find out what it really is." A participant from the negative group stated, "Support thing again… like I support you in what you want to do, I'm here if you need me, and I'll do whatever I can to help you."

It is interesting to note that the majority of participants failed to relate financial support to the initial question, but with a follow up question resoundingly agreed that it is a large and very important part of the parents' role to either provide a portion of funding or aid their child in finding sources of funding. Like the results of the first question the similarities in participant responses across groups is more indicative of participation in a shared academic culture.

Perceptions of parent's roles in academic success

Participants across all three parent-child relationship groups expressed a shared belief that the quality of students' relationships with their parents play an important role in their ability to be successful but variance in answers emerged as participants elaborated on their reasoning for this belief.

Participants in the positive parent-child relationship group expressed the influence of parents as vital to academic success due to their provision of family support and providing a fallback in times of struggle. One

participant stated, "I think, definitely, if you have a good relationship with your parents it helps a lot and it's nice to have that net to fall back on." Relating to the ways in which their strong relationships with their parents have benefited them, participants in the positive parent-child relationship group expressed the ability of good relationships with parents to reduce life challenges and decrease the stress of facing problems on their own. For example, one participant commented, "It gives them more of a challenge if they don't have a good relationship with their parents usually they have more problems in their life, I guess, the more stress, because they don't have the support." Another participant stated, "For someone like myself whose grown up in a good family situation and church it's important to have that interaction, reassurement from your parents." In relation to their own experiences, this group made positive connections with the ways they have benefited from a strong relationship with their own parents and their current success in college.

Participants in the neutral parent-child relationship group expressed that parents have an influence on academic success, but that the ultimate defining factor would be dependent on the student's internal motivation. For example after answering yes to the initial question, one of the participants said, "It has to come from inside, it has to be intrinsic, it has to be internal drive to do well in school. There's only so much that parents can do to help their kids." This group expressed that parents' ability to affect the academic success of their children is due to the drive and motivation they encourage and foster through providing support and a stable environment. One participant stated, "People that have a strong support system in their family have a better chance. Having a support group is helpful and if your parents are there for your support then you have a lot more capability to be successful."

Participant responses from the negative parent-child relationship group contrasted responses from the positive and neutral groups by relating to the negative correlation between the disadvantages of not having a strong relationship with parents and the ability to succeed. The negative group expressed the derogatory affect poor parent-child relationships have as creating feelings and attitudes of worthlessness and lack of confidence. For example one participant stated, "I accepted mediocrity because I felt like I wasn't worth anything more… that definitely derived from my relationship with my parents."

The capacity to complete college was not only expressed as dependant on internal confidence but also related to challenges on time and monetary capabilities, for example, parents' disappointment in students not working longer hours and making more money coupled with constant pressures to do so and lack of financial aid from parents. One participant related the tension between him and his father over the economic situation of being a student when he said, "I can't work as much as I want to and it makes him upset that I can't make my insurance payment every month." One participant related the reasons his parents thought he shouldn't attend college when he said, "We can't afford it and you have to be able to support yourself when you get out of high school. We're not going to support you." This is an example of how participants with the weakest parent-child relationships viewed the effects parents have on their child's ability to succeed as negative and creating further challenges.

Academic self-efficacy

The fourth research question examined if strong parent-child relationships tend to cause higher levels of self-esteem would participants with the strongest parent-child relationships display the highest levels of confidence in being able to achieve academic success on their own regardless of outside forces? Responses to this question provided the greatest variance between the three groups.

The positive parent-child relationship group expressed the lowest levels of confidence in their ability to succeed academically without the relationship they have with their parents. One participant stated, "I probably wouldn't even be here. I wouldn't have any motivation to be." The relationships between these participants and their parents were expressed as a necessity for the development of motivation to even attend college or be successful in life. Another participant stated, "I probably could, but I probably wouldn't. I mean it's possible that I could, but I don't think I would be as pushed to do well." This group displayed an external locus of control in expressing that their relationship with their parents is more a driving force for their desire to attend and do well in college than their own internal drive and motivation. These results contradict the expected findings of this research that the group with the strongest parent-child relationships would develop the highest levels of self-worth (Verschueren & Marcoen, 2002) and as a byproduct would develop the highest levels of confidence in their own abilities to achieve academic success.

The neutral parent-child relationship group displayed greater variance in their responses to this question. Several participants expressed high levels of confidence towards achieving success with their own abilities. One participant stated, "I believe I can, I believe that you can do anything you want just as long as you put the effort into it." The majority of responses, however; showed more similarities to the doubts expressed by the positive group, for example, "In order to achieve… I don't think that I would have met that mark without that support group."

Participants expressed that they may be able to succeed despite the lack of a relationship with their parents, but challenges would have taken longer to overcome and the process would have been more difficult. This group displays a somewhat balanced locus of control by expressing that they could still achieve success, but the relationship with their parents is important to them in excelling in their education. One participant stated, "I think I could. There might be a few times where I hit a low point and I might stay down there a little bit longer" Although there is an increase in confidence compared to the responses from the positive group responses are still far from the high levels of confidence expected from this group.

It was assumed that in accordance with previous research the negative parent-child relationship group would display lower levels of self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities as is typical of children lacking strong parent-child relationships (Verschueren & Marcoen, 2002). Conversely this group displayed the strongest feelings of determination and internal drive, that no matter whether a strong relationship existed with a parent or not they would succeed and achieve their goals. One participant stated, "I really think that's my own success, that's my own." Another participant stated, "I'll do it no matter what!" This group displayed high levels of confidence in their abilities and even a determination derived from feelings of failures in their parental relationships to prove their worth and abilities, exemplified by one participant who stated, "For me I turned their negative nonsupport into a driving force to make me, showing them that I can be something, that I am a worthy human being."

Discussion

The results from this study indicate the converse of the two major hypothesis of this research that: 1) students would not be aware of effects parent-child relationships have on academic success, and 2) that participants with the stronger parent-child relationships would exhibit the highest levels of academic self-efficacy and as a result also express the highest levels of confidence in their abilities to achieve their goals regardless of outside influences. The results show that all participants not only expressed an awareness of a causal relationship between their relationships with their parents and their ability to achieve success, but were also able to articulate how this relationship functioned. Participants with the strongest parent-child relationships saw the benefits received from this: encouragement, support, guidance, and even financial back-up, as such a crucial part of their academic success that they exhibited severe lack of confidence in their ability to obtain their academic goals without their relationships with their parents. This shows that the strength of parent-child relationships plays an important role in the development of attitudes towards academic success.

Looking at the four main research questions, we see that the way participants define success and what role they think parents should play in their child's college education have a low association, if any, with the strength of their relationships with their parents and may have a stronger association with the cultural environment and expectations that college students share. The common attitude expressed that parents should provide support and encouragement while allowing their child the freedom to make their own decisions is indicative of participants' shift into young adulthood and the desire to be seen as autonomous adults while being afforded the freedom to make their own mistakes and learn from them (Bucx and Van Wel 2008).

Although the negative parent-child relationship group expressed strong feelings that their relationships with their parents do not affect their ability to succeed, we must consider that their high levels of determination and drive may be more related to their relationships with their parents than participants are aware of. These levels of determination may have developed as a means of proving others wrong or proving their own worth to counteract disappointments in their relationships with their parents and lack of support and encouragement that has been available in their lives. This is exemplified in one participant's expression of her motivation, "A lot of it is to prove to him that this isn't a joke, that college degrees are a serious thing. They're not just something where, ah well! You're just going back to school." Based on attitudes expressed by participants, it is also necessary to acknowledge that these levels of determination may be driven, in some part, by a desire to avoid being stuck in the same lifestyles as their parents.

The negative parent-child relationship group displays an internal locus of control by attributing their ability to succeed in college solely to their own abilities and not to any outside forces, especially relationships with their parents. This type of an internal locus of control was found to be a characteristic of students reaching high levels of academic success (Weiner 1972) suggesting that although the majority of participants in this group were from single-parent or low-income backgrounds, demographics underrepresented at the college level, they held attitudes that would be beneficial in assuring their success in college. This indicates that the small percentages of this demographic that continue on to college are using the disadvantages from their family backgrounds in motivational ways as determination to achieve their academic goals. This does not minimize the variety of other challenges faced by these students that will play a role in their likelihood to continue to graduation. Although participants in this

group do not have the ideal relationship they would like with their parents they are supplementing their lack of parental support with support from other types of relationships, which the majority of participants in this group stated were intimate partners.

Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that family background and the strength of parent-child relationships children grow up with do have an effect on attitudes and confidence levels necessary to achieve success in adulthood. This indicates that when educational attributes and disadvantages are being discussed it is imperative to consider student's family backgrounds and their quality of relationships with their parents to fully understand all the factors influencing academic potential. Educators must understand that, though college students are adults and acting autonomously, their attitudes and characteristics are still a product of the benefits or disadvantages provided by their quality of home life and relationships with their parents.

This knowledge can provide ways for educators to better understand, identify, and aid student's with particular challenges, for example, providing students who do not have a strong relationship with their parent's more encouragement and mentorship. This research also provides an opportunity for parents and children alike to gain an awareness of how the quality of their relationships will affect children's future goals and abilities. Raising awareness in parents can provide opportunities to encourage them to provide relationships that will lead their children to greater, future achievement.

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Appendix A

1. Tell me about the life events that have led to you going to college.
2. How old were you when you started college?
3. Did you go straight from high school to college?
4. When you were in high school and preparing to apply for college who helped you figure out what the process was for applying and choosing a major?
5. Where there any major influences as far as why you chose your major?
6. What was your parents' role in encouraging you to go to college?
7. What do you think had a bigger affect on you going to college, your own desire or the expectations of other that you go?
8. What challenges have you had to overcome in order to go to college?
9. How have they affected your determination to do well in school?
10. Who do you talk to about those challenges?
11. What does success in college mean to you?
12. How do you think you are doing on that scale?
13. So what do you think your role is as the student in being successful?
14. What is an ideal parent-child relationship to you?
15. How does that compare to the relationship you have with your parents?
16. How often do you talk to your parents?
17. What do you talk about?
18. Is there anything you don't feel comfortable disclosing to them?
19. What do you think a parent's role should be in their child's college education?
20. How do your parents compare to that?
21. Do the relationships that college students have with their parents affect their ability to be successful?
22. If you didn't have the relationship you do with your parents could you achieve your definition of success you explained to me earlier?