

Generational Status as a Moderator in the Relationship Between Perceived Parental Support and Perceived Stress Among College Students

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Abstract

Existing research highlights a connection between perceived parental support and stress, but primarily among adolescents rather than college students. The current study examined the association between parental support and stress and explored generational status as a moderator, with the expectation that this relationship would be stronger for first-generation students. Data were collected using an anonymous online survey distributed via social media websites. Participants were current college students between the ages of 18 and 30 ($N = 101$). Consistent with previous findings, family support was associated with stress, however, when first-generation and continuing generation college students were analyzed separately, results revealed a stronger correlation among first-generation college students. The difference in strength of the two correlations was not statistically significant.

Background and Justification

Stress is a major issue for college students that can be detrimental to their health. For this reason, there is a need to explore the factors that may improve student well-being students and their ability to cope with stress (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012). Previous research has identified perceived parental support to be associated with lower levels of stress among college students (Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme & Alpert, 2011).

Although previous research has examined the relationship between social support and psychological problems, there is a lack of knowledge on how perceived parental support is associated with student stress (Ratelle, Larose, Guay & Senecal, 2005), particularly among college students.

Recognizing that perceived parental support promotes a healthy adjustment and development of stress coping mechanisms, the current study aims to fill a potential gap by examining the association between perceived parental support and stress among college students between the ages of 18-30. The first-generation status of students may act as a risk factor, potentially moderating the association between support and stress and thus affecting how students cope with stress. First-generation students are at-risk because they lack knowledge of the university system and typically have poorer academic performance. These results suggest that first-generation students' stress levels may be even more dependent on the emotional support and guidance of a parent when experiencing problems (Dennis et al., 2005).

Research Questions

1. Is perceived parental support associated with perceived stress among college students?
2. Does generational status moderate the relation between perceived parental support and perceived stress such that the relationship is stronger among first generation students?

Methods

Sample ($N = 101$)

- Age: 18-30 ($M = 22.35$, $SD = 2.55$)
- Gender: 90.1% Female, 9.9% Male,
- Race: 62.4% White (Non-Hispanic), 23.8% Hispanic/Latino/a, 4.0% Black/African American, 8.9% Other
- Year in college: 19.8% 1st & 2nd year, 34.7% 3rd & 4th year: 34.7%, 31.7 % Graduate Students

Procedures

Data were collected using an anonymous Qualtrics survey distributed via social media websites such as Facebook. Eligible participants were current college adults between the ages of 18 and 30. The survey took an average of 6 minutes to complete.

Measures

Perceived Stress Scale: 10-item Perceived stress scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1988).

- Likert scale (0 = *Never*, 4 = *Very often*)
- Composite score created by computing the mean score of the items such that a higher score indicated higher levels of perceived stress ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.50$)

Perceived Parental Support: 4-item multidimensional scale of perceived social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988).

- Semantic differential (1 = *Very strongly disagree*, 7 = *Very strongly agree*)
- Altered by removing questions that asked about peer support (4 of 8 original items)
- Composite score created by computing the mean score of the items such that a higher score indicated higher levels of support ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.50$)

Generational Status: single self-report yes/no question asking participants if they were the first in their family to attend college

Results

H1. Perceived parental support will be negatively associated with perceived stress.

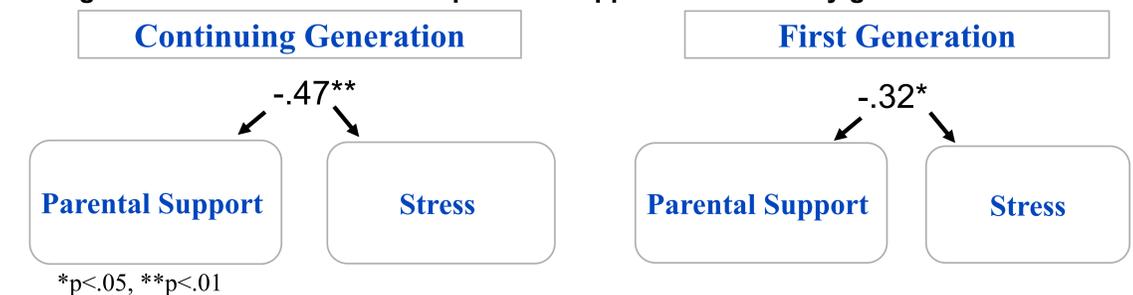
Results of the correlation analysis revealed a moderate negative association between perceived parental support and perceived stress ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). These findings provide support for the first hypothesis, such that respondents who reported higher parental support reported lower levels of stress.

H2. First-generation status will moderate the relation between perceived parental support and perceived stress such that the association will be stronger among first-generation students.

Results of a second correlational analysis revealed a moderate negative relationship between parental support and stress among first-generation college students ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$), as well as a weak negative relationship between parental support and stress among continuing generation students ($r = -.32$, $p < .05$).

A z -test for difference in strength of correlation showed that strength of relationship between support and stress for first-generation and continuing-generation students was not statistically significant ($z = .84$, $p > .05$). In sum, these findings do not support the hypothesized role of generational status as a moderator in the relation between parental support and stress.

Figure 1. Correlations between parental support and stress by generational status



Discussion

Parental support was found to be associated with stress however, when first-generation and continuing generation college students were analyzed separately, results revealed a stronger correlation among first-generation college students. These results also revealed that the role of generational status as a moderator in the relation between parental support and stress was not statistically significant.

Limitations

- Small, primarily female sample, over 30% graduate students
- Self-report measures
- Inability to establish causal relationships between support and stress

Implications

Future research should explore the association among a larger sample that includes more male college students and controls for other factors that might relate to stress (employment, year in school, academic performance).

References

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