Self-Reliance and Relations with Parents as Predictors of Anxiety and Depression in College Students

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Abstract The transition to college can be stressful for young adults. Researchers have investigated factors related to students' mental health as they adjust to college life. The current study examined the relative contributions of measures of self-reliance and parent relations to the prediction of anxiety and depression in college students. A sample of 153 college students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a southeastern university completed the self-reliance and parent relations scales of the BASC-2 SRP-COL, the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)*,* and the Hamilton Depression Inventory (HDI). Multiple regression analyses indicated that self-reliance and parent relations were significant predictors of anxiety and depression with self-reliance scores making a greater contribution to the prediction of each of the outcome variables.

Keywords: anxiety, depression, college students, parent relations, self-reliance

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1. Introduction

The adjustment necessitated by moving away from home and living independently can be stressful for many young adults as they transition to college. College students may face feelings of distress and anxiety as they adjust to living independently and experience increased academic demands, financial responsibilities, and social stressors [17,24]. Findings from previous research suggest that variables related to social support [9,20] and healthy views of oneself [1,12] could be important protective factors for lower risk of mental health problems. The purpose of the current study was to examine the relative contributions of measures of self-reliance and relations with parents to the prediction of anxiety and depression in college students.

Research indicates that many of today's college students experience problematic levels of stress [8] and mental health problems for this cohort continue to be on the rise [10]. Specifically, the prevalence of anxiety among college students has more than doubled from 6.7% in 2000 to 15.8% in 2015 [2,3] and the rates of depression for this age group have steadily risen as well from 10% in 2000 to 13.1% of college students being diagnosed and/or treated for depression in 2015 [2,3].

Anxiety in college-age students has been associated with negative consequences such as social isolation, negative thinking, maladaptive coping [18], hypertension [21], problematic alcohol use [14], depression and suicide [11]. Depression in college-age young adults is also a disorder that can lead to impairments in multiple areas of one's life. The basic symptoms of depression can cause disturbances in sleep and appetite, poor memory and concentration, lack of motivation and self-care [4]. Furthermore, depression in college students is associated with negative outcomes including substance abuse, co-occurring psychiatric problems, poor academic performance, and suicide [15,19]. Given that the presence of depression and anxiety in college students is on the rise and that both of these mental health problems are related to serious negative impairments for young adults, it is important to study factors that contribute to the occurrence of these problems as well as those that lower a young adult's risk of experiencing mental illness.

The presence of positive social support from parents, peers, and other significant individuals in a college student's life has been related to general adjustment to college, academic performance, retention, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and overall well-being [13,16,24]. Social support also is a factor associated with lower risks of mental health problems for college students [9]. Positive attachment bonds with parents and close friends have been negatively correlated with depression and positively associated with self-esteem in college students [16]. Specifically, Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, and Boswell [20] found that strong parental social support during the college transition period was related to lower levels of depression and anxiety.

Additionally, a positive view of oneself is important for college students' well-being [6]. For example, high self-esteem is a strong predictor of college adjustment while low self-esteem is related to problems with anxiety, depression, and interpersonal difficulties [1,12,25]. Reynolds and Kamphaus [22] have identified self-reliance as another measure of personal adjustment separate from

self-esteem. They define self-reliance as "self-confidence and assurance in one's ability to make decisions" (p.79). Self-reliance and college students' psychosocial adjustment has not been investigated. The transition to college may lead to new experiences and challenges for many young adults. One of the most important of these may be dealing with stressors and solving problems independently with less guidance from parents. Perhaps students high in self-reliance who also have good parental support might make the most successful transition to the college environment. We hypothesized that self-reported self-reliance would make a larger contribution to the prediction of anxiety and depression than perceived relations with parents.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 153 students (122 women and 31 men) enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a four-year public university in the southeastern United States. The average age of the participants was 21.83 ($SD = 1.65$). The sample was comprised of 22% freshmen, 25% sophomores, 33% juniors, and 20% seniors. The ethnic break-down of the sample was as follows: 56% African American, 41% Caucasian, and 3% Other.

2.2. Materials

The Behavior Assessment System for Children 2nd Edition Self Report of Personality College form (BASC-2 SRP-COL) [22] was used to measure participants' self-reliance and self-reported levels of perceived relations with parents. The BASC-2 SRP-COL measures various components of behavior, emotions, and self-perceptions of college-age young adults aged 18-25. The BASC-2 SRP-COL form consists of 185 items that require students to rate statements as either (T) *True* or (F) *False* on a four-point Likert scale using the following response options: (N) *Never*, (S), *Sometimes*, (O) *Often*, or (A) *Almost Always*. Individuals typically take about 20-30 minutes to complete the BASC-2 SRP-COL. The BASC-2 SRP-COL yields 16 subscales with scores reported as *T* scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Twelve of the subscales are clinical scales designed to measure problematic types of behavior such as attention problems, alcohol abuse, anxiety, and depression. Four adaptive scales on the BASC-2 SRP-COL assess positive components of personality and behavior such as self-esteem, relations with parents, and interpersonal relations. *T* scores of 70 and above on the clinical subscales are considered to be clinically significant while *T* scores ranging from 60 to 69 are indicative of at-risk levels of characteristics that may lead to problems in functioning. For the adaptive scales, lower scores rather than higher scores represent problems in adaptive functioning. *T* scores ranging from 31 through 40 are considered at-risk, and *T* scores of 30 and below considered clinically significant.

Data from the Self-Reliance and the Relations with Parents subscales of the BASC-2 SRP-COL were used in this study. Self-Reliance is one of the four adaptive subscales on the BASC and was developed to assess a

young adult's confidence in his or her ability to deal with life's challenges, solve problems, and make decisions. Questions on this subscale reflect beliefs and ideas related to self-confidence in handling difficulties on one's own and making good decisions. At-risk and clinically significant scores may reflect fear of facing difficulties on one's own and a lack of confidence in one's ability to take responsibility for life's challenges. Relations with Parents is also one of the four adaptive subscales on the instrument and was designed to assess a young adult's self-reported perceptions about characteristics and quality of his or her relationship with parents. Questions concentrate on themes such as perceived level of parental involvement and trust, closeness to one's parents, and interaction time with parents. At-risk scores may indicate mild to moderate problems regarding relations with parents while clinically significant scores represent severe problems and possible estrangement from one's parents. The BASC-2 SRP-COL has been shown to have good internal consistency with reliability coefficients of .90 for the Relations with Parents subscale and .73 for the Self-Reliance subscale for the combined gender norm and male and female samples [22]. The test-retest reliability coefficients for college students are .79 for Self-Reliance and .85 for the Relations with Parents subscale. Evidence about the validity of the BASC-2 SRP-COL provided through factor analysis and correlations with other similar behavior measures is described in great detail in the manual.

The State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) [26] is a self-report inventory comprised of two subscales of 20 items assessing state and trait anxiety. Each item on the State and Trait Anxiety subscales is rated on a 4-point intensity scale ranging from 1 to 4. Participants are instructed to complete the state form, immediately followed by the trait form. The measure has been shown to have adequate internal consistency, with reliabilities ranging about .60, and test–retest reliability, in the mid .70s for T-Anxiety.

The Hamilton Depression Inventory (HDI) [23] is a measure used to identify and evaluate specific symptoms of Major Depression as delineated by *DSM-IV*. It consists of a 23-item full form, a 17-item form, and a 9-item short form. The measure has been shown to demonstrate high levels of reliability ranging from .91 to .96.

2.3. Procedure

Students in introductory psychology courses volunteered to participate in the study and provided their written consent. Each student completed the BASC-2 SRP-COL, the STAI, and the HDI. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

3. Results

Four scores were recorded for each of the 153 participants: Self-Reliance T score on the BASC, Parent Relations T score on the BASC, Trait Anxiety T score on the STAI, and Depression T score on the HDI. Descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix for the measures are shown in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted for each criterion

variable (anxiety and depression) to determine the relative contributions self-reliance scores entered at Step 1 and parent relations scores entered at Step 2 made to the prediction of the criterion. As shown in Table 3, the predictor variables each made a significant contribution to the prediction of trait anxiety; self-reliance explained 27% of the variance and parent relations explained an additional 11% of the variance in trait anxiety scores. As shown in Table 4, the predictor variables each made a significant contribution to the prediction of depression; self-reliance explained 20% of the variance and parent relations explained an additional 10% of the variance in the depression scores.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Reliance, Parent Relations, Trait Anxiety, and Depression Scores

Variable	*M*	*SD*
Self-Reliance	50.49	8.73
Parent Relations	48.93	9.94
Anxiety	46.12	10.75
Depression	49.58	10.13

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Self-Reliance, Parent Relations, Trait Anxiety, and Depression Scores**

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Self-Reliance	___	.364	-.516	-.451
2. Parent Relations		___	-.491	-.457
3. Anxiety			___	.638
4. Depression				___

** All correlations are significant at $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Table 3. Regression Analysis for Trait Anxiety

Variable	*Beta*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step1		.516***	.266	
Self-Reliance	-.516***			
Step 2		.610***	.372	.106
Self-Reliance	-.389***			
Parent Relations	-.349***			

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Regression Analysis for Depression

Variable	*Beta*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step1		.451***	.203	
Self-Reliance	-.451***			
Step 2		.550***	.302	.099
Self-Reliance	-.389***			
Parent Relations	-.349***			

*** $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

The hypothesis that self-reliance would make a larger contribution to the prediction of anxiety and depression than perceived relations with parents was supported. Both self-reliance and relations with parents were significantly and negatively related to self-reported problems with anxiety and depression for the students in our sample. Self-reliance and relations with parents also were both significant predictors of the outcome variables suggesting that they are both important factors related to anxiety and depression in college students. These results are consistent with past research that indicates social support is a factor associated with lower risks of mental health problems for college students [9] and that a positive view of oneself is related to college students' well-being [6] and adjustment to college [12]. However, according to our findings, self-reliance, which specifically represents a positive view and confidence in ones' ability to make decisions, was a better predictor of lower levels of self-reported anxiety and depression than social support provided by parents.

It may be important for counseling professionals, faculty, and other college student personnel who work with at-risk college-age students to assess students' levels of self-reliance and parental support when developing interventions to assist such students especially if these students present with symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. While much media attention has been directed to so-called Helicopter Parents, who are viewed as being overly involved in their adult children's lives, results of a recent analysis of the 2007 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement show no evidence that high parental involvement is problematic for students [27]. Although faculty, student affairs professionals, and the media have worried about an increase in parental involvement and associated potential conflicts and negative outcomes, college students seem to benefit from the additional support and encouragement they receive from parents. These results suggest that community building and partnerships with parents [5,7,28] appear to be helpful to college students. However, high parental involvement has been associated with lower grades [27]. This finding is counter to other findings in this study that show positive results for high involvement with parents. However, high involvement may be a function of the frequency with which parents intervene with the institution on the student's behalf. It is likely that the major reasons for the intervention are that the student is struggling with academic progress. What the Shoup, et al. [27] study did not determine is whether students with poor grades who have highly involved parents are ultimately more successful than students who have poorer grades with non-supportive parents, therefore further research to address these specific issues is warranted. It may also be important to discuss and address issues about the difference between supportive parent involvement that promotes self-reliance and autonomy in young adults compared to developmentally inappropriate problematic parent involvement. Perhaps the right type of parental support for college students fosters self-reliance/self-efficacy in the same manner that secure infant attachment leads to independence and higher self-esteem in young children [29]. It is possible that college students who have a belief that their parents "have their backs" and are available for support if needed may be more willing "spread their wings", test their limits and capabilities, and ultimately increase their own self-reliance and independence. Conversely, young adults without parental backing and support may be more fearful and anxious about taking risks, question their own capabilities in making decisions, hence hindering their development of positive self-reliance.

It is important to note that a limitation of the study is that participants were all students enrolled in introductory

psychology classes from a single university, thus limiting the ability to generalize these findings to college students as a whole. Another limitation of this study is that it is correlational, and not an experiment. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the direct effects of parental support on depression and anxiety, the direct effects of self-reliance on depression and anxiety, or the direct effects of parental support on self-reliance. It can be said that students with higher levels of positive relations with parents and who are more self-reliant are less likely to experience depression or anxiety. This at least suggests that students who do not have those protective factors are at risk and students who do have them are likely to be more resilient. Additional research will be needed to determine the causal connections between parental support and student self-reliance, and between each of these variables and protection from anxiety and depression.

List of Abbreviations

BASC-2 SRP COL: Behavior Assessment System for Children-2 Self Report of Personality College Form
HDI: Hamilton Depression Inventory
STAI: State Trait Anxiety Inventory

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