Operationalizing Parent Involvement in College: A Confirmatory Factor Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test a working definition of parental involvement (PI) in college as a multidimensional construct composed of parental support giving, contact, and academic engagement (N = 797 freshmen).

Results supported a one-factor model, primarily indicated by support, while controlling for student sex, race, and parent education level.

BACKGROUND

Parents are key socialization agents during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) that can facilitate a successful college transition.

- Parent communication and emotional support are positively related to academic outcomes and wellbeing among freshmen.
- Absent from this literature is a consensus on the definition of PI that is appropriate for emerging adults in college.
- A recent working definition proposed PI in college is composed of parent support giving, contact, and academic engagement (Wartman & Savage, 2008).
- No research to date has systematically investigated this definition.

Objective of the current study: Examine PI in college as a multidimensional construct among a sample of freshmen students.

METHOD

Participants & Procedures
- 797 freshmen (55% female; 84% Caucasian); Online surveys in Fall 2013

Measures
1) Support giving (6 items; α = .85): “In the past few months, how often has your parent provided you with emotional support (e.g., express care)?”
   - 1 (Not at All) – 7 (Daily); M = 4.24, SD = 1.31
2) Contact (5 items; α = .28): “In the past few months, how often have you and your parent communicated by text?”
   - 1 (Not at All) – 7 (Daily); M = 19.11, SD = 4.57
3) Academic engagement (4 items; α = .73): “My parent and I discuss what I am learning in classes.”
   - 1 (Strongly Disagree) – 5 (Strongly Agree); M = 3.81, SD = .76

Analysis
- Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) via Stata 13.0; ML Estimation
- Control variables on PI: Student sex, race, & parent education level (M = 3.77 [has a college degree], SD = .91)

RESULTS

Overall Model:
- χ² = 44.67 (797), p < .001, R² = 82%
- RMSEA = .08, CFI = .94

Factor Loadings:
- PI explained 76% of variance in support giving (95% CI of β = .82 – .93)
- PI explained 46% of variance in contact (95% CI of β = .62 – .74)
- PI explained 33% of variance in academic engagement (95% CI of β = .51 – .63)

Covariates:
- Student sex & PI = .16***
- Student race & PI = -.02 ns
- Parent education level & PI = .09*

CONCLUSIONS

- Results supported PI during college as a multidimensional construct, and revealed parent support, contact, and academic engagement positively loaded on PI.
- While overall model fit was adequate, this was the first empirical test of the PI definition proposed by Wartman & Savage (2009).
- Results contribute to clarifying a conceptual and operational definition of PI in college that can be utilized to inform parent programming.

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