



Parent and peer social norms and youth's post-secondary attitudes: A latent class analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores whether college-going norms of parents and peers are intertwined or distinct in their contributions to college-going attitudes. Latent class analysis identified latent groups based on youth's social norms from parents and friends. Data was used from the High School Longitudinal Study (HSLS:09), a nationally representative and longitudinal study of ninth grade American students ($N = 10,663$). Four classes were identified: *universal college norms* (53.57%, $N = 5712$), which included youth with high support from both parents and friends; *parent college norms* (12.71%, $N = 1355$), wherein youth's parents demonstrated high support while friends displayed low school engagement; *friend college norms* (27.53%, $N = 2935$), in which youth had highly engaged peers but limited parental support; and *limited college norms* (6.20%, $N = 661$), comprised of youth whose parents and friends displayed limited academic engagement. Findings indicate that parents and friends play separate roles in the development of college-going attitudes.

1. Introduction

Social norms represent an individual's basic understanding of how one should behave in certain situations and are learned through one's observation of behaviors and attitudes of surrounding individuals. Social norms may include strict cultural and religious traditions, such as abstaining from meat or alcohol, or informal behaviors such as shaking hands with opponents at the end of a sport's game. Our understanding of "normal" behaviors comes from observations of individuals of importance, such as parents, siblings, friends, and supervisors. Substantial research has explored social norms of health attitudes and behaviors, finding parents and peers to play significant roles in setting social norms. For instance, Eisenberg and Forster (2003) found adolescent smoking behaviors to increase when youth observed other teens to be smoking and to decrease if the adolescent perceived adults to disapprove of smoking. Moreover, social norms are predictive of alcohol consumption and marijuana use among college students (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007; Pearson et al., 2018; Su et al., 2018), while also dictating eating habits. Particularly, a review by Stok, de Vet, de Ridder, and de Wit (2016) found adolescents to eat certain types of food in the presence of peers, based on their perception of friend food preferences. Further research by Pedersen, Grønhoj, and

Thøgersen (2015) found parent eating behaviors to be the strongest predictor of youth's fruit and vegetable intake.

1.1. Theoretical framework and prior research

Given the relationship between social norms and health and behavioral habits, social norms set by parents and peers may also play an important role in one's decision to enroll in post-secondary education. The present study is grounded upon the classic idea of normative social influence, in which our behaviors conform to the positive expectations of those around us (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). This idea was extended upon by Rimal and Real (2005) in their theory of normative social behavior to explain how we alter our behaviors to reflect perception of societal norms. For youth, societal norms are established initially by parents and further defined by peers as one ages. Applied to college-going attitudes, youth's predisposition to attend college will be molded based on whether parents and friends establish college-going as a normative behavior. Norms are established by either descriptive norms or injunctive norms (Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Descriptive norms refer to one's perceptions about common behavior, while injunctive norms represent overt social approval for a specific behavior. Applied to college-going, an adolescent may perceive

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college-going as a normal behavior due to the descriptive norm that adults of importance (parents, older siblings, and teachers) have a college degree or from watching their friends complete college applications. On the other hand, injunctive norms may arise from specific statements parents or friends have made about the importance of going to college. For example, parents who vocally state their expectations for children to attend college are establishing college-going as an injunctive norm for the family. Parents can establish college-going as a descriptive norm by supporting their children's educational efforts through active involvement at their children's schools or opening a college savings account for their children. Friends can set college-going as a descriptive norm by getting good grades, taking college credit courses, and displaying interest in school activities.

Considerable research has found parental norms to be predictive of child's educational attainment. In particular, parent expectations for child's educational attainment has been correlated with child's educational expectations (Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011; Mao & Bikos, 2000; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Qian & Blair, 1999; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Zhang, Haddad, Torres, & Chen, 2011). High parental aspirations has also been found to maintain children's aspirations over time while lifting college expectations for children with low aspirations (Kao, 2002). Along with parental expectations, parental savings for college further normalizes college as the appropriate behavior. This idea has been reinforced by Elliott and Beverly (2010), who found youth with a savings account designated toward college to be four times more likely to attend college than youth without an account.

While parents play a substantial role in their children's college decisions, surrounding oneself with college-going and academically engaged peers further establishes college enrollment as a social norm. Specifically, research by Wu (2015) found friends' college-going attitudes to be associated with educational decisions. As Wu's research asserts, "The higher the average friends' likelihood of college enrollment, the more likely the adolescent's likelihood of college enrollment increased" (2015). In fact, Picou and Carter (1976) found peers to have a stronger relationship with educational aspirations than parents. Moreover, among a sample of high school youth, Mounts and Steinberg (1995) found peers to predict grade point average, controlling for baseline GPA. Additional research has found that individuals are more likely to remain in friendships with others who have similar educational aspirations (Kiuru, Aunola, Vuori, & Nurmi, 2007; Sokatch, 2006). Similarly, results by Darenbourg and Blake (2014) indicate that peer and parent characteristics are associated with academic achievement, suggesting that both factors need to be considered when examining academic outcomes.

1.2. The present study

Given the important role of both parents and peers on educational attainment and the significant effect of educational attainment on future outcomes, it is important to understand how college-going norms of parents and peers can vary across youth. The present study extends findings from past research by identifying patterns of college-going norms among parents and peers. While some research suggests that individuals choose friends with similar college-going norms as their parents, we would expect a significant amount of heterogeneity and thus the present study seeks to capture this variation and employ it as a prediction of youth's college-going attitudes. Through this approach, we can elucidate risk profiles for educational attainment based on social norms of parents and peers.

This is an especially timely topic given trends in college enrollment rates. Undergraduate enrollment in the United States has been rising steadily over the past two decades, with 69% of recent high school graduates enrolling in a two- or four-institution immediately after high school (McFarland et al., 2017). However, considerable disparities in college enrollment rates exist by race/ethnicity and income. Particularly, 87% of Asian high school completers immediately enrolled in

college, compared to 70% of Whites, 67% of Hispanics, and 63% of African Americans. With regards to family income, 83% of high school completers from the highest income families immediately enrolled in college, compared to 63% of high school completers from the lowest income families (McFarland et al., 2017).

The present study has two primary research questions. First, what underlying latent subgroups of high school youth exist with regards to college-going norms of parents and friends? Second, are college-going norms of parents and friends intertwined or relatively discrete? We hypothesize most youth will have parents and friends with concordant norms. A smaller number of youth will have discordant norms, with either high college-going norms from parents and low college-going norms from friends, or low college-going norms from parents and high college-going norms from friends.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data and sample selection

The present study utilized Wave 1 of the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HLS:09), a nationally representative and longitudinal study of over 23,000 high school students. Wave 1 was collected in 2009, when students were in ninth grade. Youth were selected for the study using a stratified, two-stage random sample design; the sampling process has been described previously (Ingels et al., 2013). Data was collected through interviews with students, parents, teachers, counselors, and school administrators along with collection of high school transcripts across three waves from ninth through twelfth grade. The HLS:09 focused on student's academic and career trajectories from ninth grade into postsecondary education, providing ideal information to examine college attitudes.

For Wave I study collection, 20,781 participants completed the student interview while 16,996 parents completed the parent interview. Youth were included in the present study's analytic sample if they had valid information on parent and friend college-going norms ($n = 11,277$) obtained from interviews with the students and parents in Wave 1. Roughly 600 youth were then excluded from the study due to missing information on the demographic covariates. The final analytic sample size was 10,663 youth.

2.2. Variables

2.2.1. Indicators

This study identified sub-groups of youth based on six indicators of parents' and friends' college-going norms. Parental college-going norms consisted of two indicators: financial preparation for college and expectations for child's educational attainment. Parental financial preparation for college consisted of parent response to "What grade was [child] in when you or someone in your family began to financially prepare for [his/her] education after high school?" Response options were collapsed to include whether the parent: does not plan to help child financially with college, had not begun saving but planned to help child financially, began saving while the child was in grades 1–9, or began saving before the child was in first grade. Parental expectation for child's educational attainment was based on parent response to how far in school he/she expected the child to go and categorized based on responses of: less than bachelor's degree; bachelor's degree; or master's degree or higher.

College-going norms of youth's friends were based on youth's response to three questions related to whether a statement was true or false for one's closest friend. The statements included: "Your closest friend gets good grades;" "Your closest friend is interested in school;" and "Your closest friend plans to go to college." The final indicator included youth response to whether she/he talks more to parents or friends about future plans.

The indicator variables represented a combination of both

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