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Sense of relatedness boosts engagement, achievement, and well-being: A latent growth model study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine how adolescent students' sense of relatedness toward parents, teachers, and peers were differentially related to engagement, disaffection, achievement, and well-being. Two longitudinal studies were conducted among Filipino high school students. Study 1 focused on how sense of relatedness was associated with academic outcomes (engagement, disaffection, and achievement), while Study 2 focused on how relatedness was associated with well-being. Results of Study 1 showed that students' sense of relatedness predicted both initial levels and changes in engagement and disaffection, which in turn, mediated the effects of relatedness on subsequent academic achievement. Parental relatedness seemed more important for academic achievement compared to teacher and peer relatedness. In Study 2, sense of relatedness was found to be associated with positive and negative affect. Findings of this study provide evidence for the importance of relatedness in facilitating optimal outcomes and suggest that different types of relatedness may have differential effects. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

How can we help students become more engaged in school? How do we encourage them to achieve more? And more importantly, how do we help them become happier? Prominent theories of achievement motivation have attempted to answer these questions by focusing on the role of internal motivational factors such as self-beliefs, interest, autonomy, and goals among others (Huang, 2011; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Moller, Pohlmann, Koller, & Marsh, 2009; Su & Reeve, 2011). While focusing on these internal factors may be important, researchers also need to look at how students' perceptions of their social relationships shape overall adjustment and functioning.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine how sense of relatedness was associated with indices of optimal functioning such as engagement, achievement, and well-being. This study addresses several gaps in the extant literature. First, studies have shown that relatedness with distinct social partners may have different effects (e.g., Guay, Marsh, Senecal, & Dowson, 2008; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). However, several studies have measured relatedness as a global construct and have not posited distinctions among relatedness with different social partners thereby precluding an examination of differential effects (e.g., Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012).

While there are studies that disentangled the effects associated with various social partners (Feldman, 2012; Ryan et al., 1994), additional research is needed to have a more fine-grained understanding of the differential effects associated with relatedness with various social partners. Some of these studies have failed to include the full array of social partners that students interact with. For example, Guay et al. (2008) only focused on relatedness with parents and peers but did not include relatedness with teachers. Wentzel, Battle, Russell, and Looney's (2010) study focused only on students' relationships with teachers and peers but did not include parents. Thus, in the current study, students' relatedness with parents, teachers, and peers are simultaneously examined.

Studies in cross-cultural psychology have claimed that people in different cultures may differ in terms of how embedded they are in social relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It is assumed that those from collectivist cultures are more deeply embedded in social networks and identify more closely with significant others, while those from individualistic cultures perceive themselves to be more autonomous (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 2003). In the current study, students from a collectivist society, i.e. the Philippines, are sampled. In collectivist societies the family usually occupies a central place in one's life (Fuligni, 2001), which may lead to parental relatedness playing a more important role compared to relatedness with teachers and peers. Third, previous research on relatedness has mostly been conducted among elementary school children (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Adolescent students are at increased risk for developing strained

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relationships with their parents and teachers compared to younger children (Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2010). Thus, it seems important to examine how sense of relatedness to various social partners would play out in the *sturm und drang* (storm and stress) of adolescent life.

1.1. Sense of relatedness

Self-determination theory posits that humans have three basic psychological needs: need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The focal construct in this study is students' sense of relatedness which pertains to the feeling that one is special and important to key social partners (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Sense of relatedness (Connell, 1990) may function as a motivational resource that drives engagement and achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012).

The underlying idea behind the construct of relatedness has been studied from different theoretical perspectives. Best known are theories of attachment which have been identified as consequences of secure versus insecure attachments to primary caregivers (Ainsworth, 1979). Research has shown that children with secure attachments to their caregivers exhibit better overall functioning (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Studies in biopsychology have also supported the contention that there are clear associations between biological correlates of relatedness and outcomes such as learning (Clark-Elford et al., 2014), motivation (Love, 2014) and well-being (Bartz, Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2011; Baumgartner, Heinrichs, Vonlanthen, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2008; Insel & Young, 2001; Siegel, 2001). Researchers have posited that the need for belongingness is a universal human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When the need for belongingness is fulfilled, people experience higher levels of well-being and overall functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

More relevant to the current study would be the self-system model of motivational development (SSMMD) which offers a more precise theoretical formulation of ideas on relatedness and engagement based on broader self-determination theory (see Skinner et al., 2008 for an overview). The SSMMD model focuses on how self-system processes predict engagement and its opposite disaffection. This model assumes that there are three types of self-system processes which are organized around people's fundamental needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence. Self-system processes can be understood as durable personal resources that individuals construct over time in response to interactions with the external environment. Each of the three self-system processes based on competence, relatedness, and autonomy in turn, is hypothesized to function as proximal predictors of engagement and disaffection which then influence academic achievement. Situating sense of relatedness within the SSMMD model offers a more precise theoretical formulation of how relatedness facilitates engagement, and disentangles the relatedness construct from engagement itself. Some studies conceptualize relatedness as part of engagement itself (e.g., Jimerson et al., 2003) which confounds the relationship between these two constructs.

In terms of the three self-system processes, competence has been well-studied under various labels such as self-efficacy, academic competence, and control. Autonomy has also received much attention with numerous studies showing that students who experience a greater sense of autonomy exhibit more adaptive school outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness, however, has received relatively less attention. Skinner et al. (2008) argued that "relatedness tends to be overlooked as a self-perception in the academic domain" (p. 768).

There is an abundant amount of research on social support, however, among adolescent students. Social support bears some conceptual similarity to sense of relatedness but it is useful to note a subtle distinction between these two constructs. Social support measures have ranged from the very global with different sources of social support aggregated into a single score (e.g., Doeglas et al., 1996) to the very specific with distinct dimensions of social support elucidated (e.g., Wentzel et al., 2010). Despite the difficulty of synthesizing findings from the vast social support literature, a common strand among different measures of social support is that they include elements of functional support or instrumental support for the accomplishment of a relevant task.

In contrast, sense of relatedness does not explicitly tap into this instrumental support dimension. Instead, it focuses more on one's perceptions of warm and intimate emotional connections with different social partners. It is possible that one can receive instrumental support from another person but may perceive little emotional warmth in the relationship (e.g., a pragmatic boss providing his/her subordinates instrumental support to accomplish work goals but caring little about their well-being outside the workplace). The distinction between relatedness and social support becomes evident in the following example: Chen (2005) found that parental support is negatively related to academic achievement. She explained that parents whose children are not achieving well in school may increase the provision of social support for their children to achieve better, thus, the negative correlation. Given the subtle distinction between social support and relatedness, findings from the social support literature cannot be assumed to automatically apply to research on relatedness.

1.2. Sense of relatedness, engagement, and achievement

Furrer and Skinner (2003, p. 148) defined engagement as "active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions with the social and physical environments." Engagement in school is recognized as an important academic outcome in its own right. It improves academic achievement and enhances learning gains (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engaged students are portrayed as energized, enthusiastic, and focused. These conditions create an optimal condition for students to actually learn more.

The opposite of engagement has been termed as disengagement or disaffection (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). This state is characterized by apathetic withdrawal from learning activities, passivity, lack of initiation, and giving up in the face of perceived difficulties (Vallerand, 1997). The SSMMD model assumes that self-system processes act as proximal predictors of engagement and disaffection, which in turn influences learning and achievement. In this study, the primary focus is on relatedness as a self-system process. Students' sense of relatedness is posited to have energizing functions and is considered as a catalyst for engagement and achievement.

While research on relatedness as a self-system process in the educational context is less common compared to studies that focus on autonomy and competence, previous studies which have drawn on closely related constructs have shown that students who feel connected to teachers, parents, and peers have more adaptive academic outcomes (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, & Li, 2012). Furrer and Skinner (2003) identified three types of significant others that constitute young people's most important social relationships: parents, teachers, and peers. In the following paragraphs, evidence associated with each of these social relationships is briefly reviewed. However, note that most of the studies reviewed below have measured social support rather than sense of relatedness per se:

A comprehensive review by Bergin and Bergin (2009) concluded that students who had a secure attachment to their parents had higher grades and standardized test scores compared to those with insecure attachment. Insecure children have lower verbal ability, reading comprehension, and academic achievement and are less curious in school (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). Insecure attachment predicted lower academic achievement, poorer study skills,