

Educational background, high school stress, and academic success



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 April 2016

Received in revised form 8 August 2016

Accepted 8 August 2016

Available online 10 August 2016

Keywords:

Students without college educated parents

Stress

High school success

College

Retention

ABSTRACT

This research considers whether students without college-educated parents encounter more stressful life events, and if this exposure influences high school academic success, college matriculation and college degree attainment. Analyses were performed on 7989 students between 1988 and 2000 from NELS:88/2000. Findings suggest that students without college-educated parents encounter more stressful life events. This difference did not account for group differences in outcomes. However, exposure to certain stressors affects high school success over the entire sample. These stressors tend to be beyond student control. In addition, total life events in high school relates to students' ability to finish a college degree over the entire sample. This research extends current knowledge by considering stress' impact on student growth, academic trajectory and retention.

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1. Introduction

Recently, the support of students without college-educated parents has attracted renewed attention. Articles in the press (McCormack, 2013; Pappano, 2015; Riggs, 2014; Tough, 2014) as well as scholarly attention (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012) cover the gaps and myriad difficulties encountered by this population. For example, this population earns a bachelor's degree at the rate of 27.4% after four years compared with 42.1% for their counterparts (Pryor, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, Hurtado, & Tran, 2011). Many explanations have been postulated for the gaps in achievement between first-generation college students and their counterparts. First-generation college students have been described in the literature as being more exposed to a variety of stressors, such as a steeper learning curve in the transition from high school to college (Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2006), increased family demands (London, 1989), lack of peer support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005), difficulty establishing connection on campus, (Bean & Metzner, 1985), stereotypes (Steele, 2010), and financial burdens (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

A neglected area of investigation which may help to explain the achievement gap between students without college-educated parents and their counterparts involves the possible connection between stress and academic success. Recent research examines the connection between demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, exposure to stressful events, and health (Adler & Snibbe, 2003; Adler et al., 1994; Akdeniz et al., 2014; Cohen, Doyle, & Baum, 2006;

Hamblin, 2015). Given the relationship between stress and health, the potential link between stress and educational success merits inquiry.

1.1. Review of the literature and conceptual framework

Earlier psychological models (Cope & Hannah, 1976) involving student retention separated groups of students into "stayers" and "leavers." This approach would attempt to isolate characteristics of both groups. Leavers, conceptualized in this way, would necessarily possess a deficit which led to their departure. This lens focused on personality as the salient variable. In contrast, social or sociological models have addressed gaps in educational achievement in various ways that emphasize the environmental contribution on retention. Rooted in theories by Emile Durkheim, functionalists emphasize how different elements of society interconnect toward a particular purpose, such as stability. Social status may therefore be viewed as an attribute in the social landscape which promotes or hinders educational attainment by maintaining social equilibrium (Featherman & Hauser, 1978). Conflict theory, on the other hand, traced to the work of Marx, highlights groups and interests competing rather than providing stability. For example, Pincus (1980) posits that educational institutions are inherently elitist. Therefore, lack of persistence by certain groups is both a reflection and the process of inequality.

More current theories postulate that an interplay exists between individual characteristics and the institutional environment, particularly the school itself. Previously, theories of student departure had not widely considered the role of the institution in retention. However, Coleman (1961) demonstrated that the peer environment in schools was an important determinant in student success. Tinto (1993) extended this idea and contended that the level of integration between the student and the educational environment is crucial to academic achievement. These models consider both individual

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level factors and institutional factors in the determination of student educational outcomes.

Almost parallel to these more integrative sociological models, psychological models have recently posited a relationship between individual characteristics, environmental circumstances, and conditions such as health status. For example, [Adler and Snibbe \(2003\)](#) propose that “Behavioral, cognitive and affective tendencies that develop in response to greater psychological stress encountered in lower SES environments may partially mediate the impact of SES on health” ([Adler & Snibbe, 2003](#), pg. 121). Therefore, both individual (behavioral, cognitive and affective) and environmental (lower SES environments) variables influence health outcomes via stress exposure.

Students without college-educated parents are frequently from lower SES backgrounds, and are described in the literature as exposed to many stressors, such as incongruities between their background and the college environment and lack of “insider knowledge” ([Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012](#)), experiences of lack of belonging ([Walton & Cohen, 2011](#)), family disenfranchisement, role strain from competing responsibilities ([Dennis et al., 2005](#)), and campus climate concerns ([Steele, 2010](#)). Since integrative models have currently been proposed incorporating individual and environmental characteristics, stressor exposure and health outcomes, similar logic could be applied to educational outcomes ([Basch, 2010](#)). Specifically, a model that considers individual factors, environmental conditions, stressor exposure and opportunities for coping may help to explain educational gaps experienced by students whose parents did not attend college in their secondary and post-secondary academic progress when compared to their advantaged counterparts.

Stress can be understood in many ways. An established way of measuring stress is in terms of distinct life events ([Holmes & Rahe, 1967](#)). In their formulation, each identified stressful life event was assigned corresponding life change units, reflecting the magnitude of the stressor. In this research, a stressful life events battery was used to operationalize stress that is present in the NELS questionnaire. However, in the absence of an assignment of life change units, events were coded as endorsed (1) or not endorsed (0). In addition, [Lazarus and Folkman \(1984\)](#) conceptualized stress as the interaction between a person’s skills in dealing with stress, the stress exposure itself, and the environment. This formulation is also built-in to the model applied in this research.

[Moos and Holahan \(2003\)](#) developed a proposed integrative model of stress and coping that accounts for individual (or as they state, dispositional) factors, environmental factors, stressful circumstances, coping, and well-being outcomes. The authors applied the original model to the

coping process. In Blocks One and Two, they first environmental factors and then personal and personality traits. Block Three contains life events. Block Four contains different coping mechanisms. In evaluating coping, they first considered personal, dispositional and stylistic coping factors, which include 1) problem-focused coping, 2) adaptive emotion-focused coping, and 3) problem-solving coping. They then considered contextual coping approaches such as cognitive and behavioral styles. Finally, Block Five contains well-being outcomes. Although the attention of the [Moos and Holahan \(2003\)](#) model was on coping, the present research focuses its questions on the relationship between stress and academic performance. This relationship is already inherent in the model. The only major adaptation (besides shifting the attention from coping to stressors) was changing the outcomes from well-being outcomes to educational ones.

In the adapted version of this model, Block One contains ongoing environmental conditions or social resources available to the individual or group, including the variable parental level of education. This Block also includes other familial conditions or attributes, peer attributes, community factors, and institutional characteristics. Block Two includes individual demographic characteristics and personality attributes, and other personal factors previously investigated for their salience in educational success like self-concept ([Purkey, 1970](#)) and locus of control ([Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991](#)). Block Three contains stressors as life events. Block Four includes coping skills. In this case, the NELS only included limited questions about coping, particularly behavioral coping skills such as seeking guidance, support and validation from various people, like parents and teachers ([Moos & Holahan, 2003](#)) as well as the adaptive strategy of attending religious services. Block Five comprises the outcomes of interest. In the original formulation of the model, these outcomes are functioning in the domain of well-being ([Moos & Holahan, 2003](#)). In the adaptation of this model, there are four academic outcomes: high school math and reading scores, and four-year college matriculation and retention. Therefore, the effect of stressful life events on educational outcomes is the salient posited relationship in the model ([Fig. 1](#)).

1.2. Research questions

Given this conceptual framework, three research questions comprise this inquiry:

1. Do high school students with and without college-educated parents differ in their exposure to stressful life events by type and amount?

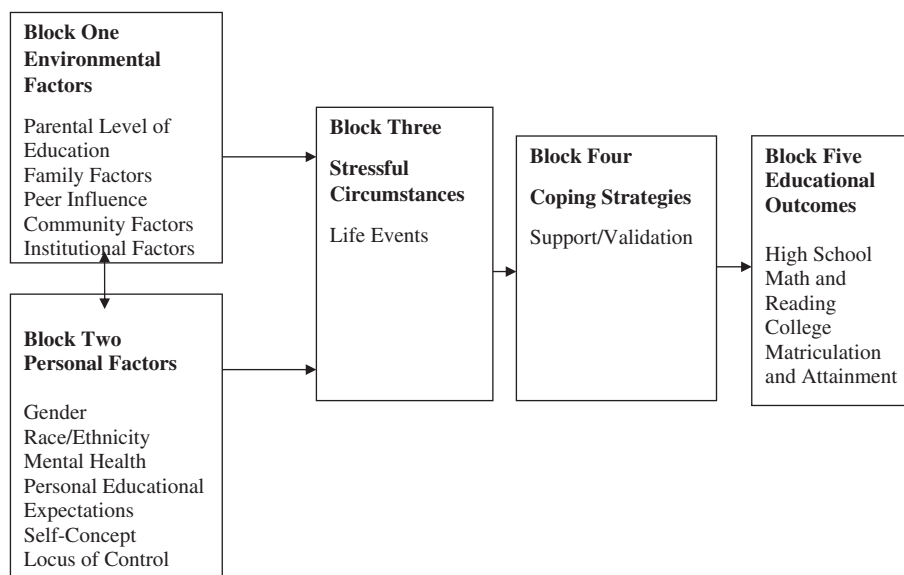


Fig. 1. Adaptation of [Moos and Holahan \(2003\)](#) model to high school students, stressful circumstances and educational outcomes.

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