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## Changes in family cohesion and links to depression during the college transition



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### ABSTRACT

Parent relationships remain an important component in the lives of adolescents, with particular respect to their well-being. In the current study, we sought to understand how changes in family cohesion across the high school–college transition may be related to changes in depressive symptoms. Three hundred and thirty-eight college freshman completed self-report measures prior to attending college and again two months into their first semester. Although depressive symptoms significantly increased, adolescents who reported increases in family cohesion reported declines in depressive symptoms during the college transition. Furthermore, this effect was mediated by changes in self-esteem and optimism. Finally, we show unique associations for male and female adolescents, such that changes in family cohesion were only related to changes in depression for girls. Results suggest that parent relationships may buffer against increased depressive symptoms during this important transition period.

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The alteration of the social milieu during the transition period from high school to college affects the psychological adjustment of college bound students (Alfred-Liro & Sigelman, 1998; Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Larose & Boivin, 1998; Rutter & Sroufe, 2000). The college transition occurs in tandem with substantial increases in depression which peak around age 18, rising 500% from childhood to adolescence and 400% by young adulthood (Thapar, Collishaw, Pine, & Thapar, 2012). These findings indicate this is an essential developmental period to study depressive symptoms in order to find the means to promote mental well-being at a time where rates of depression among college freshmen have reached historic heights (Eagan et al., 2014). It is possible that such a decline in psychological well-being may be due, in part, to the changing nature of adolescent–parent relationships. In the current study, we examine whether changes in the quality of parent–adolescent relationships (i.e., changes in family cohesion) are associated with adolescents' psychological adjustment during the transition to college and whether this differs for males and females.

Late adolescence and young adulthood are often perceived as stages in which individuals pursue their own interests and show little connection to their parents (Arnett, 2007). However, existing literature suggests otherwise. Adolescents value the relationship with their parents and possess a desire to maintain cohesive relationships (Fulgini, 1999; Noller & Callan, 1986). Although there is a modest decrease in family cohesion at the onset of adolescence, perhaps due to increased time spent with peers and a desire for autonomy, by the time individuals reach late adolescence, declines in family cohesion stabilize or recuperate to pre-adolescent levels (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007; Shearer, Crouter, & McHale, 2005).

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This trend continues through late adolescence, where family relationships remain an integral component of an individual's life and even increase in importance two years after high school (Tsai, Telzer, & Fuligni, 2013). Additionally, despite increases in conflicts during adolescence, cohesion is more salient such that adolescents and their parents may quarrel, but both still desire a healthy and nurturing relationship (Feldman & Gehring, 1988; Noller & Callan, 1986; Shearer et al., 2005).

Given the importance of parent relationships in late adolescence, it is not surprising that various aspects of adolescent–parent relationships prior to attending college contribute to later adjustment. In particular, higher levels of family cohesion just prior to the start of college serve as a buffer against increases in depressive symptomatology (Benson, McWey, & Ross, 2006; Kenny & Rice, 1995; Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011). It is important to note, however, that previous research has not focused on understanding how changes in family cohesion are associated with adjustment outcomes across the high school–college transition. Instead, pre-college levels of family cohesion are used to predict later adjustment outcomes. Since the dynamic of parent–adolescent relationships changes over time (Shanahan et al., 2007; Tsai et al., 2013) it is reasonable to infer that leaving home to attend college will elicit changes in family cohesion. In other words, family cohesion is not a static construct and is likely affected by the college transition. Thus, it is important to understand how such changes may play a role in affecting the mental health of college-bound adolescents. Given the increasing importance of the family for one's sense of identity during this developmental transition (Tsai et al., 2013), adolescents whose family cohesion declines may also experience increases in depressive symptoms.

### **The role of self-esteem and optimism**

There is evidence to suggest that the association between changes in family cohesion and depressive symptoms may be explained, in part, by changes in self-esteem and optimism. Both self-esteem and optimism are buffers against depressive symptoms, and those with low self-esteem tend to be at risk for experiencing higher levels of depressive symptomatology (Brisette et al., 2002; Dumont & Provost, 1999; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Moreover, the impact of changes in self-esteem and optimism on mental well-being is amplified during major transitory periods (Brisette et al., 2002; Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014). Family cohesion is also associated with self-esteem in both children (Cooper, Holman, & Braithwaite, 1983) and adolescents (Farrell & Barnes, 1993). Furthermore, family cohesion predicts changes in self-esteem during adolescence (Baldwin & Hoffmann, 2002) and the relationship between family cohesion and depressive symptoms is mediated by self-worth among young adults (Kenny & Sirin, 2006). Therefore, increases in family cohesion during the college transition may bolster self-esteem and optimism, which, in turn, may influence the mental health of adolescents during the transition to college.

### **Gender differences**

Family relationships may be especially meaningful for adolescent females. Girls are more likely to use social relationships as an avenue for self-disclosure, emotional intimacy, and support (Cyranowski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000; Rudolph, 2002). Higher levels of social support, particularly from parents, are a strong buffer against depressive symptoms for girls (Schraedley, Gotlib, & Hayward, 1999). For example, decreases in family cohesion during adolescence are less pronounced for girls than boys (Tsai et al., 2013), and strong family relationships during this time are associated with lower depressive symptoms, but only for girls (Telzer & Fuligni, 2013), suggesting that girls' well-being may be more dependent on the quality of their family relationships. This strong familial importance among adolescent females continues during the transition into young adulthood. For instance, throughout the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, females tend to identify more with their family and spend more time engaged in daily family leisure activities and familial communication than males (Fuligni & Masten, 2010; Tsai et al., 2013).

Taken together, the literature indicates that while parent relationships continue to be significant social bonds for adolescents and young adults, they are especially so for girls. This is due, in part, to the fact that girls rely on social relationships for greater emotional intimacy and support (Rudolph, 2002). Because girls rely on close relationships for emotional support and are more sensitive to any accompanying interpersonal stressors than boys (Rudolph, 2002), changes in family cohesion are potentially more salient for girls. Thus, adolescent females who experience declines in family cohesion during the college transition may experience greater increases in their depressive symptoms, an effect that may not occur for adolescent males.

### **Current study**

Little research has examined how family cohesion, a dynamic construct, changes during the college transition and what implications this may have for adolescents' well-being. In the current study, we investigated how changes in family cohesion during the college transition are associated with adolescents' depressive symptoms. Notably, we only measured adolescent's self-reported family cohesion. As a result, when we refer to family cohesion, we are more specifically referring to adolescent's perceptions of family cohesion. While this is an important distinction to make, previous work suggests there may be little differences between adolescent and parent perceptions of family cohesion (Feldman &

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