

# Demographic correlates of college student-parents' outcomes and stressors:



## Implications for well-being and intervention

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### Background

Non-traditional college students can be conceptualized as having one of the following characteristics: delayed entry into college, having dependents, being a single parent, working full-time, being financially independent, attending class part-time, or not having a high school diploma (Choy, 2002). Based on this definition, about 73 percent of all college students can be viewed as non-traditional (Choy, 2002). Compared to "traditional" college students, non-traditional students face various challenges, such as having children, that can make successfully completing college difficult (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Jacobs & King, 2002).

Gender and marital status are factors that may impact persistence in completing a college degree, perceptions of the ability to receive social support from friends and family, or a person's perceived stressors. For example, Jacobs and King (2002) found that being divorced or being under the age of 25 and the parent of a young child could inhibit persistence once enrolled in college. Also, being a mother and a wife can inhibit women's ability to attend college and their persistence once enrolled in college (Christopher, 2005). Additionally, being a single parent can make completing college more difficult (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Women typically endorse more stressors (i.e., academic, child, family, and work) than men (McDonough & Walters, 2001; Misra et al., 2000). Also, women tend to use social support more often than men and have been shown to use emotional support to a greater degree than men (Day & Livingstone, 2003). According to Vaux and colleagues (1987), emotional support is defined as receiving concern, affection, or comfort or encouragement from others and practical support is conceptualized as the provision of advice or guidance.

Given these aforementioned group differences, we chose to examine demographic differences (gender and marital status) in emotional support, perceived stress, and intrinsic goal orientation among college students with at least one child between the ages of 0 and 17 years.

### Research Questions & Hypotheses

#### Research Questions

- 1) What is the relationship between perceived stress, social support (practical and emotional for both family and friends), and intrinsic goal orientation (attitudes towards learning in college) among our sample?
- 2) Are there gender differences among college student-parents on measures of perceived stress, emotional support from friends, and intrinsic goal orientation?
- 3) Are there marital status differences among college student-parents on measures of perceived stress, emotional support from friends, and intrinsic goal orientation?

#### Hypotheses

- 1) Perceived stress will be negatively correlated with all forms of social support.
- 2) Perceived stress will be negatively correlated with intrinsic goal orientation.
- 3) Women will report higher perceived stress and receiving more emotional support from friends than men.
- 4) No a priori hypotheses were made about marital status differences among study variables or on gender differences in intrinsic goal orientation.

### Methods

**Participants:** 131 college student parents (53% were between the age of 18 and 22) were recruited through the undergraduate psychology research participant pool. Eligibility criteria for the study included full-time enrollment status and being the parent or caregiver of a child between the ages of 0-17 years of age. The majority of participants self-identified as African American (59%), 21% were Caucasian, 11% were Asian American, 5% were Hispanic, and 5% were "Other". 70% of participants were female and 30 percent were male.

**Procedures:** Participants completed an online survey packet for course credit. The survey packet investigated sources of stress, social support, and factors that promote psychosocial adjustment and academic achievement for college students with a child between the ages of 0-17 years of age.

### Methods (conti.)

#### Measures:

- **Participants' marital status and gender**
  - Marital status was collapsed into 3 overall marital categories: (a) Married, (b) Single (never married or co-habiting), and (c) Previously Married (divorced, widowed, or separated).
  - Gender (1=male & 2=female)
- **Social Support.** Social support was measured using the Social Support Behaviors (SS-B) Scale (Vaux et al., 1987). The 36-item scale included two subscales that assessed emotional support and practical assistance received from both family and friends. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 'no one would do this' (1) to 'most family members/friends would certainly do this' (5). Separate scores were obtained for social support from family and from friends: emotional support from family ( $\alpha=.94$ ), practical support from family ( $\alpha=.94$ ), emotional support from friends ( $\alpha=.94$ ), and practical support from friends ( $\alpha=.92$ ). Higher scores indicated a greater degree of social support received from family and/or friends.
- **Intrinsic Goal Orientation.** Participants' attitude toward learning in college was assessed with the 4-item Intrinsic Goal Orientation subscale ( $\alpha=.82$ ) from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005). Participants indicated how much they agreed with each statement using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all true of me, to 7 = very true of me). The mean of the items corresponded to the total score, with a higher score reflecting an intrinsic attitude/reason for attending college.
- **Perceived Stress.** Participants' perceived level of stress was assessed with the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamack, & Mermelstein, 1983). Perceived stress is the degree to which one finds their life overwhelming, unmanageable, and unpredictable. Participants' agreement with each statement was indicated on the 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 'never' (1) to 'very often' (5). Seven items of the 14-item scale were reversed-scored before calculating the mean across all the items to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating a greater amount of stress in the prior month ( $\alpha=.78$ ).

#### Analyses:

- **Research Question #1:** Bivariate correlations were conducted on all study variables.
- **Research Question #2 & #3:** ANCOVAs, controlling for household income, were done to investigate group (marital status and gender) differences on emotional support from friends, perceived stress, and intrinsic goal orientation.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	—							
2. Marital Status	.10	—						
3. Perceived Stress (PSS)	.25**	.25**	—					
4. Emo. Supp. – Family	-.03	-.00	-.18	—				
5. Emo. Supp. – Friends	.33**	.15	-.13	.58**	—			
6. Prac. Supp. – Family	-.04	.07	-.14	.83**	.52**	—		
7. Prac. Supp. – Friends	.15	.14	-.23*	.54**	.81**	.63**	—	
8. IGO	-.10	-.13	-.22*	.17	.85**	.10	.16	—
M			2.83	3.95	3.77	3.97	3.56	5.20
SD			.46	1.00	1.03	1.04	1.05	1.16
N	130	129	113	119	120	120	122	125
Range			2.57	4.00	3.30	4.00	3.88	5.75

**TABLE 1**  
Bivariate Correlations for Independent and Dependent Measures  
\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  \*  $p \leq 0.05$

Variable	N	Percentage
Age (N=129)		
18-22	70	53.4
23-27	24	18.3
28-32	13	9.9
33-52	22	16.7
Gender (N=130)		
Male	39	29.8
Female	91	69.5
Marital Status (N=129)		
Married	33	25.2
Single	85	64.9
Previously Married	11	8.4
Race (N=130)		
African American/Black	77	58.8
White/Caucasian	27	20.6
Asian	14	10.7
Hispanic/Latino	6	4.6
Biracial/Multiracial or Other	6	4.6
Size of Household (N=127)		
2	17	13.0
3	32	24.4
4	43	32.8
5	14	10.7
6 or more	21	16.1
No. of Children in House (N=128)		
1	14	10.7
2	74	56.5
3	27	20.6
4	8	6.1
5	5	3.8
Income (N=98)		
Under \$10,000	12	9.2
\$20,000 - \$29,999	11	8.4
\$30,000 - \$39,999	16	12.2
\$40,000 - \$49,999	19	14.5
\$50,000 - \$74,999	13	9.9
\$75,000 - \$99,999	13	9.9
Over \$100,000	14	10.7

**TABLE 2**  
Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Characteristics

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### Results

#### Research Question #1:

- Perceived Stress was negatively correlated with (a) receiving practical support from friends and with (b) intrinsic goal orientation.
- Intrinsic goal orientation was positively correlated with receiving emotional support from friends.
- All four types of social support (emotional and practical support from both friends and family) were positively correlated with each other.

#### Research Question #2:

- The covariate, household income, was not significantly related to perceived stress or receiving emotional support from friends.
- However, there was significant effect of gender on perceived stress,  $F(1,83)=8.23, p<.01$ . Women ( $M=2.90$ ) reported more perceived stress in the past month than men ( $M=2.61$ ).
- There was a significant effect of gender on receiving more emotional support from friends,  $F(1,88)=15.24, p<.01$ . Women ( $M=3.87$ ) reported receiving more emotional support from friends than men ( $M=3.04$ ).

#### Research Question #3

- The covariate, household income, was not significantly related to perceived stress or receiving emotional support from friends.
- After controlling for the effect of household income, there was a non-significant effect of marital status on perceived stress,  $F(2,81)=2.12, p=.13$ .
- There was a significant effect of marital status on receiving emotional support from friends,  $F(2,85)=3.73, p<.05$ . Those who identified as being single ( $M=3.77$ ) reported receiving more emotional support from friends than those who identified as being married ( $M=3.20$ ).

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Partial Eta Squared
<b>Perceived Stress by Gender</b>					
Household Income	.15	1	.15	.74	.01
Gender	1.64	1	1.64	8.23**	.09
Error	16.58	83	.20		
Total	694.89	86			
<b>Emo. Support from Friends by Gender</b>					
Household Income	.11	1	.11	.12	.00
Gender	13.34	1	13.34	15.24**	.15
Error	77.01	88	.88		
Total	1279.23	91			
<b>Perceived Stress by Marital Status</b>					
Household Income	.03	1	.03	.13	.00
Marital Status	.90	2	.45	2.12	.05
Error	17.26	81	.21		
Total	685.46	85			
<b>Emo. Support from Friends by Marital Status</b>					
Household Income	.39	1	.39	.41	.01
Marital Status	7.18	2	3.59	3.73*	.08
Error	81.79	85	.96		
Total	1263.47	89			

**TABLE 3**  
Summary of ANCOVA table for group differences in perceived stress and emotional support from friends.  
\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

### Discussion

#### Major Findings:

- Research Question #1: Less perceived stress was associated with higher intrinsic goal orientation and receiving more emotional support from friends.
- Research Question #2: Women reported higher perceived stress and receiving more emotional support from friends than did men.
- Research Question #3: After controlling for the effect of household income on perceived stress, the overall model for marital status differences on perceived stress was non-significant. Additionally, single college-student parents reported that they received more emotional support from friends than did married college-student parents.

#### Limitations and Strengths:

- The study is cross-sectional in nature. Longitudinal data on our population would elucidate whether perceived stress and social support predict graduation rates.
- The self-report nature of our measures.

#### Future Directions & Implications:

- Our results suggest that interventions should be tailored to address the unique needs of women who are college students and parents. Receiving emotional support from friends may be a protective factor for women and single parents, and should be further investigated to see if it moderates and/or mediates the relationship between gender and outcomes such as retention and graduation rates.
- Future research can continue to look at the gaps between married, single, and previously married persons with regards to completion rates and other measures of adjustment.
- More research needs to be done on the unique stressors of those who self-identify as single.
- Further investigation should be done on the impact that other demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, number of people in one's household, etc.) have on outcomes for college-student parents.