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The Effect of College Student Demographic Variables on Teacher Enmeshment

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Abstract

Interactions between students and faculty outside of class appear to be linked to greater achievement during and after college (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). However, sometimes there can be blurred personal boundaries and a lack of autonomy in relationships or what has been labeled enmeshment. The purpose of the current pilot study was to investigate the effect of race/ethnicity, gender, year in college, and college major on faculty-student relationships and teacher enmeshment. Teacher enmeshment was measured with the Teacher Enmeshment subscale of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine & Saintonge, 1993). A sample of 165 undergraduate and graduate students from education and psychology classes at a small, private liberal arts institution in the Northeast participated. No significant differences among the different demographic groups were found on the total teacher enmeshment score. However, significant differences were found among students with different majors, by gender, and by race on individual items. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are provided.

Introduction

The process of adjusting to college involves several factors, including college size and location, student age, and student residence (Lamport, 1993). One key variable involves the presence of agents of socialization, or people who inform incoming students about the college environment (Lamport, 1993). Many agents of socialization exist, including fellow students, residence hall staff, and administrators. However, the most influential of these agents may be faculty.

Interactions between students and faculty outside of class appear to be linked to greater achievement during and after college (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). They are also associated with value changes, such as choosing to work in a social science field (Pascarella, Ethington, & Smart, 1980). Despite these benefits, informal out-of-class interactions do not always happen, even in programs specifically designed to encourage interactions (Cox & Orohovec, 2007). One reason may be that in a university setting, different departments may foster different attitudes in students toward faculty. Research has indicated that students in humanities and social science fields reported more interaction with faculty than students in professional and science or math related fields (Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Student-faculty relationships have been found to vary based on race and ethnicity (Dwairy, 2004; Gnaulati & Heine, 2001). Anaya and Cole (2001) found that Latina/o students did not report a significant relationship between most faculty interaction variables and academic achievement. This difference may have been caused by cultural boundaries between faculty and students (Anaya & Cole, 2001). It was also found that working with faculty on research projects was linked with pursuing a graduate degree, especially among African American, Hispanic, and Native American students (Hathaway et al., 2002). This result indicated that mutually satisfying

work such as research can bridge these cultural boundaries. Overall, these studies indicated that beneficial student-faculty interactions may be harder to initiate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Gender differences have also been found in student-faculty interactions. Sax, Bryant, and Harper (2005) found that involvement in faculty research projects produced more progressive gender attitudes in male students, while female students reported more traditional attitudes regarding women's obligations to family life over career achievement. Female students also reported more frequent and positive interaction with faculty (Sax et al., 2005).

Sometimes there can be blurred personal boundaries and a lack of autonomy in relationships or what has been called enmeshment.

Enmeshment

The term enmeshment originated with research in family systems theory, which investigated the relationships between parents and children. Enmeshment has been generally defined as a dependent relationship pattern with little differentiation between people involved (Kinnier, Brigman, & Noble, 1990). It also involves blurred personal boundaries and a lack of autonomy, and can inhibit individuation (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Minuchin, 1974). Families with high conflict and enmeshment levels were more likely to be associated with reports of greater functional problems (Logan & Scharff, 2005).

Enmeshment has been identified outside the family, most notably in educational settings. When it has been investigated, teacher enmeshment has been defined as, "[S]trivings for intense, intimate attachments to teachers" (Gnaulati & Heine, 2001, p. 63). Several studies (e.g., Dwairy, 2004; Gnaulati & Heine, 2001) have investigated this construct and how it is influenced by race, gender and culture.

Gnaulati and Heine (2001) found that Caucasian students displayed more teacher enmeshment than did African American students while Dwairy (2004) found that traditional Bedouin youth displayed more teacher enmeshment than urban Arab youth did. These results showed that racial background has an effect on the presence of teacher enmeshment, with both Caucasian students and students from traditional, nonwestern backgrounds more likely to develop enmeshed relationships.

Gender and year in school can also affect teacher enmeshment. One study of European college students found that females reported more emotional dependence on parents than males did (Geuzaine, Debry, & Liesense, 2000). Other research has noted that female students may be more prone to enmeshment and spend more time interacting with faculty (Dwairy, 2004; Gnaulati & Heine, 2001). Additionally, Bernie, Larose, and Soucy (2005) found that first year students were usually in a more vulnerable state than students who had been in college longer. These finding highlight the need to further examine the interactions between teachers and female students and differences in enmeshment among students in different years.

Other variables have been found to also influence the presence of teacher enmeshment. Attachment orientation was found to affect student perceptions of faculty (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005a; Larose, Bernier, & Soucy, 2005b). Other out-of-school experiences, such as participation in a Big Brother program, were also associated with greater rates of teacher enmeshment (Saintonge, Achille, & Lachance, 1998).

Although there are many positive outcomes of student-faculty interaction, it is important that enmeshed relationships are not fostered. The development of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (Levine & Saintonge, 1993), with its Teacher Enmeshment subscale, has facilitated the research of enmeshed relationships with teachers. Most recent studies investigating

this construct have used this measure (Dwairy, 2004; Gnaulati & Heine, 2001; Saintonge, Achille, & Lachance, 1998).

The Current Study

The purpose of the current pilot study was to investigate the effect of race/ethnicity, gender, year in college, and college major on faculty-student relationships and teacher enmeshment. The primary goal of this research was to gain further insight into whether or not students seek help from faculty and to provide research-based information to college educators and administrators concerned about the difficulties students face adjusting to college.

Methods

Design

A within subjects post-test design with no control groups was used for the current study. All participants were given the Teacher Enmeshment subscale (eight-items) from the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine & Saintonge, 1993) and a demographic measure developed by the researchers.

The main research question of this study was "Do year in college, major, gender, and race/ethnicity have an effect on teacher enmeshment in undergraduate students?" Teacher enmeshment was operationally defined as "strivings for intense, intimate attachments to teachers," as mentioned in articles examining the SITA (Levine & Saintonge, 1993, p. 492).

Descriptive statistics were used to examine overall responses to individual questions and summarize the demographic differences of the sample. The Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine differences among demographic variables on individual questions. Non-parametric statistics were used because the individual items required ordinal

responses (Miles & Banyard, 2007). When a summed score was used as the dependent variable, One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences among the demographic categories.

Participants

A convenience sample of 165 undergraduate and graduate students from education and psychology classes at a small, private liberal arts institution in the Northeast participated in the study. The sample was comprised of 144 students (87.3%) who self-identified as Caucasian and 21 students (12.7%) who self-identified with another racial/ethnic group (African American, Latino/a, Asian or Pacific Islander, or Other).

Thirty-six participants (21.8%) were male and 129 (78.2%) were female. Regarding year in college, 39 (23.6%) participants were first year students, 49 (29.7%) were sophomores, 27 (16.4%) were juniors, 26 (15.8%) were seniors, and 24 (14.5%) were graduate students. Sixty-two participants (37.6%) identified education as their major. Participants listing this major included aspiring teachers, school administrators, and school psychologists at the undergraduate and graduate level. There were 31 (18.8%) psychology undergraduate and graduate majors. The remaining participants included 29 (17.6%) who indicated they were double majors and 43 participants (26.1%) who had other majors in the sciences, liberal arts, or business.

Instrument

The measure used for this study was the 8-item Teacher Enmeshment subscale of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine & Saintonge, 1993). Like the rest of the measure, this sub-test uses a Likert scale, with five meaning "strongly agree" and one equating to "strongly disagree." Items in this sub-scale generally range from statements about having close relationships with teachers to feeling concern over teacher's opinions of one

(Levine & Saintonge, 1993). This sub-scale has been shown to have strong to moderate

correlations among clinical and nonclinical samples (Gnaulati & Heine, 2001; Levine &

Saintonge, 1993). A copy of this instrument can be found in Appendix A.

A demographic survey was also developed by the researchers. It included questions

about participants' gender, major and race. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix B.

Procedure

Students within an age range of 18-30 in education and psychology classes were asked to

participate in the study. The instrument was administered in the classes with faculty permission.

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Results

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Descriptive Statistics

The mean total score on the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine

& Saintonge, 1993) was 26.24. The median was 26, and the mode was 27. Table 1 shows the

median scores on each item by year in college.

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One major difference appeared with Item #3, "With my favorite professor, I can share

some of my most personal fears and concerns." For this item, Juniors had a median score of

approximately 2.7, compared with the Graduate Students who had a median score of 3.8.

Table 2 shows how median responses to individual questions varied by major.

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Like year in college, the college major groups generally had similar medians. One difference did exist for Item #5, or have a "special relationship with one professor that goes further than the average teacher-student bond." For that item, education majors and double majors had medians of 2.8 and 3.0, respectively, while psychology majors and "other" majors had medians of 2.3 and 2.2, respectively.

Table 3 shows the median scores on individual items by gender. As can be seen in the table, females tended to have higher median scores than males on six of the eight items. There were two items where this pattern was reversed. One of these items was "In school, I have a special relationship with a professor that goes further than the average teacher-student bond." The other was "My professors give me advice about my social life."

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Finally, as seen in Table 4, the median score of Caucasian students was higher than that of students representing other racial/ethnic groups.

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Differences between Groups on Overall Score and on Individual Items

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) found no significant differences between groups among the different demographic groups when the total teacher enmeshment score was used as the dependent variable.

When individual items were analyzed by major, two items showed significant results on the Kruskal-Wallis test. For item two ("One of my favorite professors is amazingly similar to me in personality"), a significant effect was noted, $H(3) = 7.86$, $p<.05$. For item 5 ("In school, I have a special relationship with one professor that goes further than the average teacher-student bond"), a significant effect was also found, $H(3) = 9.43$, $p<.05$. The Kruskal-Wallis test was also used to examine each item by year in college. No significant results were found.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine individual items by gender. For item 2 ("The professor's opinion of me as a person is very important to me"), a significant difference was found between males and females, $z = -2.71$, $p<.01$. For item 6 ("I worry about being disapproved of by my professors"), a significant difference was also found between males and females, $z = -2.49$, $p<.05$.

The Mann-Whitney U test was also used to examine individual items by race. For item 2 ("The professor's opinion of me as a person is very important to me"), a significant difference was found between Caucasian and "others", $z = -2.48$, $p<.05$. For item 4 ("One of my favorite professors is amazingly similar to me in personality"), a significant difference was found between Caucasian and "others", $z = -2.21$, $p<.05$.

Conclusions and Educational Implications

Results indicated that there are differences in teacher enmeshment among students from different demographic backgrounds. This may mean that some groups of students are more

inclined to engage in enmeshed relationship patterns with professors than others. For example, on items 2 and 6 on the 8-item Teacher Enmeshment subscale of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine & Saintonge, 1993), female students had higher responses than male students did. These responses indicated that female students displayed more teacher enmeshment on those items. This result differed from other studies, which compared total teacher enmeshment scores by gender and did not find significant results (Dwairy, 2004; Gnaulati & Heine, 2001). However, the results could be explained by studies which examined female dependency on others such as family (Geuvaise, Debry, & Liesense, 2000) and differences in interaction with faculty (Sax et al., 2005).

For race/ethnicity, significant differences were found on some individual items. For items 2 and 4, Caucasian students had significantly higher ranks than students from other race/ethnic groups did. These results indicated that Caucasian students showed more enmeshment with faculty on those items. This result differed from previous studies, which showed significant differences between total teacher enmeshment scores based on race/ethnicity (Gnaulati & Heine, 2001). This difference could be explained by the lack of diversity in this study's sample. However, the general pattern of Caucasian students displaying more enmeshment than students from other ethnic/race groups supports the findings of Gnaulati and Heine (2001). The researchers found

There are a number of limitations in this study that should be recognized and addressed in future studies including the use of a convenience sample and the small number of students from minority groups. Researchers compensated for the non-random sample by using a non-parametric significance test with individual questions (Huck & Cormier, 1996). Further research

should replicate this study with a random sample selected from a more diverse population of students.

Insights from the current study and future research have the potential to help college faculty understand the importance of balance in their relationships with students. For example, these findings could potentially help professors better balance their supervision of and relationships with students between being helpful and facilitating harmful dependency. This research could also be used by developmental researchers to look for other variables that might affect enmeshment patterns with authority figures outside of the family.

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Table 1

Median Scores on Individual Questions by Year in College

Year in College	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 8
First year	3.3	4.32	3.0	3.07	2.28	4.04	2.0	4.04
Sophomore	3.26	4.44	3.29	3.23	2.53	3.86	2.0	4.16
Junior	3.06	4.41	2.74	2.90	2.79	4.0	1.5	4.22
Senior	3.63	4.3	3.6	2.75	3.0	3.45	1.85	3.84
Graduate	2.94	4.42	3.8	2.93	2.67	3.87	1.76	3.58

Table 2

Median Scores on Individual Items by Major

College Major	Item 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Education	3.14	4.44	3.29	3.24	2.83	3.94	1.76	3.95
Double Major	3.47	4.42	3.39	2.67	3.0	3.94	2.0	4.09
Psychology	3.43	4.32	3.21	3.05	2.33	3.83	1.82	4.0
Other	3.10	4.33	3.05	2.90	2.22	3.76	1.91	4.03

Table 3

Median Scores on Individual Items by Gender

	Item 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Male	3.0	4.04	3.14	2.95	2.6	3.42	2.0	3.8
Female	3.3	4.46	3.26	3.04	2.56	4.0	1.8	4.06

Table 4

Median Scores on Individual Items by Race/Ethnicity

	Item 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Other	3.14	3.94	3.0	2.59	2.5	3.73	1.65	3.76
Caucasian	3.26	4.44	3.26	3.1	2.57	3.91	1.88	4.05

Revised Version of the SITA's Teacher Enmeshment Subscale

Student-Faculty Attitude Survey

Taken from the *Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence* (Levine & Saintonge, 1993).

For the following questions, please **CIRCLE the Number** of the response choice which best reflects how you feel about each of the statements, using the following scale:

> **1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Generally Disagree, 3=Slightly Agree,**
>
> **4=Generally Agree, 5=Strongly Agree**

When answering, please consider professors with whom you have a close relationship.

1. Sometimes I feel very sad about having to say goodbye to a professor I really like.

    1   2   3   4   5

2. The professor's opinion of me as a person is very important to me.

    1   2   3   4   5

3. With my favorite professor, I can share some of my most personal fears and concerns.

    1   2   3   4   5

4. One of my favorite professors is amazingly similar to me in personality.

    1   2   3   4   5

5. In school, I have a special relationship with one professor that goes further than the average teacher-student bond.

   1   2   3   4   5

6. I worry about being disapproved of by my professors.

   1   2   3   4   5

7. My professors give me advice about my social life.

   1   2   3   4   5

8. I would get upset if I found out my professor was mad at me or disappointed in me.

   1   2   3   4   5

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Faculty-Student Relationships

1. Please check the response that best describes your race/ethnicity:

____ African American

____ Caucasian

____ Hispanic/Latino

____ Asian or Pacific Islander

____ Other (Please specify in space on the right) _____

2. Are you

____ Male

____ Female

3. What year in college are you currently in?

____ First year

____ Sophomore

____ Junior

____ Senior

____ Graduate Student: What year? _____

4. College major: _____