



The role of social relationships in the association between adolescents' depressive symptoms and academic achievement

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ABSTRACT

While research has established that depression interferes with academic achievement, less is understood about the processes by which social relationships may buffer the relationship between depression and academic outcomes. In this study we examined the role of positive relationships in the school, family and peer contexts in the association between depressive symptoms and academic achievement among 894 adolescents aged 12–17 years living in Santiago, Chile. Depressive symptoms were associated with lower levels of academic achievement; parental monitoring, school belonging, positive mother relationships, and having academically inclined peers moderated this relationship, though some interactions differed by sex and age. Implications for promoting the academic success of adolescents experiencing depressive symptoms are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Depression among children and adolescents is one of the most overlooked and undertreated psychological disorders, despite its known devastating impact on academic, social and health outcomes (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998; Herman, Reinke, Parkin, Traylor, & Agarwal, 2009). Among adolescents, the point prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) ranges from 1% to 27% (see Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006 for a review), while the lifetime prevalence of MDD is estimated between 15% and 25% (Kessler, Avenevoli, & Merikangas, 2001; Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, Seeley, & Andrews, 1993). Several studies indicate that symptoms of depression are even more common; between 10% and 49% of adolescents report weekly depressive symptoms with higher levels of depressive symptoms reported among older and female adolescents (Saluja et al., 2004; Scheidt, Overpeck, Wyatt, & Aszman, 2000). Such experiences of emotional difficulty during adolescence can interfere with daily functioning, particularly at school (Roesser, Eccels, & Sameroff, 1998; Shochet et al., 2001; Weist, 1997). As such, adolescents' experience of depressive symptoms represents a pressing social concern.

The association between depressive symptoms and academic difficulty has been documented among many different populations

(e.g. rural U.S. adolescents (Farmer, Irvin, Sgammato, Dadisman, & Thompson, 2009), Chinese adolescents (Li & Zhang, 2008), Finnish adolescents (Pelkonen, Marttunen, Kaprio, Huurre, & Aro, 2008), Caucasian adolescents (Marcotte, Levesque, & Fortin, 2006), diverse, urban youth (Gore & Aseltine, 2003)). Studies find that higher levels of depressive symptoms and loneliness are associated with lower grades and achievement levels (e.g. Fergusson & Woodward, 2002; Frojd et al., 2008; Wampler, Munsch, & Adams, 2002). Despite this known relationship between internalizing behaviors like depression and negative academic outcomes, research aimed at discerning factors related to academic difficulty among at-risk youth almost exclusively focuses on externalizing behaviors like truancy and attention problems, largely neglecting examination of protective factors that may mitigate the link between internalizing behaviors and academic difficulty (Reinke & Herman, 2002). Studies that do examine protective factors for academic achievement tend to examine these factors individually without consideration to how these factors may jointly impact academic difficulty (Johnson, MCGue, & Iacono, 2006) and without thought to whether particular factors might be more salient protective factors in comparison to others. Further, research aimed at identifying factors that may ameliorate depressive symptoms typically focuses on internal processes that influence depressive symptoms and pays less attention to contextual influences including psychosocial and sociostructural factors (Herman et al., 2009). This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by

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examining the role that social relationships in different contexts play in the association between depressive symptoms and academic achievement among adolescents.

1.1. Importance of social relationships among adolescents

Baumeister and Leary (1995) identify the “need to belong” as a fundamental human motivation crucial to cognitive processes and positive affect. Similarly, Social Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) posits relatedness, a desire for high quality social relationships, as a psychological need central to academic motivation and well-being. Numerous research studies attest to the importance of supportive relationships in the family, school and peer contexts to emotional well-being and academic success, particularly during adolescence (e.g., Han et al., 2012; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Indeed, Roeser et al. (1998) posit that the degree to which an environment fulfills individuals' need for relatedness is critical during adolescence when individuals are especially susceptible to poor stage-environment fit.

Within the family context, a positive mother–child relationship has been found to serve as a buffer for depressive symptoms over time (Fanti, Henrich, Brookmeyer, & Kuperminc, 2008). Similarly, parental support and overall family support are related to lower levels of adolescent depression and more positive affect (Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez-Salvat, & Silsby, 2002; Marcotte, Marcotte & Bouffard, 2003). Parental support and family support are also related to greater academic orientation, higher grades, greater connection to school and higher overall levels of academic success (Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Kenny et al., 2002; Wentzel, 1998). In keeping with these findings, research also demonstrates that parental monitoring is associated with higher levels of academic success and emotional well-being (Amato & Fowler, 2002; Coley & Hoffman, 1996; Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, Chen, & Lopez-Lena, 2003).

Within the school context, research shows that school belonging contributes both to increased academic achievement (Anderman, 2003; Ibanez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005) and to lower levels of internalizing behaviors, depressive symptoms, and feelings of loneliness (Chipuer, 2001; McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008; Ozer, 2005). Teacher support and involvement in the classroom are positively associated with students' sense of school belonging, and also appear to have direct effects on academic engagement and achievement (Brown & Evans, 2002; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; Roeser et al., 1998). Lower levels of teacher support are also associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007).

Within the peer context, lower levels of peer harassment and rejection are associated with higher levels of academic achievement (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; French & Conrad,

2001). In addition, lower levels of peer victimization, higher levels of peer acceptance and having more friends are associated with fewer depressive and internalizing symptoms (Bauman, 2008; Klima & Repetti, 2008; Schwartz, Gorman, Duong, & Nakamoto, 2008). Higher levels of peer support are also associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms (Klima & Repetti, 2008; Way & Chen, 2000).

As they transition through adolescence, there is some evidence that youth may experience decreasing levels of social support (DeWit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011; Way et al., 2007) and increasing levels of depressive symptoms (Kessler et al., 2001; Scheidt et al., 2000). However, there are differences between males and females as well as young and older adolescents that need to be taken into consideration. Although social support is particularly salient for adolescent females (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Reddy et al., 2003; Schraedley, Gotlib, & Hayward, 1999), this does not mean that social relationships are not important for males. In fact, DeWit et al. (2011) found that adolescent boys showed a steeper decline in peer support compared to females following the transition to high school, and that this decline was associated with depression. With regard to age, Young, Berenson, Cohen, and Garcia (2005) noted a stronger association between peer support and emotional well-being among older versus younger adolescents. Collectively, these findings suggest that it is important to include sex and age when investigating the role of social relationships in the association between depression and academic achievement.

1.2. Current study

Although the importance of supportive relationships in the family, school and peer contexts to adolescents' emotional well-being and academic success has been documented by many studies, few studies have examined the protective role of these social relationships in the association between depressive symptoms and academic achievement or have simultaneously compared the role of social relationships from several different contexts. Notably, Stice, Ragan, and Randall (2004) find that while depression contributes to lower levels of peer support during adolescence, parental support seems to decrease the risk for depression, suggesting that the extent to which social relationships may moderate the relationship between depressive symptoms and academic achievement may vary by context. Due to known sex and age differences in the association between social relationships and both academic achievement and depressive symptoms during adolescence, it is also important to consider whether the protective role of social relationships may vary by age or sex. Finally, given numerous studies pointing to the fact that lower socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (e.g. Goodman, 1999; Lorant et al., 2003), SES was controlled for in all analyses.

Based on a socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) and a strength-based approach (Cowger & Snively, 2001; Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2004), this study sought to elucidate whether positive relationships and social supports within the family, school and peer contexts may serve as protective factors in the association between depressive symptoms and academic difficulty. This study adds to previous research by considering the influence of social relationships across multiple developmental contexts and how these factors may individually or jointly serve as protective factors in the relationship between depressive symptoms and academic difficulty. Based on previous research, we predict that depressive symptoms will be associated with lower levels of academic achievement. We further expect that positive relationships and social supports in the family, school and peer contexts will moderate the relationship between depressive symptoms and academic achievement. We also anticipate that sex and age may further moderate the observed moderation effects of social relationships on the association between depressive symptoms and academic achievement.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	SD	Percent
Female	–	–	48%
Age	14.4	1.48	
SES	0.15	2.74	
Academic achievement	2.96	0.56	
Depressive symptoms (DS)	0.33	0.31	
School belonging	3.28	0.43	
Teacher support	3.22	0.58	
Parental monitoring	3.96	0.74	
Relationship with mother	3.27	0.49	
Relationship with father	3.21	0.53	
Peers – acad. oriented	2.94	0.67	
Peers – acting out	2.23	0.65	

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