

Transition from Home to College

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Abstract: *Family Systems theory encompasses the assumption that a change in one family member leads to a change in one or more other family members. This is often the phenomenon that occurs within the familial system when a child leaves home to attend college. Another assumption from this theory includes the concept that families can only be examined or analyzed within their entire context. The ways in which open, closed, and random family boundaries affect one family member's transition into college (this being an individual child attending college as a first year freshman) and the changes that affect the family system will be examined. Identifying the existing boundaries by which the family operates, in addition to investigating how this affects the family and the individual child, is crucial. It helps to understand how a freshman student readjusts during the first year of post-secondary education.*

Introduction

In a past study, Kenny and Donaldson (1991) looked at the relationship between family structure and how college freshmen were able to function on social and psychological levels. Methods utilized within this research included a 55-item Parental Attachment Questionnaire, Family Structure Survey, Texas Social Behavior Inventory, as well as Hopkins Symptom Checklist.

The sample size for this study involved 226 first-year college students with 173 female and 53 male students participating. Of this sample, 78% were eighteen years old, 15% were seventeen years of age, 6% were 19 years, and 1% was 20 years of age. Eight-one percent of the students studied were Caucasian, 5% were African American or Asian American, 6% were Hispanic American, and 3% of the sample consisted of other ethnic groups (Kenney & Donaldson, 1991).

Results from this study included findings that college women reported closer attachment toward their parents compared to college men, and college women were more positive in their parental attachment than college men. Positive parental attachment in the absence of both parental/marital conflict and familial anxiety related to the separation were associated with high social competence and low levels of maladaptive psychological symptoms for female college students. It was also found that college females, who reported moderate levels of family stress associated with the separation, still maintained personal social competence and acquired parental support. These findings are similar to assumptions based on attachment and family-structure (family systems) theories (1991).

Therefore, the question the present study tried to answer relates to family boundaries and the impact the transition into college has on first-year freshman. We attempted to measure the correlation between family boundaries and adaptation to change for first-year college freshmen. Family Systems Theory encompasses the assumption that a change in one family member leads to a change in one or more other family members. When a child leaves home to attend college, this is a phenomenon that occurs within the familial system.

Another assumption from this theory that ties into the research includes the concept that families can only be examined or analyzed within their entire context. A family researcher/practitioner must look at the familial system as a whole in order to understand family content and relationships. Within the research, we examined how open, closed, and random

family boundaries affected one family member's transition into college (this being an individual child attending college as a first-year freshman).

In addition, we analyzed how this change affected the family system. As potential family life professionals, one cannot generalize how young individuals adapt to the university system until these professionals examine the family context that the child experienced when he or she left home and transitioned into college life.

It is important to identify existing boundaries and how the family operates as well as identify how it affects the family and the individual child. This, in turn, allows one to understand how a freshman student can readjust to a new lifestyle during his or her first-year college experience.

The proposed hypothesis for the study is that the more open the family boundaries become, the easier is the transition into college. The variables for this study included family boundaries and transition into college.

Methods

The variables within the present study are operationally defined in the following manner. Family boundaries are categorized as open, closed, or random. When rules are flexible, developmentally appropriate to all family members, and exhibit morphogenesis (family is open to change) over time, open family boundaries are utilized within a familial unit. In these families, feedback is especially crucial, and the opinion of each family member is equally valued. Also, communication of these views is expressed freely and openly. Family boundaries are permeable. Members can move from one environment to another (such as from home to college) and not suffer negative family-based ramifications. In addition, individuals whose families possess open familial boundaries see change as a positive and necessary event.

Those who are apart of a closed family system perceive change as problematic and seek a morphostatic (resistant to change) environment. Familial feedback and communication are severely limited and perceived as satisfying the status quo. Rules are strict and usually do not change from one family life cycle stage to the next. Consensus is greatly valued within this family boundary style and family members are restricted from moving comfortably from one living environment to another. Change is seen as inherently negative and subject to a family-perceived crisis.

Random family boundaries exist when a family ceases to create consistent and clearly defined rules. Structure and consistency lack within the temporal arena of this familial unit. The communication style is usually expressed as a neutral, accidental event where members lack negotiation and collaborative decision-making skills. Change is seen as being dealt with when time deems convenient. Family members are free to move from one system to another without feedback or communication from other family members.

College transition is defined as being a first-year freshman exhibiting an easy, moderate, or hard transitional experience from home to college life. In addition, freshman attitudes toward overall college environment, dorm life, roommates, money, academics, and social activity were included within the operational definition of the collegiate transition.

Sample and Procedure

The population consisted of first-year University of Wisconsin-Stout freshman, between the ages of 17 and 19 years. The study sample included a non-random, non-probability quota and accidental procedure in which 32 students were asked to participate in the research study. The sample consisted of 21 Caucasian females and 12 Caucasian males. Of this sample, 71.9% were eighteen years old and 28.1% were nineteen years of age. Of the college students surveyed at University of Wisconsin-Stout, 100.0% were first semester freshman. Also, 96.9% of the students surveyed lived on campus in residence halls and 30.1% of students resided off campus.

The instrument used to assess the first-year collegiate transition consisted of a survey. The survey was based on a five-point Likert scale that asked students the following: personal

attitudes and beliefs regarding family rules, opinions on family rule formation, communication with immediate family members, familial adaptation to change, roommates, college social gatherings, access to monetary funds, college staff, and campus services, as well as overall perception of transition to college thus far. The Likert scale survey ratings ranged from 1 (strongly disagreeing) to 5 (strongly agreeing).

Another component included in the survey was a semantic differential scale; it measured student's feelings of involvement and independence since entering college. It also identified feelings of support, organization, loneliness, confidence, outgoingness, knowledgeability, isolation, and satisfaction while attending college.

The measures used within the survey appeared to express face validity. The responses to survey questions that addressed the type of familial boundaries appeared to be positively correlated with responses to questions regarding overall college transition. The instrument appeared to express consistency and was a useful tool to gather this type of data. Reliability was assessed using Chronbach's alpha reliability test. For this particular research study, .4202 reliability was expressed for family rules, .6199 for college related aspects, .6982 for family communication, and .7471 for individual college student characteristics listed within the semantic differential portion of our instrument. Considering the limited number of variables assessed together, reliability was deemed existent within this study.

Data was collected the week of November 8, 2004. The process for data collection included the selection of a primary source method in which a collective questionnaire was distributed to first-year college freshman ranging in age from 17 to 19 years. With instructor approval, the surveys were dispersed to two UW-Stout Freshman English Composition courses.

Results

Data analysis was completed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 11.5). Study results were compared and analyzed using means, grand means, modes, medians, reliability and frequency scales, as well as recoding and correlation statistical assessments. As shown in Table 1, the variables are discussed in relation to the survey items. All variables listed in the semantic differential portion of our survey are listed as personal characteristics for college students. Descriptive statistical data analyses for variables tested are read as the following: The more open the family boundaries are result in a higher mean; the more closed the family boundaries are result in a lower mean.

Table 1
Survey items and their association with the Likert scale.

Survey Items	Variable
4,5,6	grand mean for family rules
7,8,10	grand mean for the communication with immediate family members.
11,12,13,14,15	College (attitudes toward college environment overall, dorm life, roommates, money, academics, and social activity).
9	family adaptation to change

Family Systems Theory was used as a framework for our research; our original hypothesis included the assumption that the more open the family boundaries, the easier the transition can be for a first-year college freshmen. To evaluate the association between family boundaries and college transition, a bivariate analysis in accordance with Pearson's correlation analysis were used for this study.

Results indicated that two of the three concepts related to Family Systems Theory were significantly correlated with positive personal characteristics listed within the semantic differential portion of the survey. The variable of family communication exhibited a high positive correlation of .624 to personal characteristics of the college students assessed. The variable of family adaptation to change expressed a positive correlation of .421 to freshman personal characteristics. The third concept, family rules, did not seem to make a significant impact on a first-year freshman's transition into college (.188).

Discussion

Taking this into consideration, we conclude that our hypothesis is partially supported in that the more open the family boundaries, the easier the transition to college for first-year freshman students. The results found in our research study suggest that there is a correlation between the openness of family boundaries and ease of college transition. When reviewing the data, college transition seemed to be easier when family communication and family adaptation was positive. Therefore, when a student's family has open boundaries, the student often has an easier time transitioning from home to college life. On the other hand, students who have minimal communication within his or her family tend to have a more difficult time adjusting to new life situations (ie. College).

Family Systems Theory emphasizes the family system as a whole and the interrelations between individuals. Therefore, families that are open and have permeable boundaries tend to accept change and find creative ways to adjust. They use communication skills well and try to help each individual within the system move towards change. These families may encourage the idea of college as a great opportunity to better one's self and open new doors for the future. Therefore, college students that have adjusted well to the transition may have come to college with a more positive and optimistic attitude towards the change. It has made it easier for them to adjust, and may be possible that open families may produce more confident children.

Limitations

Although our data supported our hypothesis as well as some of the Family Systems Theory, we feel that the findings were insufficient due to the following limitations.

1. Our sample size was too small.
2. We did not take into consideration gender and its possible effects on the study.
3. We did not take into consideration the effects ethnicity may have had on our study, primarily because all of our subjects were Caucasian.
4. Our survey did not look at the possibility of living alone.
5. We were unable to analyze random families. We only analyzed open and closed families.
6. The possibility of self-reporting bias, or the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Throughout the research process, we have learned that one's family of origin may have a significant effect on the transition from one life experience to the next. Through this study, we are able to see the importance that good communication skills have on ways in which people adjust. Families with children leaving for college and families who are more open to change tend to have a better time moving and adjusting through various life stages.

Our findings partially supported the assumptions of Family Systems Theory, which included communication between each individual as well as adaptation to inherent change. Due to the limitations of our research, we were unable to determine if the theory's assumption on rules were supported by our research; whether or not rules were clearly stated, and if everyone had input in the process of the rule making within the family. Because the assumption of rules was unclear, we were unable to determine the kind of family boundaries.

Some of the practical implications of our research include taking the information that we have found and using it on other campuses throughout the nation. It can be used to help

individuals who are having a difficult time with school and help them find ways to adjust. Such surveys could be distributed by residence hall coordinators, the administration, and counseling centers on campus to help assess some of the problems students may be having in their academics; therefore, the problems may be due poor adjustment. Although maladjustment is not always the culprit behind poor academics, it may play a substantial role in how involved and focused one a student is in his or her work.

Steps could be taken to help those individuals adjust. This could include an attempt to get the family more involved in their child's life by offering family days. A family day is an event where the family is invited to spend the day with their child and be involved in the college experience. Also, surveys, such as the one we used in our study, could be given to students in high school for those students planning to go on to college. Assessment of these surveys could determine whether or not pre-college programs would be a beneficial start to further advancement of their education.

Implications for Future Research

Future research in this area may be very useful in determining the types of programs that would be helpful .0009 Tc ms3e adjustment from home to college students struggling with the transition. It would be important to take .0to consideration the limitations of our study and apply new ideas for future studies. When evaluating the results, it may be helpful for new studies to look at ethnicity09 Ty, gender, and the geographic locationthe subjects as well as the size of the high school,

References

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