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PREDICTING RISK BEHAVIOR IN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A FUNCTION OF FAMILY DYSFUNCTION



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Predicting Risk Behavior in College Students: A Function of Family Dysfunction

Synopsis:

Two measures of elements of family dysfunction (scores on Minuchin's "family Dynamics" scale and naïve rater ratings of student free writing about how his or her family would handle a family crisis) were gathered along with scores on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Results showed that higher self-reported levels of dysfunction of Minuchin's scale were positively correlated with scores on multiple subscales of the Risk Behavior Survey.

Predicting Risk Behavior in College Students: A Function of Family Dysfunction

Much attention has been paid to elements of family environment and the physical and mental health of children (e.g., Blair, 1996; Minuchin, Rosman & Baker, 1978; Lucey & Lam, 2012). Minuchin's early work likely set the tone for assessing elements of family dysfunction (the precursor, perhaps, to the term dysfunctional family) and serious illnesses in children such as eating disorders and substance use disorders. Work with troubled adolescents has also shown that family environment is a significant predictor of suicidal ideation and attempted suicide (Lucey & Lam, 2012). But not much of this work has been done on those making the transition from a home environment to a college environment – first year college students. The current project measured dynamics of families (Minuchin's characteristic of enmeshment, rigidity, lack of conflict resolution and triangulation) and self-reported risk behaviors using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey – a nationally administered instrument. Additionally, participants were asked to consider a scenario in which a negative event has happened in his or her family and to write about why that event would have occurred and what his or her family would likely do in response to that event. Naïve raters used definitions of Minuchin's Family Dynamic characteristics to “score” the essays for elements of dysfunction.

It was hypothesized that higher scores on the dynamics of family dysfunction (both on Minuchin's scale and in the free write ratings) would correlate with higher scores on all of the elements of youth risk (safety, violence, suicide, tobacco use, drug use, sexual practices, eating patterns, and physical activity) as assessed by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. In addition, it was hypothesized that higher scores on Minuchin's characteristics of family dysfunction as assessed by self-report scale scores would correlate with higher levels of those characteristics in the free essay as rated by the naïve raters. As predicted, higher levels of family dysfunction (participants self-reporting higher levels of triangulation, lack of conflict resolution, rigidity and enmeshment) were associated with higher overall levels of risk as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Not all elements of youth risk, however, correlated with family dynamic characteristics. A full exploration of the correlation matrix will be presented. Those participants rating their families as having higher levels of the elements of family dysfunction, also wrote essays about how their families would handle a negative event that were rated by naïve raters as demonstrating higher levels of those dynamics as well.