

Article

Examining the Role of Social Support for Adolescents from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds in a College Access Program

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Abstract: Prior research has shown that college access programs help to increase college-going for youth from lower-income backgrounds. In addition to increasing college access, these programs also provide social support to youth and impact their academic and non-academic outcomes. Guided by risk and resilience frameworks, the present study examined social support from the college access program as a promotive factor for adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The results indicated that social support was positively associated with personal resources, future college-going, and confidence in academic abilities. Overall, the current findings affirm the importance of investigating social support for adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These findings also have implications for future research related to social support from college access programs.

Keywords: social support; promotive factors; adolescent outcomes; personal resources



Citation: Gale, A. Examining the Role of Social Support for Adolescents from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds in a College Access Program. *Adolescents* **2021**, *1*, 391–399. <https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents1040029>

Academic Editor: Laura L Hayman

Received: 2 July 2021

Accepted: 10 September 2021

Published: 23 September 2021

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time of rapid physical, social, and cognitive changes, making this period an especially vulnerable time for adolescents to experience negative outcomes [1–3]. Among adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the various changes associated with adolescent development occur within settings that are not optimal for successful development [4,5]. These adolescents are more likely to experience deleterious outcomes because of their socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., lower school and neighborhood quality). Given the deleterious impact of low socioeconomic status (SES) on adolescent outcomes, it is important to identify factors that lessen the effects of risk for these adolescents. Prior research has shown that social support from trusted adults is an important protective factor for adolescents who have been exposed to risk [6–8]. In particular, researchers have found that social support from non-parent adults contributes to positive outcomes for adolescents who have been exposed to risk as well [9]. The present study contributes to the literature on promotive factors and risk for adolescents by examining the role of social support on adolescents' outcomes.

1.1. Guiding Framework: Theoretical Framework

Risk and resilience frameworks guide this study's conceptualization of risk and promotive factors among adolescents. These frameworks suggest that risk factors may increase the likelihood that individuals will achieve negative outcomes, while protective and promotive factors operate to eliminate or reduce the negative effects of a risk factor on an outcome [10,11]. Within the protective factor model are promotive factors, which directly impact adolescent outcomes in the face of risk. I conceptualize low socioeconomic status as a risk factor and social support as a promotive factor.

Ref. [10] refer to the process of overcoming risk as resilience and note that a fundamental requirement of resilience is the "presence of both risks and promotive factors that either help bring about a positive outcome or reduce or avoid a negative outcome" (p. 399). Promotive factors are the same as protective factors in their relation to promoting resilience. In addition, [10] differentiate between the compensatory, protective, and challenge models of resilience. In the protective model, resilience occurs when a protective factor ameliorates

or reduces the effects of a risk on an outcome. In the challenge model of resilience, no protective or promotive factors are in operation. Instead, in this model, exposure to lower levels of risk allows the individual to learn how to overcome it but are not exposed to so much risk that resilience is unattainable. In the compensatory model, a promotive factor counteracts or operates in the opposite direction of a risk factor and involves a direct effect of a promotive factor on an outcome. The current study utilizes the compensatory model, which suggests that a promotive factor may counteract the harm associated with a particular risk factor. The compensatory model is appropriate for this study because it examines social support as a promotive factor for youth from lower SES backgrounds who may face risk because of being low income.

1.2. Lower Socioeconomic Status as a Risk Factor

Socioeconomic status (SES) is generally conceptualized as a measure of income, education, occupation, or some combination of these factors [12]. Past research has found that SES is related to academic achievement [13], neighborhood quality [5], school quality [13], economic stress, chaos in the home, violence in the community [4], health, and overall functioning [14]. With respect to academic achievement, SES is directly linked to academic achievement measures such as math achievement and science achievement [15]. In particular, studies have found that adolescents from lower SES backgrounds come from families that often lack the parenting and financial resources to be academically successful [4].

Further, research has shown that SES is also related to adolescents' personal resources [16]. Personal resources refer to the intrapersonal capacities of the individual that contribute to their overall well-being and outcomes. For instance, scholars have shown that self-efficacy (i.e., individual's judgement of their ability to cope with different situations) is related to a number of positive outcomes for adolescents (e.g., academic achievement and optimism) [17]. In the current study, self-efficacy, communication, and critical thinking are examined as personal resources.

Finally, scholars have established a consistent link between SES and college attainment [18]. Similar to the link between SES and academic achievement, a lack of financial resources makes the attainment of a college degree difficult. Indeed, for many adolescents and their families, achieving a college degree is almost impossible because of a lack of resources, knowledge about the college application process, or financial resources needed to pay for college [19]. In the present study, adolescents' perceptions of future college-going are examined.

1.3. Social Support and Risk

Social support refers to a person's beliefs about supportive behaviors from people in their social network [8,20]. While the mechanisms linking social support to more positive outcomes are multivariate, scholars suggest that emotional support is among the most impactful components of social support [6]. In general, studies have linked social support to a number of adolescent outcomes including academic outcomes [9], internalizing problems, and depression [7,21]. Among adolescents that have been exposed to risk, social support has been also found to improve outcomes [22]. For instance, [22] found that social support from adults was related to higher academic achievement for adolescents from lower income families.

Similarly, a review by [23] found that social support from adults was a positive force for at-risk youth including adolescents in the foster care system—a population of youth known to be especially at risk for negative outcomes because of caregiver maltreatment. In particular, the presence of a non-parent adult-child relationship in the form of a supportive relationship was related to a number of positive outcomes including school attainment, health, and overall resilience [23] and psychological well-being [24]. Similarly [25] found that social support from program personnel, foster parents, and workers increased the likelihood that foster care youth will complete high school, be employed, and not to be

arrested. Taken together, the extant literature on social support suggests that it is very important for adolescents from lower socioeconomic status.

1.4. College Access Programs and Social Support

While prior research has shown that social support may come from parents [26], family [20], and peers [27], a burgeoning literature has shown that non-parent adults also provide social support [28]. In response to issues of college access, many universities have established college access programs (CAPs). CAPs seek to improve college acceptance and enrolment through the improvement of academic achievement including test scores, GPA, and high school graduation for youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds by providing programming, including academic mentoring, financial counseling for families, test preparation, and tuition assistance [29]. In addition to improving college access and providing academic programming, one understudied function of CAPs is the social support that they can provide for participants [30]. Indeed, CAPs may increase social capital (i.e., social networks which can provide access to other types of capital) by surrounding youth with a community of people who are invested in the success of their child [31].

Wolverine Pathways, Princeton University Preparatory Program, and Rutgers Future Scholars are all examples of college access programs that surround youth and their families with a community of people who are invested in the success of their child, including educated professionals and similarly ambitious peers. In some cases, these programs take students onto college campuses and allow them to interact with college students and professors. Yet, despite evidence of the social support provided by CAPs, little research has examined the role of social support on CAP participant outcomes.

The Present Study

The goal of the current study is to examine the promotive effects of social support, in the context of a college access program, for adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds for a number of outcomes. Although research has shown that CAPs provide direct academic benefits to students (e.g., college acceptance) through programming, there is a dearth of research examining (1) the social support provided by CAPs and (2) the positive effects of these programs on adolescent outcomes outside of college acceptance. Given previous research demonstrating the benefits of social support for adolescents' outcomes, the association between social support and adolescent outcomes was investigated. Specifically, three types of adolescent outcomes were examined: academic outcomes, personal resources, and future college-going.

First, the associations between social support and each of three academic outcomes (i.e., GPA, grades, and confidence in academic abilities) were examined. Previous studies have shown that more social support is associated with a number of academic outcomes [8,9]. Next, I examined the association between social support and each of three personal resources (i.e., self-efficacy, communication, and critical thinking). While previous studies have shown that social support reduces psychological issues such as depression and internalizing [21], little research has examined the association between social support and personal resources. The current investigation seeks to address this gap. Lastly, because the primary goal of CAPs is for participants to go to college, the association between social support and participants' beliefs about someday going to college was also assessed.

While it is expected that social support will be associated with all three outcomes, because the emotional component of social support is the most potent [6], it is hypothesized that social support will be most strongly associated with personal resources. Given that the goal of CAPs is college access [29] and programming may focus on this goal, a positive association between social support and future college-going is expected. Finally, the pathway through which social support influences academic outcomes is likely more complex than for other outcomes. In particular, improvements in academic attainment may require longer-term and continuous support over and above emotional support. Such improvements may include factors like financial aid and academic tutoring. Thus, because

the current study does not use longitudinal data, no specific hypotheses with respect to the link between social support and academic outcomes are made.

2. Procedures

Data for this study were taken from a sample of participants from a pre-college program. Students were recruited from public middle and high schools in lower SES and urban areas in a large state in the eastern United States. Following receiving parental consent, students self-selected to be a part of the study. These adolescents were recruited from five middle schools located in the same state in which the college access program was implemented. Students in the program are provided with mentoring and other academic supports from the seventh grade through high school. Those who successfully complete the program are accepted into the university that sponsored the program with full tuition remission.

2.1. Participants

The overall sample for the current study was ($N = 316$) participants, mean age = 14.47, $SD = 1.402$. The sample consisted of American Indian/Alaska Native (2%), Asian (9%), Black/African American (26%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%), White (including Middle Eastern) (11%), Latino/Hispanic (47%), and Other Race/Ethnicity (4%). Approximately 66.8% ($n = 211$) of the sample was female. While there is no specific income requirement for participants in the college access program, participants must not have had anyone in their family attend college and not be able to afford college tuition. Thus, the entire sample consists of adolescents from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

2.2. Measures

Data for each of the following measures were collected through self-report questionnaires. A summary of each measure is provided below.

Academic outcomes. Participants' GPA, grades, and confidence in academic abilities were assessed in the current study.

Grade Point Average (GPA). Participants reported their GPA by responding to the question—"Which category best describes your average GPA last year?" Participants responded to this question using a nine-point scale using a six-item scale with values ranging from below 1.0 (1) to 4.0–3.5 (5).

Grades. Participants reported their grades by responding to a single question- "Which category best describes your average grade last year?" Participants responded to this question using a nine-point scale, ranging from A (93–100), the highest grade a student could report, to D (69 or below), the lowest grade a student could report.

Confidence in academic abilities. Confidence in academic abilities was a measure of participants' confidence in their ability to complete difficult academic tasks. This scale was adapted from the McCue-Herlihy Academic Confidence Scale [32]. A sample item for this scale is "Maintain good grades (at least a B or better) in most courses". Participants responded to each prompt using a four-point scale ranging from definitely unable to do this (1) to very confident I can do this (4). Scores were recoded so that higher scores on this scale indicate greater confidence in participants' academic abilities. The Cronbach's alpha for this composite scale in the current sample was 0.865.

Personal resources. Personal resources refer to characteristics of the individual. Three personal resources (i.e., self-efficacy, communication, and critical thinking) were examined.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was a measure of participants' beliefs about their ability to meet the challenges in their lives. This scale was adapted from the General Self-Efficacy Scale [33]. A sample item for this scale is "I am confident that I could deal well with unexpected events." Participants responded to each prompt using a four-point scale ranging from not true at all (1) to exactly true (4). Higher values on this scale were indicative of more confidence that they are able to meet the challenges in their lives. The Cronbach's alpha for this composite scale in the current sample was 0.835.

Communication. The communication measure is an adaptation of the Communication Scale [34]. The scale was designed for adolescents and has been validated with this population. This scale has twelve items. A sample item for this scale is “I find it easy to get my point across.” Participants responded to each prompt using a four-point scale ranging from never (1) to always (4). Higher scores on this scale were indicative of better communications skills. The Cronbach’s alpha for this composite scale in the current sample was 0.702.

Critical thinking. Critical thinking refers to the ability to analyze and evaluate complex issues. The critical thinking measure was drawn from the Skills for Everyday Living Survey [35]. This scale consisted of five items and was designed for an adolescent population. A sample item for this scale is “I can easily express my thoughts on a problem.” Participants responded to each prompt using a four-point scale ranging from never (1) to always (4). Higher scores on this scale were indicative of better critical thinking skills. The Cronbach’s alpha for this composite scale in the current sample was 0.771.

Social support. Social support was measured using a six-item scale developed by the college access program. A sample item for this scale is “RFS staff to go out of their way to help scholars.” Participants responded to each prompt using a five-point scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). Higher scores on this scale were indicative of more social support. The Cronbach’s alpha for this composite scale in the current sample was 0.827.

Future college-going. Participants reported on their beliefs about whether they will go to college in the future. This scale consisted three items and a sample item for this scale is “I believe I will get into college.” Participants responded to each prompt using a four-point scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (4). Higher scores correspond to participants’ beliefs that they will go to college in the future. The Cronbach’s alpha for this composite scale in the current sample was 0.868.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive and Correlations

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all study variables are reported in Table 1. Average scores for social support, each of the academic outcomes, personal resources, and future college-going measures were all above the mid-point of their scales. With respect to correlations, there were significant correlations between social support and all personal resource measures and the future college-going measure. Social support was not correlated with either GPA or grades.

Table 1. Means and correlations among key study constructs.

| Variable | Mean (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|---|
| 1. Grades | 5.58 (1.54) | - | | | | | | | |
| 2. GPA | 1.53 (0.59) | 0.696 ** | - | | | | | | |
| 3. Confidence in academic ability | 3.31 (0.37) | 0.144 * | 0.199 ** | - | | | | | |
| 4. Self-efficacy | 3.17 (0.43) | 0.018 | 0.066 | 0.583 ** | - | | | | |
| 5. Communication | 3.32 (0.35) | 0.020 | 0.095 | 0.555 ** | 0.553 ** | - | | | |
| 6. Critical thinking | 3.18 (0.48) | 0.003 | 0.163 * | 0.609 ** | 0.612 ** | 0.644 ** | - | | |
| 7. Future college-going | 3.78 (0.39) | 0.015 | 0.107 | 0.435 ** | 0.369 ** | 0.259 ** | 0.281 ** | - | |
| 8. Social support | 4.50 (0.55) | 0.050 | 0.053 | 0.268 ** | 0.335 ** | 0.310 ** | 0.349 ** | 0.149 * | - |

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

3.2. Regression Analyses for Promotive Effects of Social Support

Ordinary least squares regression was used to examine the association between whether social support was associated with each dependent variable. Each regression model included participants’ gender and race as control variables. The complete results for each of the regressions are reported in Tables 2 and 3. The first set of regressions examined the associations between social support and academic outcomes (i.e., grade point average,

grades, and confidence in academic abilities). Analyses revealed that social support was not associated with participants' grade point average ($\beta = 0.058$, $p = 0.428$) or grades ($\beta = 0.049$, $p < 0.05$). However, social support was associated with confidence in academic abilities ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.01$). Social support and controls explained 13.2% of the variance in confidence in academic abilities $F(3194) = 17.182$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of regression analyses for the association between social support and academic outcomes.

| Variable | GPA | | | Grades | | | Confidence in Academic Abilities | | |
|--------------------------------|----------|-------|---------|----------|-------|---------|----------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| | <i>b</i> | SE | β | <i>b</i> | SE | β | <i>b</i> | SE | β |
| Gender | −0.065 | 0.089 | −0.053 | −0.210 | 0.233 | −0.065 | −0.172 | 0.053 | −0.216 ** |
| Race | 0.030 | 0.022 | 0.100 | 0.005 | 0.056 | 0.007 | 0.020 | 0.013 | 0.104 |
| Social support | −0.062 | 0.078 | −0.058 | 0.140 | 0.204 | 0.049 | 0.194 | 0.047 | 0.278 ** |
| R ² | | 0.015 | | | 0.007 | | | 0.132 | |
| F for change in R ² | | 0.589 | | | 0.432 | | | 9.822 ** | |

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Summary of regression analyses for the association between social support and personal resources.

| Variable | Communication | | | Critical Thinking | | | Self-Efficacy | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----------|----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| | <i>b</i> | SE | β | <i>b</i> | SE | β | <i>b</i> | SE | β |
| Gender | 0.013 | 0.049 | 0.018 | −0.126 | 0.067 | −0.122 | −0.190 | 0.059 | −0.211 ** |
| Race | −0.025 | 0.012 | −0.145 * | −0.050 | 0.016 | −0.203 ** | −0.026 | 0.014 | −0.119 |
| Social support | 0.204 | 0.043 | 0.318 ** | 0.329 | 0.059 | 0.362 ** | 0.274 | 0.052 | 0.345 ** |
| R ² | | 0.117 | | | 0.180 | | | 0.174 | |
| F for change in R ² | | 8.589 ** | | | 14.214 ** | | | 13.617 ** | |

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

The next set of regressions analyzed the associations between social support and personal resource variables (i.e., self-efficacy, communication, and critical thinking). Regression results revealed that social support was associated with communication ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.01$), critical thinking ($\beta = 0.362$, $p < 0.01$), and self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.345$, $p < 0.01$). In this model, social support and controls explained 11.7% of the variance in communication $F(3194) = 8.589$, $p < 0.001$, 18% of the variance in critical thinking $F(3194) = 14.214$, $p < 0.001$, and 17.4% of the variance in self-efficacy $F(3194) = 13.617$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 3).

The final regression examined the association between social support and future college-going. The results of this regression indicated that social support was associated with participants' future college-going ($\beta = 0.345$, $p < 0.05$). In this regression, social support and controls only explained 5.5% of the variance in future college-going $F(3194) = 3.778$, $p < 0.05$ (see Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of regression analyses for the association between social support and future college-going.

| Variable | <i>b</i> | SE | β |
|--------------------------------|----------|---------|----------|
| Gender | −0.123 | 0.057 | −0.150 * |
| Race | −0.019 | 0.014 | −0.095 |
| Social support | 0.113 | 0.050 | 0.157 * |
| R ² | | 0.055 | |
| F for change in R ² | | 3.778 * | |

* $p < 0.05$.

4. Discussion

Social support is an important influence on adolescents' outcomes as it can enhance the quality of life and provides a buffer against the effects of harmful life events (Lyell et al., 2020). For adolescents who have been exposed to risk because of their SES, social support may be particularly impactful. Guided by risk and resilience frameworks, the current study examined whether social support in the context of a college access program was a promotive factor for adolescents. The current findings indicated that the social support was positively associated with several adolescent outcomes. Overall, these findings suggest that CAPs play a role for low SES adolescents, over and above college access.

4.1. Social Support and Adolescent Outcomes

In keeping with study hypotheses, social support was a promotive factor as it was positively associated with each of the personal resource factors and future college-going in the present sample. Self-efficacy [17], communication, and critical thinking [36] are all important personal resources and are particularly critical for at-risk youth. Past research has demonstrated that each of these three resources are related to long term developmental outcomes for adolescents [17,36]. Additionally, the link between adolescents' perceptions of future college-going and social support from a CAP indicates that one of the main goals of college access (i.e., increase college going in low-income youth) is being achieved. These findings provide further evidence regarding the importance of social support for adolescents and of the overall utility of CAPs.

Interestingly, social support was not directly associated with participants' GPA or grades. This finding was not in line with previous research which found a link between social support and classroom grades for adolescents living in poverty [8,22]. It may take more time for the support provided by the current CAP to directly impact GPA or grades. On the other hand, social support was positively associated with confidence in academic abilities. This finding was in line with prior research demonstrating the importance of confidence in academic abilities [37]. This may be because CAP emphasizes the importance of academics and also recruits college-minded adolescents that, despite their SES, find value in academics [38,39]. The present findings indicate that more longitudinal research on the link between social support and adolescents' academic achievement is needed.

4.2. Future Directions and Limitations

While the current study contributes to the research knowledge base on social support for adolescents from low SES backgrounds, some limitations and caveats should be highlighted. First, the current study used cross-sectional data, and thus, the direction of association is not clear. For example, it is possible that adolescents who have better communication skills or have college-going aspirations may seek out more support from CAP staff. Thus, more longitudinal research is needed to establish the direction of the association between social support and adolescent outcomes.

Another limitation of the current study is its reliance on adolescents' self-reports of their grades and GPA. As with all studies that rely on self-reports, the current study is subject to social desirability and selection biases which may have influenced results. With regard to adolescents' grades, findings should be interpreted with caution as there may be validity issues with the question used to access adolescents' grades and GPA. A systematic review of studies using self-reported grades as a proxy for actual grades caution against the use of self-reported grades because they are often unreliable and vary in their correlation with actual grades [40]. Future research should include academic outcome measures from multiple sources.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study demonstrated that college access programs provide support for youth outside of their main goal of increasing college access. Specifically, the present results show that social support from non-parent adults may serve as a promotive

factor for youth that face income-related risk. This finding is notable as participants in this study were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and were therefore at elevated risk to positive development [4]. Overall, the current findings highlight another important benefit of CAPs. For youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, CAPs may help to ameliorate some of the risk associated with low-income status. Despite the present findings, it is clear that significant economic investment is still needed for poorer youth [41]. Finally, it is important that researchers continue to examine the ways that promotive factors like social support can contribute to adolescents' positive developmental outcomes.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Rutgers the State University of New Jersey (protocol code E12-427 and 1/18/12).

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement: Data available on request due to restrictions. The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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