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Parental Support and Anxiety among College Students: Differences by Sex-Specific Dyads

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INTRODUCTION

•Previous research suggests that parental social support may impact a child's susceptibility to developing anxiety, or may protect an individual from developing such problems (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). Higher levels of social support, whether from friends or family, may reduce the risk of anxiety in children (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011).

• Research suggests that distinct differences exist among parent-child dyads (father-daughter; mother-daughter; father-son; and mother-son), such that both sons and daughters prefer mothers, but sons also look to fathers for support (Colarossi, 2001). It may be due to parental roles in which mothers are portrayed as the nurturing, compassionate parent while the father is not as involved in giving support. Additionally, the son-father relationship may be stronger based on sons learning from their fathers as to how to act in society and cope with various circumstances (Russell & Saebel, 1997). Colarossi (2001) also reported that sons seek support from parents more so than from peers, but daughters seek more support from peers than parents.

• It is unclear, however, to what extent maternal and paternal support are differentially associated with offspring anxiety, and to what extent male and female offspring vary in their susceptibility to maternal versus paternal support. The present study investigated the possibility that sons and daughters are differentially responsive to the effects of maternal versus paternal support on anxiety.

•Hypotheses:
•Maternal support would be negatively associated with offspring anxiety (regardless of offspring sex) while paternal support would be more strongly negatively associated with anxiety for male than for female offspring.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS:

- Undergraduate college students from a private, medium-sized, Midwestern university
- N = 216; 56% male; ages 18-22; M = 18.84 years
- Predominantly middle class
- 87% Caucasian, 4% African-American, 4% Asian, 2% Hispanic, 3% other or multiple ethnicities.

MEASURES:

- Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ)** : A 16-item self-report questionnaire used to measure trait worry. Individuals responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all typical of me*) to 5 (*very typical of me*). An example item is, "As soon as I finish one task, I start to worry about everything else I have to do." Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0.88 to 0.95 and test-retest reliability ranges from 0.74 to 0.92 (Startup & Erickson, 2006).
- Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)**: The IPPA is a scale used to measure an individual's sense of psychological security and support they receive from their parents and close friends. Scales exist for mother, father, and peers. The measure is divided into three subscales: trust, communication, and alienation. The mother and father versions were used for the purpose of this study. Respondents answer on a 5-point scale from almost never or never true to almost always or always true. The communication subscale was used in this study. An example item is, "My father helps me to understand myself better." Cronbach's alpha is .93 and test-retest reliability ranges from .87 to .89 (Armsden & Greenberg, 1989).

PROCEDURES:

- Undergraduate students enrolled in an Introductory to Psychology course signed up to participate in a larger study on moderators of anxiety dispositions through an online scheduling system as a requirement for their course.
- Participants received one hour research credit for their participation in the study.

University of Dayton

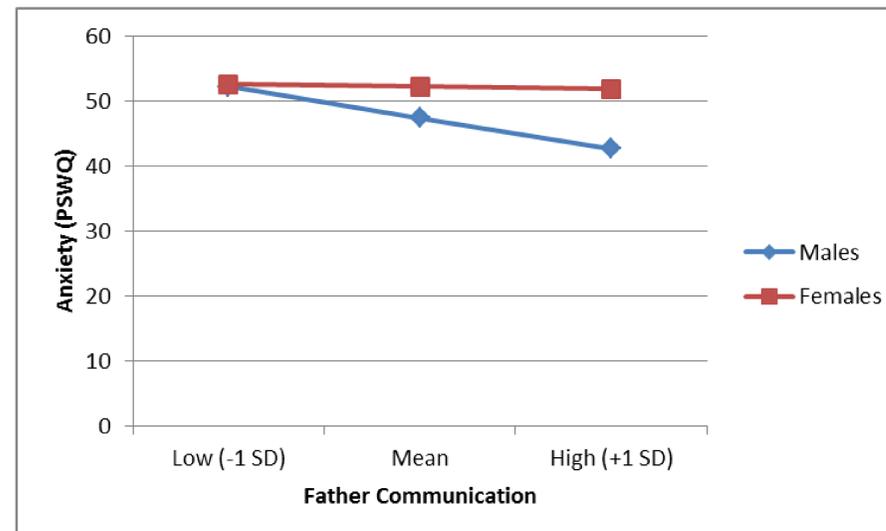
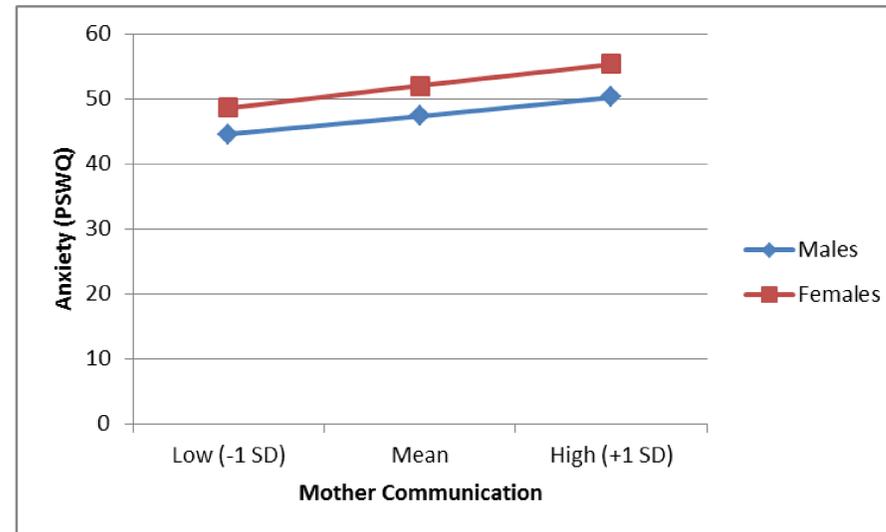
Table 1. Coefficients from model testing effects of parental communication and support on male anxiety levels

	Beta	S.E.	Z-ratio	p-value
Predictors				
Mother Communication	.23	.09	2.57	.01
Father Communication	-.37	.11	-3.52	< .0001

Table 2. Coefficients from model testing effects of parental communication and support on female anxiety levels

	Beta	S.E.	Z-ratio	p-value
Predictors				
Mother Communication	.24	.09	2.64	.008
Father Communication	-.03	.12	-.22	.82

Figures 1 and 2. Model-implied associations between offspring anxiety levels and mother communication (figure 1) or father communication (figure 2).



RESULTS

•Mother and father communication were significantly correlated ($r=.66, p=.05$). Females reported significantly higher levels of anxiety than males ($t=-2.547, p<.05$).

•Results from path analysis revealed an interaction between participant sex and paternal, but not maternal, communication when predicting participant anxiety levels.

•Paternal communication was negatively associated with sons' anxiety ($\beta = -.37, p < .0001$), but was not significantly associated with daughters' anxiety ($\beta = .03, p = .82$).

•Maternal communication was positively associated with anxiety levels for both sons ($\beta = .23, p = .01$) and daughters ($\beta = .24, p = .008$).

DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS:

•The results expressed mixed correlational associations between parental support (depending on the parent) and offspring anxiety levels. These findings suggest that the relationship between anxiety and offspring (young adult) anxiety is dyad specific. Causality and direction of influence, however, cannot be determined by correlational data.

•Interestingly, the hypothesis was not supported regarding maternal support, showing a positive association between support and anxiety levels as opposed to the predicted inverse association. The results can be interpreted as either a) anxious sons and daughters are seeking more support from their mother, or b) seeking more support from the mother leads to greater anxiety. The causal sequence of this association, however, cannot be determined because of the use of cross-sectional data. Further research in this domain is needed in order to evaluate how maternal support affects anxiety levels.

•The hypothesis was supported regarding the association between paternal support and anxiety levels of sons. For sons, the results can be interpreted as either a) anxious sons are seeking less support from their father, or b) more support from the father reduces anxiety levels. The association between paternal support and anxiety levels of daughters was nonsignificant and very small in magnitude.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

• Examine the longitudinal association between parental support and anxiety levels in an effort to more clearly examine direction of influence.

•Examine differences between sex-specific dyads regarding parental support in other domains outside of communication (e.g., trust, alienation, etc.)

•Examine difference between the sex-specific dyads regarding how parental support is associated with offspring psychological functioning outside of anxiety, such as depression levels, perceived stress, and subjective well-being.

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