University Students and Balance:

## INVESTIGATING SOCIAL SUPPORT, SELF-EFFICACY, AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

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ABSTRACT

Current studies indicate that university students in the United States are experiencing mental health concerns, including stress, at rising rates (James, 2017). Students are expected to succeed in every area of their lives, whether it be attending class 12-18 hours a week, completing homework 24-36 hours per week, working a job, worrying about finances, enjoying college life by attending social events, making time to eat healthy and exercise, or getting the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night (Cederwall, 2017). The multiple demands placed on students are experienced as stress and can lead to feelings of imbalance (Smeltzer, Cantrell, Sharts-Hopko, Heverly, Jenkinson, & Nthenge, 2016). While the associations between stress and social support (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983), self-efficacy (Wilcox & Felsten, 1992), and family communication (Schrodt & Ohrt, 2007) have been researched in the workplace, college-level student stress, and the factors that may mitigate it, have largely been ignored. This study surveys university students to look for possible relationships between these variables. Results can be used to help future university students alleviate stress and achieve balance.

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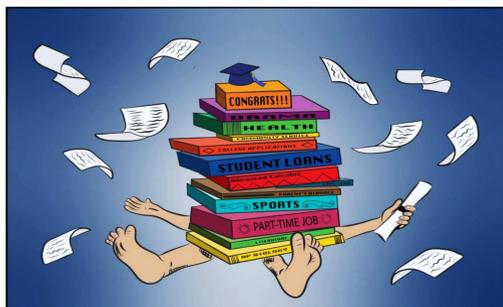
RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ1: How do (a) perceived availability of support, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) family communication patterns influence university students' perceptions of stress and balance?
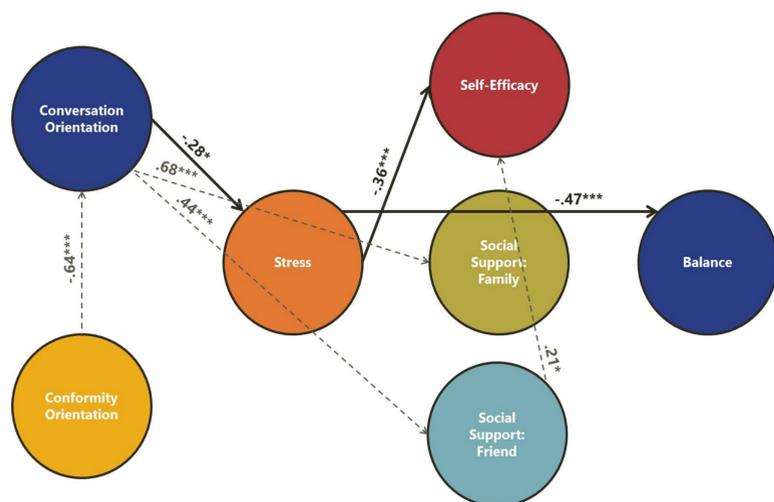
METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 98 students from colleges and universities from across the United States completed an electronic survey. The majority of participants identified as white (93.9%), with 3.1% identifying as black, 1.0% identifying as American Indian, 3.1% identifying as Asian. The average age of participants was 23.12, with ages ranging from 49 to 19; 67.4% of participants indicated they were 22 or 23 years old. Additionally, 14 participants identified as male (14.3%) and 84 as female (85.7%). Most participants had had at least 3 years of college education (74.5%), and 87.5% of participants were enrolled full-time (12+ credit hours). Eight-one participants were employed.

VARIABLES

- **Stress** has been generally defined as the physical and mental reaction to a situation in the surrounding environment which may be perceived as threatening or challenging (Antai-Otong, 2001). We used the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, 1983) to measure perceived stress. The PSS is a 10-item instrument measured on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = never and 7 = very frequently (α = .89, M = 4.16, SD = .96).

- **Balance** is a construct with no single agreed-upon definition but for the purpose of this study, we will use the following operational definition, provided by Fisher (2001): "an occupational stressor regarding issues of time, energy, goal, accomplishment, and strain" (Smeltzer, 2016). We measured balance with the Work/Life Balance Self-Assessment Scale (WLBSS; Fisher, 2001). The WLBSS is a 15-item instrument measured on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree (α = .84, M = 4.28, SD = .90).

- **Family Communication Patterns** can have different connotations depending on the person and their experiences, but for everyone, "family is the crucible of society" (Vangelisti, 2004).

  - **Conversation orientation** is "the degree in which families create a climate where all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interactions about a wide array of topics" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p.85). We measured conversation orientation with the Revised Family Communication Patterns Scale. (RFCP; Richie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The RFCP is a 15-item instrument measured on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree (α = .93, M = 5.06, SD = 1.19).

  - **Conformity orientation** represents the degree to which family communication patterns emphasize a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs. Families with a conformity orientation have parents who make decisions without input from their children and expect their children to abide by their decisions. We measured conformity orientation with the Revised Family Communication Patterns Scale. (RFCP; Richie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The RFCP is a 11-item instrument measured on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree (α = .91, M = 3.67, SD = 1.26).

- **Self-efficacy** describes individuals' beliefs about their abilities (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. We measured self-efficacy with the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). The GSE is a 10-item instrument measured on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree (α = .88, M = 5.22, SD = .78).

- **Social-Support** is the various resources provided by one's interpersonal ties. The two sources we investigate are **family support** and **friend support.** We used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support to measure perceived social-support (PSS; Zimet G. , Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The PSS is an 8-item instrument on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = very strongly disagree and 7 = very strongly agree.
  - Family Support: α = .93, M = 5.70, SD = 1.37
  - Friend Support: α = .89, M = 5.93, SD = 1.00

RESULTS
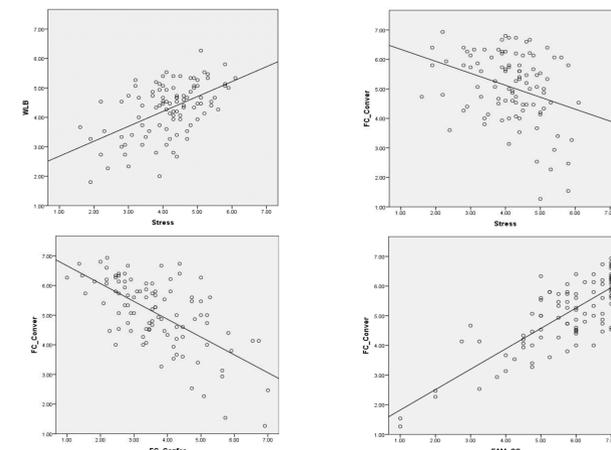
Pearson Correlations for Study Variables

	Conversation	Conformity	Stress	Family SS	Friend SS	Self-Efficacy	Balance
Conversation	—						
Conformity	-0.640 ***	—					
Stress	-0.327 **	0.251*	—				
Family SS	0.796 ***	-0.562***	-0.357***	—			
Friend SS	0.380 ***	-0.159	-0.228*	0.361 ***	—		
Self-Efficacy	0.405 ***	-0.222*	-0.478***	0.372 ***	0.379 ***	—	
Balance	0.186	-0.062	-0.535***	0.250 *	0.280 **	0.355 ***	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

DISCUSSION

- Growing up in a family with a conversation orientation is linked to higher perceived availability of support from both family and friends, while growing up in a family with a conformity orientation has a significant negative correlation with perceived ability of family support and a non-significant but negatively valanced relationship with perceived availability of friend support. Since higher perceived availability of support, both family and friend, is significantly correlated with lower stress and higher balance, we can assume that conversation orientation in families has the potential to be beneficial individuals.

- Additionally, growing up in a conversation orientated family is linked to higher perceived self-efficacy, while growing up in a conformity family has been linked to lower self-efficacy. Higher levels stress and lower levels of balance have been linked to lower self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has also been linked to higher family support and friend support.

- Our results indicate that individuals who grew up in families with a conversational orientation perceive less stress, more balance, more self-efficacy, and more social support than individuals with who grew up in families with a conformity orientation. These data suggest the communication utilized in families matters; it is essential for parents to carefully consider the way they communicate with their children.

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