

2007

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Recommended Citation

Parkinson, Chelsea and Arunachalam, Shivaram Poigai (2007) "The Effect of Parental Education on Emotions and Behaviors," *The Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 5, Article 10.

Available at: <http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol5/iss1/10>

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The Effect of Parental Education on Emotions and Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Current literature suggests that emotions are learned through socialization. The following study was completed using results compiled by a survey done for the South Dakota State University (SDSU) Sociology of Rural America course (Soc 240). The authors wished to ask the question “Do the education levels of parents affect the emotions and behaviors of their children?” There were approximately 540 respondents to this survey, all college students at SDSU. Questions dealing with students’ emotions were analyzed with respect to each respective student’s parents’ education level. The findings suggested that there is a connection between the parents’ education levels and the emotions and behaviors of children.

INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this research is to establish the significance of the parents’ educational levels in regards to the emotional or social behavior of their child. The four primary variables which we restrict this study to are: comforting a friend, the feelings of depression and anger, and the behavior of crying. The study will do this with the following hypotheses:

1. People whose mother had some college education do not get angry very often.
2. People whose father had some college education do not get angry very often.
3. People whose mother had some college education do not feel depressed very often.
4. People whose father had some college education do not feel depressed very often.
5. People whose mother had some college education comfort a friend more often.
6. People whose father had some college education comfort a friend more often.
7. People whose mother had some college education cry less often.
8. People whose father had some college education cry less often.

METHODS

The survey used for this research contained a variety of questions, some relating to rural presumptions of the students and others relating to the emotions of the student and the emotions which the student perceived to be typical for each gender. The questions

with the most relevance to this study were those relating to the emotions of the student and the qualifying questions concerning the student's parents' education levels.

This survey was distributed by students in Soc 240, for the fall 2006 semester. Each student was asked to distribute five copies of the survey to their fellow students. A total of approximately 540 results were collected. Students distributed their surveys at places on the SDSU campus. After all information had been collected, Dr. Meredith Redlin, who taught Soc 240, compiled results for these variables using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The following hypotheses were tested with the use of a means test in SPSS.

HYPOTHESES

The question of "Do the education levels of parents affect the emotions and behaviors of their children?" was broken into eight different hypotheses, each pair relating to a question from the survey. In all of the hypotheses, the independent variable was the education level of the mother or the father.

The education levels of respondents' parents were uncovered through the use of questions 25 and 26 of the survey. Question 25 asked "What is the level of your father's education?" and asked respondents to rank this with: A) Not a high school graduate, B) High school graduate, C) Some college, D) Associate degree, and E) Bachelor degree or more. Question 26 asked "What is the level of your mother's education?" and used the same ranking system as before.

The first hypothesis, "People whose mother had some college education do not get angry very often." pertained to question 10 of the survey, which asked respondents "How often do you get angry?", as well as question 26, which dealt with the mother's education. The dependent variable for this hypothesis is the respondent's frequency of anger. Respondents were asked to quantify this on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being never and five being very often. The second hypothesis pertained to the same question as before, only now relating it to the education level of the respondent's father, question 25.

The third and fourth hypotheses are very much like the first and second, with the difference of dealing with how often respondents feel depressed. These two hypotheses deal with question 13 of the survey. This question asked "How often do you feel depressed?" and asked respondents to quantify this on a scale of 1 to 5. The scale was the same as that of question 10, with one being never and five being very often.

The fifth and sixth hypotheses relate to question 11 of the survey. This question asked "How often do you comfort or support a friend in need?" and used the same ranking scale as before.

The final hypotheses confronted, hypotheses number seven and eight, concerned question 9 of the survey, which read "How often do you cry?" and, once again, used the same ranking scale as all of the other questions.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

When reviewing the data for the first hypothesis, it can be found that those respondents whose mother had some college education reported being angry less often than those whose mother was a high school graduate. On the 1 to 5 scale, with one being never and five being very often, the mean scores for respondents were: 2.5127 for individuals whose mothers were not high school graduates, 3.0593 for individuals whose mothers were high school graduates, 2.8381 for those whose mothers had some college education, 2.7917 for those whose mothers had an Associates degree, and 2.7184 for those whose mothers had a Bachelors degree or higher. The average continues to decrease as the level of the mother's education increased (See Figure 1). The only inconsistency in regard to this set of data is that those respondents whose mother was not a high school graduate reported being less angry overall than those who had any higher education whatsoever. Perhaps those individuals whose mothers were not high school graduates were less quick to anger in general. Out of 540 respondents, only 23 reported having mothers who were not high school graduates. By comparison, all other education levels had over 100 respondents that qualified. To produce conclusive results, it might be better to survey more respondents that fit the category of having mothers who were not high school graduates. Overall though, the findings seem to suggest that there is indeed a connection between the level of education of the mother and her child's frequency of anger.

The level of the father's education seemed to have a slight effect on the frequency of his child's anger; the results, however, do not seem to be conclusive enough to suggest a connection. Those respondents whose father was not a high school graduate reported getting angry more often than all other education levels except that of "high school graduate (See Figure 1)." The mean score of these respondents (whose fathers were not high school graduates) was 2.913, while the mean score of respondents whose fathers were high school graduates was 2.9448 on the same 1 to 5 scale. There is a slight decrease in how often respondents got angry with the increase of education levels (2.8438 for those whose fathers had some college and 2.7286 for those whose fathers had an Associates degree) with the exception of "bachelor degree or more," in which the average score was 2.7937. As was previously stated, the evidence does not suggest any strong connection. There is a general decrease, but only interspersed with averages which do not follow the pattern. This may be due to the fact that the father is not generally considered to be the "primary nurturer." This might suggest that children are not exposed to their father and his emotions as much as those of their mother. Whatever the reason, the education level of the father in this instance does not affect the anger level of his children to the degree which that of the mother does.

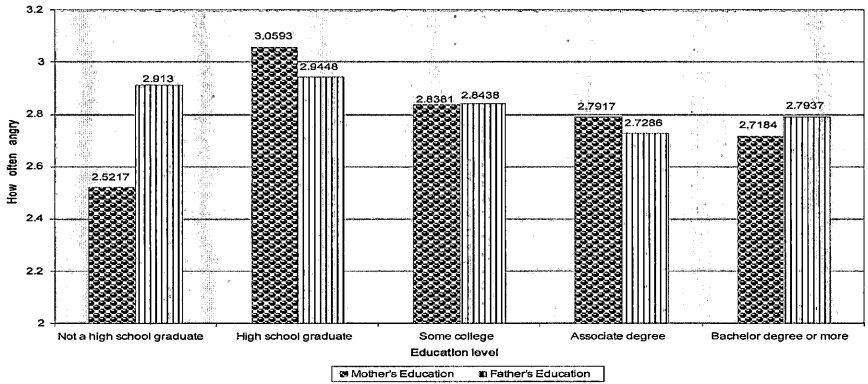


Figure 1. How often do you get angry?

The results related to the frequency of depression for respondents appear to show no consistent relation. For the father who was not a high school graduate, respondents reported feeling depression most often (2.4348 average score, once again with a score of one being never and five being very often), higher than any other education level, which is consistent with our hypothesis (See Figure 2). Education level increases after this category however do not seem to show any consistent decrease, with the average score for those whose fathers were high school graduates at 2.2966, the average for children of fathers with some college education at 2.3438, the average for children of fathers with an Associates degree at 2.3, and the average for children with Bachelors degrees or higher at 2.3085. Those respondents who had fathers who were high school graduates reported feeling depression least often, although those whose fathers had college degrees reported feeling depression at close to the same levels. The results related to the mother's education were even more inconclusive. Those respondents whose mothers had an associate degree felt depression the most often overall with an average score of 2.35, whereas those whose mothers were high school graduates reported feeling depression the least often overall with an average score of 2.2542 (See Figure 2). None of the other scores seemed to follow a pattern, with the average score for respondents whose mothers were not high school graduates being 2.3043, those whose mothers had some college scoring on average 2.3173, and those who reported their mother's education as being a Bachelors degree or higher scoring on average at 2.2989. Overall, it does not seem as if how often a person feels depression is linked to the education levels of that person's parents. This could be because depression apparently is not a learned emotion, but a psychological phenomenon.

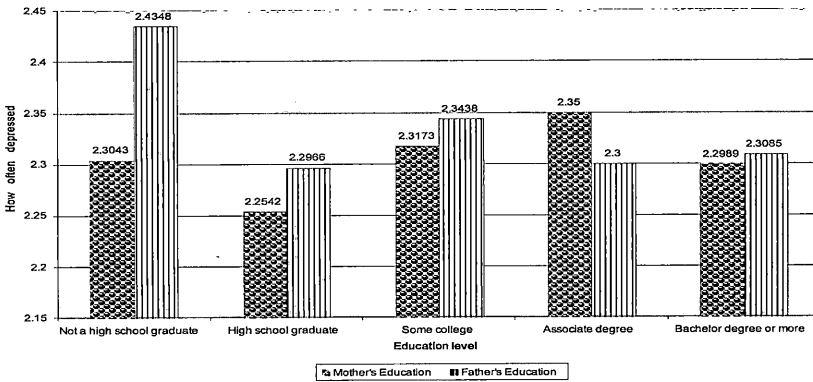


Figure 2. How often do you feel depressed?

The data collected concerning comforting or supporting a friend in need seems to be as predicted. As the education levels of both parents increase, the frequency with which respondents comfort or support a friend also shows a fairly steady increase (See Figure 3). Despite the fluctuations in levels of education such as “some college” for the mother (the frequency of comforting a friend suddenly jumps to an average score of 3.5619 and then decreases to an average score of 3.425, though continues to rise in relation to the previous levels, with an average score of 2.7291 being observed in students whose mothers were not high school graduates, rising to 3.3305 in those whose mothers were high school graduates, and finish the rise with an average score of 3.5485 in those whose mothers had a Bachelors degree or higher) and “associate degree” for the father (the same trend is observed, though not nearly as drastic, with average scores being: 2.6087 for students whose fathers were not high school graduates, 3.331 for those whose fathers were high school graduates, 3.4375 for those whose fathers had some college education, 3.4143 for those whose fathers had an Associates degree, and 3.5926 for those whose fathers had a Bachelors degree or higher, all of these scores use the same scale of ranking as before), the results suggest that the education levels of both the father and the mother are linked to how often the respondent comforts or supports a friend in need. Both parents’ education levels seem to have an equal effect in this.

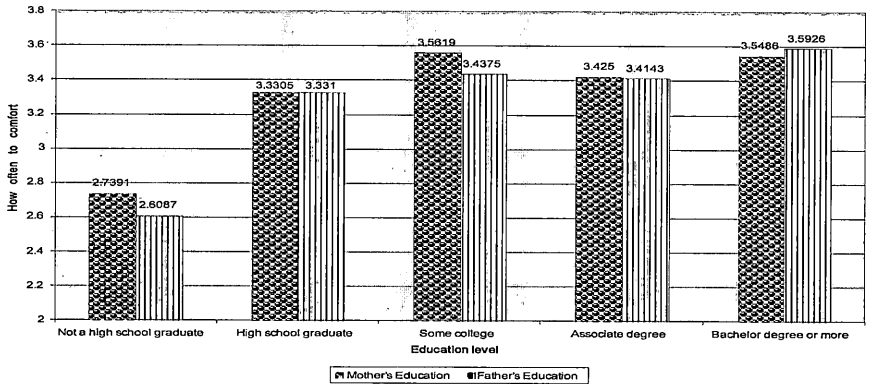


Figure 3. How often do you comfort or support a friend in need?

With the exception of the education level “not a high school graduate” for the father (with respondents ranking themselves on average at 2.4783, using the same scale as all of the previous questions), the frequency our respondents cry also seems linked to education levels. From the levels of “high school graduate” and on, there is a steady increase related to the father’s education (See Figure 4). The average scores were 2.3793 for those whose fathers had graduated from high school, rising to 2.5 for those whose fathers had some college education, still rising to 2.5714 for those whose fathers had an Associates degree, and peaking at 2.6032 for those whose fathers had a Bachelors degree or higher. The education level of the mother also appears to cause a steady increase in how often respondents cry from the level of “not a high school graduate” with an average score of 2.1304, to “high school graduate” with an average score of 2.5424, and to “associate degree” with an average score of 2.5524 (See Figure 4). At “bachelor degree or more,” a decrease was noted, with average scores dropping from 2.5583 for those whose mothers had an Associates degree to 2.4828. These results are opposite those which we hypothesized, but still suggest a connection. Also, the fact that the frequency with which the respondents cry increased with the education level of their parents may suggest that the more educated parents realize the need for a healthy outlet of emotions. These parents may encourage their children to express themselves more openly.

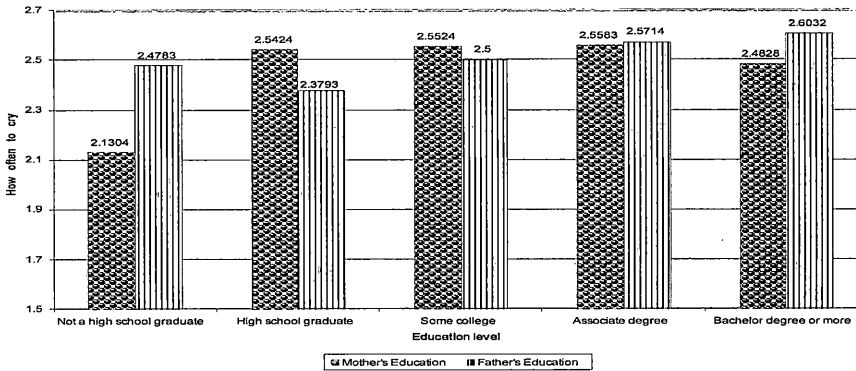


Figure 4. How often do you cry?

Overall, there seems to be a connection between the education level of the parents and certain emotions and behaviors of their children. The education level of the mother seems to have more influence in certain instances, reflecting the theory that the mother is the primary nurturer.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

There is a definite link between a child’s emotions and the education levels of that child’s parents. But how much of a link is there? An obvious limitation to this study was that the survey used was not meant specifically for emotional research. Future research into this subject should consider a larger range of emotions and behaviors. Also, more of an unbiased sample should be selected, for instance, one with an equal composition of all education types. Students from more universities should also be included, and even society members of the same relative age range that aren’t students. Using a sample of just college students gives the research a biased cast, as those whose parents have some form of higher education are more likely to pursue higher education themselves.

A possible experiment linked to this research would be one that follows a group of respondents. The respondents could be required to take a class on emotions and parenting, and then their children could later be surveyed to see if the class had any effect compared to the children of those respondents from the proposed control group who would not take this class. More research also needs to be done on the effects of the combined effects of the parents’ education levels.

If the results prove to be conclusive, relating the education level of parents to the emotions of their children, this knowledge can be used to create some type of mandatory class for new parents of all areas. The class could contain instruction on emotional management, and could be implemented beginning in the eighth grade. This assures that those students not graduating high school will still have a more stable background to

instruct whatever offspring they might have on ways to handle their emotions, as well as which emotions are beneficial and should be promoted, and which are destructive and should be minimized or avoided altogether. This class or program could also be continued on to the college level, exposing students once again to this training.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Dr. Redlin for providing the assignment that sparked interest in this project, and also our fellow students in Soc 240 who distributed the questionnaires.