



## Informant variance in perceptions of student-athlete/parent relationship qualities

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### ABSTRACT

A positive relationship with parents contributes to well-being during emerging adulthood, the developmental period that bridges adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, J. J. [2015]. *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties* [2nd ed.]. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795574.013.9>). In this study, we investigated discrepancies between parent and emerging adult perceptions of relationship qualities within the context of intercollegiate sport. Parent and student-athlete reports of parental contact, parental support, academic engagement, and basic need satisfaction were compared to determine whether agreement existed. Results examining 50 parent/student-athlete dyads from a Division I institution completed online measures of relationship qualities. Results revealed minimal agreement across all measures ( $\kappa = -.10$  to  $.12$ ). Parents reported significantly higher levels of basic need satisfaction and academic engagement while student-athletes reported significantly higher levels of tangible parental support, providing evidence of the importance of the choice of informant when assessing parent/student-athlete relationships. These findings build a foundation for future work on how reporter differences are linked to student-athlete outcomes.

### KEYWORDS

Basic need satisfaction; emerging adulthood; multiple informants; reporter discrepancies; parent-emerging adult dyads

A positive relationship with parents contributes to well-being during emerging adulthood, the developmental period that bridges adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2015). A hallmark of this period is the transition from parental- to self-dependence, or individuation. The process of individuation is facilitated by parents' adjustment of their involvement and control to suit emerging adults' burgeoning emotional and functional independence (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018) with appropriate levels of parent involvement associated with positive outcomes (e.g. life satisfaction, lower risk behaviors); moreover, inappropriate levels of parental involvement, notably overinvolvement, is associated with

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negative outcomes during emerging adulthood (Schiffrin et al., 2014). Yet our understanding of how parents and emerging-adults interpret the interactions and qualities within their relationship is limited, especially in context of inter-collegiate athletics. Thus, the overarching goal of this work was to investigate discrepancies in perceptions of relationship qualities between parents and college student-athletes.

### Basic psychological need theory

Basic psychological need theory, a sub-theory of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), offers a parsimonious explanation of how parents facilitate development. When a parent satisfies their emerging-adult's needs for *autonomy*, having a sense of one's own volition, *competence*, feeling effective in one's pursuits, and *relatedness*, caring for and feeling cared for by others, s/he facilitates personal growth and development, personality integration, optimal functioning, social development, and well-being in their emerging adult (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, when needs are not met there may be negative consequences for health and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy-supportive parenting has been associated with successful identity development formation in emerging adults (Luyckx et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2005), as well as other adaptive outcomes including self-worth, social acceptance, and kindness (Nelson et al., 2011). Examples of autonomy-supportive parenting during emerging adulthood include encouraging independent decisions related to choosing college courses, budgeting, and managing roommate conflicts, which has been positively related to emerging adults' satisfaction with university experiences (Pedersen, 2017). During emerging adulthood, however, a parent's evaluation of their child's ability to act like a self-determined adult often clashes with the emerging adult's self-perception (Nelson et al., 2011). For example, parents may be perceived as controlling (e.g. offering unsolicited advice, telling their child what to do) or unsupportive (e.g. providing little and/or vague support compared to what their child wants) while intending to promote autonomy (Schiffrin et al., 2014).

This contradiction in perceptions between parents and emerging adults and the balancing act between asserting autonomy and maintaining relationship quality with parents may be especially true for intercollegiate athletes who are navigating a demanding academic environment with added sport demands. If student-athletes perceive their parents' involvement to be controlling, overbearing, or unsupportive during a stage of life that demands independence, they may experience problems with sport, school, and well-being (Lowe et al., 2018). For instance, Division I student-athletes reporting high levels of parental involvement report lower levels of individuation (Dorsch et al., 2016; Lowe et al., 2018). The ability to exercise autonomy within close

relationships is a hallmark of emerging adulthood linked to developing both a mature sense of self and healthy relationships (Arnett, 2015).

Beyond autonomy-supportive parenting, fostering relatedness (e.g. providing non-contingent positive regard for their child and a warm, loving, and nurturing environment) corresponds to personal achievement and adjustment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Central to relatedness is the ability to establish and nurture supportive interpersonal relationships while also maintaining independence within these relationships. In fact, the ability to exercise autonomy within close relationships is a hallmark of emerging adulthood that is linked to developing both a mature sense of self and healthy functioning in adult relationships (Arnett, 2015). As such, emerging adults need to preserve the closeness of their relationship with their parents while asserting their developing autonomy. This balancing act between asserting autonomy and maintaining relationship quality with parents may be especially challenging for student-athletes who face challenges such as physical fatigue, rigid training requirements, and competitions that may overlap with classes, while striving to excel in both academic and athletic pursuits. As such, parents' support of their student-athlete's competence (e.g. helping their student-athlete to not be overwhelmed, but instead mobilize his or her resources, and thereby provide the necessary foundation to face challenges optimally), may be particularly important. Overinvolvement during emerging adulthood can convey a lack of belief in their child's abilities, reducing feelings of competence, which results in lower levels of problem-solving abilities and well-being (Schiffrin et al., 2014).

### **Informant discrepancies**

Parents and emerging adults report differing perspectives on expectations and criteria for transitioning to adulthood (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009; Nelson et al., 2011). Informant discrepancies may exist because of parents' and emerging adults' different generational stakes (e.g. one may desire more autonomy during the process of individuation while parents' family investment may result in more positive views of relationships; Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016) and may be a meaningful feature of family interactions. Investigating discrepancies in parent-emerging adult relationship qualities among student-athletes is warranted for two reasons. First, emerging adults are commonly the sole reporter in self-report data. Yet, subjective perceptions reflected in self-report data make the choice of informant an important aspect of research design, especially when family relationships are the focus of the study (e.g. Nelson et al., 2011). With relatively few studies examining systematic differences among reporters, it remains unclear how parents and emerging-adults interpret the same interactions and qualities within their relationship. Second, although theoretical frameworks identify parents as integral sources of support for

athletes' across their careers (Côté, 1999), empirical work describing parents' involvement and basic need satisfaction and evidencing links to student-athlete's outcomes is limited. Researchers recently identified domains of parental involvement in intercollegiate sport (i.e. support, contact, academic engagement, & athletic engagement) and assessed how these domains predicted student-athlete academic, athletic, and developmental outcomes (Dorsch et al., 2016; Lowe et al., 2018). Researchers investigating student-athletes' need satisfaction have also found that parents' support of autonomy and relatedness enhance retention in and satisfaction with sport (Williams et al., 2013). More systematic research is warranted to enhance understanding of family relationships in intercollegiate athletics.

As such, we compared the perspectives of parents and their emerging adult student-athletes on their perceptions of relationship qualities, including involvement (i.e. parental contact, parental support, athletic engagement) and basic need satisfaction to explore how parents and emerging-adults interpret the same interactions and qualities within their relationship. We expected parents to report providing higher levels of involvement and basic need satisfaction than their student-athletes reported receiving.

## Methods

### *Participants and procedures*

Following IRB approval, NCAA Division I student-athletes ( $N = 447$ ) from a large, public research university located in the Southwest United States were e-mailed an invitation to participate in an online survey with the opportunity to be randomly selected for a \$50 gift card. Surveys were sent directly by the research team mid-way through the Fall semester and coaches were also asked to forward the survey link to their athletes. The survey was open for approximately one month with up to six reminders sent. Over 35% ( $n = 158$ ) of student-athletes provided consent and participated in the online survey. Upon survey completion, they were asked to "think about the parent (e.g. mother, father, step-mother, step-father, adoptive parent) who has the most influence (positive or negative) on you" and to provide that parent's e-mail address, with 70% student-athletes providing parent emails.<sup>1</sup> That parent ( $N = 111$ ) was subsequently e-mailed a survey link which was open for approximately two months, with up to eight reminders sent (60 responded, of which 50 of who had useable responses). Both the parent and student-athlete survey took about 10–15 min to complete, and consent was provided electronically before accessing the survey.

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<sup>1</sup>There was no significant difference on any of the measures between student-athletes who provided and did not provide parent information, nor were there significant difference on any of the measures between student-athletes with a participating and non-participating parent.

Participants in the current study were 50 dyads, comprised of NCAA Division I student-athletes ( $n_{male} = 16$ ,  $n_{female} = 34$ ) aged 18–23 years ( $M = 19.27$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ; 52% freshmen) and one of their parents ( $n_{male} = 18$ ;  $n_{female} = 32$ ; response rate = 45%) aged 42–68 years ( $M = 52.42$ ,  $SD = 5.06$ ). Both student-athletes and their parents were predominately white (82% and 86%, respectively). Student-athletes represented a wide range of individual and team sports including baseball/softball, basketball, cross-country/track and field, football, gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, swimming and diving, tennis, triathlon, volleyball, water polo, and wrestling.

## Measures

Student-athletes and parents completed the same measures with items phrased for the appropriate respondent (c.f. Kaye et al., 2015).

### Parent involvement

Aligning with previous work, we considered parental involvement to be multidimensional, composed of contact, support, and academic engagement (i.e. Dorsch et al., 2016; Lowe et al., 2018). *Parent Contact* was assessed by six items regarding the frequency (1 = *Not at All* to 7 = *Daily*) of parent/student-athlete communication via in-person, e-mail, phone, text, social media, and video communication (Wolf et al., 2009). Total sum scores were calculated, such that higher scores indicated higher levels of contact.

*Parent support* was assessed with five items from a modified version of the Social Support Resources index (Fingerman et al., 2009) that assessed the frequency of support provided/received (1 = *Not at All* to 7 = *Daily*) on the following dimensions: emotional (e.g. expressing care and concern), practical (e.g. assistance with everyday activities), advice, financial (e.g. paying bills), and discussion about daily events. Mean scores were created, such that higher scores indicated higher levels of parent support across each type of support.

*Parent academic engagement* was measured using four items from the University of California Undergraduate Experience Study (Wolf et al., 2009). Participants responded to items such as “My parent/child and I discuss what I am learning in class,” on a 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*) Likert scale. Mean scores were created, such that higher scores indicated higher levels of parental academic engagement. Internal consistency was low for both student-athletes ( $\alpha = .62$ ) and their parents ( $\alpha = .57$ ).

### Basic psychological need satisfaction

*Autonomy support* was assessed with seven items from the sport adapted Health Care Climate Questionnaire (Adie et al., 2012). Student-athletes were asked to “indicate the degree to which your parent provided you with the following types of support ...” for items such as, “My parent listened to how I would like to do

things” on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) Likert scale. Using the same scale, parents were asked to “indicate the degree to which you provided your child who is a student-athlete the following types of support ...” for items such as, “I listen to how he/she would like to do things.” Internal consistency was high for student-athletes ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and acceptable for parents ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

The four-item Perceived Competence Scale was used to assess the degree to which student-athletes perceived that their parent supported *feelings of competence*, and the degree to which the parent reported supporting their emerging adult’s competence. Participants responded to items such as “My parent helps me to feel capable,” or “I help my child to feel capable” on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). Levels of internal consistency were good for the student-athletes ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and parents ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

The 10-item Need for Relatedness Scale (Richer & Vallerand, 1998) was used to assess parent–child *relatedness*. Student-athletes responded to the stem “In my relationship with parent, I feel ...” to items such as “... supported” on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) Likert scale. Parents responded to the stem “in my relationship with my child who is a student-athlete, I ...” to items such as “... supported him/her” on the same 7-point scale. Internal reliability was excellent in the student-athlete ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and parent samples ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### **Data analysis**

First, using dyadic matched pairs, mean level comparisons between parents and their student-athlete were examined via paired *t*-tests where difference scores greater than zero indicate the parent gave a higher rating and difference scores lower than zero indicate the student-athlete gave a higher rating than their parent. Second, patterns of parent/student-athlete agreement were examined across measures through (i) examining the magnitude of correlations between reporters and (ii) the percent agreement between reporters (i.e. kappa; Cohen, 1960). Kappa scores are generally thought to be a more accurate measure than correlations or percent agreement scores, as kappa accounts for the probability of the agreement occurring by chance. All analyses were conducted in SPSS v25.

### **Results**

Mean level comparisons and patterns of agreement are reported in Table 1. Parents reported significantly higher levels of academic engagement, autonomy support, and relatedness whereas student-athletes reported significantly higher levels of parental support. There were significant, small-to-moderate positive correlations between parent and student-athlete reports of contact, relatedness, and perceived competence. Patterns of agreement were low across all measures

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics, mean level comparisons, and agreement between reporters.

|                          | Parent |      | Student-Athlete |      | $M_{diff}$ | (95% CI)     | $SD$ | $t$    | $\kappa$ | $r$   |
|--------------------------|--------|------|-----------------|------|------------|--------------|------|--------|----------|-------|
|                          | $M$    | $SD$ | $M$             | $SD$ |            |              |      |        |          |       |
| Parental Involvement     |        |      |                 |      |            |              |      |        |          |       |
| Contact                  | 23.16  | 4.33 | 22.78           | 4.37 | 0.38       | -1.09, 1.85  | 5.16 | 0.52   | -.003    | .30*  |
| Support                  | 4.06   | 0.87 | 4.57            | 1.13 | -0.51      | -0.92, -0.10 | 1.44 | -2.51* | -.002    | -.02  |
| Academic Engagement      | 4.16   | 0.50 | 3.85            | 0.61 | 0.31       | 0.10, 0.51   | 0.70 | 2.98** | -.06     | .23   |
| Basic Needs Satisfaction |        |      |                 |      |            |              |      |        |          |       |
| Autonomy Support         | 6.42   | 0.53 | 6.04            | 0.90 | 0.38       | 0.11, 0.66   | 0.97 | 2.78** | -.10*    | .17   |
| Relatedness              | 6.32   | 0.67 | 5.96            | 1.03 | 0.36       | 0.09, 0.63   | 0.95 | 2.64*  | .05      | .44** |
| Perceived Competence     | 6.74   | 0.51 | 6.65            | 0.55 | 0.09       | -0.09, 0.27  | 0.62 | 1.03   | .12      | .32*  |

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . All scales ranges were 1–7 with the exception of academic engagement which ranged from 1 to 7 and contact which ranged from 6 to 42.

with as Kappa values ranged from  $-.10$  to  $.12$ ; notably, disagreement (i.e. negative values) occurred on perceptions of autonomy support.

## Discussion

We examined patterns of agreement between parents and student-athletes on parent involvement and basic need satisfaction. Parental involvement was comprised of the frequency of contact, support from parents (e.g. financial, emotional), and academic engagement (e.g. discussion of what is being learned in class). Basic need satisfaction was examined through the provision of autonomy, relatedness, and competence support parents reported providing their student-athlete and that the student-athlete reported receiving from their parent. Three patterns of findings emerged from the current findings. First, aligning with our hypothesis, parents reported providing higher levels of autonomy-support, relatedness, and academic engagement than student-athletes reported receiving. Second, in contrast to our expectations, student-athletes reported receiving higher levels of support than their parents reported providing. Third, parents and student-athletes reported similar levels of contact and perceived competence support.

These informant discrepancies may stem from differing perspectives on expectations and criteria for transitioning to adulthood between parents and emerging adults (e.g. Kenyon & Koerner, 2009; Nelson et al., 2011). Perspectives may differ due to different generational stakes (e.g. adolescents may desire more autonomy while parents' family investment may result in more positive views of relationships; Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016). It is also plausible that, compared to basic needs provision and academic engagement, parent support is more tangible and observable in daily life (e.g. providing financial support, advice) and is perceived as more prevalent to the student-athletes. Past research using a similar measure of parent support found that greater parent support reported by student-athletes corresponded to reduced emotional and functional independence as well as diminished attainment of adult criteria (Dorsch et al., 2016).

Similarly, practical support has been suggested to draw attention to the receivers' incompetence or inability to succeed (Fisher et al., 1982) and receiving support has been found to worsen recipients' distress (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). This explanation aligns with the idea of support visibility, or the degree to which assistance is noticed by recipients as support (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). Invisible support, provided indirectly such that the recipient does not interpret the behavior as help, has been suggested to be beneficial (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). Whereas explicit assistance calls one's struggles to attention and undermines competence (Fisher et al., 1982), negative attributions regarding competence are avoided with invisible support (Zee & Bolger, 2019). Invisible support has the most benefit, and visible support the highest costs, when recipients are striving to meet evaluative standards such as giving a speech (Bolger & Amarel, 2007), or preparing for a major exam (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Similarly, NCAA DI athletes are likely striving to meet evaluative standards, both in sport and school. Thus, it may be that parent support is perceived to a greater extent than academic engagement and basic need provision. The perceived receipt of parent support during emerging adulthood and within the context of intercollegiate sport, which is designed to operate independent of parents, may convey the message that parents do not have faith in their student-athlete to solve problems or that parents will intervene regardless.

On the other hand, the similarity between parents and student-athletes reporting on contact and perceived competence may be due to the more objective nature of these aspects. In particular, the frequency of contact is objective, and it is not surprising that parents and student-athletes are reporting similar levels of contact. In fact, this finding likely speaks to the accuracy of reporting by family members. Future research could, however, examine the type of contact parents and their emerging adult are reporting. For example, the mid-level of contact here within likely stems from more frequent communication in preferred modes, but not across all possible communication modes. This was likely coupled with low levels of in-person communication as none of the student-athletes were living at home. One important implication may be the measurement of contact (e.g. does daily contact via phone only (score of 7) mean that there is truly less contact than weekly contact across modes of communication). Past research found that student-athletes across divisions report, on average, daily text contact with parents (Lowe et al., 2018), but other communication modes might be less frequent (i.e. in-person contact). For student-athletes, it may be that texting might be an especially useful modality for student-athletes who have very busy schedules. In other words, texting may allow the student-athlete to touch base with and respond to their parent when their schedule allows. In turn, this could be linked to perceiving a supportive relationship as parents would be demonstrating respect for the student-athletes time.

While less objective than the frequency of contact, the similarity in perceived competence may reflect the fact that student-athletes receive feedback and

support on their academic and athletic competence from valid sources such as academic counselors and coaches. In turn, this feedback is likely shared with or reported to parents, which may explain the similarity in perceived competence between parents and student-athletes. Thus, while there is a discrepancy between perceptions of autonomy support and relatedness as parents and student-athletes relationship shift from parental- to self-dependence, contact and competence may be areas in which perceptions match.

These results highlight the fine line parents walk in their relationship with their emerging adult. As student-athletes navigate the demands of living independently and achieving success in the academic and athletic arenas, they need to feel a sense of volition while maintaining a sense of connection to their parents. As such, it is crucial parents and student-athletes work together to maintain open communication about their relationship and expectations for involvement and basic need satisfaction. This point is noteworthy when considering that if student-athletes feel less emotionally connected to their parents while also perceiving more active involvement by their parents during a life stage that demands independence, they may experience problems with sport, school, and well-being (Lowe et al., 2018).

Overall, our findings suggest that interpretation of parenting depends on the informant and the confidence one can place in their reporting. In other words, it matters which family member provides the self-report data on relationship quality as there are systematic differences in the perspectives of parents and their emerging adult children on basic need satisfaction, parental support, and academic engagement, with parents more likely to provide a more positive view of the relationship. The substantial disagreement suggests that the choice of informant may have the potential to alter the results of research aimed at better understanding parent-emerging adult relations and their developmental implications for both parties. This study, however, represents the cross-sectional perspectives of a small sample of NCAA Division I athletes with limited racial diversity and one of their parents. In addition, internal reliability for academic engagement was low, however it is important to consider that this scale has varied items assessing different aspects of engagement (e.g. responses may differ between discussing what classes a student should take vs. stressing the importance of good grades). Future research would benefit from more attention to the issue of divergent perspectives of family members. Thus, findings evidence the importance of the choice of informant when assessing parent/student-athlete relationships and encourage future work on how reporter differences are linked to student-athlete outcomes.

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