

Managing the Transition to College: Family Functioning, Emotion Coping, and Adjustment in Emerging Adulthood

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Using a self-reported assessment of 320 first-time college students, we tested the hypothesis that one's ability to manage emotion moderates the relationship between family environment and college adjustment. Results add to growing evidence that the way one views one's whole family environment during the emerging adulthood years is linked to one's adjustment during normative transition points, such as the college transition. Emotion coping variables also predicted college adjustment over and above the variance accounted for by family factors. The relationship between family expressiveness and social adjustment to college varies depending on emerging adults' emotion coping style. Participants from less expressive families who tend to avoid their emotions reported significantly more difficulty adjusting to college than their peers from more expressive family environments.

It is still relatively rare for family research to include assessment of the whole family environment (see McHale & Cowan, 1996) despite empirical support for clinical family systems theories advocating that assessment of the entire family system (e.g., mother, father, child) is different from and as important as assessment of the various parts of a family (e.g., dyadic family subsystems; see Johnson, Cowan, & Cowan, 1999). The majority of family research continues to rely almost exclusively on the assessment of marital and parent-child dyadic relationships (i.e., mother-father,

mother-child, and father-child dyads) as a method of evaluating family functioning. Our intent was to narrow the gap between systemic clinical theories and empirical research by adding to the growing body of family research moving beyond the dyad toward examining links between whole-family environment and individual adjustment. Specifically, we investigated family risk and protective factors for maladjustment among emerging adults when making the transition to college. The period of emerging adulthood is a challenging time of newfound independence, often leading to an increase in perceived stress, risky behaviors, suicide rates, and mental health utilization (Arnett, 2000). For the majority of emerging adults in American culture this transition begins with the shift away from their home families and into college. Not all first-year students, however, find the transition to college equally difficult. We used family systems theory to identify prerequisites of optimal academic, social, and emotional development during emerging adulthood.

The transition to college is a particularly opportune time to study family-level functioning. Family systems theories argue that functional and dysfunctional family processes are best differentiated during times of stress, such as family transitions (Bowen, 1976; Minuchin, 1974). Investigations of similar transitions at earlier developmental stages suggest a significant link between whole family

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functioning and children's social and emotional well-being among preschoolers (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998), elementary school children (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson, 2001, Johnson, 2003), and school-age children (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Johnson, 2003; Lindahl, 1998). In this study we tested similar linkages during the college transition by examining the relationship between emerging adults' (ages 18 to 21) perceptions of their self-defined whole family environment and their college adjustment.

Emerging adulthood is conceptualized as theoretically and empirically distinguishable from both late adolescence and adulthood; it is a time of instability, defined in part by changes in one's residential status, work status, education environment, and relationships (Arnett, 2000). About one third of young adults begin this developmental period with the transition to college (Arnett). Determining the variables that predict a successful transition to college can have important consequences. Between 30% and 43% of college students drop out of college without completing their degree (Tinto, 1993). Most of these students leave within the first 2 years of college, with attrition rates as high as 20% during the first year of college alone (Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987). Suicide rates and mental health utilization rates among college-age students have dramatically increased in recent decades (Sax, 1997; Schwartz, 2006). Studies of college student retention find academic adjustment and social adjustment explain the variance in decisions to drop out of a particular college (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Moreover, among college students, difficulty with social adjustment has been linked to persistent loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006).

Family relationships are among the many types of relationships that are shifting during

the developmental period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Steinglass, 1987). New college students struggle with the tangible task of separation and individuation as they leave their parents' home to live at their new college or university. This task often takes the form of a psychological struggle between family connection and independence and occurs regardless of the physical location of the child's home. Family systems theorists argue that individuals must differentiate themselves from the family on the one hand and retain a sense of connection on the other (Bowen, 1976; Minuchin, 1974).

Consistent with the theoretically informed notion of the need to balance relatedness and independence within the family (Minuchin, 1974), the limited research linking whole family factors and adjustment in emerging adulthood has begun to find relational factors in the family (i.e., cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict) to be particularly robust predictors of new college students' adjustment (Buboltz, Johnson, & Woller, 2003). *Family cohesion*, defined as the commitment, help, and support family members provide for one another, is linked to student perceived stress and depression (Cumsille & Epstien, 1994; Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & Deegan, 2008). First-year college students who perceive their families to be cohesive report experiencing less stress when making the transition to college than new college students from less cohesive families (Johnson et al.). Similarly, depressed adolescents and emerging adults report having less cohesive families than their nondepressed peers (Cumsille & Epstien). Emerging adults from families that do not encourage direct and open expression of feelings among family members (i.e., families with low expressiveness) report more trait anger than college students from families that do encourage direct and open expression of feelings among family members (i.e., high expressiveness) (Lopez

& Thurman, 1993). Family conflict is also predictive of adjustment among emerging adults; first-time college students who report more frequent, intense conflict of a longer duration experience more perceived stress when making the college transition than peers from families with less frequent, less intense conflict of shorter duration (Lopez, 1991).

This study focused on three important relational aspects of emerging adults' family environment: cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict. Based on previous studies establishing the importance of new college students' academic, social, and emotional adjustment in student retention and psychological well being, we identified variables that predict successful transition to college in all three of these areas of adjustment. Specifically, we hypothesized that greater academic, social, and emotional adjustment to college would be correlated with greater cohesion, greater expressivity, and less conflict in emerging adults' families.

MOVING BEYOND LINKAGES BETWEEN FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT

Part of what is being learned through family interaction is the ability to manage stress during times of transition and adjustment (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Asasouline, & Russell, 1994). Cutrona and colleagues argued that one's interactions with parents during times of stress and one's general experience in a family across a lifetime help to facilitate adaptive coping and positive adjustment. Johnson et al. (2008) found adolescents' emotional coping strategies moderate the relationship between family environment and adjustment. The relationship between family cohesion and adolescent academic and emotional adjustment depends on whether participants reported coping with anger by avoiding feelings or by active methods of

remediation. Participants from noncohesive families who used an active method of coping with anger reported little difficulty with academic and emotional adjustment compared to participants from cohesive families or participants from noncohesive families who coped with anger using avoidance (Johnson et al.). We attempted to replicate the findings of Johnson et al. by examining similar relationships among emerging adults' perceptions of their family environment (i.e., family cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict), coping, and college adjustment.

Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, and Palfai (2002) described a 3-component model of perceived emotional intelligence, or the knowledge individuals have about their own emotional abilities: emotional attention, emotional clarity, and emotional repair. *Emotional attention* involves awareness of one's emotions and a belief that emotions are a good source of information. *Emotional clarity*, the ability to identify and discriminate among one's emotions accurately, allows individuals to distinguish, for example, sadness from anger. *Emotional repair* involves the ability to adjust or regulate one's emotions when needed, but does not dictate a correct method for doing so. Note that two individuals can both be adept at repair but use completely different methods for managing emotions (see Kerr, Johnson, Gans, & Krumrine, 2004). Difficulty with clarity predicted an individual's distress (Salovey et al.), and the inability to label one's emotions was related to poor college adjustment (Kerr et al.).

Whereas each component of perceived emotional intelligence has been found to predict adjustment (Fernandez-Berrocal, Alcaide, Extremera, & Pizarro, 2006), we took a person-centered approach to looking at these variables (Magnusson, 1995) by identifying clusters of participants who have similar ratings across all 3 components of

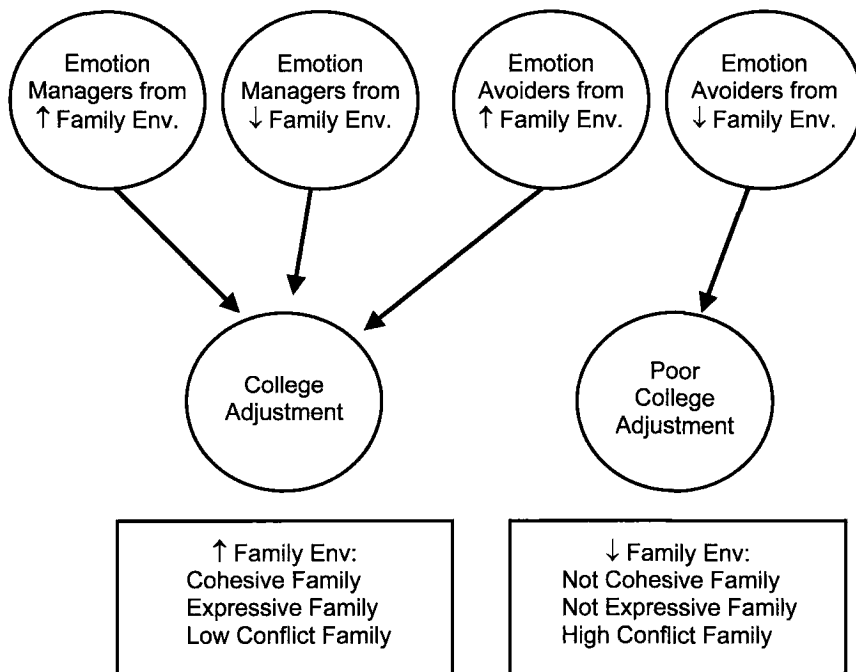


FIGURE 1. Hypothesized Moderation of the Relationship Between Family Environment and College Adjustment by Emotion Coping

perceived emotional intelligence. In this way we used clarity, attention, and repair to help identify individual differences in participants' overall ability to manage their emotions. Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996) argued that people differ in their ability to cope with difficult emotions. Some individuals believe that they should be attentive to their own emotional state in order to recognize and cope with difficult feelings, while others either disavow or dismiss the importance of emotions in themselves and others. We tested the hypothesis that college students who engage in what we are calling *emotion coping*, who are aware of their negative emotions (attention), who can identify and distinguish among their emotions (clarity), and who have the ability to implement a strategy for managing these emotions (repair), will show better academic, social, and emotional adjustment to college. Following the argument from Cutrona et al. (1994) that coping is learned

from family interaction, and the findings of Johnson et al. (2008) that coping moderates the relationship between family cohesion and adolescent adjustment, we hypothesized that college students' ability to manage their emotions (i.e., emotion coping) moderates the relationship between family environment and college adjustment (see Figure 1). In other words, a person's ability to manage her emotions effectively may protect her from the risk for maladjustment she faces from a family environment with a lot of conflict that is not particularly cohesive or expressive.

METHOD

Participants

Two cohorts of a total of 320 (93 men, 227 women) first-year undergraduate students at a state university in suburban Philadelphia participated in the Coping with the Transition to College (CTC) project. The project ran

for 2 consecutive years. Ninety-four students (30 men, 64 women) participated in cohort 1 data collection; and 226 students (63 men, 163 women) participated in cohort 2 data collection. No significant differences in student demographics were found between cohort 1 and cohort 2 participants. Eighty-three percent of the study participants were Caucasian, with the remaining 17% African American, Latino, and Asian American. Participants were first-time college students between the ages of 18 and 20 years ($M = 18.56$; $SD = 0.54$) enrolled in an Introductory to Psychology course. Eighty-four percent of the student participants lived on campus, and 98% were full-time students.

Procedure

During the second semester of their first college year, each participant completed a series of questionnaires about his/her family environment, coping style, and individual functioning. Students from all majors at the university were eligible to enroll in Introductory Psychology. As part of this course, students were required to participate in 2 hours of research through the Psychology Department's subject pool or to complete an alternative assignment. Participants were given 1 hour of credit toward their Introductory Psychology course for research participation. Requests and requirements for student participants were posted in a central location in the Psychology Department and students signed up to participate in a study of their own choosing. This study was one of many studies participants had the option of participating in to fulfill the research requirement for their course.

Measures

The Family Environment Scale (FES). The FES (Moos & Moos, 1976) measures respondents' perceptions of their family environment based

on responses of *True* or *False* to statements about their family. Family is not defined; rather, participants are asked to define for themselves "whole family environment." For some, whole family environment will include several family members from multiple generations (e.g., parents, grandparents, siblings), while for others it may only include a single parent. In contrast to assessing a subsystem of the larger family system (e.g., parent-child relationship), we asked participants to rate their whole family environment regardless of how many members they included in their family.

Responses were arranged in ten 9-item scales assessing cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, independence, achievement orientation, intellectual-cultural orientation, active-recreational orientation, moral-religious emphasis, organization, and control within the family environment. Items from all ten scales were administered to study participants. Consistent with other studies focused on relational aspects of the family system (Buboltz et al., 2003; Johnson, 2005), only the family cohesion scale measuring the commitment, help, and support family members provide for one another, the family expressiveness scale measuring how much family members are encouraged to act openly and to express their feelings directly, and the family conflict scale measuring open conflict in the family were included in data analyses. The FES is a well-used instrument in the family psychology literature with good reliability and validity (see Moos & Moos, 1976). In our results, alpha coefficients for each scale were as follows: family cohesion 0.75, family expressiveness 0.64, and family conflict 0.69.

Emotion Coping Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS). The TMMS (Salovey et al., 2002) includes 30 items using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The scale examines how individuals respond to and handle their own emotions. The

scale is divided into three subgroups: attention (13 items), clarity (11 items), and mood repair (6 items). *Attention* is conceptualized as the degree to which someone is able to pay attention to how they are feeling (e.g., "I don't pay much attention to my feelings"). *Clarity* is defined as the degree to which an individual can take his identified emotions and be clear about how he is feeling and why he is feeling that way (e.g., "I can't make sense out of my feelings"). This goes beyond identifying emotions and analyzes the emotions that are occurring, discriminating one from another. *Mood repair* is the degree to which an individual is able to repair unpleasant moods and maintain positive ones after successfully identifying and understanding those emotions (e.g., "When I become upset, I remind myself about all the pleasures in life").

The TMMS is one of the most widely used self-reported measures of emotional intelligence (Fernandez-Berrocal et al., 2006). Previous studies using this scale have shown it to be internally consistent (Salovey et al., 2002); and observational studies have established its validity (see Fernandez-Berrocal et al.). In our study, alpha coefficients for each scale were as follows: attention 0.83, clarity 0.83, repair 0.82.

Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ). The SACQ (Baker & Siryk, 1984) is a 67-item self-reported measure yielding 4 scales assessing college students' academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal/emotional adjustment, and their attachment to the university. Scoring also provides an overall index of full-scale adjustment. The academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment scales were used. *Academic adjustment* is assessed using 24 items that describe how comfortable students feel with the academic demands of college life. *Social adjustment* is assessed using 20 items that are relevant to the interpersonal-societal

demands inherent in adjustment to college. *Personal/emotional adjustment* is assessed using 15 items aimed at determining how the student is feeling psychologically and physically, or the degree to which the student is experiencing general psychological distress and/or any associated somatic problems.

Participants rated how well each experience applies to them at the present time using a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*applies very closely*) to 9 (*doesn't apply closely at all*). Raw scores are converted to *t* scores and normative data are provided by sex and semester. First-semester norms are for students who have had no previous college experience, while second-semester norms are for those students who have completed one or more semesters of college at the time of the test administration. We used second-semester norms for the Spring semester administration of the SACQ.

The SACQ is one of the most widely used measures of college adjustment and has been shown to be both reliable and valid with Cronbach's alphas for full-scale college adjustment obtained on two separate samples of .91 and .92. Subscale reliability coefficients are also good. Values for social adjustment range from .83 to .91, and for personal/emotional adjustment from .77 to .86 (Baker and Siryk, 1984).

RESULTS

We used *t* tests to assess cohort differences and gender differences among the study variables. Results indicate no significant mean cohort differences in participants' ratings of family environment, emotion coping, or college adjustment. Female participants reported being more attentive of their emotions than male participants: $t(316) = 2.24, p < .05$; $M = 49.35, SD = 7.51$ for men; $M = 51.31, SD = 6.91$ for women. No other gender differences were found.

Linking Family Environment, Emotion Coping, and College Adjustment

Pearson correlations examining the relationship among family environment, emotion coping, and emerging adults' transition to college are presented in Table 1. Participants who viewed their families to be cohesive reported few difficulties with their academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment to college. Similarly, participant ratings of family expressiveness and family conflict were linked to college adjustment. When new college students reported more expressiveness in their family, they also reported high levels of social and personal/emotional adjustment to college. No significant correlation was found between family expressiveness and participant ratings of academic adjustment. Participants from families with high levels of family conflict reported difficulty adjusting to the academic demands of college and difficulty with their personal/emotional adjustment to college. No significant correlation was found between family conflict and participant reports of social adjustment.

Participant reports of emotion coping were also linked to reports of new college student adjustment. New college students who were clear about their emotions, who paid attention to their emotions, and who were able to successfully manage their difficult emotions (i.e., TMMS Repair) reported having little difficulty managing their academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment to college.

Next, we used regression to test whether emotion coping variables made a unique contribution to the prediction of college adjustment over and above the contribution made by family environment variables. We entered family environment variables (i.e., cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict) on step 1 of each equation and emotion coping variables (i.e., clarity, attention, and repair) on step 2 of each equation. Separate but identical regression analyses were used to predict variability in students' reports of college academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment.

Results indicate that together, the family environment variables and the emotion

TABLE 1.
Correlation Between Family Environment, Emotion Coping, and College Adjustment

	FExp	FCon	Clar	Attn	Rep	AA	SA	PEA
FCoh	.44**	-.54**	.15**	.18**	.20**	.16**	.15**	.17**
FExp		-.32**	.18**	.22**	.21**	.10	.15**	.17**
FCon			-.07	-.07	-.15**	-.15**	-.06	-.25**
Clar				.33**	.23**	.32**	.30**	.39**
Attn					.28**	.22**	.11*	.11*
Rep						.34**	.31**	.48**
AA							.34**	.62**
SA								.38**

Notes. FCoh = Family Cohesion, FExp = Family Expressiveness, FCon = Family Conflict, Clar = TMMS Clarity, Attn = TMMS Attention, Rep = TMMS Repair, AA = Academic Adjustment, SA = Social Adjustment, PEA = Personal/Emotional Adjustment

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2.
Regression Analyses Predicting College Adjustment from New Student Reports
of Family Environment and Emotion Coping

	Academic Adjustment	Social Adjustment	Personal/Emotional Adjustment
	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>
Family Cohesion	0.75	1.52	-0.64
Family Express	0.04	0.70	0.90
Family Conflict	-1.55	0.32	-3.49**
TMMS Clarity	3.95***	4.16***	7.98***
TMMS Attention	1.82	-0.36	-1.42
TMMS Repair	5.22***	4.04***	6.58***

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

coping variables account for a significant amount of variability in participants' academic adjustment ($R^2 = .20$, $p < .001$), social adjustment ($R^2 = .14$, $p < .001$), and personal-emotional adjustment ($R^2 = .34$, $p < .001$) to college. Furthermore, the emotion coping variables made a significant contribution to the prediction of variance in participants' academic adjustment (R^2 change = .15, $p < .001$), social adjustment (R^2 change = .10, $p < .001$), and personal/emotional adjustment (R^2 change = .25, $p < .001$) to college over and above the contribution made by family environment variables. Participants' ratings of their clarity and ability to repair negative emotions each made a significant, unique contribution to the prediction of college students' academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment (see Table 2). Family conflict made a significant, unique contribution to our ability to predict students' reports of personal/emotional adjustment to college; family cohesion and family expressiveness, however, did not make a significant, unique contribution to the prediction of college student adjustment.

Moderating the Relationship Between Family Environment and College Adjustment

To assess the hypothesized role of emotion coping in moderating the relationship between family environment and adjustment to college, we used median splits to categorize families as high or low in family cohesion, high or low in family expressiveness, and high or low in family conflict (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

To identify distinct styles of coping with difficult emotions, emotion coping ratings on each TMMS subscale were cluster analyzed. Cluster analysis is a multivariate approach allowing for the simultaneous consideration of a participants' configuration of ratings across multiple dimensions of emotion coping (Alexander & Blashfield, 1984). After defining each participant's profile on the basis of emotion coping ratings, the clustering procedure combined participants with similar profiles into homogenous subgroups, which constitute unique patterns of emotion coping in this sample (McGroder, 2000).

The 3 TMMS subscales (i.e., clarity, attention, repair) were first standardized to scale. We used a hierarchical agglomerate

clustering method in which a cluster member's score on a variable will have greater similarity to the mean score of fellow cluster members for that variable than to the mean score for that variable in any other cluster. Cosine was used as the similarity metric which determines cluster membership by detecting pattern differences across the 3 variables used in the analysis (Hartigan, 1975). Based on notion of differences between those who avoid their emotions and those who attend to their emotions (Gottman et al., 1996), we hypothesized that 2 clusters would emerge.

Results of the 2-cluster solution indicate a cluster of 132 emotion-managing participants receiving high ratings on all 3 of the TMMS subscales (clarity of emotions, attention to emotions, and repair of emotions) and a second cluster of 188 emotion-avoiding participants receiving low ratings on all 3 emotion coping variables. The multivariate test for emotion coping type was significant, $F(3, 312) = 174.23, p < .001$. There were significant differences between groups for all 3 of the emotion coping variables. Emotion managers reported more clarity ($M = 42.91, SD = 4.47$), attention ($M = 55.89, SD = 4.10$), and repair ($M = 23.71, SD = 4.40$) than emotion avoiders ($M = 33.61, SD = 6.24$ for clarity; $M = 47.18, SD = 6.58$ for attention; $M = 21.14, SD = 5.05$ for repair).

We used Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) controlling for participants' gender to test the hypothesis that college students' emotion coping strategies moderated the relationship between family environment and the 3 scales assessing college student adjustment. To conserve power, separate analyses were computed for each family environment variable (i.e., family cohesion, family expressiveness, and family conflict). Means and standard deviations of college adjustment for emotion-managing and emotion-avoiding participants reporting

high or low family cohesion, expressivity, and conflict are listed in Table 3.

Family Cohesion. We found a significant multivariate effect of emotion coping, $F(3, 302) = 5.78, p < .001$. No significant multivariate effect was indicated for family cohesion, $F(3, 302) = 1.21, p = .31$; or the interaction between family cohesion and emotion coping, $F(3, 302) = 0.40, p = .75$. Univariate effects indicated a significant main effect of emotion coping for academic adjustment, $F(1, 304) = 13.23, p < .001$, social adjustment, $F(1, 304) = 7.58, p < .01$, and personal/emotional adjustment, $F(1, 304) = 11.30, p < .001$. Participants who reported avoiding their emotions reported being less academically adjusted to college ($M = 43.83, SD = 8.69$), socially adjusted to college ($M = 46.76, SD = 9.39$), and personally/emotionally adjusted to college ($M = 42.96, SD = 9.53$) than their peers who manage their emotions ($M = 48.91, SD = 9.49$ academic adjustment; $M = 50.61, SD = 10.73$ social adjustment; $M = 47.34, SD = 9.15$ personal/emotional adjustment).

Family Expressiveness. We found a significant multivariate effect of emotion coping, $F(3, 303) = 7.00, p < .001$; and a significant multivariate effect of the interaction between family expressiveness and emotion coping, $F(3, 303) = 3.49, p < .05$. No significant multivariate effect was indicated for family expressiveness, $F(3, 303) = 1.84, p = .14$. Univariate effects indicated a significant main effect of emotion coping for academic adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 9.47, p < .001$, social adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 5.52, p < .05$, and personal/emotional adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 11.68, p < .001$. Participants who reported avoiding their emotions reported being less academically adjusted to college ($M = 43.85, SD = 8.67$), socially adjusted to college ($M = 46.73, SD = 9.35$), and personally/emotionally adjusted to college ($M = 42.89,$

TABLE 3.
Means (Standard Deviations) of College Student Adjustment for Emotion-Managing and Emotion-Avoiding
Participants Reporting High or Low Family Cohesion, Expressivity, and Conflict

	Family Cohesion		Family Expressivity		Family Conflict	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
<i>Emotion-Avoiding Participants</i>						
Academic Adjustment	43.24 (8.97)	46.25 (7.00)	43.29 (9.12)	45.14 (7.46)	45.42 (8.92)	42.15 (8.11)
Social Adjustment	46.47 (9.31)	47.92 (9.80)	45.17 (8.79)	50.25 (9.68)	46.79 (9.45)	46.62 (9.36)
Personal Adjustment	42.56 (9.49)	44.58 (9.63)	41.78 (9.11)	45.40 (9.95)	45.27 (9.52)	40.16 (8.85)
<i>Emotion-Managing Participants</i>						
Academic Adjustment	48.68 (9.88)	49.40 (8.68)	50.10 (8.36)	47.79 (10.26)	49.15 (9.72)	48.48 (9.16)
Social Adjustment	50.01 (10.75)	51.88 (10.71)	51.40 (10.45)	49.50 (11.02)	51.22 (9.91)	49.60 (11.78)
Personal Adjustment	46.64 (9.46)	48.58 (9.63)	47.51 (7.71)	47.31 (10.48)	48.43 (9.55)	45.71 (8.40)

$SD = 9.50$) than peers who manage their emotions ($M = 48.94$, $SD = 9.39$ academic adjustment; $M = 50.45$, $SD = 10.74$ social adjustment; $M = 47.41$, $SD = 9.16$ personal/emotional adjustment).

Univariate effects of the interaction between family expressiveness and emotion coping were significant for social adjustment only, $F(1, 305) = 9.68$, $p < .01$. As indicated in Figure 2, participants from nonexpressive families who also report avoiding their emotions were significantly less socially adjusted to college than their peers from either more expressive families, regardless of their emotion coping style, or less expressive families who were adept in managing their emotions. No significant univariate interaction effects were found for academic adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 3.32$, $p = .07$; or personal/emotional adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 2.80$, $p = .10$.

Family Conflict. We found a significant multivariate effect of emotion coping, $F(3, 303) = 9.02$, $p < .001$; and a significant multivariate effect of family conflict, $F(3, 303) = 4.56$, $p < .01$. No significant multivariate effect was indicated for the interaction between family conflict and emotion coping, $F(3, 303) = 1.08$, $p = .36$. Univariate effects indicated a significant main effect of emotion coping for academic adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 22.83$, $p < .001$; social adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 10.32$, $p < .001$; and personal/emotional adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 16.34$, $p < .001$. Participants who reported avoiding their emotions reported being less academically adjusted to college ($M = 43.91$, $SD = 8.69$), socially adjusted to college ($M = 46.71$, $SD = 9.38$), and personally/emotionally adjusted to college ($M = 42.91$, $SD = 9.54$) than peers who

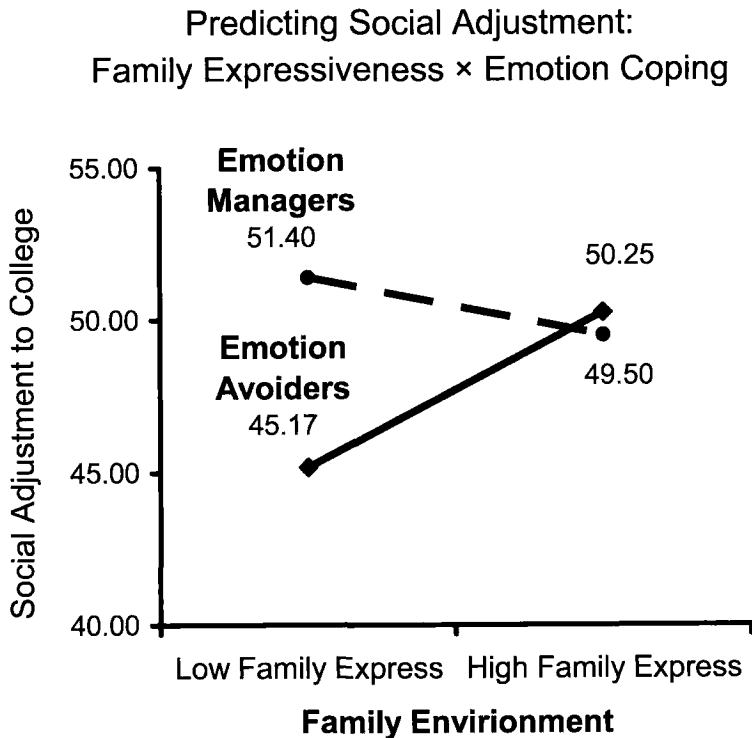


FIGURE 2. The Relationship Between Family Expressiveness and Participants' Social Adjustment to College as a Function of Emotion Coping

manage their emotions ($M = 48.87$, $SD = 9.46$ academic adjustment; $M = 50.55$, $SD = 10.71$ social adjustment; $M = 47.31$, $SD = 9.16$ personal/emotional adjustment).

Univariate effects also indicated a significant main effect of family conflict for personal/emotional adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 13.33$, $p < .001$. Participants who reported more family conflict also reported being less personally/emotionally adjusted to college ($M = 42.27$, $SD = 9.06$) than their peers who viewed their families as displaying less family conflict ($M = 46.62$, $SD = 9.64$). We did not find univariate effects of conflict for academic, $F(1, 305) = 3.57$, $p = .06$; and social adjustment, $F(1, 305) = 0.59$, $p = .44$.

DISCUSSION

Data from this study support the notion that family functioning and the tendency to actively manage one's emotions are related to college adjustment. We found support for the hypothesis that college students' perceptions of their family environment—namely family cohesion, family expressiveness, and family conflict—are linked to their academic, social, and emotional well-being when making the transition to college. Consistent with family systems theories (Minuchin, 1974), which argue that cohesive families are more likely to facilitate adaptive individual functioning among emerging adults, our data show family cohesion to be linked to 3 aspects of college adjustment. Family conflict and family expressiveness were also related to participants' college adjustment. When emerging adults perceived their families to be less cohesive prior to beginning college, they reported experiencing less academic adjustment, more dissatisfaction with their social adjustment, and more general psychological distress and/or somatic consequences of distress after making the transition to college. These findings offer

support for the notion that a cohesive family may provide college students with a secure base that facilitates the developmentally appropriate struggle of separation and individuation (Bowen, 1976; Minuchin).

As a whole, these findings add to the growing evidence that the way one views one's whole family environment during the emerging adulthood years is linked to adjustment during normative transition points. However, it is important to note that when emotion coping variables were included in our assessment of college adjustment, family factors appeared less influential. Whereas each aspect of family environment studied was linked to participants' reports of their college adjustment, family environment did not make a significant, unique contribution to explaining variance in college adjustment once participants' emotion coping was included in our analyses. The one exception to this pattern was the relationship between family conflict and personal/emotional adjustment to college. This relationship remained significant even after variance in participants' personal/emotional adjustment to college (i.e., general psychological and physical well-being) was accounted for by emotion coping variables.

The authors borrowed from Gottman and colleagues (1996) the notion of meta-emotion philosophy and from Salovey and colleagues (2002) the 3-component model of emotion processing and management (clarity, attention, and repair), which we used to identify 2 distinct types of emotion coping among our study participants: emotion managing and emotion avoiding. These clusters appear to mirror the division of parents who are aware and accepting of their sad and angry feelings, from parents who tend to disavow or dismiss their negative emotions as described by Gottman et al. Our findings are similar to those of Kerr and colleagues (2004): that college students who are unable to recognize their emotions

have considerably more difficulty adjusting to college. The emotion coping variables included in this study make an independent contribution to the prediction of college adjustment over and above the predictive contribution of participants' perceptions of their family environment. Moreover, we found that not only did participants' ratings of their clarity, attention, and emotion repair make a significant and unique prediction of their academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment to college, but their emotion coping type also predicted adjustment. In particular, our emotion-avoiding participants reported significantly more difficulty with all aspects of their college adjustment than emotion-managing participants.

Similar to findings by Johnson et al. (2008) that adolescent coping moderates the relationship between family cohesion and adjustment, we found the relationship between family expressiveness and college adjustment to vary depending on emerging adults' reports of their emotion coping. Individuals from less expressive families who did not manage their emotions carried the greatest risk for poor adjustment. Among emerging adults who viewed their families as not very expressive, participants who reported avoiding their emotions appeared to have significant difficulty managing their social adjustment to college. Participants who viewed their families as not very expressive but who reported paying attention to their emotions, being clear about their emotions, and having a method for repairing their emotions reported making a more favorable social adjustment to college. In fact, no significant differences in social adjustment were indicated among emotion-managing participants from less expressive families, emotion-managing participants from more expressive families, and emotion-avoiding participants from more expressive families.

These findings suggest that when family does not provide an optimal environment for fostering strong adjustment to college, the ability to manage emotions may buffer individuals from the risk for poor social adjustment. Moreover, when the individual is comfortable managing negative emotions and the family is expressive, social adjustment is high.

Limitations

A number of study limitations deserve particular attention. First, the relatively homogeneous sample that we used limits our ability to generalize these findings beyond the sample studied. Moreover, we did not have access to demographic information about family income or family structure. It is certainly possible that the relationship among family environment, emotion coping, and college adjustment differs for emerging adults from different socioeconomic statuses or from different family structures (e.g., intact, divorced, blended). Second, using median splits to dichotomize the family environment variables into high and low groups is likely to have reduced our power by restricting the range of possible values for each of the family environment variables. Examining an interaction effect in this way, however, was the most parsimonious test of our moderator hypothesis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Despite restricting the range of these variables and thereby losing power, we did find a significant interaction of family expressiveness and emotion coping when predicting emerging adults' social adjustment.

Future Research

Future study with a more diverse student population is necessary. Furthermore, it may be that the significant correlation found between new college students' perceptions of their family environment and their attention, clarity, and repair of emotions represents an artifact of the self-reported nature of the

measurement instruments used in this study. Future study of family functioning and the college transition should include both self-reported and observational assessments of family functioning. Only with a more objective measurement will we be able to ascertain the degree to which emerging adults' perceptions of their family environment differ from that of an outsider, how both perspectives contribute to understanding variance in emerging adults' academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal/emotional adjustment to college, and how family functioning is linked to emerging adults' emotion coping skills.

Although preliminary, our data do suggest that intervention with emerging adults making the transition to college that encourages the management of emotions as opposed to the avoidance of emotions may improve student academic, social, and emotional well-being. Whereas it would be extremely difficult to provide family therapy to new college students who are often physically distant from their family environment, it may be possible to assist them in developing techniques and skills for managing their difficult emotions. For example, assisting first-year college students with skills that will increase the attention they pay to their emotions, the clarity in recognizing particular emotions, and the tools they feel comfortable using to repair their mood state may facilitate easier adjustment to college even when their family environment leaves them at risk for adjustment difficulties during this transition period.

The effectiveness of programs assisting new college students in their college adjustment have shown some promise and continue to be evaluated (Pratt et al., 2000). Most programs of this kind focus on building social support or on strengthening academic skills and not on improving processes like emotion coping, that may be underlying adjustment problems when starting college. Emotional understanding is useful in facilitating better adjustment among younger children and has been effectively integrated into preschool and elementary school classrooms (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). Our findings suggest that including instruction on managing emotions early in a student's transition to college may be helpful in facilitating social adjustment to college, which has been implicated as one predictor of college retention and mental health among emerging adults (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Mounts et al., 2006). It is possible that lack of social adjustment is the start of a trajectory that may lead to adjustment difficulties that go beyond feeling less integrated into the social fabric of college life. Our findings, together with future research influenced by our study, can assist in designing interventions that facilitate better adjustment among emerging adults making the transition to college.

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