

# Family Quality of Life: Influence of Social Support, Gender and Parental Marital Status

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**Abstract:** This study examined the influence of gender, parental marital status and social support on family quality of life of college students. A total of 377 college students participated in this study with 106 male and 271 females. Family Quality of Life scale (FQOL) was used to measure three subscales, interaction, parenting and emotional well-being. ANOVA revealed that students with high social support scored higher in all subscales of family quality of life scale than those with low social support. The study also showed that students with married parents scored significantly higher in subscales of interaction, parenting, and emotional well-being than those from divorced parents. Gender difference showed that female students scored significantly higher than male students on interaction and parenting scales but there was no significant difference on emotional well-being scale for both genders.

**Keywords:** parenting, interaction, emotional well-being, social support, marital status.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The main goal of most family when they send their children to college is to ensure a successful college experience on academic, social and psychological growth. This has not been the case as college students have been reporting a consistent decline of emotional well-being over the past 25 years according to national survey of college students (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake & Tran, 2011; Sax, Bryant & Gilmartin, 2004).

There is a persistent gender gap with female students showing lower levels of emotional well-being than male students (Pryor, et al., 2011). One of the biggest benefits to positive emotional development is for students to develop close friendships and feel at home on campus (Astin, 1993). Communication with the parents help to increase a sense of well-being for students who see their parents as supportive, interested, helpful, nonintrusive and uncritical.(Pryor, et al., 2011). This study will examine the influence of student gender, parental marital status and social support on college students' family quality of life. The family quality of life will be measured by on the scale of family interaction, parenting and emotional well-being of the students.

### **Social support on college students and related theoretical perspectives:**

Miller and Brown (1997) reviewed the common factors that leads to rising stress levels among young adults and concluded schools related issues, peers, family and parenting are among the common stressors. Conflict with parents, heavy loads of homework and intense urge to conform to peers were the common issues faced by young adults. Therefore, social support plays an important role for college students physical and psychological health in buffering the impact of stress (Lian & Geok,2009). Social support refers to having a group of family and friends who provide strong social attachment; being able to exchange helpful resources among family and friends with the feeling of having supportive relationships and behaviors (Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993).

A study revealed that up to 20% of college students experience depression during their undergraduate education (Daughtry & Kunkel, 1993). A cross-sectional study indicated that first years college students who have more perceived social support from family members could cope better with their surroundings and studies compared to those who have

less perceived social support (Holahan et al., 1995). Social support help college students to cope with stress common to them such as separation from family, adaptation of new environment, and beginning of new relationships (Lian & Geok, 2009).

Family discourse is constructed by family members, each of whom holds certain expectations and goals for each particular interaction. During family interaction, members role are often based on each individual's gender and position in the family (Johnson, 2007). Parents look at family interaction as a way to socialize children on how to contribute relevant information as well as learning to assert themselves (O'Reilly, 2006). Children are hierarchically below the parents in most decision making processes and are sometimes in marginalized roles in family interaction and gender differences exist for children during family interaction (Ely, Gleason & McCabe, 1996).

College students are emerging adults who are in a transitional period and in a variety of possible life directions appertaining to love, work and starting a family. Individuals in this stage of life depend less on their parents yet they do not have enduring responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2010). In order for emerging adults to make the transition to adulthood, they should accept responsibility of one's self, make independent decisions and become financially independent (Arnett, 2010). College experiences provide an intensive socialization process where new academic, social and developmental challenges are negotiated (Coccia & Darling, 2015). During this period, the relationship between college students and their families are in a state of instability and parent-child relationship is complex (Coccia & Darling, 2015).

Social support can be described as providing assistance to other people to help them cope during the time of need and it comes from interpersonal relationships, family members, neighbors, support group, religious groups and friends (Mahanta & Aggarwal, 2012). The mutual sharing of personal and social life by people who supports each other helps in the individual and social development (Turner, 1999). Regardless of the level of stress in adolescent's life, social support provides a positive influence on the individual's adaptations in a positive direction (Cohens & Wills, 1985). Social support is viewed as care, value and guidance provided from family, peer and community members. It is an expansive construct that describes the physical and emotional comfort given to individuals by their family, friends and other significant persons in their lives (Israel & Schurman, 1990). Social support has shown to relate positively to student's satisfaction with schooling experience, physical and mental health, optimism, happiness and life satisfaction (DeVries et al, 2007; Matheny et al, 2002)

The desire and need for social support have evolved as an adaptive tool for survival and the perceptions that the world around as being supportive from our interaction and attachment experiences early in life (Bowlby, 1973; Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Social support from family and friends is a protective element against a variety of adverse health outcomes and early family experiences associated with later perceived social support (Gayman, Turner, Cislo & Eliassen, 2011). Social support has been noted as the most consistent and compelling indicator in relation to health of an individual (Turner, 1983).

Developmental and life course theorist have recognized family experiences to be associated with later perceived social support. Thus adolescent family experiences can be used to predict perceived social support in young adults (Gayman, Turner, Cislo & Eliassen, 2011). Parent-child relationships during early adolescence plays a significant role in promoting the acquisition of personal attributes that foster experiences of social support in adulthood (Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Early positive family relations are associated with perception of social support among college students (Sarason & Sarason, 1982). Studies have shown that negative social interactions have greater mental health consequences than positive interactions (Lincoln, Chatters and Taylor, 2003) but also that perceptions of negative family environment predict lower levels of perceived social support from friends (Lakey & Dickinson, 1994). Thus the consequences of negative family experiences during early adolescence may extend to social relationships in general later in life. The family structure is likely to have important implication for the availability and perception of social support.

#### **Gender differences:**

The aspect of differentiation human beings on account of gender is a very important issue that influences almost every aspect of the humanity. The society socializes young people both male and female into masculine and feminine adults (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gender is important because most important aspects of peoples' lives such as how they behave themselves, the social opportunities, constraints in their lives, the social life and occupational path they pursue is

heavily influence by society gender-affirmation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gender differentiation is crucial because many qualities and role selectivity promoted in male and females tends towards those ascribed to male as to be more desirable, affectual and of higher status (Berscheid, 1993). However, most of the stereotypes attributed and roles in regards to gender arise due to cultural design than from biological aspects of gender (Epstein, 1997). Psychological theories generally indicate that cognitive construction of gender conceptions and styles of behaviors are situated within the familial transmission model. The model upholds the emphasis of adoption of gender role with the family by the process of identification (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Behaviorist theory argue that parents are responsible for shaping and regulating gender-linked conduct in favor of biological determinant and familial genes as the main transmission agents of gender differentiation in the society (Rowe, 1994). The cognitive theory agrees that gender conceptions and role behavior are products of a broad network of social influence operating both within the family and in many societal systems that are encountered everyday (Bandura, 1997). Some psychological theories treat gender development as primarily an issue of early childhood rather than one that operates throughout the life course even though gender role conduct vary in some degree across social context and at different periods in life (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Social cognitive theory takes perspective that spans the entire age range (Bandura, 1997).

Social support-seeking differs by gender as women generally seek support more frequently than men (Matheny, Ashby & Cupp 2005). Day and Livingstone (2003) in a study of university students, women were reported to have higher likelihood of utilizing family and friends social network than men. The support from family and friends is virtually unrelated to life-satisfaction for women, but showed a positive relationship for men (Fusilier, Ganster & Mayes, 1986). Gender plays a great part in perceived social support. Sharir, Tanasescu, Turbow and Maman (2007) study on psychiatric patients indicated that females are more likely to receive social support from friends and significant others than the male patients. Similarly, another study revealed females have been found to receive more social support from their friends than their males counterparts by the fact that they are more emotional as compared to males, thus they might be able to share their feelings more freely and readily (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994).

#### **Parental Marital Status:**

Divorce is a phenomenon that is ever growing in the today's society as it is estimated that at least 40% of the American children will experience divorce of their parents before they reach adulthood (Amato; Emery, Otto & O'Donohue, 2005). This new divorce phenomenon has necessitated researchers to seek to understand its possible consequences on children's well-being. Parental divorce has been associated with depression, lower life satisfaction, impaired behavior, psychological adjustment and educational attainment (Agar, Cioe & Gorzalka, 2010; Wauterickx, Gouwy & Bracke, 2006). Parental discord also had a negative effect on adult children adjustment, regardless of parental marital status. It was also established that parent-child relationships were also negatively affected by parental marital discord (Agar, Cioe & Gorzalka, 2010). Parental divorce weakens parent-child bonds through the removal of a parental figure from the household leading to decrease in the immediate accessibility of that parent and this lowers the quality of father-child relationship as the mother retains children custody in most cases (Dunn, O'Connor & Bridges, 2004).

Research has indicated that children of divorced parents are at risk of reduced social economic well-being, reduced academic achievement, physical health problems and behavioral problems (David, Geraldine, McLeod & Horwood, 2014). Childhood parental divorce may have enduring effects in adulthood including; mental health problems, emotional problems, reduced physical health and lower socioeconomic (Sigal, Wolchik, Tein & Sandler, 2012; Christensen & Brooks, 2001). Studies has shown that those reared in childhood environments subject to parental divorce have more partner changes in adulthood, less stable relationships and more perpetration of inter-partner violence (Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron & Koene, 2011; Amato & Booth, 2001; Riggo, 2004).

Christensen and Brooks (2001) noted that males and females react differently to divorce of their parents and that these differences may be repeated in their future partner relationships. Other studies found that daughters of divorced parents report reduced intimate relationship quality (Christensen and Brooks, 2001; Mustonen et al., 2011). Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch (1991) found that older adolescents were more likely than younger adolescents to be caught between parental conflicts. This is a result of their greater emotional and cognitive maturity, being better able to empathize with each parent's perspective — a process that heightens their feelings of being caught in the middle.

Afifi and Schrodt (2004) found that offspring from divorced parents reported greater dissatisfaction and avoidance than did offspring with continuously married parents. Young adults with continuously married but discordant parents, like

those with divorced parents, often felt caught in the middle and had more distant relationships with mothers and fathers (Amato & Afifi, 2006). White (1992) highlighted that, many parents provide support to their adult children in the form of babysitting, loans for education, housing during times of unemployment, down payments for homes, and advice. Major turning points in adult's children's lives, such as marrying and having children of their own, can increase children's contact with parents (Troll & Fingerma, 1996). Divorced parents who become involved in their grandchildren's lives may discover that this involvement reignites unwanted relationships with former spouses (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Social support from parents can create new sources of tension between divorced parents, with implications for adult children's feelings of being caught between parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

Stepparent who actively attempt to bond with the stepchildren before remarriage by engaging in shared interests and maintain those bonding efforts after remarriage are most likely have good relationship than those who did not engage in any relationship building strategy (Ganong and Coleman 2014). Children do notice step-parents relationship building efforts, perceive the benefits to themselves and their families and decide to respond with own affinity behaviors to develop the relationship (Ganong and Coleman, 2014).

Fathers who are involved in young adults and adolescence life contribute positively on their child's likelihood of internalizing problems, prevent school failures and prevent self-image problems for adolescence (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Individuals from divorced families tend to report less nurturance and emotional involvement with their fathers than those growing up in intact families (Schwartz & Finley, 2005). The reduced parental support and higher residential mobility commonly characterized by single-parent and step families can have a negative impact on peer relationships of young adults (Head, Gorman & Kapinus, 2008). This study was guided by the following research questions;

1. Is family quality of life of college students different by gender?
2. Does parental marital status impact college student's family quality of life?
3. Does family quality of life differ between students with high social support and those with low social support?

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

### **Procedure:**

Participants of the study were undergraduate college students recruited from their classes with the permission from the instructors. Permission to use human subjects was obtained from the institutional review board before the study commenced.

Instructors were requested via email for permission for their students to be recruited during class time. Data was collected from willing volunteer students during class. Student's participation in the study was completely voluntary and anonymous.

### **Materials:**

The Family Quality of Life Scale (FQOL) (Beach Center of disabilities, 2012) was the main scale used to collect data in this study. The FQOL is a 16-item inventory rated on a 5 point Likert-type scale. The FQOL Scale uses satisfaction as the primary response format. The anchors of the items rated on satisfaction are rated on a 5-point scale, where 1 = very dissatisfied, 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 5 = very satisfied. It measures several aspects of families' perceived satisfaction in terms of quality of family life. Family quality of life is measured under three domains: Family Interaction, Parenting and Emotional Well-being. Additionally, demographic questions were asked, the key ones asked about the participants' gender, marital status of parents and amount of social support.

### **Participants:**

A total of 377 college students participated in this study with 106 male and 271 females. The participants were mainly undergraduate students. Their mean age was 22 years and majority of the participants were juniors comprising of 141 students, followed by freshmen with 89 students and senior with 78 students. Ethnic composition of the participants included Caucasian 295 participants, African American 48, Asian, 11 and about 12 described themselves as others.

### 3. RESULTS

#### Research Questions:

#### 1. Is family quality of life of college students different by gender?

Multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was carried out with three subscales of family quality of life instrument (interaction, Parenting and emotions wellbeing) as the dependent variable and gender (male or female) as the independent variable. A significant effect was found ( $\Lambda(3, 373) = .031, P = .000$ ). Follow-up univariate ANOVA indicated that FQOL parenting subscale differed by gender ( $F(1, 375) = 7.199, P = .008$ ) and emotional wellbeing ( $F(1, 375) = 4.759, P = .030$ ) with females having higher scores than males. However, there was no significant difference found in FQOL interaction subscale between females and males ( $F(1, 375) = .717, P = .398$ ).

**Table 1- ANOVA of FQOL subscales by gender.**

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Square	F	Sig.
FQOL Interaction	Male	106	23.7358	4.05510	16.625	.717	.398
	Female	271	24.2030	5.08150	23.196		
	Total	377	24.0716	4.81439			
FQOL Parenting	Male	106	24.2075	4.06311	117.658	7.199	.008
	Female	271	25.4502	4.03461	16.343		
	Total	377	25.1008	4.07580			
FQOL Emotional Wellbeing	Male	106	14.7736	3.00882	50.838	4.759	.030
	Female	271	15.5904	3.36404	10.683		
	Total	377	15.3607	3.28477			

#### 2. Does parental divorce impact college students' family quality of life?

Multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was carried out on three scales of family quality of life instrument (interaction, Parenting and emotions wellbeing) as the dependent variable and parental marital status (married or divorced) as the independent variable. A significant effect was found ( $\Lambda(3, 309) = .948, P = .001$ ). Follow-up univariate ANOVA indicated that students with married parents had higher scores than students from divorced parents in all three subscale of the FQOL subscales; interaction ( $F(1, 311) = 7.251, P = .007$ ), Marital status, ( $F(1,311) = 12.738, P = .000$ ), and emotional wellbeing ( $F(1, 311) = 13.980, P = .000$ ).

**Table 2- ANOVA of FQOL subscales by parental marital status**

		N	Mean	Std. Dev	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
FQOL Interaction	Married	215	24.86	4.44	1	147.104	7.251	.007
	Divorced	98	23.38	4.60	311	20.288		
	Total	313	24.39	4.55	312			
FQOL Parenting	Married	215	25.91	3.58	1	182.452	12.739	.000
	Divorced	98	24.27	4.20	311	14.323		
	Total	313	25.40	3.86	312			
FQOL Emotional Wellbeing	Married	215	15.94	3.00	1	133.627	13.980	.000
	Divorced	98	14.53	3.27	311	9.558		
	Total	313	15.50	3.16	312			

### 3. Does family quality of life differ between students with high social support and those with low social support?

Multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was carried out on three scales of family quality of life instrument (interaction, Parenting and emotions wellbeing) against participant high and low social support. A significant was found ( $\Lambda(3, 307) = .804, P = .000$ ). Follow-up univariate ANOVA indicated that students with high social support scored higher than those with low social support in all FQOL three subscales; interaction ( $F(1, 309) = 73.652, P = .000$ ), parenting by ( $F(1,309) = 41.225, P = .000$ ) and Emotional wellbeing by ( $F(1, 309) = 37.229, P = .000$ )

**Table 3- ANOVA of FQOL subscales by emotional wellbeing**

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
FQOL Interaction	Low. S. Support	75	20.92	5.12	1	1207.125	73.652	.000
	High. S. Support	236	25.53	3.65	309	16.390		
	Total	311	24.42	4.50	310			
FQOL Parenting	Low. S. Support	75	23.12	4.45	1	528.004	41.225	.000
	High. S. Support	236	26.15	3.26	309	12.808		
	Total	311	25.42	3.80	310			
FQOL Emotional Wellbeing	Low. S. Support	75	13.69	3.23	1	326.633	37.229	.000
	High. S. Support	236	16.09	2.87	309	8.774		
	Total	311	15.51	3.13	310			

## 4. DISCUSSION

The family quality of life was measured in three domains; interaction, parenting and emotional well-being. The study inquired whether family quality of life of college students was impacted by gender, parental marital status, and emotional wellbeing. The results of the study indicated that females scored higher than males in the FQOL parenting and emotional wellbeing subscales, but not in the FQOL interaction subscale. These results imply that females could have better family quality of life in view of parenting and emotional wellbeing than males. The study agree with a study conducted by Matheny, Ashby and Cupp (2005) that noted women seek social support more frequently than men and this may lead gender gap in the family quality of life. Day and Livingstone (2003) reported that female college students had likelihood to utilize family and friends social network than men. A study on psychiatric patients showed that female patients were more likely to receive social support from friends and significant others than male patients (Sharir, et al, 2007). Another study revealed females have been found to receive more social support from their friends than their males counterparts by the fact that they are more emotional as compared to males, thus they might be able to share their feelings more freely and readily with their friends (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994).

The current study also indicated that students whose parents who were married scored higher in all the three subscales of the FQOL (interaction, parenting and emotional wellbeing) than those whose parents were divorced. These findings agree with other research that has indicated that children of divorced parents are at risk of reduced social, economic well-being, reduced academic achievement, physical health problems and behavioral problems (David, Geraldine, McLeod & Horwood, 2014).

It has also been noted that childhood parental divorce may have enduring effects in adulthood including; mental health problems, emotional problems, reduced physical health and lower socioeconomic (Sigal, Wolchik, Tein & Sandler, 2012; Christensen & brooks, 2001). Studies have shown that those reared in childhood environments subject to parental divorce

have more partner changes in adulthood, less stable relationships and more perpetration of inter-partner violence (Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron & Koene, 2011; Amato & Booth, 2001; Riggo, 2004). Parental divorce has been associated depression, lower life satisfaction, impaired behavior, psychological adjustment and educational attainment (Agar, Cioe & Gorzalka, 2010; Wauterickx, Gouwy & Bracke, 2006). Lastly, the current study found that students with high social support had higher scores on all the three subscales of the FQOL subscales (interaction, parenting and emotional wellbeing) than the students with low social support.

These findings agree with a cross-sectional study that indicated that first year college students who have more perceived social support from family members could cope better with their surroundings and studies compared to those who had less perceived social support (Holahan et al., 1995). Social support helps college students to cope with stress common to them such as separation from family, adaptation of new environment, and beginning of new relationships (Lian & Geok, 2009). Social support from family and friends is a protective element against a variety of adverse health outcomes and early family experiences that are associated with later perceived social support (Gayman, Turner, Cisko & Eliassen, 2011). Social support has been noted as the most consistent and compelling indicator of relation to health of an individual (Turner, 1983).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that there is gender gap on family quality of life among college students. The study also indicated that family quality of life is impacted by parents' marital status, and social support. This study makes an important contribution in understanding family quality of life and the aspects that impact it.

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