Intentional Interactions and Identity Development: Perspectives on Education?

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Authors' contributions

This work is a continuation of the collaboration between both authors. Both authors conceptualized the community expectancy theory and jointly designed and executed the study. Similarly, they jointly wrote the manuscript, dividing the work equally. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

This study utilized self-report survey data to explore formal, intentional interactions measurably impacting an individual's identity among three groups in the mid-western United States. Data were collected across three levels: individual college-aged students in late-adolescence or early-adulthood, parents of college students, and adult community citizens. The mean scores of all three groups were compared using ANOVA and revealed no significant difference between the three groups, thus suggesting that students, parents, and community members agree that their direct words influence the actions of others. The results of the study illustrate both the impact and influence of parents on children, that it is difficult to measure inter-relationship between parent and child, and the interactions between these groups can be difficult to measure, suggesting a complicated relationship. However, the study does underscore the profound impact that people around children have on identity development and ultimately student actions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

How and why individuals make decisions about their own lives has been frequently studied [1]. Some of this research has been grounded in economics, including opportunity cost where decisions are balanced against different types of perceived gains, and some of this research has been grounded in disciplines like sociology where social exchange theory places decision emphasis on what a person benefits from taking some sort of action. Other research even explores how individuals face and overcome crisis, while still yet others explore social and physical interrelationships [2]. But, despite this strong foundation of research, decisions about postsecondary enrollment have remained difficult to predict and anticipate as they relate to individual decision making [3].

Postsecondary enrollment takes on many forms and includes a growing array of institutional choices. These include local, low-cost community colleges, expensive private national universities, convenience based affordable (and not so affordable) online providers, and among many others, including institutions that cater to specific jobs and careers. Most of the existing body of research has focused on traditional aged prospective students making decisions about attending a traditional four-year university, although research on community college enrollment and adult student enrollment has also been cyclically popular.

Part of the reason the traditional aged student college-going decision-making is so important is that it reflects a critical time in an individual's life where decisions are made to chart a future of work and life. Individuals maturing out of mandated public education have to make choices not only about who they are, but what they will do with themselves personally and professionally. For some, decisions are made by default due to lack of ability or lack of financial resources, and for others, decisions are made and un-made over a prolonged period of time.

For those individuals who ultimately decide upon pursuing a college education, the benefits can be significant. In addition to greater lifetime earning potential, those with a college education report a higher satisfaction with their quality of life, they report fewer addiction issues and fewer health concerns, and are the most likely to be engaged in their communities and make philanthropic contributions.

A major part of the difficulty in identifying why individuals make their college-going decisions is that there are multiple variables working and interacting with, to, for, and on an individual as life choices are being made. Additionally, all of these social interactions carry a different weight, and these pressures can be fluid or stable, meaning that a pressure from a peer group, for example, might exert tremendous influence from year-to-year. Similarly, the influences of community level variables can be exerted differently based on the size of the community, the intensive nature of community interactions, and even pressures from within a family unit to accept or deny the pressures being exerted [4].

An emerging field-theory to explain the variety of pressures placed on an individual is that of community expectancy. The theory holds that community-level variables interact in knowing and unknowing ways on an individual to guide actions or create expectations. These expectations can be related to macro-level variables as well as very personal, micro-level variables.

The idea of verifying this theory is at the center of the current study, as previous work detailed later, has identified that unintentional actions can influence the behavior of others. These unintentional interactions can also be critical in identifying the perceptions of the collegiate experience as students arrive on campus [5], and in turn, can frame a student's perception of what college is or should be, impacting retention and satisfaction [6].

The purpose for conducting the current study was to explore how formal, intentional interactions measurably impact an individual's identity, including perceptions about formal education. Although the questions of intentionality and community expectancy are broadly considered here, the research question is situated specifically in how intentional actions and behaviors influence an individual's decision to enroll in postsecondary education.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

How an individual makes life-changing decisions is difficult to understand [7]. Multiple theories incorporate hundreds of variables, ranging from

personal morals and values to those held by others that are expressed onto them, such as immediate and extended family members [8]. Some variation of this range of decision making influencers has been identified in college going models [9] that largely incorporate variables such as family education levels, cost and resource availability, and career outlook. These models, however, are often limited in their view of what constitutes 'higher education,' and what other social capital variables might have influence on an individual.

A major part of the difficulty identifying why individuals, particularly traditional aged students in late-adolescence (approximately aged 17-19) make the decision to attend postsecondary education is the range of postsecondary education providers. These include trade and vocational institutes, community colleges, proprietary training colleges, and a wide variety of four-year institutions, including religiously affiliated institutions, comprehensive regional universities, and research universities. Why a student decides to attend a strongly adherent religious institution, for example, might be very different from a student who decides on attending a research-oriented four-year university, although these differences are often not considered in discussions of decision-making about attending a 'four-year' university [10].

What most college-going models do have in common is some element of either self-determination or external pressure to decide to attend 'college.' What these models do not account for, however, is the creation of internalization of this self-determination or external pressure which is partly what has led to the creation of the field-theory of community expectancy. As Kahn [11] noted, "experience can edit identity" (¶1).

Community expectancy as a theory is in the process of being tested and validated through practical application and study, resulting in its reference as a 'field-theory.' As a predictive model, it holds that external pressures exert themselves onto an individual and that the combination of external pressures and the environment of the individual combine to compose a disposition about taking an action, such as attending some form of postsecondary education [12,13].

Early modeling on community expectancy included five external variables that exert

influence over an individual's behavior decisions, including formal education bodies, civic agencies, informal associations, religious affiliations, and home life [14].

Formal education bodies are the schools and school-related opportunities and activities that are available and frequently required of youth. The impact of these bodies on an individual often begin with the quality of the education provided to the individual, and this is in turn can be impacted by a wide variety of variables. Teacher pay, for example, might determine whether the school is able to attract and retain high quality teachers. School funding can also impact the types of activities and resources available to students, including technology, conducive learning environments, library resources, and even the types of extra-curricular activities that can be offered. Resources, including those that are financial and those that are social capital based, can exert pressure on a young person to make certain types of decisions, such as pursuing postsecondary education.

Similar to formal education bodies, civic agencies consist of the formal bodies that support the operation and community infrastructure of a given location. These bodies might include a chamber of commerce, a philanthropic community, a public library and other public services. These types of organizations can manifest themselves unto an individual's identity formation in both what they can provide, such as exposure to differentiated thinking, and what they can structure, such as educational pipeline programs, trade and occupational training experiences and internships, etc. These bodies have a less direct interaction with a young person as compared to a formal education body, yet they are clearly present and capable of interacting and expressing thoughts and ideas upon an individual.

Informal associations are those encounters that have the potential to impact how individuals see themselves. These associations might be expressed onto an individual through an interaction such as a neighbor expressing excitement of an alma mater's athletic success, an employment market that does not value education or labor migration, and even how individuals in the community express a value. These associations are primarily informal in that the individual makes no conscious decision as to whether or not stimuli from these associations are expressed upon the individual. The individual

does have the ability to mitigate these associations yet, they can and perhaps are present in ways that may not always be acknowledged.

Religious beliefs and the formal bodies for the expression and practice of religion can also influence how an individual creates a self-identity. Religion can be a powerful force in how a person constructs identity, as issues such as self-determination can be critical in determining a work ethic, world outlook, feelings of sympathy and empathy, and even the ability to question. Some faiths have a stringent perspective on not questioning parents or faith, but only accepting such [15]. With that type of disposition, an individual is less likely to ask questions about their own feelings or might be less likely to explore a life that could be different from parents or a family.

And, there has been perhaps the most research conducted on the idea that family expectations and behaviors are transferred onto an individual and that those expectations are then realized [16]. These expectations might be to further an education by going or college, or conversely, immediately getting a technical job and earning a salary immediately rather than pursuing additional education. Family influences can even be expressed as an interest in not working or pursuing an education. As an individual often relies on a family structure from infancy, these individuals are commonly thought to have the greatest influence on the type of choices an individual makes.

As a series of interrelated associations and interactions, each of the variable groupings identified in community expectancy can play an important role in an individual's identity formation and educational decision. The field-theory of community expectancy can be divided into four separate postulates, including four if-then statements.

IF: informal interactions
        measurably impact an
IF: Formal, intentional interactions
        individual's identity
IF: An individual's heredity dispositions
        (including perceptions about
IF: Immediate interactions with the environment
        formal education)

THEN: An individual's community can measurably impact an individual, including

perceptions about formal education and postsecondary attendance.

In an effort to explore the first of the postulates, Miller [17] studied self-report perceptions of the power of informal interactions. Using the topic of mental health awareness and pursuit of treatment, they found that individual's reported, as did community members and family members, that informal interactions can indeed result in an individual making a decision about either using or not using a mental health treatment option.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

In an effort to explore formal, intentional interactions measurably impacting an individual's identity, the current study made use of self-report survey data collected specifically for the study. Survey research of this nature has several key limitations, perhaps most importantly that it relies on an individual to critically think, recall, and report the reason for taking some specific action. Thoughts and memories such as these can be difficult, at best, to capture and report, and as a result, the current study results should be referenced with caution.

Data collection occurred across three levels: individual college-aged students (age range 18-24) in late-adolescents or early-adulthood, parents of college students, and adult community citizens. Data were collected using survey research methods and a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling.

Survey instruments used in the data collection were adaptations and modifications of those used to explore unintentional interactions [18]. The instruments were based on the work of sociologist James McCroskey [19,20,21]. The first instrument was designed to collect perceptions of current college students regarding how their behaviors are influenced by other people, particularly in environments with formal, planned, or structured communication. This survey consisted of ten items, with the first eight being specifically taken from the content of community expectancy theory [22,23,24,25]. The last two items on the survey specifically related to the individual's decision to attend college.

The college student survey used a Likert-type scale of 1-to-5, with 1=Strongly Disagree with the item progressing to 5=Strongly Agree with the item. With ten items and no reverse item coding,

the total possible score for the instrument would have a range of 10 to 50, with a hypothetical mid-point, then, of 30. As with McCroskey's previous research, using the hypothetical mid-point, any score over 30 would indicate a high level of intentional influence by the 'community,' and scores below 30 would indicate low levels of community influence.

The second survey was designed in a similar manner to the college student survey, although survey items were revised to reflect the respondent's position as a college student parent, a parent of a young-adult not in college, and adult community members. These items were particularly influenced by the work on family influence in community expectancy, namely the work of Tolliver [26] and Tolliver, Kacirek, and Miller [27]. As the instrument did not include the survey items about attending college, the result was that only eight items were included on this survey. Again, with no reverse coding, there was a total possible score range of 10 to 40, and a hypothetical mid-point of 25.

In a series of six pilot tests with different populations between 2017 and 2020, the survey instrument had a Cronbach alpha level of .8326 for students and .6900 for non-students. In the 2019 administration of the survey modified for mental health assistance, the survey had a Cronbach alpha level of .8221. These levels of reliability, along with the exploratory nature of the study, indicated that the instrument was appropriate for use.

The college student sample used in the study consisted of all first-year students living on one of three college campuses in the mid-western United States in February of 2020. The population of this student sample was approximately 4,700. These institutions were comprehensive in nature and focused primarily on undergraduate instruction, although two of the three did offer a range of doctoral programs. The common characteristic for these institutions was that over 80% of their first-year classes came from within their home states, meaning that they had a regional focus and that students generally were staying somewhat close to their hometowns. As a cautionary note, the survey was distributed electronically approximately two weeks before many campuses began to seriously consider, and ultimately move their primary instruction to online formats. Potential respondents received an introductory email informing them that they would be receiving the survey and asked for their participation. In the distribution of the survey, each included an introductory email along with a link to the survey. The instruments were also distributed in collaboration with the university's housing offices, and the amount of email being sent from these offices regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was increasing dramatically and might have impacted student participation.

The non-student sample included a listing of 2,200 parents of those 4,700 students living in residence halls. The listing was obtained from each of the three university's parent's associations, which were memberships of paid individuals to participate in a range of specialized programs for the parents of first-year students. An additional sample of adult community citizens was included in the study, distributing the survey through three public library informational lists. These lists were online communities of library card holders in the communities of the three universities, and combined, they had a distribution of over 26,000 unique email addresses.

The research protocol for the study was approved by the host institution's Institutional Review Board, and that each individual who received the survey had to indicate knowledge of the study and agree to participation. Additionally, the research protocol was approved at each of the three participating universities, as well as the library advisory board's special committees on communication and outreach. The instrument was distributed to all members of the sample in early-February 2020, and reminder emails were sent three times to non-respondents.

Using the limited geographical area presents several limitations to the study, including an caution about generalizing results beyond these mid-western US communities. Access and use of technology similarly may reflect a more educated and adept group of participants, limiting findings to not include those who might be less able to access technology.

4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Students

Following the three rounds of distribution, a total of 282 college student surveys were returned from the 4,700 that were distributed. This 6% survey response rate was deemed acceptable for

the current analysis due to the descriptive nature of the study. The response rate for both students and community members was lower than traditional survey research, particularly when collected manually using 'paper-and-pencil' methods, but is very consistent with other research involving online survey methods. This response rate does suggest some further limitation in the ability to generalize findings, yet also demonstrates, based on raw number of respondents, a strong interest in the topical area.

As shown in Table 1, the average rating for an item on the Perceptions of Community Influence survey was $\bar{x}$=4.66, meaning that respondents typically agreed with the individual survey items. These surveys had an average composite score of 45 with 257 of the responses having a composite score over the hypothetical mid-point of 30, meaning that they agreed through self-reporting that the intentional interactions with other individuals does influence their behaviors.

College students agreed most strongly with the survey items of "what others have formally done has influenced my attitudes toward going to college" ($\bar{x}$=4.87), "what others directly say to me can convey an expectation of me" ($\bar{x}$=4.81), and "I do things because I have been told by others to do them" ($\bar{x}$=4.80).

4.2 Community Members

Of the 26,000 emailed surveys distributed, after three follow-up reminder emails, 140 surveys were returned and deemed usable in the data analysis, representing a .5% response rate. Of the 2,200 parents who were emailed the survey, 44 completed and returned the survey for a 2% response rate.

The parent responses had an average score of 47 and the community members had an average score of 45, both representing scores above the hypothetical mid-point of 30, meaning that they also perceived that their intentional interactions had direct outcomes on individual behavior.

For the parents (see Table 2), they agreed most strongly with the statements "my conscious actions can result in other people's behavior" ($\bar{x}$=4.90), "what I expect from others can be conveyed by what I directly say to them" ($\bar{x}$=4.88), and "what I expect from others can be conveyed through my actions" ($\bar{x}$=4.84). Community members had the highest levels of agreement with those same three items, with mean scores of 4.85, 4.75, and 4.79, respectively.

To compare the mean scores of all three groups, an Analysis of Variance was computed and revealed no significant difference between the three groups (p<.05) of responses (f=.3925). This lack of difference means that all three groups, students, parents, and community members, agree that their direct words influence the actions of others.

Table 1. College student perceptions of community influence N=282

	$\bar{x}$	Range	Std Dev
What others have formally done has influenced my attitudes toward going to college.	4.87	3	.1111
What others directly say to me can convey an expectation of me.	4.81	3	.4041
I do things because I have been told by others to do them.	4.80	4	.3200
My actions have been influenced by those around me.	4.68	4	.4320
What others (non-family members) have directly said to me have influenced my attitudes toward my going to college.	4.68	4	.4666
I have felt the consequences of other people's Intentional public actions.	4.65	3	.2890
I behave in certain ways because my actions have been influenced by others.	4.62	3	.5627
I interpret how other people present themselves differently than they might intend.	4.55	3	.5559
My behaviors can be the result of other people's conscious actions.	4.50	3	.3223
What others do can convey an expectation of me.	4.50	4	.5656

Table 2. Community and family member perceptions of community influence

	Parent n=44 $\bar{x}$	Community Member n=140 $\bar{x}$
My intentional actions influence those around me.	4.61	4.37
I behave in certain ways because my actions influence others.	4.72	4.44
Other people do things because they see how I do them.	4.78	4.49
There can be consequences to my public actions.	4.63	4.36
How I present myself can be interpreted differently by different people.	4.49	4.40
My conscious actions can result in other people's behavior.	4.90	4.85
What I expect from others can be conveyed by what I directly say to them.	4.88	4.75
What I expect from others can be conveyed through my actions.	4.84	4.79

5. DISCUSSION

One of the most common parental challenges occurs when an individual child begins to resist or question the parent or guardian's behavior and belief system. Some children never force this type of resistance in an open way with their parents, but may once they have left the family home. Measuring the extent that an individual would actually disagree with a parent's words is difficult, at best to measure, especially during the transition from adolescence to adulthood that occurs while in college. Often this relationship is nuanced and although a child might fight or resist the wishes of a parent, over time, there might be a merger of thinking resulting in a common view of an issue, the value of education, importance of a career, or other values that are indicative of life choices.

This inter-relationship between parent and child can be seen in elements such as selecting a particular major in college. The parent might desire, and express, for example, a practical major that would result in immediate employment after college, and the child might desire something more personally and intellectually fulfilling, yet less likely to result in a post-college job. The student may find, of personal accord, that a job immediately after college is desirable and might then major in a discipline that leads to this outcome. To what extent, then, is the parent's voicing their desire the cause of the action of the student switching majors? Such questions are difficult, at best, to try and answer, and the current study made use of self-report data, meaning self-perceptions were all that could be reported.

If the self-report perceptions in the current study are accurate, then the field-theory of community expectancy is supported and advanced in its understanding. Those involved in the study all reported that what they said to one-another made a difference. Although unable to prove this linkage with causation, there is some level of evidence within this study that people respond to and are influenced by one-another. These responses and interactions cause behavioral outcomes that are initially observed during early adulthood while in college. It would stand to reason that these behavioral outcomes would be influenced by nearly two decades of parenting, family values, social engagement, and other culturally impactful experiences.

Behavior modification based on the comments and directives of others may not be an absolute, but they may provide some foundation for understanding both the impact and ongoing magnitude of interpersonal relationships that are established during the formative years. Additionally, such cultural adherence may ebb and flow throughout generations, and might ultimately result in eras when student uprising and revolt against cultural norms are more or less common. The idea of era-based compliance is in alignment with life-course theory, which maintains time and place make a significant difference in how an individual accepts and incorporates personal, familial, and societal perceptions [28,29].

6. CONCLUSION

Additional research that can better document cause-and-effect by parent and community member words and actions would be helpful in strengthening this element of community

expectancy and the overall understanding of identity development. Such work, however, will most likely need to occur in an environment of experimental design over longer periods of time where stages of development can be examined appropriately. These results do, though, provide policy makers and educators important information about the role of others, especially parents and influential community members, in making decisions as young adults in college. If policy makers and educators truly desire to increase college going and graduation rates, they must find ways to get those around potential students to provide intentional support for student actions. Appropriate efforts to support student adjustment in the college selection, planning, and ultimately transition phases must realize the impact of others in the lives of college students.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard guideline participant consent and ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/60961