

# Impact of Interpersonal Relations on the Mental Health of College Students

Yueqian Lang \*

Saxo Fintech Business School, University of Sanya, Sanya, 572022, China

\* Corresponding author: langyueqian@sanyau.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Over the years, mental health has become a hot issue, and it seems that after the rampant COVID-19, increasingly numbers of people have suffered from mental distress. Especially for college students who are in the transition period from teenagers to adulthood, it is valuable to explore the conditions of their mental health, for mental well-being may affect students' academic performances, interpersonal relationships, and even their future. This article will focus on one of the most important factors that may influence students' mental status, namely, interpersonal relationship. Three types of relationships that are common and predominant in students' social networks will be discussed in the article by comprehensively analyzing previous studies and students' mental health. As a result, it is transparent that both family relationships, peer relationships and romantic relationships are related to students' mental health, and some studies also revealed that diagnose histories are often associated with poor social conditions. Therefore, this paper is aiming to focus on the influences of multiple types of interpersonal relationships that may result in mental disorders and provide possible prospects for future study.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal relationships; mental health; college students.

## 1. Introduction

With rapid transfer and development of the society, it has been widely acknowledged that mental dysfunction is one of the most serious illnesses and can lead to irreversible consequences. Mental disorders like depression, anxiety, eating disorder, etc. are becoming commonplaces and numerous people are struggling with these problems. Statistics published by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation indicated that more than 7 million committed suicide each year, and that approximately 280 million people in the world suffer from depression [1]. Especially after the COVID-19, an increasing number of people reported that they were subjected to anxiety caused by global lockdowns and hopeless futures [2].

Nevertheless, in 2023, the American College Health Association revealed that over 76% of college students experienced different levels of psychological distress [3]. What's more compelling is that, according to a survey conducted by Hunt and Eisenberg, approximately 10% of college students had the inclination to commit suicide [4]. On account of the significance and crisis that mental health maintains, it is necessary to examine the reasons for causing these problems. This paper will focus on how interpersonal relationships affect students' mental well-being. Interpersonal relationship is a complex field which conclude various social bonds, including the relationship within family, friends, colleagues, teachers, etc., and each of them may be a possible factor that related to students' mental dysfunctions. However, only a few studies serve interpersonal relationships and students' mental health as vital topics. What's more, although some studies mentioned that question, neither of them involved various types of relationships, for they only focused on one specific indicator.

To better discuss different forms of relationships that may exert influence on students' mental conditions, this paper will cover 3 key elements in college students' social networks: peer relationship, family relationship, and romantic relationship. In addition, multiple surveys that conducted to examine the topics will be demonstrated and analyzed in the paper. Most of the surveys this paper choose were conducted in colleges, and data analyzed in those surveys was collected based on

questionnaires. Apart from that, limitations of former studies and future prospects will be given at the end of the paper.

## **2. Introduction of Interpersonal Relations and Mental Health**

### **2.1. Definition of Interpersonal Relationship**

As we all acknowledged that it's human nature to live in groups and to have constant interaction with others, there must be some kind of connection within people's relations. Researchers named the relationships and connections that people built among others as “interpersonal relationships”. According to Kelly and her colleagues, relationships exist when people perform occasional interdependent connections [5]. Moreover, they also indicated that these types of relationships always included individual's mutual thoughts, emotions, behaviors, etc. [5]. Therefore, interpersonal relationship has become a diver studying field regarding sociology, psychology, behavior and so forth.

### **2.2. Mental Health and Mental Disorder**

Given that the environment in which people live is changing dramatically and people's mental states are quite different from each other, it is really hard to standardize mental health to a certain degree.

Some scholars narrowed mental health to three basic parts: disease absence, fully functioning state, and balance in both internal and external body. Mental health allows people to interact with each other and maintain nice relationships with people in various kinds of situations [6]. Bhugra also suggested that mental health is critical for people to perform congenial social roles in society and to better manage self-emotions when something extreme happens [6].

Contrary to mental health is what normally called mental disorder or mental illness. As mentioned above, the drastic advance of society brings extreme mental pressure on people, so the content of mental disorder is getting more and more complex.

WHO (World Health Organization) now categorizes mental disorder into several phenomena: anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, eating disorders, disruptive disorders and dissocial disorders, and neurodevelopmental disorders [7].

Anxiety, for example, is a fearful or panicky state toward the upcoming future [8]. Depression, which is one of the most typical mental disorders and is tightly associated with stress from both external and internal [9]. These are two typical mental disorders that widely have been accepted by the public.

Besides, alexithymia is a kind of communication disorder defined by a disability in clearly expressing one's own feelings [10].

### **2.3. Three Elements of Interpersonal Relationships**

Three major interpersonal relationships of college students that have the potential to pose mental problems to them will be focused on the paper: they are family relationship, friend relationship, and romantic relationship.

#### **2.3.1. Family Relationship.**

Family relationship is always used to describe the relationship between student and their intimate kin, for instance, their parents or siblings. Mostly, family refers to the environment in which students grow from childhood to adulthood, potentially impacting their thinking and behaviors. Since college is often perceived as a transition stage, it is a critical mission for students to properly cope with problematic family relationships before entering the real world in order to gain momentum without family burden.

### **2.3.2. Friend Relationship.**

As defined by Duck et al., friend relationship is a willingness between two or more individuals to voluntarily depend on one another, including mutual support and companionship [11]. Children start engaging in groups and making friends even when they are in preoperational period (2~7 years old), and their relationships with each friend are consistently shifting during their lifespan. Especially for college students who mainly stay on campus, friendships are indispensable, for they could receive benefits and companies from their friends.

### **2.3.3. Intimate/Romantic Relationship.**

Apart from what friend relationship has involved, romantic relationship is a kind of deeper emotional attachment with another person and contains some extra feelings regarding love and affection. In addition, romantic relationship is helpful to facilitate people's resilience, which in turn lowering mental disease rate [12].

## **3. The Relation Between Family Relationships and College Students' Mental Health**

This part will cover several typical family relationships that tightly related to students' growth. The first one is sibling relationships.

Stocker, C. M. et al. did a survey to examine the influence of sibling relationships on students' young adulthood in terms of their mental health. They collected a sample consisted of undergraduates who reported having at least one biological sibling from Colorado, the U.S. For cases that have more than one sibling, half of the participants were randomly selected and asked to give information about the sibling they get on best, and the other half were assigned to report information based on the one they get on worst (this action was aimed to control errors brought about by participants' preferences and ensure that the answers of the whole questionnaire were given based on the same sibling). The study used developed ASRQ (Adult Sibling Relationship Questionnaire) which includes 81 items about sibling relationships to assess respondents' attitudes towards their siblings. Participants were required to rate each question of the scale by using Likert scales ranging from 1 ("hardly at all") to 5 ("very much"). The internal consistency alpha for the scale in the sample was 0.96. Apart from that, 62 participants in the Colorado sample were also asked to do a re-test 2 weeks later so as to confirm previous results.

In order to assess the correlation between sibling relationships and students' mental health, conductors also measured participants' psychological function in the Colorado sample by using Brief Symptom Inventory. Participants' mental health state will be represented by scores: the higher the score, the healthier they will be.

Stocker et al. analyzed data collected from the samples by using oblique-rotated principal-component analysis. And after that they conducted a correlation analysis based on BSI results (reported only by the Colorado sample) and ASRQ results to figure out the relationship between sibling relationship and students' mental health. Finally, they drew the conclusion that participants who had higher mental health scores tend to have stable and relatively peace relationships with their siblings. In contrast, those who reported to have tense relationships with their siblings had lower mental scores. Based on the conclusion, they hypothesized that the conflicts between siblings is likely to raise individuals stress levels which deteriorate peoples' mental health [13]. Nonetheless, this survey still had some limitations since result from only one of the siblings may have biases. Future experiment may organize experiment involving both the siblings and compare their answers, so as to get an impartial description of their relationships.

Another type of family relationship will be discussed is the relationship between students and their parents. It has been well accepted by the public that parental relationships are the most significant bond for everyone in the world, and they are exactly associated with personality cultivation. However, sometimes inappropriate parental relationships may create underlying stress for students.

Chinese researchers argued that alexithymia may be triggered by excessive parental control. They tried to figure out the association between parental psychological control and college students' interpersonal relationship dilemmas. They initially pointed out that excessive parental control would be an underlying cause of alexithymia. The subject of the experiment was selected by convenience sampling from a university located in Fujian Province, China. In this study, each of the participants was asked to complete the Parental Psychological Control Questionnaire, the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale, and the Interpersonal Relationships Assessment Scale. 430 of the returned questionnaires proved effective. They analyzed the result by using Bootstrap estimation, and they found out that there was a significant correlation between parental control and alexithymia, indicating that inappropriate parental psychological control indeed has negative influences on students' interpersonal relationships. They dove deeper into the result by explaining that extreme parental intervention or refusal will lead children to avoid basic social actions. Long time of disconnection from their social circle refrained children from building up confidence in making friends, which may result in social anxiety or lead to feelings of desperation [14].

Still, this experiment ignored the fact that many families contain not only direct family members but also indirect kin like grandparents, uncles, aunts, or cousins. This family structure is called expanded family. Expanded family are really common recently owing to the expansion of people's lifespans, as well as higher marriage age [15]. Jansen also claimed that extended family members have the nature to be in support of each other, even when other family members live in different geographical sites, so that students engaged in this positive family atmosphere are less likely to have mental illnesses [15]. In particular, in many countries like China, where people normally live with multiple generations, children are always taken care of by more than one family member. It is very practical and meaningful to examine the influence of expanded family on children's mental health since such studies will become valuable guidance for numerous families.

Both of the two experiments illustrated students' mental health being genuinely affected by family relationships. It turns out that students with relatively unfavorable family relationships are prone to have mental disorders. On the contrary, family support could help students build up a resilience mindset to offset mental problems. Whereas some more specific experiments should be conducted to explore which types of mental illness are most likely to be induced by family relationships and the influence of expanded family should also be focused.

#### **4. The Relation Between Peer Relationships and College Students' Mental Health**

After children step into adolescence and enter school, it is their peers that they spend more time getting along with. On account of that, besides the influence of the family, peer relationships should also be considered crucial factors that may have positive or negative effects on students' mental health. Especially in college, which is often regarded as a "microsociety", students must encounter numerous people coming from various regions, backgrounds, genders, and also people with different personalities. Some students may be lucky enough to find good friends whom they can rely on or support. Unfortunately, sometimes negative relationships could put students in trouble or, even worse, result in mental illnesses.

In particular, one of the main topics at the university is independence. Most of the college students have to share dormitory with one or more people at the same time. To some extent, roommates can be perceived as special friends since this kind of relationship also contains mutual support and interactions. As a matter of fact, students who just enter colleges do not have such similar experiences living without their parents or family members. Thus, with so many people coming from all over the country, it is typical for freshmen to feel lonely and homesick. In the meantime, how to cope with the relationships within their dormitories could serve as predictions of their satisfaction with college life and mental health. Rahiminia et al. proposed that psychological health is largely affected by living quality among students who live in dormitories [16]. Additionally, Waldo also suggested that

roommate relationships can not only influence students' mental status but also be associated with their long-term academic performances [17].

Lepore inclined to support the theory that positive roommate relationships play a key role in lowering students' distress and, accordingly, reducing conflict rates even outside of dorm confines. This conclusion was acquired from a longitudinal study based on 228 college students. Lepore sampled relatively equal amounts of male (106) and female (122) students who were new to the dormitories. Out of the purpose of figuring out the situation of students' psychological distress with and without roommates, he conducted the interviews separately after participants moved onto campus 2 days and 7 days later. Multivariate analyses of variance were used to analyze the data collected from the two time points, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to compare the results. Lepore finally drew the conclusion that students with higher support from roommates tend to weaken conflicts between their friends. And additionally, roommate supports are really helpful in releasing psychological distress by offering companies as well as making suggestions [18]. In short, students were indeed buffered by their roommates, especially when they have trouble in other social domains. Admittedly, Lepore provided strong evidence to describe the importance of roommate support for students and that support from others does help to release distress. However, further study is still needed to determine whether roommate support has any adverse impacts on students in terms of overcontrol. What's more, it had been repeated many times in the article that social support may also be helpful to release distress. Thus, other studies could focus on exploring the healing function of social support, which is beneficial for educators and school counselors to adopt effective actions to help students out.

Notwithstanding, the relationship between peer relationships and college students' mental health is unidirectional, yet the two variables show reciprocal relations. Besides the benefits of positive peer relationships, some researchers stated that students' mental health in turn has an impact on their social interaction with peers. King et al. claimed that although there were intricate links between friendship and mental health, studies involving diverse indicators of distress may be useful to reveal the complex relationship between friendship and mental dysfunctions. In order to tangibly examine the theory, King and his colleagues conducted a survey based on a wide range of indicators, including depression symptoms, friendship maintenance, satisfaction with life, etc. 988 participants at the University of North Dakota were asked to complete several questionnaires to illustrate their mental conditions through several measurements. Researchers used the MD-P subscale, an abbreviated version of the Acquaintance Description Form (ADF-F2), to demonstrate students' difficulty in maintaining their friend relationships. The validity of MD-P subscale was proved by its internal reliability ( $r = 0.62$ ) and test reliability ( $r = 0.79$ ). As for their mental status, participants were asked questions based on the customized listing of the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria of depression and panic symptoms, and the results were represented by scores ranging from 0 ("no such symptom") to 5 ("present daily with significant distress or impairment") so that researchers could find out if they have such inclinations. Participants were also required to provide information about previous mental treatment histories.

After collecting large amounts of data, King and his colleagues analyzed bivariate correlations between mental health indicators and the quality of friend relationships. As a result, they concluded that students' current mental dysfunction symptoms may result from less favorable friendship circles. At the same time, previous illness histories were also a critical effect that may influence students' current friendship. Despite that a large proportion of King's article discussed negative friendship as having the potential to exert harmful impacts on students' mental health, researchers also suggested that students who have regular and positive support from their peers are more likely to have a growth mindset to conquer obstacles they confront [19].

While in this article researchers were confident to support the theory that friendship and mental health status have bidirectional influences on one another, we cannot deny the limitation of the survey that this research design lacks the capacity to reflect how much strain that mental problem will put on students' friendships or whether unfavorable conflicts will deteriorate mental health. Therefore, some related studies should be conducted to figure out those problems in the future.

Some researchers also mentioned that peer relationships are partially affected by their family and that dysfunction of family relationships, such as emotional avoidance, which is associated with dysfunction of peer relationships [20]. Thereby, involving family relationships as an intermediary role can also serve as study orientation to further examine peer relationships and students' mental health.

## **5. The Relation Between Romantic Relationships and College Students' Mental Health**

Aside from the peer relationships and family relationships that are common among college students' social networks, a new type of relationship is likely to emerge in their early adulthood, namely, romantic relationships. Romantic relationships can be perceived as two people who are falling in love with each other, and are also featured by mutual commitment. According to previous literature, marriage is a powerful mitigation to mental distress, and it can be the most overriding factor to release mental problems [21]. Similar to this statement, Coombs also claimed that, compared to couples, single individuals have a higher chance subjected to mental illness [22]. For most college students who have not achieved legal married age, they usually foster an intimate relationship characterized by dating and hookups. Just like the positive influence of marital status, romantic relationships tend to have salutary impact on young adults, even they don't genuinely get married. However, other researchers argued that sometimes students are easily hurt by their romantic partners and prone to experiencing mental difficulties [23]. Arnett (2002) emphasized that romantic relationships in early adulthood are in fragile stages and thus will face numerous pressures. Therefore, this part is going to discuss the multiple influences of romantic relationships on students' mental health [24].

First and foremost, Braithwaite et al. claimed that it's a crucial period in emerging adulthood when students' mental and physical development is increasingly rapid. They did a survey aimed to examine the causal effect of committed romantic relationships on students' mental function. They initially hypothesized that students who have committed romantic relationships perform better mental status than their single peers. To support this hypothesis, they conducted an experiment at a university in the southeastern part of the United States. Firstly, they randomly mailed 4485 students to participate in the survey, and as a result, 1621 returned questionnaires were proved valid (37 questionnaires were excluded since participants were married, divorced, or bereaved). Before delving deeper into the questions, participants' current relationship status was identified by scores into 2 categories: single (scored as 0) and committed or dating relationship (scored as 1). Researchers perceived students' academic performances as consequences brought about by mental disorders. 6 items that related to common mental disorders, such as "depression/anxiety disorder" and "eating disorder" were included in the questionnaire, and each item ranged from 0 ("this did not happen to me") to 5 ("received an incomplete or dropped the course"). Each type of the symptoms was represented by just one question. Therefore, the summed responses of the 6 items ranged from 6 to 30, and a higher score indicating a poorer mental state. Students' relationship status served as independent variables, and dependent variables were analyzed by multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Braithwaite and his colleagues finally observed a significant effect of romantic relationships on students' mental health. Consistent with their previous hypothesis, students engaged in romantic relationships experienced a lower rate of mental problems ( $d = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ) [25].

Although Braithwaite et al. posed a brand-new insight in investigating premarital romantic relationships among college students, the limitations of the study cannot be ignored, either. For one thing, psychological dysfunctions were only measured by students' academic performances. Nevertheless, some symptoms of participants were excluded since they were not relevant to the survey or did not serious enough to do harm to students' academic performances. Therefore, there are possibilities to bring about unexpected errors. What's more, the gender distribution (female 64%, male 36%) of the sample was not fairly equal, which means the outcome may be biased. At last, the data from this experiment suggested the sample was made up by couples who were engaging content relationships during that time, and lacked the capacity to demonstrate any other conditions, like

conflicts. Thus, it really valuable for future studies to examine the effect of romantic relationships with regard to various qualities of the relationships.

It was not soon after Braithwaite and his colleagues published the article that, in 2022, Ritter et al. also published a journal regarding college students' romantic relationships and mental health. Ritter's study focused on whether relationship maintenance, creation, and dissolution were related to mental health. To verify their first hypotheses, Ritter et al. developed a 43-item online survey targeting college students in the United States. Instead of solely collecting their mental status and relationship status, participants were also asked questions with regard to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and life-satisfaction. As a result, 267 students were proved qualified in the survey (total responses were 277, approximately 86%). Likert scale measurements was widely applied in this survey. In detail, students were required to rate 5 statements with regard to mental conditions during relationships in order to examine whether there were mental improvements. The degree to which their attitude toward those questions were ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). By the way, Ritter et al. also examined students' relationship formation attitudes as well as dissolution reasons.

Both t-tests and Spearman's correlation coefficients were used to analyze the data collected from previous tests. Researchers at last figured out that 65.9% of the participants reported that they had suffered from at least one mental illness. 33% of sample students reported that romantic relationships genuinely had positive impacts on their mental health, and 32% said they were no aware of such influences. More than half of the students perceived that mental illness had no impact on their decision-making processes in relationships. In addition, this survey also indicated that female students ( $SD = 1.34$ ) were more likely to suffer from mental illness compared to male students ( $SD = 0.85$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Surprisingly, there were no significant correlations between mental illness and relationship dissolution [26]. To sum up, researchers in this study supported Braithwaite's conclusions and also highly recommended the significance of social supports in relationships.

Although the survey conducted by Ritter et al. complimented the study fields that had not been prioritized by the public before, flaws of the survey still cannot be ignored. For instance, this study merely focused on a small amount of sample and the sample selected was mostly composed of white women. The measurements they use in the study are not rigorously based on scientific scales. Future studies are wanted to examine these theories in border regions, concluding involve more convincing measurements.

According to two studies mentioned above, there is a significant relationship between romantic relationships and students' mental health. When it comes to this conclusion, we can confirm the fact that partners who commit to intimate relationships are devoted to supporting each other and may offer abundant care and love. The conclusions provided educators and instructors with convincing theories to determine the impact of unhealthy or positive relationships on students' romantic relationships. However, neither of them posited valuable insights to address the unpleasant outcomes of negative relationships. Thus, there are still myths waiting for future studies to answer.

## **6. Conclusion**

To sum up, the relationship between interpersonal relationships and students' mental health has been widely acknowledged by previous researches. Students' social networks are comparably simply and can be divided into three categories: family relationships, peer relationships and romantic relationships. Studies about parental relationships and students' mental health illustrated that excessive parental control and sibling conflict will make children subjected to mental disorders. Nevertheless, family support could help students build up a resilience mindset to offset mental problems.

Other researchers argued that students' current mental dysfunction symptoms result in less favorable friendships. At the same time, previous diagnose histories were also a critical indicator that may

influence friendship maintenance. Lepore suggested companies and social support from peers have therapeutic effects to release mental distress and pressure.

Another two studies discussed in the paper were conducted by Braithwaite et al. and Ritter et al., and both of them were focused on relationships between students' mental health and their romantic relationships. Significant effects of romantic relationships on students' mental health were observed and verified by both studies.

Although the studies mentioned above enriched valuable theories in the field of college students' mental health, only a few have come up with appropriate solutions to tackle the unpleasant fact that numerous students are suffering from social dilemmas and mental dysfunctions. Exploring the therapy and mitigation for mental dysfunctions will be required in future research. In addition, involving social support in counseling and therapy may be one congenial treatment to conquer social dilemmas.

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