



# Parental and Peer Attachment, Adjustment, and Mental Health in College Students



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## Introduction

- ❖ There is great pressure on students to obtain higher education. 69.2% of high school students attend college after graduation (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). However, only about 60% of students seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution will complete that degree in six years (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). Retention of students, or the number of students returning after their first year of college, is also concerning; only 79% of students return after the first year, nationally.
- ❖ College adjustment coincides with late adolescence/emerging adulthood. To this end, this period of life fosters new challenges personally, academically, and socially for students, as well as structurally within familial and parental relationships. Because of these challenges and transitions in relationships, students entering college are often susceptible to depression (Hysenbegasi, Hass, & Rowland, 2005; Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980).
- ❖ During adolescence, the role of attachment becomes complex, as both parental and peer attachment play important, yet distinct roles. Some studies suggest that during adolescence, peers may be more influential on adjustment than parents (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000).
- ❖ This study aimed to better understand attachment and depression during the coinciding periods of college adjustment and emerging adulthood, and how these factors may be affecting overall adjustment to college and institutions' retention of students.

## Methods

### Participants:

- ❖ Participants were 429 college students (58.3% females, 22.1% males, 0.5% transgender males, 0.2% transgender females, 1.2% non-binary students [17.7% missing]) from a college in West Haven, CT.
- ❖ The mean age of students was 22.2 years old (SD= 5.6)
- ❖ 34% of participants were underclass students (those who have been at the school for 3 semesters or less), and 48.3% were upperclass students (those who have been at the school for 4 semesters or more)
- ❖ Regarding self-reported ethnicity, 67.1% of students were White/Caucasian, 12.5% were Hispanic/Latino, 8.8% were Black/African American, 4.8% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.7% were Indian/Southeast Asian, 1.1% were Middle Eastern/Arab American, 0.6% were Native American or Alaskan Native, and 3.4% reported other/prefer not to answer.

### Measures:

- ❖ **Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000):** A 36-item shortened version of the original scale was created and tested with adolescents with the purpose of assessing facets of attachment security; namely, the trust, communication, and alienation with attachment figures (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987).
- ❖ **College Adjustment Scale (CAS; Kaya & Weber, 2003):** 28-item structured questionnaire that assesses college adjustment based on social adjustment, academic adjustment, institutional adjustment, and personal adjustment.

- ❖ **Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology-Self Report (QIDS<sub>16</sub>; Rush et al., 2003):** The QIDS<sub>16</sub> is a structured questionnaire that assesses the severity of depressive symptoms; the self-report consists of 16 items covering 9 diagnostic symptom domains designated by the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, DSM-IV).

## Procedure

- ❖ Students were sent an email with a link to the survey, inviting them to participate in the study.
- ❖ Participants completed the measures through the online survey.

## Results

### Preliminary Results:

- ❖ Overall, scores on all students revealed positive perceptions of Peer Attachment ( $M= 45.3$ ,  $SD= 7.548$ ), Mother Attachment ( $M= 43.4$ ,  $SD= 9.988$ ), and Father Attachment ( $M= 38.6$ ,  $SD=10.638$ ).
- ❖ Levels of depressive symptoms suggested possible mild depression among students ( $M=7.7$ ,  $SD= 4.606$ ), but were below a score of 16, which indicates clinical depression.
- ❖ Overall reports of adjustment were also positive ( $M= 4.67$  on a 7-point scale,  $SD= 0.675$ ).

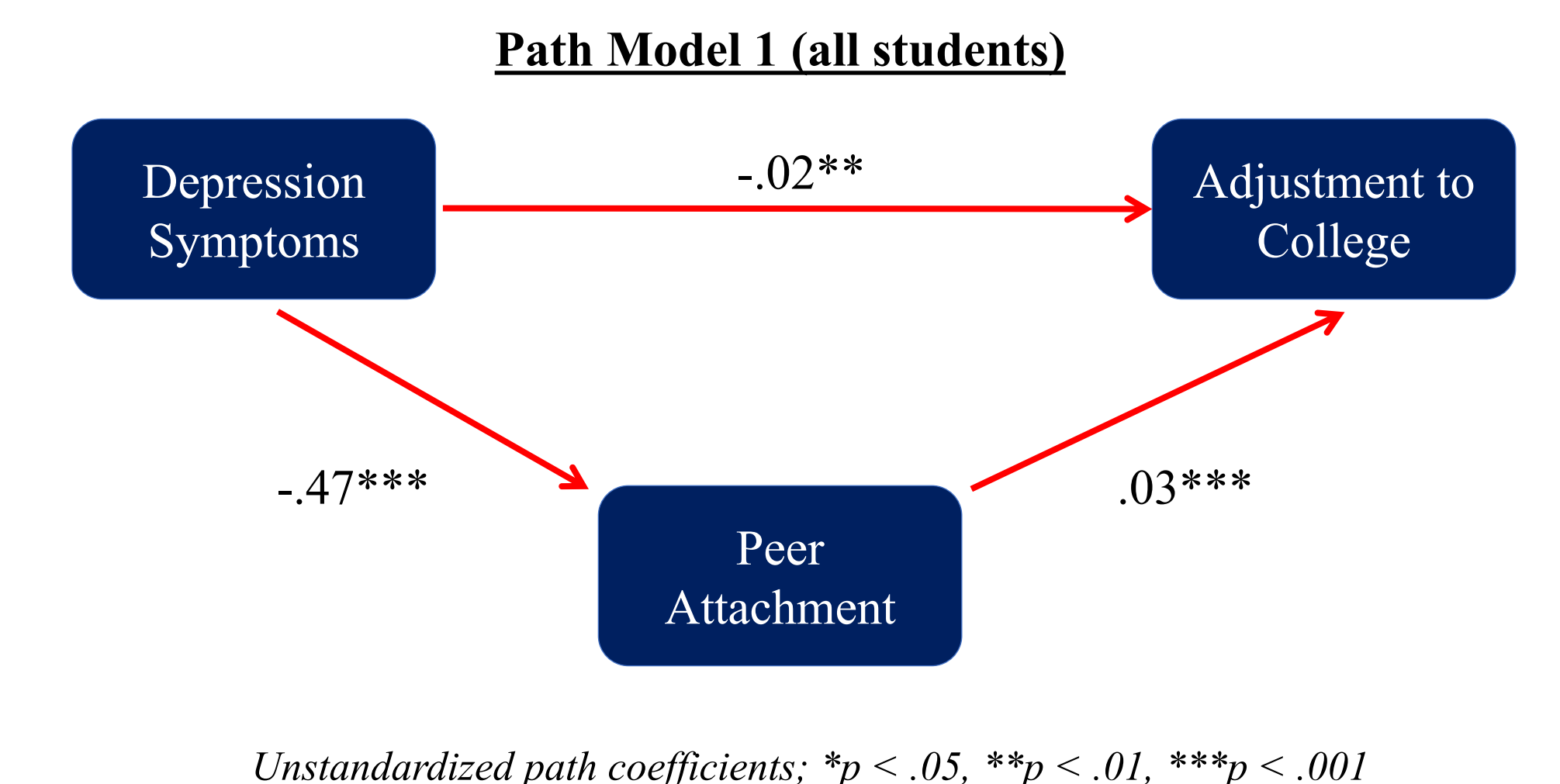
### Regression Analyses:

- ❖ Separate regression analyses were performed for all students, as well as upperclass and underclass students, to determine how well attachment and depressive symptoms predicted overall adjustment to college.
- ❖ The regression analysis for all students revealed that peer attachment had a significantly positive affect on adjustment ( $\beta= .317$ ,  $S.E.=.005$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and depressive symptoms had a significantly negative affect on adjustment ( $\beta= -.178$ ,  $S.E.=.009$ ,  $p<.01$ ).
- ❖ The regression analysis for underclass students also revealed that peer attachment made a significantly positive contribution to adjustment scores ( $\beta= .239$ ,  $S.E.=.009$ ,  $p<.02$ ), and depressive symptoms again made a significant negative contribution ( $\beta= -.225$ ,  $S.E.=.014$ ,  $p<.04$ ).
- ❖ The regression analysis for upperclass students were similar to all students in that peer attachment made a significantly positive contribution to adjustment scores ( $\beta=.378$ ,  $S.E.= .006$ ,  $p<.001$ ). However, depressive symptoms were now only marginally significant ( $\beta= -.156$ ,  $S.E.= .012$ ,  $p=.055$ ).

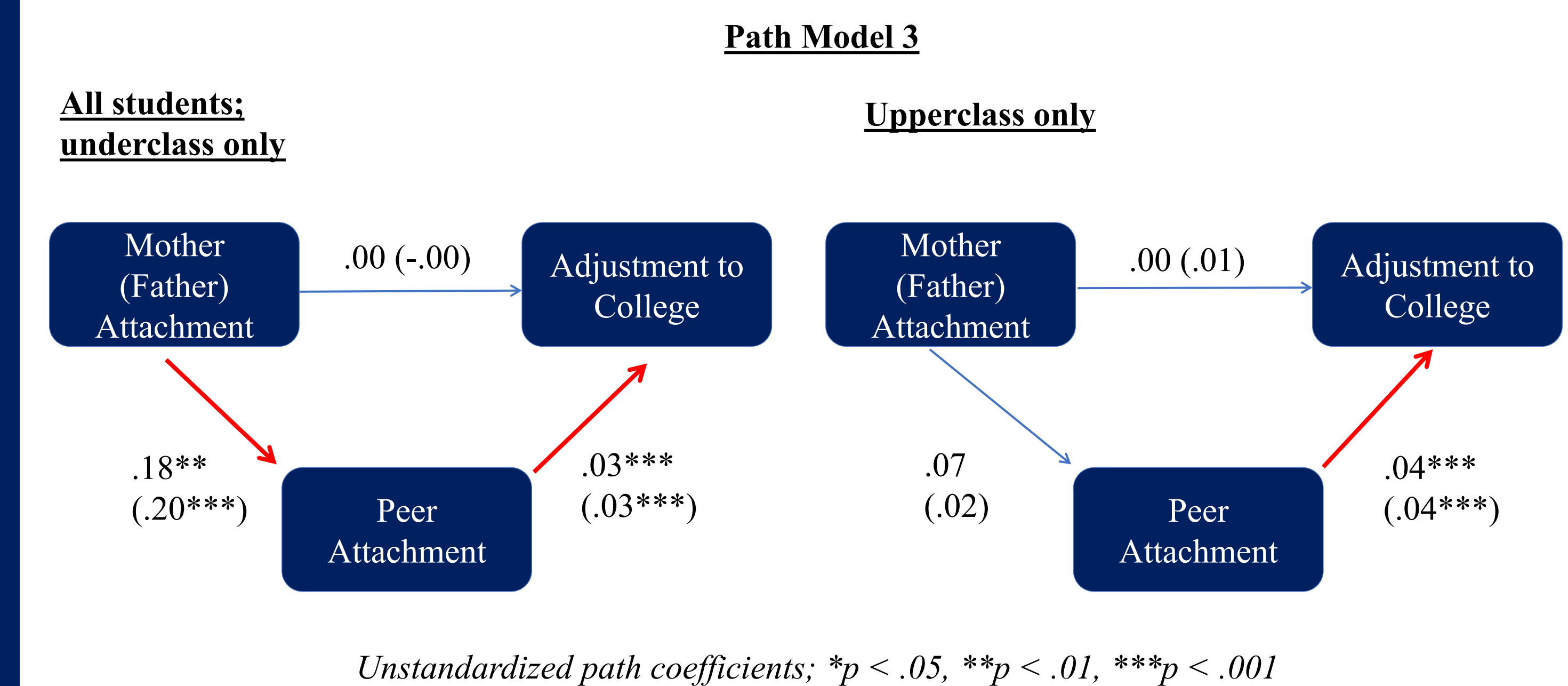
### Mediation Analyses:

- ❖ **Path Model 1.** Peer attachment mediated the relationship between depression symptoms and college adjustment for all students, including upperclass and underclass students.

- ❖ Specifically, depression symptoms were negatively related to positive attachment with peers, which was related to better adjustment to college. A Sobel test supported a mediation effect for all students. Results were similar when depression symptoms and peer attachment were flipped. [See figure below for path analysis results]



- ❖ **Path Model 3.** Peer attachment mediated the relationship between mother and father attachment and college adjustment for underclass students only. Specifically, a positive attachment to parental figures was related to a more positive peer attachment, which was related to better adjustment to college. A Sobel test supported a mediation effect for the underclass students. [See figure below for path analysis results]



## Discussion

- ❖ These analyses suggest that peer attachment and depressive symptoms contribute to adjustment for all students directly, as well as indirectly through each other. Institutional promotions of peer relations and awareness of depression may be a target area for schools to help students adjust to college, as well as remain in school.
- ❖ These analyses also suggest that parental attachment influences adjustment through peer attachment for underclass students. Institutions may also want to provide techniques for both parents and students to navigate the transition in their relationship during the adjustment period.

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### References

- ❖ Available on handout