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Perceived Parental Approval and Self-Esteem in College Students

Sarah L. Skytte

Abstract: This current study looked at whether college students' self-esteem is related to their perceptions of how well they meet their parents' approval, the type of contingencies of self-worth they have and the degree to which they incorporate important others into the self-concept. College students (N = 126) were asked to complete measures of global self-esteem, contingencies of self-worth, relational-interdependent self-construal, self-ratings on personal attributes, and parental approval and disapproval beliefs. There was no significant findings to suggest that college students' self-esteem is related to parental approval or disapproval beliefs, suggesting that emerging adults are becoming more independent and autonomous during this time and do not base their feelings of self-worth on their parents' approval.

Humans have a developmental need for autonomy once they reach young adulthood (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). This is a time when most people move out of their parents' home for the first time, come face to face with more adult responsibilities, and become more independent from their parents. Here the question arises that if young adults are seeking autonomy or independence from their parents, is their self-esteem still affected by parental approval or disapproval of their individual traits?

In this study I am interested in whether or not people's self-esteem can be influenced by the perceived approval or disapproval from parents. I am also interested in the factors that are related to people's high or low self-esteem based on their conception of parental approval or disapproval. I believe that the typical level of self-esteem people have and the fluctuation of their self-esteem can be explained in terms of their contingencies of self-worth and the relational self-construal. For purposes of this study, I will only be focusing on people's typical level of self-esteem, or their global self-esteem.

Contingencies of Self-Worth

People inherently seek to protect, maintain, and enhance their self-esteem (Crocker, 2002). People must attempt to achieve success and stay away from failure in the areas in which they have placed their self-worth in order for them to accomplish their goals of protecting, maintaining, and enhancing their self-esteem (Crocker, 2002). The areas or domains that have a strong impact on self-worth, depending on how people feel they measure up to a self-standard in that domain, are referred to as contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). People will choose situations and engage in behavior that will enhance their self-esteem by fulfilling their contingencies of self-worth (Crocker, 2002). For example, if people's self worth is contingent on family support, they will be likely to put time and effort into spending more time with their family because successful relationships will validate the individual's self-worth.

Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003), focused on seven domains (or contingencies) hypothesized to be important to college students' self-esteem: others' approval, appearance, competition, competence, family support, virtue, and God's love. Crocker et al.'s (2003) measure of contingencies of self-worth focused on (a) approval from generalized others, which is generally seen as a source of conditional love, and (b) family support, which is generally seen as a source of unconditional love. The implication for the current study is that most people have contingent self-worth. In fact, only 4% of participants in Crocker et al.'s (2003) study had non-contingent self-worth, and these participants could have had their contingency in a domain that was not tested. This study focused on those who have external contingencies of self-worth. In other words, people who place their self-worth on the approval of other people, and if those other people are not approving of a certain trait that is of value to them, then they are more likely to have lower self-esteem. For example, when people's parents are not approving of their grades, and they place



their self-worth in their parents' approval of them, then they are likely to have lower self-esteem.

Contingencies of self-worth are self-regulatory, meaning that people select the situations they want to be in based on their contingencies (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In other words, how much effort exerted is determined by whether or not people believe that they will most likely find success or failure in a situation that their self-worth is contingent. Self-regulation is important because in order for people to protect their self-esteem in the domains in which they are contingent, people do not perform up to their highest potential, because success may be a lower priority than protecting self-esteem (Crocker, Brook, Niiya, & Villacorta, 2006). For instance, Crocker et al. (2001) found in their unpublished study that in the areas that people are contingent, people will try to place themselves in situations in which they know they will succeed and will try to avoid situations in which they believe that they will fail (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In this way, people control the efforts they put into these situations (Crocker, 2002). Generally, depending on where people place their self-worth, or where it is contingent, successes will increase self-esteem and failures will decrease self-esteem (Crocker, 2002). This means that over time, contingencies of self-worth when paired with successes or failures are connected to the fluctuation of a person's self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In general, contingencies of self-worth also make up the goals that people set for themselves. In order to accomplish goals, people have to be willing to persevere through difficulties and setbacks (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). In addition, not only is perseverance important, but also the ability to use hardships as a time to learn helps accomplish goals (Crocker et al., 2006).

Because people have an inner desire to succeed and avoid failure, they tend to self-handicap in the domains that represent contingent self-worth (Crocker et al., 2006). In order to avoid a negative shift in self-esteem, people will self-handicap by creating excuses for their upcoming performance when they believe they are going to fail at a task (Crocker et

al., 2006). For example, in one unpublished study by Niiya and Crocker (2005), they looked at the effects that contingencies of self-worth have on motivation by presenting participants with easy or difficult sample test questions from a verbal test (Crocker et al., 2006). Participants were told that they could practice the answers to this test up to 25 times before they took the test. Although not significant, those who were highly contingent tended to practice for a longer period of time than those participants who were less-contingent (Crocker et al., 2006). Highly contingent participants also were seen to practice more when they thought that the test was going to be easy than when they thought it was going to be difficult, which is consistent with previous research that indicates that motivation increases when students who have a high academic contingency of self-worth expect an easy task (Crocker et al., 2006). In addition, less-contingent students were seen to practice more when they thought that the test was going to be difficult than when they thought that the test was going to be easy. This study shows that people whose self-esteem is contingent in academics engage in self-handicapping by not practicing in order to be able to say that their failure is because they did not study and it is not because they lack the ability to do well (Crocker et al., 2006). In the same way, people who are contingent in others' approval and family support may self-handicap in the areas that may disappoint their parents if they were to fail.

People differ in the areas in which they are motivated to act; some people are motivated by intrinsic factors and some by extrinsic factors. People who are motivated by intrinsic factors choose to act based on personal values and desires (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is also characterized by doing things based on inner interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, young adults who are contingent in the areas of others' approval and parental support will be motivated to spend more time with their family than those who are not contingent in those areas. In contrast, those who are motivated by extrinsic factors act out of the interest of others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, young adults whose self-esteem is not contingent on others' approval and family support will likely only spend



time with their parents if their parents are pressuring them or forcing them to spend more time at home, rather than coming home because they enjoy and get satisfaction from being with their parents.

Because contingencies of self-worth make up an intrinsic motivation factor where people are motivated by their interests and values, contingent self-worth improves motivation and assists self-regulation. In a longitudinal study by Crocker et al. (2003), over 600 incoming first-year college students were assessed during their college orientation. Participants completed a measure that revealed their contingencies of self-worth. Then participants were tested again at the beginning and end of their second semester of college. During these two testing periods, participants were asked questions regarding the last semester, specifically looking at the activities the participants engaged in and how many hours a week they spent doing these activities. The results of their study showed that contingencies of self-worth predicted the time college students spent on activities and what activities they chose to engage in. For example, students who were contingent in appearance reported spending more time partying, grooming, socializing, and shopping; students who were contingent on God's love reported joining religious organizations; and students who were contingent on family support reported spending more time with their family. Based on the results of Crocker et al.'s (2003) study, college students participating in my study should also report that their self-esteem is positively influenced by parental approval and negatively influenced by parental disapproval if their self-esteem is contingent in the areas of others' approval and family support.

Emerging Adulthood

During the time that people are in their late teens to their early twenties, they are experiencing many important changes and have to choose between possible life directions (Arnett, 2000). This stage of life is called emerging adulthood. Even having reached the legal age of adulthood, most emerging adults in the United States feel as though they are not adolescents but have

not yet reached adulthood (Arnett, 1997). During emerging adulthood, people are also concerned with forming their own identity. Identity formation is expected to take place during the college years. College gives emerging adults many opportunities for students to think about and reevaluate their identity, such as exploring different majors (Arnett, 2000). In order for people to feel that they have completely entered adulthood, they must believe that they are a self-sufficient person by being able to accept responsibility, establish financial stability, and make decisions independently (Greene, Wheatly, & Aldava IV, 1992).

Part of the way young adults start to feel independent is through changes in their relationship with their parents. A problem that most emerging adults (i.e., college students) will have is that they want autonomy and independence from their parents, but at the same time they are still dependent on their parents for financial support (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). This parent-child relationship leads to a new reality which requires many changes within the family structure, and leads the parent and child to rethink the terms of their relationship and the responsibilities and obligations of each party. During emerging adulthood, the interactions between parents and their young adult child are now seen as a relationship between two adults rather than as a relationship between a parent and child (Arnett & Tanner, 2006).

Unfortunately, there are some parents who believe that their children need to conform to their own expectations regardless of their children's own wants and desires. These parents are seen as psychologically controlling and they put tremendous amount of pressure on their children to meet their expectations (Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007). This control hinders adolescent children from experiencing a healthy form of autonomy (Barber, 1996) and can lead to children having a fear that they are going to fail (Elliot & Thrash, 2004). In terms of college students, psychological control impacts emerging adults who are still searching for autonomy by the way in which they go about making commitments and the choices that they make (Luyckx et al., 2007).



For example, people who have psychologically controlling parents may have difficulty choosing a major during college because they fear that they will not choose a major that will lead to success.

An important element to emerging adulthood is autonomy, which refers to a positive process of development in which people are in charge of their own behaviors and choices; they are independent from the control of anyone else (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). The development of autonomy can also be looked at in terms of separation-individuation theory (Levy-Warren, 1999). During this process, not only do adolescents and parents become both physically and mentally separated, but adolescents also begin to take on more adult responsibilities without the help of their parents (Levy-Warren, 1999). In this way, autonomy is achieved by positive developmental outcomes (i.e., people knowing who they are as an individual, having a friendship with their parents) (Levy-Warren, 1999).

Some research suggests that there may be emotional difficulties when adolescents are no longer relying on their parents (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). When adolescents gain autonomy from their parents, they may develop a more negative form of development called emotional autonomy (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Emotional autonomy is characterized as the extent to which childish ties have been cut between an adolescent and his or her family members (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Further, emotional autonomy may be seen as a more general distancing or detaching oneself from the parents and an unwillingness of an adolescent to rely on his or her parents; adolescents with emotional autonomy generally see their parents as unsupportive and dismissing (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). In their study, Ryan and Lynch (1989) found that as people feel a greater amount of emotional autonomy, adolescents tend to feel less security and rely less on their parents, mid-adolescents and young adults perceive their parents as being more rejecting than accepting of them, and there is little family cohesion and acceptance between young adults and their parents. Also, young adults have a high risk of forming a negative view of themselves the more they are emotionally autonomous from their parents (Ryan & Lynch, 1989).

According to the research by Arnett and Tanner (2006) and Luyckx et al. (2007), it would be possible for parents to continue to have an impact on their adult children's self-esteem. For instance, higher self-esteem would be expected from emerging adults who have an adult relationship with their parents because if emerging adults see that their parents are treating them as autonomous and as an adult, the parent and child will be able to have a closer relationship and will feel as if their parents are supportive of their decisions. On the other hand, lower self-esteem would be expected from emerging adults who have more controlling parents, because if people see that their parents are trying to make them live up to their expectations and they are not successful, then they will feel that their parents do not support them and are not letting them live autonomously.

Relational Self-Construal

The relational self-construal is based on two different construals of the self, independent and interdependent. The independent self-construal is where people see themselves as separate from others, and who sees themselves as special, based on their own thoughts and feelings (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Many people in Western cultures see themselves as independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama (1991) assume that people in Western cultures tend to be more independent than those who are from an East-Asian culture, but like in every culture, people will vary in the extent to which they represent their cultural norms. In order for people to live up to the Western culture's goal of independence, they must see their behavior as being created out of the collection of their own thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than from the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The independent self-construal is based on people's own experiences, traits that only they possess, their own abilities, things that only they like, and their own goals which are separated from social contexts (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). People who are more intrapersonal are typically independent and view relationships as unnecessary for contentment and fulfillment (Cross & Morris, 2003).



In contrast to the independent self-construal, in order for a person to have an interdependent self-construal, an individual must define the self through important roles, group involvement or close relationships, and feel a connection to others (Cross et al., 2000). In this way, a person's behavior will be dependent on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others that are in the relationship, because interdependence involves viewing oneself in the larger context of a social relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To develop and strengthen relationships, a highly interdependent individual will think and behave in ways that will show a connection to others (Cross et al., 2000). Within an interdependent self-construal, the self is not complete and meaningful until the self is in a social relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

An important principle of the relational self-construal is that relationships tend to define the self; thus, highly relational people strive to build and maintain close relationships, and will behave in a way that will strengthen and maintain those relationships (Cross et al., 2000). One way that people try to enhance a new relationship is by using self-disclosure, both sharing about themselves and listening to others share about themselves (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). This self-disclosure will communicate to both parties a sense of trust, liking, and openness and will lead to an increase in closeness in the relationship (Collins & Miller, 1994). For example, Cross and Morris (2003) showed in their study of college roommates that highly relational individuals are more optimistic in their evaluations of the closeness of the relationship with their roommate than people with a low relational self-construal. This may be because highly relational people hope for a better relationship in order to make improvements. People's optimism about their roommate is present because their relationships are self-defining, meaning that with a good relationship comes an increased well-being and liking for the self. Within the context of a family, this might mean that children who are highly relational will be more likely to engage in self-disclosure with their parents in order to strengthen their relationship. In addition, people might be more likely to

believe that they have a close relationship with their parents, creating a sense of trust and fondness between parent and child.

According to Cross and Morris (2003), highly relational people may tend to bias the amount of closeness there really is in the relationship in order to motivate themselves to continue with the relationship. In addition, these researchers found a negative relationship between the closeness of the relationship and well-being for low relational individuals. These findings suggest that for family relationships, people with a high relational self-construal will be more likely to think that they are closer than they really are to their family, and will also have an increased well-being when they perceive the relationship to be close (Cross & Morris, 2003). For people with a low relational self-construal, the more distant they see the relationship being, the higher their well-being will be. This might be because they lack interpersonal skills or because they see the relationship interrupting their independence (Cross & Morris, 2003).

When making important decisions, those who score high on a relational self-construal test are more likely than those who score low to take into account the wishes and opinions of their partners in a close relationship (Cross et al., 2000). For example, interdependent students who are considering going out of state for college may look at the consequences that decision will have on a romantic relationship. Whereas independent students may not take into account the opinions and beliefs of others about the decision they make. In Cross et al.'s (2000) study, they hypothesized and later confirmed that those who scored high on a relational self-construal measure would show that during their decision making processes, they would indicate relational factors as an influence and they would indicate other people, including close relationship partners, as an influence during their decision making process.

Overview

The purpose of this study is to add to the growing literature on contingencies of self-worth and the relational self-construal to see if they



explain college students' self-esteem as it relates to parental approval or disapproval. There has been little research conducted on how self-esteem is affected by college students' perceptions of parental approval or disapproval. For those who are more interpersonal, have contingent self-esteem, and have a high relational self-construal, self-esteem may be affected by the specific characteristics they think their parents value and how they believe they measure up to those important characteristics. When college students believe they have not met their parents' expectations, they may show signs of increased stress. In a study done by Kagan and Squires (1984), 10% of college students are often worried about pleasing their parents and 5% are almost always worried. In general, there is a lack of research examining the relationship between living up to parental expectations and psychological distress (i.e., depression, sadness). There is a possibility that this lack of research is because there is a lack of awareness of the influence parental expectations can have on college students.

Although the current study will be similar to MacDonald, Saltzman, and Leary's (2003) work on social approval and trait self-esteem, this study is different because it focuses completely on the effects of family approval on trait self-esteem. In MacDonald et al.'s (2003) study, participants first rated their personal attributes (i.e., competence, physical attractiveness, material wealth, sociability, and morality), and then indicated their beliefs about the degree to which others are accepting or rejecting of people who do or do not possess those attributes. The domains were chosen to reveal possible determinants of a person's self-esteem (MacDonald et al., 2003). The domains were also broad categories that would be relevant in many social situations and groups because the researchers were interested in global trait self-esteem (MacDonald et al., 2003).

In MacDonald et al.'s (2003) study, they found that in four out of the five domains, people with high self-esteem typically reported that they felt they possessed the traits that were valued by others. Participants also felt that these beliefs would lead to approval from generalized others and would

help them avoid disapproval from others. MacDonald et al. (2003) was able to confirm previous research on interpersonal approaches to self-esteem by finding that self-esteem is dependent on the strength of people's belief that others' assessment and reaction to them are based on their attributes.

In the current study, students were asked to evaluate their personal attributes and their beliefs about the extent to which their parents are more approving and disapproving of people who possess the personal attributes. Students also evaluated their contingencies of self-worth and relational self-construal. These questionnaires were used to order to see if the self-esteem of college students is related to their perception of parental approval or disapproval.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

The essential feature of high relationals is that they view themselves in the context of social relationships; therefore, the more highly relational people are, the more their self-esteem will be related to how well they meet their parents' expectations about morals and competence. Further, the more highly relational people are, the more they should be contingent on others' approval and family support.

Hypothesis 2

The essential feature of low relationals is that they evaluate themselves independently from others; therefore, low relationals should have contingent academic competence because competence comes from an internal validation rather than external.

Hypothesis 3



The essential feature of contingent family support is that self-worth is defined by how supportive and loving the relationship is between people and their family; therefore, the more people are contingent on family support, the more their self-esteem will be impacted by how well they meet their parents' expectations about morals and competence.

Method

Participants

Participants were 126 undergraduate students (27 men, 97 women, and 2 unreported) at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University. Of the participants, 66 were introductory psychology students who participated in partial completion of a course requirement and 60 were developmental psychology students who participated in exchange for extra course credit. The mean age of participants was 19.48 ($SD = 1.32$).

Materials

Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (RISC). The RISC (Cross et al., 2000) was used to measure the degree to which participants define themselves in terms of close others. The RISC consists of 11 items (e.g., "When I think of myself, I often think of my close friends or family also" and "In general, my close relationships are an important part of my self-image," $\alpha = .88$).

When participants completed the RISC, they were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Those who responded with a higher score indicated that they have higher levels of the relational self-construal.

Family Approval Beliefs. A self-report measure developed by MacDonald et al. (2003) was used to determine the beliefs people have

about specific domains leading to approval or disapproval from their parents. Participants were asked to indicate on a 12-point scale the degree to which they believe their parents are more approving and accepting of those who (a) are intelligent, competent, talented, and skilled, (b) are physically attractive, (c) have expensive material possessions, (d) possess sociable characteristics (such as those who are humorous, friendly, and nice), and (e) are moral and ethical (1 = *strongly disagree*; 12 = *strongly agree*). Those who responded with a higher score believed that the higher they stand in that domain, the more their parents will be approving and accepting of them.

In addition to questions about their beliefs about specific traits leading to approval and acceptance from their parents, participants also rated the degree to which they believe that not possessing these five traits may lead to a person experiencing disapproval and rejection from their parents. On a 12-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 12 (*strongly agree*), participants indicated the degree to which their parents are more disapproving and rejecting of those who (a) are not intelligent, competent, talented, or skilled, (b) are physically unattractive, (c) do not have expensive material possessions, (d) do not possess sociable characteristics (for example, who lack a sense of humor, are unfriendly, and cold), and (e) are immoral and unethical. Those who responded with a higher score believed that the higher they stand in that domain, the more their parents will be disapproving and rejecting of them.

Self-ratings in each domain. For each of the five approval domains (i.e., competence, physical attractiveness, wealth, sociability, and morals) from MacDonald et al.'s (2003) study, participants rated how they compare to their peers on a 12-point scale ranging from 1 (*much less*) to 12 (*much more*). A higher score in a specific domain means that participants believed that they hold a more positive self-evaluation in that domain.

Global self-esteem. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965), which consisted of 10 items (e.g., "On a whole, I am satisfied with myself," $\alpha = .89$). Answers were given on a 4-



point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), and higher scores reflected higher global self-esteem.

Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS). The CSWS (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003) assessed seven domains or subscales in which self-esteem may be dependent. The subscales included others' approval (e.g., "I don't care what other people think of me," reversed scored, $\alpha = .79$); appearance (e.g., "My self-esteem does not depend on whether or not I feel attractive," $\alpha = .74$); competition (e.g., "Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect," $\alpha = .87$); academic competence (e.g., "My self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance," $\alpha = .85$); family support (e.g., "It is important to my self-respect that I have a family that cares about me," $\alpha = .84$); virtue (e.g., "My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles," $\alpha = .82$); and God's love (e.g., "My self-esteem goes up when I feel that God loves me," $\alpha = .96$). Participants rated each domain on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Attachment Styles. Attachment styles were assessed using Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) four-category conceptualization of attachment styles. Participants rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*doesn't describe me at all*) to 7 (*describes me very well*) four different paragraphs describing the secure attachment style (e.g., "I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me"); dismissing attachment style (e.g., "I am comfortable without close emotional relationships"); preoccupied attachment style (e.g., "I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them"); and fearful attachment style (e.g., "I am somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others"). In addition, participants selected the one paragraph that best described them (1 = secure; 2 = dismissing; 3 = preoccupied; 4 = fearful).

Procedure

Participants completed a series of six questionnaires. All of these questionnaires were accessed by using Survey Monkey, which is an online survey database, except for the introductory psychology students who completed the RISC scale in an online prescreening session. The first questionnaire assessed participants' relational self-construal and the second questionnaire was a background questionnaire that was used to ask bogus questions about their birth order in order to distract the participants from the real reason for this study. The third, fourth, and fifth questionnaires looked at their global self-esteem, contingencies of self-worth, and attachment style. The final questionnaire was a two part questionnaire that assessed their (a) beliefs about the extent to which five specific domains lead to parent approval or disapproval, and (b) beliefs about how they feel they measure up to these five domains.

Results

The dependent variable in all analyses was global self-esteem. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. In all hierarchical regression analyses, self-ratings, approval-value, and the relational self-construal were zero-centered.

Table 1 presents a correlational analysis for all variables. In correspondence with my hypotheses, there was a significant positive correlation in that people with higher RISC scores were more likely to be contingent on others' approval and family support (see Table 1). Contrary to my hypotheses, people with higher RISC scores were more likely to have their contingencies of self-worth in academic competence, $r(122) = .20, p < .05$. It is interesting to see that those who had higher others' approval contingencies of self-worth were more likely to have lower self-esteem and those who have higher family support contingencies of self-worth were more likely to have higher self-esteem (see Table 1).



Relational Self-Construal

To determine global self-esteem as a function of the relational self-construal and parental approval and disapproval beliefs, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. In this analysis, I was only looking at the domains of competence and morality. For the domains of competence and morality, the main effects of self-ratings in that domain, beliefs about the approval-value of that domain, and the relational self-construal were entered in step 1 of the regression equation. In step 2, all two-variable interaction terms (the products of a participant's score on each pair of predictors) were entered, and in step 3 the three-variable interaction term (the product of a participant's score on all three predictors) was entered. To test the role of disapproval beliefs, this procedure was repeated for each domain, substituting the measure of disapproval beliefs for approval beliefs. The three-variable interaction was not significant for any of the analyses.

Overall, the results for the relational self-construal were not consistent with hypothesis 1. There was not a significant interaction effect found that would suggest that for people who are highly relational, their self-esteem will be affected by how their own self-evaluations of morality and competence meet their parents' expectations about morality and competence (see Tables 2-5). A significant main effect was found for self-ratings of morality, such that those who believed that they have high morals had high self-esteem, regardless of relational self-construal and disapproval beliefs of morality (see Table 3). A significant interaction effect was found in the regression analysis between the relational self-construal and self-evaluation of morals, such that those who were highly relational and felt as though they have high morals also had higher global self-esteem, regardless of parental approval beliefs about morality (see Table 2).

There were also significant main effects for self-rated competence, such that high self-ratings of competence was related to higher global self-esteem, regardless of relational self-construal and both parental approval or

disapproval of competence (see Tables 4 and 5). Finally, a significant main effect was found for the perceived parental disapproval of those with low competence, such that those who perceived their parents as more disapproving of those with low competence had lower global self-esteem, regardless of the relational self-construal and self-rated competence (see Table 5).

To summarize, when people rate themselves high in the domains of morality and competence, they tend to have higher global self-esteem, which suggests that whether or not they are relational, people gain high self-esteem just by having an internal validation of their good characteristics.

Contingencies of Self-Worth

To determine global self-esteem as a function of contingencies of self-worth and parental approval and disapproval beliefs, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. In this analysis, I was only looking at family support. For the domain family support, the main effects of self-ratings in that domain, beliefs about the approval-value of that domain, and contingencies of self-worth were entered in step 1 of the regression equation. In step 2, all two-variable interaction terms (the products of a participant's score on each pair of predictors) were entered, and in step 3 the three-variable interaction term (the product of a participant's score on all three predictors) was entered. To test the role of disapproval beliefs, this procedure was repeated for each domain, substituting the measure of disapproval beliefs for approval beliefs.

Overall, the results from this study do not support hypothesis 2 for contingent family support. There was one significant interaction effect found that would suggest that for people who are contingent on family support, their self-esteem will be affected by how their own self-evaluations of morality and competence meet their parents' expectation about morality and competence. The significant interaction effect was found between



family support and self-ratings on competence and disapproval beliefs of low competence (see Table 9). This suggests that college students who are contingent on family support, believed that they have high competence, and perceived their parents as being more disapproving of those who are not competent had lower self-esteem.

A significant interaction effect of contingent family support and self-evaluation of morals was found, such that those who were contingent on family support and believed that they had high morals also had higher self-esteem, regardless of parental approval of morality (see Table 6). A significant interaction effect of contingent family support and self-ratings of morality was found, such that those who were contingent on family support and believed that they have high morals had high self-esteem, regardless of parental disapproval of morality (see Table 7). There was also a significant interaction effect of self-ratings of morals and parental disapproval of immorality, such that those who believed that they have high morals and perceived their parents as being more disapproving of people who are immoral had lower self-esteem, regardless of contingent family support (see Table 7).

A significant main effect was found for contingent family support, suggesting that those who had their self-worth contingent on family support had high self-esteem, regardless of self-ratings of competence and parental approval of competence (see Table 8). Finally, there was also a significant main effect for self-ratings of competence, such that those who believed that they have high competence had high self-esteem, regardless of contingent family support and parental approval of competence (see Table 8).

To summarize, like the relational self-construal, when people rate themselves high in the domains of morality and competence, they have higher self-esteem, which suggests that whether or not they have external contingencies, people gain higher self-esteem just by having an internal validation of their good characteristics. Further, having external

contingencies produces a lower self-esteem than internal contingencies because internal validation is easier to control than others' positive regard.

Discussion

This study examined how college students' self-esteem relates to their perceptions about their parents' approval or disapproval. If self-esteem is influenced, then what are these factors that are related to increased parental influence? I suggested two factors that can be used to evaluate whether or not parental approval or disapproval will be related to the self-esteem of their child, which are the relational self-construal and contingencies of self-worth.

Overall, the results show that most of my hypotheses were only slightly supported. Consistent with the first hypothesis, people with higher RISC scores were more likely to say that they have higher contingent family support scores. On the other hand, people with lower RISC scores were more likely to say that they have lower contingent self-worth scores on academic competence. Although there is no past research that studies both the relational self-construal and contingencies of self-worth, this finding is consistent with past research on the relational self-construal which suggests that interdependent people, or high relationals, view themselves in the larger context of a social relationship and the self is not seen as meaningful until it is in a social relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, it makes sense that highly relational people would place their self-worth in contingencies that need external validation, such as family support. As for people with lower RISC scores, besides their having contingent self-worth in other things not tested, one factor that might have influenced this result is that there were many people with above average RISC scores who participated in this study, resulting in skewed RISC scores.

Also not consistent with my first hypothesis was that people with higher RISC scores were more likely to have self-esteem that was not affected by how well they believed that their own morals or competence



meet the expectations of their parents. One explanation for this is that interdependent people focus on their connections with others and how they are incorporated into the broader social context in close relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Unlike independence, interdependence does not focus as much on self-validation and with the comparison to others, which could lead to being affected by parental approval or disapproval of their characteristics.

The results of this study do not support my second hypothesis that for people with higher contingent family support scores, they would be more likely to say that their self-esteem is in line with how well they meet their parents' expectations of morality and competence. I found an inverse relationship in which people actually had lower self-esteem scores when they believed that they met their parents' expectations for competence. Although not consistent with my hypothesis, this result is consistent with past research that suggests that for people who place their self-worth in external validation, such as family support, that their psychological well-being is hindered which could lead to low self-esteem (Crocker et al., 2003).

Overall I found that people with higher contingent family support scores were more likely to have a higher self-esteem score and people with higher scores for contingent others' approval were more likely to have a lower self-esteem score. This is consistent with past research that sees family support as more of an unconditional form of love, whereas others' approval is seen as conditional, meaning that parents are seen as loving and supportive no matter what qualities they have, whereas generalized others tend to approve of someone only if they measure up to their expectations (Crocker et al., 2003). In general, when people have external contingencies, satisfying these contingencies in order to have high self-esteem becomes a challenge because it becomes hard to impress people all the time. Whereas if people have internal contingencies, they have more control over satisfying them to have high self-esteem.

Possible limitations to this study could be that since I am only looking at students from two Catholic colleges, this will not be a very good

representation of the entire population of college students. For instance, participants' beliefs about the extent to which they meet their parents' expectations of morality might have worked well because of the religious nature of the schools. Also, almost all participants were classified as having a high relational self-construal, which might have been due to the strong community aspect of the two schools or to self-selection in which people who are highly relational choose to go to college where there are many other high relationals, leading to the possibility of skewed results. Another limitation could be that I did not control for state self-esteem, in that participants might have answered the global self-esteem questionnaire based on the way they were feeling at the time of the study. Finally, this study also consisted of predominately women (78% women, 22% men), which is due to the population of psychology students at the two schools in which the majority of psychology students are women.

Future research on college age students and the effects of perceived parental approval or disapproval should consider five issues. First, researchers should see if there is a connection between the relational self-construal and contingencies of self-worth, again looking to see if they have an influence on global self-esteem. I believe that this would be important to look at because I can only assume for now that people who are highly relational will also be more likely to have external contingencies of self-worth and that low relationals will be more likely to have internal contingencies of self-worth. A correlational analysis will show if a connection exists between the relational self-construal and contingencies of self-worth and their affects on self-esteem as they relate to perceived parental approval.

Second, researchers should focus on how state and trait self-esteem can have an influence on self-esteem when looking at perceived parental approval. In other words, is there a difference between the affects of parental approval or disapproval on state self-esteem and global self-esteem? I believe that for people whose contingency of self-worth is family support, global self-esteem will be affected by how they perceive their



parents to typically approve or disapprove of them. On the other hand, state self-esteem will be affected by individual situations in which people who are contingent on family support do not meet their parents' expectations. This is because people cannot always meet their parents' expectations and when people based their self-worth on external validation, they are more likely going to experience fluctuations in their state self-esteem.

Third, researchers should replicate this study in a more diverse setting where there may be some cultural implications to perceived parental approval on self-esteem. For instance, East Asian cultures are seen as more interdependent cultures where they focus more on their connection to others and evaluate themselves as a group rather than individually (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Since I found that people in a Western culture (i.e., independent) who have higher RISC scores are more likely to base their self-esteem on external validation, there might be different patterns of results for more interdependent cultures.

Fourth, researchers should look at autonomy in emerging adults and see if whether or not college students have a positive or negative (i.e., emotional autonomy) form of autonomy, if their self-esteem is affected by perceived parental approval or disapproval. I believe that the self-esteem of people who have a healthy form of autonomy will be more likely to be affected by parental approval than those who have emotional autonomy. This is because people, who are autonomous, rather than emotionally autonomous, still have a good relationship with their parents. I would expect that this good relationship would lead people to base more of their self-worth on parental approval or disapproval.

Finally, researchers should examine the role that adult attachment styles and contingencies of self-worth may play on the perceived parental approval and self-esteem in college students. Based on past research by Park, Crocker, and Mickelson (2004), I believe that secure individuals will be more likely to be contingent on family support; therefore, their self-esteem will be more likely to be influenced by perceived parental approval.

I also believe that preoccupied and fearful individuals will be more likely to have contingent self-worth in others' approval; therefore, their self-esteem will also be more likely to be influenced by perceived parental approval. Finally, I believe that dismissing individuals will be more likely to have contingent self-worth in academic competence because they are more independent; therefore, their self-esteem will not be likely to be influenced by perceived parental approval.

I began this study by asking if the self-esteem of young adults is still affected by parental approval or disapproval of their individual traits and if so, what are the factors that influence self-esteem. I found that having external contingencies of self-worth, such as family support, may lead to lower self-esteem, because even if people believe that they meet their parents' expectations for approval, they cannot always meet their parents' expectations. This is because it is not possible for people to act in a way that others desire all of the time, people are human and they make mistakes. But people may have higher self-esteem just by being contingent on family support because it is an unconditional form of love in which parents are expected to always love and support their children. Also, although the relational self-construal may not have an effect on the self-esteem of college students in terms of perceived parental approval, it does still suggest that the more highly relational college students are, the more likely they will place their self worth in places of external validation because social relationships make them feel meaningful. Overall, I conclude that once people have moved out of their parents' home, they are seeking independence and autonomy; therefore, regardless of relational self-construal and contingencies of self-worth, college students' self-esteem is not more likely to be related to perceived parental approval or disapproval.

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Table 1
Bivariate Correlations Among Global Self-Esteem, Contingencies of Self-Worth Subscales, Attachment Styles, and RISC

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Global Self-Esteem	----									
2. RISC	-.03	----								
3. Others' Approval	-.38*	.32*	---							
4. Family Support	.21*	.18*	.06	----						
5. Self-Ratings-Morality	.30*	.20*	.03	.23*	----					
6. Self-Ratings-Competence	.37*	-.05	-.03	.01	.27*	----				
7. Approval-Morality	.13	.23*	.08	.07	.42**	.06	----			
8. Approval-Competence	-.05	.05	.14	-.11	.09	.20*	.41*	----		
9. Disapproval-Morality	.14	-.03	-.05	.05	.24**	.13	.41*	.27**	----	
10. Disapproval-Competence	-.19*	.11	.13	-.15	-.01	.02	.11	.44**	.30**	--

Note. $N = 123$. RISC = Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal.

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



Table 2
*Hierarchical Regression for Relational Self-Constraint, Self-Ratings of
 Morality, and Parental Approval of Morality Predicting Self-Esteem*

<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
<u>Step 1</u>			
	-0.47	.43	-.10
-1.11			
	1.49	.46	.32
3.25***			
	0.09	.46	.02
0.20			
<u>Step 2</u>			
	0.73	.32	.23
2.27*			
	-0.09	.39	-.02
-0.23			
	-0.36	.33	-.12
-1.08			
<u>Step 3</u>			
	-0.43	.25	-.26
-1.76			

Note. $N = 122$

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression for Relational Self-Constructual, Self-Ratings of Morality, and Parental Disapproval of Immorality Predicting Self-Esteem

<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
<u>Step 1</u>			
	-0.44	.42	-.09
-1.03			
	1.45	.43	.31
3.34***			
	0.30	.42	.06
0.70			
<u>Step 2</u>			
	0.52	.30	.16
1.74			
	---	---	---

	-0.78	.43	-.16
-1.82			
<u>Step 3</u>			
	-0.42	.48	-.08
-0.87			

Note. *N* = 122

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$



Table 4
Hierarchical Regression for Relational Self-Construal, Self-Ratings of Competence, and Parental Approval of Competence Predicting Self-Esteem

<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
<u>Step 1</u>			
	-0.02	.40	-.00
-0.05			
	1.89	.41	.40
4.59***			
	-0.60	.41	-.13
-1.47			
<u>Step 2</u>			
	0.18	.38	.04
0.46			
	-0.76	.42	-.16
-1.81			
	-0.29	.34	-.07
-0.84			
<u>Step 3</u>			
	0.36	.44	.08
-0.81			

Note. $N = 122$

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 5
Hierarchical Regression for Relational Self-Constraint, Self-Ratings of Competence, and Parental Disapproval of Incompetence Predicting Self-Esteem

	B	SE	β
<i>t</i>			
<u>Step 1</u>			
RISC Scale	0.05	.40	.01
0.14			
Self-Rating-Competence (SRc)	1.80	.40	.38
4.53***			
Parental Disapproval-Competence (DisC)	-0.94	.40	-.20
-2.38*			
<u>Step 2</u>			
RISC x SRc	0.25	.39	.06
0.65			
RISC x DisC	0.60	.46	.01
0.13			
SRc x DisC	0.60	.42	.01
0.15			
<u>Step 3</u>			
RISC x SRc x DisC	-0.21	.48	-.04
-0.44			

Note. *N* = 122

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$



Table 6
Hierarchical Regression for Contingent Family Support, Self-Ratings of Morality, and Parental Approval of Morality Predicting Self-Esteem

β	t	B	SE
<u>Step 1</u>			
Family Support (FS)		0.72	.42
1.71			.15
Self-Rating-Morality (SRm)		1.24	.46
2.70**			.26
Parental Approval-Morality (AppM)		0.03	.45
0.07			.01
<u>Step 2</u>			
FS x SRm		1.09	.45
2.44*			.23
FS x AppM		-0.29	.48
-0.60			-.05
SRm x AppM		-0.23	.29
-0.77			-.08
<u>Step 3</u>			
FS x SRm x AppM		0.29	.36
0.81			.10

Note. $N = 123$

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 7
Hierarchical Regression for Contingent Family Support, Self-Ratings of Morality, and Parental Disapproval of Immorality Predicting Self-Esteem

<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
<u>Step 1</u>			
	0.72	.42	.15
1.72			
	1.18	.43	.25
2.75**			
	0.34	.42	.07
0.80			
<u>Step 2</u>			
	0.91	.42	.20
2.18*			
	-0.63	.53	-.11
-1.18			
	-0.86	.42	-.17
-2.05*			
<u>Step 3</u>			
	0.25	.55	.05
0.45			

Note. *N* = 123

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$



Table 8
Hierarchical Regression for Contingent Family Support, Self-Ratings of Competence, and Parental Approval of Competence Predicting Self-Esteem

β	t	B	SE
<u>Step 1</u>			
Family Support (FS)		0.93	.39
2.38*			.20
Self-Rating-Competence (SRc)		1.82	.40
4.59***			.39
Parental Approval-Competence (AppC)		-0.49	.40
-1.22			-.10
<u>Step 2</u>			
FS x SRc		-0.27	.54
-0.50			-.06
FS x AppC		-0.06	.57
-0.11			-.01
SRc x AppC		-0.34	.37
-0.92			-.08
<u>Step 3</u>			
FS x SRc x AppC		-0.35	.49
-0.72			-.09

Note. $N = 123$

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 9
Hierarchical Regression for Contingent Family Support, Self-Ratings of Competence, and Parental Disapproval of Incompetence Predicting Self-Esteem

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
<i>t</i>			
<u>Step 1</u>			
Family Support (FS)	0.87	.39	.19
2.24*			
Self-Rating-Competence (SRc)	1.74	.38	.37
4.54***			
Parental Disapproval-Competence (DisC)	-0.80	.39	-.17
-2.07*			
<u>Step 2</u>			
FS x SRc	-0.19	.45	-.04
-0.43			
FS x DisC	0.12	.38	.03
0.32			
SRc x DisC	0.14	.42	.03
0.34			
<u>Step 3</u>			
FS x SRc x DisC	-0.98	.42	-.25
-2.30*			

Note. *N* = 123

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$



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