INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education is associated with higher incomes, greater access to health care, positive mental health, positive parenting practices, low levels of parenting stress, children’s academic success, and children’s social competence. However, student parents experience stress as they balance multiple roles. It is unclear what influence the stress associated with being a student has on parent-child relationships.

THEORY

Contagion of stress argues that the combination of work and family roles creates stress and there is a contagion of stress between these role domains. One form of stress contagion is spillover where stress in one domain results in stress in another domain. For example, a bad day at work makes one feel lousy and subsequently a family argument occurs at home.

MEASURES

The Stress Overload Scale (SOS)

- **Personal Vulnerability:** Cronbach alpha = .92
  - perceived inability to deal with stress
    - "...that odds were against you?"
    - "...like there was no escape?"

Parenting Stress Index (PSI)

- **Distress in the Parent-Child Relationship:** Cronbach alpha = .85
  - parent sees the child as a disappointment, feels rejected or alienated by/from the child, or has not properly bonded
    - "My child smiles at me much less than expected"
    - "My child’s behavior is more of a problem than I expected."

RESULTS

Parent gender moderated the effect of personal vulnerability on distress in parent-child relationship. Fathers who reported higher than average personal vulnerability reported more distress in their relationship with their child than mothers also experiencing higher than average personal vulnerability (See Figure).

IMPLICATIONS

- Remind students of the long-term benefits, and relatively short duration of school attendance
- Event load subscale of the SOS, measuring perceived demands, was non-significant indicating it may be most fruitful to focus on stress coping skills rather than reducing “event load”
- Engage fathers in parenting education
- More parenting education targeted at fathers
- Schedule to fit student-parents needs

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