

Appalachia, Attitudes toward Authority and GPA

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Abstract

Previous research on Appalachian students has shown that collectivistic regional values play a role on academic performance. Based on a students region they are supposed to display certain cultural values such as collectivism. No research has looked at college student's attitude towards authority and the connection to GPA. It is hypothesized that those who display high attitude toward authority will be more likely to have higher GPA's. Participants were 187 college students from Appalachia and non-Appalachian regions that completed survey assessments of the variables. A regression analysis confirmed the hypothesis.

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Academic success is a major goal of the university. Researching ways that universities can address ways to improve their student's success is beneficial to both the students and the university itself. One way that this can be defined simply is by looking at their GPAs. By looking at student's GPAs, a university can look at either individual success or take a broader look and study specific groups and their success. Individual cultural groups show differences in academic performance and motivation, and their values regarding academics and the school environment may be attributed to why this is true. The purpose for this study will be to examine how cultural values in an academic setting relate to academic performance.

One of the ways that cultural values are developed is within the region that a person lives. People who are from the same regional area tend to show similar cultural values. These cultures tend to either be individualistic or collectivistic (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995, 2001). Individualistic cultures tend to focus more on personal goals and interests, while collectivistic cultures tend to focus more on the goals of one's family and the group's interests. People from collectivistic cultures also tend to show higher connectedness to individuals and institutions, fear of success, need for conformity and positive attitudes towards authority figures (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Regions can have their own set of cultural norms different from that of the mainstream society; an example of this is the Appalachian region in the United States. The Appalachian region, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), includes the areas from northeast Mississippi to southwest New

York. The individuals within this culture have been shown to express certain characteristics unique to those who live there. The Appalachian region has been shown to have different values than mainstream United States including that they are shown to have more of a collectivistic attitude than people from other regions (Tang & Russ, 2007). These values have also been shown to carry over into students in universities, which further translates into their academic success.

College students who are able embody the values of their own culture in an academic setting are more successful than those who do not embody their culture's values. Past research has shown that middle school and college students from the Appalachian region, who have collectivistic academic attitudes, are more likely to have higher GPAs than those Appalachian students who do not have collectivistic academic values (Gore & Wilburn, 2010). They also tend to have higher levels of academic efficacy, school connectedness, and fear of success than Appalachian students who do not embody collectivism (Gore, Wilburn, Treadway & Plaut, 2011). In addition, Wilson and Gore (2010) examined how students from the Appalachian region would benefit from a school that had a high level of perceived school connectedness more than students from an individualistic region. They found a positive relationship between school connectedness and GPA for Appalachian students. This suggests that the regional values learned by these students could play a role in their academic achievement. If school connectedness is playing a vital role in Appalachian student success, then it is reasonable to believe other variables may also be playing a role in student success as well.

Academic attitudes and performance seem to revolve around cultural values. Based on the research by Gore and his colleagues, it seems that it is especially true for Appalachian students that their cultural values influence their academic success. The academic attitudes that the Appalachian students display seem to be different than that of non-Appalachian students. Coming from a collectivistic region, Appalachian students are probably more likely to hold a positive attitude towards authority than students who are not from the Appalachian region. Furthermore, this attitude among Appalachian students may further enhance their academic performance, as collectivism and school connectedness does. The purpose of the current study is to examine these relationships.

The relationship between perceptions of authority and school achievement has been studied thus far with parent-child relationships only by examining the types of parental relationships that influence academic success for their children (Kordi & Baharudin, 2010; Leung, Lau & Lam, 1998). The studies found that authoritative parenting styles correlated to higher academic achievement for their children. Leung, Lau and Lam (1998) found that these findings had cross-cultural implications that suggest different populations of people may be affected differently by authority styles. Specifically, children from China and also from Western cultures who were low in SES showed a positive association between parental authoritarianism and academic performance, whereas children from Western cultures who were middle to high SES showed a positive association between parental authoritativeness and academic performance. These studies would suggest that parental authority transfers over into academic perception, which leads to

academic performance. The students who display positive attitudes towards authoritarian style relationships will be more likely to be academically successful. To date, however, no study has examined similar relationships within the academic setting between the teacher and the student.

Based on these previous studies, the next step would be to look at if there is a correlation between attitude towards authority and academic performance, and how this relationship differs between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students. Previous research has not yet looked into the idea that attitude towards authority is a collectivist value that could impact academic success. By looking into this variable, it will build upon previous research to show how this has been overlooked in the education system until now. It is hypothesized that attitudes towards academic authority is more highly related to GPA for Appalachian students than non-Appalachian students.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The participants in this study consisted of 187 college students (43 male, 144 female) from a mid-South University. From this sample, 81 of the participants came from Appalachian areas and 106 came from areas outside of Appalachia. They received course completion credit for their participation.

Participants completed the survey questionnaire by logging onto the SONA system and volunteering for the study. They read an informed consent statement and then completed all measures related to this study. When finished they were provided a debriefing statement.

Materials

Attitude to Authority. Nine items from the Freedom vs. Regulation Subscale of the Attitude toward Authority scale were used to assess participant's values of authority (Ray, 1971). These items were rephrased to reflect how much authority students believed their professors should have (Cronbach's Alpha = .55). Responses to items were made on a 5-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 5=*strongly agree*).

Regional Origin. To determine participants' region of origin we asked, "In which town or city did you spend most of your childhood?" Answers were coded using Appalachian or non-Appalachian according to response given. The Appalachian counties were noted by looking at the Appalachian Regional Commission's list of counties in Kentucky (<http://www.arc.gov/index>).

Grade Point Average. Participants were also asked to indicate what their cumulative grade point average was at the time of the study.

Results

To test the hypothesis that regional origin moderates the association between attitude towards authority and GPA a hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted with the centered Attitude to Authority and dummy coded regional origin scores as the independent variables, and GPA was entered as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant effect of student's positive attitude towards authority and GPA which was qualified by a significant interaction effect (see Table 1). Simple slopes analysis showed that the relationship between attitude towards authority and GPA was positive significant for Appalachian students ($\beta = .17, p < .01$; see Figure 1) and not

significant for non-Appalachian students ($\beta = .00$, *ns*). Thus, the hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

The hypothesis was confirmed by the results, showing that college students from Appalachia with high positive attitude towards authority show greater academic achievement than non-Appalachian college students. Specifically, students from the Appalachian region who were shown to display high attitude towards authority were also more likely to have higher GPAs, but there was no relationship between attitude toward authority and GPA for students from outside the Appalachian region.

Attitude towards authority is a collectivistic value. Since the Appalachian region is a collectivistic subculture in the United States, it makes sense that Appalachian students should display this value. In addition, students who display this positive attitude towards their professors and other authority figures are more likely to be academically successful. Past research showed that Appalachian students with collectivistic attitudes are more likely to have higher GPAs than others (Gore & Wilburn, 2010; Wilson & Gore, 2010). The current study expands upon this research by showing that students who embody their culture's values in the academic setting are more likely to be successful. More specifically, our results showed that Appalachian students' attitudes towards their professors can play a vital role in their success in the university.

If Appalachian students who display a positive attitude towards authority are more likely to be academically successful then that has implications that can be useful in university settings. Professors who are able to successfully integrate a positive relationship with their students will improve the students' academic success for

Appalachian students. These students will benefit by having a positive relationship with their professors because this embodies their cultural values. Appalachian students could benefit from having this strong relationship with their professors that would help them in their academic endeavors.

This gives further support to the idea that success for Appalachian students is strongly based on integrating their own cultural values into the academic environment. This suggests that, when college students reflect the characteristics and values of their regional culture, they are more likely to be academically successful than if they are in conflict with their cultural values. Appalachian students who embody collectivistic values are more likely to have success in the university. This study focused on the collectivist belief about attitude towards authority. For Appalachian students it is beneficial for them to embody their cultural belief about attitude towards authority for them to achieve academic success.

This study has implications that can be applied to colleges and universities. Universities are constantly searching for ways to improve students' academic success. When students are struggling academically, it may be due to conflict with their cultural values. If the university is able to intervene and correct these conflicts then the possibility for the student to become academically successful will be achievable. If the professors are able to identify key information such as regional origin and cultural values held by that student, then steps could be taken to improve the relationship between the professor and student. The professor being aware of the importance of this for Appalachian students will go a long way to develop a strong relationship between the teacher and

student. With this positive relationship the student will be able to improve their attitude towards their professors and in turn hopefully become more academically successful.

One limitation to this study is that both GPA and attitude towards authority were self-reported. Students could have misreported these two variables for various reasons. Some students may want to report having higher GPAs than they actually have or report a higher attitude toward authority to make themselves look better to the university. Future research could look into student records to document students' GPA, this would eliminate any possibility of misrepresentation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, college students from Appalachia who display a collectivistic attitude are more likely to have a high attitude towards authority, which leads to being more academically successful. So, college students from Appalachia who display the cultural values from their region are more likely to be successful than those college students who are in conflict with their regional values.

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Table 1

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for regional origin and attitude towards authority predicting GPA

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Step 1			
Attitude towards Authority	0.16	0.05	.12*
Region	0.08	0.05	.07
Step 2			
Attitude towards Authority	0.00	0.10	.00
Region	0.09	0.05	.07
Attitude X Region	0.22	0.12	.14*

Note. $R^2 = .02$ ($p < .01$) for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .01$ for Step 2 ($p < .05$).

* $p < .05$

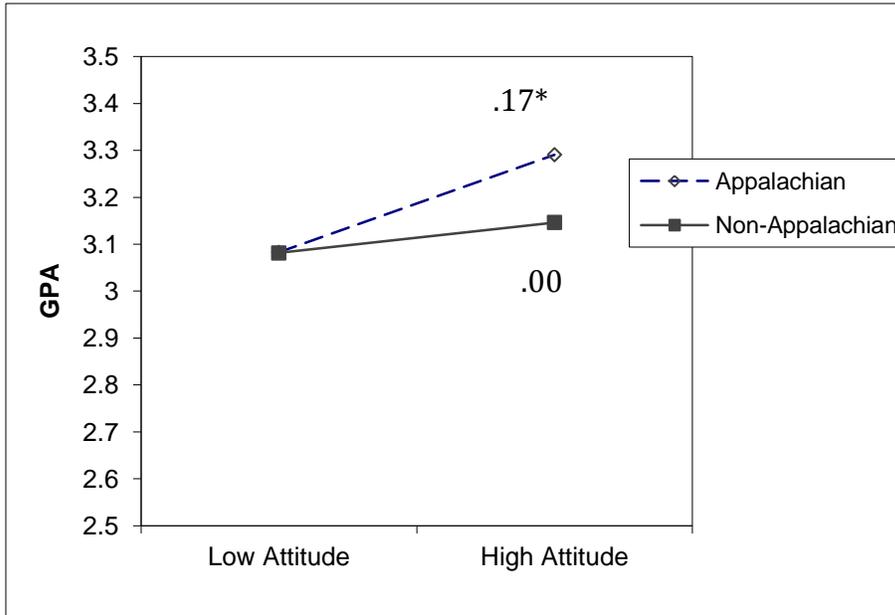


Figure 1

Simple slopes between Attitude toward Academic Authority and GPA for Appalachian and non-Appalachian students.