

The Relationship between Childhood Overindulgence and Personality
Characteristics in College Students*

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ABSTRACT

The overindulgence of children is a common theme as well as concern in today's culture. Until now, what little people did know about overindulgence was often confused with spoiling children. This study explores the relationship between childhood overindulgence and characteristics (family cohesion and adaptability, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-righteousness, satisfaction with life, dysfunctional attitudes, and life distress) in college students (young adulthood). Results indicate that childhood overindulgence is significantly related to a number of negative characteristics in young adulthood: lower self-efficacy, an inflated sense of self-righteousness, and an increase in dysfunctional attitudes. Further, these negative characteristics were also associated with other indicators of overindulgence: lack of chores, too many toys, too much clothes, too much freedom, parents being over-loving and providing attention, lack of rules, not enforcing the rules, and parents providing too much entertainment. Childhood overindulgence was not significantly related to self-esteem, satisfaction with life, life distress, socioeconomic background, or type of family system they grew up in.

INTRODUCTION

If books mirror our culture, then we live in a culture of overindulgence. Book titles such as “Simple Indulgence: Easy, Everyday Things to Do for Me” (Eastman, 1999) and “Endangered Pleasures: In Defense of Self-Indulgence & Simple Luxuries” (Holland, 1995) reflect these widely held cultural beliefs. At the same time this societal overindulgence is encouraged, parenting books like “Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age” (Kindlon, 2001a), and “Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents are Giving Children Too Much - But Not What They Need” (Ehrensaft, 1997) warn parents about the effects of overindulging children. Central to these two conflicting messages is the question: “Is overindulging children a bad thing, or not?”

It is probably natural for all parents to want the best for children. To give their children everything they can so that they have a good start in life; but giving children “too much” is quite a different thing from giving them “enough.” Coles (1977) recognized this in an early study on the effects of “affluence” on children. The author states, “‘Privileged’ children keep struggling with their perceptions of what life is like in America for others, for the less fortunate. [T]he ‘privileged’ seem, in fact, frightened and guilty and confused and conflicted – in their own ways, victims” (p. xiv). Hausner (1990), a family therapist with extensive experience counseling affluent families, also observed this victimization: “Just as poverty has a profound influence, so too does affluence. It creates distinct opportunities as well as problems...spoiled children with obnoxious behavior and superior attitudes, unmotivated adolescents who care only for their stereos and clothes, reckless teenagers living delinquent and self-destructive lives” (p.9). What then is overindulgence?

Defining Overindulgence

Overindulgent parents inundate their children with family resources such as material wealth, time, attention, and experiences. Additionally, they often fail to expect responsible behavior that commensurate with the child's developmental age (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998; Clarke, Dawson, & Bredehoft, 2004). Overindulged children grow up in an unrealistic world and as a result. They fail to learn skills such as perseverance, coping with failure in effective ways, and getting along with others. Parents overindulge to meet their own needs, not the needs of their children (Bredehoft et al., 1998). For example, they may have grown up in a very poor family and as a result shower their children with excessive material wealth because they do not want their children to have the same painful experience. Is overindulging children synonymous with spoiling children?

Differences Between Spoiling and Overindulgence

The concepts of “overindulgence” and “spoiling” are commonly confused. Spoiling is only one aspect of overindulgence. Swain (1985) and McIntosh (1989) state that the process of “spoiling children” emanates from the child's needs resulting in excessive, self-centered, obnoxious, and ill-tempered child behavior. Whereas the process of “overindulgence” stems from the parents' needs (Bredehoft et al., 1998). Overindulgent parents do not provide appropriate structure for their children. In addition, they give their children excessive family resources at developmentally inappropriate times, which prevent them from learning their developmental tasks (Clarke & Dawson, 1998).

Research on Overindulgence

Some articles on the topic of spoiling published in professional journals have been opinion pieces based on the author's professional experience (Nelms, 1983; Swain, 1985; McIntosh, 1989) while

others have been studies measuring parental attitudes about spoiling (Brook, Watemberg, & Geva, 2000; Garner, 1996; Ispa, 1995; Robinson, 1978; Solomon, Martin & Cottingham, 1993; and Wilson, Witzke & Volin, 1981). Of the few studies on overindulgence represented in the literature (Kindlon, 2001b; and Pietropinto, 1985; Young, 1986; Carson, Council, & Gravley, 1991; Handford, Mayes, Bagnato, & Bixler, 1986; Scheiner et al., 1985; Rosenfarb, Becker, & Mintz, 1994; Bredehoft et al., 1998; and Bredehoft, Dawson & Clarke, 2003) most do not investigate overindulgence as an exclusive independent variable, rather, overindulgence is researched as one of many dependent variables employed to research some other construct.

The existing literature related to overindulgence can be synthesized into three categories: (1) attitudes and opinions concerning overindulgence, (2) overindulgence as one of many dependent variables in relation to a medical condition or psychological issue, and (3) the relationship between childhood overindulgence and characteristics in adulthood. We first discuss the literature on attitudes and opinions concerning overindulgence.

Attitudes and Opinions Concerning Overindulgence

Two studies have investigated attitudes and opinions concerning overindulgence (Kindlon, 2001b; Pietropinto, 1985). Using a convenience sample, Kindlon (2001b) surveyed 1,078 parents' and 654 teenagers' attitudes on overindulgence. The study found that high percentages of the children in their sample "owned things" (e.g., car, cell phone, parent-financed credit card, TV in bedroom, computer in bedroom). Further, these children reported relatively high levels of self-centeredness (32.6%), anger (28.4%), envy (24.8%), sloth (25.8% boys, 14.9% girls), eating problems (6.4% boys, 23.5% girls), self-control problems (58.9%), and being spoiled (11.0% boys, 19.8% girls). Pietropinto (1985) surveyed a convenience sample of 400 psychiatrists asking them questions about unhappy marriages and their effect on children. Results indicate "emotional neglect" or

“overindulgence of children” by incompatible parents to be among the major concerns of the psychiatrists surveyed. Next, we discuss the literature using overindulgence as one of many dependent variables while investigating a medical or psychological issue.

Overindulgence - One of Many Dependent Variables

Five studies have investigated overindulgence as a dependent variable in relation to a medical or psychological issue (Young, 1986; Carson, Council, & Gravley, 1991; Handford, Mayes, Bagnato, & Bixler, 1986; Scheiner et al., 1985; Rosenfarb, Becker, & Mintz, 1994). Young (1986) indirectly explored overindulgence in a study of primiparas’ attitudes toward mothering. Attitudes of 77 first-time mothers whose infants were one, six, and twelve months of age were assessed using the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation Scales (Roth, 1961) on which one subscale measures overindulgence. Results found that attitudes of overindulgence were negatively correlated with child acceptance. This study also found that married women were more accepting and less rejecting of their children compared to non-married women and when their babies were one month old, married mothers scored significantly lower on the Overindulgence and Overprotection subscale scores.

Carson, Council, & Gravley (1991) investigated post-hospitalization adjustment in 47 tonsillectomy patients (aged 4-23 years). Results suggest that adjustment prior to hospitalization was the best predictor of post-surgical adjustment and that maternal overprotection and overindulgence of the child were correlated with poorer adjustment. Handford, Mayes, Bagnato & Bixler’s (1986) study with hemophilic boys and their parents employed the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation Scales (Roth, 1961). Contrary to other clinical reports, the researchers found a significant negative correlation between parents’ attitudes on the acceptance scale and the overindulgence and overprotection scales.

Scheiner et al. (1985) investigated 17 mothers who gave birth to low birth weight infants and 17 mothers of normal weight babies matched for age, education and marital status. Results showed no difference between mothers of low birth weight infants and their normal weight matches. However, the authors note that six of the term infants' mothers scored high in overindulgence and overprotection on the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation Scales (Roth, 1961) suggesting this to be more prevalent than previously thought. And last, Rosenfarb, Becker, & Mintz (1994) investigated dependency and self-criticism in a population of adult females diagnosed with bipolar depression. They found that dependency was marginally related to perceptions of increased parental attention and overindulgence.

The Relationship between Childhood Overindulgence and Adulthood Characteristics

To date, only two studies (Bredehoft et al., 1998; Bredehoft, Dawson & Clarke, 2003) have explored the relationship between childhood overindulgence and subsequent characteristics in adulthood. Each will be presented here in greater detail because they are the only studies directly investigating the construct of overindulgence.

In the first of these two studies (Bredehoft et al., 1998) 730 adults completed an author-developed questionnaire on overindulgence with 124 participants identifying themselves as adult children of overindulgers (ACOs). The ACO subsample was predominantly female (87.7% female; 12.3% male) and ranged in age from 19 to 80 years of age (Mean = 42.2 years).

These findings paint a less than happy picture for adults who were overindulged as children. A high percentage of ACOs come from violent homes and homes in which parents were addicted to alcohol, drugs, work, or food. ACOs reported the following life problems which they associated with their overindulgence: not knowing what is enough, overeating and gaining weight, money management problems, parenting and childrearing conflicts, conflicts with interpersonal

boundaries, difficulty in decision-making, poor self-esteem, poor health, and being involved in an excessive number of activities. As a result of being overindulged ACOs reported mostly negative feelings: confused, embarrassed, guilty, and ignored.

The greatest number of ACOs indicated that they were overindulged by both mother and father. The next largest number was overindulged by mother alone and then father alone.

Compared to non-ACOs, ACOs were significantly more likely to overindulge their own children and engage in higher levels of self-indulgence which they believed resulted in gaining weight, feeling guilty, experiencing lower self-esteem, poor health and loneliness.

Surprisingly ACOs did not limit their overindulgence to simply being given too many things; instead they identified 17 areas of overindulgence (e.g., clothes, toys, lack of rules, no chores, being over-loved, being entertained, being allowed too much freedom), which logically can be classified into three categories: Material Overindulgence (too much), Structural Overindulgence (lack of rules and soft structure), and Relational Overindulgence (over-nurture).

Bredehoft, Dawson and Clarke (2003) conducted a web-based follow-up study designed to further explore the relationship between childhood overindulgence, adulthood temperament, and parental locus of control. Of the 391 participants, 348 identified themselves as parents from 39 states and 12 countries. The parent subsample was predominantly female (89.7% female; 10.3% male) and ranged in age from 26 to 95 years of age (Mode = 46-55 age bracket). In addition to demographic information and 14 author developed likert-style overindulgence items, participants completed a series of psychological inventories which were selected in part because they possessed established reliability and validity: Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES-III; Olson, 1986 & 2000); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1979); Dysfunctional

Attitude Scale (DAS; Weissman, 1979 & 1980); and the Parental Locus of Control Scale (PLOC; Campis, Lyman, & Prentice-Dunn, 1986).

Results from Bredehoft, Dawson and Clarke (2003) suggest that overindulgence is a complex construct. Using factor analysis, the researchers verified that there are three types of overindulgence: Factor 1: Material Overindulgence, “too much” (loadings range from .593 to .746), Factor 2: Structural Overindulgence, “soft structure” (loadings range from .389 to .901), and Factor 3: Relational Overindulgence, “over-nurture” (loadings range from .707 to .745). Further, a statistically significant correlation was found between childhood overindulgence and scores on four of the scales: FACES-III, the RSES, the DAS, and the PLOC. Childhood overindulgence was statistically related to family adaptability ($r = .142, p < .01$), dysfunctional attitudes ($r = .201, p < .001$), and parental locus of control ($r = .244, p < .001$). The greater the childhood overindulgence, the more chaotic the subjects’ families of procreation were, the more likely they were to hold dysfunctional attitudes, and believed they had little control over their child.

The dysfunctional attitude finding is of interest because the DAS was designed to identify cognitive distortions that underlie depression. Further, researchers have found these dysfunctional attitudes to be closely associated with a variety of negative attributes ranging from the need for approval, being self-critical, perfectionism, poor social adjustment and depression (Blatt, Quinlan, Pilkonis & Shea, 1995; Whisman & Friedman, 1998; Sheppard & Teasdale, 2000).

Finally, the more parents were overindulged as children, the more likely they were to hold ineffective parenting beliefs ($r = .244, p < .001$). Overindulged parents believed they were not effective parents ($r = .206, p < .001$), thought their child controlled their lives ($r = .295, p < .001$), perceived that they had little control over their children ($r = .144, p < .01$), and believed in fate or

chance when it comes to parenting ($r = .200, p < .001$). As predicted, overindulged parents thought that neither they nor their child were responsible for their children's behavior ($r = .008, p < .879$).

In sum, the results from these two studies suggest that there are numerous negative effects related to overindulgence during childhood (Bredehoft et al., 1998), and they linger on into adult life (Bredehoft, Clarke & Dawson, 2003).

PURPOSE

The current study was designed to expand the knowledge base concerning overindulgence. On the basis of previous research on overindulgence (Bredehoft et al., 1998; Bredehoft, Dawson & Clarke, 2003), nine hypotheses were predicted for this study:

- H₁:** Overindulgence occurs more often in the extreme family systems than in midrange family or balanced family system.
- H₂:** Overindulgence is more prevalent in young adults who grew up in higher income affluent families.
- H₃:** There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-esteem in young adulthood.
- H₄:** There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-efficacy in young adulthood.
- H₅:** There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-righteousness in young adulthood.
- H₆:** There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and satisfaction with life in young adulthood.
- H₇:** There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and dysfunctional attitudes in young adulthood.

H₈: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and life distress in young adulthood.

H₉: There is a relationship between the single overindulgence item and thirteen indicators of overindulgence.

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 74 participants (43 female/31 male) from a small Midwestern liberal arts college. The majority of the participants was in the 17-25 age-range (89.2%), had never been married (86.5%), and predominantly Caucasian (89.2%). More than half of the subjects reported their religious affiliation as Protestant (60.8%), followed by “other” (28.4%), Catholic (8.1%), and no religious identification (2.7%). Parental household income ranged from under \$29,999 to over \$100,000 per year (Mode = \$50,000-69,000).

Participants were recruited from psychology classes and given bonus points for participating. Participants brought laptop computers to one of seven lab periods held in a network-accessible classroom. Research assistants met the participants and gave them written and verbal instructions on how to log onto the university’s computer network. Once the study’s web page was located they completed the questionnaire and submitted their data electronically for analysis.

MEASURES

After reading and agreeing to the consent form, participants answered a 147-item web-based questionnaire made up of demographic data, items from seven inventories: FACES-III – the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (Olson, Portner & Lavee, 1983; Olson, 1986, 2000); the RSES -Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979); the SES - Self-Efficacy Scale

(Maddox, Mercandante, Prentice-Dunn, Jacobs, & Rogers, 1982); the SRS - Self-Righteousness Scale (Falbo & Belk, 1985); the SWLS - Satisfaction With Life Scale (Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985); the DAS - Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (Weissman, 1980); the LDI - Life Distress Inventory (Yoshioka & Shibusawa, 2002); and 14 author-developed likert-style questions on overindulgence. Reliability and validity coefficients for each of the inventories are presented in the following section.

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES-III)

FACES-III (Olson, 1986 & 2000) is a 20-item inventory that measures family adaptability and cohesion. FACES-III is based on the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson et al., 1983; Olson, 2000) which asserts that there are three central dimensions in family dynamics: cohesion, adaptability, and communication. This inventory measures two of the three dimensions in the Circumplex Model: cohesion and adaptability. Whereas family cohesion measures family togetherness: “the emotional bonding that family members have towards one another” (Olson, 2000, p. 145), family adaptability measures family flexibility: “the amount of change in its leadership, role relationships and relationship rules” (Olson, 2000, p. 147). Scores from FACES-III can be plotted on the Circumplex Model, which identifies sixteen types of marital and family systems. These can be further reduced to three general types: balanced, midrange, and extreme family systems. FACES-III possesses an overall internal consistency alpha of .68, .77 for cohesion, and .62 for adaptability and test-retest reliability of .80 (adaptability) and .83 (cohesion) for a four to five week interval. More than 250 studies have conducted validating this instrument (for an in-depth discussion on the reliability and validity of the Circumplex Model see Olson, 2000).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)

The original purpose of the RSE (Rosenberg, 1979) was to measure the self-esteem of high school students. Since its development the scale has been widely used with many different groups. The RSE has high internal consistency with an alpha of .92. Two studies measuring test-retest reliability over a two-month period report high correlations .85 and .88, which indicate good stability. The RSE correlates significantly with other measures of self-esteem and demonstrates good construct validity.

Self-Efficacy Scale (SES)

The SES (Sherer, Maddux, Mercandante, Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1982) is a 30-item scale used to measure general perceptions of self-efficacy (e.g., When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work; 1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly). The underlying assumption of this scale is that expectations of mastery are a determinant of behavioral change. Different experiences in the past lead to different levels of self-efficacy. The SES contains two subscales, general self-efficacy and social self-efficacy. Reported alpha's for internal consistency are .86 for the general subscale to .71 for the social subscale. No test-retest reliability data are reported. The SES reports good criterion-related validity by accurately predicting that people with higher self-efficacy would have greater success. The SES also demonstrates good construct validity by correlating with a number of other related measures such as the Ego Strength Scale, the Interpersonal Competency Scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Self-Righteousness Scale (SRS)

The SRS (Falbo & Belk, 1985) is a seven-item scale that measures whether or not one's beliefs and behaviors are correct, especially when compared to the beliefs and behaviors of others (e.g., People who disagree with me are wrong.). Highly self-righteous people believe that there is one "right way" to think or behave, and they are anxious to denigrate alternative beliefs and behaviors.

The SRS has two subscales: general self-righteousness and acceptance. Internal consistency for the two scales was .60 for the general subscale and .58 for the acceptance subscale. Reliability for the scale was moderate using test-retest correlations after a 10-kilometer race. Items for the scale were selected on the basis of lack of association with a measure of social desirability. Both concurrent and predictive validity are reported for the SRS.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The SWLS (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) measures basic well-being in relation to global life satisfaction. The short five-item scale is based on factor analysis. SWLS has good internal consistency with a score of .87. After a two-month period of time, the scale shows good test-retest reliability with a score of .82. The SWLS used two samples of college students to determine concurrent validity. The scores correlated with nine measures of subjective well being for both samples. As a measure of concurrent validity the SWLS also correlates with self-esteem.

Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS)

The DAS was developed by Weissman (1979, 1980) to identify and measure cognitive distortions underlying depression. The 40 items on the DAS were based on the cognitive therapy model developed by Beck (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979) representing seven major value systems: love, achievement, approval, autonomy, perfectionism, entitlement, and omnipotence. Responses to each item are made on a 7-point scale (1 = totally agree, 7 = totally disagree) with elevated scores indicating greater endorsement of dysfunctional beliefs. The DAS has very good internal consistency (alphas range from .84 to .92). The DAS possess excellent stability with test-retest correlations over an eight-week time period of .80 to .84. The DAS has very strong concurrent validity correlating significantly with many other measures of depression and cognitive distortions.

The DAS also has strong known-groups validity, distinguishing between groups that have been diagnosed as depressed and those that were not.

Life Distress Inventory (LDI)

The LDI (Yoshioka & Shibusawa, 2002) is an 18-item inventory that assesses distress associated with 18 areas of life (e.g., Management of time; 1 = no distress, 7 = the most distress I've ever felt). Five subscales for the LDI exist: marital concerns (MC), career concerns (CC), outside activities (OA), self and family (SF), and self-optimism (SO). Test-retest reliability of .66 was established over a six-month period. Internal consistency was high with an alpha of .85. Alphas for the LDI subscales indicate fair to good internal consistency: MC=.84, CC=.55, OA=.76, SF=.71, SO=.77. The LDI also reports convergent validity correlating positively with other similar measures.

Measures of Overindulgence

A literature search revealed no published instrument designed specifically to measure overindulgence. Only a single subscale on the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation by Roth (1961) was found to measure this construct. However, the use the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation was ruled out on the strength of Whitman and Zachary's (1986) evaluation suggesting this scale no longer be used for research because it needed revision and renorming. As a result the authors developed a single likert-style overindulgence item to measure overindulgence

Insert Figure 1 about here

along with thirteen items we call "indicators of overindulgence" (see figure 1). These items were developed based on data from a previous study on overindulgence (Bredehoft et al., 1998). Following development, the overindulgence items were pre-tested on a sample of thirty-five

individuals. Responses to each item range from a low of 1 = never or almost never to a 5 = always or almost always.

RESULTS

One-way ANOVAs were used to determine if overindulgence occurs more often in extreme and midrange family systems than in balanced family systems, and if overindulgence is more prevalent in young adults who grew up in affluent families. Participants were coded into one of three family system types (balanced, midrange, or extreme) based on scores from FACES-III. Differences in mean responses to the question “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” were analyzed using one-way ANOVA for the three family system types: balanced = 2.08 (SD = .70), midrange = 2.15 (SD = .89), extreme = 2.56 (SD = .83); $F(2, 71) = 1.12, p = .33$. **H₁**: Overindulgence occurs more often in the extreme and midrange family systems than in a balanced family system was rejected.

Differences in mean responses to the question “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” were analyzed using one-way ANOVA comparing the low family income (0 - \$59,999; N = 36) and the high family income participants (\$60,000 – above \$100,000): low family income = 2.22 (SD = .96), high family income = 2.13 (SD = .70); $F(1, 72) = .216, p = .64$. **H₂**: Overindulgence is more prevalent in young adults who grew up in higher income affluent families was rejected.

The second set of analyses employed a Pearson correlation coefficient to examine the relationship between participants’ responses to “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” (the single likert-style overindulgence item) and the aggregate scores from the remaining measures employed in this study: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Self-Efficacy Scale, the Self-Righteousness Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, and the

Life Distress Scale (see Table 1). Responses to the question “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” correlated significantly with four of the aggregate scores:

Insert Table 1 about here

the Self-Efficacy Scale score ($r = -.237, p < .05$), the Self-Righteous Scale score ($r = -.248, p < .05$), and the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale score ($r = .233, p < .05$). **H₄**: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-efficacy in young adulthood; **H₅**: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-righteousness in young adulthood, and **H₇**: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and dysfunctional attitudes in young adulthood were accepted.

No statistically significant relationships were found between “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” and the self-esteem, satisfaction with life, or the life distress aggregate scale scores. Thus, **H₃**: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-esteem in young adulthood. **H₆**: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and satisfaction with life in young adulthood, and **H₈**: There is a relationship between childhood overindulgence and life distress in young adulthood were rejected.

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients examining the relationship between participants’ responses to “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” and thirteen author-developed Indicators of Overindulgence (see Figure 1 for specific items).

Insert Table 2 about here

Statistically significant relationships were found between “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” and eight of the thirteen Indicators of Overindulgence: chores ($r = .403, p < .001$);

allowed to have any clothes ($r = .261, p < .05$); gave me lots of toys ($r = .325, p < .01$); gave me too much freedom ($r = .325, p < .01$); parents were over-loving and gave too much attention ($r = .467, p < .001$); did not have rules ($r = .334, p < .001$); did not enforced rules ($r = .417, p < .001$); and makes sure I was entertained ($r = .247, p < .05$). No statistically significant correlations were found between this item and the remaining four indicators of overindulgence: parents did things for me that I could do for myself; allowed lots of privileges; allowed me to take the lead or dominate the family; and not expected to learn skills other children learned. **H₉**: There is a relationship between the single overindulgence item and thirteen indicators of overindulgence was partially supported.

Secondary Analysis

A secondary analysis was performed to further interpret this finding. The single overindulgence item and its strongest three correlates (chores, over-loving, and enforced the rules) were correlated with the individual items from the SES, SRS, and DAS. The more our college age sample agreed with the statement “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” the more they viewed themselves negatively (e.g., “I am incapable of dealing with most of life’s problems” ($r = -.269, p < .05$); “I give up on new things if I am not successful” ($r = -.242, p < .05$); “I can help others by telling them how to live” ($r = -.277, p < .05$); “I cannot be happy unless most people I know admire me” ($r = .234, p < .05$), “If a person asks for help, it is a sign of weakness” ($r = .234, p < .05$), “If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that he does not like me” ($r = .316, p < .01$), “If others dislike you, you cannot be happy” ($r = .254, p < .05$), and “It is best to give up on your own interests in order to please other people” ($r = .305, p < .01$).

The more our college age sample indicated their parents did not expect them to do chores when they were growing up, the more likely they believed in the following dysfunctional beliefs:

“If you cannot do something well, there is little point in doing it at all” ($r = .276, p < .05$), “If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that he does not like me” ($r = .339, p < .01$), “I am nothing if a person I love doesn’t love me” ($r = .280, p < .05$), “People who have good ideas are better than those who do not” ($r = .289, p < .05$), “It is best to give up on your own interests in order to please other people” ($r = -.266, p < .05$).

Participants who said their parents were over-loving and gave them too much attention when they were growing up, also surrendered to the following dysfunctional beliefs: “People will probably think less of me if I make a mistake” ($r = .261, p < .05$), “If I do not do well all the time, people will not respect me” ($r = .356, p < .01$), “I cannot be happy unless most people I know admire me” ($r = .257, p < .05$), “If a person asks for help, it is a sign of weakness” ($r = .292, p < .05$), “If I do not do as well as other people, it means I am a weak person” ($r = .274, p < .05$), “If you cannot do something well, there is little point in doing it at all” ($r = .289, p < .05$), “If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that he does not like me” ($r = .356, p < .01$), “My value as a person depends greatly on what others think of me” ($r = .368, p < .001$), “People who have good ideas are better than those who do not” ($r = .321, p < .01$), “It is best to give up on your own interests in order to please other people” ($r = .381, p < .001$), and “I do not need the approval of other people in order to be happy” ($r = .239, p < .05$).

Finally, the more our college age sample said parents did not enforce rules when they were growing up, the more likely they agreed with the following beliefs: “When trying to learn something new, I soon give up if I am not initially successful” ($r = -.337, p < .01$), “If I can’t do a job the first time, I keep trying until I can” ($r = -.271, p < .05$), “One of my problems is that I cannot get down to work when I should” ($r = -.266, p < .05$), “My happiness depends more on other people than it does on me” ($r = .232, p < .05$), “If I am to be a worthwhile person, I must be

the best in at least one way” ($r = .242, p < .05$), “If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that he does not like me” ($r = .398, p < .001$), “If I do not do well all the time, people will not respect me” ($r = .321, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Recent studies suggest that overindulged children experience an array of difficulties in adulthood (Bredehoft et al., 1998; Bredehoft, Dawson & Clarke, 2003). Specifically, most overindulged children grow up feeling confused, guilty, sad and plagued with dysfunctional thoughts. Further, as adults they require constant affirmation from others, have extreme difficulty making decisions, have difficulty with delayed gratification, resulting in problems with interpersonal relationships, overeating, overspending, and a lack of basic life skills (Bredehoft et al. 1998). Their families of procreation are chaotic, and as a parent they experience lower self-esteem, dysfunctional attitudes, and think they have little or no control over their children (Bredehoft, Dawson & Clarke, 2003). The purpose of this study was to expand the overindulgence knowledge base with a population of college-age young adults.

Overindulgence’s relationship with Type of Family System, and Socioeconomic Level

Contrary to our predictions, overindulgence occurred in all 16 family systems types in the Circumplex Model (Olson, 1986 & 2000) with no significant differences among them (H_1), and across all socioeconomic levels, not just in affluent families (H_2). Nonetheless, this is a very interesting finding. We propose one explanation for both results. Overindulgence can occur in all family system types and across all socioeconomic levels because overindulgence is more complex than a single factor. In fact, there are three types of overindulgence (Bredehoft, Dawson & Clarke, 2003; Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2004): Material Overindulgence (too much); Structural Overindulgence (soft structure, lack of rules or not enforcing rules); and Relational

Overindulgence (over-nurture, doing things for children they should be doing themselves). One, two or three types of overindulgence could be occurring simultaneously. For example, we would not expect structural overindulgence (lack of rules or not enforcing the rules) to occur in a rigidly enmeshed family system, however relational or material overindulgence could be occurring. The same could be true in highly affluent families; we expect material overindulgence to occur more frequently in these families as a result of the financial resources available, but what about poorer, less affluent families? Material overindulgence may not be going on in poorer families; however, structural or relational overindulgence may nonetheless occur in instead.

Overindulgence's relationship with Self-Esteem, Satisfaction with Life, and Life Distress

Support was not found for **H₃**, **H₆**, and **H₈**: a significant relationship between childhood overindulgence and self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and life distress in young adulthood.

A previous study collecting qualitative data on overindulgence (Bredehoft et al., 1998) indicated that adults (modal age 41-50) experience extreme psychological pain from childhood overindulgence (e.g., "I have extreme difficulty making decisions." "I need praise and material reward to feel worthy." "I don't have to grow up because other people will take care of me." "I feel like I need lots of things to feel good about myself." "I'm unlovable." "I have to buy gifts to be loved." and "I constantly need outside affirmation from my friends"). Perhaps, the present study did not yield similar results because college age populations lack a larger database of life experience to compare with, and therefore later in life may reevaluate self-esteem, life satisfaction and life distress more negatively.

Self-Efficacy, and Self-Righteousness and Dysfunctional Attitudes' relationship with Overindulgence

As predicted, support was found for **H₄**, **H₅**, and **H₇**; significant relationships between childhood overindulgence, self-efficacy, self-righteousness, and dysfunctional attitudes. Secondary analysis with individual scale items from the SES, SRS and DAS highlight the multiplicities of negative attitudes associated with Overindulgence in general, Relational Overindulgence (parents over-nurturing) and Structural Overindulgence (no chores and not enforcing the rules).

The SES measures mastery. College students who were overindulged as children scored low in self-efficacy. This suggests that they will have greater difficulty in reaching future vocational, educational, and monetary goals (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994). When parents overindulge they unknowingly train their children to be helpless. This tendency toward “trained helplessness” is demonstrated by overindulged college students agreeing with these SES statements: “I am incapable of dealing with most of life’s problems” and “I give up on new things if I am not successful.”

The SRS “measures the conviction that one’s beliefs or behavior are correct especially in comparison to alternative beliefs or behaviors” (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994, p. 535). For example, overindulged college students would agree with the following SRS item: “I can help others by telling them how to live.” Children who has been catered to believe they are the center of the universe and come to know what is best for everyone else.

Dysfunctional attitudes (DAS) have been linked with a number of problems including depression (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994), assertion problems (Kuiper, Olinger, & Swallow, 1987; Olinger, Shaw, & Kuiper, 1987), poor social skills (Kuiper et al., 1987), gravitating toward individuals who also held similar negative views (Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992), and now to overindulgence. The process of overindulgence may send the wrong signals to a child about what to think. In particular, that they are incapable of being happy, and that their happiness

depends on others as demonstrated by the secondary item analysis. Overindulged children grow up believing dysfunctional thoughts such as: “I cannot be happy unless most people I know admire me,” “If others dislike you, you cannot be happy,” and “If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that he does not like me.”

Further, the top three indicators of overindulgence (chores, over-loving, and do not enforce the rules) were also strongly related to dysfunctional thinking. College students in our sample whose parents did not require them to do chores grew up believing statements like: “If you cannot do something well, there is little point in doing it at all,” “I am nothing if a person I love doesn’t love me,” and “It is best to give up on your own interests in order to please other people.” Parents who were over-loving raised children who think “If I do not do well all the time, people will not respect me,” “If I do not do as well as other people, it means I am a weak person,” and “If you cannot do something well, there is little point in doing it at all.” And parents who did enforce the rules raised children who would agree with: “When trying to learn something new, I soon give up if I am not initially successful,” “One of my problems is that I cannot get down to work when I should,” and “My happiness depends more on other people than it does on me.”

Indicators of Overindulgence

In partial support of our predictions (H_9), a significant relationship between the single item “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” and eight of the Indicators of Overindulgence: chores, clothes, toys, freedom, parents over-loving/too much attention, rules, enforced the rules, and entertained me (See Figure 1).

IMPLICATIONS

Numerous implications can be drawn from this study. First, it identifies overindulgence as a problem issue within the college student population and it gives college personnel language and

concepts to begin the long-needed dialog about this issue, as well as how to address it. This study raises the awareness of school personnel for what overindulgence is, and that it exists in the populations they are working with (students from all types of family systems and from all socioeconomic levels).

Second, it implies that overindulged children grow up to become young adults who view themselves as less effective college students, with an inflated sense of self-righteousness. As a result, these college students have a sense of entitlement with little or no ability to delay gratification (e.g., entitled to the A even though it was not earned; or they do not have to follow residence hall rules because the rules do not apply to them). It is clear that overindulged college students do not respect standards or boundaries. Thus, these results give support for both faculty and student affairs workers in demonstrating how important and necessary it is to have expectations, as well as set and maintain rules and standards. Additionally, the college students in our study who were overindulged as children held a greater number of dysfunctional thoughts. Student affairs workers should know that dysfunctional thoughts have been linked to mental health problems such as depression (Weissman & Beck, 1978; Weissman, 1980) and problematic interpersonal behaviors (Whisman & Friedman, 1998).

Finally, because overindulgence was significantly associated with the lack of doing chores, having too many clothes and toys, having too much freedom, parents over-loving them and giving them too much attention, not having or enforcing the rules, and making sure they were entertained; overindulged college students will most likely put extra pressure and demands on student affairs personnel. They will not have many of the necessary life skills to be effective college students (time management, effective decision making, the ability to delay gratification etc.). Student affairs workers need to be vigilant about implementing strategies that assist these students in

mastering these important life skills. Further, they will not be accustomed to following the rules which are necessary for a well-ordered residence hall and campus to function properly.

Overindulged college students will not be accustomed to sharing a room with a roommate, let alone having the space needed to house all of their possessions. They will expect that resident assistants and other college personnel entertain them and cater to most all of their needs rather than becoming more and more self sufficient. And, when things do not go the way they would like them to, they will call their parents in for backup to rescue them. Consequently, student affairs workers should be trained to identify overindulged college students and to respond to them in effective ways.

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FIGURE 1.**Indicators of Overindulgence[‡]**

1. When I was growing up, my parents did things for me that I could or should do for myself.
 2. When I was growing up, my parents expected me to do chores.
 3. When I was growing up, I was allowed to have any clothes I wanted.
 4. When I was growing up, I was allowed lots of privileges.
 5. When I was growing up, my parents gave me lots of toys.
 6. When I was growing up, my parents gave me too much freedom.
 7. When I was growing up, my parents allowed me to take the lead or dominate the family.
 8. When I was growing up, I was expected to learn the same skills that other children learned.
 9. When I was growing up, my parents were over-loving and gave me too much attention.
 10. When I was growing up, my parents had rules that I was expected to follow.
 11. When I was growing up, my parents enforced their rules.
 12. When I was growing up, my parents scheduled me for activities, lessons, sports and camps.
 13. When I was growing up, my parents made sure I was entertained.
 14. Do you think you were overindulged as a child?
-

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TABLE 1.
“Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” Correlated with Scale Sum Scores

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Overindulged [‡]	-						
2. RSE	.089	-					
3. SES	-.237*	.423***	-				
4. SRS	-.248*	.120	.339**	-			
5. SWLS	-.107	.695***	.494***	.157	-		
6. DAS	.233*	-.530***	-.528***	-.410***	-.520***	-	
7. LDI	-.170	.429***	.382**	.170	.602***	-.390**	-

Note: N = 74, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p.001, 2-tailed, ‡ Overindulged = single item, RSE=Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, SES=Self-efficacy Scale, Score, SRS= Self-Righteousness, SWLS=Satisfaction With Life Scale, DAS=Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, and LDI=Life Distress Inventory

TABLE 2.
“Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” Correlated with Indicators of Overindulgence

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Overindulged [‡]	-													
2. Did things for me	.207	-												
3. Chores	.403***	.352**	-											
4. Clothes	.261*	.360**	.276*	-										
5. Privileges	.182	.213	.345**	.378**	-									
6. Toys	.325**	.345	.250*	.607***	.399***	-								
7. Freedom	.325**	-.030	.322**	.189	.560***	.183	-							
8. Dominate Family	.215	.075	.098	.316**	.330*	.205	.384**	-						
9. Skills	.079	.190	.394**	.079	.063	.022	.071	.106	-					
10. Parents over-loving	.467***	.083	.148	.089	.165	.059	.158	.264*	-.069	-				
11. Rules	.334***	-.028	.466***	.145	.267*	.130	.470***	.214	.095	.239*	-			
12. Enforced Rules	.417***	-.094	.355**	.088	.216	.178	.418***	.320**	-.068	.284*	.615***	-		
13. Activities	-.162	.114	-.002	-.005	.120	-.006	-.224	-.214	-.184	.024	-.194	-.346**	-	
14. Entertained me	.274*	.201	.119	.154	.321**	.324**	.166	.145	-.026	.071	-.055	-.034	.336**	-

Note: N = 74, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, 2-tailed, [‡] see figure 1 for exact wording of the Indicators of Overindulgence