

Psychosocial Predictors of Adjustment Among First Year College of Education Students

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The purpose of this study was to examine the contribution of psychological and social factors to the prediction of adjustment to college. A total of 250 first year students from colleges of education in Kwara State, Nigeria, completed measures of self-esteem, emotional intelligence, stress, social support and adjustment. Regression analyses revealed that all the independent variables predicted adjustments. Social support interacted with stress to predict adjustment. Implications for the counselors, parents and college authorities in enhancing students' adjustment to college were discussed. Further, the findings implicated the need for college authorities to integrate activities designed to improve students' adjustment into college co-curricular activities meant for youth development.

Keywords: stress, social support, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, adjustment, students, college of education

Introduction and Background

The transition from high school to tertiary institution of learning is a major life change for many youth. Attending tertiary institution of learning offers students with learning experiences and opportunities for psychosocial development (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000). However, entering the institution of higher learning may be a source of strain and an acute stressor (Friedlander et al., 2007). At the colleges and universities, academic demands increase and new social relations are established. However, students are often not sure of their abilities to cope with these demands (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001).

Most students are bound to move away from home to attend higher institution of learning. Such transition to higher institutions or colleges usually reduces contact and social support from friends and family members. Difficulties in handling the stressors/challenges associated with the transition may lead to decreased academic performance and increased psychological distress (Friedlander et al., 2007). Weighing the negative role that stressors associated with transition to college or university plays in the Nigerian students' educational pursuit in tertiary educational institutions against their academic performance and well-being, it becomes imperative that further steps need to be taken to address the situation. Previous research showed self-esteem, social support (Friedlander et al., 2007; Hickman, Bartholomae, & Mckenry, 2000; Tao et al., 2000) and emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 2001; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001) as predictors of better adjustment to college programmes and activities. Perceived stress has also been shown to predict low level of adjustment to college (Friedlander et al., 2007; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

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New students at the college as youth who are exposed to independent life styles are likely to experience anxiety over the freedom from parental and family restrictions at home, which they seem to be enjoying in institutions of higher learning. It should also be noted that most of the first year students find themselves as a last resort at the colleges of education. The reason is that, generally, the youth do not want to choose teaching as a career due to the poor remuneration, low prestige employers and society attached to teaching job (Salami, 2008a). In most cases, people use teaching as a stepping stone to more lucrative jobs. Another point to note about the Nigeria youth is that most of them are usually not vocationally mature by the time they are leaving secondary school. They have unrealistic vocational aspirations and they lack vocational identity, meaning that majority of them usually have not achieved identity status (Salami, 2008b).

The implications of poor adjustment are many and have effects on the students, the family and the nation. Little attention has been paid to how social support (from family and friends), self-esteem (academic, social and global), emotional intelligence and stress differentially predict adjustment especially in non-western cultures. The purpose of this study was to examine the joint contribution of self-esteem, social support, emotional intelligence and stress to the prediction of adjustment to college among first year students.

The important components of adjustment to college or university considered in this study include students' academic, social and emotional adjustment as well as institutional attachment. Academic adjustment includes how well students deal with educational demands, such as motivation to complete academic requirement, academic effort and satisfaction with academic environment (Friedlander et al., 2007). Social adjustment includes the students' involvement in social activities and satisfaction with various aspects of college experience. Emotional adjustment involves students' proneness to emotional problems, such as manifestation of depressive symptoms. Institutional attachment describes a student's satisfaction with the college experience in general and with the college he/she is attending in particular.

Adjustment is a continual process by which a person varies his/her behaviour to produce a more harmonious relationship between himself/herself and his/her environment (Aggarwal, 1998). It implies changes in our thinking and way of life to the demands of the situation. Based on the above definitions, adjustment could be seen as a condition or state in which one feels that one's needs have been (or will be) fulfilled and one's behaviors conforms to the needs of a given environment.

Colleges of education are established to produce teachers at their youthful stage of life at the primary school level and first three years of secondary school. There are three types of colleges of education: those for basic subjects (primary and first three years of secondary schooling), those for technical subjects and those for special education (physically challenged students). Students who attend colleges of education are generally youths, so they need social support from their parents, peers as well as college authorities. Generally, it is the cultural expectations in Nigeria that make every community believe that it is their responsibility to cater for the youths, and they are to be nurtured to become responsible for young adults. The communities where the students come from expect that the students behave responsibly and show signs of well-adjusted persons.

However, students' entries into the colleges are often met with challenges. The students often find that learning packages and teaching methodologies are different from what obtained at the secondary school level. Generally, college classes are more difficult than high school classes. More reading assignments, examinations and papers usually cover a greater amount of materials. Lecturers expect students to do more work outside the classroom. In order to survive, students must take responsibility for their actions. All these can result in

emotional strain. In some cases college students may use different forms of stress-relief to cope with their classes and assignment, which may range from smoking to alcohol consumption.

Students at higher institutions of learning are expected to live independent life styles. The students' increased personal freedom can be wonderful and frightening. They can come and go as they choose, with no one to worry about them. This freedom could be a mixed blessing as they may not face their studies appropriately. They may infringe on college rules and regulations and the laws of the society. All these could lead to low academic achievement, drug abuse and other maladaptive behaviors.

The new college environment in which the students find themselves with new kinds of procedures and new people can create emotional problems. The first few weeks at campus can be a lonely period. The students need to form new relationships which may not develop overnight. A great deal of time is needed to develop intimacy in secondary school friendships; the same truth will be about the intimacy in college of education friendships. Living with roommates in hostels or halls in the college can present special problems. For example, negotiating respect of personal property, personal space, sleeping and relaxation needs can be a complex task. The complexity increases when roommates are of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds with different values. Students' inability to cope up with the new college environment may result in despondency and maladjustment. From above discussions, it is apparent that learning packages and teaching methodologies, independent lifestyles and new location demands tend to predispose new students to stress and maladjustment in the college.

Literature Review

Self-esteem is defined as the emotional evaluation individuals make about themselves, which is generally in the form of approval or disapproval. It indicates the extent to which persons believe themselves to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. According to M. Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach and R. Rosenberg (1995), global self-esteem is an overall feeling of self-worth. Higher global self-esteem has been shown to be vital for transition to college (Hickman, et al., 2000), but lower self-esteem has been related to poorer social adjustment (Rice, 1999). Similarly, higher global self-esteem is related to overall, as well as academic and social adjustment among first year students (Elias, Mahyuddin, & Noordin, 2007; Friedlander et al., 2007; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007). It is expected in this study that self-esteem will predict adjustment to college in first year students.

Perceived social support is the perception of the availability of support or assistance from others, such as friends and family. Social support may be in the form of guidance and feedback (advice and instruction), non-directive supports (trust and intimacy), positive social interactions (spending time with friends and family) and tangible assistance (shelter, money or materials). Previous researchers have found that perceived social support was related to academic, personal, emotional and social adjustment of first year university students (Friedlander et al., 2007; Jamara, Belgrave, & Zea, 1996; Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Solberg, Valdez, & Villarreal, 1994; Tao et al., 2000). First year students with higher levels of perceived parental and peer social support showed better adjustment (i.e., higher well-being and happiness) and less distress (less depression and anxiety) than those with lower levels of perceived parental support (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994; Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). It is expected that perceived social support from parents and friends will predict adjustment to college in the first year students and that social support will interact with stress to predict adjustment to college.

Stress is the demand made on people to which they respond and affects their physical, psychological and behavioral characteristics. Stress has been reported to affect psychological and physical health of students (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Researchers have shown that students' stress level at the beginning of the semester predicted their academic, social, personal-emotional and overall adjustment later (Friedlander et al., 2007; Jamara, Belgrave, & Zea, 1996; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Allisat, 2000; Pritchard, et al., 2007; Solberg, et al., 1994; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). However, Kerr, Johnson, Gans and Krumrine (2004) did not find any significant relationship between stress and college adjustment. It is expected that stress will predict lower adjustment to college.

Emotional intelligence is defined as: (1) the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; (2) the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought, the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and (3) the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Emotional intelligence has been related to several human values, such as personal relations, effective leadership skills, life satisfaction, creativity, sales and success in occupations (Bar-On, 1997; Goleman, 1995; Palmer et al., 2001). Researches have shown that people who have high emotional intelligence demonstrate better psychological well-being (Bar-On, 2005; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001) and adjustment to college or university (Elias, et al., 2007; Parker, Hogan, Eastbrook, Oke, & Wood, 2006; Westphal, 2007). It is proposed that emotional intelligence will predict adjustment in college of first year students.

Theoretical Framework

A useful theoretical framework for understanding adjustment to college is the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; 1992). According to social cognitive theory, human motivation and action are extensively regulated by forethought. This anticipatory control mechanism (forethought) involves three types of expectancies: (1) situation-outcome expectancies, in which consequences are cued by environmental events without personal action; (2) action-outcome expectancies, in which outcomes flow from personal action; and (3) perceived self-efficacy, which is concerned with people's beliefs in their capabilities to perform a specific action required to attain a desired outcome.

Situation-outcome expectancies represent the belief that the world changes without one's personal engagement. This means environmental factors, such as social support and stress, can influence adjustment to college. Action-outcome expectancies include options to change the environment and cope with adjustment problems. In this study, social support and stress represent environmental factors. Action outcome expectancies are represented by appropriate behaviors that ensure adjustment while personal factors (self-efficacy expectancies) are represented by self-esteem and emotional intelligence. All these factors could influence the students' adjustment to college.

Statement of the Problem

In view of the importance of the concepts of self-esteem, emotional intelligence, perceived stress and social support in students' adjustment to college, as well as the need for more empirical research on these variables especially in Nigeria, this study investigated the psychosocial predictors of adjustment among first year students in college of education.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

(H₁) Self-esteem, social support, emotional intelligence and perceived stress would jointly predict adjustment to college of first year students;

(H₂) (a) Self-esteem, (b) emotional intelligence, (c) perceived stress, and (d) social support would separately predict adjustment to college of first year students;

(H₃) (a) Self-esteem, (b) social support, and (c) emotional intelligence would interact with stress to predict adjustment of first year students.

Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was adopted to examine the relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable.

Participants

The participants for this study were 250 first year students (Male = 135 (54.0%), Female = 115 (46.0%)) randomly selected from three colleges of education in Kwara State, Nigeria. The mean age of the sample was 20.01 years (SD = 3.82) with age range at 18-22 years.

Measures

Trait emotional intelligence scale by Law, Wong and Song (2004) known as WLEIS (Wong and Law EI Scale). The WLEIS is a 16-item scale consisting of four sections: self-emotions appraisal, others emotions appraisal, use of emotions and regulation of emotions. It adopted a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree". The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the sections ranged from 0.72 to 0.89 for this study.

Multidimensional scale of perceived social support. The MSPSS (multidimensional scale of perceived social support) (G. D. Zimet, Dahlem, S. G. Zimet, & Parley, 1988) is a 12-item self-report inventory used to assess perceived availability of social support from friends and family. The MSPSS adopted a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Very strongly disagree" to 7 = "Very strongly agree". The MSPSS has good internal and test-retest reliability as well as adequate construct validity with different samples which included university undergraduates (Zimet, Powell, Parley, Werkman, & Berkoff, 1990). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the present study ranged from 0.86 to 0.90.

Perceived stress. Cohen's PSS-10 (perceived stress scale-10) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Marmelstein, 1983) was used to assess the degree to which each participant perceived his/her experience and environment to be stressful. The PSS-10 is a short, 10-item Likert type self-report scale. Participants rated each statement on a scale of 0 = "Never" to 4 = "Very often" in terms of stress over the previous month. A total stress score was computed. For this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained for PSS-10 was 0.82.

Self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg RSE (self-esteem scale) (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure global self-worth. Items were measured on a 5-point scale using anchors of 5 = "Strongly agree" to 1 = "Strongly disagree". The reliability of RSE was 0.87. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of RSE, for this study, was 0.86.

The student adaptation to college questionnaire. The SACQ (student adaptation to college

questionnaire) (Baker & Siryk, 1989) was used to assess the psychological functioning of the college students. The SACQ contains 67 items with four subscales: academic (24 items), social (20 items), personal-emotional (15 items) and institutional attachment (8 items). Overall adjustment was used in the study by summing students' scores on all the four subscales. Students responded to each statement on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 = "Applies very closely to me" to 9 = "Doesn't apply to me at all". High scores indicate better adjustment. Alpha coefficient for the full scale and the subscales ranged from 0.81 to 0.95 among first year university students (Baker & Siryk, 1989). Coefficient alphas for the present study's sample ranged from 0.81 to 0.93 for the full scale and subscales.

Procedure

The researcher and three research assistants explained and administered the questionnaires to the participants in their colleges. The participants provided the best of their cooperation and returned the completed questionnaires after answering. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 250 were found properly filled and were used for analysis giving a response rate of 83.33%.

Data Analysis

The study employed Pearson's product moment correlation and hierarchical multiple regression techniques in analyzing the data obtained.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of the variables in the study.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix of All Variables in the Study

No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Age	1.00						
2	Gender	0.05	1.00					
3	Self-esteem	0.09	0.08	1.00				
4	EI	0.03	0.05	0.16	1.00			
5	Stress	0.07	0.06	0.17	0.16	1.00		
6	Social support	0.05	0.12	0.14	0.08	-0.15	1.00	
7	Adjustment	0.11	0.09	0.32*	0.28*	-0.30*	0.36*	1.00
	Mean	20.41	-	27.40	65.34	12.32	6.30	80.25
	SD	3.82	-	2.85	4.20	3.65	2.70	4.67

Notes. EI = emotional intelligence; SD = standard deviation; * = $P < 0.05$ (2-tailed test).

Results in Table 1 show that there were significant linear correlations between adjustment to college and self-esteem ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$), social support ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$), emotional intelligence ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$), and stress ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.05$) but not with age ($r = 0.11$, $p > 0.05$) and gender ($r = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$).

On the joint contribution of all the independent variables (self-esteem, emotional intelligence, stress and social support) to the prediction of adjustment to college, results in Table 2 indicate that all the independent variables when pulled together yield a multiple regression R of 0.61 and R^2 of 0.37 ($F_{(1,244)} = 5.43$, $p < 0.05$). This is an indication that all the independent variables contributed 37% of the variance in adjustment to college.

Therefore, H₁ is accepted.

Results in Table 2 show that in step 1, age and gender did not predict adjustment to college. In step 2, addition of psychological factors (self-esteem, emotional intelligence and stress) as block to the regression significantly predicted adjustment ($R^2 = 0.23$, $F_{(3,245)} = 8.95$, $p < 0.05$) accounting for 23% of the variance in adjustment.

Self-esteem (Beta = 0.30, $t = 5.83$, $p < 0.05$), emotional intelligence (Beta = 0.25, $t = 5.14$, $p < 0.05$) and stress (Beta = -0.22, $t = -4.32$, $p < 0.05$) made significant separate contributions to the prediction of adjustment to college. Therefore, H_{2a}, H_{2b} and H_{2c} were confirmed. In step 3, addition of social factor (social support) also predicted adjustment to college ($R^2 = 0.37$, R^2 change = 0.14, F change_{(1,244) = 4.20, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H_{2d} was confirmed.}

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for the Prediction of Adjustment From Psychosocial Factors

Predictor variables	R	R ²	R ² change	F	F change	DF	Beta	t	p
Step 1	0.15	0.02	-	1.20	1.00	2,248	-	-	-
Gender							0.07	0.89	0.70
Age							0.08	0.90	0.70
Step 2	0.48	0.23	0.21	8.95*	6.52	3,245	-	-	-
SE							0.30	5.83*	0.03
EI							0.25	5.14*	0.03
Stress							-0.22	-4.32*	0.04
Step 3	0.61	0.37	0.14	5.43*	4.20	1,244	-	-	-
S.S							0.35	6.74*	0.02
Step 4	0.67	0.45	0.08	4.80*	3.46	3,241	-	-	-
Stress x SE							0.12	1.50	0.73
Stress x EI							0.11	1.45	0.70
Stress x SS							0.30	4.63*	0.04

Notes. N = 250; SE = self-esteem; EI = emotional intelligence; SS = social support; * = $p < 0.05$.

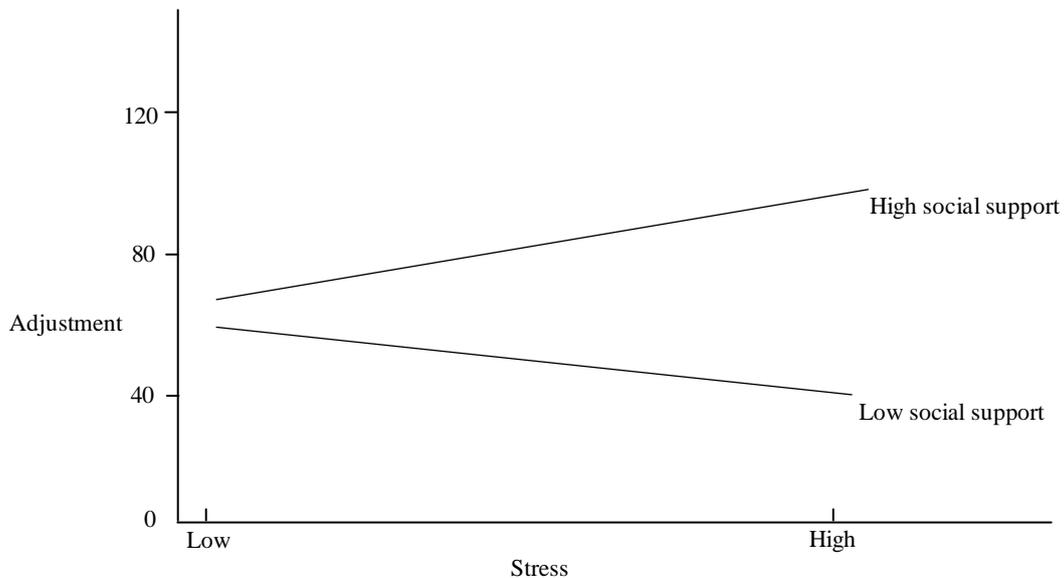


Figure 1. Two interaction of stress x social support in relation to adjustment.

In step 4, interaction stress x social support (Beta = 0.30, $t = 4.63$, $p < 0.05$) predicted adjustment, thereby confirming H_{3b}. Students who experienced stress but reported high social support relatively showed

high adjustment compared to their low social support counterparts (see Figure 1). However, the interactions of stress x self-esteem and stress x emotional intelligence did not predict adjustment. Therefore, H_{3a} and H_{3c} were not confirmed.

Discussion

The present study examined the psychological and social factors predicting adjustment in college of first year students in a higher educational institution. That self-esteem predicted adjustment to college supported the work of previous researchers, who found that global self-esteem was related to adjustment (Elias et al., 2007; Friedlander et al., 2007; Pritchard et al., 2007). A possible explanation could be that the students believed that they were confident and that they were capable of handling any academic, social or personal-emotional challenges that they faced as new students in their college.

That emotional intelligence predicted adjustment to college corroborated the findings of previous researchers, who reported similar findings (Elias et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2006). A possible explanation for this finding could be that the students possessed the ability to access, understand, express and regulate emotions which resulted in promoting their emotional and intellectual growth. This resulted in their ability to cope adaptively with their academic, social and personal-emotional challenges in their new college environment. Perceived stress was revealed as a potent predictor of adjustment to college. This finding gained support from works of previous researchers who reported that students' stress levels at the beginning of the semester predicted their academic, social, personal-emotional and overall adjustment (Friedlander et al., 2007; Pancer et al., 2000; Pritchard et al., 2007; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Because stress affects the psychological and physical health as well as behavioral characteristics of the students. Students under high stress may not be able to handle effectively any academic, social, personal-emotional challenges arising from their stay in the new college environment.

That social support predicted adjustment to college concurred with the findings of previous researchers who reported similar results (Friedlander et al., 2007; Jamara, et al., 1996; Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Tao et al., 2000). An explanation for this result is that students who have sources of social support from friends and family members, such as guidance feedback, intimacy, positive social interactions and tangible assistance (money or materials) are likely to be able to handle effectively any academic, social, personal-emotional problems arising in their new college environment. Therefore, they will be in a position to adjust to college situations without many problems. This was the case with the sample in this study.

That social support interacts with stress to predict adjustment supported the work of previous researchers who found that first year students with high levels of parental and peer support showed better adjustment (less depression and anxiety, higher well-being and happiness) than those with lower levels of parental support (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Rusell, 1994; Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). An explanation for this finding is that it is easier for a student under stress to solve his/her academic, social and personal-emotional problems in the new environment when he/she has effective social networks of support than when he/she does not have social support from parents and friends who give necessary assistance when required.

Implications of the Findings

Findings from this study have implications for the roles of counselors, parents and college authorities in designing youth development programmes. The findings from this study implicate the need for college authorities to employ counselors who will design youth development programmes consisting of counseling

intervention programmes that would consider the first year students' ages, needs and their challenges, especially during the orientation programmes for new students. In this regard, students should be taught how to schedule their time effectively, how to take tests successfully and reduce test anxiety, how to balance academic, personal and social demands. They should also be taught how to make use of their independent lifestyles (freedom) at the college without stepping on other people's toes. Students could also be assisted in exploring the new college environment.

The emotional predictors of adjustment to college demand that colleges should develop programmes to foster self-esteem and emotional intelligence among students. Counselors could teach students the basics of emotional intelligence and how they could develop positive self-concept and enhance their self-esteem. Counselors could thereby use emotional intelligence and self-esteem enhancement programmes in developing students' adjustment to college. Given the significant negative relationship between stress and adjustment, counselors should help students manage stress. Intervention strategies for managing stress should be developed by counselors and made to reach more students rather than the few that have high levels of stress problems. Similarly, athletic and recreational facilities that could help students exercise more regularly should be provided as these could serve as methods of modulating stress among students.

College management should provide relevant architecture, staffing and policies of hostels and lecture rooms that will facilitate stress management and development of new peer networks for students living away from home. Hostel facilities that will allow students the flexibility to sleep, study and socialize when they need and want without infringing on other students should be provided (Friedlander et al., 2007). Hostel staff should assist in helping students adjust to living away from home and access programmes to help manage stress or treat adjustment problems. The impact of parental support in addition to peer support in facilitating students' adjustment to college or university cannot be ignored and parents need to encourage and support their children. They need to assist them when they (students) encounter high levels of stress in their transition to college or university. Parents should have adequate information on key people, such as student affairs and resident staff and resources within the college to help their children access available services when they have problems in transition to college or university.

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