Cognitive Distortions and College Adjustment of First Year Students in Samar State University

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ABSTRACT

The transition to college is challenging, often linked to adjustment difficulties and mental health risks. This mixed-methods sequential explanatory study examined factors impacting these difficulties among freshmen, focusing on cognitive distortions (illogical thinking patterns). Quantitative results reveal a significant relationship between socio-economic factors, cognitive distortions, and adjustment difficulties. Qualitative interviews then identified five key themes: academic adjustment difficulties, financial stress, career choice difficulties, social adjustment difficulties, and psychological distress. These themes illustrate how socio-economic pressures and negative thought patterns manifest in specific challenges faced by students. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive support programs addressing both financial and psychological well-being, as well as targeted interventions focusing on cognitive restructuring and coping skills development to facilitate a smoother transition to college life.

Keywords: cognitive distortions, college adjustment, mental health, cognitive behavioral theory, social stress theory

INTRODUCTION

Adapting to higher education is a complex and demanding process, requiring individuals to navigate significant physical, emotional, and mental changes (Stoklosa, 2015; Tartakovsky, 2018; Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin, & Uli, 2009). This adaptation involves mobilizing relevant skills and resources to cope with leaving home, entering college, interacting with diverse peers, and meeting academic demands (Santrock & Halonen, 2010; Ines, 2019). However, not all students can effectively manage these challenges, leading to increased risk of psychological difficulties such as mood and anxiety disorders, and suicidal thoughts (American College Health Association, 2008, 2015; Pryor et al., 2009). This vulnerability is compounded by the developmental transition of emerging adulthood, characterized by the struggle for independence and adult roles, coinciding with college years (Rosenberg, 2016; Munsey, 2006). This period is also when mental health issues often emerge, further complicating students' challenges (Collins, 2018; Rosenberg, 2016). Without proper intervention, students may face heightened susceptibility to developing mental disorders amidst the academic and developmental pressures of emerging adulthood.

The discourse on mental health in the Philippines has gained traction in recent decades with the professionalization and regulation of guidance and counseling (2004) and psychology (2009), along with the enactment of the Mental Health Act in 2018. Despite these efforts, mental health remains under-resourced, receiving only 3-5% of the Department of Health's total budget (Lally, Tully, and Samaniego, 2019). Limited epidemiological evidence on mental disorders further complicates the situation. However, local literature is beginning to accumulate scientific evidence shedding light on mental health conditions, particularly among Filipinos, including students. Studies such as Solidum's cross-sectional descriptive study (2018) among 200 students aged 16-20, and Cleofas' research (2020) among 249 university students, reveals moderate depression and elevated levels of psychological distress, notably anxiety and depression. Interpersonal conflicts and relationship issues, especially among first-year students, are also common, as indicated by studies conducted by Ng and De Guzman (2017) and Li and Shan (2013).

The growing evidence highlighting the vulnerability of Filipino college students to various mental health issues emphasizes the importance of identifying factors linked to adjustment difficulties. This knowledge can inform the development of targeted interventions and programs aimed at preventing the progression of adjustment difficulties to mental disorders and supporting students' overall well-being and psychosocial needs. Cultural factors such as shame, stigma, and collectivist beliefs about mental health in the Philippines may act as barriers to accessing psychological services, potentially leading to undetected mental disorders among college and university students (Tuliao, 2014). Thus, addressing these barriers is crucial to encourage help-seeking behavior from professionals.

Local studies have identified various external factors contributing to adjustment difficulties among individuals, including environmental stress, broken relationships, domestic violence, maltreatment, socio-economic factors, school teasing, and social media influence (Caday, 2017; Quintos, 2017; Nicdao & Soriano, 2016; Bansal, Goyal, Srivastava, 2009). In contrast, foreign literature emphasizes the role of cognitive distortions and irrational beliefs in the development and perpetuation of mental disorders such as schizophrenia, eating disorders, sexual disorders, anxiety, and mood disorders (Kring, 2014). Research grounded in cognitive theory has consistently highlighted the relationship between psychological distress and cognitive distortions, which are illogical and negatively biased errors in thinking that lead individuals to perceive reality inaccurately (Rnic, Dozois, & Martin, 2016; Nyarko & Amissah, 2014; Wilson, Bushnell, Rickwood, Caputi, & Thomas, 2011).

Despite numerous factors linked to adjustment difficulties, many fail to fully capture the unique experiences of students at Samar State University. Therefore, drawing from both Social Stress and Cognitive Theories to consider socio-economic factors and cognitive distortions, the present study aims to outline the distinct adjustment profile of SSU students. Such investigations are vital for advancing the scientific discourse on mental health in academic settings and fostering the development of context-specific, evidence-based interventions and programs. As Cleofas (2020) argues, educational institutions must create environments conducive to student well-being and quality of life. This study represents a step in that direction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research utilized a mixed method approach, employing a sequential explanatory design (SED), where quantitative data was collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to complement, verify, or expand on the quantitative findings. This approach aimed to provide a detailed understanding of adjustment difficulties among university students through the lens of cognitive and social stress theory (Creswell, 2014).

Freshmen students from all five colleges within SSU were included in the study through stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across academic disciplines. The total population of freshmen students in SSU Main campus is 1,825, and based on Yamane's Formula for Sample Size, a total of 328 respondents were recruited, specifically, 97 from College of Education, 33 from College of Engineering, 42 from College of Nursing and Health Sciences, 74 from College of Arts and Sciences and 82 from College of Industrial Technology. Respondents were freshmen aged 18-25 enrolled at Samar State University's Main Campus. Those scoring 70 and above on the College Adjustment Scale (CAS) were invited for the qualitative phase.

Data collection involved obtaining permissions from the University President and College Deans. Subsequently, a fishbowl sampling method was employed for respondent recruitment due to its suitability for populations with readily available lists of individuals, as was the case with the freshmen students across the colleges. This method ensures an equal chance of selection for each student, enhancing the randomness and generalizability of the sample.

Respondents completed sociodemographic profiles and questionnaires including the Shortened General Attitude and Behavioral Survey (SGABS), a 26-item brief assessment of two subscales, rationality and irrationality and College Adjustment Scale (CAS), a 108-item screening instrument which measures degree or level of difficulty on nine scales: Depression (DP), Suicidal Ideation (SI), Anxiety (AN), Substance Abuse (SA), Self-Esteem (SE), Interpersonal Problems (IP), Family Problems (FP), Academic Problems (AP), and Career Problems (CP).

Respondents who fall in the "area for further evaluation" based on College Adjustment Scale (CAS) results were

then invited for in-depth interviews, with 17 students agreeing to participate. Ethical considerations were paramount, with approval from the university's Ethics Review Committee and informed consent obtained from respondents. Confidentiality was maintained through audio-recording interviews (with permission) and respondent numbers. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, while quantitative data was analyzed with appropriate statistical tests. Rigor was ensured through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexivity, and thick description of findings, enhancing the study's credibility and transferability.

RESULTS

Profile of the Student Respondents

Out of the 328 freshmen respondents, the majority were female (N=191 or 58.23%), with an average age of 19.30. Most graduated from the SHS academic strand (STEM, GAS, HUMMS) and were from the College of Education. The respondents generally lived with their parents, whose highest educational attainment was often elementary level. Many mothers were housewives or unemployed, while fathers were skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers. The average family size was around 6.13, with most earning less than 5,000 monthly income.

Among the 17 students in the qualitative phase, there were more females (N=10 or 58.82%) with an average age of 18.82. Most graduated from an SHS Academic Strand, and students from COED and CAS constituted the largest proportion. The majority still lived with their parents, whose education level was typically college or college graduate. Most mothers were housewives or unemployed, and fathers were service and sales workers. Similarly, the majority earned less than 5,000 monthly income with a family size averaging around 7.55.

The demographic profile of the qualitative participants offers valuable insights into the specific context of adjustment difficulties faced by freshmen students at SSU. The predominance of females, who often report higher rates of psychological distress than males, may suggest a need for gender-sensitive interventions. The concentration of students from the Academic Strand indicates that adjustment challenges may be more pronounced in these academic areas, warranting tailored support programs.

Additionally, the fact that most students still live with their parents, whose education and occupation levels are relatively high, suggests that socio-economic factors may play a nuanced role in adjustment difficulties. While these families might provide financial support, they may also have higher expectations for their children's academic performance, contributing to stress and pressure.

The relatively low monthly income and large family size of most participants indicate potential financial constraints, which could exacerbate adjustment challenges related to affordability and access to resources. These findings underscore the importance of considering both individual and familial factors when developing interventions to support freshmen students during their transition to college life.

Student - Respondents' Adjustment on the Nine Scales

The College Adjustment Scale reveals that the student-respondents exhibited areas for further evaluation (AFE) in the Depression (DP) and Suicidal Ideation (SI) scales, with mean t-scores suggesting difficulty. However, the remaining scales, including Anxiety (AN), Substance Abuse (SA), Self-Esteem (SE), Interpersonal Problems (IP), Family Problems (FP), Academic Problems (AP), and Career Problems (CP), indicated area of normal functioning (ANF) with mean t-scores below 59.

Table 1 Student-Respondents' Adjustment on the Nine Scales

Adjustment Scales	Normal Functioning		Suggestive of Difficulty		Significant Difficulty		M	SD	Interpretation
	n	%	n	%	n	%			
AN	227	69.21	92	28.05	9	2.74	56.63	6.41	ANF

DP	126	38.41	177	53.96	25	7.62	61.05	5.92	AFE
SI	102	31.10	179	54.57	47	14.33	60.23	11.37	AFE
SA	291	88.72	36	10.98	1	0.30	48.93	8.23	ANF
SE	177	53.96	139	42.38	12	3.66	58.78	5.93	ANF
IP	221	67.38	90	27.44	17	5.18	57.25	6.83	ANF
FP	202	61.59	122	37.20	4	1.22	57.88	5.57	ANF
AP	285	86.89	42	12.80	1	0.30	52.32	6.14	ANF
CP	199	60.87	123	37.50	6	1.83	57.96	5.92	ANF

Student-Respondents' Cognitive Distortions

Most of the respondents have reported low cognitive distortions with a total of 161 out of 328 students (49.09%), followed by moderate cognitive distortions (N=122 or 37.20%), and high cognitive distortions (N=45 or 13.72%). In general, the respondents yielded a mean sum score of 67.42 which suggests a relatively low propensity to engage in cognitive distortions. Focusing on the CAS results of the 17 respondents who were in the area for further of evaluation for interview, results reveals that there were 5 (29.41%) who engage in low cognitive distortions, 7 who engage in moderate cognitive distortions (41.18%) and 5 who engage in high cognitive distortions (29.41%).

Among the 17 students selected for further evaluation, the distribution of cognitive distortions scores is relatively even. Around a third of the students exhibited low cognitive distortions, while moderate and high levels were present in roughly equal proportions (around 41% each). This suggests that the interview participants represent a diverse range of experiences regarding negative thinking patterns, potentially providing valuable insights into how cognitive distortions manifest in the context of their specific adjustment challenges.

The equal distribution of moderate and high cognitive distortions among these students indicates a significant need for targeted interventions and support services for this subgroup. Understanding the specific types of cognitive distortions prevalent in this group, and how they relate to their individual adjustment difficulties, can help tailor interventions to their specific needs. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) could be employed to help students identify and modify negative thought patterns, promoting healthier coping mechanisms and improving their overall well-being during the transition to college life.

Relationship between the Student– Respondents' Level of Adjustment and their Profile

Table 2 reveals that the following profile variates have a significant relationship to anxiety (AN) scale: sex (df=2; p=.008), SHS track/strand (df=6; p=.000), living condition (df=8; p=.039) and mother's occupation (df=22; p=.000). These suggests that being a female, taking Academic track (HUMSS, STEM, GAS) in SHS, living with parents, and having a stay-at home mom while in college may increase vulnerability to anxiety. Gender (df=2; p=.010) and the father's educational attainment (df=20; p=.031) meanwhile, were found to be significantly related with Suicidal Ideation, which means that being a female and having a father who only reached elementary level increases suicide risk in students. The association of female gender and lower paternal educational attainment with increased suicidal ideation among students suggests a complex interplay of factors. Gender differences in mental health, including higher rates of depression and anxiety among females (Albert, 2015), may contribute to this vulnerability. Additionally, lower paternal education could be linked to socioeconomic stressors and adverse childhood experiences, impacting family dynamics and potentially increasing the risk of mental health problems in offspring (Kim et al., 2018; Collishaw et al., 2007).

Only gender (df=2; p=.008) yielded a significant relationship with Substance Abuse. This meant that males have higher tendency to engage in the use or abuse of controlled or prohibited substances than females. The finding that male gender is significantly associated with increased substance abuse (df=2; p=.008) is consistent with broader research trends. Studies have shown that males generally engage in higher rates of substance use and

exhibit more risky behaviors compared to females (Nolen-Hoeksema & Hilt, 2006). This could be attributed to various factors, including biological differences in neurotransmitter systems and hormonal influences, as well as social and cultural expectations regarding masculinity and risk-taking behavior (Becker & Hu, 2008). Furthermore, traditional gender roles might expose males to greater peer pressure and social environments that encourage substance use as a form of coping or bonding.

In the self-esteem (SE) scale, two variables, namely, gender (df=2; p=.004) and father's educational attainment (df=20; p=.038) were found to be significantly related. This implies that females have esteem-related problems, while students whose fathers reached only elementary level had issues with self-esteem. A mother's occupation was found to be significantly related to interpersonal problems (IP). This suggests that students with stay-at-home mothers tend to experience interpersonal problems more than others. The following factors were found to have a significant relationship with Academic Problems: college program (df=8; p=.010), living condition (df=8; p=.004), mother's occupation (df=22; p=.021) and father's occupation (df=22; p=.000). These suggest that being in programs with licensure exams, having a stay-at-home mom and a father who works as fisherman or farmer may contribute to the academic difficulties experienced by college students. Finally, a mother's educational attainment (df=22; p=.003) was significantly related with a student's Career Problems. This suggests that students with mothers who reached high school level are more prone to experience career choice difficulties.

Table 2 Relationship between the Student-Respondents' Adjustment and their Profile

Profile Variates		Adjustment Scales								
		AN	DP	SI	SA	SE	IP	FP	AP	CP
Sex	df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
	p-value	.008*	.172	.010*	.008*	.004*	.762	.778	.692	.884
Age	r_{xy}	-.042	.084	.041	.029	-.012	-.022	-.055	-.009	.011
	p-value	.447	.129	.455	.596	.835	.693	.324	.871	.846
Track/Strand	df	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
	p-value	.000*	.097	.929	.798	.062	.145	.946	.658	.754
College Program	df	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
	p-value	.358	.165	.105	.090	.178	.404	.755	.010*	.823
Living Condition	df	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
	p-value	.039*	.439	.493	.994	.158	.501	.672	.004*	.081
Mother's Educational Attainment	df	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22
	p-value	.664	.263	.410	.989	.301	.102	.385	.562	.003*
Father's Educational Attainment	df	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
	p-value	.058	.435	.031*	.695	.038*	.475	.912	.183	.076
Mother's Occupation	df	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22
	p-value	.000*	.692	.140	.993	.363	.004*	.336	.021*	.681
Father's Occupation	df	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22
	p-value	.853	.495	.249	.990	.718	.192	.287	.000*	.138

Family Size	r_{xy}	.048	-.018	-.049	-.003	.019	.052	-.055	-.069	.048
	p-value	.385	.747	.373	.963	.730	.345	.324	.213	.813
Family Monthly Income	df	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
	p-value	.433	.364	.563	.201	.588	.760	.109	.603	.059

*-p-value is significant below 0.05

Relationship between the Student- Respondents' Level of Cognitive Distortion and their Profile

As can be gleaned in Table 3, sex (df=2; p=.013) and mother's occupation (df=22; p=.023) were found to have significant relationship with cognitive distortions. This implies that females tend to engage in cognitive distortions more than males and students with stay-at-home moms had higher propensity to engage in cognitive distortions.

Table 3 Relationship between the Level of Cognitive Distortion and Profile Variates

Profile Variates		Cognitive Distortion	Interpretation
Sex	df	2	Significant
	p-value	.013	
Age	r_{xy}	-0.03	Not Significant
	p-value	.594	
Track/Strand	df	6	Not Significant
	p-value	.648	
College Program	df	8	Not Significant
	p-value	.133	
Living Condition	df	8	Not Significant
	p-value	.788	
Mother's Educational Attainment	df	22	Not Significant
	p-value	.094	
Father's Educational Attainment	df	20	Not Significant
	p-value	.390	
Mother's Occupation	df	22	Significant
	p-value	.023	
Father's Occupation	df	22	Not Significant
	p-value	.166	
Family Size	r_{xy}	.064	Not Significant

	p-value	.250	
Family Monthly Income	*df*	12	Not Significant
	p-value	.937	

p-value is significant below 0.05.

Relationship between the Student– Respondents' Cognitive Distortions and their College Adjustment

The correlation coefficients (r) and associated p-values were computed to examine the relationship between respondents' cognitive distortions and adjustment difficulties. For anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, self-esteem, interpersonal problems, family problems, academic problems, and career problems, significant correlations were found ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, strong positive correlations were observed for anxiety ($r = 0.374$, $p = 0.000$), depression ($r = 0.343$, $p = 0.000$), and self-esteem ($r = 0.252$, $p = 0.000$). Moderate positive correlations were found for suicidal ideation ($r = 0.210$, $p = 0.000$), interpersonal problems ($r = 0.263$, $p = 0.000$), family problems ($r = 0.226$, $p = 0.000$), academic problems ($r = 0.261$, $p = 0.000$), and career problems ($r = 0.234$, $p = 0.000$). The only exception was substance abuse, where no significant correlation was found ($r = 0.019$, $p = 0.729$). Overall, these results indicate that freshmen students' engagement in cognitive distortions is associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing adjustment difficulties in college.

Table 4 Relationship between the Student-Respondents' Cognitive Distortion and Adjustment Difficulty

Adjustment Scale	Cognitive Distortion		Interpretation	Decision
	r	*p-value*		
Anxiety (AN)	.374	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Depression (DP)	.343	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Suicidal Ideation (SI)	.210	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Substance Abuse (SA)	.019	.729	Not Significant	Accept H$_o$
Self-Esteem (SE)	.252	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Interpersonal Problems (IP)	.263	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Family Problems (FP)	.226	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Academic Problems (AP)	.261	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$
Career Problems (CP)	.234	.000	Significant	Reject H$_o$

Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Adjustment Difficulties Experienced by Freshmen Students

There were different themes that were extracted from the in-depth interview data that were gathered by the researcher. The researcher analyzed the data and came up with five (5) themes, academic adjustment difficulties, financial stress, career choice difficulties, social adjustment difficulties and social adjustment difficulties.

Theme 1 - Academic Adjustment Difficulties. Freshmen students are still on the verge of coping up with academic changes brought about by college. There are three subthemes under this theme: (1) Academic Transition, (2) Teacher Factors and (3) Time Management Issues.

Subtheme 1 - Academic Transition. The study reveals that student-respondents perceive college as markedly distinct from senior high school (SHS), characterized by a higher level of complexity, faster pace, and greater emphasis on independent learning. Respondents emphasized the importance of acquiring new coping strategies to meet the academic demands and standards of college life. Many expressed the need for sufficient time to adjust fully and to meet the rigorous standards of their college, adapting to the changes that come with the transition to higher education. Respondent 4 statement says:

"Ma'am, it is hard to adjust because there is really a huge gap between the discussions in Senior High School and in college. I mean… they are somewhat related but in a different level, and the pacing is fast maybe because we are already in college. And we are really the ones who work for ourselves, we really need to study hard. But now Ma'am, I am still adjusting, I really have to improve my strategies in studying, I need to level up, study harder, and refrain from lying- low because I am already in college".

Subtheme 2 – Teacher Factors. The student-respondents noted that their academic adjustment difficulties were influenced by teachers' strategies, varying standards, and personalities. Respondent 16 specifically highlighted this, suggesting that these factors play a role in shaping their experiences.

"I am finding it hard to understand discussions, on top of that I am also having a difficulty catching up with my teachers' standards. That is why I feel like… I just came from a public school and my teachers are from Ateneo, came from [prestigious schools] …. And they have high standards because they are already professionals, I feel like they want us to level up and reach the same standards with them, that is why it is quite hard for me, I see myself as a lower knowledge (slow learner), I didn't expect that I need to exceed the standards of my teachers".

Subtheme 3 – Time Management Issues. Respondents in the study reported struggling to balance academic responsibilities with household chores, leading to conflicts within their families. The transition to college resulted in less time spent at home and decreased involvement in household tasks, contributing to tensions in family dynamics. A statement of Respondent 17 is as follows,

"It is like I have to allot time in the morning for school and in the evening at our house, I feel so exhausted running all the chores at home, I feel tired and sleepless but there are still projects I have to work on".

Theme 2 – Financial Stress. Financial stress is widespread among college students. There are three subthemes under this theme: (1) Insufficient Financial Resources and Support, (2) Settling Debt for Sustenance.

Subtheme 1 – Insufficient Financial Resources and Support. In this study, respondents reported that they are tempted to quit schooling because they think that their parents will not be able to handle the financial demands of college and will not support them anymore. Here is a statement of Respondent 14,

"I am affected because I am interested in continuing my studies, I am also expecting that they [parents] will support me until I finish my studies but every time I ask for financial support, they cannot give any. I am really affected because they are only the ones I rely on in terms of finances".

Subtheme 2 – Settling on Debt for Sustenance. Respondents in this study reported that they borrow money in order to sustain their basic needs and education. A statement of Respondent 3 is as follows,

"When I am not given an allowance, I would find ways, like borrowing money from my friends and I will pay it within 2 days. We always have financial difficulties… but I will see to it that I can still find ways. Like my grandmother in my mother's side, by the way, my mother already passed away, so that's it… I borrow money from my grandma and to my uncles in Manila, but I rarely ask help from them, only if my father is overwhelmed financially".

Theme 3 – Career Choice Difficulties. Some respondents in this study reported that they are uncertain with the

program they enrolled in and they were somewhat forced to pursue it for some reasons such as parents/social influence, practicality issues or just out of curiosity.

Subtheme 1 – Career Indecision. Some respondents in this study were still uncertain with their chosen program, because of this, shifting to another program was an option for them. Respondent 10 statement is as follows:

"Actually, at first, I wasn't able to enjoy it because this wasn't my first choice, my desired course wasn't education. Since I have to be practical with my career decision, I just chose whatever is available here".

Subtheme 2 – Social Influence in Career Choice. In this study, many of the student-respondents' career choices were influenced or decided by their parents or other significant people and was forced to pursue a program he/she does not like to avoid disagreements or conflicts in the family. Because of other people's opinion they have doubts about their chosen program. Respondent 1 said,

"Uhhmm… actually, this course is not my first choice, my parents suggested this because they do not like my first choice".

Theme 4 – Social Adjustment Difficulties. Some students experience (1) difficulties in establishing relationships with new classmates, (2) social conflict and compatibility issues due to individual differences, and (3) social isolation.

Subtheme 1 – Difficulty in Establishing Relationships. First year students have issues in building new relationships and these connections may not be established at once (Ng & De Guzman, 2017). Respondent 7 reveals,

"In socializing, I am looking for a person I can be comfortable with, but if I am not comfortable, I just avoid them".

Subtheme 2 – Social Conflict and Compatibility Issues. In this study, respondents reveals that conflicts started when they found out that their trusted friends backbite them. Some also experience conflicts due to compatibility issues because they have different opinions or perspectives about things. Respondent 3 said,

"About my friends who are traitors. I expected that all the things that happened to us in the past remains within our circle. And it should not be shared with others, but during that time, my friends reveals it to others that is why I got mad and left the original group".

Subtheme 3 – Social Isolation. Students who do not feel that he/she belongs in a group, he/she isolates him/herself.

"It feels like I am isolated because I am still not okay, that is why I distanced myself from my classmates and she looks happy with them, so I feel like they root for her, and it seems like nobody cares for me".

Theme 5 – Psychological Distress. Many studies point out high levels of psychological distress in university students, specifically symptoms of (1) anxiety, (2) depression, (3) suicide risk and (4) low self-esteem.

Subtheme 1 – Symptoms of Anxiety. The most frequent responses shown by the respondents were anxiety and fear. As Respondent 3 reveals,

"I feel pressured when I am asked by my teachers, I know the answer but I feel so tensed that I think when I blurt the wrong answer, maybe my classmates will tease me, because most of them are smart, so I have this… fear that maybe they will judge me or maybe my teacher will ask me in class and then I am afraid that I will suddenly be mental blocked. That's it."

Subtheme 2 – Symptoms of Depression. Some students feel overwhelmed with all they have to do, feel things are hopeless, feel mentally exhausted, feeling sad, and feeling depressed. As said by Respondent 8,

"I cram most of the time, overthinks about anything… in general, I feel sad and I find myself so vulnerable and

I easily cry and thinks that the world is against me that is why I am experiencing this. It seems like I am deprived with all the happiness that others are experiencing".

Subtheme 3 – Suicide Risk. Thoughts of suicide most often occurs when a person feels they are overwhelmed with problems, just like what Participant 13 says,

"I sometimes have suicidal thoughts… These thoughts creep in when I am overwhelmed with problems… school problems, this is also triggered by problems at home, but I don't want… I can't do it, so far, I never attempted".

Subtheme 4 – Low Self-Esteem. Most of the student-respondents feel low of themselves because of physical or body issues. Some also are not just bothered by physical issues but also with their socio- economic status. They also have this preconceived idea that their peers will not like them because of these factors. Respondent 4 reveals,

"Maybe I feel intimidated because of my physical appearance and my status in life Ma'am, I feel ashamed that is why I am frustrated with myself, I am disappointed with myself, why are you so weak?... I was thinking if I make friends maybe they will look at my physical appearance".

DISCUSSION

The quantitative results reveal a significant relationship between adjustment difficulties and cognitive distortions across various scales, excluding substance abuse. These findings were corroborated by qualitative insights, wherein respondents shared experiences of psychological distress (Theme 5), including anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Theme 5 subthemes). Respondents described feelings of anxiety and fear regarding academic standards, anticipating negative events, and apprehension about peer judgment. These automatic negative thought patterns align with cognitive theory, suggesting irrational beliefs and biases in judgment. The results support Beck's theory of the cognitive triad and Cognitive Behavior Therapy Model, indicating how negative thoughts lead to distress and impact behavior and emotions. (Beck as cited in Pomerantz, 2011; Harris, n.d.; McLeod, 2019)

Respondents likewise reported being in depressive states especially when circumstances are perceived as particularly difficult or challenging. Below is a sample statement of Respondent 8: *"I am cramming most of the time, overthinking about anything... in general, I feel sad and I find myself so vulnerable and I easily cry and think that the world is against me that is why I am experiencing this. It seems like I am deprived of all the happiness that others are experiencing".* This case illustrates the cognitive distortion of catastrophizing, which involves focusing excessively on negative events and ignoring positive ones, also known as self-downing (Pomerantz, 2011). Negative self-talk can have significant effects on bodily reactions, triggering a cascade of hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline that can impact mood, weight control, motivation, and heart health. Additionally, it can lead to symptoms such as anxiety, depression, perfectionism, low self-esteem, and chronic fatigue (Eckelbarger, 2020).

Various studies consistently highlight the heightened suicide risk among college students, often linked to socio-environmental factors (Mossakowski, 2014). In this study, a female respondent described experiencing suicidal thoughts amid overwhelming schoolwork and family issues, while a male respondent disclosed a suicide attempt, attributing it to familial problems. Both individuals exhibited cognitive distortions, anticipating negative reactions from their families without factual basis, hindering rational decision-making. Research suggests that recent suicide attempters are more prone to engage in such distortions, with "fortune telling" or predicting negative outcomes being a common irrational belief associated with suicide attempts (Hyman et al., 2014). Fortune telling involves anticipating negative outcomes without considering realistic probabilities (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Los Angeles, 2015). This suggests that individuals who attempt suicide often perceive negative situations in advance and believe that ending their life is preferable to facing them. Suicide ideation or attempts typically occur when individuals feel trapped in seemingly unsolvable, intensely painful, and perpetual problems (Sison, 2017).

The current investigation highlights low self-esteem as a significant concern among college students, echoing findings from previous studies. Both male and female respondents attributed their diminished self-worth to

concerns about physical appearance and socio-economic status, fearing rejection by peers due to their looks or financial limitations. These results align with Social Stress Theory, which posits that exposure to social stressors related to social statuses can contribute to mental health problems like low self-esteem (Mossakowski, 2014). Additionally, they support cognitive theory, as engaging in self-downing or mind reading—such as anticipating peer rejection based on perceived negative social status—can exacerbate feelings of low self-esteem (Pomerantz, 2011). Developing positive self-esteem is crucial during the transition to adulthood, reflecting intrinsic belief, self-respect, and acceptance of one's strengths and weaknesses. Positive self-esteem is also a key predictor of academic success and serves as a protective factor against adversities (Maheswari & Maheswari, 2016). The observed positive correlation between cognitive distortions and low self-esteem underscores the need for concern, as prolonged neglect of such patterns may exacerbate and potentially lead to diagnosable mental health issues.

Qualitative findings from the current study underscore the link between cognitive distortions and social adjustment difficulties. Students reported experiencing Social Adjustment Difficulties, particularly a perceived lack of social support both in school and at home, leading to feelings of isolation. For instance, a male respondent described the strain of balancing household chores with part-time work to support his family, which negatively impacted his studies and resulted in frequent class absences, leading to social isolation and mistrust. This pattern reflects the cognitive distortion of overgeneralization, wherein negative experiences are applied more broadly than warranted, leading to emotionally charged self-downing and distrust of others (Pomerantz, 2011).

The qualitative findings of the current study support the relationship between cognitive distortions and academic adjustment difficulties. Cognitive distortion was found to significantly predict students' academic performance, accounting for up to 64 percent of variance. Negative self-beliefs correlated positively with poor academic outcomes, suggesting that students' low self-esteem adversely affects their scholastic success. These negative perceptions increase the risk of academic failures and career indecision (Usen, Eneh & Udom, 2016). Students from various colleges noted that academic difficulties stemmed from stress and pressure to meet high expectations and standards, as well as conflicts with parents over expectations, finances, and time management. Living with parents while pursuing demanding programs often led to arguments and misunderstandings, further straining relationships. These conflicts frequently revolve around parents' expectations, financial constraints, and the student's academic workload, exacerbating academic challenges. These findings are unsurprising, particularly within the Philippine context, where parental pressure for academic success is deeply ingrained in the culture. Filipinos highly value formal education as a means to escape poverty, placing immense pressure on students to excel academically to honor their families and secure future employment opportunities (Lee, Sta. Maria, Estanislao, & Rodriguez, 2013).

Financial stress is also prevalent among students, stemming from inadequate support from parents or guardians and the burden of school expenses. This is expected, given that many come from low-income households with parents who have limited education and employment opportunities, often working in agricultural, forestry, or fishery sectors (Lee, Sta. Maria, Estanislao, & Rodriguez, 2013).

Finally, the relationship between cognitive distortion and career choice difficulties was also reinforced by the qualitative findings of the current study. Specifically, the students reveal that they are often overwhelmed by Career Choice Difficulties (Theme 3) and career indecision (Theme 3, Subtheme 1). Respondents whose parents did not graduate from college reveal uncertainty about their chosen programs and contemplated switching courses due to fear of future uncertainties. This anxiety reflects cognitive distortions such as the need for comfort and catastrophizing (Pomerantz, 2011). Their indecision is influenced by parental expectations and developmental demands, requiring emerging adults to navigate decisions independently (Santrock & Halonen, 2010). This transition from high school to university is challenging, with pressures to excel academically and socially. Hence, there's a need for career planning support and role models to guide students towards suitable career paths.

CONCLUSION

The present investigation extensively supported both the social stress theory and cognitive theory, emphasizing the socio-economic conditions of Samar State University (SSU) students and their impact on various aspects of

their lives. The study highlighted that many students come from low-income families with mothers often being housewives and fathers working in agricultural, forestry, or fishery sectors. It underscored the need for informational resources and role models to guide students' career decisions and prepare them for the demands of tertiary education. The study also reveals a cyclical pattern wherein unfounded personal beliefs triggered psychological distress, leading to anxious and depressive states, low self-esteem, academic and career choice difficulties, and interpersonal problems. This pattern aligns with Beck's Cognitive Model, which describes how perceptions influence emotional and behavioral reactions. The investigation emphasized the importance of advocating for mental health in academic institutions, given the growing prevalence of psychological distress among students. Furthermore, it shed light on the mental health situation at SSU, indicating students' susceptibility to erroneous self-beliefs and struggles with adapting to academic standards. The study highlighted the potential progression of these issues into more severe mental disorders if left unaddressed. Additionally, it identified a relationship between cognitive distortions and adjustment difficulties, suggesting that some students rely on old ways of thinking and may struggle to integrate environmental demands. In conclusion, socio-economic factors and cognitive distortions are significant variables in the adjustment difficulties experienced by freshmen students transitioning to higher education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Statement on Conflict of Interest

None

NOTES ON APPENDICES

The complete appendices section of the study is accessible at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wg0t9hLTkHAk6QLjNL5pcpkebKISpKVq/view?usp=sharing

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