

The Role of Psychological Distress in Shaping Academic Adjustment: Implications for Undergraduate Support Systems

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ABSTRACT

College is a time for preparation and transition from youth to adulthood and from education to employment. A person's inability to adjust to university life impacts not only their academic performance and university life but also their career and post-adult life. Anxiety and sadness, however, can impede students' growth and general well-being. It is therefore crucial to comprehend the relationship between psychological distress and academic adjustment. This study employs quantitative research techniques and a cross-sectional study design, utilizing a sample of 409 sophomore students from one public institution in Hebei, China, taken using the stratified random sampling technique and analysis by SPSS 27 and AMOS 24. In the relationship between psychological distress and academic adaptation, strong negative relationships were found. Teachers, mental health specialists, and legislators may create more specialized treatments and support networks to assist college students, especially vulnerable groups, succeed academically and emotionally by identifying these internal mechanisms.

Keywords: academic adjustment, psychological distress, negative relationships, implications, support

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are seen as more than just a place to get a degree; they are also influential in the development of a person's life since it is a time of transition and preparation from adolescence to adulthood and from studying to working. Individuals' failure to adapt to university life affects not only their studies and life at university but also their work and life after adulthood. However, Morton et al. (2014) explained that university students in the 20-year-old age group who have left home and long-standing family dynamics to act as independent adults for the first time have faced a variety of transition challenges, such as adjusting to life, environment, work, academics, interpersonal communication, and psychological stress. Similarly, according to Feng (2020), research in the past 40 years in China has shown that the problems of students in adapting to the new environment were mainly as follows: lack of adaptation to the new environment, lack of adaptation to the teaching methods of college teachers, many problems in the way of learning in college, and the new interpersonal relationships. Freshmen typically struggle more with academic motivation and lifestyle because they are living and learning independently for the first time and enjoying freedom from strict control management. However, compared to students in other grades, sophomores show a worse self-evaluation of their ability to adjust to learning, campus life, physical and mental adaptation, and employment confidence (Zhou, 2014) and even lower support levels (Zhao, 2021). Low academic performance and adjustment, as well as increasing dropout rates, are not new phenomena in educational institutions around the world, owing to the strong correlation between academic adjustment, performance, and dropout rates (Alipio, 2020).

On the other hand, 75 percent of adults experience a mental illness before the age of 25, according to Kerr (2020), and college students are not exempt from these mental health problems. Young adult students, who make up between 12 and 50 percent of the population in this category, are significantly more susceptible to mental health issues (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2020). Furthermore, compared to other people, university students were more likely than the general population to have stress, anxiety, and depression (Ljubičić et al., 2020), and

they were more likely to have suicidal thoughts and attempt suicide (Mortier et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Only a small percentage of students who are clinically distressed seek therapy, despite the high incidence of distress (Blanco et al., 2008; Stallman, 2010). The fact that just 1 in 6 adolescents who seek treatment receive "minimally adequate" care raises additional concerns (Stein et al., 2013). However, students in China have less access to help, with a counseling-to-student ratio of only 1:4000 (Li & Yang, 2020). Therefore, the project intends to investigate the internal mechanisms that influence college students' academic adjustment and psychological misery to offer institutions significant theoretical and practical implications for the prevention and intervention of college students' academic adjustment in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is a general term for psychological functioning that is disrupted in the face of stressful life circumstances. While it is rarely characterized as a distinct category. According to Drapeau et al. (2012), undifferentiated clusters of symptoms are commonly described as psychological anguish such as personality traits, functional impairments, and behavioral disturbances, as well as signs of generalized anxiety disorder and depression. Most researchers also defined psychological distress in the same way as the state of low psychological well-being characterized by a uniform mix of symptoms ranging from depression to anxiety, functional impairment, and behavioral problems (Radeef & Faisal, 2020; Rentala et al., 2019).

However, recognizing this distressing emotional experience is essential for learners to seek help in the future (Rentala et al., 2019). They claim that this awareness is necessary to prevent psychiatric diseases like poor diet, attempted suicide, symptoms of stress, anxiety, and sadness. Consequently, it is imperative to identify the characters of psychological distress. There are five characteristics of a person who experiences psychological distress, powerlessness, ups and downs of emotional states, unease, communication breakdown, and mistreatment, according to a review by Arvidsdotter et al. (2016). The simplest definition comes from Kessler et al. (2003), and Turner et al. (2019), psychological distress is explained as the emotional suffering brought on by the interaction of depressive and anxious symptoms. Depression and anxiety were defined as psychological distress in this research context.

Academic Adjustment

When someone joins a new area, they try to "fit in" by being more culturally aware and altering who they are. The term "adjustment" refers to this procedure. The literature on transition has proposed several stage models, and it is common for "adjustment" to follow a predictable learning curve, like a W-curve or U-curve. Prior studies on the stage model have mostly focused on two types of sojourners: those who are short-term (like international academic sojourners) and those who are long-term (like immigrants). In general, long-term sojourners aim for comprehensive acculturation, while sojourners studying abroad or in a brand-new environment focus on achieving immediate scholastic objectives (Wu & Hammond, 2011). In this study, all these categories are considered important indicators of how well a student has adapted to college.

Academic adjustment, on the other hand, narrowly encompasses all aspects of adjustment, especially learning appropriate study techniques, writing and summarizing, thinking and memorizing, managing a large amount of reading, submitting term papers, translating lectures, writing term papers, managing time effectively, and taking exams in early research. This definition has been expanded to include a quarter of academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional commitment aspects of college adjustment (Credé & Niehorster, 2012), which focuses on college students' attitudes toward their academics, including motivation to learn, steps toward meeting academic requirements, meaningfulness, and overall satisfaction with the educational environment, which is like the idea of Anderson et al. (2016). They state that academic motivation, academic success, and academic lifestyle are the three most challenging processes a student faces once they enter tertiary education. In this context, the researcher considered academic adjustment as a specific term focused only on academics, rather than a general term in the academic environment, and adopted Anderson's definition with three domains: academic motivation, academic success, and academic lifestyle.

Relationship between Psychological Distress and Academic Adjustment

Students may experience stress when they move from school to college because it throws them off balance and makes them respond differently to diverse stimuli. Students encounter all kinds of social and academic shifts when they move from school to college. Students who make this shift experience major changes in their living arrangements, financial security, social life, academic pressure, lifestyle, and other areas (Larson et al., 2002). Specifically, the demands of performing well academically, lighting the path through a new curriculum, managing the workload, and future planning while maintaining a fine balance between academic and social life appear like onerous undertakings for young adults. Students' stress levels might be increased by misalignment in any one of these areas. Some factors, including pressure to achieve, post-graduation plans, and academic success, must come together to generate academic adjustment, which is correlated with stress (McCullough, 2022). Academic performance is identified by 82% of students as a substantial source of stress, and students' subjective stress levels and academic stress are often more negatively correlated (Malik & Javed, 2021). The sudden transition from a traditional classroom to a virtual one within the pandemic's boundaries necessitated intellectual adjustment to the new structure. Higher stress levels have been repeatedly associated with poorer self-reported academic adjustment among students in this shift (VanRoo et al., 2023).

According to the findings, academic concerns have been the most reliable indicator of stress (Dusselier et al., 2005). Indeed, in both traditional and non-traditional learning modes, stress, anxiety, and depression have been among the top concerns for college students (Pedrelli et al., 2015). More than one-third of a sample of university pupils showed indicators of stress, according to an investigation of the frequency and associated factors of stress, anxiety, and depression (Beiter et al., 2015). Moreover, it was demonstrated that most college students possessed elevated levels of perceived stress when looking at the various stressors with a group of college students from France (Al Omar et al., 2020). According to Wong et al. (2006), about 30% of students at a university in Hong Kong showed signs of moderately severe psychological stress. The stress faced by college students seems to be ubiquitous throughout programs and between countries.

Another study among university freshmen in Pakistan by Nosheen et al. (2020), showed that psychological distress (depression, anxiety, & stress) is strongly negatively correlated with overall adjustment. According to Yıldırım and Solmaz (2022), among Turkish adults, and mental health workers in rural Australia, higher levels of positive psychological adjustment were linked to increased life satisfaction and decreased levels of stress, anxiety, despair, and burnout. Similarly, a student's level of fitness has an impact on their overall psychological well-being as well as their physical and mental health (Engels et al., 2019). A few earlier research alluded to the connection between poor academic achievement, low enrollment, school dropout rates, and overall self-evaluation and academic adjustment. Misalignment with academic obligations can impact people both immediately and overtime on an individual's overall health.

Failure to adapt to expected academic duties promptly may be interpreted by students, which can have negative effects on their lives in other domains (Simiyu et al., 2018). Haktanir et al. (2021) found that academic self-concept and resilience were significant, favourable markers of first-year undergraduate students' adaptation to American college life in the South. Research on the impact of psychological distress on academic adjustment in Asia, particularly in the setting of China, is relatively lacking, despite evidence linking psychological distress to poorer adjustment in many areas. In a recent study among technical college students in Asia Malaysia, Ling and Tini (2022) observed that academic adjustment and psychological distress are significantly correlated. There was also a propensity and chance that a student's academic motivation, academic success, and academic lifestyle would be impacted by factors related to psychological wellness. This study, however, was unable to fully define and account for the relationship between these two variables because more research was required to confirm and assert that psychological distress could have an impact on academic adjustment levels.

Nevertheless, the opposite finding is found by Martin (2021), there was no evidence to suggest that psychological distress from natural disasters would hurt pupils' ability to succeed in a large southwestern university. As mentioned by Elemo and Türküm (2019) with a 2×3 controlled quasi-experimental group design, they revealed that there were no appreciable variations in psychological adaption and distress between the two different groups among international students in Turkey. Despite the surprising nature of this finding, a

study by Di Pietro (2018) indicated that distress from natural disasters does not always affect college students' ability to succeed academically, which is consistent with Martin (2021), although natural disasters are always stressful. Therefore, it is worth exploring what are the inner potential mechanisms between psychological distress and academic adjustment.

Research Objectives

This study looked into the degree of academic adjustment and psychological distress among undergraduates in Hebei, China. Then how psychological distress influenced undergraduates' academic adjustment in universities is another key research objective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs quantitative research techniques and a cross-sectional study design, utilizing a sample of 409 sophomore students from nine departments in one public institution in Hebei, China, taken using the stratified random sampling technique. There were five demographic information in this study, including gender, age, department, whether taking a student organization, and the frequency of participating in extracurricular activities. SPSS 27 and Amos 24 are software programs to analyze data. A questionnaire served as the study's research tool, which was designed to measure academic adjustment and psychological distress. The questionnaire was created by reviewing previous research and adapting from established scales such as the Academic Adjustment Scale (AAS) from Anderson et al. (2016) with three domains: academic accomplishment, academic motivation, and academic lifestyle. Academic lifestyle is described as a person's compatibility with their short-term position as pupils. Satisfaction with academic performance is referred to as academic achievement. The concept of academic motivation is the desire of students to continue and complete their educational journey. Psychological Distress Scale (PDS) (Kessler et al., 2003) with depression and anxiety. Depression is characterized by a core collection of symptoms that last for at least two weeks and are present for most of the day. Anxiety was defined as depression, stress, and being in a tumultuous mood such as afraid and empty.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study discovered that second-year Chinese college students had moderate to high levels of psychological distress and moderate to high levels of academic adjustment. This suggests that, in part, Chinese college students did not have significant issues with academic adjustment as predicted but rather experienced unexpectedly high levels of psychological distress. The most prevalent psychological discomfort item among students was hopelessness. In contrast, students who wanted to enjoy their time as students most needed the academic skills for academic adjustment.

Additionally, a high negative correlation was discovered between psychological suffering and academic adjustment. There is a high link between psychological discomfort and academic adjustment, as evidenced by the unstandardized path coefficient of $-.522$ ($p > .5$) in Table 1. According to this value, there would be a $-.522$ unit increase in academic adjustment for every unit decrease in psychological discomfort. According to Hair et al. (2017), the following standards are offered to facilitate the interpretation of the degree of correlation between two variables: A value of $>.50-.75$ indicates a strong correlation. Psychological distress had a significant ($p < .001$) impact on academic adjustment.

Consequently, the findings demonstrated that psychological discomfort significantly impacted academic adjustment, suggesting that students who had less psychological distress been more likely to find academic adjustment enjoyable. If the most prevalent psychological discomfort and hopelessness level was improved, male students and students in the most typical age focused on, and academic adjustment level was supposed to increase. Besides that, female students need to improve their learning ability, appreciate the lifestyle of university students, and have greater confidence in their academic abilities to enjoy more about their academic life. Furthermore, the frequency of participating in extracurricular activities would impact the level of academic adjustment. If the most needed academic skills for academic adjustment were offered, students

would be more likely to enjoy their academic life in their universities.

Table I: path coefficient between psychological distress (PD) on academic adjustment (AA)

| Path | Unstandardized Estimate | S.E. | C.R | p-Value | Standardized Estimate |
|-------|-------------------------|------|-------|---------|-----------------------|
| PD-AA | -.522 | .061 | 8.561 | *** | -.432 |

Note:

PD – Psychological distress, AA – Academic adjustment

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Theoretically, the focus of Bandura's reciprocal determinism hypothesis is on how psychological elements influence an individual's conduct in this example, their academic adjustment. Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, environmental influences, behavioral factors, and personal factors interacted with each other. Psychological distress was a personal factor, a support system was considered an environmental component in this context, whereas academic adjustment was considered behavioral element. In this perspective, college students' academic maladjustment and psychological suffering are characterized as support system failures. Undergraduates, on the other hand, are more likely to acquire new abilities, with the help of a support system, and integrate them into a strong sense of self, all of which contribute to improved academic adjustment.

Practically, this study identifies some vulnerable groups, that need play important on them. Institutions and management, counseling centers, educators, and society at large will find the research findings on psychological discomfort and academic adjustment to be crucial. Students' psychological distress and its impact on their academic adjustment at college or university will be better understood and assessed thanks to the analyses. For pupils with serious psychological problems to receive real support, educational boards will need to collaborate and provide an efficient on-campus public health program that involves the entire school. Similarly, the data from the findings tell the management and the institution how psychosomatic conflict may exert control over students' motivation, academic performance, and way of life. In addition, the study's findings may help the counseling centre's counselors better manage and evaluate the psychological symptoms of students in each set of situations. To prevent and treat students, especially faculty members who have a wide range of mental health criteria, the counselor may design a program that is integrated into an educational institution (Arvidsdotter et al., 2016). Programs like academic counseling, job training, psychotherapy, healthcare services, and clinical evaluation, for example, should be included in the strategies to address and deal with important challenges that undergraduates face. Because the counselors can offer the required treatment in attending to the case, earlier diagnosis services or resources can be retrieved in this way.

Furthermore, because an educator is someone who knows and interacts with students during the course, they can be crucial in identifying and reducing psychological problems in students. Preventive programs in various settings will raise awareness of students who require help with mental and emotional problems and notify them of available therapy resources (Dian et al., 2018; Latifah et al., 2016). Additionally, teachers might increase the number of children seeking assistance, which would result in a more dynamic learning environment for all students. This will increase students' and teachers' confidence and faith in their ability to properly manage psychological distress.

However, society will also benefit from this research by understanding the psychological well-being of students' academic adjustment. It will help and get society ready to investigate the potential causes of this emotional and mental stress in pupils and its consequences. In the same vein, society should take the lead and divide its duties in raising awareness and offering support for psychological suffering. Society could lessen the likelihood of this emotional and mental disorder in this way.

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