

College Freshmen's Self-Efficacy, Effort Regulation, Perceived Stress and their Adaptation to College

Chooi Seong, Lai,
Tunku Abdul Rahman University College, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
(Email: laics[at]acd.tarc.edu.my)

ABSTRACT

A survey research and correlational study was conducted to investigate how academic, social, personal-emotional adaptation, college attachment, self-efficacy, effort-regulation and perceived stress of college freshmen can influence their adaptation to college life. A total of 279 first year students from the faculty of social science, arts and humanities in a private university college participated in this research. Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) were employed to measure the relationships amongst these variables. The most significant influential variables of freshmen's college adaptation are their academic adjustment ($r = .813$), followed by college attachment ($r = .708$), personal-emotional adjustment ($r = .660$), social adjustment ($r = .654$), self-efficacy ($r = .497$) and lastly perceived stress ($r = -.136$). Overall, it can be said that the better a college freshman can adjust socially, personal-emotionally, academically and are strongly attached to their college, then they can adapt better to the overall college demands.

Keywords: Academic Adaptation, Social Adaptation, Personal-Emotional Adaptation, College Attachment, Perceived Stress, Adaptation to College

1. INTRODUCTION

Transition to college contains many challenges to new students and can result in a decrease in graduate rate and high failure and drop-out rate (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). Adaptation to college life is not always a smooth and easy transition. This is shown clearly when the number of enrolments and graduation in higher level of education in Malaysia are being compared. It can be clearly seen that although the number of students' enrolments are very high but the actual entrants are actually only around half the number of the enrolment and only half of these entrants would be able to graduate (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). The increasing college students' suicide rates in Malaysia is certainly an indication that many students cannot cope with college adaptation.

Previous research found that two of the main factors that caused this phenomenon were the students' inability to adapt to college and being overly stressed by the many changes occurring at the same time, and especially to those without prior experience in this setting or those who have poor adaptability (Maria Chong Abdullah, Habibah Elias, Rahil Mahyuddin, & Jegak Uli, 2009; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010; Galatzer-levy, Burton & Bonanno, 2012).

It is found that students going through this transition need to adjust to various changes in life such as academic adjustment (Ilic, 2008; Gagliardi-Blea, Kurpius, & Kerr, 2008; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010); social adjustment (Ilic, 2008; Gagliardi-Blea, et al. 2008; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010); personal-emotional adjustment (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Maria Chong Abdullah, et al. 2009; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010); and all of these aspects would in turn foster college attachment (Gefen & Fish, 2011); and the students' perceived stress (Oguz-Duran & Yüksel, 2010; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010; Guo, Wang, Johnson & Diaz, 2011).

Inability to make social connections is also found to impact greatly unto freshmen's adaptation (Enochs, et al. 2006). On the other hand, having a good social support would greatly impact students' adaptation and academic performances (Lieberman, Solomon, & Ginzburg, 2005; Hwang, Wang & Sodianine, 2011). This is supported by a research done by another research as that research found that staying in a familiar environment, especially with supportive figures, would cause students to adapt more easily (Lama M. Al-Qaisy, 2010).

Poor academic performance and low motivation are other factors that affect freshmen's adaptation to college life. This is because a better relationship between people and environment is associated with academic performance (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011). Past research had shown that, if the college freshmen can do well in their academic performance, they will adapt better to college life (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Maria Chong Abdullah, Habibah Elias, Rahil Mahyuddin, & Jegak Uli, 2009). Besides, freshmen with higher motivation will also decrease the drop-out possibility as motivation will bring satisfaction and enjoyment toward college life (Baker, 2004; Shankland, Genolini, Franc, Guel, & Ionescu, 2010). As performance and motivation are mainly related with self-efficacy (Choi, 2005), therefore, by increasing self-efficacy, performance and motivation can be increased, thus adaptation will increase, too.

Stress can also lead to difficulties in adaptation to college, as most of the freshmen feel stress because of homesick caused by leaving home (Beck, Taylor, & Robbins, 2003) and culture shock caused by changes in one's environment (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). However, in Malaysia, major stress comes from academic-related issues, especially medical students (Muhamad Saiful Bahri Yusoff, Liew, Ling, Tan, Loke, Lim, & Ahmad Fuad Abdul Rahim, 2011). Gefen and Fish (2011) stated that freshmen who avoid stressors would have low academic adaptation, which in turn, have low attachment to the college because less effort would be invested due to the presence of the stressors. However, it is found that being too attached is not good as students would tend to be too dependent (Li, 2008). This was also proven by other researches that stress can lead to academic difficulty and then resulted in difficulty in college adaptation (Suido, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaifer, 2009; Zheng, Peveryly, Tao, Huang, & Wang, 2003).

Suido et al. (2009) reported that freshmen's academic performance would be reduced due to environment stressor, which means that stress is resulted from difficulty of adaptation to the environment. This finding is supported by Zheng et al. (2003) whose study indicated that first-generation Chinese-American adolescents had more difficulty in adjusting to school due to depression, anxiety and social stress, which lead to negative evaluation toward teacher and school environment, as well as academically when compared to the Mainland Chinese and European American adolescents (Zheng et al.,

2003). Therefore, it can be concluded that once the college freshmen have good coping skills to handle stress, it will help them to better adapt to college life (Dyson & Renkprove, 2006). If freshmen cannot cope with stress, it can result in some negative effects such as insomnia (Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin, & Greeson, 2010), and become ill (Roddenberry & Renk, 2010).

Self – efficacy for learning and performance refers to a student's self-confidence that they can master academic demands coupled with expectancy for success that they will reach the course learning demands (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992). Persons with high self-efficacy beliefs show confidence in their skills and abilities to do well and have been shown to participate more in learning activities. These students tend to expend greater effort and persistence and achieve higher levels of academic performance than students with low self-efficacy (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 1991). This self-efficacy for learning and performance is similar to the general self-efficacy defined as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances,” by Bandura, 1986).

As self-efficacy referred to one’s cognitive capability in action (Choi, 2005), thus, it is believe that one with higher self-efficacy will have better coping skill as coping is a technique which relies on cognitive capability (Sideridis, 2006). This is supported by Aguayo, Herman, Ojeda, and Flores (2011) whose research results reported that self-efficacy and stress served as a root factors affecting the adaptation of freshmen to college life.

Besides, according to Bresó, Schaufeli, and Salanova (2011), Salanova, Llorens, and Schaufeli (2011), and Choi (2005), higher self-efficacy will increase students’ engagement and enhancing performance. This can be further explained by Tsai and Coleman (2009), as engagement and performance are motivated by one’s high self-efficacy. In addition, high self-efficacy will enhance motivation at between-person level (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006). Self-efficacy will also motivate students to develop self-directed learning (Lema & Agrusa, 2006) and help out in academic achievement and performance (Hodges & Kim, 2010; Kim & Keller, 2008).

Furthermore, self-efficacy and college adaptation were strongly and positively correlated (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011). It is because high self-efficacy means having more confident in overcoming challenges that would be faced in college (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). In summation, self-efficacy will lead to better academic performance, and then finally results in better adaptation to college life. As supported by the research done by Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) and Shankland et al. (2010), high self-efficacy was found to be associated with better academic performance, and also better college adaptation. Besides, Maria Chong Abdullah et al. (2009) had found that most of the freshmen adapt moderately, however, successful in academic performance can use to foresee freshmen’s overall adaptation, that is better academic performance will have better adaptation to college life (Pittman & Richmond, 2007).

Other than that, relationship between self-efficacy, stress, and college adaptation can be linked together. Research found that first-generation college students (FGCSs), which is the students whose fathers or mothers did not study at college, are predicted facing more

academic difficulties due to the low academic self-efficacy and will have more physical symptoms (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). This research also supported by Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007), which indicated that non-first generation students will have high efficacy because they experienced less of these difficulties, and thus, better academic performance come along with high self-efficacy, also better adjustment.

Additionally, the effort a student expends to reach his or her learning goals is termed effort regulation. Effort regulation is similar to *volitional control* which is defined as the “tendency to maintain focus and effort toward goals despite potential distractions,” (Corno, 1994, p. 229). Effort regulation enhances the ability of the learner to handle setbacks and failures within the learning process by correctly allocating resources and appropriate effort for more successful learning in the future (Chen, 2002). The effort students expend on a learning task is influenced by the importance, usefulness, and value ascribed to the task (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992).

Therefore, in this present study, the researcher aimed to investigate the relationships between these 7 variables: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, college attachment, perceived stress, self-efficacy, and effort regulation with freshmen’s overall adaptation to college. The following hypotheses will guide this investigation:

- H1: There is significant and positive relationships between academic, social, personal-emotional adaptation, college attachment of freshmen and their adaptation to college.
- H2: There is a significant and negative relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college and their perceived stress.
- H3: There is significant and positive relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college with their self-efficacy.
- H4: There is significant and positive relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college with their effort-regulation.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory was used to explain human’s cognitive functioning in learning, which is a cognitive process that combine one’s thinking and behaviour with other through the observation of environment and others (Burney, 2008). This theory also stated that self-efficacy will affect the development of human cognitive and performance (Burney, 2008). Besides, social cognitive theory also indicated that self-efficacy will bring motivation (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006) and the motivation will be maintain or enhance by self-efficacy, which is self-efficacy person is confidence to do something and it will bring positive outcome, thus, being motivated (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Paunonen & Hong, 2010; Tsai & Coleman, 2009). That is, motivation and self-efficacy are interrelated with each other, and then influence human’s cognitive functioning and performance.

Therefore, it can be said that freshmen with high self-efficacy will have better cognitive functioning, which will help the freshmen to overcome obstacles with cognitive strategies, especially in learning and academic performance and also coping strategies to

cope with stress, then maintain and enhance the motivation, and thus, lead to a better adaptation to college life.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Instruments

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)

The SACQ (Baker & Siryk, 1989) was administered to determine students' adaptation to college with 66 items. It is divided into four subscales including academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and college attachment. The academic subscale is focused on student adjustment to academic demands in college. The social adjustment subscale is focused on interpersonal and societal demands commonly encountered in college. The personal-emotional subscale is focused on psychological and physical well-being in college; and lastly the college attachment subscale is focused on students' feelings about being in college and his/her specific attachment to the college. In general, the higher the score of this subscale, the more well-adjusted to college he/she is considered to be. SACQ demonstrates good reliability and validity (Baker & Siryk, 1989). The reliability test for this questionnaire showed a high score of .866.

Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)

Self-efficacy for learning and performance, and effort regulation of resource management strategies for learning were employed from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie; 1991). College freshmen rated themselves on a seven point Likert scale from "not at all true of me" to "very true of me".

Self-efficacy for learning and performance comprised 8 items intended to measure both efficacious appraisals of ability (self-efficacy) and performance expectations (expectancy for success) in a specific college course (Pintrich et al., 1991). Expectancy for success refers to performance expectations, and relates specifically to task performance. Self-efficacy is a self-appraisal of one's ability to master a task. Self-efficacy includes judgments about one's ability to accomplish a task as well as one's confidence in one's skills to perform that task (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie; 1991). In this present study, the reliability (α) level for this subscale was .63.

Effort regulation comprised 4 items which assessed the students' ability to control their effort and attention in the face of distractions and uninteresting tasks. Effort regulation is self-management, and reflects a commitment to completing one's study goals, even when there are difficulties or distractions (Pintrich et al., 1991). Effort regulation is important to academic success because it not only signifies goal commitment, but also regulates the continued use of learning strategies (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie; 1991). In this present study, the reliability (α) level for this subscale was .72.

Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen)

Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1994) was employed to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items were designed to tap how

unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded students find their lives. The reliability test for this 10-items questionnaire showed a moderately high score of .742.

3. DATA

The data of this research is collected by giving out survey questionnaires by using convenience sampling technique. The sample of this research consists of 279 freshmen from a local private university college. All the respondents are currently in the first semester of college with different college specializations namely Diploma in Counselling, Advertising, Broadcast Communication, Media Studies, Journalism, Public Relation, Multimedia Design, Graphic Design, Fashion Design and Hospitality Management. Data was collected in the mid of their first semester when assignments and tests were all about to due. More than half of the participants were females as the sample consists of 88 males and 187 female students. This might be due to the fact that most students studying under the faculty of social science, arts and humanities are females.

4. RESULTS

H1: There is significant and positive relationships between academic, social, and personal-emotional adaptation, college attachment of freshmen and their adaptation to college.

Table 1: Relationship between freshmen’s academic, social, and personal-emotional adjustments, college attachment of freshmen and their adaptation to college

		Correlations				
		Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Academic Adjustment	Social Adjustment	Personal- Emotional Adjustment	College Attachment
Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Pearson Correlation	1	.813**	.654**	.660**	.582**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	279	279	279	279	279
Academic Adjustment	Pearson Correlation	.813**	1	.419**	.367**	.420**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	279	279	279	279	279
Social Adjustment	Pearson Correlation	.654**	.419**	1	.040	.408**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.511	.000
	N	279	279	279	279	279
Personal-Emotional Adjustment	Pearson Correlation	.660**	.367**	.040	1	.177**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.511		.003
	N	279	279	279	279	279
College Attachment	Pearson Correlation	.708**	.513**	.411**	.335**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	279	279	279	279	279

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

Table 1 showed the results of the bivariate correlation test between freshmen’s academic, social, and personal-emotional adjustments, college attachment and their adaptation to college.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to analyze the relationships between freshmen’s academic adjustment, social, and personal-emotional adjustments, college attachment and their adaptation to college. Firstly, the analysis indicated that, there was significantly strong and positive relationship between academic adjustment and adaptation to college $r = .813$, $n = 279$, $p < .01$. Secondly, a significant, moderate and positive relationship was also found between freshmen’s social adjustment and college adaptation, $r = .654$, $n = 279$, $p < .01$. Thirdly, for the relationship between freshmen’s personal-emotional adjustment and college adaptation was also significant with moderately positive association, $r = .660$, $n = 279$, $p < 0.01$. Lastly, a significant, moderately strong and positive relationship was also found between freshmen’s college attachment and their college adaptation, $r = .708$, $n = 279$, $p < .01$.

As indicated by the statistical results, the most influential variable of college adaptation was freshmen’s academic adjustment ($r = .813$), followed by college attachment ($r = .708$), personal-emotional adjustment ($r = .660$) and lastly, social adjustment ($r = .654$). Both personal-emotional and social adjustment were almost equally influencing college adaptation of freshmen. Overall, it can be said that the better a college freshman can adjust socially, personal-emotionally, academically and are strongly attached to their college, then they can adapt better to the overall college demands.

H2: There is a significant and negative relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college and their perceived stress.

Table 2: Relationship between freshmen’s attachment to college and perceived stress levels

Correlations			
		Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Perceived Stress
Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Pearson Correlation	1	-.136*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.023
	N	279	278
Perceived Stress	Pearson Correlation	-.136*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.023	
	N	279	279

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between freshmen’s attachment to college and their perceived stress levels. Results indicated that there was a significant but mild and negative association between freshmen’s attachment to college and their perceived stress levels, $r = -.136$, $n = 279$, $p < .05$; which meant that higher freshmen’s perceived stress is related to lower freshmen’s adaptation to college.

H3: There is significant and positive relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college with their self-efficacy.

Table 3: Relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college and their self-efficacy

Correlations			
		Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Self-efficacy
Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Pearson Correlation	1	.497**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	279	279
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.497**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	279	279

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Results of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to test the hypothesis H3 that there is significant and positive relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college with their self-efficacy indicated that there was a significant, moderate and positive association between freshmen’s attachment to college and their perceived self-efficacy levels, $r = .497$, $n = 279$, $p < .01$. This means that the higher the freshmen’s self-efficacy, the higher is their adaptation to college.

H4: There is significant and positive relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college with their effort-regulation.

Table 4: Relationship between freshmen’s adaptation to college and their effort regulation

Correlations			
		Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Effort regulation
Students’ adaptation to college (SAC)	Pearson Correlation	1	.299**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	279	279
Effort regulation	Pearson Correlation	.299**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	279	279

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

Results of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to test the hypothesis H4 indicated that there was a significant, relatively moderate and positive association between freshmen’s attachment to college and their effort regulation levels, $r = .299$, $n = 279$, $p < .01$. This means that the higher the freshmen’s effort regulation, the higher is their adaptation to college.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Due to time constraint, this research has neglected a few other elements that may affect the research results such as the culture, values, and believe system of the freshmen from different college specializations, proficiencies in English Language, and students’ family and academic background. Therefore, these few issues should be corrected in future studies. A more

thorough survey could be collected in different time of the semester to prevent results biases towards certain elements such as stress.

From the perspective of positive psychology, findings from this study suggest a way in which college officials and administrators may structure students' first-year seminars and orientation programs to promote the most positive development and outcomes of students' adaptation to college life. Currently, relatively little is known about how interventions to increase resilience for coping during the transition to college can be used to increase students' persistence in, and completion of post-secondary education. Such research is especially needed given recent research indicating that, on average, only 57% of students who enroll as freshmen in four-year institutions will graduate (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). Researchers and academicians hence must identify methods to improve students' behavioral coping skills and resiliencies to the numerous college stressors and overall well-being.

The results of this study also suggested that providing students with the techniques to develop social connections (social adjustment) and learn optimistic and motivated thinking styles (academic, social, personal-emotional adaptation, self-regulation and self-efficacy) might be effectively beneficial in promoting their psychological well-being and assisting them in dealing with the transition to college as well as to completion of their studies.

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