

ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Bongani Innocent Dlamini, Durban University of Technology
Reyagalaletsa Felicity Tom, University of Limpopo
Kathryn Anne Nel, University of Limpopo
Luther-King Junior Zogli, Durban University of Technology

ABSTRACT

Background and Objective: *For most students, adjusting to both social and academic life entails engenders a modicum of stress and emotional challenges for most students, resulting in risks of students drop-out. The current study sought insight and understanding into the adjustment experiences of first-year students at a previously disadvantaged tertiary institution of Higher learning in South Africa.*

Materials and Method: *Qualitative research was conducted to establish the lived experiences of the participants. Four focus with eighteen first-year participants from different departments were utilised for data collection. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, which allowed probing. Thematic Content Analysis was employed to gather themes from the data.*

Results: *The main results indicated that first-year students found life was different, many old familiar and predictable relationships disintegrating. However, they also found independence and the resilience to adapt to change. Positive adjustment experiences and coping mechanisms included working hard, interacting with lecturing staff and attending religious events, while negative ones included drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana.*

Conclusions: *The study recommended that orientation for first-year students is imperative and should incorporate a programme that helped first-year students understand the challenges they are likely to face in this new phase of their academic and social development.*

Keywords: Coping, Content Analysis, Dropout, Tertiary Setting, Workload, Psychological Stress.

INTRODUCTION

According to Ayele (2011),

“Adjustment involves the ability to select appropriate and effective measures in meeting the demands of a new environment while maintaining a healthy attitude towards it”.

This does not just solely rely on academic ability, but also on the ability of a student to quickly adjust to an environment that requires greater autonomy and responsibility than was expected in a school setting (Brinkworth et al., 2008). The adjustment process can be achieved through internalising the character, culture, and behavioural norms of the institution in which the student is enrolled. Secuban (2012) states that students’ ability to set goals and achieve a balance between academic and social activities plays a critical role during their first-year, which culminates in successful graduation. Some students adjust relatively well to their new environment, whilst for others, the transition entails a great degree of personal stress and emotional maladjustment (Beyers & Goossens, 2003).

The majority of studies on the adjustment experiences of students attending tertiary institutions are quantitative in nature (Schultz, 2008; Somer & Dumont, 2011; Thurber &

Walton, 2012) and do not address their in-depth lived experiences. In Southern Africa, Mudhovozi (2012) posits that only one phenomenological study in Zimbabwe, using a semi-structured interview guide; with seven participants, was found. The current research used a qualitative approach with focus groups and thus makes a unique and significant contribution to research in the field. It was also undertaken in South Africa with students from underprivileged backgrounds.

Bojuwoye (2002) describes academic challenges, which include demanding coursework and a heavy academic work-load, as being stressful. Other challenges include homesickness; (Thurber & Walton, 2012); problematic relationships with roommates (Secuban, 2012); and poor student-lecturer relationships (Ayele, 2011). One orientation week survey quoted by Bojuwoye (2002) found that students knew that university life was going to be different from high school but they did not expect such a big difference. However, Goleman (1998) states that not all students become stressed when they enter tertiary education and many experience it in a positive manner. Successful adjustment to an institutional setting not only depends on academic factors but also non-academic ones, including the resilience of the individual which is often based on their Emotional Intelligence (EI) quota. EI is defined by Salami (2011) as an individual's ability to understand their innermost thoughts and emotions, their facility to empathise with others and the capacity to react in an appropriate manner in stressful or new situations.

Enrolling at a tertiary institution can be seen as a very positive event, with many opportunities for the academic and social development of an individual (Secuban, 2012). However, it is also accompanied by numerous significant life challenges, with students having to deal with the challenges of a new environment and the stressors associated with being separated from their previous settings. These circumstances may contribute towards psychological and physical ill-health. Therefore, a connection to family is essential during this period. According to Thurber & Walton (2012) and Secuban (2012), students' ability to set goals and achieve a balance between academic and social activities is important as it enables them to adjust to the demands of university life.

Psychological stress indicates that there is an unfavourable person-environment fit. Consequently, individuals alter their circumstances, or how they are interpreted, in order to make them appear more favourable. In psychological terms, this is defined as coping. Coping is a process in which an individual employs on-going efforts to manage specific demands, appraised as difficult or overwhelming. Although stable coping styles do exist and are important, coping is highly contextual. Consequently, for it to be effective, Folkman & Lazarus (1985); Folkman (2008) and Eisenbarth (2012) state that it must change over time and contexts.

Coping affects subsequent stress reactions in two critical ways. Firstly, if an individual's relationship with the environment is changed by coping actions, the conditions of psychological stress can be changed for the better. This is known as problem-focused coping. Secondly, in emotion-focused coping people change only the way they interpret what is happening and, thinking about the threat is avoided. Re-appraisal of a threat is thought of in a way that is non-threatening and removes the cognitive basis of the stress reaction (Bojuwoye, 2002; Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Mudhovozi, 2012; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Eisenbarth, 2012; Goleman, 1998; Salami, 2011; Wintre et al., 2011).

Tao et al. (2000), posits that the styles of coping elicited by stressful events are important and related to positive or successful adjustment to a new environment. Proactive and preventive coping mechanisms have a positive impact on individual adjustment to university life as they are functional ways of coping (Schwarzer, 2000).

Dysfunctional coping strategies are negative coping mechanisms which are destructive to psychological well-being and are associated with poor academic performance.

Students have an inherent desire to belong and feel socially accepted. Accordingly, they find themselves using maladaptive coping mechanisms such as illegal drug use, alcohol abuse and promiscuous sexual behaviours (Fischer, 2009; Somer & Dumont, 2011; Thurber & Walton, 2012). These avoidant coping mechanisms are described by various authors Leong et al. (1997) and Fischer (2009) as being dysfunctional and can lead to social withdrawal, negative attitudes, and the avoidance of problems. Another way of coping includes behavioural disengagement, such as reducing efforts to deal with a stressor and/or self-distraction Tuna (2003) states that this involves doing things to distract from the stressor and includes day-dreaming, escape through sleep and, in the worst-case scenario, committing suicide. Sledge (2012) asserts that the greater the family participation in the student's entry into university life, the better, as it helps the student cope with the challenges ahead. The emergence of negative emotions is likely to appear as students deal with the differences in values and morals that they are exposed to in higher education environments. This causes them to question their own and their family and community values (Sledge, 2012).

Mudhovozi (2012) describes positive coping as characterised by an approach-oriented style and problem-focused efforts, and is related to fewer emotional and behavioural disorders. It also predicts positive academic, personal and emotional adjustment in a student's first-year of tertiary education. Students are likely to use both problem-focused and emotion-focused forms of coping in stressful encounters (Sledge, 2012). For example, a student will rely more on problem-focused coping in situations where there are beneficial outcomes (for instance, dealing with stress using positive coping mechanisms before an up-coming examination). However, in situations where little can be done to change the outcome, such as coping with stress while waiting for the results of an examination, they may rely more on emotion-focused coping. Molapisi (2009) describes this as usually a negative way of coping, but is often the only realistic option when the source of stress is outside their control.

Students who use positive methods of coping to deal with academic stress for instance, breaking down modules into sections, forming study groups and trying to avoid time-wasting activities, are more likely to be successful in their academic life. The use of active internal coping strategies such as direct problem-solving, positive thinking and relaxation activities are also related to academic success and good overall psychological well-being. On the other hand, Jemal (2012) maintains that the use of avoidant coping strategies such as withdrawal and avoidance is related to a decreased emotional and psychological well-being and depression.

Dropout rates amongst first-year university students are higher as compared to their senior counterparts (Jemal, 2012; Le Roux & Brier, 2012). Because there are more problems with social adjustment as compared to academic and psychological adjustment amongst other year levels. Fundamentally, many first-year students find it difficult to interact socially and establish meaningful, quality relationships in their first-year of study (Le Roux & Brier, 2012). This, may be attributed to the freshness of their environment as they may experience feelings of isolation and a deteriorating in self-esteem (Salami, 2011). For those whose parental (or caregiver) support is minimal, adjustment to university is even more challenging. Salami (2011) postulates that students who have parental or caregiver support manage the adjustment process well. They have less depression, stress and anxiety and experience more positive psychological and physical well-being.

This study discovers the true feelings of students in terms of their adjustment experiences. This could be beneficial to administrators who plan first-year orientation programmes. The researchers were able to uncover in-depth information pertaining to first-year students' experiences which have not been documented in the mostly quantitative research that has taken place in the field.

METHODOLOGY

The research approach chosen for the study was qualitative. Qualitative methods can be used to gain new perspectives pertaining to phenomena or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively. The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate the meaning students attribute to their own experiences relating to their academic and social adjustment challenges of first-year life at a tertiary institution. Most studies in this arena are quantitative thus in-depth knowledge about how students perceive adjustment challenges adds a new dimension to previous studies (Schultz, 2008; Somer & Dumont, 2011; Thurber & Walton, 2012).

Population and Sample

The study used a non-probability sampling method, namely purposive sampling, whereby the sampling units were selected subjectively by the researcher, who attempted to obtain a sample that appears to be representative of the population (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981). The researchers chose a group or number of individuals in whom they had an interest. The participants had experience of adjusting to first year, the event or condition under investigation. The chosen sample allowed the collection of rich data and an ability to interpret and understand the ideas of First-year students (Holloway, 1997). The sample was drawn from the population of undergraduate first-year students in 2018 at a tertiary institution in South Africa. First-years were chosen because many of them were away from home for the first time and thus had to adjust to their new environment. For the majority, it was also the first time they had registered at an institution of higher learning. Consequently, their adjustment experiences were pertinent to the study topic.

Data Collection

The study made use of focus groups as a method of data collection. Focus groups were numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4, comprising between six and ten participants each. The participants were recruited by putting up a notice outside the Psychology building asking interested first-years to contact the researchers. Participants were first-years registered for Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Science and Law (LLB) degrees. With the permission of the participants, an audio recorder was utilised to record the focus group sessions. Field notes were also taken during the interviews and were later used during analysis by comparing them with the recorded data. This form of data triangulation enhanced the reliability of the research. The researcher also made field notes in order to record non-verbal behaviours as recommended by (Patton, 2002).

Appointments were made telephonically with each participant who agreed to participate in the study and the time and venue for the focus group was decided upon. Rapport, which is described by Shenton (2004) as a state of mutual trust and responsiveness between people, was established at the start of each focus group. Participants were de-briefed immediately after each focus group session. Maree (2010) explains that debriefing is an opportunity to share in-depth recent experiences with someone who is willing to listen and care, without judgment or criticism. An appointment was made after each focus group discussion in order to give feedback to the participants so that they could validate the data transcripts. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the focus group discussions. Probing took place so that a more in-depth understanding and elaboration of points of interest could be achieved. The questions in the interview guide were developed by using the theoretical perspectives of the study as a guide, namely the Theory of Student

Adjustment for new students (Tinto, 1993) and the Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1999).

Qualitative Analysis

The method of qualitative data analysis chosen for this study was Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). TCA entails the identification, analysis and reporting of themes within data. It is used to elaborate on themes gleaned through interpreting the in-depth experience of participants. The method was also chosen for its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

For the purpose of this paper, the following themes are reported: Disintegration, Independence and Change. Statements which underpin the themes are presented as expressed by the participants themselves. Table 1 presents a summary of these themes.

Themes	Description of themes	Example of statements
Theme 1: Disintegration	First-year students' experience of the 'disintegration' of previous relationships in either a positive or negative manner	<i>"I don't do things I used to do before, such as going to visit friends when I'm at home because I spend most of the time here." "Being away from my friends is a blessing. I have been with friends who did not have dreams."</i>
Theme 2: Independence	Students' experiences of becoming 'independent' when away from home for the first time.	<i>"For me being away from home is good. We are able to socialise. It's a good feeling each and every day. I like working with lecturers." "I think being away from home is exciting. You get to meet new friends, who are at your level of intellect and education."</i>
Theme 3: Change	First-year students' experience of transition or 'change' when entering a new environment. This includes both the positives and negatives relating to change.	<i>"At first I was confused, I didn't know if I was happy or sad, because to some extent, I enjoyed the freedom. I could stay awake watching TV for as long as I wanted, I could go out anytime I wanted or do anything I liked." "But then the idea of having to start new relationships, having to analyse your partner, whether or not to do this and that, how will they react...it's a bit challenging."</i>

Theme 1: Disintegration

First-year students according to Tinto (1993), distance themselves from previous friendships and communities. They go through a process of questioning the values of their previous social context in order to adopt values, and perform well in a university environment. This is supported by recent research which suggests that positive academic performance is related to how first-year students cope with perceived threats and challenges and adapt to new affiliations. According to Thurber & Walton (2012), separation is essential if they are to make the most of the educational and social benefits of their new environment. Some first-year students in this study reported feelings of *drifting apart* from their friends at home. This represents a disintegration of former friendships. For others, it meant that they were able to separate themselves from an environment where they were bullied. As one

participant stated, they made fun of me. For this student, moving to a new, more positive environment entailed the disintegration of a negative.

Participant 4 Group 3:

"I don't do things I used to do before, such as going to visit friends when I'm at home because I spend most of the time here. I used to spend much time with my friends, but when I go home now I just spend time at home watching TV. I don't know what happened, maybe it's because I spend a short period in my village."

Participant 2 Group 1:

"Ehhh...actually, I don't have close friends. Most of the people I used to call my friends were only classmates. Most of them are around the campus, and we are no longer that close. I don't have any problem about the issue of friends. Sometimes I drink too much alcohol. My friend smokes dope [marijuana]."

Participant 1 Group 3:

"I think I have lost touch. Back at home, I was in touch with nature and when I go back home now, I feel like it's not my thing anymore. I become confused at times."

Participant 4 Group 2:

"Being away from my friends is a blessing. I have been with friends who did not have dreams. Their dream each and every day was about how to get the next drink."

Participant 4 Group 4:

"When I go home now to visit my home, I feel that my friends back at home are slow. I feel as though we don't click any longer."

Participant 1 Group 3:

"For me it's good because my friends back at home don't like education. Here, I'm meeting people that like education like me."

Participant 3 Group 1:

"Here on campus you get to meet sociable people who have dreams, academics, lots and lots of people. But then at home you get to meet lots of different people. Some do not have dreams. When they feel like drinking, they drink. There is nothing which pushes them to follow their dreams. Here its people with same mentality (similar dreams), that is to pursue our studies."

Participant 4 Group 1:

"I consider it a good thing. I used to have friends that were not good for me or for my standards. They made fun of me [bullies]. They would make sure that each and every day they look down on me, make statements that would degrade your confidence."

Theme 2: Independence

However, the majority of students in the sample could not wait to go to university as they felt they would be independent, meet new friends and gain new knowledge. This is in contrast to other study findings that separation anxiety separation anxiety is a specific problem, particularly amongst females. They had to mentally prepare themselves for their university experience by psychologically distancing themselves from their homes, communities and school life, which helped them realise their independence. However, this

study or research has shown that some first-year students are emotionally immature and struggle to adjust to institutional life. In this study participants worked hard when they first entered the institution and dedicated their energy to activities on campus (positive coping strategy), which maximised the educational and social benefits of their adjustment process (Tinto, 1993). Making statements such as I am enjoying being away from my family. This is supported by findings which indicate that positive coping occurs.

Participant 4 Group 4:

“I couldn’t wait to come to university. My parents are overly strict and as a result, we used to fight a lot because I’m someone who likes to party. At the university, I do not have curfews, I do as I wish, no one tells me when to come back home, or when I should do my laundry.”

Participant 5 Group 2:

“For me being away from home is good. We are able to socialise. It’s a good feeling each and every day. I like working with lecturers.”

Participant 2 Group 3:

“I think being away from home is exciting. You get to meet new friends, who are at your level of intellect and education.”

Participant 1 Group 1:

“Being away from family is such a relief. The culture I come from, when you’re a man or a boy, when you get to a particular age, you have to leave the house. Even if you’re not working, you have to find a place to stay; they expect you to be working. For me, being away from home is like a dream come true.”

Participant 3 Group 2:

“I am enjoying being away from family and experiencing a new life.”

Participant 4 Group 3:

“For me it’s good because you get to meet new people and learn new languages. I participate in many things, for instance, I attend religious occasions when gospel singers perform on campus.”

Theme 3: Change

There is no doubt that change serves as a bridge between the old and the new and entails first-year students acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to interact with members of a new group (Tinto, 1993). They take some time to fully integrate into their new tertiary and academic environment and often search for connections with their old environment with regard to norms, values, morals and relationships. When the differences between the old and new are complete opposites, the student finds it more difficult to adjust.

Participant 6 Group 2:

“It’s nice, especially the excitement of getting to meet new people. But then the idea of having to start new relationships, having to analyse your partner, whether or not to do this and that, how will they react...it’s a bit challenging. But for me it is the challenge that is exciting.”

Participant 2 Group 2:

“For me its fun, it’s like a bitter-sweet situation. The freedom of having to answer to no one is nice. But then there are days when things don’t go well and you miss your parents, your siblings and family. There are also financial challenges, but we have to make the best of it.”

Participant 1 Group 4:

“At first I was confused, I didn’t know if I was happy or sad, because to some extent, I enjoyed the freedom. I could stay awake watching TV for as long as I wanted, I could go out anytime I wanted or do anything I liked. On the other hand, I really missed my family. Especially when faced with challenges, I missed my mother and sibling as I knew they would have been able to help me. There is also a lot of work. Often too much, many of us can’t manage.”

Participant 4 Group 1:

“The other thing, you tend to focus more on the future when you are here. You begin to behave in a certain manner in order to prepare yourself for the future, whereby you are going to be independent. It is hard to get used to the teaching. We don’t get much help, we must do it ourselves. We need to be independent.”

Participant 4 Group 2:

“We have particular groups of people that are too noisy. But I’m used to them now. I came to realise that these people are happy, why can’t I be like them and enjoy life? Eventually I learnt not to take life too seriously, and now I’m happy and their noise doesn’t bother me anymore.”

DISCUSSION

First-year students, according to Tinto (1993), distance themselves from previous friendships and communities. As indicated by Tinto (1993), students not only have to make a physical break from their previous communities, but also a mental break in order to fully realise the benefits of the new environment. These feelings are essential for maximising the educational and social benefits of the tertiary setting. It is a period where some students reach a breakthrough in their development and consequently the values and the culture of the university is exciting. According to Astin (1999), students work hard during this stage and dedicate energy into the activities on the campus, which maximises their educational and social benefits and prepares them for the succeeding stages of the adjustment process.

According to Tinto (1993), this stage serves as a bridge between the old and the new. Students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to interact with members of a new group. They may not yet be fully integrated into their new university environment may still be searching for a connection with their new and old environment with regard to norms, values, morals and relationships. Students find it hard to choose between their old environment and the new one, they may know that they do not belong in their old environments but have not yet to found their place in the new one (Aldridge & Roesch, 2008).

New interaction patterns are established with other students and lecturing and administrative staff, thereby avoiding the risk of dropping out. Ultimately students enjoy success with the new conditions they encounter. Adjustment of first-year students in this study is divided into positive and negative adjustment experiences as follows. Some participants had positive academic adjustment experiences (about 50 % of the positive responses were received from participants from the Law). Positive experiences pertaining to financial support were received from two Law students and one participant from registered in the Faculty of Science. Furthermore, 50% of the participants who reported social and emotional support were from Law and the other 50% were from participating students from

other faculties who contributed to the focus groups. Of those who reported negative adjustment experiences, 60% of the participants who commented about unsupportive lecturers and department wherefrom departments situated within the Faculty of the Humanities. The other 40% were spread equally amongst participants from departments in other faculties.

CONCLUSION

Being away from home has always been a challenge, especially for young adults seeking to advance their careers. In conclusion, some students in this study experienced homesickness and social isolation because of being away from home for the first time. For instance, some found it difficult to establish friendships due to the newness of the environment. Others missed family members to whom they were very close. However, most of them found a degree of independence and were able to adapt to their environmental change. The disintegration of their former relationships was both positive and negative. Positive coping mechanisms such as good relationships with lecturers and social integration were reported. Negative coping mechanisms included drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana.

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