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The Relationship Between Psychological Distress and Academic Adjustment Among the Undergraduates: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

College is a period of transition and preparation from adolescence to adulthood, and from studying to work. Failure of individuals to adapt to university not only affects their studies and life at the university level but also affects their work and life after adulthood. Depression and anxiety also have negative effects on student development. The relationship between psychological distress and academic adjustment is worth exploring. Numerous studies claim a correlation between these two variables in previous research. However, by increasing the level of student life satisfaction or reducing academic stress by observing and responding to the event, psychological distress does not always affect college students' academic adjustment. The inner potential mechanism between psychological distress and academic adjustment is needed to do further exploration.

Keywords: - Academic adjustment, psychological distress, relationship

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1. Introduction

College life is both an opportunity and a challenge for students. On the one hand, leaving the old environment, the diversity and openness of the college environment, and the unknown and uncertainty of college life also allow college students to explore different possibilities and find themselves. On the other hand, after entering the college campus, students must adjust in every way, including the changes in life, learning, environment, and other aspects, as well as the clear learning goals and self-development requirements of the college. Students' academic maladjustment to this stage not only easily leads to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, but also impacts their career choices and even their personal development after graduation (Huang, Liu, & Luo, 2022). This finding is also supported by Thompson et al., (2019), while managing developmental tasks such as academic tasks, social interactions, and personal needs; it is not unexpected that many students

experience low psychological well-being. Due to the strong correlation between academic adjustment, performance, and dropout rates (Alipio, 2020), low academic performance and adjustment, and increasing dropout rates to college challenges are not brand-new phenomena in educational institutions around the world.

As reviewed by Kerr (2020), 75 percent of adults develop a mental disorder before the age of 25. Young adult students, who make up between 12 and 50 percent of the population in this category, are even more likely to experience mental health problems (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2020). Since they must deal with several demands, including living away from their families, a rigorous curriculum, and ineffective mentor-mentee and health education programs, students in higher education are thought of as going through a difficult stage in their lives. Thus, the considerable high probability of emotional disruption might cause psychological distress among them such as depression, anxiety, and stress particularly especially during the Covid-19 over restriction orders on

social interaction, isolation, and the switching of teaching and learning platforms from the physical classroom to virtual classroom (Planchuelo-Gómez et al., 2020). Psychological distress not only decreases the mental health of students directly (Petzold et al., 2020), but also lower academic performance as it will have an impact on how students learn (Thompson et al., 2019), and this procedure has an impact on how well students perform academically as well as on their way of life and commitment to their studies. Furthermore, poor psychological health will increase substance use and suicide ideation (Luca et al., 2016).

As disclosed by Achmad et al., (2018), self-adjustment at college was related to stress, pressure, and cultural background; consequently, these contexts affect students' academic performance, emotional response, and sociability. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the relationship between psychological distress and academic adjustment to improve students' college life experiences.

2. Definition Concept of Academic Adjustment

Gerdes & Mallinckrodt (1994) referred to academic adjustment as a process that demonstrates how students cope with their social, psychological, and academic challenges. However, academic adjustment has been defined by Van Rooij et al., (2018) as the degree of intellectual acceptance of the new environment as a significant indicator of how much a student has transitioned into university successfully. They categorize academic adjustment into four aspects: the motivation to study and have specific learning objectives, to contribute oneself to academic practice, to aspire to fulfil academic requirements and to be pleased with the academic climate. Anderson et al., (2016) nevertheless, endorse that academic lifestyle, academic achievement, and academic motivation are the three most challenges a student faces once they enter tertiary education.

Academic lifestyle is described as a person's compatibility with their temporary role as a student. The main goal of the academic lifestyle is to achieve intellectually satisfying results. 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. In this context, academic adjustment is defined as the ability to adjust to the new environment, which contains that academic lifestyle, academic achievement, and academic motivation.

3. Definition and Concept of Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is a general term for psychological functioning that is disrupted in the face of stressful life circumstances. This definition is consistent but precisely with Burnette et al., (2020), it is described as depression, anxiety, psychological stress, (lack of) well-being, and the absence of other distress-related notions (e.g., suicidality). While psychological distress is

frequently mentioned in healthcare literature, it is rarely described as a separate concept. Kessler et al., (2003) defined psychological distress as emotional suffering brought on by the interaction of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which the same definition of Turner, Aspin, and Gillman (2019). In this study, psychological distress was defined as a uniform mixture of symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5 (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines depression as a disorder characterized by either a depressed mood or noticeably diminished pleasure in all activities, as well as at least four additional symptoms lasting at least two weeks, such as significant weight loss or gain, disturbed sleep, decreased concentration, fatigability, psychomotor agitation, or rumination. Meanwhile, Latifah et al., (2016) characterized depression as sadness, feelings of guilt, loss of interest, and low concentration. In other words, depression could appear as the feeling of low spirit or dejection, mental distress, deep disappointment, and failure in fulfilling specific goals in life, which may lead to a suicidal impression. Anxiety was explained by Bukhari & Afzal (2017) as tension and apprehension, which is a normal reaction to the impression of threat but is out of proportion to the seriousness of the situation and interferes with day-to-day functioning. It affects how someone functions emotionally, cognitively, physically, and behaviorally (Kiran et al., 2020).

4. Relationship between Psychological Distress and Academic Adjustment in Previous Research

Based on numerous studies, there is a correlation between psychological distress and academic adjustment. For example, a study among university freshmen in Pakistan by Bukhari & Ejaz (2020) showed that psychological distress (depression, anxiety, & stress) is strongly negatively correlated with overall adjustment. This situation is in line with the article reported by Ling & Tini (2022) in Malaysia, depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and hostility significantly impacted the academic adjustment of students and academic adjustment issues are considerably exacerbated by psychological strain. Similarly, a study from Iran demonstrates that there is a negative relationship between academic achievement and anxiety and depression (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019). A review of literature from the past 30 years shows that over 40% of undergraduates cite mental and emotional problems as contributing to their academic performance challenges (Sharp & Theiler, 2018). In other words, higher anxiety and depression will adversely impact the success and academic achievement of students.

However, if students increase their level of life satisfaction or reduce academic stress by observing and responding to events, achievement and success in academic status depend on students' abilities, behaviors, or qualities. As endorsed by Van der Zanden et al., (2018), students reported higher psychological well-being in learning environments where their perspectives were

challenged, and higher-level thought was stimulated. For instance, people who must choose between their social life and their studies stressed that anxiety is typically achieved in the classroom. In a similar vein, among Turkish adults, and mental health workers in rural Australia, higher levels of positive psychological adjustment were associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout, as well as higher life satisfaction (Yildrm & Solmaz, 2022; Samios, 2018). This probably also explains the research 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. Despite the surprising nature of this finding, a study by Di Petro (2018) indicated that distress from natural disasters does not always affect college student's ability to succeed academically, which is consistent with Martin (2021), although natural disasters are always stressful. These inconsistencies inspire the researcher to explore more what are the inner potential mechanisms between psychological distress and academic adjustment.

5. Conceptual Framework

University students frequently experience high rates of mental illnesses like depression, stress, and anxiety, which can be detrimental to their academic success and emotional health. Milic et al., (2020) emphasized this point, noting that mental health disorders are more prevalent in schools than in the general population, probably because of the high academic demands. Over their three or four years of education, students must overcome and adapt to a range of new problems to successfully move to university.

This conceptual framework as shown in Fig. 1 demonstrates the link between psychological discomfort and academic adjustment. Depression and anxiety are the psychological distress domains (Kessler et al., 2003). Whilst according to Anderson et al., (2016), academic adjustment primarily consists of three components: academic lifestyle, academic achievement, and academic motivation.



Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, to achieve a successful transition to university, students must overcome and adjust to a variety of changes including academic lifestyle, academic achievement, and academic motivation while in college. Psychological distress among undergraduates is significantly higher and alarming and generally harms

their academic performance. Therefore, the relationship between psychological distress and academic adjustment among undergraduates should be identified. This paper describes the definitions and correlation between academic adjustment and psychological distress among undergraduate students worldwide. It is not only of great significance to individuals' academic adjustment and future careers but also provides an essential theoretical and practical significance to universities for preventing and intervening in college students' academic adjustment and psychological distress.

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