



Effects of Perceived Stress And Social Support on Students' Adjustment to College

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationships between perceived stress levels, perceived social support (i.e. overall, significant others, family, and friends), and adjustment to college. Data was collected from an online survey of 79 undergraduate students. College adjustment was found to be associated with perceived significant other and friend social support.

An association was also found between perceived stress and adjustment to college. There was not a significant association between perceived stress and college adjustment NOTE: THESE STATEMENTS CONTRADICT ONE ANOTHER.

Theoretical Background

•Researchers have investigated the relationship between perceived stress, social support, and adjustment to college. Friedlander and colleagues (2007) found a negative correlation between perceived stress levels and all categories of college adjustment. Social support from friends and decreased stress served as predictors for improvement of social adjustment. Social support from friends was also positively correlated with improvement in many areas of adjustment, except for academic adjustment (Friedlander et al., 2007).

•Day and Livingstone (2003) found that friends, family, and partners were major sources of support that undergraduate participants reported they would turn to under certain stressful scenarios. Shumaker and Hill (1991) have also discovered that friends and family provide social support to first-year college students as a healthy approach to manage stress.

•Past research has indicated that first-year students were better adjusted when they had higher levels of perceived parental support and were also less distressed (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995).

•The current study was at attempt to link these areas of research and examine the relationships between the three factors. The goal was to determine the factors that best predict college adjustment.

Research Hypotheses

1. There would be a negative correlation between perceived social support and perceived stress levels.
2. There would be a positive correlation between perceived social support and adjustment to college.
3. There would be a negative correlation between perceived stress and college adjustment.

Methodology

Participants

- 79 undergraduate students with ages ranging from 18-23 years old
- Recruited through online SONA subject pool maintenance system used by the Psychology Department
- Students participated for course credit or extra credit

Measures

- The *Life Events Scale for Students* (LESS; Clements & Turpin, 1996) was used to assess perceived stress responses to various events and asked about participants' hypothetical reactions to potential life events. The 24-item scale addresses potential life stressors including parents, breakups, and college.
- The *College Adjustment Test* (CAT; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp 1990) consists of four sub-scales measuring positive affect, negative affect, homesickness, and overall adjustment to college. The CAT is a 19-item scale that asks participants to respond to how much each item applies to them on a 7-point Likert scale.
- The *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988) is a 12-item scale, which consists of three sub-scales to measure three different social supports utilized by the participant. The three sub-scales measure perceived social support from friends, family, and a significant other.

Results

Hypothesis 1:

- LESS v. MSPSS-Friends [r (77) = .10, p = .189]
- LESS v. MSPSS-Family [r (77) = .23, p = .024]***
- LESS v. MSPSS-Significant Other [r (77) = .05, p = .330]
- LESS v. MSPSS-Overall [r (77) = .16, p = .078]

- Perceived stress was positively correlated with family social support

Hypothesis 2:

- CAT v. MSPSS-Friend [r (78) = .30, p = .004]****
- CAT v. MSPSS-Family [r (78) = -.11, p = .179]
- CAT v. MSPSS-Significant Other [r (78) = .20, p = .037]***
- CAT v. MSPSS-Overall [r (78) = .06, p = .175]

- College adjustment was positively correlated with friend social support
- College adjustment was positively correlated with significant other social support

Hypothesis 3: CAT v. LESS [r (76) = -.14, p = .123]

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)
 ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, perceived social support was associated with students' adjustment to college. Specifically, perceived social support from friends and significant others were associated with an improvement in students' adjustment to college. Interestingly, there were no significant associations between perceived stress and adjustment to college. Contrary to previous research findings, perceived social support from family was positively correlated with perceived stress (Friedlander et al., 2007; Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). These findings suggest that as perceived social support from family increased, perceptions of stress also increased for students. A possible reason for this finding may be that a student's stress is affected by family pressures or conflict. Bryan and Simmons (2009) interviewed first-generation college students and found that many of the participants felt pressure from their families to succeed. Hannum and Dvorak (2004) found a relationship between family conflict and psychological distress of college freshman.

There are limitations to this study. The proximity of social supports was not examined in the study, which could affect how participants felt about their support system. For example, some students live more locally to their families (perhaps affecting stress levels), and it is unclear whether the social network of friends resided within the college, from their hometown, or both. Also, this study assessed perceptions and did not account for the actual size or strength of the social support network. Perceptions may still be important as these are actual indications of how the participant feels. Lastly, the reliability for the College Adjustment Test was marginal ($\alpha = .612$), which could have affected some of the results.

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