Factors Negatively Affecting University Adjustment from the Views of First-Year University Students: The Case of Mersin University[*]

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aims to investigate the most common factors that negatively affect adjustment to university and coping strategies used by first-year university students in the adaptation process from the viewpoint of first-year university students. The participants were 25 first-year university students from various faculties at Mersin University. The data were gathered through interviews, which comprised 24 interview questions developed by the researchers. Collected data were content-analyzed following the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing data patterns. The results revealed significant factors that negatively affect the academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional adjustment of first-year university students. These students' academic adjustment was negatively affected by relationships with faculty and teaching quality, whereas social adjustment was negatively affected by friendship relations, participation in recreational activities, and leisure-time management. In addition, individual factors, such as shyness, fear of failure/disapproval, loneliness, and homesickness, and institutional factors, such as sense of identity and belonging to a university, were perceived as prominent factors affecting students' adjustment. The results also indicated that these students mostly used avoidance coping to deal with challenges in the university adjustment process.

Keywords

Academic Adjustment, Coping Strategies, Organizational Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, Qualitative Study, Social Adjustment, University Adjustment, University Students.

Life transitions, including new experiences and changes, naturally involve an adjustment process in the lives of individuals. The shift from high school to university is one major life transition for young adults (Buote, 2006). This transition period is a change and adjustment process accompanied by significant challenges and stresses for emerging adults to meet the personal demands of the new academic and social environment (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; D'Augelli & Jay, 1991; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Erikson, 1968; Jackson, 2008; Lau, 2003; Tuna, 2003). In other words, university life requires that young adults learn to cope with various challenges and take actions to integrate into the university's academic and social life, meet academic demands,

establish new friendship networks, become more independent, take responsibility in their personal lives, and make career choices (Aladağ, 2009; Ayhan, 2005; Duchesne, Ratelle, Larose, & Guay, 2007; Gizir, 2005; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Tuna, 2003). Actually, while most freshmen are able to deal with these transitional challenges and adjust to university life successfully, some feel overwhelmed and experience various adjustment problems (Bernier, Larose, & Whipple, 2005; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Kuh, 2005; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005) that lead them to drop out of university (Buote et al., 2007; Estrada, Dupoux, & Wolman, 2005; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Robbins, Lese, & Herrick, 1993).

Related literature considers university adjustment as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon (Baker & Siryk, 1984, 1986; Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985). As such, the process of university adjustment is described mainly by identifying four types of adjustment, namely academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal/emotional adjustment, and goal commitment/institutional attachment (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Briefly, academic adjustment involves students' perceived ability to achieve school work and acceptance of the academic environment; social adjustment refers to dealing with a new social environment effectively such as by establishing positive and accepting friendships and being involved in social activities on campus; personal/emotional adjustment includes the well-being of students; and institutional attachment refers to students' feelings of commitment to university and satisfaction with attending a particular university (Baker & Siryk, 1986).

Research on university adjustment indicates that various psychosocial variables are strongly associated with the adjustment levels of university students (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Leong, Bonz, & Zachar, 1997; Reischl & Hirsch, 1989). Specifically, demographics (Arı, 1989; Ayhan, 2005; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Wintre & Bowers, 2007; Yalım, 2007), locus of control and self-esteem (Bettencourt, Charlton, Eubanks, & Kernahan, 1999; Njus & Brockway, 1999; Sun-Selışık, 2009), stress and anxiety (Pancer, Pratt, Michael, & Alisat, 2000), self-efficacy (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Torres & Solberg, 2001), personality characteristics (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Yalım, 2007), and coping styles (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Tuna, 2003) are related with overall university adjustment.

Research also shows that the number of students seeking counseling for university adjustment had the highest percentage among all problem areas within the first period of university life in Turkey (Doğan, 2012; Gizir, 2014). Although related research emphasizes the importance of identifying factors affecting university adjustment, only a limited number of studies focus on the adjustment of first-year university students in Turkey. These studies indicate that university adjustment is associated with demographic variables (Ayhan, 2005; Sürücü & Bacanlı, 2010), academic procrastination (Çakıcı, 2003), loneliness (Kozaklı, 2006), optimism, and resilience (Yalım, 2007), locus of control and assertiveness (Karahan, Sardoğan, Özkamalı, & Dicle, 2005a), and coping styles (Tuna, 2003). In addition, these studies were conducted through quantitative research methods, and focus only on overall adjustment or one adjustment dimension such as academic or social adjustment. A review of the related research revealed that a multifaceted and holistic approach is required to investigate university adjustment in Turkey. Against this background, the present study aimed to identify common factors negatively affecting adjustment to university and coping strategies used in dealing with the challenges experienced by students in the adaptation process from the views of first-year university students. With this aim, this study was conducted through an in-depth qualitative method, focusing on Mersin University as case.

Method

Research Model

In this study, a qualitative case study design was preferred since the phenomenon to be studied includes complex human and organizational interactions (Peterson & Spencer, 1993). In addition, there are few in-depth studies focusing on the university adjustment of first-year university students in Turkey.

Participants

The participants of this qualitative study were 25 (14 female, 11 male) first-year university students experiencing adjustment difficulties despite attending the university for six months. The mean age of the participants, who are from various faculties at Mersin University, was 19.64 years (SD = 1.65) with an age range of 18 to 24 years.

Data Collection Instrument

To collect the data, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview script comprising 24 open-ended questions. Probing questions were added as necessary. Three faculty members, experts on qualitative research and college counseling, reviewed the script. After revising the script based on the experts' opinions, a pilot study was conducted to test the open-ended questions included in the script to confirm their sequence, content, wording, and approximate duration of the interview. The interview script was then finalized. A typical interview took nearly 50 minutes. All interviews were audiotape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using inductive content analysis following the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing data patterns. Based on related literature, academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional adjustment were defined as main themes for the content analysis.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were followed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, freshmen experiencing adjustment problems were purposely selected to ascertain first-hand perspectives regarding the subject matter. Second, a pilot study was conducted on four first-year university students from different departments to finalize the interview script. Third, a triangulation procedure was used. To triangulate, two researchers with previous experience randomly selected interview transcripts, analyzed participants' responses, and then compared the results of their analyses. Finally, the authors created a safe and non-threatening environment for interviewees, which included explaining the purpose of the qualitative study, the process of obtaining informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality at the beginning of each interview.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study revealed a number of common factors negatively affecting the academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional adjustment of first-year university students. Moreover, the results indicated that freshmen experiencing adjustment difficulties mostly used avoidance coping strategies in dealing with challenges in the university adjustment process (see Table 1).

Table 1
Factors Negatively Affecting University Adjustment and Students' Coping Strategies

Themes	Main Categories	Sub-Categories
Academic Adjustment	Relationships with Faculty	Formal Relationships with Faculty Informal Relationships with Faculty
	Teaching Quality of Faculty	Classroom Management Skills Teaching Skills Teaching Motivation
Social Adjustment	Relationships with Friends	Relationships with Friends in Class Relationships with Friends Outside of Class
	Participation in Social Activities	Not Being Informed about Activities on Campus Lack of a Group of Friends to Join Activities
	Leisure Time Management	Using Spare Time with few Friends Using Spare Time Alone
Personal-Emotional Adjustment	Individual Factors	Homesickness Loneliness Shyness Fear of Failure/Disapproval
	Causes of Preference	Causes of University Preference Causes of Department Preference
Institutional Adjustment	Institutional Belongingness	Sense of Belonging to Academic Context Sense of Belonging to Social Context
	Institutional Identity	Perception of the University Perception of Other Students at the University
Coping Strategies	Avoidance Coping	Withdrawal/Distancing Disengagement Daydreaming/Fantasy

Based on the analysis, two main categories, namely *relationships with faculty* and *teaching quality of faculty* emerged as significant factors negatively affecting the academic adjustment of first-year university students. According to the results, freshmen experiencing adjustment difficulties describe their faculties as less caring, warm, and supportive. Results also showed that both formal and informal relationships between students and faculty were relatively infrequent. These results seem to be consistent with past research, which reported that both formal and informal interactions with faculty positively impact university experience and improve the adjustment levels of university students (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Delaney, 2008; Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Feldman &

Newcomb, 1969; Hirscy & Wilson, 2002; Lamport, 1993; Martin, Swartz-Kulstad, & Madson, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson, 1997). Regarding the *teaching quality of faculty*, freshmen perceived their faculty as unintentional instructors who lack pedagogical knowledge/skills and effective classroom management skills. Similarly, previous studies show faculty quality as an important educational issue, and that undergraduate students give more importance to various instructor characteristics, which associated both negatively or positively with academic success and adjustment (Acker, 2003; Aulls, 2004; Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000; Brown, 2004; Brown & Tomlin, 1996; Lammers, Shelia, & Smith, 2008; Okpala & Ellis, 2005).

When considering social adjustment, three main categories, *relationships with friends, participation to social activities,* and *leisure time management* appeared to be the most common factors that negatively affect the social adjustment of first-year university students. In other words, students experiencing adjustment difficulties indicated limited interaction with and little social support from classmates, since relations among friends in and out of class are perceived as competitive, superficial, and selfish. Moreover, freshmen affirmed their need for a group of friends and/ or peers' encouragement to be involved in extracurricular activities on campus. These students are also mostly interested in individual activities in their spare time because they have no friends. Similarly, previous research reports that developing new friendships, forming pleasing interpersonal relationships on campus, and socially integrating into university life play a prominent role in successfully adjusting to university (Astin, 1993; Baker & Siryk, 1984; Bonhert, Aikins, & Edidin, 2007; Dextras, 1993; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Gizir et al., 2010; Karahan, Sardoğan, Özkamalı, & Dicle, 2005b; Langston & Cantor, 1989; Lorang, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 1981; Tinto, 1982; Wise & King, 2008).

Regarding personal-emotional adjustment, *individual factors and causes of preference* are the two main categories negatively affecting the personal-emotional adjustment of first-year university students. Particularly, the results indicated that most freshmen reported experiencing homesickness, loneliness, shyness, and fear of failure or disapproval. Numerous studies indicate that first-year university students tend to experience a magnification of personal-emotional

problems including social isolation, homesickness, loneliness, shyness, and "friendsickness" (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Duru, 2008; Karahan et al., 2005a; Paul & Brier, 2001). Moreover, *causes of university and department preferences* were observed as categories negatively affecting the personal-emotional adjustment of first-year university students. Before entering university, high school graduates must pass a nation-wide double-stage examination administered by the Student Selection and Placement Center in Turkey. Most freshmen reported selecting their departments and universities based on their university exam scores rather than individual needs, field of interest, career aspirations, and/or characteristics of selected institutions. This situation may cause students to emotionally withdraw from the preferred university and common patterns including low levels of adjustment. Although Litten and Hall (1989) view the university selection items of students and parents as outcomes, program characteristics, faculty behavior, and facilities, this may not be true for first-year university students experiencing adjustment difficulties in the present study.

On the topic of institutional adjustment, the results revealed *institutional identity and sense of belongingness* to department and university as prominent factors affecting the institutional adjustment of first-year university students. Similarly, Baker and Siryk (1984) pointed out that university students' commitment to the particular university plays an important role in adjusting to it. Moreover, Osterman (2000) stated that students experiencing a sense of belongingness are not only highly motivated and engaged in learning, but also more committed to the institution. Voelkl (1997) confirmed that sense of identity represents the extent to which individuals form attachments to an institution and integrate it as a significant part of their lives. On the other hand, the results of this study indicated that freshmen's negative academic, social, and individual experiences on campus, and significant burdens regarding their career preferences related to academic major and university decreased students' academic and social adjustment, institutional identity, and sense of belonging to department and university.

Finally, the results show that freshmen experiencing adjustment difficulties mostly use avoidance coping strategies including withdrawal/distancing, behavioral and/or mental disengagement, and daydreaming/fantasy to cope with challenges in the university adjustment process. Similarly, the literature review indicates that while problem solving strategies were positively predicted in university adjustment,

avoidance coping strategies (Lazarus, 1993; Roth & Cohen, 1986) negatively predicted the adjustment of first-year university students (Chroniak, 1998; Endler & Parker, 1990; Heiman, 2004; Tuna, 2003).

Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study indicate common factors negatively affecting the academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional adjustment of first-year university students. The results also showed that freshmen experiencing adjustment difficulties mostly use avoidance coping in dealing with challenges in the university adjustment process. In conclusion, the results of this study yield several counseling implications for preventive and developmental interventions to help first-year university students adjust to university life. First, there is a need to identify counseling needs of the freshmen with personal-emotional adjustment difficulties and propose diverse outreach activities for them at the university. Second, since formal and informal interaction with friends and faculty contributes to students' university adjustment, universities should develop an effective advisory system and mentoring programs for new students to establish natural and successful social networks with peers, faculty, and other university personnel. Finally, universities may provide diverse faculty development programs, such as in-service training focusing on various instructional methods and pedagogical techniques for teaching staff to meet first year students' academic and social needs in the classroom. This qualitative study focused on a single institution as case, which potentially restricts the generalizability of the results. Further research is needed with different samples using diverse research methods and instruments to address the importance of adjustment for university students, replicate these outcomes, and examine potential explanations for the results.

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