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Adjustment to first year of college – relations among self-perception, trust, mastery and alienation

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Abstract

The present research investigates the relation among self-perception, beliefs about control over events (feeling of mastery), belief about human nature, trust in people and the feeling of alienation. Eighty seven first year students were assessed with five questionnaires and the results showed those students with a positive self-perception and who feel they have control upon events have low alienation feeling. Also those who trust other people don't feel alienated, but the perception over human nature (cynics vs. trusting) didn't present significant results. All together, the significant variables can explain 50 percent of the variance of alienation scores. The implications on possible preventing measures are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Students entering universities are entering a new range of experiences, connected to learning but also to meeting people, exploring new roles and status, interacting with peers and also with academics. Most of all, entering university might mean leaving home, friends and familiar environment and adapting to new environments and presenting yourself all over again. For some persons this transition is coming natural, with no “bumps” but some are facing loss of roles and status (Cucos, 1997). Transition from high school to university is compared with an initiation process, going through phases such as exploration, conforming, and integration (Păun, 1999). The

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expression „first year adjustment reaction” (Kneipp, Kelly & Cyphers, 2009) describes a set of symptoms that first year students might experience in relation with academic encounter: anxiety, depression, loneliness, alienation. These reactions are not common, but the fact that they might occur signals the importance of the changes involved in starting the life as a college student. Many of the differences consist of becoming more independent, being able to organize your own life, to prioritize, to negotiate and to comply with the requirements imposed by the academic staff. Sometimes, all of that can be divergent because students want to maintain their responsibilities to a minimum in order to have fun, to live without external control, postpone worry with career obligations or “grown up tasks”. So, is no wonder that around half of the freshmen in university never graduate (Kneipp, Kelly & Cyphers, 2009).

A good transition is seen as an adaptation to the academic setting, and is placed in relation with well-being in order to avoid the multiple designation of adaptation concept. So, Feldt, Graham & Dew (2011) suggest that psychological well-being for academic transition means the ability to cope with the obligations as a student, to deal with a complex and new situation, to sustain intrinsic motivation, to wake up on time in the morning and to participate, get involve and complete your work at the appointed date. In order to succeed all the above, there are several factors involved, factors that are connected to external resources or internal resources of a students.

To narrow the focus of the present research we'll only name some of the variable: external factor studied in relation with psychological well-being in first academic year are: financial resources, environmental support, connection opportunities with the origin family or distance, involvement in extracurricular activities (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007; Ahern & Norris, 2011). Internal factors that are connected with academic adaptation are: attachment styles, self-concept, loneliness, religiosity and spirituality, resilience (Wiseman, Mazzeless & Sharabanz, 2006; Kneipp, Kelly & Cyphers, 2009; Ahern & Norris, 2011).

One of the central notions that have to do with adaptation is self-concept, defined by Hewitt (1991) as a set of unique characteristics, that a person consider to possess which contribute to autonomous functioning. Human being forms self-concept in relation to those traits that are considered important to perform tasks and to relate with others in order to exhibit a social role. People prefer to develop and maintain a positive self-concept but this self-concept (or self-image) emerges from personal beliefs as an interaction between person and environment (Celik & Odaci, 2012). Caselman & Self (2007) consider that self-perception evolves from early childhood and is influenced by relevant experiences that one underwent, including the level of academic accomplishments. Development of self-concept uses different attribution comparing with the way we perceive others, but the two notions are not independent, meaning that the trust or lack of trust we have in others moderate different beliefs we construct about ourselves (Pennell, & Ogilvie, 1995). An important part about how we perceive ourselves has to do with the belief on how much control we have upon things. If we consider some actions depend on us (we control them) we develop a sense of mastery (Dollinger, Matzja & Huber, 2007).

2. Objectives

In order to prevent school failure among college freshmen it is important to identify students that are at risk and to implement measures that support adjustment and psychological well-being. The present research is looking at the relation among self-perception, beliefs about control over events (feeling of mastery), beliefs about human nature, trust in people and the feeling of alienation. If we can recognize the variables that contribute to the unsecure feeling concerning the significance of everyday activities and roles, we can intervene and improve those feeling. We presumed that students with a positive self-perception and a sense of control upon events will not display alienation. Also, that it will be differences between students who have a cynic's view on human nature and those who trust in other people.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Eighty seven freshmen students (forty-six females and forty-one males) from two study programs were investigated. The age range varied from 18 to 44 years old, with a mean age of 20.87 years old. Asked about their home residence 48.7 percent declared that they live in Brasov and 51.3 percent do not. Students were asked to

complete five questionnaires in the fourth week of school. All results were confidential and the total time per participant to complete them was about 30 minutes.

3.2. Instruments

All questionnaires were obtained from a collection edited by Robinson, Shaver and Wrightsman (1991) with measures of personality and social psychological attitudes.

Personal Evaluation Inventory - PEI (Shrauger, 1990) measures self-confidence as a feeling of competence and a capacity to handle efficiently any kind of situation. The inventory comprises 54 items grouped in six scales: academic performance, sports, physical appearance, intimate relations, interpersonal relations and speaking with people. Internal consistency vary among scale between .74 and .89 and test-retest fidelity between .80 and .93. PEI correlates with Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($r = .58$). Internal consistency for the present research showed a Cronbach's Alpha of .93.

Mastery Scale (Pearlin et al. 1981) measures the feelings about self-control as a capacity to anticipate and control approaching events. The scale consists in seven items with a four level scale. The authors demonstrated the stability of the construct assessed by the scale.

Alienation Scale (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) determines the level of uncertainty in connection with connotation of the oncoming event and day by day roles and the perception of being isolated by others. Internal consistency of the instrument is high (.81) and validity revealed negative correlation with self-esteem ($r = -.60$ for female and $r = -.52$ for male) and with peer support ($r = -.44$ for female and $r = -.39$ for male). This scale contains 7 items with four levels of agreement.

Revised Philosophies of Human Nature Scale (Wrightsman, 1974) measures expectancies a person has concerning people behavior. The questionnaire resides in twenty items that present different attitudes organized on two dimensions: trust – the belief that people are conventional good and cynic – the belief that people are self-regarding and hostile. Internal consistency for the present research showed a Cronbach's Alpha of .69.

Faith in people (Rosenberg, 1957) measures the belief in people honesty, kindness, generosity and brotherliness. The subject has to mark if he agrees or not with the statement. Homogeneity of the scale is high (Cronbach's Alpha is .92). The author connected the responses of the subject with their career choices revealing that those who don't have trust in people tend to choose a political career.

4. Results

Before starting to compare different variables we were interested to see if home residence introduces any difference in alienation feeling of the participants. The results showed no significant difference ($t = .86$, $p = .39$), even if literature revealed possible negative feelings if one is leaving home and has to adapt in an unfamiliar environment (Ahern & Norris, 2011). Focusing on the relation among alienation and self-perception, mastery and trust in people, and perception upon human nature results confirmed most of the hypothesis.

There is a high and negative correlation between self-perception and alienation and a moderate negative correlation between mastery and alienation. There is also a low but significant negative correlation between trust in people and alienation (table 1). Participants were split into two categories based on their philosophy on human nature and their feeling of alienation was compared. The results didn't show significant difference between the two groups ($t(86) = .91$, $p = .36$). We have to mention that the two groups were disproportionate with 72 participants holding a cynic opinion on human nature and only 15 believing in people as being good, generous and altruists.

Table 1. The relation among self-perception, mastery, trust in people and alienation

Values	Corelation (r)	Significance (p)	Participants (N)
Alienation			
Self-perception	-.66	.000	87
Mastery	-.55	.000	87
Trust in people	-.24	.02	87

The next interest of the present research was to determine if the above variables are responsible for alienation scores and how much from the latest can be explained by personal beliefs. Multiple linear regressions was used in order to determine the contribution of predictive variables (self-perception, mastery and trust in people) in alienation scores. The results showed that all three variables produce significant differences on alienation scores ($F_{(3, 84)} = 29.60$, $p = .000$, $R = .72$; $R^2 = .52$ and adjusted $R^2 = .50$). Table 2 presents the effect identify in the research and regression coefficients involved in prediction.

Table 2. Multiple correlation indices and regression indices involved in alienation's prediction

Variables	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Standardized Coefficients		
				Beta	t	Sig.(p)
Self-perception				-.55	-6.08	.000
Mastery	.72	.52	.50	-.20	-2.20	.030
Trust in people				-.20	-2.61	.011

The prediction variables produce a significant effect on alienation scores, meaning that low levels in self-perception, a reduce feeling of mastery and lack of trust in people can explain a higher level of alienation feeling.

5. Discussion

Results showed that half of the variance in alienation scores can be explained by combined contribution of self-perception, the feeling that one can anticipate and understand the meaning of events and trust in people. Caselman & Self (2007) explain that self-perception influence socialization process meaning that a negative self-perception generates avoidance of social contact and unsatisfactory adjustment to social interaction. Jones (2008) showed that people who don't perceived they have control over events manifest less initiative, are not involved in addressing questions and delay academic tasks. Also, Fall and Roberts (2012) and Wiseman, Mazseless, & Sharabanz (2006) suggest that there is a direct correspondence between social support and the feeling of control both related with success in school involvement. All of the above are susceptible to improvements and in this way diminish the uncertainty in day by day roles or the sense of isolation. Designing small intervention programs like socialization week or tutoring activities reduces alienation and helps freshmen continue to stay in school. The activities suitable for interventions programs introduce students to the habits of university life and allow them to familiarize with the environment and with obligations and rights that they have to be aware of. The sense of control increases and with it the sense of being alone and lacking understanding of life matters decreases (Dollinger, Matzja & Huber, 2007). Also, tutoring activities among older and younger students contribute to a higher sense of worth and a better self-image. Once again, the adjustment of students' life is better and the chances to graduate increases (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007; Fall, & Roberts, 2012; Pennell, & Ogilvie, 1995). Interesting findings are those regarding the perception on human nature, with more than 80 percent of the respondents holding a cynic view upon it, meaning they consider people as self-centered, hostile and reluctant to offer help. This finding may also be considered one of the short-coming of the study, that didn't identify balanced group of participants who have a more optimistic view on human nature and also didn't investigate the relations with the cynic perspective. It would have been helpful to

collect data upon the social support the students experienced during first weeks of academic life because the results didn't present any differences between student's who left their home and those who continue to live in their house.

Further research may imply the role of gender in adjustment process, the sense of support in the origin family, motivation for academic learning or more detailed analyses on students' values.

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