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Sex Differences and the Relation of Age in Adjustment Difficulties Among College Freshmen

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Abstract

This study focused on adjustment difficulties of college freshmen with reference to sex and age and was conducted in a state college during the First Semester of School Year 2010-2011. Adjustment difficulties are believed to be one of the primary reasons for the decline in enrolment of college freshmen come second semester of every school year. To achieve the purpose of the study, an initial survey instrument was developed based on the review of relevant literature and on the result of a focus-group interview conducted with eight college freshmen representing several courses as participants. The initial survey instrument was reviewed and evaluated by three Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs). Suggestions given by the RGCs were taken into account in the preparation of the pre-try-out survey instrument. A trial-run using the pre-try-out survey instrument was conducted among 20 college freshmen to check for the average time needed for administering, the clarity of the direction, and suitability of language used. Observations and comments from the trial-run participants were taken into consideration in the preparation of the final survey instrument. The final survey instrument consisted of 68 items covering academic, social, and personal adjustment difficulties. A total of 470 college freshmen (Male=134, Female=336) completely answered the final survey instrument. Statistical analysis showed that males and females significantly differed in terms of adjustment difficulties. Age was also found to be significantly correlated with academic adjustment difficulties.

Key words: first year in college, female students, male students

Introduction

It is a known fact that getting a college degree increases one's chance of having a better life. That is why everyone is more than eager to graduate in college despite of the many hurdles. Colleges and universities play a big role. In order to improve graduation rates, increase attention must be given to the retention of college freshmen¹. There is also a need to identify the adjustment difficulties of students². Identifying the adjustment difficulties of college freshmen is justifiable, yet, it must not stop in simple identification. Gaining deeper understanding of adjustment difficulties is necessary especially with reference to sex differences and age. Understanding the adjustment

difficulties of college freshmen with the hope of retaining them may seem complex. This is especially so when there is no basis for its understanding. Therefore knowing the possible variables connected with retention is necessary. In line with this it is asserted¹ that "several variables have been linked to retention including academic achievement, connection to college community, and the ability to adjust to college life". Going to specifics, different changes are happening in the lives of college freshmen. "The first few weeks of college for freshmen students can be a wonderful passage as they find new friends, acquire new knowledge and grow as young people. However, this transition can also be a distressful, confusing, and puzzling experience"³. This is may be attributed to the reality that many transitions are

simultaneously required when attending college or university⁴. Adjusting to college life requires the overcoming of several concerns. Based on the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)⁵, these concerns include: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and attachment to the institution. It is believed⁶ that students move in three stages to be successful in college: separation, transition and incorporation. It is being said that “students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide support-academic, social, and personal - in ways which is both available and connected to other parts of their collegiate experience”⁷. Generally, the transition from high school to college is a stressful experience⁸⁻¹¹ because it is considered to be “a major transition in a young adult’s life”¹². Despite being a stressful experience, it is still an important developmental milestone and has potentials for personal growth and behavioral change¹³. Thus, helping college freshmen to overcome this major life transition is necessary. It must be realized in the end that students enrolling in colleges and universities are increasing and if their adjustment process does not go smoothly, many might leave and might not even return to school³. It is suggested that “appropriate intervention programs can be planned to assist new students who have problems in coping with the demands and challenges that could create stress and tension to their life”². Although, the development of appropriate intervention programs must be founded on a solid basis. That is why, conducting a research that gives due attention to the adjustment difficulties of college freshmen with reference to sex and age is a meaningful undertaking. This is so because “the process of adjusting to college is a recognized research and programmatic issue”³.

Experimental

Since adjustment difficulties are a reality among college freshmen, this study focused primarily on sex differences and the relation of age.

Survey instrument

An initial survey instrument was developed by the researcher based on the review of relevant literature and on the result of a focus-group interview conducted with eight college freshmen representing several courses as participants. The initial survey instrument was reviewed and evaluated by three Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs). Their suggestions were taken into account

in the preparation of the pre-try-out survey instrument. A trial-run was conducted among 20 college freshmen using the pre-try-out survey instrument to check for the average time needed for administering, the clarity of the direction, and suitability of language used. Based on the feedback of the trial-run participants, the final survey instrument was prepared. It consisted of 68 items covering academic (24 items), social (22 items), and personal (22 items) adjustment difficulties.

Participants of the study

A total of 522 college freshmen during the First Semester of School Year 2010-2011 answered the final survey instrument. However, only 470 college freshmen (Male=134, Female=336) answered it completely. Thus, responses from the 470 college freshmen were the ones analyzed.

Sampling method

The convenience sampling method was used. Convenience sampling involves choosing settings, groups, and/or individuals that are conveniently available and willing to participate in the study¹⁴. The willingness of the participants was of prime importance because willingness entails the sincerity of responses.

Hypotheses of the study

Following the purpose of the study, these two hypotheses were tested: (1) there are differences in adjustment difficulties between males and females, and (2) there is a relationship between adjustment difficulties and age.

Statistical method

To test the first hypothesis, independent samples t-test was used. The independent samples t-test is used when one wants to examine the mean difference between two exclusive or independent groups¹⁵. On the other hand, to test the second hypothesis, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient, which is sometimes referred to as the PMCC and typically denoted by “r,” is a measure of the correlation (linear dependence) between two variables¹⁶. Both statistical procedures were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15.0.

Results

The differences in adjustment difficulties between males and females are presented Tables 1a to 1d while the relationship between adjustment difficulties and age is presented in Table 2.

Table 1a presents the difference in total adjustment difficulties between males and females. The scores presented in this table are the combined mean scores of the participants in academic, social, and personal adjustment difficulties. As can be seen in Table 1a, there is a significant difference ($p=0.00$) between the mean scores of male and female participants. With reference to the mean scores, males scored higher compared to females.

Table 1b presents the difference in academic adjustment difficulties between males and females. The scores presented in this table are the participants' mean scores in academic adjustment difficulties. Items reflected in the survey instrument for this subscale had something to do with adjustment difficulties that are academic in nature. This includes adjustments as manifested by difficulties in passing written examinations, completing academic requirements, finding interest in the lessons, meeting deadlines, attending classes regularly, coming to class on time, working with classmates during classroom activities, understanding the lessons, understanding teachers' instructions, enjoying academic-related activities, coping with class schedules, understanding school procedures, studying lessons, getting high grades, following teachers' discussions, paying close attention during discussions, participating in classroom discussions, reviewing lessons, making advanced readings, remembering what has been taught, adjusting with the types of tests given by teachers, adjusting with the school environment, organizing school works, and speaking in front of the class. As can be seen in Table 1b, there is a significant difference ($p=0.00$) between the mean scores of male and female participants. With reference to the mean scores, males scored higher compared to females.

Table 1c presents the difference in social adjustment difficulties between males and females. The scores presented in this table are the participants' mean scores in social adjustment difficulties. Items reflected in the survey

instrument in this subscale had something to do with adjustment difficulties that are social in nature. This includes adjustments as manifested by difficulties in making new friends, relating with classmates, relating with teachers, relating with older classmates, relating with younger classmates, relating with school officials, relating with non-teaching personnel, relating with schoolmates, joining student organizations, communicating, dealing with people from different backgrounds, fitting in with others, participating in extra-curricular activities, looking for school-based organizations to suit one's interests, sharing emotions, finding someone to study with, finding enjoyment in the presence of other people, seeking assistance from other people, being a leader, being a follower, compromising with others, and looking for someone to talk with personal concerns. As can be seen in Table 1c, there is a significant difference ($p=0.00$) between the mean scores of male and female participants. With reference to the mean scores, males scored higher compared to females.

Table 1d presents the difference in personal adjustment difficulties between males and females. The scores presented in this table are a reflection of the participants' scores in personal adjustment difficulties. Items reflected in the survey instrument in this subscale had something to do with adjustment difficulties that are personal in nature. This includes adjustments as manifested by difficulties in being independent, setting priorities, feeling confident, leaving home, making decisions, taking responsibilities, budgeting money, managing time, avoiding the commitment of mistakes, learning from mistakes, finding solutions to problems, knowing what one really wants, accepting negative comments from other people, keeping up with target goals, controlling emotions, acting according to age, appreciating one's self, thinking positively, feeling contented, finding enjoyment in life, finding purpose in life and, overcoming shyness. As can be seen in Table 1d there is a significant difference ($p=0.00$) between the mean scores of male and female participants. With reference to the mean scores, males had higher scores compared to females.

Table 2 presents the correlation between adjustment difficulties and age. As can be seen in Table 2, the only significant correlation (r -value = 0.10, p -value = 0.04) established is between age and academic adjustment difficulties. The r -value

Table 1a. Difference in total adjustment difficulties between males and females

	N	M	SD	t	p
Male	134	188.66	40.87	-3.60 (equal variances assumed)	0.00
Female	336	173.27	42.18		

Table 1b. Difference in academic adjustment difficulties between males and females

	N	M	SD	t	p
Male	134	66.17	15.50	-3.15 (equal variances assumed)	0.00
Female	336	61.10	15.88		

Table 1c. Difference in social adjustment difficulties between males and females

	N	M	SD	t	p
Male	134	60.97	14.14	-3.82 (equal variances assumed)	0.00
Female	336	55.49	14.01		

Table 1d. Difference in personal adjustment difficulties between males and females

	N	M	SD	t	p
Male	134	61.52	14.42	-3.13 (equal variances assumed)	0.00
Female	336	56.69	15.39		

Table 2. Correlation between adjustment difficulties and age

Adjustment Difficulty	N	r-value	p-value
Total Adjustment Difficulties	470	0.06	0.18
Academic Adjustment Difficulties	470	0.10*	0.04
Social Adjustment Difficulties	470	0.05	0.29
Personal Adjustment Difficulties	470	0.03	0.59

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

reflects the strength of the correlation while the *p*-value indicates the significance.

Discussion

Retention and attrition are major issues in higher education^{1, 17}. Therefore, something must be done especially in the case of college freshmen. Adjustment difficulties being experienced by college freshmen must be thoroughly analyzed in order to develop interventions that can be of help. One way to look at is the differences in adjustment difficulties between males and females, and the relation of age. In line with this, the results of the study offer valuable insights. Most noteworthy of which is the significant differences between adjustment difficulties of males and female with males consistently having higher mean scores, and the significant relationship between academic adjustment difficulties and age. Males and females

being different in terms of adjustment difficulties can be attributed to differences in perceptions even if exposed to the same experiences and of course actual adjustments. This is parallel with the findings of a previous study¹⁸. In the said study, there were significant differences between males and females in the level of adaptation of university. It was found that perception of men and women regarding stress and their reactions differed¹⁹. Likewise, it is also observed that there were sex differences in the relationship between social support and several indices of student adjustment²⁰. In relation to these differences, intervention programs must be designed with sex of the recipients being taken into consideration. What might work with one group may not necessarily work with the other. Mental health practitioner should consider interventions in relation to these differences¹⁹ and "different people experience many different life transformations and these factors are highly individual, thus necessitating the need for

an individual approach to helping students of any type adjust¹⁹. On the other hand, males consistently having higher mean scores in terms of adjustment difficulties found in this study may be attributed to the differences in actual adjustment. Poorer adjustment means greater adjustment difficulties. The same was found in a study conducted among Korean international students²¹. The researchers found that female students showed a higher level of adjustment than males and English proficiency was a positive predictor of adjustment. However, this and the result of the present study are not consistent with the conclusion of previous one². Based on the result of their study, the researchers concluded that “female students are expected to encounter more adjustment problems especially in the social context as compared to their counterparts. Similarly, in another study it was found that male students experience less stress compared to the female students²². These inconsistencies may be attributed to the differences in the characteristics of the participants of the studies. Meanwhile, the significant relationship between age and academic adjustment difficulties can be attributed to the fact that as people get older, they are expected to be more responsible and thus are pressured to do better especially in the tertiary level. Relative to this, it was claimed that “in school, adolescents often see themselves as being evaluated in terms of their academic performance and the pressure to excel is an important measure of their success²³. Academic stress adversely affects overall adjustment of students²⁴. In general, students do face a variety of problems and difficulties in their effort to adjust themselves²⁵.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to sex differences and the relation of age in adjustment difficulties of college freshmen. Only 470 college freshmen (*Male=134, Female=336*) enrolled during the First Semester of School Year 2010-2011 in a state college were included in the study. Therefore, the results of the study may not necessarily hold true to college freshmen from other colleges and universities either locally or abroad.

Recommendation

Adjustment difficulties being experienced by college freshmen must be addressed accordingly. Intervention programs like orientations and transition activities must be tailored based on variables such as sex and age. Similar studies are

also encouraged to be conducted so that results can be compared and contrasted. This will then give thorough understanding of sex differences and the relation of age in the adjustment difficulties of college freshmen.

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