College Adaptation among Traditional and Non-traditional College Students

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Abstract

Although research has established several factors related to college adjustment in traditional college students (e.g., self-esteem, perfectionism, family environment), few studies have examined whether these factors also relate to college adjustment in non-traditional students. The present study examined whether the factors related to academic and emotional adjustment to college differed between traditional and non-traditional college students. Three hundred thirteen college students (78% traditional; 22% non-traditional) completed the almost perfect scale revised, the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, and the family environment scale. Non-traditional college students displayed significantly greater academic and emotional adjustment to college than did traditional college students. Academic adjustment was related to self-esteem in both groups; in addition, perfectionism related to academic adjustment in traditional students. Emotional adjustment related to self-esteem and independence in both groups; in addition, emotional adjustment related to achievement motivation and organizational skills in non-traditional students and discrepancy between self and ideal in traditional students. College administrators may wish to emphasize different factors for these two groups when discussing adaptation to college during orientation sessions. Keywords: college adaptation, traditional v. non-traditional students

Introduction

College enrollment of non-traditional students (typically defined as 24 years of age or older; Jinkens, 2009) is on the rise. Between 2000 and 2009, college enrollment of students aged 25 and older increased by 43%, whereas enrollment in college students under the age of 25 only increased 27% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Academically speaking, non-traditional college students adapt to college just as well as traditional students, and in fact, have a higher GPA than traditional college students (Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009), and may display a higher motivation to succeed in academics (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Chao and Good (2004) noted that non-traditional students tend to use support from their family, friends, teachers, and themselves in order to succeed in college. In this paper, we are interested in the relation between self-esteem, family environment, perfectionism, and adjustment to college in traditional and non-traditionally aged college students.

Traditional college students typically tend to be fresh out of high school, and many students go out of state for college. Entering college demands more responsibility and some students may doubt their ability to be successful at the college level which may lower their academic success and increase their stress level (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). According to Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, and Pohlert (2003-2004), positive self-esteem and social support can be good predictors of academic adjustment and social adjustment.

While there is research that compares traditional and non-traditional college students on factors such as the "ideal" course and professor (Strage, 2008); student development (Macari, Maples, & D'andrea, 2005); student wellness (Hermon & Davis, 2004); and achievement goal orientation and coping style (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003), little research has examined how well non-traditional students adjust to college in comparison to traditional students. Below we will discuss factors that may differ between traditional and non-traditional students, which may influence adjustment to college in the two groups.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem affects the health of both body and mind (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001), and it has been suggested that self-esteem relates closely to adjustment to college. For example, traditional students' self-esteem level in the summer prior to matriculation predicted academic, social, and emotional adjustment to college for the next six months (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alistat, 2000). This is not surprising as Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) found that among traditional college students if the student feels like he or she has the capability of succeeding academically they are more likely to do so. The purpose of this study is to not only to explore the relationship of self-esteem between academic and emotional adaptation, but also to see if there are differences between traditional and non-traditional college students when looking at self-esteem.

Perfectionism

In addition to self-esteem level, certain personality traits may affect college student adjustment. For example, perfectionists with high standards seem to self-criticize more, leading to difficulty adapting emotionally to college (Rice, Vergara, & Aldea, 2006). On the other hand, perfectionism is a multi-dimensional construct and certain aspects of perfectionism may actually be advantageous. For instance, Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, and Rice (2004) looked at traditional students who were adaptive perfectionists, these students showed lower anxiety, higher self-esteem, and adapted better academically to college. However, traditional students who are maladaptive perfectionists show more difficulty coping with stress-management due to personal emotional difficulties, and leading to poorer emotional adjustment to college (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003). As perfectionism is multi-faceted and different aspects of the trait may help or hinder college students, the present study examined three factors of perfectionism: (1) standards; (2) discrepancy, which is defined by Slaney et al., (2001) as the view that one keeps failing to achieve the high standards that one has set for oneself; and (3) order in order to see if these different factors have a relationship with academic and emotional adaptation, and whether there are differences in these relations between traditional and non-traditional college students.

Family

In addition to factors internal to the student (e.g., personality, self-esteem), external factors may also impact adjustment to college. For example, college students tend to adjust to college easier when they come from an authoritative family (Hickman, Bartholomae, & McKenry, 2000). An authoritative family is accepting, warm, and encouraging, but is also firm. They teach clear principals, giving suitable expectation without being invasive or restrictive (Blondal & Adalbjamardottir, 2009). Similarly, Johnson, Gans, Kerr, and LaValle (2010) found that traditional aged students who viewed their family as cohesive displayed little difficulty adjusting academically and emotionally to college. On the other hand, students that come from families that have conflict and poor coping skills do not adapt well to college (Feenstra, Banyard, Rines, & Hopkins, 2001). Again, these studies were conducted using traditional aged college students; thus, little is known about the impact of family-of-origin on non-traditional aged college students. The present study examined the relation between family-of-origin environment and academic and emotional adaptation to college. Given that non-traditional students have been away from their family-of-origin longer than traditional students, we wanted to ascertain whether these relationships may differ for traditional and non-traditional college students. For example, would these relationships have less of an impact on non-traditional students as they are older and more removed from their family-of-origin?

Present Study

Although previous research has examined the impact of self-esteem (Blankstein, & Dunkley, 2008), perfectionism (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003), and family-of-origin environment (Feenstra, Banyard, Rines, & Hopkins, 2001) on academic and emotional adjustment in traditional college students, no studies have examined these relationships in non-traditional college students. Non-traditional college students, by virtue of being older and having had more life experiences, may be less, or more, affected by these factors than traditional college students. As the rate of non-traditional college students entering college is increasing rapidly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), it is important to ascertain not only how well they adjust to college, but also what factors may impact their adjustment.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine whether self-esteem, perfectionism, and family-of-origin environment relate to academic and emotional adjustment to college in the same way in traditional and non-traditional college students. Due to their maturity levels and life experiences, we first hypothesized that non-traditional college students would display greater academic adjustment to college than would traditional college students. Although we expected self-esteem, perfectionism, and family-of-origin environment would relate to academic and emotional adjustment in traditional college students, no predictions about these relations among non-traditional college students were made as no studies have examined this question before.

Method

Participants

Participants were from a public university in the Northwest and were enrolled in a general psychology course. A total of 313 undergraduate students participated: 197 were female, 114 male, and 2 transgendered. 79.6% were Caucasian, 5.6% Latino, 3.8% Asian, 3.1% African-American, 1.9% Native American, .9% Pacific Islander, and 3.1% identified themselves as other. The average age was 22.2 ($SD = 6.90$). The participants responded to an online survey and were awarded with credit toward their general psychology course. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board before data collection commenced.

Materials

Almost perfect scale-revised. The Almost perfect scale-revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001) is a 23-item scale that measures perfectionism with three subscales: 7 items that measure high standards for personal performance (e.g., I have high standards for my performance at work or at school; $\alpha = .86$), 12 items that measure discrepancy (e.g., I often feel frustrated because I can't meet my goals; $\alpha = .93$), and 4 items that measure order skills (e.g., I am an orderly person; $\alpha = .84$). The APS-R was measured using a 7- point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree.* Each subscale is summed, with higher scores of each subscale indicating higher levels of that particular dimension.

Rosenberg self-esteem scale. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item Likert scale with items that look at how one feels toward oneself (e.g., On the whole, I am satisfied with myself). It was answered on a four-point Likert scale measuring from 3 = *strongly agree* to 0 = *strongly disagree*. The 10 items were summed, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem ($\alpha = .91$).

Student adaptation to college questionnaire. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ, Wetzel, 2007) is a 39-item Likert scale that looks at how well a student adapts to college with two subscales that look at academic adaptation ($\alpha = .87$) and emotional adaptation ($\alpha = .85$). Each subscale was summed, the higher the score the higher adaptation.

Family environment scale. The Family environment scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1986) is a 90-item Likert scale that looks at relationships and overall social environment among the family. Items are scored true/false. This scale had 10 subscales: (1) cohesion–the level of commitment, help, and support members give to each other (e.g., family members really help and support one another); (2) expressiveness–the amount to which family members are encouraged to express their feelings (e.g., family members often keep their feelings to themselves); (3) conflicts–the amount of open expression of anger and conflict between family members (e.g., we fight a lot in our family); (4) independence–assesses the extent to which family members are sure of themselves, self-sufficient, and make their own decisions (e.g., we do not do things on our own very often in our family); (5) achievement orientation–assesses how much activities (such as school and work) are shown as an achievement-oriented or competitive framework (e.g., we feel it is important to be the best at whatever you do); (6) intellectual-cultural orientation–the degree of interest in political, intellectual, and cultural activities (e.g., we often talk about political and social problems); (7) active-recreational orientation–looks at participation in recreational activities (e.g., we spend most weekends and evening at home); (8) moral-religious orientation–evaluates the importance placed on ethical and religious issues and values (e.g., family members attend church, synagogue, or Sunday school fairly often); (9) organization–the

importance that is given to organization and structure in planning family activities and responsibilities (e.g., activities in our family are pretty carefully planned); (10) control–assesses the extent to which rules and procedures are used upon the family (e.g., family member are rarely ordered around).

Results

Some studies have defined non-traditional college students as 24 years or older (Jinkens, 2009). However, for the purpose of this study traditional college students were grouped by ages 18-22, and nontraditional college students were grouped by ages 23 and older. The reason that non-traditional college students were grouped by ages 23 or older instead of ages 24 or older was because a bachelor degree takes on average between 4 to 5 years to obtain, therefore if a student would enter directly after high school the average age that they would obtain their bachelors would be around age 23. There were 222 traditional students, and 79 non-traditional students; 18 participants did not indicate their age. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals of all factors by age group (traditional v. nontraditional college students). Overall, traditional students showed a higher mean when looking at discrepancy, conflict, achievement-orientation, active-recreational orientation, and control, while non-traditional students showed a higher mean when looking at high standards, order, self-esteem, academic adaptation, emotional adaptation, cohesion, expressiveness, independence, and moral-religious orientation.

As expected, non-traditional college students ($M = 144.10$, $SD = 32.34$) displayed significantly greater academic adjustment to college than did traditional college students ($M = 134.91$, $SD = 27.94$), $t(298) = -2.29$, $p < .05$. In addition, non-traditional college students ($M = 84.76$, $SD = 25.71$) also displayed significantly greater emotional adjustment to college than did traditional college students ($M = 78.07$, $SD = 22.59$), $t(297) = -2.06$, $p < .05$.

In order to examine whether differences in our independent variables (self-esteem, family environment, and perfectionism) related to age group (traditional v. non-traditional) differences in our dependent variables (academic and emotional adaptation to college), we ran separate regressions for traditional and non-traditional college students using the stepwise method (see Tables 2-5). The stepwise method was chosen because we felt it was important not only to know whether different factors predicted adjustment in traditional and non-traditional college students, but also their order of importance.

In non-traditional college students, self-esteem was the sole predictor of academic adjustment to college, $R^2 = .12$, $F(1, 62) = 8.39$, $p < .01$ (see Table 2). In traditional college students, self-esteem was also the primary predictor, $R^2 = .20$, $F(1, 192) = 46.24$, $p < .001$. However, having high standards (perfectionism) was the secondary predictor, $R^2 = .22$, $F(2, 191) = 27.44$, $p < .001$ (see Table 3).

In non-traditional college students, self-esteem was also the primary predictor of emotional adjustment to college, $R^2 = .48$, $F(1, 61) = 56.122$, $p < .001$. The secondary predictor was independence, which measured how sure family members are about themselves, and whether they make their own decisions, $R^2 = .576$, $F(2, 60) = 40.10$, $p < .001$. Achievement, which measures degree of achievement-orientation that a family has, was the third predictor, $R^2 = .61$, $F(3, 59) = 30.26$, $p < .001$. Finally, the fourth predictor was organization, which measures how much a family values organization and structure in the family, $R^2 = .64$, $F(4, 58) = 24.91$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). In traditional college students, self-esteem was shown to be the primary predictor, $R^2 = .29$, $F(1, 192) = 76.22$, $p < .001$ of emotional adjustment to college. Independence from other family members was the secondary predictor, $R^2 = .32$, $F(2, 192) = 45.32$, $p < .001$. The third predictor was discrepancy, which measured the difference between a person's standards and their actual performance (Sirois, Monforton, & Simpson, 2010), $R^2 = .34$, $F(3, 192) = 32.94$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether self-esteem, perfectionism, and family-of-origin environment relate to academic and emotional adaptation in traditional and non-traditional college students in the same way. As expected, non-traditional college students displayed greater academic and emotional adjustment to college than traditional college students. Although we expected self-esteem, perfectionism, and family-of-origin environment would relate to academic and emotional adaptation in traditional college students, no predictions about these relations in non-traditional college students were made. Results will be discussed below.

Self-esteem

The results from the present study showed that self-esteem was the primary predictor of academic and emotional adaptation for traditional and non-traditional college students. The present study measured global self-esteem which has been identified to be related to psychological well-being (Oguz-duran & Tezer, 2009). This finding is interesting because it may help college counselors when attempting to assist college students who are struggling to adapt to college. The fact that it was the primary predictor for both traditional and non-traditional college students makes it more interesting because college counselors might start by assessing the student's level of self-esteem in order to determine what might inhibit the student's adjustment to college. However, future studies should conduct a comparison between specific self-esteem (which has been identified with academic achievements such as GPA) and global self-esteem. It seems that students who have a high level of global self-esteem seem to maintain that high level despite of academic failure. This may be because students with a high level of global self-esteem are relying on other sources such as family and friends or devaluing academia (Peixoto & Almeida, 2010), while students who rely more on specific self-esteem are relying primarily on their academic success, and if that plummets they might be left with a feeling of failure and of not being able to cope. Future studies might want to see whether there are differences between traditional and non-traditional college students and if one tends to have more of a global self-esteem or a specific self-esteem than the other.

Perfectionism

The present study showed that among traditional college students, high standards was the secondary predictor for academic adaptation. High standards has been identified to capture personal standards and performance expectations (Stoeber & Eysenck, 2008). Therefore, traditional college students might rely on performing a certain way academically because they expect to do so. The study that Stoeber and Eysenck (2008) performed showed that individuals with high standards tend to find something wrong even when there is not, and tend to display less efficient performance. When looking at emotional adaptation, the third predictor for traditional college students was discrepancy. The same study of Stoeber and Eysenck (2008) showed that individuals who tend to believe that they are constantly failing to meet their perfectionistic expectations are more cautious and conservative. They also are reluctant to blame themselves even when there is something wrong. Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals with high discrepancy tend to be more likely to adapt emotionally to college because they are not assuming responsibility if something is goes wrong or not as planned. This study looked only at perfectionism for college adaptations, but future studies might want to see how these two types of perfectionistic traits might affect academic performance.

Family environment

Beyers and Goossens (2003) showed that students who had positive feelings of being separated from their parents during college was a predictor of adjusting to the college environment. This supports our findings that independence was the secondary predictor for non-traditional and traditional college students when looking at emotional adaptation to college. In this study, independence is known as the extent to which family members are sure of themselves, are independent, and make their own decisions. This may be due to individuals who developed skills of not depending on their family and who might not have viewed being separated due to college as a big strain. It is worth mentioning that non-traditional students are older and might have not lived with their family for a while, thus they might be accustomed to the separation and might know how to live already on their own. Future studies should measure if students are living on their own and if so for how long, in order to more accurately determine family independence as a predictor of emotional college adjustment between traditional and non-traditional college students. Achievement orientation was the third predictor for emotional adjustment to college among non-traditional college students. The fourth predictor for emotional adjustment to college among non-traditional college students was family organization.

Limitations

Possible limitations of this study include the fact that this survey was self-reported, therefore it is not possible to know if participants were being completely honest. Also, because data was collected in a university where there is a fair amount of non-traditional college students, generalizability to other universities where there are

not that many non-traditional students may be difficult because non-traditional students on a non-traditional campus may be able to adjust better to college classrooms when they see there are more non-traditional students and they might feel like less of an outsider; whereas, a non-traditional student on a traditional campus might feel less comfortable in a classroom where there are a fair amount of much younger students. Finally, this study was correlational in nature. Future studies should examine how self-esteem, perfectionism, and family-of-origin environment relate to academic and emotional adaptation in traditional and non-traditional college students over time.

Conclusion

Our study shows that while self-esteem is a strong indicator of adaptation to college for both traditional and non-traditional college students, there are also different predictors for traditional and non-traditional college students. Non-traditional students seem to be influenced more by family, while traditional students are influenced by family independence. They also are influenced by perfectionist tendencies, while non-traditional students are not. Finally, non-traditional college students seem to adapt better academically and emotionally to college when compared to traditional college students.

We believe the findings in this study will assist in the expansion of the differences between traditional and non-traditional college students. Knowing what factors might help in adapting to college will allow for school counselors and professors to know where to aid each type of student when facing difficulties. Knowledge in this area will help to ensure academic success for college students. Future research should examine how family environment, self-esteem, and perfectionism affects students in a longitudinal dimension starting from their freshman year until graduation, and it should see if there are different predictors along the course and if traditional and non-traditional students tend to develop more difficulties adjusting to college on different time frames.

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Tables

Table 1. Survey Items with Means, Standard Deviations and Confidence Interval

Survey	Traditional			Nontraditional			
	n	*M (SD)*	95% CI	*n*	*M (SD)*	95% CI	*t*
APS-R (standards)	225	41.06 (5.64)	[-1.68, 1.59]	66	41.11 (6.84)	[-1.68, 1.59]	-.05
APS-R (discrepancy)	233	44.56 (14.91)	[-.93, 7.47]	66	41.28 (16.69)	[-.93, 7.47]	1.53
APS-R (order)	229	5.54 (2.21)	[-.76, .44]	66	5.70 (2.16)	[-.76, .44]	-.52
RSES	227	21.04 (5.89)	[-2.82, .41]	66	22.24 (5.77)	[-2.82, .41]	-1.47
SACQ (academic)	233	134.91 (27.94)	[-17.10, -1.29]	67	144.10 (32.34)	[-17.10, -1.29]	-2.29*
SACQ (emotional)	233	78.07 (22.59)	[-13.08, -.29]	66	84.76 (25.71)	[-13.08, -.29]	-2.06*
FES (cohesion)	225	6.55 (2.17)	[-.77, .44]	66	6.71 (2.31)	[-.77, .44]	-.53
FES (expressiveness)	226	5.41 (1.87)	[-.80, .22]	66	5.70 (1.75)	[-.80, .22]	-1.12
FES (conflict)	231	4.79 (1.40)	[-.16, .61]	65	4.57 (1.41)	[-.16, .61]	1.14
FES (independence)	228	6.63 (1.60)	[-.66, .22]	66	6.85 (1.60)	[-.66, .22]	-.99
FES (achievement-orientation)	228	5.80 (1.52)	[-.02, .83]	66	5.40 (1.65)	[-.02, .83]	1.87
FES (active-recreational)	225	5.50 (2.11)	[-.56, .63]	66	5.47 (2.30)	[-.56, .63]	.11
FES (moral-religious orientation)	227	4.78 (2.72)	[-.95, .51]	65	5.00 (2.40)	[-.95, .51]	-.59
FES (control)	228	4.55 (1.36)	[-.27, .48]	65	4.45 (1.37)	[-.27, .48]	.56

Note: *$p < .05$

APS-R: almost perfect scale revised

RSES: Rosenberg self-esteem scale

SACQ: student adaptation to college questionnaire

FES: family environment scale

Table 2. Summary of stepwise regression analysis for the variables predicting academic adaptation among non-traditional college students

Variable	B	SE	β
Step 1			
Self-esteem	2.08	.72	.35*

Note: ** *p* < .01

Table 3. Summary of stepwise regression analysis for the variables predicting academic adaptation among traditional college students

Variable	B	SE	β
Step 1			
Self-esteem	2.13	.31	.44**
Step 2			
Self-esteem	1.88	.32	.39**
Standards	.90	.34	.18*

Note: ***p*< .001,
   * *p* < .01,
   Standards: perfectionist standards

Table 4. Summary of stepwise regression analysis for the variables predicting emotional adaptation among non-traditional college students

Variable	B	SE	β
Step 1			
Self-esteem	2.93	.39	.70***
Step 2			
Self-esteem	2.70	.36	.64**
Independence	4.56	1.27	.31**
Step 3			
Self-esteem	2.74	.35	.65***
Independence	4.11	1.25	.28**
Achievement orientation	-2.61	1.16	-.19*
Step 4			
Self-esteem	2.52	.36	.60***
Independence	3.70	1.23	.25**
Achievement orientation	-3.59	1.23	-.26**
Organization	2.06	1.02	.19*

Note: ****p* < .001
   ***p* < .01
   **p* < .05

Table 5. Summary of stepwise regression analysis for the variables predicting emotional adaptation among traditional college students

Variable	B	SE	β
Step 1			
Self-esteem	2.02	.23	.53***
Step 2			
Self-esteem	1.74	.24	.46**
Independence	2.90	.89	.21**
Step 3			
Self-esteem	1.19	.33	.32***
Independence	3	.88	.22**
Discrepancy	-.31	.13	-.2*

Note: ***$p < .001$
   **$p < .01$
   *$p < .05$