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academic and social adjustment, while conscientiousness associated negatively with
these two indices of college student adjustment. (Contains 32 references and 1 table.)
(Author)

The Relationship between Higher Order

Personality Factors and Student Adjustment

by

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Abstract

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# 1. Introduction

The college years can be a period of great transition and change in a person's life. This time is marked by complex challenges in academic, social, and emotional adjustment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Some students seem to deal adaptively and constructively with these challenges, while others seem overwhelmed by them and unable to make healthy adjustments. Though there could be many reasons why students leave higher education, the fact remains that more than 40% of all college students exit colleges and universities without earning a degree (Tinto, 1987). It may be assumed that the various resources individuals have will be needed in coping with the adjustments required in college. Any deficits in individuals' psychological make-up or maladaptive coping strategies will hinder their development in adjusting to college. A more thorough knowledge of college student adjustment would aid professionals in understanding why individuals decide to leave school and in enhancing the coping skills of students in their adjustment to college. Important dimensions of college student adjustment include academic, institutional, social, and personal/emotional adjustment.

Early studies initially focused on academic ability as a predictor of retention and adjustment. Later findings, however, indicated that academic performance typically accounted for no more than half of the variance in decisions to drop out of college (Pantages & Creedon, 1978). The broader concept of academic adjustment involves more than just a student's academic ability. Other important components of academic adjustment include motivation to learn, taking action to meet academic demands, a sense of purpose, and general satisfaction with the academic environment (Baker & Siryk, 1984, 1989).

Closely related to academic adjustment is the concept of institutional commitment and adjustment. Some studies have looked at commitment as involving a firm resolve to complete a college degree and strong attachment to a particular institution (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Bean, 1980; Munro, 1981). It has been found that commitment variables have a strong direct effect on persistence; whereas, demographic variables such as age, sex, or socioeconomic status tend to have more indirect effects that interact with social and academic integration or institutional commitment in the prediction of persistence (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983).

A growing number of studies have indicated that social adjustment of students may be as important as academic factors in predicting persistence (Malinckrodt, 1988; Pantages & Creedon, 1978). Theorists have contended that integration into the social environment is a crucial element in commitment to an academic institution. Important components of social adjustment include forming a social network, managing new social freedoms, and becoming integrated into the social life of college (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). In fact, some of the most commonly reported crises in the freshman year involve difficulties in social adjustment, including feelings of homesickness and loneliness (Lokitz & Sprandel, 1976; Rich & Scovel, 1987). The perception of insufficient social support have been found to be predictive of attrition for both Caucasian and African-American students (Malinckrodt, 1988).

In terms of personal or emotional adjustment, students commonly question their self-identity, social relationships, and future goals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The resulting inner turmoil caused from these many questions leads to personal crises (Henton, Lamke, Murphy, & Haynes, 1980). Manifestations of personal or emotional problems include "global psychological distress, somatic distress, anxiety, low self-esteem, or depression" (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994,

p. 281). In fact, depression is the leading psychiatric disorder observed among college students (Sherer, 1985). In addition, anxiety has been consistently cited as predisposing students to dropping out (Pappas & Loring, 1985). Based on a review of the psychological literature, factors that may influence college student adjustment are personality variables of the five-factor model of personality.

## 2. Personality Variables of the Five-Factor Model

There are some theorists and researchers, including this writer, who believe that a "consensus" has emerged in psychology about a five-factor model of personality first proposed by Tupes and Christal (1961) and Norman (1963) to explain individual differences. Research (Jackson, 1984; McCrae & Costa, 1986; McCrae, Costa, & Busch, 1986; Mann, 2001; Mann, In preparation) has shown that the five-factor model of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect can be recovered in questionnaires and adjective checklists. McCrae and Costa (1986) found that the five-factor model closely matched factors derived from self-reports and peer ratings. Additionally, Goldberg (1981, 1992) reported support from detailed studies on the natural language of personality. A recent, large-scale intercultural comparison (McCrae and Allik, 2002) provided evidence and illumination of the five-factor model and a solid basis for cross-cultural support, and confirmation of its validity. Also, cross-cultural validation of the five-factor model is found in the research of Amelang and Borkenan (1982), who independently discovered the same five dimensions in self-reports and ratings of German subjects. McCrae and Costa (1989, 1997) believe that the five-factor model offers a universal and comprehensive framework for the description of individual differences in personality.

There is evidence that "student adjustment" may be predicted by the five-factor model of personality variables of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect. These key terms used in this five-factor model of the structure of personality are defined below:

Extroversion

Traits associated with extroversion include being sociable, active, talkative, person-oriented, optimistic, fun-loving, and affectionate (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). "Extroversion reflects the *quantity* and *intensity* of relationships with one's environment (notably social), and refers to a tendency to seek contacts with the environment with energy, spirit, enthusiasm, and confidence, and to live out experiences positively" (Rolland, 2002, p. 8).

Emotional Stability

Adjectives related to emotional stability include being calm, relaxed, unemotional, hardy, secure, and self-satisfied (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). *"Neuroticism (vs.* adjustment) is a classic dimension of personality represented in most models. It takes into account individual differences in the inclination to construct, perceive, and feel reality as being problematic, threatening, and difficult; and to feel negative emotions (such as fear, shame, and anger)" (Rolland, 2002, p. 8).

Agreeableness

Qualities associated with agreeableness include being softhearted, good-natured, trusting, helpful, forgiving, gullible, and straightforward (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). "This dimension concerns the nature of one's relationships with others, and differs from extroversion (another dimension with a strong interpersonal component) in that it refers more to the relational sphere

and the tone of relationships with others (kindness, empathy *vs.* cynicism, hostility) whereas extroversion refers more to the individual him/herself. Agreeableness deals with the quality of interpersonal relationships on a spectrum ranging from compassion to antagonism" (Rolland, 2002, p. 8).

## Conscientiousness

Some descriptors of conscientiousness include being organized, reliable, hard-working, self-disciplined, punctual, scrupulous, neat, ambitious, and persevering (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). "Conscientiousness is a dimension that focuses on issues such as orientation, persistency of behavior, and control of impulses. This dimension comprises dynamic elements (anticipation, success-orientation, task-orientation) and control and inhibition elements of behavior (organization, perseverance, thoroughness, respect for standards and procedures)" (Rolland, 2002, p. 8).

## Intellect

Traits commonly associated with intellect include being imaginative, curious, creative, original, and having broad interests (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). "This dimension is independent of cognitive aptitudes and groups together different types of behavior related to an active search for and a love of new experiences. It describes cognitive and non-cognitive openness to experience, which is manifested in a wide range of interests and an eagerness to seek out and live new and unusual experiences without anxiety and even with pleasure. The acceptance of new experiences may be relevant to various domains and different spheres (i.e., ideas, beliefs, values, actions) of behavior" (Rolland, 2003, p. 8).

### 3. Purpose of Study

Some theorists and researchers (McCrae & Costa, 1986; Wiggins, 1987) believe that individual differences in personality, as suggested by the "five factor model" best account for behavior like adjustment. That is, one's emotional, interpersonal, experiential, and motivational style is the primary determinant of behavior. Thus, the hypothesis of this study is that the five factors of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect will significantly predict college student adjustment.

### 4. Methods

<u>Participants</u>

The participants for this study were 200 introductory psychology students at a large public university in Canada. participants were between 18 and 49 years of age (M = 23.9). The sample was predominantly female (59%), Caucasian (59%), and single (90%). Forty-six percent of the participants were first-year students, 24% were second-year students, 18% were third-year students, and 11% were fourth-year students.

<u>Procedures</u>

All participants were recruited from several classes through in-class presentations by the author. Each volunteer received a packet to be completed. Every packet contained the instruments (randomly distributed per packet), a brief demographics questionnaire, a consent form, and a prize entry form to encourage participation. Participants were given a week to complete the packets. Those who completed all of the inventories were entered into a prize drawing, if they so chose. In addition, psychology students received two experimental credits for their participation. If an

inventory was not completely filled out by a respondent, it was discarded because total scores were required on all inventories used.

Measures

To test this hypothesis of this study, a research methodology was employed utilizing criterion and predictor variables. The criterion variable in this study is college student adjustment. This construct was measured using the Student Adaption to College Questionnaire (SACQ, Baker & Siryk, 1989) with its accompanying dimensions of academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, goal commitment/institutional attachment. The predictor variables in this study are the personality variables of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect. These constructs were measured using the Transparent Bipolar Inventory (Goldberg, 1992).

For the purposes of this study, a correlational analysis and a canonical correlational analysis were performed on the data. Using these analyses, patterns among the variables could be determined.

The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1989) is a self-report measure consisting of 67 items. It was designed to assess "how well a student is adapting to the demands of the college experience" (Baker & Siryk, 1989, p. 4). The measure has four subscales: academic adjustment (24 items), social adjustment (20 items), personal-emotional adjustment (15 items), and goal commitment/institutional attachment (15 items). Each SACQ item is rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from "applies very closely to me" to "doesn't apply to me at all." The sum of the individual items for each subscale represents an index for the four dimensions of adjustment. The sum of the scores for all of the items--the full scale score--

constitutes an index of overall adjustment. Examples of items include the following: (3) "I have been keeping up to date on my academic work" (academic adjustment), (4) "I am meeting as many people, and making as many friends as I would like" (social adjustment), (7) "Lately I have been feeling blue and moody a lot" (personal-emotional adjustment), and (16) "I am pleased now about my decision to attend this college in particular" (goal commitment/institutional attachment). The authors report alpha coefficients from 0.92 to 0.95 for the full scale. In addition, they report that the SACQ correlates with the following scales: goal instability, academic locus of control, psychological coping resources, revised UCLA loneliness scale, social avoidance and distress scale, mental health inventory anxiety subscale and depression subscale, and psychological distress inventory.

The Transparent Bipolar Inventory (Goldberg, 1992) is a self-report measure consisting of 50 bipolar scale items (e.g., introverted-extroverted). The scale was developed by Goldberg to provide a set of alternative Big-Five factor markers to replace those created over 25 years ago by Norman (1963). Each item is a bipolar scale with two descriptors on each end (e.g., disorganized-organized) and a nine point Likert scale in the middle ranging from 1 (very) to 3 (moderately) to 5 (neither) to 7 (moderately) to 9 (very). Examples of items include the following: under extroversion (Factor I), inhibited--spontaneous; under agreeableness (Factor II), uncooperative--cooperative; and under emotional stability (Factor IV), moody--steady. The coefficient alpha reliability estimates of the scales were .88, .88, .85, .88, and .84 for Factors I through V, respectively, averaging .87. In terms of validity, correlations with the corresponding scales from the NEO-PI were .68, .54, .51, -.65, and .48 for Factors I through V respectively.

## 5. Results and Summary

A canonical correlation analysis was conducted with all of the variables in the study to determine which variables were predictive of the set of college adjustment variables. The following table summarizes the results of this study.

Table I.

Canonical Analysis: SACQ Scales and Personality Scales ($\underline{N}$ = 126)

|  | Standardized Canonical Coefficients | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Scales | Variate One | Variate Two |
|  | .454* | .357** |
| SACQ Scales (Set 1) | | |
| Academic Adjustment | -.0880 | .8295 |
| Social Adjustment | -.1114 | .6109 |
| Personal-Emotional Adjustment | -.1910 | .0673 |
| Institutional Attachment | 1.0063 | -.2326 |
| Personality Scales (Set 2) | | |
| Extroversion | .1012 | .4201 |
| Agreeableness | .2348 | .8745 |
| Conscientiousness | .3512 | -.5256 |
| Emotional Stability | .5389 | -.2288 |
| Intellect | .1304 | -.1906 |

*$\underline{p}$ = .0005
**$\underline{p}$ = .0668

The first variate in Table I can best be described as institutional attachment and emotional stability. In this variate emotional stability is predictive of the set of college adjustment variables.

The second variate in Table I is a contrast between positive agreeableness and extroversion and negative conscientiousness. In this less significant variate, the personality variables of extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are predictive of the set of college adjustment variables.

It was concluded that: (A) Emotional stability correlated positively with attachment and was predictive of the set of college adjustment variables. (B) At a less significant level, agreeableness and extroversion correlated positively with academic and social adjustment, while conscientiousness correlated negatively with these two forms of adjustment. These three personality variables were predictive of the set of college adjustment variables.

**Future Directions for Research**

(A) Other research should confirm that emotional stability is indeed predictive of college student adjustment. Specifically in what ways does emotional stability contribute to commitment/attachment?

(B) Other studies should also confirm that agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientious are predictive of college student adjustment. Specifically in what ways does agreeableness and extroversion contribute to academic and social adjustment? In what ways does conscientiousness negatively influence academic and social adjustment?

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