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**EFFECT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT
 AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The study investigated the effect of psychological distress on psychosocial adjustment of first-year students at Rivers State University. A sample of 243 students participated in the research, providing data through surveys and assessments. The findings revealed that higher levels of psychological distress were associated with lower psychosocial adjustment, underscoring the importance of addressing mental health concerns for overall well-being. Practical recommendations were provided, including the implementation of mental health awareness campaigns, and gender-inclusive support initiatives. The study contributes to knowledge by advancing our understanding of psychosocial adjustment in higher education and offering actionable insights for universities to enhance the well-being of their first-year students. The inclusion of a holistic assessment method during the admission process was proposed as a novel approach to improve early identification of at-risk students and tailor support strategies effectively.

Keywords: *First-year students, Gender, Psychosocial adjustment, Psychological distress, Rivers State University, Self-efficacy.*

Introduction

Making a transition from secondary school to a university environment can be stressful for many students. Living away from home, leading a more independent and less supported life, and coping with the study demands of the program can be difficult for young people (Kumar et al., 2013). Regardless of the program, the first year is considered to be particularly stressful as students for the first time come into close contact with serious responsibilities coupled with lectures totally differing from what prior knowledge, they have which may exert a negative effect on their psychological health (Kumar et al, 2013). The transition stage from high school to college can be challenging for students particularly following departure through the dependent phase at home or in school where they have to stand by the regulations laid down by parents and the school. From their view, the university is a moment when these controls are not there and the students become autonomous just like adults. Earlier studies have revealed that the transition time from secondary to tertiary schooling is a critical phase (Hutardo and Carter, 1997).

According to American Psychological Association (APA), psychosocial adjustment refers to an individual's ability to cope with and adapt to the demands and challenges of their social and psychological environment. It encompasses a wide range of factors, including emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, coping strategies, and overall psychological functioning (APA, 2018). Lots of students experience the first adaptation to university as demanding and negative in different ways (Pancer, Anderman, Hammen & Freeman, 2000; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). This experience could be due to a range of difficulties faced by students, particularly in their initial years on campus. The difficulties consist of forming new interactions, adapting to changes in interaction with parents and family (leaving away from home), and learning novel strategies in the new educational setting. If the students fail to deal with the new difficulties, they have to leave the program even before completion. Success for first-year university students is often different in terms of making changes in taking responsibility.

Sociology-based theories classify various factors, both outside and inside the university, that can affect the process of adjustment including students' primary objectives and commitments, their cloistered experiences including their college performance, supplementary activities and relations with faculties, staff, and peer groups, their interaction with people and societies outside the university including parents, peers, employers, and community of various organizations and their individual unique attributes (Tinto, 1993, cited in Adanewh, 2007).

Baker and Sirk (1989) state that successful adjustment to university has been defined by criteria such as remaining on campus, enjoying emotional well-being, and performing well academically. Concerning this, the research findings of Charles and Stewart (1991) reveal that if students fail to adjust to a new college atmosphere, they will face high levels of depression, isolation, and loneliness which can present severe obstacles to the attainment of their college objectives. Once students adjust to the requirements and roles of the new environment, however, their academic and psychosocial experience is likely to be successful and achievable (Charles and Stewart, 1991).

A study concerning the behavior of students' transitions to university offers important insights into the internal and external contexts and factors that can affect the process. In addition to the classroom setting, students indicate that genuine educational transition processes from secondary to tertiary level include rising existence skills such as money and time management skills, private goal setting, rising self-regulation taking responsibility for one's physical, financial and educational well-being, and developing a clear understanding of oneself and one's own goals through relations with faculty and peers who have goals, attitudes or values different from the students (Terenzini, 1994).

Psychological Distress and Psychosocial Adjustment

The term "psychosocial adjustment" applies to both psychological and social facets. On the psychological front, this entails learning effective coping mechanisms, techniques for controlling one's emotions, resilience, self-esteem, and a good self-concept. Socially, it entails establishing and keeping supportive connections, effectively engaging and communicating with others, and carrying out social tasks and duties. It refers to people's capacity to adapt to the environment, which implies that the individual has sufficient mechanisms to feel good, integrate, respond adequately to the demands of the environment, and achieve his or her objectives (Madariaga et al., 2014).

The term psychosocial adjustment is also used to refer to an individual's ability to adapt and function effectively within their social environment while also maintaining positive psychological well-being. It involves the process of managing and coping with the various challenges and demands presented by one's social interactions and life circumstances. According to Anderson, Keith, and Novak (2002), psychosocial adjustment is the process through which a person adjusts mentally and emotionally to a transition or life-altering event.

According to Mirowsky and Ross (2002), psychological distress is primarily described as an emotional state marked by depressive and anxious symptoms, such as restlessness and tension. These symptoms could be linked to somatic complaints (such as fatigue, headaches, and sleeplessness), which are likely to differ between cultures (Kleinman 1991; Kirmayer 1989). The definition of psychological distress has been expanded with additional requirements, although there is no agreement on these criteria. The stress-distress model, in particular, holds that exposure to a stressful event that poses a threat to one's physical or mental health, the inability to effectively cope with this stressor, and the emotional turmoil that results from this ineffective coping are the characteristics of psychological distress (Horwitz 2007, Ridner, 2004).

Psychosocial adjustment and psychological distress go alongside each other hand. Psychosocial adjustment can be significantly affected when people suffer psychological distress. For instance, an individual who is depressed could find it difficult to maintain relationships, participate in social activities, or succeed in school or the workplace. Likewise, going through stressful life experiences like a loss or trauma can impact a person's mental health and capacity to handle everyday stress. When students experience psychological distress, it can interfere with their ability to adapt and thrive in their academic and social environments.

The process of psychosocial adjustment takes into account a number of variables, such as the person's resilience, social support network, coping mechanisms, and accessibility to mental health resources. Solid coping mechanisms, a solid network of family and friends, and enough access to professional aid all increase a person's likelihood of making good adjustments to difficult situations and successfully managing psychological distress. Additionally, according to Tseng (2002), there are four main categories of adjustment issues that college students must deal with which includes general living, educational, socio-cultural, and personal-emotional adjustment.

Living scenario adjustments, financial concerns, situations, norms, values, rules, and regulations are all included in general living adjustments. Dealing with loneliness, discord, feeling homesick, isolation, hopelessness, and loss of identity status are all aspects of personal-emotional adjustment. Course loads, difficulty completing assignments and studying for exams, a lack of prior knowledge of a field of study, and sociocultural adjustment issues like language problems, accommodation issues, dietary restrictions, loneliness, and a sense of loss are all examples of educational adjustment issues. According to researchers, "psychosocial adjustment" is a term that is frequently used to refer to both social and personal emotional changes (Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002).

Students must adjust to a variety of changes as they transition to university life, including changes to their housing arrangements, learning environments, and social networks as well as increased independence and responsibility in their personal and academic lives. Even though the fact that university life has the potential to successfully change many students, some may endure long-lasting emotional maladjustments and a sense of

hopelessness (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000; Hammen, 1980; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000 quoted in Lama M. Al-Qaisy, 2010).

According to Bradburn & Carroll's research findings from 2002, the majority of new entry students during their first year of university depart campus life without earning a degree, accounting for one-third of the undergraduate population. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) suggested that social adjustment can be just as important as intellectual adjustment. They conducted their research on 155 first-year students and discovered that personal adjustment and integration with college life's social relationships are at least as essential to student retention rates as academic aspects.

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Aim and Importance of the Study

The new university environment in which the students find themselves with new kinds of procedures and new people can create emotional problems. The first few weeks on campus can be lonely. The students will need to form new relationships which may not develop overnight, as intimacy in university friendships may take a lot of time. Living with roommates in the hostels or halls of the university can also present special problems. For example, negotiating respect for personal property, personal space, sleeping, and relaxation needs can be a complex task. Students' inability to cope with this new environment may result in distress and maladjustment.

A study by Lent et al. (2009) shows that the better students adapt to their academic environment, the better will be their university experience. Once students adjust to the requirements and roles of the recent environment, their academic and psychosocial experience is likely to be satisfying (Charles & Stewart, 1991). The four main categories of adjustment issues that college students frequently experience were general living, educational, sociocultural, and personal-emotional adjustment, according to Tseng (2002). Financial hardships, academic difficulties, cultural differences, and emotional challenges are just a few examples of the many obstacles that might arise throughout the adjustment process. Education-related transition issues can include challenges with course loads, assignments, and exams, while personal-emotional adjustment issues can include feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and a loss of identity status. Language obstacles, lodging concerns, and dietary constraints are examples of socio-cultural adjustment problems.

Based on the review of the literature, there appeared to be a scarcity of research regarding the psychosocial well-being of first-year students. Although psychological distress and academic self-efficacy have theoretically been believed to have a significant influence on student's academic performance, empirical research looking into the relation of these variables with students' psychosocial adjustment has been limited. With this in mind, an attempt was made to investigate the effect of psychological distress and psychosocial adjustment of first-year students with the following research question:

To what extent will psychological distress affect the psychosocial adjustment of first-year students?

Method

Study Design and Study Site

The design used in conducting this study was a descriptive survey research. This design was used as the researcher is interested in describing the extent of interaction between the variables, and data from the variables were in ratio or interval scale (scores) to create the possibility for the scores to be analyzed. The study was conducted in the four campuses of Rivers State University. They include Emohua campus, Ahoada campus, Etche campus and Port-Harcourt (main) campus.

Participants

Students who were in their first year (100 level) from the different campuses were recruited for this study. A total of 245 respondents were used for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the faculties from the eleven faculties of the University. The faculties include Social Sciences (Emohua campus), Humanities (Ahoada campus), and Agriculture (Etche campus). Systematic sampling was used to select students from each of the faculties. Exclusion criteria were those who were not willing to take part in the study and those who were not be available at the time of administering the questionnaire.

Study instrument and Data collection

Data for this study were collected using structured questionnaires. Students' level of psychosocial adjustment was measured by an adapted version of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) by Baker and Siryk (1999). The scale will measure attributes in academic, social, and personal-emotional areas. The scale is a 22-item self-report measure with a five-point scale (5=strongly agree and 1= strongly disagree). Kessler psychological distress scale (K10) developed by Kessler et al. (2003), was used for assessing psychological distress in respondents. The questionnaires were administered in English language. The instruments were administered to the sample with the help of instructors from the university.

The questionnaire's validity has been evaluated through comparisons with diagnostic interviews and other established measures of mental health, showing good agreement. The K-10 has demonstrated high sensitivity and specificity in detecting psychological distress and has been found to be effective in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Overall, K-10 is considered a valid and reliable tool for assessing psychological distress and identifying potential mental health problems. To assess the validity of the SACQ, researchers typically conducted studies comparing the questionnaire scores with other established measures or criteria related to student adaptation to college. Baker and Siryk (1989) reported an alpha coefficient as follows: academic adjustment 0.84, social adjustment 0.76, and personal-emotional 0.88.

Statistical analysis

Primary data obtained were entered into an excel file and cleaned before exporting into the software, and Service Solution (SPSS) version 25 for analysis. Data were presented as frequencies and percentages. The influence of psychological distress on psychological adjustment was tested for statistical significance using the Independent t-test at $p < 0.05$.

Results

In terms of faculty (30.6%) were in faculty of agricultural science, (24.9%) were in faculty of humanities, (39.2%) were in faculty of social sciences, (1.2%) were in faculty of media and communication studies, (0.8%) were in faculty of management, (0.8%) were in faculty of sciences while (2.4%) were in faculty of engineering. In terms of age (71.8%) were 16-20 years of age, (25.7%) were 21-25 years of age while (2.4%) were 26-30 years of age. In terms of gender, (45.7%) were males while (54.3%) were females. Based on religious affiliation (95.9%) was Christian, (1.6%) were Muslim while (2.4%) reported other religions affiliation. All the respondents (100.0%) were first year students. The socio-demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

The statistical analysis (Table 2) revealed that there was significant influence of psychological distress on psychosocial adjustment ($t(243) = 7.29, p < .05$). This means that first year students with low psychological distress reported higher psychosocial adjustment (Mean = 43.87; SD = 9.43) compared to first year students with high psychological distress (Mean = 34.16; SD = 11.22) who reported lower psychosocial adjustment. The hypothesis which stated that higher levels of psychological distress will influence the psychosocial adjustment of first year students in Rivers State University was accepted.

Table 1: Respondents' Socio-demographics (N = 245)

Category	Level	N(%)
Faculty	Agricultural science	75(30.6)
	Humanities	61(24.9)
	Social sciences	96(39.2)
	Media and communication studies	3(1.2)
	Management	2(0.8)
	Sciences	2(0.8)
	Engineering	6(2.4)
Age	16-20 years	176(71.8)
	21-25 years	63(25.7)
	26-30 years	6(2.4)
Gender	Male	112(45.7)
	Female	133(54.3)
Religion	Christian	235(95.9)
	Muslim	4(1.6)
	Others	6(2.4)
Are you currently a first year students?		
	Yes	245(100.0)

Hypothesis One: Higher levels of psychological distress will influence the psychosocial adjustment of first year students.

Table 2: Summary of Independent Sample t-test of psychological distress on psychosocial adjustment

DV	Psychological distress	N	Mean	Std	Df	T	p
Psychosocial adjustment	Low	116	43.87	9.43	243	7.29	<.05
	High	129	34.16	11.22			

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate a significant effect of psychological distress on psychosocial adjustment among first-year students at Rivers State University. Specifically, the data reveals that there is a significant influence of psychological distress on psychosocial adjustment, as indicated by the t-value ($t(243) = 7.29$) and the p-value ($p < .05$). This means that the level of psychological distress experienced by first-year students has a substantial impact on their psychosocial adjustment. The direction of this influence is noteworthy – students with lower psychological distress tend to report higher levels of psychosocial adjustment (Mean = 43.87), whereas students with higher psychological distress tend to report lower psychosocial adjustment (Mean = 34.16).

The result aligns with the findings of Al-Amayra (1988) who discovered academic, social, and personal-emotional issues as the areas in the study where college students' psychosocial issues first surfaced. Cornell (1994) who discovered that academic pressures, interpersonal issues, and personal emotional stress were prevalent issues among members of new-entry of college students.

Nora and Cabrera (1996) who discovered that adjustment issues were related to money, the academic program, a lack of support services, relationships with peers, and academic professors and staff. The findings from their studies all stated that these issues have the potential to increase the likelihood of academic failure as well as feelings of depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. This result also aligns with the hypothesis, which posited that higher levels of psychological distress would have an adverse effect on the psychosocial adjustment of first-year students. The findings suggest that psychological distress does indeed influence and negatively impact the psychosocial adjustment of these students.

Summary

The study investigated the effect of psychological distress on psychosocial adjustment of first-year students in Rivers State University. The study carefully studied the problems associated with first-year students with the major problems being academic, financial, interpersonal, and social. Several literatures on the relationship between psychological distress and psychosocial adjustment were reviewed. Methodologically, the study adopted a descriptive research design. This design helped with the use of a quantitative approach to studying the variables through the distribution of questionnaires to get the view of the respondents. The population of the study constitutes all first-year undergraduate students in Rivers State University. The study's findings reveal inverse relationship between psychological distress and psychosocial adjustment, where higher distress is associated with lower adjustment levels. This finding has implications for universities and institutions in terms of providing targeted support and interventions to enhance the well-being and adjustment of their students.

Significance of the findings

This study makes a significant contribution to knowledge by deepening our understanding of the intricate process of psychosocial adjustment among first-year university students. In addition to these insights, the study offers practical recommendations that can guide the university in fostering a more supportive and inclusive academic environment for its students.

Limitations of the study

The present study was conducted in Rivers State University, in Rivers State, Nigeria. Hence, it may lack generalizability to other populations and societies.

Conclusion

It was concluded that indeed, first-year students experience psychological distress. How well students adapt to university life, will depend on a variety of factors including financial stability, coping ability, level of support they receive, their perception of the academic workloads, etc.

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