Geographical Dislocation and Adjustment in University Students: The Impact of Attachment, Autonomy and Coping Behaviour on Stress and Well-Being

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Abstract

The relative contribution of geographical dislocation, attachment styles, coping behaviours, and autonomy, to successful student adjustment, was examined in relation to stress and well-being. A sample of 142 on-campus first year university students, across four Victorian university campuses completed self-report questionnaires. Questionnaires included demographic, social network, intrapsychic (attachment and autonomy), and coping variables. Multiple regression analysis revealed that being female, not having made a friend to confide in personal matters, lower achieved autonomy, and use of emotion-focused coping predicted higher levels of student stress. A second multiple regression analysis revealed that living away from home, and preferring others to approach oneself to initiate conversation or friendships predicted lower well-being, whilst increased frequency of phone and email contact, and greater secure parent and peer attachment, predicted greater well-being. Pearson's correlations indicated that securely attached students used more problem-focused coping and social support, whereas insecurely attached students used more emotion-focused coping. Qualitative data indicated student concerns about being away from family and friends, finance, course direction and structure, social opportunities on campus, and generally adjusting to the university culture. It was concluded that first year on-campus students would benefit from program initiatives targeting enhancement of on-campus social opportunities, development of autonomy, problem-focused coping behaviour, interpersonal and social assertiveness.

Lazarus and Launier (1978) conceived stress as a physcially and psychologically deficient outcome of a transactional process between an individual's perception of a stressor, and their coping resources. Initially, a person engages in primary appraisal of the stressor. If the stressor is considered benign or irrelevant, no further appraisal is made but, if considered a threat, challenge, or harmful, secondary appraisal is engaged, wherein available coping resources are assessed and implemented. Problem-focused coping, (i.e., making a plan of action and following it) and social support are considered adaptive behaviours, and emotion-focused coping (self-blame, wishful thinking, avoidance) is non-adaptive behaviour in response to stressors (Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro, & Becker, 1985). If an individual has inadequate and non-adaptive resources, a high level of distress is experienced (Lazarus & Launier). Distress has been examined as a decreased level of well-being, with increased loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem (Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 2000), and depression (Lopez, Mauricio, Gormley, Simko, & Berger, 2001; Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999) considered to indicate low levels of student well-being. Gadzella (1994) found that women, experienced more stressors and reactions to stressors than men, particularly in relation to pressures and changes. A student faced with balancing study requirements, work hours, managing finances, illness, gaining social acceptability, and living away from home, may or may not have the resources to approach these stresses constructively, resulting in either positive adjustment or greater distress and therefore lower well-being.

Attachment and autonomy are intrapsychic factors proposed to influence psychological adjustment (Bowlby, 1979), stress, and well-being (Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 2000; Noom et al., 1999). Students who experience high levels of autonomy through a greater sense of control over life, feeling, and attitudes, may cope more effectively with challenges at university. Greater levels of autonomy have been positively related to high self-esteem, and social and academic competence (Noom et al., 1999).

Attachment feelings are established early in life through the development of relationship bonds to
influential attachment figures, such as a parent, influencing one's conception of self, and the style of interpersonal interaction continued into adulthood (Bowlby, 1979; Feeney & Noller, 1996; Salter-Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Students whose interpersonal interactions were based on positive attachment feelings of trust and sensitive communication from others, appeared more confident in initiating contacts for social support, than students whose interactions were based on feelings of distrust and insensitive communication (Ognibene & Collins, 1998). Secure attachment relationships were important during adolescence, as students may begin to transfer attachment feelings from parents to peers (Fraley & Davis, 1997). Secure parent and peer attachment was found to predict greater well-being (Armsden & Greenberg, 1985).

While the attachment system is considered to be active at all times, its activation is increased, and particularly influential in time of stress (Salter-Ainsworth et al., 1978). Students with secure attachment have been found to use support seeking and forms of problem-focused coping behaviour in response to stress (Armsden & Greenberg, 1985). Insecurely attached student’s increased experience of distress was mediated by the use of coping behaviours, in which those who reported relying on reactive (strong emotional responses, impulsivity, and distortion) forms of emotion-focused coping, experienced increased distress (Lopez et al., 2001). Those students relying on reactive and suppressive (denial, confusion, and suppression of problems) forms of emotion-focused coping did not experience such distress. As secure attachment was the only attachment style to consistently predict use of social support and problem-focused coping behaviours in response to stress (Armsden & Greenberg, 1985; Ognibene & Collins, 1998), it still remains a question as to whether coping behaviours mediate students’ levels of stress and well-being.

Many students who move away from home may face increased responsibilities due to independent living. For example, Callaghan (2001) found that students are under increasing socio-economic pressure to work at least part time, whilst studying full-time, in order to meet basic financial needs of living. This was particularly relevant for students who moved away from home to attend university. Students may face altered access to previous networks of family and friends, perhaps perceiving previous social support as an inaccessible resource to utilise in response to stress. Tchen et al. (2001) reasoned that living away from home, without accessible parental support, decreased student’s use of parental social support as a coping behaviour. The importance of access to at least one source of social support at university was found by Davis, Morris, and Kraus (1998), wherein the absence of at least one confidant impacted negatively on emotional loneliness. If secure students, who live away from home, are confident in initiating contacts for social support (Ognibene & Collins, 1998), there may be less need to contact parents and friends in times of stress, and seeking access to previous networks of family and friends may take more symbolic forms, such as the use of phone, email, or letter (Leonardi & Kiosseoglou, 2000). Given that secure attachment was predictive of frequent phone contact to family (Armsden & Greenberg, 1985), it is also open to question whether students seek social support from newly made contacts, or previous family and friends via such forms of communication as phone or email, to reduce their level of distress and improve their well-being.

The present study examined the contributions of moving away from home to attend university, to the levels of stress and well-being experienced by first year university students. The influences of coping behaviour, social opportunity, attachment, and autonomy, in the process of adjustment, in terms of perceived stressors and reactions, and personal well-being, were also examined.

**Method**

**Participants**

First year university students were recruited from four campuses of a Victorian university in Australia. Of the 142 respondents, the majority (73%) were female. The regional distribution of participants across the campuses consisted of 22% from the Melbourne metropolitan campus, 45% from two regional city campuses, and 33% from a rural city campus. Students were aged from 17 to 57 years ($M = 21.44; SD = 6.96$). The majority of participants (97%) studied full time, and 53% were in part-time employment. Sixty one percent of students were living away from family home, 29% having left home in the first six months of the year, whereas 40% were living at home with family.

**Measurements**

**Demographic Variables** Participants indicated their age; gender (females coded ‘0’, and males ‘1’); whether they studied full (coded 1) or part-time (coded 0). Participants also indicated the length of time (months) since leaving home, and how far (kilometres) their previous residence (family or independent home during past three years) was from their university campus (geographical dislocation). “Time since left home” was recoded into a dichotomous variable according to whether students live “still at home” coded 0, or “away from home” coded 1.
Social Network Participants were asked to indicate “yes” (coded 0) or “no” (coded 1) to questions about friendships outside university: “I miss my friends who don’t go to university with me”; new friendships made at university, “I have made new friends or contacts at university with whom I feel I could confide in about personal matters”; and communicating with others, “I am comfortable in approaching others to initiate conversation or friendships”, and “I prefer people to approach me to start conversation or initiate friendships.” These questions investigated the dynamics associated with making new social contacts at university.

Contact Participants indicated the type (phone, letter, or email), and frequency (per week, on average) of contact to family and friends that do not go to university with them.

University Experience Two qualitative questions asked participants to report any issues that concerned or influenced: 1) their experience of attending university, and 2) their experience of having moved away from home to attend university.

Intrapsychic and Coping Variables

Autonomy An autonomy scale (Noom et al., 1999), measured adolescents’ ability to exercise control over their lives, enabling the examination of the relationship of student autonomy to levels of stress and well-being. The scale contains 15 items, with three, five item subscales: attitudinal (e.g., “I can make a choice easily”), emotional (e.g., “When I disagree with others, I tell them”), and functional, (e.g., “I go straight for my goal”). Each item was scored on a likert type scale ranging from 1 (a very bad description); to 5 (a very good description). Reliability estimates for the subscales were: attitudinal autonomy \( \alpha = 0.71 \); emotional autonomy \( \alpha = 0.60 \); and functional autonomy \( \alpha = 0.64 \), and there was good construct, convergent, and discriminant validity (Noom et al.).

Attachment quality The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) assessed: 1) an individual’s level of trust in an attachment figure, perception of understanding by the attachment figure, and respect for needs and desires (trust); 2) the level of perceived sensitivity of the attachment figure to one’s emotional states and helpfulness with concerns (communication); and 3) assessment of anger toward, or emotional detachment from attachment figures (alienation). The IPPA contains two subscales, measuring attachment to the most influential parent (28 items), and attachment to peers (25 items). The total score represented the degree of attachment on a continuous scale ranging from insecure to secure, where a higher score indicated a higher degree of secure attachment. Scores were scaled on a five point likert type scale, with 1 (almost never or never); to 5 (almost always or always). Cronbach’s alphas for the IPPA were: \( \alpha = 0.93 \) for the parent scale, and \( \alpha = 0.86 \) for the peer scale.

Coping Behaviour The Ways of Coping Checklist (WCCL) (Vitaliano et al., 1985) is a 42-item scale, designed to measure coping behaviours used in response to stressful situations. The scale was derived from Lazarus and Launier’s (1978) model of stress and coping. Participants were asked to indicate how they have generally responded to stress, on a four point likert scale, with 0 (does not apply and/or not used), 1 (used somewhat), 2 (used quite a bit), and 3 (used a great deal). The WCCL contains five subscales: problem-focused coping (15 items, e.g., “I made a plan of action and followed it”); three types of emotion-focused coping, (3 items for self blame, e.g., “Blamed yourself”; 8 items for wishful thinking, e.g., “Hoped a miracle would happen”; 10 items for avoidance, e.g., “Tried to forget the whole thing”); and social support (6 items, e.g., “Talked to someone about how I was feeling”) as a coping behaviour. The scale demonstrated construct and concurrent validity, and good reliability (\( \alpha = 0.82 \)) (Vitaliano et al.).

Outcome Variables

Personal Well-Being Index The Personal Well-Being (PWB) subscale of the International Well-Being Index (IWB), (Cummins, Eckersley, Pallant, van Vugt, & Misajon, 2002) was designed to assess an individual’s general perceived satisfaction with future security, standard of living, physical health, achievements, personal relationships, safety, and feeling part of the community. A likert scale ranging from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied) was used to measure responses. For the domains on which the scale was founded, construct validity ranged from \( r = .21 \) to \( r = .58 \); and convergent validity was \( r = .73 \), with a measure of satisfaction with life as a whole (Cummins et al.). There was a strong reliability based on the factor loadings, which ranged from \( r = .44 \) to \( r = .72 \) (R. A. Cummins, personal communication, October 28, 2002; Cummins & Pallant, 2002).

Student Life Stress Inventory (SLSI), (Gadzella, 1994), is a 51 item scale. The first section (23 items) includes five categories designed to measure the number of stressors experienced due to frustrations, conflicts, pressures, changes, and self-imposed stress. The second section (28 items) measured student’s reactions to stressors (physiological, emotional, behavioural and cognitive). The test was scored using a five point likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (most of the time). Cronbach’s alpha (\( \alpha = 0.76 \)),
showed strong reliability and validity \( (r = 0.73) \) (Gadzella).

**Procedure**

Following approval by the University Ethics Committee, 700 questionnaires were distributed over a period of four weeks; with a response rate of 20.3%. Contact was made with academic staff of all faculties on each campus of the University, to arrange permission to invite student participation in the study, during lecture times. Participants responded to advertisements placed in the student university magazine, and collected questionnaires from various locations (e.g., student services, faculty office) at the university campuses. Participants completed the questionnaires in their own time; these were returned in an internal mail envelope, attached to each questionnaire for anonymous return.

**Results**

**Social Network and Contact Variables**

Eighty percent of students reported missing their friends who did not go to university with them; 77% of students reported that they had made new friends or contacts at university with whom they felt they could confide in about personal matters, compared to 33% who had not made new friends to confide in. In terms of initiating relationships, 68% of students reported that they were comfortable to approach others to start conversation or initiate friendships, whereas 61% students preferred other people to approach them to start conversation or initiate friendships. *Contact* with family and friends who do not attend university with students, ranged from: not at all to 30 times per week \( (M = 3.62; SD = 4.20) \) via phone; not at all to 10 times per week \( (M = 2.15; SD = 2.60) \) via email; and not at all to three times per week \( (M = .18; SD = .48) \) via letter.

**Preliminary Data Analysis**

Prior to analysis, all variables were examined for accuracy of data entry, missing values, and compliance with the assumptions of regression analysis. Reliability analysis on all scales ranged from \( \alpha = 0.79 \) to \( \alpha = 0.94 \). Table 1 indicates Cronbach's alpha, means, and standard deviations for intrapsychic (autonomy and attachment) and coping variables, and the dependent variables: stress and well-being. The mean score \( (M = 7.23) \) for well-being was just below the average set point for most people in the Western world (Cummins et al., 2002). As there was only a moderate negative correlation between stress and well-being \( (r = -.48, p < .01) \), the variables were considered to be independent constructs (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

**Multiple Regression Analyses**

Two-step sequential multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of the dependent variables: stress and well-being. The demographic and study situation variables: age, gender, and living at home/away, were entered into the first step. In the second step, the variables: social network, frequency of contact by phone, letter, and email, degree of autonomy, attachment quality, and coping behaviour, were entered.

The sample size satisfied the ratio of cases to variables \( N \geq 104 \) plus the number of independent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Scale Means, Standard Deviations, and Alpha Coefficients for the Intrapsychic and Coping Variables and the Dependent Variables: Stress and Well-being (N = 142)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scale</strong></td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
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<td>Well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Independent variables</strong></td>
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<td>Autonomy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secure parent attachment</td>
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<td>Secure peer attachment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-focused coping</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeking social support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotion-focused coping</td>
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**Correlates of Stress** At step 1, with age, gender, living at home/away entered, \( R^2 = .01, F (3,138) = .65, ns. \) Gender appeared to be a suppressor variable in the first step which was freed up in the second step making a minor contribution to the prediction of stress. At step 2, social network, frequency of contact, autonomy, quality of attachment, and coping behaviour, added to the prediction of stress: \( R^2 = .45; \) adjusted \( R^2 = .38; \Delta R^2 = .43; F (16,125) = 6.28, p < .001. \) The combination of demographic, situational,
intrapsychic and coping variables accounted for 45% (adj 38%) of the variance in students' stress. The significant correlates suggested that a higher level of stress was associated with being female ($\beta=-.17$), not having made a new friend to confide in personal matters ($\beta=.18$), a decreased level of autonomy ($\beta=-.20$), and greater use of emotion-focused coping ($\beta=-.37$).

Correlates of Well-Being At step 1, with age, gender, and living at home/away entered, $R^2=.04, F(3,138)=1.89, ns$. Living at home/away appeared to be a suppressor variable in the first step which was freed up in the second step to make a minor contribution to the prediction of well-being. At step 2, living at home/away, frequency of phone and email contact, autonomy, preference for people to approach, and quality of peer and parent attachment, predicted well-being, $R^2=.49$; adjusted $R^2=.42$; $\Delta R^2=.45; F(16,125)=7.37, p<.001$. The combination of demographic, situational, intrapsychic and coping variables accounted for 49% (adj. 42%) of the variance in students' well-being scores. The significant correlates suggested that lower levels of well-being were associated with living away from home ($\beta=-.22$), preferring others to approach oneself to start conversation or initiate friendships ($\beta=.18$), increased phone ($\beta=.27$) and email ($\beta=.15$) contact with family and friends, and insecure attachment bonds with peers ($\beta=.24$) and parents ($\beta=.31$).

Qualitative Data

Transcripts of the responses to the two qualitative questions were analysed and coded into themes jointly across the two questions, by isolating and collating key phrases and sentences. Students indicated concern with demands and challenges of adjusting to the university culture and environment. Distance from family and friends emerged as a theme involving concern by 21% of students about loss of contact and availability of support, e.g., "I miss my parents and brother . . . Lost contact with some friends, hard to maintain close friendships over a distance." With 21% of students referring to basic financial living requirements and costs of study, e.g., "Paying rent, bills etc. while studying fulltime has been tough", finances were a concern. Student's concern with the direction of their courses was apparent, with 20% wondering whether they had chosen a personally suitable course, with some who expressed course dissatisfaction, and concern about job prospects. General adjustment demands for 17% of students included concerns with balancing competing demands of school, work and family life, maintaining personal well-being, and the level of independence required to meet these needs. Course structure and demands were also issues for 16% of students who expressed dissatisfaction with lecture times, workload, and course content. Concerns and issues with social opportunity and support showed that some students (15%) felt they had not connected socially to the university culture and environment, and that improvement was needed in the provision of social opportunities and social integration for on-campus (as opposed to residential) students. Nine percent of students reported positive experiences including enjoyment in their chosen course, opportunities for establishing or furthering independence, and making new friendships. A minority (2%) of responses regarded cultural issues, in which students expressed feeling overwhelmed with cultural differences in education, social interaction, social support, and missing family.

Discussion

Stress Students' greater use of emotion-focused coping was associated with higher levels of stress, providing support for the non-adaptive nature of emotion-focused coping found in previous research (Lopez et al., 2001; Tchen et al., 2001; Vitaliano et al., 1985).

The importance of roles played by newly made social contacts at university was supported, as having made a friend at university to discuss personal matters, was related to reduced stress. The finding suggests the importance of having close social support (Davis et al., 1998) at university. Being female also predicted higher levels of stress, supporting Gadzella's (1994) study.

In contrast to the findings of Leondari and Kiosseoglou (2000) and Noom et al. (1999), student peer and parent attachment were not predictive of stress; but, in support of Noom et al.'s findings, lower achieved autonomy predicted higher levels of stress. As correlations between quality of peer and parent attachment and stress showed weak, but significant negative relationships, the size of the current sample may not have been large enough to detect a predictive relationship.

Attachment. In support of previous literature (Armsden & Greenberg, 1985; Lopez et al., 2001; Ognibene & Collins, 1998) bivariate correlations showed that secure parent and peer attachment dimensions were positively related to use of social support and problem-focused coping behaviour, and insecure attachment was positively related to emotion-focused coping.

Well-Being The reported average score of 66% for well-being was below the average range of 70% to 80% reported for people in the Western world (Cummins et al., 2002), suggesting that students subjective well-being is below the average in society. Students' living away from home was associated
with lower well-being, which may relate to their expressed concern over managing various domains of personal well-being. Personal relationships were of concern, e.g., "... hard to maintain close friendships over a distance." Another domain of concern was standard of living e.g., "Money is the biggest issue..." With 55% of students employed at least part-time, it is likely that students living away from home are under increasing pressure to work part-time to supplement the costs associated with school and basic living expenses (Callaghan, 2001). It appears that some students may need to work part-time whilst studying full-time (Callaghan), with 97% of students reporting full-time study, and 52% of those full-time students in part-time employment. There was further support for such a need to work from 21% of students' expressed concern over finance, within the qualitative data.

In support of Armsden and Greenberg (1985), both secure parent and peer attachment was predictive of greater well-being. Findings indicated the greater importance of parental attachment bonds to students of this age group who are still in the process of transferring attachment bonds to peers (Fraley & Davis, 1997). Contrary to Noom et al. (1999), autonomy was not predictive of well-being. This inconsistency may be explained by the measures used to assess well-being in each study. In Noom et al., autonomy predicted increased social competence (perception of popularity and ease of making friends), academic competence (perception of one's intelligence and study competence), and self-esteem (how satisfied a student is with themselves). Lower achieved autonomy was also associated with increased depression (internalised distress). These are all specific measures of one's perceived internal ability to respond to external demands. As Cummins et al. (2002) explain, the Personal Well-Being Index domains are more abstract, and serve a protective self-evaluation function, making evaluations more impervious to change. For instance, within the qualitative data, one student expressed satisfaction with their competence in knowing "... how to pay bills etc. [although challenged by the demands]... of academic learning at uni."

Increased use of phone and email contact predicted greater well-being, supporting Armsden and Greenberg's (1985) findings. Although this finding does not necessarily support the suggestion that support seeking takes more symbolic forms (Leonardi & Kioussoglou, 2000), it does support the concerns expressed by students in the qualitative data about missing family and friends that don't go to university. Maintaining the quality of such relationships appears to be important to students' perceptions of well-being. Not being comfortable to approach others to initiate conversation or friendship was predictive of lower well-being. In the qualitative data some students reported a need for improved social opportunities on-campus and improved social interaction between faculties as a means for social support. Students appeared to desire more social opportunity on-campus as an impetus for initiating conversation and friendships.

Limitations of this study include the correlational design, meaning that no causal effects can be concluded. As the study was based on a self-report questionnaire reliability is questionable. Generalisability is limited to first year students attending one University in Victoria, Australia (although across four metropolitan and rural campuses). Sample size was relatively small, possibly influencing the sensitivity and power of the analysis. Further study to collect qualitative data on coping behaviours, or examine the mediation of coping behaviours on student stress and wellbeing, may highlight the various kinds of coping behaviours used by students. To gain further understanding of the potential stability of coping behaviour with attachment, future study could examine these constructs for differences over time (e.g., the beginning and end of the year).

Implications of this research suggest that first year on-campus students, would benefit from program initiatives that target social opportunities for all students, particularly those living away from home. University counsellors could focus on supporting the development of autonomy and the use of adaptive, problem-focused coping behaviours, including interpersonal and social assertiveness skills of students experiencing distress or a decreased sense of well-being. The availability and advertisement of workshops on survival skills in academic culture for first year students would be a productive initiative to alter coping behaviour. Indicators of student stress and well-being show that all avenues for improving retention rates of first year students have not been exhausted.

References


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