

Attachment and coping as theoretical frameworks for understanding adjustment to university for local and international students

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Abstract

For most students, coming to university is among their first major life transitions, presenting them with many adaptational demands for which they may or may not be adequately prepared. Theoretical views of stress and coping would suggest that adjustment to university will be influenced by individual resources for coping, their social resources and the adaptational demands of the new environment. Attachment theory and research, on the other hand, would suggest that early attachment experiences help shape internal working models that determine how individuals view themselves and their expectations in adolescence and beyond. A secure attachment base allows individuals to explore new situations with the internal resources to evaluate and cope with the anxiety inherent in such new situations. Peer relationships during this transition period are seen as an extension of the form and quality of those relationships within the family. There is debate in the literature as to the applicability of attachment theory across cultures, with much of the contemporary research focused on western populations. Student attrition is a major area of concern for universities. Helping students successfully make the adjustment is of primary importance in addressing a large part of the reasons for attrition. Academic factors explain only a small proportion of the reasons for students leaving university. A greater understanding of the role of attachment relationships and coping style in adjustment to university by both local and international students will help to better inform the design of appropriate interventions and support structures for students.

Introduction

Research on how students make the transition from high school to university has a history going back over the past forty years. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identified over 3,000 studies during the previous two decades examining the transition process. The most influential theories to emerge during this period were the Integration model of Tinto (1975, 1993) and the Persistence model of Bean (1980). Drawing on the work of Durkheim (1954), Tinto proposed that individuals establish their membership of the university community through a gradual process of academic and social integration. Integration also extends to how well the individual identifies with the normative values and attitudes of others, such as classmates and lecturers, and thus takes on membership of the university community (Napoli & Wortman 1998). Bean's (1980) model compared attrition in university with employee turnover in the workplace. He emphasises how important

behavioural intentions are as predictors of persistence behaviour. It assumes a process occurs which shapes these intentions, and that beliefs shape attitudes, which in turn influences behavioural intent. Students' beliefs are affected by their experiences with the overall quality of the campus, the courses, and friends. External factors in this model play a significant role in affecting student attitudes and decisions during university.

Integration/persistence models have not been without their critics particularly in relation to the growing trend towards commuter universities and a greater need for students to engage in paid work. A number of studies have failed to provide support for aspects of integration as a factor in attrition (Nora 1987; Nora et al. 1990). However, despite criticisms, significant support has remained for these models and they continue to be widely used as a basis for research into student adjustment and attrition.

Psychological Well-Being

Baker and Siryk (1984) outlined four dimensions of adjustment; academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional attachment, which broadly reflect Tinto's integration model, but also acknowledges the importance of psychological adjustment. Their assumption is that adjustment to university is multifaceted and requires adjustment to multiple demands. Academic adjustment is measured by how well academic demands are met. Social adjustment relates to how well the student negotiates the interpersonal aspects, such as making friends and joining in on the social life of university. Personal-emotional adjustment is measured by the level of psychological distress experienced by the student, and institutional attachment relates to the level of commitment felt towards the university (Beyers & Goossens 2002). Baker and Siryk (1989) reported numerous psychological factors associated with maladjustment; e.g. depression, anxiety, loneliness, and psychological distress. Conversely they reported that positive psychological factors; e.g. self-esteem, positive affect, psychological wellbeing, positive self-concept, are associated with adjustment. Out of their work they developed the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). The SACQ is a widely used measure of student adjustment to higher education, used by clinicians and educational and psychological researchers alike. Robbins et al. (2004) in a meta-analysis of 109 studies of psychosocial and study skills factors (PSF) across both educational and psychological domains found that PSFs were more influential in predicting university outcomes than were traditional demographic factors such as socio-economic status (SES) and high school grade point average (GPA). With a resurgence of research looking at psychological factors over the past two decades numerous aspects of psychological adjustment have been examined; internal locus of control (Martin & Dixon 1994); alexithymia; poor affect regulation (Kerr et al. 2004; Mallinckrodt & Wei 2005; and self-efficacy and optimism (Chemers et al. 2001). However there have also been some mixed findings regarding the impact of psychological factors on adjustment, academic achievement and attrition. Svanum and Brody (2001), in a study involving 412 (300 female, 112 male) undergraduate students, found that while a substantial proportion of students met DSM-111-R criteria for psychological disorders, there was no net

impact on GPA. However in the case of substance use disorders there was an associated decrease in GPA while anxiety disorders were associated with higher GPAs. Perfectionism has also been associated with higher GPA (Fergusson & Bonshek 1996; Pritchard & Wilson 2003).

The presence of psychopathology is not in itself predictive of risk for failure. Different psychological problems would appear to be associated with differential outcomes (Banyard & Cantor 2004). How students react to and adjust to stressful life events may be of more importance in understanding their impact. Successful adjustment to university is facilitated by students' beliefs in their competence to deal with emotional distress and also the social supports available to them. Supportive parent and peer relationships can act as a buffer against stressful life events, and conversely their absence can compound the impact of such stressors (Kenny & Stryker 1996). Thus, adjustment to university for many students is influenced by their attachment histories (Larose et al. 2005).

Overview of Attachment

Attachment (Ainsworth 1967; Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1969) is primarily concerned with the nature of close, enduring emotional bonds between infant and primary caregivers and how these unique relationships affect and shape the infant's developmental trajectory. Bowlby (1969) argued that the quality of early relationships with primary caregivers shape the individual's conception of competence and lovability, as well as their expectations about the dependability of others to provide assistance when needed. Infants who develop a well functioning attachment relationship with their caregivers can progressively explore their environment in the knowledge that they have a 'secure base' to return to at times of perceived threat. They experience their adult caregivers as warm and consistently responsive to their emotional needs while also encouraging of independent exploration. Within their first year the theory posits that securely attached infants will have formed positive working models, or cognitive schemas, of themselves and of others. They will demonstrate appropriate development of their affect regulation capabilities. On the other hand, children who develop insecure attachment relationships with their caregivers will experience these adults as either inconsistently responsive, or consistently rejecting. Consequently, insecurely attached infants internalise less favourable working models of themselves, as unlovable or others as undependable, or both. These working models of *self* and *other* dispose the insecurely attached infant towards dysfunctional forms of affect regulation, such as continual proximity-seeking, or avoidance and social disengagement. Once formed, attachment orientations, secure and insecure are, according to Bowlby, relatively stable over time and provide a template for organising the individuals functioning into adolescence and adulthood.

Adult Attachment

A theory developed initially to conceptualise the infant care-giver relationship, attachment has been extended to the study of adult functioning, linking variations in adult attachment styles with adjustment processes. Main,

Kaplan, and Cassidy (1985), with the development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), were the first to identify attachment categories for adults that approximate the original infant classifications developed by Ainsworth et al., (1978). These attachment categories were: *secure* (autonomous); *preoccupied* (anxious/ambivalent); *dismissing* (avoidant); *unresolved* (disorganised).

Other researchers such as, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) developed similar categorical models identifying distinct adult attachment styles: *secure*; *dismissive*; *pre-occupied*; and *fearful*. Secure adults are said to have developed a positive internalised model of self and other. Secure individuals are comfortable with both closeness and separateness in their relationships. Individuals with a dismissive style have internalised a positive model of self and negative model of other. Preoccupied relates to a negative internalised model of self and positive model of other, and finally, fearful relates to internal working models of both self and other (Lopez & Gormley 2002).

Brennan et al. (1998) described adult attachment in terms of two orthogonal dimensions; *anxiety* and *avoidance*, preferring to conceptualise attachment in terms of dimensions rather than categories. Anxiety, from this perspective, relates to fear of rejection, and avoidance relates to fear of intimacy and discomfort with closeness and dependency. The literature on adult attachment has consistently shown links between adult attachment and indices of distress and adjustment (Wei et al. 2005). A number of studies provide evidence of attachment style differences in the nature of emotional experience, coping and affect regulation. Differences in adult attachment style explain important variations in a number of transitional adjustment processes and outcomes (Lopez & Gormley 2002).

Attachment and Adjustment to University

There is now a relatively large body of research looking at the implications of attachment in the adjustment to university by students. This is probably not surprising, given the developmental stage of students entering university and that most are facing the single most significant transition in their lives. Making those first tentative steps towards independence and separation from parents will challenge and stretch internal resources of adolescents. Most will adapt well to the new environment of university and the dual challenges of separating from parents and adjusting to an adult world. For others it will be accompanied by a degree of stress and emotional adjustment. Adapting to this new environment involves establishing a system of support to replace that provided up to that point by family (Beyers & Goossens 2003; Hannum & Dvorak 2004; Kenny & Stryker 1996). How well this process is negotiated, the role of family relationships, and the internal resources required to negotiate it are the subject of much of the research in this area.

Lopez and Brennan (2000), in looking at the dynamics of the development of the 'healthy and effective self' or the 'healthy personality' from an attachment perspective, identified three key areas: cognitive processes, affect regulation, and relational behaviours. Common cognitive processes include more accurate

assessments of others, more integrated self structures, being able to make more accurate attributions for others behaviour, have more positive expectations about partner's behaviour and demonstrate attention biased towards greater trust of others. Other studies have supported the role of cognitive biases that maintain an individual's internal working model (Barrett & Holmes 2001; Feeney & Noller 1990). Those with secure attachments are likely to have positive perceptions of themselves and others and tend to be self-assured in their social interactions with others.

Barrett and Holmes (2001) presented 161 undergraduate students with 12 ambiguous scenarios which they had to interpret as threatening or non-threatening and how they would respond. They found a difference in how those with an insecure and secure attachment respond to ambiguous situations. Individuals with a perceived insecure attachment with parents or romantic partners were more avoidant, more aggressive and less proactive in their plans than those with a perceived secure attachment. Those with secure attachment displayed an enhanced capacity to deal with stress and negative emotions. They tended to seek social support when under stress.

The quality of attachment to parents has been shown repeatedly to affect the adjustment of students to university during the transition period (Goldberg & O'Brien 2005; Kalsner & Pistole 2003; Larose et al. 2005; Lopez & Brennan 2000; Lopez et al. 2001; Mattanah et al. 2004). Much of the early research focused on the separation process, and the development of autonomy and individuation, as the key developmental task during this period (Arnstein 1980; Hoffman & Weiss 1987; Lapsley et al. 1989; Lopez et al. 1988). More recently Beyers and Goossens (2003) re-examined the role of psychological separation from parents in adjusting to university. Using Hoffman's (1984) multidimensional conceptualisation of psychological separation they surveyed 969 undergraduate students (764 female and 205 male). They identified two dimensions of psychological separation; independence from parents and positive separation feelings, as being predictive of adjustment to university. Positive separation feelings were the better predictor of the two factors. These students developed independence from parents and positive feelings about the change in the relationship, and thus positive adjustment to university.

Strage and Brandt's (1999) study involved 236 undergraduate students (197 female, 39 male). They found that an authoritative parenting style with high levels of autonomy, demand, and emotional support, was predictive of adjustment. Soucy and Larose (2000) in their study of 158 at-risk students (95 female, 63 male) found that parental control was predictive of adjustment. Behavioural control facilitated adjustment. However psychological control aggravated adjustment and was the precursor of problems in social and emotional adjustment and institutional attachment.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that both secure parental attachment and a healthy level of separation are associated with positive adjustment to university (Lopez et al.2002; Mattanah et al. 2004;

Wintre & Yaffe 2000). In their study, Mattanah et al. (2004) looked at the role of both parental attachment and separation-individuation in the adjustment of 404 undergraduate students (158 male, 246 female). They found that secure attachment was associated with positive adjustment for both men and women, and that separation-individuation is facilitated by the presence of secure relationships. This is contrary to some of the earlier beliefs that continued secure attachment to parents actually impeded separation-individuation in adolescents. Separation / individuation, it would appear, occurs in the context of ongoing secure relationships with parents. According to Mattanah et al. (2004) adolescents who are cut off from supportive relationships are more likely to experience difficulty adjusting during important transitions, such as going to university. Attachment and separation needs to be given equal importance in looking at developmental pathways. A continued sense of connectedness, as well as separation is necessary for adaptive functioning in adolescents (Kenny & Donaldson 1991).

A basic assumption in attachment theory is that early experiences with caregivers, and in particular those experiences around separation, reunion and distress, are fundamental in shaping internal working models of close relationships. These *internal working models* incorporate cognitive schemas based on *self/other*. *Self* pertaining to perceptions about self worth, competence, and *other* about trustworthiness and dependability of others, 'The self and other models represent general expectations about the worthiness of the self and the availability of others' (Griffin & Bartholomew 1994) . Lopez et al. (1998), in a study involving 253 undergraduate students (157 female, 95 male), looked at how these internal working models predict levels of self-reported problems and help seeking attitudes. Those with positive *self* models reported significantly fewer problems than those with negative *self* models. They also found that those with high levels of problems and a negative model of *others* were less likely to seek counselling. Similarly, Burge et al. (1997) found that women who perceive others to be dependable, trustworthy and close were less likely to exhibit various symptomatology, including anxiety, mood disorders, eating disorders, eating disorders, and personality disorders.

While much of the research on adjustment of university students focuses on parental attachment, a natural extension of this is to look at the role and function of other important relationships, such as peer relationships. In the research literature, peer relationships are conceptualised in two different and distinct ways using Compensatory/competition and Continuity/cognitive models (Bowlby 1969/97, Cooper et al. 1998, Wilkinson 2004). Essentially compensatory/competition is about satisfying unmet needs in parental attachment relationships. As adolescents strive for independence they enter a period of transition where parental relationships become less important and peers and friends more so. In contrast, continuity/cognitive models would see peer relationships as extensions of and reflecting the form and quality of parental relationships. This view is more in keeping with attachment theory (Ainsworth 1989, Bowlby 1969/97) and is more dominant in the literature.

In a meta analysis of relevant studies from 1970 to 1998, Schneider et al. (2001) found much support for a link between parental attachment style and the quality of peer relationships. A key finding was that the link between attachment style and peer relationships strengthens with age. The older the sample is when being assessed the stronger the effect size linking parental attachment and attachment to peers. This is in line with Bowlby's (1969/97) belief that those internal working models of relationships become more stable with age.

Others have made this distinction between intimate dyadic relationships and peers (Wilkinson 2004). This they posit is because the trust and intimacy of close friendships have similarities to the bonds of family. In a large Dutch study involving 2912 adolescents (Helsen et al. 2000) found that strong attachments to peers were not shown to always provide security. On the contrary those students reporting a high level of peer support, but low levels of parental support were reporting the highest level of emotional problems. Peer support did not compensate for lack of parental support. These authors suggest that the relationship with parents forms an important basis for psychological development, a basis which continues to be important throughout adolescence and young adulthood, both for the development of friendships with peers and for psychological wellbeing.

Cross Cultural Studies

While a number of studies have included students from various ethnic backgrounds in their sample, the focus of much of the research on the influence of attachment on adjustment to university has been with white middle class students. Consequently not a lot is known about attachment and adjustment among non-majority cultural groups and international students, particularly those from non-western countries. With the increasing internationalisation of tertiary education, Australian universities are attracting ever growing numbers of students from Asia and other non-western regions. This follows similar trends in the US, UK and other major European centres. While resident non majority students have specific issues in adjusting to university, of particular interest are those international students from non western countries.

International students face many challenges in their adjustment to university. Collectively known as *acculturative stress*, it can be manifested in many ways, physical, social and psychological. Constantine, Kindaichi et al. (2005), in a qualitative study of female Asian international students at a large US university, found a number of factors impacting on their adjustment. They reported that, while excited about the opportunity to study in the US, they also experienced feelings of sadness, loneliness and some anxiety about living in the US. Value conflict related to gender socialisation norms and attempts to juggle two often conflicting cultural value systems could result in increased anxiety. Academic challenges and language acquisition difficulties also contributed to problems in adjustment.

Asian students reported having good family and peer networks and this was seen as important in 'maintaining social connections with individuals who can validate their sense of self and ways of being' (Constantine,

Kindaichi et al. 2005). This is consistent with other studies noting the importance of family and peer support to international students (Constantine, Berkel et al. 2005; Mori 2000). Seeking the advice of friends and family is in keeping with the often strong collectivist values of Asian international students. Forbearance of problems, however, appears to be a feature of some collectivist cultures. Seeking professional help or burdening others with your problems is often the last resort, thus it is the case of 'keeping problems to yourself'. Shame and the stigma of 'mental health problems' can prevent international students from seeking help and this has implications for their adjustment. The experience of many campus support services is that international students are more likely to seek help when it is a crisis situation.

Interestingly, international students reported that they learned to be more independent and self sufficient. While interdependence might be more congruent with their values, they recognised the occasional importance of engaging in independent behaviours (Constantine, Kindaichi et al. 2005). Students from highly collectivist cultures have to balance two very different value systems, that are often in conflict, while constructing a world view that incorporates aspects of the adopted culture but maintains their core cultural values (Choi 2002).

Cultural Aspects of Attachment

Since the early development of attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), the predominant view of the 'cultural universality' of attachment has been widely maintained. Bowlby (1969) believed that the infant caregiver attachment relationship has for millions of years been crucially important for the survival of relatively helpless infants. It is essentially part of the biological makeup of humans according to Bowlby. According to the universality hypothesis, attachments bonds develop similarly in different cultural contexts and while there may be variations due to the cultural context the core concepts are 'universal'. Indeed Ainsworth's (1967) early research involved observational studies of infant caregiver attachment in rural Uganda and in Baltimore, thus adding weight to the cultural and social universality of the construct. Other researchers since have found similar patterns of attachment across different cultural environments (DiTommaso et al. 2005; Posada & Jacobs 2001; Van Ijzendoorn & Sagi 1999; Wei et al. 2004).

A notable exception is the work of Rothbaum et al. (2000). They question the universality of the core hypotheses addressing the antecedents, consequences and nature of secure attachment. That is, (1) the sensitivity hypothesis which describes the mothers sensitivity to, and ability to appropriately respond to the child's signals; (2) the competence hypothesis; children who are secure are more socially and emotionally competent both as children and later in adulthood; (3) the secure base hypothesis; infants are more likely to explore when they feel protected by their mother's presence. Under threat infants seek proximity with their mother. The Secure base is a central concept in Bowlby and Ainsworth's analysis. The primary attachment figure is the person whom the child uses as a secure base across time and across situations. Rothbaum et al

(2000, p.1095) argue that 'these hypotheses are embedded in Western historical, social, political, economic, demographic, and geographic realities in the same way that theories of achievement, control and self are embedded in Western experiences and ideas'. They contend that there are fundamental differences in the objectives and primacy of those core concepts across cultures and particularly the linking of attachment and exploration. They point to Japan as an example of where social competence is more likely to entail dependence, emotional restraint, indirect expression of emotion, and far less exploratory activity among Japanese babies compared with US babies.

Rothbaum and his colleagues have been accused, however, of being selective in their review of empirical studies in Japan and ignoring important evidence which supports the validity of attachment theory in the Japanese context (Van Ijzendoorn & Sagi 2001). Others have questioned the view of Japanese culture as internally homogeneous and also questioned the very real differences between cultural values, that are often ideologically tainted, and the lived experience of contemporary Japanese (Chao 2001; Gjerde 2001). There is however wide acceptance of the view that culture does have an influence on attachment but also importantly that intracultural variations can often result in even greater differences in attachment (DiTommaso et al. 2005). According to Chao (2001) the development of a culturally sensitive model of attachment requires the integration of the universal and the cultural specific.

Overview of Coping

Interest in adaptational processes can be traced back to Freud (1933) and his central concept of defense mechanisms as a way individuals manipulate reality to manage distressing feelings. More contemporary theories viewed coping as a conscious process but nonetheless trait based, assuming consistency in individuals across stressors and situations (Folkman & Lazarus 1980). The work of Folkman and Lazarus (1980) marked a significant change in how we perceived coping. The advent of their transactional model of coping spurred a plethora of research emphasising the influence of situational factors on coping processes while at the same time downplaying the role of individual personality or dispositions.

'Coping responses refer to the behaviours, thoughts and feelings that individuals adopt to avoid being harmed by life stressors. Different ways of coping serve to prevent, avoid or control emotional distress. Coping is also viewed as a process and involves continuous adjustment between the person and the situation. If the situation changes the person's way of coping may change once they have reappraised the demands they face' (Abbott 2003 p.42).

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition of stress encompasses 'specific external and / or internal demands that are *appraised* as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person'. It is not the situation or event in itself that is stressful but the individual's interpretation of it. This conception of coping as a cognitive process of perception, or appraisal, of stress was the most significant change in the thinking around coping. They

defined primary appraisal as the evaluation of the meaning of the stressor for the individual; is there potential harm, threat, loss challenge, or is it benign? Secondary appraisal is an assessment of what needs to be done in the situation. That is, a matching of the environmental demands and the resources available. The degree of match or mismatch determines the severity of the situation.

In more recent research there has been a revival of interest in the role of personality factors in coping. According to this view general coping strategies which are situationally based may be associated with stable dispositional coping in the individual (Vivekananda 2001). While this does not mark a return to earlier trait based conceptualisations of coping it does recognise the important role of the person, the situation and coping in adjustment to stressors.

Coping is commonly conceptualised in terms of problem focused coping (the management of problems) and emotion focused coping (the regulation of emotion). Understanding coping behaviour is of major interest to researchers as it is an important mediator of psychological adjustment in the face of life stressors. However, it would appear that there are as many critics of the field of coping research as there are proponents. In a recent special feature on stress and coping research in *American Psychologist* a number of articles critiqued the current state of research in the field. Coyne and Raccioppo (2000, p.657) were particularly acerbic in their assessment of the state of coping research:

there is a profound crisis in the existing descriptive research using standardized checklists, stemming from its chronic failure to produce credible, substantive findings that cannot be dismissed as truisms, trivia, or the product of a confounding of stress, coping, and distress, ... omnibus checklists are not a useful means of studying coping as it occurs across situations.

Somerfield and McCrae (2000) were equally critical, citing numerous descriptions of coping literature as; 'trivial' 'disappointing', 'tentative', 'modest', 'sterile', and 'stagnated'. The two major criticisms of coping research are the lack of a link between research findings and clinical practice and the use of omnibus checklists. Tennen et al. (2000) propose the use of daily process methods, such as diaries. This idiographic design, they say, would allow investigators to capture proximal stressors, coping, and adaptational outcomes in real time and track changes in mood and coping closer to their actual time of change. Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) argue that research on coping over the past 30 years has been dominated by contextual models that emphasise coping in the context of particular stressful encounters. What has been missing according to these authors is an approach that looks at positive affect in the stress process, in particular its adaptational significance. They argue that: 'positive affect can co-occur with distress during a given period; Positive affect in the context of stress has important adaptational significance of its own and coping processes that generate and sustain positive affect in the context of chronic stress involve meaning' (p.649).

They point to growing empirical evidence to show that positive affect frequently occurs during chronic stress contrary to the widely held view that negative affect goes hand in hand with chronic stress.

Most critics of coping research point to methodological deficiencies in current approaches. Omnibus checklists and quantitative methods, it is argued provide superficial descriptions. Much more can be learned by getting individuals to provide narratives about stressful events, what happened, what emotions were experienced, and what they did in the situation (Folkman & Moskowitz 2000). Lazarus (2000) in a spirited defence of the field, of which he is a pioneer, agreed that overdependence on questionnaires is a difficulty and they should be seen as an initial step only. He points to a growing body of coping research based on in-depth interviews and observations:

... they are examining psychological events more closely, in-depth longitudinally, and more holistically as people cope with stress, think, want, feel, and act in their struggle to advance their interests and adapt (p.671).

The divide between psychological research and clinical practice is not limited to the area of stress and coping, it is a familiar theme in most fields of psychology:

... it is disheartening that so few researchers accept the responsibility of making the relevance of their research clear to the practitioner, and so few clinicians pay attention to such research even when it has implications for clinical practice (Lazarus 2000).

Coping and Adjustment to University

Students face many challenges in their transition to university. How they negotiate the transition has been of interest to many researchers, in particular the role of coping in managing the myriad stressors experienced by students as they make the transition to their new role as university students. As already discussed success at university is often determined by how well students make the transition. How well the transition is made is also influenced by how well students manage the challenges they face as they settle in to their first year at university.

A study by Clark (2005) of freshmen at a four year public college in eastern United States examined adjustment in the first year at college. The approach to the research in this study was one that addressed many of the criticisms outlined previously. Qualitative methods were applied involving semi-structured interviews over second semester of first year. Ten interviews per participant on a bi-weekly basis were conducted. Students who took part in the study were traditional aged, first time college students. A number of interesting findings emerged from the study. Challenges experienced by the students were rarely resolved by individual strategies at a given time. Instead, it required an ongoing process of assessing and reassessing,

and adjusting strategies as the dynamic of the person-environment-behaviour evolved. The other interesting finding involved the extent of proactive coping engaged in by students. Strategies were not always responses to environmental challenges. They appeared to be prompted instead by their personal goals, 'student's short and long-term goals served as self-motivators for some of their reported strategies during the first year' p309.

Struthers et al. (2000) in a study involving 203 undergraduate students looked specifically at academic stress and in particular domain specific coping styles in response to stressful academic events. The methodology employed was quantitative with standardised questionnaires administered and analysed with structural equation modelling. The study found that the relationship between college students' stress and academic achievement was mediated by their academic coping style and motivation. Specifically they found that problem-focused coping influenced course grades but emotion-focused coping didn't. Problem-focused coping also influenced motivation, which in turn was positively related to course grades, whereas emotion-focused coping did not. Thus, students who used problem focused coping strategies in academically stressful situations were more likely to be motivated and perform better academically than students who used emotion-focused coping.

Previous research has shown that problem-focused coping strategies are useful in addressing anxiety in stressful situations that are controllable, but can increase anxiety in stressful situations that are uncontrollable. Conversely emotion-focused coping strategies have been shown to be useful in stressful situations that are uncontrollable. Importantly, individuals who persist in using particular types of coping strategies or who randomly choose coping strategies tend to experience more anxiety than those who choose coping strategies according to the nature of the stressful situation (Cheng 2003). According to Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory of Coping, cognitive processes intervene between the stressful situation and the coping response. Achieving a good fit between the coping strategies and the stressful situation requires the individual to be able to accurately discriminate between the characteristics of the situation and the choice of coping behaviours in response to changing contingencies. In a study involving 208 first year students in a Hong Kong university this discriminative facility was investigated (Cheng 2003). It was proposed that the construct of discriminative flexibility is related to cognitive competence and is the cognitive process underlying coping flexibility. Those higher in discriminative facility are more likely to encode the situation in terms of 'if-then condition-response-contingencies'. While those low in discriminative facility are more likely to encode the situation in more broad, abstract, non-contextualised terms. The results suggest that some individuals, by employing conditional coding, make refined analyses of the salient features of stressful situations and discriminative choices of coping strategies. Thus their coping patterns are more likely to be flexible and adaptive across stressful situations. The author suggests how the findings could inform clinical interventions to enhance individual's ability to cope with situational demands.

Attachment and Coping

Attachment theory, as discussed in detail earlier, is widely viewed to have applicability across the life-span. Also while individuals typically draw on a wide range of coping strategies in response to stressful events, it has been demonstrated that individuals also display dispositional coping styles (Carver et al 1989). Theoretical links have been demonstrated to exist between attachment styles and coping dispositions (Kobak & Sceery 1988). Securely attached individuals might be expected to respond to distress in a constructive manner and take action to reduce distress, whereas avoidantly attached individuals may be more likely to deny their distress. In a study of attachment, coping and explanatory style Greenberger and McLaughlan (1998) surveyed 157 undergraduate students at a large public university in western United States. Explanatory style is not normally associated with attachment, it is a concept more aligned with cognitive approaches. However the authors hypothesise that 'explanatory style' may be equivalent to the 'working model' of self of attachment theory, 'because more securely attached individuals are thought to develop a conception of themselves as lovable and competent, they should be predisposed to develop a favourable or positive explanatory style' (p.125). The results showed that, for females, current attachment security played a substantial role in organising preferred coping strategies and cognitions about causes of positive and negative life events. The other interesting finding in this study was the degree to which early parental security and current nonparental security of attachment was independent of each other, demonstrating that working models of self are substantially modified over time.

A number of studies have looked at the role of coping style as a mediator of attachment and psychological distress (Lopez et al. 2001; Wei et al. 2003). Individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment orientations tend to use ineffective coping strategies, which serve to increase their levels of distress. According to Lopez et al. (2001) a significant proportion of the distress experienced by students may have a developmental basis originating out of attachment orientations to close relationships and their ability to manage closeness and distance in those relationships. Reactive coping may be the preferred way of coping for anxiously attached students whereas suppressive coping is more likely to be the preferred means of coping for students with a more avoidant attachment orientation (Kobak & Sceery 1988; Lopez et al. 2001).

Wei et al. (2003) examined the role of perceived problem-solving effectiveness, as opposed to applied problem-solving, in mediating psychological distress. Evidence suggests that there is a relationship between perceived effectiveness in problem-solving and psychological distress (Heppner & Lee 2002). That is, people who think they will not be able to effectively cope with a problem are more likely to experience psychological distress, 'persons who perceive themselves as ineffective problem solvers report themselves to be more interpersonally sensitive, less trusting of other people, more socially anxious, and less interpersonally assertive and engage in less social support' (Wei et al. 2003, p.450). Results indicated that perceived coping fully mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and psychological distress, indicating a more

complex relationship than previously hypothesised. The relationship between attachment anxiety and distress is not a simple linear relationship; perceived coping is also an important mediator of psychological stress. Thus, in attempting to understand psychological distress, it is not only important to consider attachment, anxious or avoidant, but to also consider the important role of perceived coping in the relationship.

Conclusion

Attachment theory has been proposed as an integrative 'metaperspective' for research and practice in counselling psychology (Lopez & Brennan 2000). An impressive body of research has examined the experience of student's adjustment to university from an attachment perspective. The preceding review of some of the significant literature affirms its importance in furthering our understanding of the important role of one's continuing attachments to others in fostering optimal psychological health and development.

However it is also important to understand the complex interrelationships between attachment orientations and coping styles in student's adjustment to university.

Given the debate as to the cultural universality of attachment theory a further examination of cultural factors in attachment orientation and adjustment to university is warranted. Much of the research into university student adjustment has taken place in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia with mainly local students. There is a paucity of research into the adjustment experiences of international students, particularly international students from predominantly 'non-western' countries featured by collectivist cultural values.

Through further research we can hopefully gain a better understanding of what role close relationships, both with parents and with peers, play in helping students develop adaptive coping abilities as they negotiate the major transition from high school to university. Also how our understanding of this process translates cross-culturally. That is, does the model of secure attachment, low anxiety and low avoidance, promoted as optimal for adjustment, apply cross culturally and does it have relevance for understanding adaptive functioning in non-western populations, in particular those featured by highly collectivist cultures?

Proposed research with first year students at the University of New South Wales will examine the relations between current parental and non-parental attachment security and dispositional coping, and explore the differences between local and international students in the relations between attachment and coping. International students, while facing many of the same challenges as local students in making the transition to university, are also faced with particular stressors; often collectively termed acculturative stress. The study will look at the unique adjustment experiences of international students; linguistic, academic, social, emotional and financial, and how they cope with such life stressors; in particular the role of social supports, coping strategies and help seeking behaviours. Results will further inform the debate on the cultural

universality position on attachment theory and also help in better understanding the support needs of international students.

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