

EARLY PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IS A PRECURSOR TO COLLEGE MEN'S LATER ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

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Abstract

What predicts college men's academic and social adjustment in the transition to college? We used a short-term prospective study design to examine the effects of early psychological distress on later reports of college adjustment (academic and social) using a sample of first semester college men ($N = 216$; ages 18-21). Greater reported levels of distress at T1 (first week of the semester) were associated with lower levels of academic and social adjustment at T3 (last week of the semester). Reports of loneliness and neuroticism at T2 (middle of the semester) partially mediated these relationships. Implications for college administrators and retention efforts during the transition to college are discussed.

Key words: college men; psychological distress; college adjustment; loneliness; neuroticism

The majority of emerging adults (ages 18-29; Arnett, 2004) in the U.S. enroll in college. In fact, entrance into college after high school graduation is at an all-time high with a 34% increase in enrollment from 2000 to 2009 (Aud et al., 2011). College enrollment represents the potential intersection of multiple relational and developmental milestones. For example, many students enrolled in college move away from their home (i.e., are launched from their family of origin) and live in a new environment. They also enter a new developmental period that is often characterized by increased identity exploration and instability,

including living circumstances and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2004).

Given these multiple transitions, some individuals tend to fare better in their college adjustment and eventual graduation than do others. For example, only 49% of those who enter college obtain a degree (i.e., certificate, associate's, bachelor's) within five years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Graduation among college students varies by gender. Between the age of 18 and 24, fewer men compared to women are enrolled in college (39% vs. 47%) and fewer men who are enrolled in college persist

to graduate compared to women (46% vs 52%; NCES, 2012). These gender differences could indicate that men may have more difficulty adjusting to the college environment compared to women. Overall, adjustment to college is met with an increase in psychological distress for both men and women (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014).

College graduation has been linked to reports of college adjustment (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). A number of factors have been shown to influence college adjustment. Among these are personality (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992), peer relationships (Magolda, 1992), social competencies, and loneliness (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). For men, college adjustment has been shown to be influenced by aspects of personality such as being performance oriented (D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsntas, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to examine how early feelings of psychological distress were related to later reports of academic adjustment. Also, because men are more likely to experience college dropout, we chose to focus on freshmen men. Based on the literature, we examine whether reports of social aspects of college (i.e., loneliness) and personality (i.e., neuroticism) helped to explain the relationship between distress and adjustment using a short-term prospective study design.

Methods

Participants

Due to the purposes of the study, the sample was limited to first semester college men. Three different semesters of data (Fall 2008, 2009, and 2010) were combined to have adequate power to run analyses. Descriptive information for the final sample ($N = 216$) is in Table 1.

Procedures

Participants were from a larger study examining emerging adults' (Arnett, 2004) college and relationship experiences at a large southeastern university in the U.S. The larger study was approved by the university institutional review board. Individuals were recruited from an introductory course that met a university liberal arts requirement. Thus, participants represent a variety of majors across the campus in which the study occurred. After providing informed consent, participants completed a restricted access online survey. Participants completed surveys at three different times during the semester (T1 = week 1, T2 = week 8, T3 = week 15).

Measures

Psychological distress was measured at T1 using the 10-item CES-D (Radloff, 1977). Responses ranged from (0) *rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)* to (3) *Most or all of the time (5-7 days)*. Items were coded and summed so that higher scores indicated greater distress ($\alpha = .72$).

At T2, loneliness was measured using the 8-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996). Responses ranged from (1) *never* to (4) *often*. Items were coded and averaged so that higher scores indicated greater feelings of loneliness ($\alpha = .85$).

Neuroticism was also measured at T2 using Costa and McCrae's (1992) 6-item measure of neuroticism. Responses options ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. Items were coded and averaged so that higher scores indicated greater levels of neuroticism ($\alpha = .65$).

College adjustment was measured at T3 using two subscales (Baker & Siryk, 1986). Academic adjustment was measured with 10 items. Social adjustment was also measured with 10 items. Both subscales had response options that ranged from (1) *very poorly* to

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants (N = 216)

Age (years), mean (SD)	18.1	(.40)
Race/Ethnicity, n (%)		
White	154	(71.3)
Latino	23	(10.6)
African American	21	(9.7)
Asian American	9	(4.2)
Other	8	(3.7)
No response	1	(0.5)
Family structure, n (%)		
Parents married and living together	158	(73.1)
Parents separated or divorced	37	(17.1)
One parent is deceased	10	(4.6)
Parents never married	9	(4.2)
Other	2	(0.9)
Sexual orientation, n (%)		
Heterosexual	204	(94.4)
Gay	7	(3.2)
Bisexual	2	(0.9)
No response	3	(1.4)
T1 Relationship status, n (%)		
No	150	(69.4)
Yes	66	(30.6)
T1 Romantic relationship type ^a , n (%)		
Dating exclusively	44	(66.7)
Dating non-exclusively	16	(24.2)
Engaged	1	(1.5)
Other	2	(3.0)
Didn't report	3	(4.5)

^aAmong those reporting involvement in a relationship ($n = 66$)

(5) *very closely*. Within subscales, items were coded and averaged so higher scores indicated greater adjustment ($\alpha = .86$ for academic adjustment, $\alpha = .91$ for social adjustment).

Alcohol use was included as a control variable and was measured at T1 using a 3-item scale of alcohol consumption (Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993). Items were rescaled to be the similar across items (range = 0-5) and averaged so higher scores indicated greater alcohol use ($\alpha = .90$).

Results

Men had an average score of 7.20 ($SD = 4.31$) on the CES-D and about 27% met the clinical cut-off score for depression (a score of 10 or more). Table 2 shows that all variables were significantly correlated and our control variable (T1 alcohol use) was only correlated with T3 academic adjustment ($r = -.12, p < .05$).

We then conducted a path analysis using Mplus, and missing data was handled using full information maximum likelihood (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). This analysis examined the influence of T1 psychological distress on T3 academic and social adjustment and the mediating roles of loneliness and neuroticism at T2. Figure 1 shows these relationships. Model fit indices showed adequate model-data fit: $\chi^2(3, N = 216) = 1.93, p = .59, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .001, SRMR = .016$. Psychological distress had a direct effect on both academic ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$) and social adjustment ($\beta = -.13, p < .05$). Also, T2 loneliness and T2 neuroticism served to partially mediate this relationship. That is, psychological distress was positively associated with loneliness ($\beta = .38, p < .001$) and neuroticism ($\beta = .41, p < .001$), and greater levels of loneliness was negatively associated with later academic ($\beta = -.32, p < .001$) and social ($\beta = -.36, p < .001$) adjustment. Also, greater levels of loneliness was negatively associated with later social adjustment ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$), but was not associated with academic adjustment.

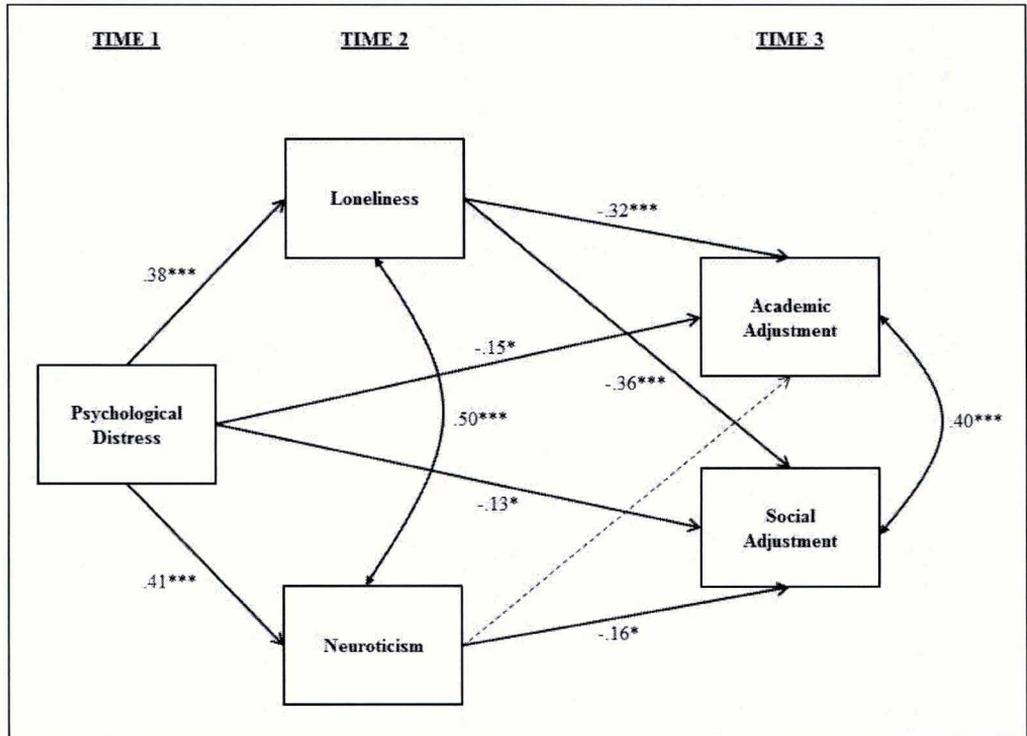
Table 2. Study variable correlations and descriptive statistics (N = 216)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. T1 Psychological distress	-					
2. T2 Loneliness	.37***	-				
3. T2 Neuroticism	.40***	.58***	-			
4. T3 Academic adjustment	-.28***	-.39***	-.27***	-		
5. T3 Social adjustment	-.33***	-.50***	-.42***	.52***	-	
6. T1 Alcohol use	.05	.01	.02	-.12*	-.08	-
M	7.20*	1.84	2.39	3.35	3.77	1.80
SD	4.31	.56	.67	.72	.77	1.47
Range	0-30	1-4	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5
α	.72	.85	.65	.86	.91	.90

*The clinical cutoff score for depression is 10.

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 1. Path analysis of study variables (N = 216)



Note: All paths represent standardized path coefficients

* $p < .05$, *** $p \leq .001$

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how psychological distress, upon making the transition to college life, was associated with later reports of academic and social adjustment among a sample of first semester college men. We also examined the mediating role of loneliness and neuroticism while controlling for alcohol use.

We found that about 1 in 4 of our participants reported clinical levels of psychological distress at the beginning of their first semester of college. This early distress had a direct negative relationship with their reports of adjustment at the end of their first semester. That is, men who reported feeling greater levels of distress when they first arrived on campus were more likely to report that they were not adjusting well to both the academic and social aspects of college life. We also found that loneliness and neuroticism (at T2) helped to partially explain why men were less well adjusted at the end of the semester. Men who were more distressed at the beginning of the semester also reported greater loneliness about mid-way through the first semester, and greater feelings of loneliness were negatively associated with their academic and social adjustment. Also, men who were more distressed at the beginning of college reported greater neuroticism at mid-way through the first semester, and reports of greater neuroticism were negatively related to reports of social adjustment (but not academic adjustment). Recent evidence shows that psychological distress has been found to decrease more rapidly among women compared to men (Conley et al., 2014). However, our study finds that men's psychological distress persists and likely creates problems for future feelings of college adjustment.

Our findings, coupled with higher college dropout rates among men (NCES, 2012), indicate that college administrators

should focus retention efforts on men with elevated levels of distress when transitioning to college. Efforts should be directed at promoting involvement in clubs/organizations and dorm-life participation as peer relationship have been shown to buffer the negative effects of psychological distress (Magolda, 1992). Further, therapists serving college clientele should address early feelings of distress and loneliness among men, as these affect men's early college experiences and may ultimately be associated with persistence to graduation.

Limitations and Future Research

Findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the sample was collected from a single university. In addition, the sample was fairly homogeneous and was not collected randomly from the population of college students. Thus, caution should be exercised in generalizing findings. Future research should test these relationships among first semester college students enrolled in a variety of colleges and universities across the U.S. Also, future research should examine whether these same relationships exist among students attending community colleges.

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