

PEER AND FAMILY RELATIONS: A THEORETICAL MODEL FOR HELPING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

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Abstract

Peers are the front line support group for most adolescents both inside as well as outside college or university. Students' adjustment at the university is also largely determined by the formation of good and lasting relationships with peers and these relationships are largely dependent on many factors including family relationships. Good and close family relationships tend to ensure better social adjustment and relationships with peers at the university together ensure less student distress and college/university adjustment problems. This paper explores this issue of students in distress in colleges and universities and what research says regarding the problems they face and causes of these problems. It also provides a theoretical framework based on peer and family relations to understand the multitude causes of student distress and recommends some solutions that university authorities may need to take into account to help alleviate these problems that plague universities all over the world.

Introduction

With the increase of student enrolment in institutions of higher learning and the limited human resources in these institutions, the issue of lack of help for students with problems is becoming more and more serious, especially for foreign students. Several instances of students dropping out of college, resorting to drugs and violence and even committing suicide in institutions of higher learning recently are ample proof of the lack of support in these institutions for students in distress. Many studies have shown that although these institutions have counseling centers, students seldom seek help from these places (Sharkin, Plageman, Mangold, 2003). Many reasons could account for this situation. This paper intends to synthesize the findings of research relating to the factors causing these

problems, the reasons why students do not seek help and how institutions of higher learning can enhance efforts to help students in distress before it is too late.

Rationale

The Malaysian media has consistently highlighted incidents of students unable to cope with the demands of university life, parents, peers and society. Cases of students committing suicide only after a few weeks in college, students dropping out of college and joining the already crowded unemployment market, students hurting other students and university professors perhaps indicate the need for more effective measures to help students cope with university life. There is indeed a great need to understand the root causes of these problems and set up various mechanisms in institutions of higher learning to help students in distress. Research has indicated that peers and family relations may form crucial support mechanisms that can be integrated in the overall counseling services to enhance the efficacy of the counseling efforts at these institutions.

Objectives

This paper will attempt to explore the problems facing students in institutions of higher learning, and the contributory factors to such problems. The paper proposes a framework, based on these factors, on how institutions of higher learning may be able to help students in distress from the perspective of peer and family influences.

Review of Literature

A plethora of research exists on problems students face in colleges and universities, factors causing these problems and how authorities and significant others can help students overcome these problems. Among the most common problems are depression, loneliness (Wiseman, Gutfreud & Lurie, 1995), problems in peer relationships, substance abuse, eating disorders (Sesan, 1989) and life transitions.

Common Problems of Students in Higher Institutions

On an average about 10% of university undergraduates suffer from some form of depression (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, & Andrews, 1993). In another study (Sharkin, *et al.*, 2003) of those who seek help, about 40% was for depression, 38% was for missing classes, 33% for relationships problems, 29% family and relationships issues, 27% for drinking and drugging, 23% for anxiety, 15% for eating problems, 10% for unusual or strange behavior and 9% for death of a family member or friend (Sharkin, *et al.*, 2003) (there are cases with multiple reasons for not seeking help). Other problems reported include potential suicide risk (6%), self-harm (4%), physical and sexual assault (4 %) and potential harm to others.

However, studies have also shown that not many students seek clinical or counseling assistance. A large percentage also do not know where to seek help. Among the people most able to help are their peers and teachers or lecturers. The peers form the best group of individuals who will be able to first detect problems amongst their friends, as they are 'on the front lines and may have knowledge of other students having problems well before anyone else on campus' (Sharkin, *et al.*, 2003, p. 691). One way counselors can assist these students is to train student counselors as well as teachers or lecturers to identify students going through depression and help them by referring to the relevant authorities for further assistance.

Loneliness is another major problem students face in institutions of higher learning (Uruk & Demir, 2003; Wiseman, *et al.*, 1995) and this problem is more evident among adolescents. This is attributed to the fact that the development task of adolescents at this stage is the relinquishing of parental attachment and establishing of attachments with either same-sex or opposite sex friends or groups (Brown, 1990). It is during adolescents' development that peers become more important than parents (Rice, 1999). Several factors could have brought about loneliness among adolescents. One is the lack of ability of some adolescents to form relationships with their peers and others in their surroundings (Ponzetti, 1990). This may result in lower self-esteem among them and other problems including dropping out of school, substance abuse and depression (Brage & Meredith, 1994; Page & Cole, 1991).

Factors Contributing to These Problems

Studies, both local and overseas, have shown that there are many common factors causing students in institutions of higher learning to be distressed and perform poorly academically or drop out. Among the most common factors include their own personality characteristics and personal factors, peers, family, school and society.

Personality characteristics commonly reported in literature include hardiness which refers to the ability to withstand a reasonable amount of stress (Kashubeck & Christensen, 1992) and resiliency (or the lack of these factors). Peers include classmates, course mates or age mates who indulge in delinquent behavior such as bullying and harassment. Low peer acceptance (Sletta, Valas, Skaalvik & Sobstad, 1996) and peer rejection (Rotenberg & Bartley, 1997) are also strongly related to the problem of loneliness, mentioned above. Adolescents tend to place a lot of importance on friends and any slight ridicule or rejection from these friends tend to lead to low self-concept and loneliness (Demir, 1990)

Family factors include family structure, parent-child interaction (Lopez & Brennan, 2000; Skowron, Wester & Azen, 2004) which include parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991) and financial issues. Family relationships help in the resolution of the adolescent's identity crisis as indicated in Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Erickson, 1963) since they provide sense of cohesion, adaptability and communications network that help the individual learn how to communicate, listen, interact and negotiate. These family factors especially warm and supportive parenting styles are highly correlated to the formation of the adolescent's self-esteem and the formation of close friendships and that are learned in the family (McCombs, Forehand & Smith, 1988; Dekovic & Meeus, 1997; Demo, Small & Savin-Williams, 1987).

Parenting styles also influence adolescents in that parents who are authoritarian tend to lead adolescents towards low self-esteem, low social skills and higher level of depression. Children of indulgent parents may have higher self-esteem, have better social skills and lower levels of depression but they tend to have behavior problems and perform poorly in school. Parents who are authoritative tend to have children who are more socially and

instrumentally competent. However, children of parents who are uninvolved tend to have children and adolescents who perform poorly in most domains. Karadayi (1994) found that adolescents who have good and close relationship with their parents tend to be optimistic, self-reliant and have high self-esteem while adolescents with parents who enforce strict discipline tend to be pessimistic and highly dependent on others.

School factors include the level of enforcement of discipline, academic issues (Crespi & Becker, 1999) and existence of effective counseling facilities.

Personal factors comprising the type of thinking styles whether collectivist or individualistic. (Aydin, 2000), and Physiological factors relating to the nature of the illness and depression also tend to determine the level of social adjustment in universities. Other than this Societal factors that relate to what extent policies and regulations are in place to help students at risk stay do well in school are also important.

a) Model of Peer and Family Relations

From the research findings and discussion above, it appears that Peers and Family Relations form the two main factors that the shape adolescent behavior and determine how well they adjust to the university environment. This contention is also supported many studies (Uruk & Demir, 2003, for example). Based on these two factors, it is possible to create a 2 X 2 matrix that classify in which category / quadrant these students fall based on the nature of Peer Relations and Family relationships and what their resultant effect will be on their adjustments at the university and also in their personal life (see Figure 1).

Students who are in quadrant A are those who have positive effect on both Peer and Family influences while students in quadrant D are those who have negative effects on both these influences.

Quadrant B comprises students who have negative peer influences but these bad influences may be mitigated to some extent by the positive family influences. Students in quadrant C, on the other hand, are students who have negative family influences but these influences may be mitigated by positive peer influences.

The relative positions of these students in the matrix determine the severity of these influences. Figure 1 shows the characteristics of students in these quadrants.

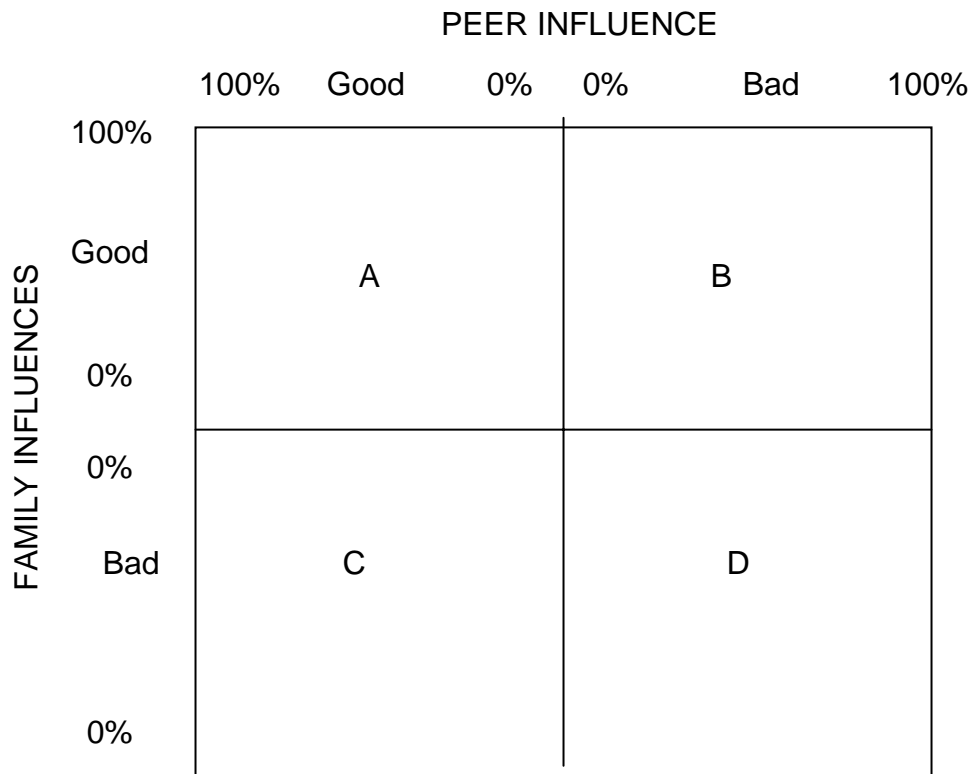


Figure 1: Model of the influence of Peer and Family Relations in relation to students' adjustment at the university.

Quadrant A: Positive peer effects and family influences

1. Socially well adjusted
2. Independent
3. Have many friends
4. Helpful and will make an excellent peer counselor and educator
5. High self-esteem

Quadrant B: Negative peer effects but good family influences

1. Independent
2. Have many friends but may indulge in bad behavior
3. High self-esteem
4. May suffer from depression
5. May present discipline problems

Quadrant C: Positive peer effects but bad family influences

1. Dependent
2. Low self-esteem
3. Friends replace parents as main motivators
4. Not socially adjusted
5. May not have many friends

Quadrant D: Negative peer and family influences

1. Lonely
2. Suffer from depression
3. Most likely to drop out of college
4. Indulges in substance abuse
5. Low self-esteem

The above characteristics of adolescents were gleaned from research reviewed above and it stands to be empirically tested. More research on the nature of the problems faced by students in these four quadrants would certainly throw more light on the different types of problems students face and more effective corrective interventions may be designed at the university level to help these students with full knowledge of the causes of these problems.

Helping Students in Distress

University students present a wide range of problems stemming from various sources and causes which could be based on the matrix indicating the relative influences of both Peer and Family Influences described above. In order to understand these problems and to design intervention programs to help them, universities may need to first establish the nature of Peer and Family Influences and which quadrant these students fall into. Based on this theoretically based classification, it may be possible to design intervention programs most suitable for these students in distress.

Students in quadrant A are not expected to have serious forms of distress. As such efforts may be expanded to help them maintain or enhance their level of social adjustment in the college.

Students in quadrant B, due to bad peer influence may suffer from depression and delinquency problems. Since peers are closer to these students, peer counselors may be engaged to help them. Peer counselors have been found to be one of the most cost effective and efficient approaches to help students at risk (Hayes, Mckenzie & Privette, 1975). Counseling centers may also need to be organized to facilitate these students who wish to seek help.

Students in quadrant C, due to poor family influences, may suffer from loneliness and depression. Depression could result from loneliness and as such counselors may need to look at the causes of depression first. Also, family relationships need to be looked into. Student counselors may be able to step in and provide the kind of support these individuals lack at home.

Students in quadrant D who are doubly disadvantaged, may present with more problems than the others and may need more help. Student counselors alone may not be able to help them overcome the many problems they may be facing. One possible suggestion would be to first identify them before they start succumbing to the problems at college

and getting peer counselors to help them from the very beginning. Peer counselors may be able to recommend to these students to seek expert help at the counseling centers.

Conclusions and Implications

The literature review and findings indicate that it is extremely important for institutions of higher learning to step up efforts to address student stress and distress at their institutions. Two factors appear to form the major issues that may cause these problems, namely peer and family influences. A matrix for identifying these students based on the nature of peer and family influences is proposed to help classify the causes of these problems as well as the students so that effective steps or intervention strategies may be formulated to address these problems from the beginning. It is recommended that empirical investigation be undertaken to ascertain the validity of these classifications and the effectiveness of the interventions proposed.

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