Self-Evaluations and Adjustment of Traditional and Mature University Students

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The association between global self-esteem and overall adjustment and the association between identity integration and institutional attachment/commitment was examined in traditional and mature university students. 165 students of first semester Masters (83 traditional and 82 mature) from six universities participated in this study. Traditional students were 21-23 years of age (M=22, SD = .73), with a linear pattern of education without any gap, whereas mature students were aged 25 years or older (M=31, SD =7.42), and had returned to their education after a gap of minimum two years.The Multi-dimensional Self-Esteem Inventory, and Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire were administered for assessment. Bivariate analysis of the scores of students on these scales indicated a significant positive relationship between global self-esteem and overall adjustment for both groups, whereas identity integration correlated significantly and positively with institutional attachment/ commitment for mature students but not for traditional students. Related factors for these findings and their implications are discussed in the last section of the study

Mature students, also called adult learners or non-traditional students are generally defined as those who are older than the regular school leavers and have returned to education after interrupting their studies for a period of time. Universities differ in their criterion of age that differentiates a mature learner from a traditional one who is younger and has recently graduated from school. In undergraduate programs, it may be considered to be as low as 21 years (Knightley & Whitelock, 2006), or 22 years

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(Hagedorn, 2005), or 23 years (Kantanis, 2002), but many universities and adult education scholars consider 25 to be the age that typically defines a mature learner (Kasworm, 2003; McGivney, 2004).

The past two decades have seen a progressive rise in the number of students in the institutions of higher education in Pakistan who return to education after interrupting their studies due to employment, marriage or other life circumstances. These students form a majority of the student population in evening programs, in-service courses and degree programs requiring some relevant job experience as a prerequisite. Whereas the higher education literature in the West is burgeoning with studies since the last forty years to understand and effectively recruit, retain and enhance mature students' learning experience (e.g. Cross, 1981; Richardson, 1995; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Wonacott, 2001; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001; Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006), efforts to understand the unique characteristics and needs of this older student segment relative to those who are younger and have followed a linear path to education have remained almost non-existent in Pakistan.

While reporting the graduate data from 2005-6 to 2008-9, the Statistical Information Unit of Higher Education Commission Pakistan acknowledges the need to examine and identify vulnerabilities of our graduate education system for which "graduate data is being compiled by gender; sector; year; level of degree; year of education; university and graduating streams i.e. universities, colleges and as private candidates" (para 6, HEC Pakistan, 2010). While this information will provide some insight into the systemic aspects of graduate studies; student-related variables required for identifying and understanding the mature students, for example their age, length of gap in studies, job status and personality variables will still remain unexplored. This study is an initial attempt to reduce the gap in existing knowledge and explore the influence of self-perceptions of both traditional and mature students on their adjustment processes. The self-related constructs examined in this study are global self-esteem and identity

integration (a measure of global self-concept) whose respective relationship with overall adjustment and institutional attachment/ commitment (a sub-domain of adjustment) is being investigated.

Global Self-Esteem

Blascovich and Tomaka (1991) define self-esteem as an "overall affective evaluation of one's worth, value or importance" that is formed by aggregating evaluations of salient self-related aspects. They emphasize on the global nature of self-esteem, distinguishing it from more specific evaluations of narrower aspects of self, such as body, confidence, intelligence, etc. Such a multi-faceted conception of self-esteem has been agreed upon by many theorists who also note that global self-esteem or self-worth cannot be considered a simple sum of domain-specific self-evaluations (Harter, 1999; Rosensberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995), as some of them contribute more in constituting the broader evaluation than others, depending upon their salience for that particular person.

Global self-esteem is considered a stable trait-like feature of personality (Kuster & Orth, 2013), that refers to the cognitive appraisals of personal worth or as a feeling of liking, loving and respecting oneself not necessarily based upon logical evaluative processes (Brown & Marshall, 2006). Confirming this assertion, it has been found that global self-esteem determines the way people react emotionally to their real or imagined experiences of success and failure, remaining to a great extent uninfluenced by their beliefs about the abilities and traits in specific domains, these being more relevant to their cognitive reactions of performance outcomes (Dutton & Brown, 1997).

There is substantial evidence in literature about the positive relationship of global self-esteem to adjustment in academic settings (DuBois, Bull, Sherman & Roberts, 1998). Some studies have found it to be one of the strongest predictors of overall adjustment in college and university students (Toews & Yazedjian, 2010), with

its effect mediated by the level of their educational commitment defined as feeling part of and enjoying being in the institution as well as having a sense of obligation to pursue education (Bejerano, 2014). It has been reported that university students having high self-esteem and optimism enjoy better physical and psychological outcomes with lesser health problems and more positive affect during the first year of their studies (Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007). Self-esteem has also been found to influence feelings of sadness (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007) and people's well-being and better outcomes at work, so that people with higher self-esteem report greater justice and support, less work-related stress, higher job satisfaction and success, and less counterproductive behaviors at work (Kuster, Orth,& Meier, 2013).

Adjustment

Adjustment to college or university is an important area to be considered for understanding student well-being and educational outcomes. Due to challenges that usually require more than the existing methods of coping, such as working in a less structured academic environment, settling and finding a place in the novel social complex, exploring and engaging in career-related choices, and to manage greater freedom and responsibility while striking a balance between mastery and subjective well-being, university freshmen are at a greater risk for feeling stressed and maladjusted (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007; Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley, & Audin, 2006; Robotham & Julian, 2006; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). Emil (2003) categorized stressful life events of university students in five areas that include anxiety or problems related to self, change-related problems, family related problems, and academic problems. For the adjustment process to be successful, students have to meet multiple challenges by devising strategies that serve the purpose of pursuing goals, overcoming obstacles, utilizing opportunities, and dealing with change (Clark, 2005). Described as such, it is evident that the adjustment of university students is a multidimensional construct, including various aspects such as Academic, social, and psychological adjustment. Although correlated, these are separate aspects that work together for a student's over-all adjustment.

An extensive review of literature based on the meta-analysis of studies using this multidimensional construct of adjustment found college adjustment to be strongly predictive of academic performance in college and college retention (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Winter & Bowers, 2007). However, recent evidence shows that the significance and interrelationship of various factors contributing to adjustment and subsequent retention vary for different students groups (Fischer, 2007) and change with each passing year as students' progress through their university programs (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). Such differences have been observed between traditional and mature students, as the relevance and implications of these factors are quite dissimilar for both these student groups in major areas of life pertaining to family, studies, peer and intimate relationships, autonomy and responsibility (Dill & Henley, 1998) and also because of their different expectations, motivation, and involvement in campus activities impacting their time management, stresses and coping styles (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2010).

Identity Integration

Identity integration reflects the ability of a person to have a clear sense of and consistency in the various aspects of self, resulting in internal coherence of self-concept, and clear, well defined goals and sense of direction in life (O'Brien & Epstein, 1988). While analyzing Erikson's formulation of identity development, Côté and Levine (2014) identified three interrelated facets of psychosocial functioning – the subjective psychological aspect of ego identity, the personal characteristics of behavior and personality, and the social aspect based on the roles identified in the community. According to them, the harmonious interplay of these dimensions is required for healthy development of identity, and till this happens, the individual experiences an internal state of confusion and instability marked by inconsistencies in behavior, character and in the acquisition and fulfillment of socially approved roles, called "identity crisis" by Erikson.

The university or college experience is a major vehicle in the construction of the identities of students, as they most frequently report reflecting on identity issues related to personal growth and professional identities when inquired about the life construction aspects of their student lives (Lairio, Puukari, &Kouvo, 2013). This is of particular relevance to traditional students, who have not yet achieved their adult identity status and are still exploring and evaluating their personal and professional identities.Due to the constant flux of the identity formation processes, traditional students are more likely to be marked with indecisiveness about the direction they would like to take in life, and depending upon the normative expectations of society, can lead to societal criticism or disapproval if carried on without developing effective goal-directed behaviors (Harter, 2012). Failure to timely develop a coherent and integrated sense of identity based on the acceptance and integration of the various aspects of one's self-concept adversely impacts psychological, social, and emotional well-being not only by problems in meeting current developmental challenges, but also by disrupting adaptive functioning in future as a true adult (Harter, 2012).

Other studies have found differentiation of self that is characterized by a clear sense of personal identity, ability to modulate emotions and maintain a balance between autonomy and intimacy in close relationships to directly influence student adjustment and mediate the effect of college stress related to studies and financial matters (Skowron, Wester, &Azen, 2004).

Institutional Attachment / Commitment

The level of satisfaction and belonging that a student possesses with the academic institution where he or she is enrolled is referred to as Institutional attachment/commitment (Baker & Siryk, 1999). A meta-analysis of studies in student adjustment over the last two decades reported institutional commitment to be the strongest predictor of retention so much so that its effect alone was found to be almost equal to the joint effects of all the other aspects of adjustment (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). There is evidence that this

predictive capacity is effective from the very beginning of the freshman year. However, depending upon the time at which the students are in their academic programs, the various aspects related to commitment change in significance. In the first year, commitment to the university is constituted by having clear occupational goals and reasons for seeking a degree and being in the university. While this remains a persistent factor in retention throughout their academic programs, in the second year it becomes associated to a greater degree with their academic self-efficacy and faculty support, while in the third year the status and reputation of the university and the value of its degree gain significance (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011).

Factors leading to institutional attachment have been found to be different for traditional and mature students. The mature students report academic environment to be the most important factor for their commitment to the institution, whereas the support available serves as the most significant contributor of the integration of the traditional students in the university environment (Wardley, Bélanger, & Leonard, 2013).

It is clear from the literature of other countries that there is a positive relationshipof global self-esteem with overall adjustment as well as of identity integration withinstitutional attachment / commitment, of mature and traditional students. As global self-esteem and identity integration gives usa clear sense of direction in life, it is therefore expected that these two variables would be positively related to overall adjustment and institutional attachment / commitment, respectively of the students of the sample who have recently got themselves enrolled into Masters Programs in various universities. As in Pakistan few researches focused on self-esteem and adjustment of mature and traditional university students, therefore focusing on this topic is a need of time. The results would help student counselors in understanding adjustment issues of these students.

Hypotheses

1. The scores on the global self-esteem scale will relate positively with the overall adjustment scores of traditional and mature university students.

2. The scores on the identity integration scale will relate positively with institutional attachment/commitment scores of traditional and mature university students.

Method

Participants

I65 students from six public and private sector universities were chosen through purposive sampling for this study. Out of these, 83 students belonged to the traditional group that was defined as being 21 to 23 years of age (M=22, SD =.73), and having a linear pattern of education without any gap.The other group consisted of mature students with their ages ranging from 25 to 54 years (M=31, SD =7.42), and having returned to education after a gap of at least two years. All the students were first semester Masters Students and the gender ratio was almost equal in both groups, with the difference in the number of male and female students being one in one group and two in the other. Being a regular student in the first semester of Master's Program.

The detailed demographic characteristics based on mean age, gender, and on marital, employment and student status are given in table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Traditional and Mature University Students

Student Groups		Mean Age (years)	Marital Status		Employment Status		Student Status	
			S	M	E	NE	FT	PT
Traditional Students N = 83	Male N = 42	22.02	42	--	9	33	39	3
	Female N = 41	21.71	40	1	2	39	41	--
Mature Students N = 82	Male N = 42	30.55	29	13	28	14	13	29
	Female N = 40	31.45	21	19	17	23	24	16

*Note:*Marital Status: S = Single; M = Married; Employment Status: E = Employed; NE = Not Employed; Student Status: FT = Full-time; PT = Part-time

Measures

Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory. Global self-esteem and identity integration were measured through Multidimensional Self-esteem Inventory (MSEI) by O'Brienand Epstein (1988). MSEI self-report inventory consisting of eleven scales of ten items each which are rated on a five point likert type scale by the respondents. It adopts a hierarchical conceptualization of self-esteem and gives separate scales of global self-esteem and identity integration in addition to eight specific components of self-esteem and a defensive self-enhancement scale. For this study statistics were applied only to the scores of global self-esteem and

identity integration scale. MSEI conceptualizes global self-esteem as a summation of feelings of worthiness that generally exert an effect on an individual's expectations about future behavior and outcomes. Identity integration is considered to be a fundamental function of self-evaluations and refers to the organization and integration of self-related experiences in the self-concept resulting in its adequacy and better level of functioning.The internal consistency of both these scales has been reported to be good with the values of alpha coefficient as.90 for global self-esteem and .85 for identity integration.

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire. Overall adjustment and institutional attachment/commitment were measured through Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) by Baker and Siryk (1999). It is a 67-item self-report inventory requiring the respondents to rate each item on a nine-point scale based on how closely that item applies to them. Overall adjustment is referred to as full scale adjustment in SACQ and is calculated by combining the scores of four sub-scales measuring the domains of academic, social and personal-emotional adjustment as well as institutional attachment/commitment. Institutional attachment/commitment comprised of 15 items and refers to the level of commitment a student has with educational goals and the degree of bonding the student develops with the institution in which he or she is currently enrolled. Baker and Siryk (1999)report s the alpha coefficients for full scale to range from .92 to .95, whereas for institutional attachment/commitment they range from .85 to .91.

Procedure

To collect data, approvals were sought from the heads of the respective departments after which the students were approached in their classrooms. Students who voluntarily agreed to participate and fulfilled the inclusion criteria were selected for the study. After receiving their informed consent, they were given ademographic information form, SACQ and MSEIwhich they filled in the presence of the researcher (complete forms of MSEI and SACQ were administered in the actual study which is a doctoraLrescarch.

This paper is based upon the results of selected scales from these questionnaires)

The whole procedure took about an hour but in some cases exceeded by 15-20 minutes depending upon the speed of the respondents. In most instances, forms were administered in a group except when only one or two students from a class fit the sample. The respondents were not offered any incentive for their participation. Forms with incomplete information or omitted responses were not included in the final data. Its scoring was done as, mentioned in the manual of the forms. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was applied to scientifically understand the results of the current study.

Results

This study attempted to investigate the relationship of global self-esteem with overall adjustment as well as identity integration with institutional attachment/commitment of traditional and mature university students.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's r for Global Self-esteem and Overall Adjustment

Student Groups	Global Self-esteem		Overall Adjustment				
	M	SD	M	SD	r	n	p
Traditional	35.01	5.87	36.90	59.85	.35	83	.001***
Mature	34.54	7.23	35.41	53.93	.50	82	.000***

*** p<.001

Table 2 show, both the students groups (traditional and mature) had highly significant positive relationship (p < .001) between global self-esteem and overall adjustment resulting in the acceptance of the first research hypothesis.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's r for Identity Integration and Institutional Attachment/Commitment

Student Groups	Identity Integration		Institutional Attachment		r	n	P
	M	SD	M	SD			
Traditional	32.52	6.05	88.72	19.46	.12	83	.296
Mature	33.84	6.54	83.07	14.47	.52	82	.000***

*** p<.001

Results show that the second hypothesis was only partially proved as there was no significant relationship between identity integration and institutional attachment/commitment for traditional students. For mature students, on the other hand, a highly significant positive relationship was found between these variables (r = .52, p < .001).

Discussion

Global Self-Esteem and Adjustment

The significantly positive relationship of global self-esteem to overall adjustment for both traditional and mature university students confirms the general empirical findings found in the literature. There are several factors that help explain this relationship. One of the reasons for it is that positive self-regard leads to greater goal self-concordance, resulting in goals that have

greater congruence with intrinsic factors and personal values, which affects job and life satisfaction (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005). Self-esteem has also been found to play a mediating role between executive self and negative affect indicating that the effect of choosing, monitoring and regulating behaviours is influenced by our evaluations of personal worth leading to feelings of happiness or sadness (Neiss, Stevenson, Sedikides, Kumashiro, Finkel, & Rusbult, 2005).

There are several other areas in which self-esteem contributes to better adjustment, for example, adopting an approach tendency during problem-solving. Heimpel, Elliot, and Wood (2006) found self-esteem to be positively related to approach temperament and to play a mediating role in the relationship between neuroticism and avoidance goals, as well as between approach/avoidance sensitivity with regard to the pursuance of achievement goals. However, while pursuing achievement goals, people having low self-esteem not only begin with a disadvantage but also find it difficult to regulate their persistence when faced with repeated failures.

People having low self-esteemare typically believed to have a low relational value and are not sure of being accepted by others. Their increased sensitivity and fear of rejection causes them to engage in self-protective rather than self-enhancing behaviors in interpersonal situations, focusing more on the costs rather than the benefits of social situations or new relationships (Baumeister, Tice & Hutton, 1989, as cited in Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007). On the other hand, people with high self-esteem have a higher sense of personal worth and pay little attention to cues that indicate the risk of possible rejection. Thus, students with low self-esteem showed their willingness to join a group only when they believed that they will be accepted, whereas the decision of students with high self-esteem to join a group was not contingent upon the guarantee of acceptance from the group (Anthony, Wood,& Holmes, 2007).

The above findings imply that even if people having high and low global self-esteem hold similar conceptions about their abilities in a particular area, their physiological, cognitive, emotional and

behavioral reactions after a particular experience will be quite different leading to differing patterns of coping and adjustment. The propensity of people to remain focused on outcomes and thoughts that align with their previously held self-evaluations cause's individuals with low self-esteem to engage in compensatory exaggerated behavior that is in accordance with their self-image after undergoing experiences in which their behavior is discrepant with their self-evaluation (Brooks, Swann Jr,& Mehta, 2011). Thus, they might create self-handicapping situations to bring congruence between their real world experiences with their inner sense of self causing deleterious effects on their adjustment.

As global self-esteem was found to be related to adjustment for both traditional and mature students, the effects of high and low self-esteem level appear to be applicable to both these student groups.This implies a need to ascertain the level of self-esteem in the beginning of their academic programs and design measures to enhance it if required. However, considering the different positions in the life-world milieu of traditional and mature students, further research is also recommended to fine grain the unique contribution of factors comprising the self-esteem of developmentally diverse student populations. Such studies will not only help to develop an understanding of students in higher education but can also be utilized to designfocused and developmentally appropriate interventions for promoting student well-being on campus.

Identity Integration and Institutional Commitment

The level of identity integration as indicated in table 2 was found to be significantly related to institutional attachment/ commitment for mature students only and not for traditional students. This implies that understanding the effect of an integrated self-concept on commitment with academic goals and satisfaction with academic environment and institution requires more than the knowledge of its level. It also indicates that mature students have a clearer understanding of their academic goals and a higher level of commitment with them. Similar findings were reported by Riediger, Freund, and Baltes (2005) who investigated goal-

achievement and goal-coherence in young and older adults using time-sampling methods and found that older adults selected goals that were more coherent and less conflicting with each other. On the contrary, traditional students who by virtue of being emerging adults might be at different stages of identity development and goal achievement. As they are still exploring, evaluating and selecting occupational and interpersonal options available to them, it might be expected that many of them might not have reached the achievement status, which is marked generally by the beginning of a job in the occupation of choice or a long-term committed relationship most commonly represented as marriage in our society. Thus, for traditional students identity integration appears to have greater flux and heterogeneity as a construct than that of mature students.

Another related aspect explaining the findings of this study for traditional students might be the motives leading to identity commitments, as these have been found to influence adjustment in addition to the effect of the strength of commitments (Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, Papini, & Vansteenkiste, 2011). They pointed out that autonomous motives comprising of identification and integration were positively related to self-esteem and sense of agency and negatively related to depressive tendencies, while the opposite was true for controlled motives consisting of introjection and external regulation. They also found commitment motives to partially mediate the relationship between the three identity styles (informational, normative and diffuse-avoidant) and their relationships with adjustment indices (Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, Papini, & Vansteenkiste, 2011). In Pakistani society, it has been observed that many times the motives for pursuing a particular field in higher education is determined by the societal pressures especially parental directives rather than the intrinsic interest of students. Thus for many of the traditional students the motives in making occupational choices may be more controlled than autonomous. On the other hand, the mature students are more likely to be at a point in life where their identity commitments are made by choice rather than duty or obligation and thus they may be expected to have a higher level of clarity and identification with

their commitments and subsequent satisfaction with their choice of institutions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the positive relationship of global self-esteem with adjustment of traditional and mature university students. The absence of any significant relationship between identity integration and institutional attachment/ commitment in traditional students indicates that identity integration is a more heterogeneous construct in these students representing multivariate combinations of identity dimensions and goal commitments rather than a crystallized construct as might be assumed in the case of mature students that have gone past the stage of exploration and have made choices with greater certainty. It also brings attention to the fact that knowledge about factors other than the level of identity integration is required to understand its effect on traditional students' attachment and commitment to their academic goals and institutions.

Limitations

Limitations on the representativeness of the sample of this study might have been imposed due to the relatively small sample size and purposivesampling.Includingonly those students who voluntarily agreed on participating might have also produced selection bias as students who didn't agree might have personality or adjustment characteristics different from the ones who participated. Since this study was based solely on self-reports and does not look into actual behavior of the participants in real life, it could not counter the effects of lack of self-awareness or reflectivity and thus, the level of authenticity of self-concept or self-esteem could not be ascertained.

Recommendations

Academic programs in higher education should capitalize the potential of learning experiences to shape individual development

beyond this life stage and should strive to facilitate identity achievement bydesigning interventions that link identity processes with program goals. Developmentally appropriate programs focusing on self-esteem enhancement and identity integration are required to promote students' well-being and adjustment by meeting the unique needs of students at different developmental stages.

Implications

The findings of this study imply a need to ascertain the level of self-esteem in the beginning of the academic programs and design measures to enhance if required. Present research results also highlight the need for further research regarding the various aspects of the identity formation and integration processes as they exist in the freshmen context for traditional students. Having enrolled in a Master's program, it is obvious that they have made commitments to a certain extent, but whether they identify with these commitments and do they match with their ideal self is the main factor that needs to be determine.Making externally regulated commitments that do not pertain to their personally valued goals can be expected to cause a period of extended moratorium which leads to blocks in attaining development tasks of adulthood as well as subjective distress and social disapproval. Feelings of authenticity and ideal-actual self-discrepancy are other avenues for further research into factors that determine adjustment and well-being of university students.

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