Coping with the Transition to Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

The increasing diversity of adult learners requires an understanding of their perceived demands and coping strategies in order to provide appropriate campus support programs. A transition perspective was used to examine the individual nature of student responses and to identify common themes in student experiences during the first year of post-secondary studies. Although academic demands were central concerns for students, there was considerable variability in the perceived characteristics of transition demands associated with the student role. Age and sex differences are discussed in light of recommendations for addressing the needs of students in transition.

Résumé

La diversité d'adultes apprenants requiert une compréhension des besoins perçus par ceux-ci et un développement de stratégies dans le but de procurer des programmes supports sur le campus. Une perspective transitionnelle a été utilisée pour examiner la nature individuelle des réponses des étudiants et pour identifier les thèmes communs dans leur expérience au cours de leur première année d'études postsecondaires. Quoique les demandes académiques furent le thème central des inquiétudes pour les étudiants, il y avait une variabilité considérable au niveau des caractéristiques des demandes perçues concernant la transition associée au rôle de l'étudiant. Les différences au niveau de l'âge et du sexe sont discutées à la lumière des recommandations adressant les besoins des étudiants en transition.

One of the greatest challenges to educators is to meet the educational and personal needs of students entering higher education (Parkes, 1983). Post-secondary programs now enroll students of all ages and developmental stages. The largest shift in enrollment patterns is from students enrolling directly from high school, to students with multiple career routes and complex reasons for pursuing higher education (Keierleber & Hansen, 1992). To be responsive, campus support programs require information about the neeeds of their diverse clientele.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING ADULT TRANSITION

A fundamental premise of most transition models is that adults experience continuous change (Bridges, 1980, 1991). It is the personal experience of change, not change per se, that determines the meaning of a transition (Schlossberg, 1984). An individual's perceptions, reactions, and coping resources are essential for understanding adult transitions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Robertson, 1992). Therefore, in working with adults, it is useful to consider a general framework, while addressing the unique needs of the individual in transition (Brammer & Abrego, 1992).

TRANSITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The majority of adult students are in the midst of a career transition (Abrego & Brammer, 1992; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980), characterized by changes, such as, job termination, unemployment, skill redundancy, disability, relationship breakdown, or job advancement. These changes act as triggers that prompt many adults to pursue higher education. Thus, transition into higher education is embedded in other transitions happening in the lives of most adults (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989).

Not only do adults have to manage the changing circumstances leading them to higher education, they must deal with changing student roles. Personal and academic demands shifting over the academic year suggest that the student role itself contains multiple transitions. "Transitions that prompt a return to school join transitions inherent in the educational process itself" (Schlossberg, et al., 1989, p. 14).

Consistent with Bridges' (1980, 1991) model, Schlossberg et al. (1989) consider transitions in education to have three main phases: moving into the post-secondary environment, moving through it, and moving on, or preparing to leave the educational environment. By virtue of moving into the adult student role, other life areas are altered and new opportunities begin. As students move through their academic programs, demands shift, roles change, and perceptions of self are modified to accommodate these changing perceptions. As program completion draws near, a radical change in demands occurs. At each stage, coping strategies need to adjust to meet the changing situation, if the transition is to be successful.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Viewing transition as a process suggested that students' experiences may change over time in response to emerging demands. Thus, the current study investigated the transition to higher education, tracking perceived demands and coping resources throughout an academic year. In order to understand the shared experiences of particular groups, the influence of age and sex on transition was considered. Methodology was used that was sensitive to uncovering group similarities and differences while preserving the individuality of students' transition experiences. Through examining transitions as a process over time, it was hoped that the study would provide information to assist students in managing transition during the first year of a post-secondary program.

METHOD

A 2 (gender) × 3 (age) × 4 (time) repeated measures design was used, gathering data at four designated points during the academic year. This

allowed tracking student demands across time and comparing different subsets of the sample.

Sample

A stratified random sample of 168 volunteers enrolled in 2-year academic programs at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) was selected. Located in Calgary, Alberta, SAIT is a polytechnical institution with a full-time enrollment of approximately 7,000 students. Only programs with at least a 70/30 gender ratio and grade 12 entrance requirements were included. There were 56 participants in each of three categories: direct entry (ages 18-19), mature students (age 25 and older), and other students (age 20-24). A total of 152 students, 70 males and 82 females, completed the first set of questionnaires. Complete data were obtained for 94 participants.

Dependent Measures

Coping. Coping was assessed with *COPE* (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). The COPE is a 60-item Likert scale consisting of 15 subscales grouped into three coping dimensions: *problem-focused coping* (Active Coping, Planning, Suppression of Competing Activities, Restraint Coping, Seeking Instrumental Social Support), *emotion-focused coping* (Seeking Emotional Social Support, Positive Reinterpretation and Growth, Acceptance, Denial and Turning to Religion) and *coping by disengagement* (Focusing on and Venting of Emotions, Behavioural Disengagement, and Mental Disengagement). Two subscales (Alcohol and Drug Use, Humour) are exploratory.

The *COPE* has good psychometric support. Cronback alpha reliability ranges from .45 to .92, with only mental disengagement falling below .6 (C. Carver, personal communication, June, 1991). Test-retest reliability (8-week interval) ranges from .46 to .86. Low correlations between the COPE scales suggest they are relatively independent of each other. Convergent and discriminant validity has been demonstrated by linking coping strategies to a variety of personality qualities (Carver et al., 1989).

Student demands and coping experiences. Student demands and their coping experiences were assessed by the *Inventory of Student Demands* (ISD), a researcher constructed open-ended questionnaire (see Arthur, Hiebert, Waters & Johannson, 1992). The questionnaire consists of a series of open-ended questions which ask students to describe the nature of their current demands and coping attempts. Participants also are asked to quantify, using a 6-point Likert scale, items such as: degree of general stress, stress experienced in each demand, and coping effectiveness. In addition, the ISD asks students to comment on institutional resources that potentially could assist them in managing transitions.

Procedure

All dependent measures were administered at each time of the data collection. For the ISD, participants were asked to list up to five current demands, elaborate the top demand, and describe their current coping strategies. At the second and subsequent data collection times, the top demand from each previous test time was revisited in addition to the current top demand in order to determine whether coping approaches adjusted to meet changing demands. A coding taxonomy was derived from a content analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions. Three raters then categorized student responses, using the method of constant comparisons (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) to reduce "rating drift" and maintain high inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa > .90).

<center>RESULTS</center>

Nature of Demands

Table 1 highlights the frequencies of students' top ranked demands at each data administration time. Demands related to the student role were the most frequently reported top-ranked demands, comprising from 63%-75% of the responses. Next, the five demands listed by students at each data collection time were examined. When considering all reported demands, not just the top-ranked ones, students identified family and relationship demands about two-thirds as frequently as academic demands and finances were listed about one-third as frequently. Chi-square tests of independence indicated there were no significant differences in the types of top-ranked demands reported by students of different ages or sexes. However, when considering all the demands reported, females showed a greater tendency to report family and relationship demands than did males. It is interesting to note the wide variation in the reasons why a given situation was demanding and how those reasons changed across time. This underscores the role that perception plays in people's transition experiences.

Coping

To investigate the influence of age and sex on stress and coping, a MANOVA was conducted using general stress level and the COPE sub-scales as dependent measures. There was a significant Time effect, $F(48, 483) = 1.87$, $p < .01$; Age-by-Time interaction, $F(96, 962) = 1.30$, $p < .03$; and Sex-by-Time interaction, $F(48, 483) = 1.46$, $p < .03$. Follow-up univariate tests indicated significant Time differences on the following scales: General Stress, $F(3, 177) = 4.96$, $p < .003$; Acceptance, $F(3, 177) = 3.15$, $p < 0.3$; Behavioural Disengagement, $F(3, 177) = 4.47$, $p < .005$; and Denial, $F(3, 177) = 2.59$, $p < .05$. Post-hoc Sheffe tests indicated that the sample as a

TABLE 1

Frequencey Of Top-Rated Demands
And Reasons Why Those Situations Were Demanding

Demand/Reason	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3		Time 4	
Academic	98		89		59		60	
Too much work		35		49		34		38
Work is too hard		26		16		6		7
Poor achievement		4		18		12		11
Poor instruction		2		4		2		0
General/unspecified		31		2		5		4
Relationship & Family	20		5		8		8	
Parents		4		1		2		0
Spouse/significant other		2		2		2		5
Children		5		2		2		0
General/unspecified		9		0		2		3
Finances	18		14		13		9	
Paying bills		8		11		9		10
Supporting family		3		0		0		0
Affording education		4		1		0		2
Affording luxuries		4		4		4		3
General/unspecified		5		2		1		0
Employment	5		3		7		3	
Obtaining qualifications		1		2		0		1
Job availability		2		1		4		3
General/unspecified		2		0		3		0
Other demands	11		8		7		11	

Note. Some totals do not add up because more than one reason for the demand was given.

whole reported more stress at Time 4, was more likely to use Accceptance to cope at Times 3 or 4 than at Times 1 or 2, used more Behavioural Disengagement at Time 1 than subsequent Times, and more Denial at Time 3 than Times 1 or 2.

Regarding the Age-by-Time interaction, follow-up univariate tests indicated significant differences on the following scales: General Stress, $F(6, 177)=2.11$, $p<.05$; Suppression of Competing Activities, $F(6, 177)=2.31$, $p<.04$; and Venting Emotions, $F(6, 177)=2.84$, $p<.01$. Post-hoc Sheffe tests indicated that early in the academic year (Time 1), direct entry students, age 18-19, were more likely to cope through Venting Emotions, but 20-24-year-olds were more likely to use that strategy at the end of the academic year. Students age 25+ were more likely to cope through Suppression of Competing Activities at the beginning of the year and

students age 20 and older showed significantly higher scores on this way of coping by the end of the year.

Regarding the Sex-by-Time interaction, follow-up univariate tests indicated a significant difference on Seeking Social Support-Emotional, $F(3, 177) = 3.51$, $p < .02$. Post-hoc Sheffe tests indicated that at Times 1, 2, and 4, females had significantly higher scores than males.

To obtain a more general view of coping pattern, the COPE subscores were rank ordered for each Time. The rank order of COPE subscales revealed that throughout the academic year, students were most likely to use Positive Reinterpretation and Growth as a means of coping, followed by Planning, Action, Acceptance, and Suppression of Competing Activities. This pattern was consistent over time with two exceptions. First, students were more likely to cope using Positive Reinterpretation and Growth and Acceptance at the beginning of the school year and more likely to cope using Suppression of Competing Activities and Seeking Social Support at the end of the year. Second, Positive Reinterpretation and Growth decreased in February (Time 3), suggesting perhaps that during the winter doldrums students are less able to reframe their demands as potential benefits. Age subgroups had similar patterns of coping, except that students age 18-19 reported Mental Disengagement more frequently than other students. Denial, Religion, Behavioural Disengagement, and Alcohol/Drug Use were reported least frequently at all four times.

Summary

Not surprisingly, demands related to the student role were central concerns during the transition to post-secondary education. However, the reasons why students found academic concerns demanding varied considerably. The pattern of demands was similar across age level and sex, with the exception that females reported family and relationship demands more frequently than males. The sample as a whole reported less stress in September and more stress at the end of the academic year. At the beginning of the academic year, younger students used coping strategies that withdrew them, actively and mentally, from the demand situation. Older students were more likely to cope by suppressing activities which competed with the primary demands they were facing. This suggests that older students may be dealing with multiple role demands which require them to prioritize activities in order to cope with their top demands. Female students were more likely to use social support as a way of coping, which can be seen as appropriate, given the greater likelihood of females to report family and relationships as demands. Females were equally likely as males to use problem-focusing coping strategies, suggesting that female students may have broader coping repertoires than males.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the nature of demands perceived by students during the transition to post-secondary studies, the strategies used to cope with those demands, and the extent to which student age and sex influenced their experience. The results have implications for facilitating student transition.

Our results confirm the centrality of academic concerns in the transition to higher education. Although novelty may be a factor initially (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the persistence of academic demands, and the perceived stress associated with them suggest that many students were not adequately prepared for the student role. The high ranking of financial and relationship concerns confirms the perspective that educational transitions are embedded in other life areas (Schlossberg, 1984).

Although academic situations were the most demanding, the reasons varied considerably. Responses ranged from workload factors, including the amount of homework, expectations for performance by self and others, the nature of work, difficulty of subject material, to concerns about the impact on family and friends. This underscores the importance of looking past common themes to explore personal meanings associated with students' experience (Keierleber & Hansen, 1992).

Previous researchers have considered that age may influence both the sources of stress and resources used to cope with stress during life transitions (Arthur, Hiebert & Waters, 1994; Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley & Novacek, 1987; McCrae, 1982). In general, when controlling for type of stressor, this research suggests that with age, people become more selective and effective in their use of coping strategies. While age was not a major factor influencing perceived demands during the transition experience, support was found for the differential use of coping srategies by students in different age groups.

Similarly, previous researchers have investigated a dispositional explanation of sex differences in coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Billings & Moos, 1984) while others have maintained that the context of the situation, as well as differential access to coping resources need to be considered (Arthur & Hiebert, 1994; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Miller & Kirsch, 1987). The current study found only modest support for sex differences in the nature of reported transition demands. There were no significant differences in the top ranked demands reported by males or females. The greater frequency of family and relationship demands for females at the beginning of each semester reflects an initial adjustment concern that stabilized as the semester progressed.

As the academic year unfolded, several coping patterns were noted. First, in response to similar demands, there was coping stability, suggesting that students continued to use familiar methods. Increasing levels of stress throughout the year suggest that these coping efforts were inade-

quate. Even though coping strategies were not effective in dealing with demands or alleviating stress, students relied on what they used and were unable to implement more effective ways of coping.

A second pattern in the transition experience was evident in the nature of the coping strategies used by students. The most frequently used coping strategy was positive reinterpretation and growth, making the best of the situation by viewing it in a more favourable light, or growing from it (Carver et al., 1989). This strategy, paired with the use of problem-focused coping, indicates that students develop a mental set which enables them to take action to manage transition demands. Taylor and Brown (1988) have suggested that a positive outlook may be especially beneficial to enhance motivation, persistence, and performance, which are essential for success in higher education. Despite adversity, so long as students are able to use positive appraisal, they are more apt to initiate and/or continue problem-focused coping.

A third pattern in coping with transition demands emerged in the investigation of sex differences. Female students did exhibit higher levels of emotional stress and used more emotion-focused coping than males, corroborating some previous work (Jick & Mitz, 1985). Male and female students were equally likely to use problem-focused coping, also substantiating previous investigations (Miller & Kirsch, 1987). When interpreting these findings, it is important to appreciate that there is considerable debate in the literature about whether emotion-focused coping represents less adaptive forms of coping. Some researchers have suggested that there are advantages to using emotion-focused coping in situations appraised to be beyond the individual's control (Folkman, 1984). Thus, the female students in this study demonstrated a fuller range of coping strategies which may leave them better equipped to deal with both changeable and unchangeable aspects of transitions (Hiebert & Basserman, 1986). Alternatively, findings that males persist with instrumental forms of coping may imply they have greater perceived or actual power to change the situation and thus persist with a problem-focused approach. It may be that social expectations allow male and female students different roles in which appraisals of control and subsequent coping efforts are influenced (Miller & Kirsch, 1987).

The fourth pattern in the transition experience derives from the differences found between the strategies of direct entry students and students age 20 and older. The latter group used more suppression of competing activities, an active coping strategy essential to cope with competing role demands. This finding may support the position that older students have multiple roles to balance and need to suppress some in order to succeed with others (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Alternatively, it may suggest that with the additional life experience, students are more selective about matching particular coping strategies to meet transition

characteristics (Folkman et al., 1987). This may explain why direct entry students were more consistent with their use of strategies and used more emotion-focused and disengagement coping strategies than other students. Given the new and changing demands faced by students, direct entry students may benefit from problem-solving and/or social skills programs to enhance their capabilities to manage transition demands (Magnusson & Redekopp, 1992). Without a varied coping repertoire that includes both self- and situation-management strategies, younger students may lack the flexibility that is essential for managing the process of transition in higher education (Keierleber & Hansen, 1992).

Regardless of age, all students would benefit from a range of coping strategies that, (a) address transition situations directly, (b) change the meaning of transition, and (c) manage the stress associated with transition (Hiebert, 1988). Working with students to view their circumstances as opportunities for learning may assist the development of coping skills essential for personal and professional competency in future transitions.

CONCLUSIONS

Counsellors in post-secondary settings work with an increasingly diverse student population and with increasing numbers of students managing multiple transitions. There is considerable variation in students' experience of transition. Therefore, programs designed to assist students need to educate students about the nature of transitions while simultaneously addressing unique student concerns.

Our findings suggest several ways in which counsellors can assist students to cope effectively with transition demands. First, the presenting concerns of students need to be explored in the context of the idiosyncratic meanings attached to demands by students. Different people find the same situations demanding for different reasons. Second, the resources available to students need to be visible. It is frequently possible to increase students' ability to cope by helping them access resources available on campus (Arthur & Hiebert, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Third, interventions need to consider the existing strengths of students and not interfere with existing coping strategies. Some recommendations may actually represent additional demands for an individual who already is feeling overwhelmed. Effective intervention requires assessment of the nature of demands and the student's existing coping repertoire, as well as assistance to learn new ways to enhance the student's efforts to manage transitions.

Through a general understanding of transition models, counsellors and educators can assist students with both common and unique transition experiences. The results of this study raise concerns about the sufficiency of student coping repertoires. The transition to higher education is characterized by a move to a new situation in which old, familiar

coping strategies are not always appropriate for new and changing circumstances. Students will be most successful if they can identify the specific aspects of their situation that produce the demand and consider alternative coping strategies to manage transition in post-secondary education.

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