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An interpretative phenomenological analysis of stress and coping in first year undergraduates

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Abstract

In the UK, changes to the Higher Education system have increased the range of stressors experienced by students above those traditionally associated with the transition to university. Despite this, there is little qualitative research examining how students experience and cope with the adjustment to university. The experience of the transition was investigated in depth amongst 10 first year UK undergraduates. Purposive sampling resulted in a group with demographics similar to national statistics on UK undergraduates. Semi- structured interviews were used beginning with a content specific vignette to develop rapport. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was utilised to analyse the transcripts (Smith, 2003) and quality checks were implemented to increase the validity of the analysis. Five main themes were identified: all the change, with subthemes of independent living, homesickness, differences between post-compulsory education and university; expectations of university; academic focus with subthemes of self-discipline, motivation, learning from experience; support network with subthemes of establishing a support network, support for coping with problems; and difficulties with subthemes of difficulties experienced with housemates, finances and employment, and academic difficulties. Students used a range of coping strategies. By identifying the role of positive psychological strengths such as optimism, hope, self-efficacy, and self-control in coping with stress and facilitating positive adaptation, the study locates positive psychological strengths within a transactional understanding of stress and provides depth and relevance to their role in facilitating adjustment. Such qualitative research is rare in the positive psychology and stress literature. Suggestions for easing the transition are made.

Keywords: stress, coping, undergraduate students, positive psychology

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Introduction

Throughout the last thirty years, the United Kingdom higher education system has experienced considerable change. New universities replaced polytechnics, and Government policy encouraged students to attend university, leading to consistent and dramatic increases in student numbers. In response to escalating numbers and increased expenditure on grants, the cost of tuition was shifted onto students via means-tested student loans, consequently increasing levels of student debt and financial pressures (McCarthy & Humphrey, 1995). As a result of these changes more students work part-time. In 1996, four out of ten worked to help fund themselves, and two thirds felt this negatively affected their studies, with missed deadlines and poor attendance (National Union of Students, 1996). A more recent survey suggests this continues, with 39% working part-time, and 3% full-time (UNITE, 2004). There are now more students aiming to enter an increasingly competitive job market, which exacerbates the pressure to achieve a respectable degree (Robotham & Julian, 2006). In addition to financial and employment pressures, the transition to university itself is a period of significant change in a student's life, with heightened levels of stress (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Lu, 1994).

Stress

According to the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress results from the appraisal that environmental or internal demands exceed or tax the coping resources of the individual. The individual evaluates events in terms of their significance for well-being. Stressful situations are appraised to involve harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Lazarus, 1993). If the individual determines an event to be significant; the transactional model proposes that an individual will engage in coping to deal with the perceived threat, loss or challenge.

Two broad dimensions of coping have been consistently identified; coping responses which deal with the problem (problem-focused) and those which manage the associated emotions (emotion-focused) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research shows that problem-focused coping is often predictive of positive adaptation (Endler & Parker, 1990), while emotion-focused coping is often predictive of negative adaptation (Beiler & Terrell, 1990). Coping is best conceptualised as a range of actions an individual performs in order to handle a stressful event (Bartlett, 1998) and there are several distinct strategies related to problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Carver *et al.,* 1989).

The original transactional model had little to say regarding negative outcomes of coping with stress, except that people would engage in the same appraisal-coping-reappraisal process. Folkman updated the transactional model in 2008 to include a new category of coping – meaning-focused coping. The updated model proposed that following failed coping efforts, people will engage in meaning-focused coping which in turn facilitates positive emotions. Positive emotions refresh coping efforts and provide motivation to continue in using adaptive methods of coping to deal with a stressor. Types of meaning-focused coping that have been identified include benefit finding, benefit reminding, adaptive goal processes, reordering priorities, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning (for a review see Folkman, 2008).

Transition to university

The transition and subsequent adjustment typically involve positive aspects including growth opportunities, and meeting new people; however it is also a period of great change which is stressful (Fisher, 1994). Students must leave their established routines and support networks, develop new ones, take on new responsibilities such as independent living, and adapt to new academic challenges. In addition students must cope with the stressors commonly associated with university life; notably financial pressures, examinations, and study-related stressors

(Robotham & Julian, 2006). The impact of these stressors can be exacerbated due to lack of experience, knowledge, or competence. There is an increased sensitivity and vulnerability amongst students in transition (Fisher, 1994). Tinto (1993) reported that 75% of non-progressing students attributed the reasons for leaving university to problems encountered in their first year. Matheny *et al.* (2002) found that students who had more coping resources had lower levels of stress. For adjusting to university, problem-focused coping and support have been shown to be beneficial for well-being and positive adaptation (e.g. Leong *et al.,* 1997), whereas emotion-focused coping and avoidance have been associated with greater distress (e.g. Stewart *et al.,* 1997).

Positive psychology

Positive psychology focuses on individual strengths, valued subjective experiences, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and emphasises understanding the processes and factors which contribute to the health, success, and flourishing of individuals. Psychological strengths represent key foundations of human behaviour, and strength congruent conduct facilitates psychological well-being, such as success, longevity, and happiness (Steen *et al.,* 2003). Aspinwall and Taylor (1992) showed that the psychological strength of optimism was positively associated with lower stress for American undergraduates. Higher optimism predicted greater use of social support and active coping, which predicted better psychological adjustment. Chemers *et al.,* (2001) found that self-efficacy and optimism were strong predictors of adjusting to university amongst first year American undergraduates. Confident and optimistic students were more likely to perceive the transition as a challenge rather than a threat, and reported better adjustment, and less stress. Tangney *et al.,* (2004) discovered that undergraduates with high self-control reported better psychological adjustment. These were all quantitative studies using standardised measures of stress.

A model which focuses specifically on student stress is that of Meijer (2007). The model emphasises the role of cognitive capacity and affective variables such as self-efficacy. Meijer proposes that student stress is determined by experienced workload and the perceived level of guidance from teachers. Coping capacity is important for managing demands, and is determined both by the cognitive ability of students and affective variables, such as how self-confident students feel in their ability to meet demands. Similarly to Aspinwall et al. (1992), Meijer (2001) found that self-belief in ability is significant for coping with stress amongst undergraduates.

Related to the recent emphasis on incorporating positive emotions in the stress process, Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, and Perry (2007) developed the control-value model which demonstrated how emotional experience is significant for undergraduates in terms of achievement and learning. The theory assumes that achievement emotions occur in response to whether a student feels in control of, or out of control of, achievement tasks and important academic goals. Arousal of achievement emotion is central to the theory. Emotions are suggested to also be influenced by non-cognitive factors such as genetics and temperament. The model proposes a reciprocal relationship between achievement emotions, students' motivation, performance, and regulation of learning over time.

Qualitative research

In contrast to quantitative research, there is a limited amount of qualitative research examining the transition and the associated stress and coping behaviour amongst new students (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). In a diary study, Benjamin (1991) found that the transition involved great dislocation in students' daily lives; students were constantly attempting to create a balance between social, academic, and personal domains. Greenbank (2007) reported that the greater emphasis on independent study and less staff support were experienced as stressful.

Social support, transitional issues, time management, expectations, and emotions were shown to be central to the experience of Australian undergraduate students (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Social support was the most prominent factor in aiding adjustment to university, fostering optimism and positive coping. In a phenomenological study undergraduates reporting feeling excited, hopeful, and confident in their abilities prior to university were less likely to withdraw (Minnick, 2008). Students who dropped out of university felt isolated, unmotivated, and disappointed. These two studies provide some qualitative evidence for positive psychological beliefs facilitating adjustment to university and this will be examined further in this UK study.

Qualitative studies are also rare in stress and coping research (Lazarus, 2006). This is problematic as the quantitative cross-sectional designs commonly applied impose an objective structured reality on the stress concept via the questionnaires used to define what is stressful. Coyne (1994) and Somerfield (1996) argue stress research needs to focus more on qualitative methods, such as phenomenology, to provide in-depth understanding of the stress process. Phenomenology views subjective lived experience as central to understanding and this focus on subjectivity in relation to stress is important. Cognitive appraisal, a central component of the transactional approach, is the individual's subjective interpretation of a transaction. It represents the individual's perceptions of an event which are influenced by beliefs, expectations, and the meaning and significance of the event for the individual's well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The phenomenological approach assigns importance to these subjective, experiential, and process-oriented aspects of human functioning (Bartlett, 1998). By focusing on the lived experience and personal world of the individual via phenomenological methods, this study will deepen understanding of stress and coping amongst undergraduates. Identifying the role of positive psychology strengths in coping will also enrich the positive psychology literature where such qualitative research is rare.

Data will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is concerned with subjective experience and perceptions of the world (Smith, 2003). Of central concern to IPA is in-depth exploration of an individual's lived experience of a phenomenon, its meanings for the individual and how the individual understands and makes sense of their personal and social environment (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). IPA has not been applied to this topic previously, and it will allow an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experience to emerge.

Methods

Participants

The emphasis within IPA research is on using a purposive homogenous sample rather than random or representative sampling to ensure the topic is relevant for the sample and can be explored in depth. Various sample sizes have been used for IPA, typically from one to 15 (Bramley & Eatough, 2005). There is no 'right' sample size (Smith & Eatough, 2006); however, the emerging consensus is to use smaller samples, as the difficulties exploring testimonies in-depth from large samples can lead to superficial understanding (Smith, 2003). The sample was purposive, consisting of 10 first year undergraduates from a UK university. There were three males and seven females with a mean age of 19 years (SD = 1; Range 18-21); seven (70%) lived away from home, and five (50%) had a job whilst at university. These demographics are similar to national statistics on UK undergraduates which showed that slightly over half worked part-time, and two-thirds lived away from home (Centre for Higher Education Research & Information, 2005).

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule containing open-ended, non-directive questions to encourage free narrative and detailed responses as required for IPA (Smith, 2003) was used. This was flexible enough to adapt to the narratives presented. Vignettes have been shown to

facilitate rapport and ease respondents into interview situations (Barter & Renold, 1999). A content specific vignette based on a hypothetical situation, likely to be encountered by undergraduates was developed and used to open the discussion and develop rapport (Veal, 2002). The vignette was constructed to be realistic, consistent with the research question, non-directive, and worded to be clearly understood and related to by respondents (Barter & Renold, 1999). It provided enough contextual information but was ambiguous enough to be open to interpretation based on the participants' perceptions and experience (Seguin & Ambrosio, 2002). The following vignette resulted:

'Think about your experience of coming to university last September. Now I'd like you to vividly imagine that a friend of yours is starting university next year and is interested in studying for the same degree as you. They have asked you for advice.'

Participants were asked questions based on this scenario beginning with the advice they would give, as a way of getting them to talk about their own experience. The questions focused on the experience of coming to university, performing well academically, dealing with the challenges of studying, and covered the transition, academic challenges, adjustment, and coping with stress at university. Responses were probed further as necessary for clarification. At the end of the interview, respondents were invited to add any additional comments to ensure their experience had been sufficiently covered. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in a private room in the university in a naturalistic relaxed setting. Respondents were given information about the study, asked for their informed consent, and provided with the vignette to read. The tape recording began when interviewees felt ready. Each interview lasted approximately one hour followed by debriefing.

Data analysis

IPA was employed to analyse the transcripts (Smith, 2003; Willig, 2001). Each transcript was read several times to encourage familiarity. Thoughts, reflections, and preliminary codes were noted in the left margin of the first transcript. The transcript was read through again and preliminary themes were recorded in the right margin. These themes represented the beginning of the conceptualisation process, and this process was iterative in that it involved an interaction between the text and the reader. Next, the preliminary themes were clustered into groups of themes according to common features in terms of meaning. These themes were validated by checking with the transcript. The themes were next illustrated with supporting quotes from the transcript to ensure they were adequately represented and grounded in the data. Any theme that was not sufficiently grounded was removed.

This was repeated for each transcript. The themes for each transcript were compared and combined into master themes to provide a composite portrayal of experience. The master themes were checked and re-checked against the interview transcripts to ensure they adequately represented the undergraduates' experience. Commonalities amongst the preliminary themes were represented as sub-themes, which were judged to reflect lower order aspects of the master themes. A research colleague not involved in the study was provided with three of the 10 interviews to check the coding system and verify that the themes were sufficiently grounded in the data.

Quality

Various criteria have been suggested for evaluating the quality of qualitative research, for example, Henwood and Pidgeon (1992), Elliott *et al.,* (1999), and Yardley (2000). For this study Elliott *et al.'s* (1999) criteria were applied as they are rooted within a phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition (Willig, 2001). Several strategies were used. Descriptive data about the respondents is included and the perspective of the researcher is acknowledged and highlighted. The methods and procedures are described in-depth to enable

replication. Examples of the data are provided to illustrate each theme, and the data is presented in a coherent narrative format. A research colleague "checked" the findings, and a reflexive journal was kept throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflexive journal also represents a decision trail which helped the researcher to approach the data with an open mind, to ensure the data was analysed thoroughly and faithfully, and to limit misinterpretations.

Reflexivity

Qualitative analysis is a subjective process and IPA recognises that a researcher's perspective invariably affects the analysis (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). Following good IPA practice, the researcher's personal perspective relative to the research topic is presented, to assist the readers interpret the analysis and for transparency (Elliott *et al.,* 1999). The researcher's interpretative framework has been influenced by: previous research in stress and positive psychology focusing on undergraduates; knowledge from teaching undergraduates; personal experience of the transition to university; and coping with academic challenges, all of which would facilitate rapport and effective analysis. Preconceptions were documented to encourage awareness and interview questions were removed during analysis to focus purely on the data. It is recognized that the analysis is influenced by the researcher's perspective and the framework applied to understand the data; specifically stress, coping, and positive psychology theory.

Results and Discussion

Five main themes were identified from participants' testimonies: all the change; expectations of university; academic focus; support network; and difficulties.

Theme 1: All the change

This theme concerns how the students felt the transition to university represented considerable change in their lives. Independent living, homesickness, and the difference

between post-compulsory education and university make up the key aspects to the change participants discussed.

Independent living

Living independently was a significant change to the lifestyle of respondents who left home to attend university. Some struggled with the new situation and 'all the change' happening to their lives simultaneously.

Having to sort myself out and being more independent and with all the change I found it quite hard to like begin with and it's really quite scary in the first few weeks just thinking 'oh God I'm here by myself, what am I doing now'. It was like a lot of things were changing and happening all at once. (John)

This finding is similar to that of Benjamin (1991) who found that students felt the transition represented considerable change to their daily lives. The need to be self-reliant was a stressful transitional issue, identified in previous research (Fisher, 1994). Lack of experience of being away from home made adjustment difficult; whereas previous experience helped respondents feel more confident and capable of coping with the change as reported by Fisher *et al* (1987). This was noticeable from Jane particularly, who had previous experience of adjusting to a new country as an international student when studying at post-compulsory education.

University's not something new for me cos I've been in college as well so it was again an unfamiliar environment and unfamiliar people around me, and then I couldn't speak English at all, so can you imagine that? So now I think it's a lot easier. (Jane)

Preparation for living independently made the transition easier to manage. Other ways to adjust to independent living included devising plans, figuring out what was required for everyday life, and through accepting responsibility for the situation.

I used to sort of think about things that happened at home and think 'I've gotta do that for myself, I've gotta do this for myself' and just started getting used to it and worked out what I

needed to do. I used to plan what I needed to do, and slowly I got used to doing things on my own and being more responsible. (John)

Planning and preparation represent forms of problem-focused coping (Carver *et al*., 1989). Problem-focused coping has been consistently supported to influence positive adaptation (Endler & Parker, 1990) and is effective because it deals directly with the problem/s at hand and facilitates perceived control over situations. Control is important for the transition which involves a temporary loss of control over a new environment (Fisher, 1994).

Furthermore, control is important for learning and achievement within educational and social settings in the sense of perceived control over tasks. Pekrun et al. (2007) specify how in response to task demands control is a factor which influences positive outcomes for students; specifically positive emotions and achievement.

Related to the transactional model, the change associated with the transition appears to be a stressor which occurs as a function of this life event. Consistent with research, problem-focused coping was constructive as a strategy for dealing with the change, and having previous experience enabled participants to draw on learned behaviours to negotiate the situation.

Homesickness

A common response amongst students who left home was homesickness. Participants appeared to grieve for and miss home, the way their life was, and the relationships they had. The separation influenced negative emotional reactions and feelings of distress initially. Having strong relationships with friends and family intensified feelings of homesickness. Homesickness has been shown to be a prevalent and unsettling response for university students (Fisher *et al.,* 1990) with Fisher and Hood (1987) finding almost a third of first year students reporting feeling homesick. Participants coped initially by keeping in regular contact

with home-based friends and family. Over time, acceptance of the need to establish emotional independence facilitated gradual adjustment. Michelle felt she had to gradually 'wean people off' her. Homesickness decreased over the first year as participants adapted to being away from home.

I speak to them every day so I'm always in contact with them (family). Since I've been at uni I've always missed people, but I suppose everybody does, but I think it gets easier with time. Last semester I went home every weekend, but now if I leave it on the weekend I'm not as bad as what I was last year, so I suppose that's it really just getting used to being away from people. (Gemma)

Acceptance was a functional coping response which enabled students to come to terms with the reality of the situation at hand and accept that their life is changing. Although acceptance is by definition an emotion-focused coping strategy (Carver *et al.*, 1989), research has shown that this is adaptive for situations which are uncontrollable (Lazarus, 2006); in this instance that relationships change and people move on in response to separation.

Not having a good support group at university intensified feelings of homesickness and made adjusting to university a struggle, whereas having good support helped respondents feel that they were gradually fitting into their new environment.

I think like if you don't feel comfortable with people directly around you, and you haven't got people around who can care for you and support you then I think that's why I've struggled so much. (David)

Research shows that social support is a central factor in the successful adjustment of first year students to university and for academic persistence (Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Lamothe *et al.*, 1995; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007).

Using Folkman's updated transactional theory (2008), acceptance can be interpreted here as a form of meaning-focused coping, in that the efforts to cope with separation influenced

feelings of distress at first and through reappraisal students gradually used acceptance as a more constructive means of coping. Acceptance seemed to be a gradual process established over time. The type of meaning-focused coping acceptance relates to is adaptive goal processes, in that the students often discussed adjustment to separation as a necessary stage to achieving independence, as evident from Gemma.

Differences between post-compulsory education *and university*

Participants found the need to be more independent compared to post-compulsory education difficult at first due to the changes in learning routine, course requirements, and increased responsibility. Students needed to use their own judgement concerning the standard of their work to a greater extent. Once they 'got used to the new systems' and being responsible for their own attendance and deadlines, they tended to feel they could manage independent study more easily.

It was quite difficult being an independent student at first. It was probably mainly the change that was, and getting used to it and Blackboard and where to find things, and like getting the e-mails and making sure I'm checking them regularly, and making sure I know when things have got to be in and everything. (Andrea)

Students consistently compared the new academic environment to previous studying at post-compulsory education in order to make sense of their experience.

When you're doing your actual assignment you're like 'oh, am I doing alright here or not' cos you don't actually know until you get your feedback, cos like obviously when you went to college you do drafts, loads of drafts beforehand and then they look at it and then they give you feedback whereas here you just have to go off your own peer feedback. (Sarah)

Greenbank (2007) also found that the greater emphasis on independent learning was a major source of stress associated with the transition from post-compulsory education to university.

Post-compulsory education (Further Education - FE) and university (Higher Education - HE) in the UK emphasise different learning styles; learner independence is a key part of HE (Brown *et al.,* 1999), whereas FE encourages student support and guidance for completing work which are commended by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as the features of effective FE education (Greenbank, 2007). The increase in student numbers over the last decade in the UK has resulted in increased class sizes and higher student-staff ratios, making it more difficult to provide student support (Greenbank, 2007). Similarly, Cook and Leckey (1999) report that students are used to small class sizes and a higher degree of support from teachers, thus making the transition to university difficult which was noticeable for the students in this study. This finding links to Meijer's model in that stress was related to how students perceive there to be less teacher guidance as a function of the different learning environment at university in comparison with post-compulsory education.

Greenbank (2007) suggests FE should focus more on developing autonomous learners. Additionally, the provision of further support strategies at university could be effective. For example, programmes that address time management, autonomy, and coping with difficulties (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Many UK universities now provide support programmes for new students, and the present research reinforces the value of this.

Theme 2: Expectations of university

This theme represents the anticipatory beliefs students had regarding university. Respondents experienced disappointment and greater stress from university not meeting their expectations; whereas students who held more accurate expectations adjusted to the transition, because they were more prepared for the experience.

I came expecting like that you'd come here and make sort of loads and loads and loads of friends and it would be great but it didn't really happen like that for me. I feel upset it didn't work out better. (Claire)

It kind of summed up what I thought of it. I thought it would be a lot of people meeting a lot of new people, might be a little bit daunting at first but I just kind of got myself into a confidence mode just thinking I've got to make new friends and I'm sure I will. (Michael)

Claire adopted a more passive approach compared to Michael who was active and realistic about meeting new people. Expectations have been shown to play a prominent role in university adjustment due to their influence on feelings, perceptions, and coping responses (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Students who have expectations that are positive and realistic tend to adjust better than students with negative expectations or who experience discrepancies between expectations and reality (Jackson *et al.,* 2000). Unrealistic expectations and consequent dissatisfaction with university have been shown to contribute to attrition (Kantanis, 2000).

An important influence on the expectations of starting university was the information participants received from various sources beforehand. Jane was nervous about the beginning and described how misinformation contributed to her worries.

I met a girl during the summer, last summer, and she had just completed a university Psychology degree and she got a 2:1, and she was like 'I was reading day and night and I just didn't have social life, and I didn't work as well', and I was like if you got 2:1 and you spend like 3 years of your life in the library and I thought, 'oh my gosh what am I going to do there?', and I was like what am I going to do because I have to work and all other things. (Jane)

Conversely, Michael felt prepared for starting university. He studied the, 'information (he) got in the post beforehand' and, 'knew what to expect' as a result.

Positive expectations can be taken to represent optimistic thinking, which refers to positive outcome expectancy, and negative expectations represent pessimistic thinking (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Research has shown that optimistic and confident students successfully adjust to the university transition (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992). Students with optimistic expectations anticipate potential challenges and acknowledge the importance of their role in the adjustment process, and accordingly use effective coping strategies (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Actively meeting new people and preparation were constructive for the students in this instance.

Optimistic beliefs are suggested to act as a moderator in the stress-outcome relationship, which buffer the potential impact of a stressor and contribute to the use of more effective coping techniques (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). In this instance, optimistic beliefs helped students to actively cope with the challenges of the transition.

Theme 3: Academic focus

This theme covers the focus and application of the students regarding academic work, and contains sub-themes of self-discipline, motivation, and learning from experience.

Self-discipline

Participants felt they needed to be self-disciplined to complete academic work and perform well. Specifically, being organized, prepared, and planning ahead helped them manage academic demands. Strategies such as keeping a diary, having a timetable, and devising a routine helped with management of time and workload.

Try and stick to like a planned timetable cos it really does help cos I've started doing that now in semester two, and I should've done it in semester one but I didn't, and I'm a lot more at ease. I'm not panicking about what I've got to do and where I've got to be. (Lynn)

Respondents felt it was important to 'try hard to stick to' the plans they made, due to the temptation to procrastinate and other distractions such as peer pressure which affected their academic focus. Participants coped with peer pressure and distractions by realising that they need to do the work for their future.

You don't come to uni for just the social side, you've got to do work as well, so I think it (giving in to distractions) just made me realise that I'm actually wasting my opportunities, and it's not me not to do my best. (Lynn)

The efforts of the students to exercise a degree of discipline over their academic studies can be interpreted to represent the positive psychological strength of self-control. Self-control can be defined as the ability to exercise restraint and control over behaviour in order to meet long-term objectives (Muraven *et al.,* 1998); in this instance academic achievement. The consequences of lacking self-control, such as spending too much time socializing, contributed to disappointment and negatively affected academic focus. Respondents learned to be more self-controlling throughout the first year which contributed to better management of academic demands. Research shows that self-control is associated with the promotion of positive outcomes, such as academic achievement and positive psychological adjustment at university (Tangney *et al*., 2004).

Motivation

Having a goal focus for the degree acted as a source of motivation to succeed, which in turn facilitated adjustment and application to the course. Respondents felt a sense of pride and self-respect from motivating themselves.

I can see my goal and the end of it so I'm going towards it so I know that I'm going to get it

so it actually makes me closer you know to my goal and my dreams so I try not to see it as a

very stressful thing to do, instead I see it as a very beneficial and very interesting thing to do,

so I try to concentrate on the positive side of it not the negative. (Jane)

In contrast, lacking a clear goal focus for attending university was related with poorer

commitment and doubts over staying for the course.

As the time come closer I was getting stressed out and that and erm sort of realised

that I sort of didn't want to go. When I was here I made a really good effort but I don't know,

I realised up to the time that maybe I wasn't doing the right thing, which kind of like I

probably set myself up for failure. (David)

In positive psychology, hope reflects the beliefs that goals can be achieved and the

motivation to do so (Snyder, 2002). This goal orientation amongst the students is argued to

represent hopeful thinking, and the motivation reflects goal-congruent behaviour to meet

academic achievement targets. Hope is important for facilitating academic adjustment

because students who had specific goals and reasons for attending university felt they had a

purpose which encouraged commitment to reach academic objectives. Previous quantitative

research supports the notion that hope is important for academic achievement (e.g. Alexander

& Onwuegbuze, 2007; Snyder *et al.,* 2002).

Learning from experience

Respondents learned from mistakes and successes in the first semester and tried to improve

their studying in the second semester. Meeting deadlines was a particular source of stress, and

participants tended to contribute to their own stress by leaving work until the last minute.

Some of the respondents missed a deadline which they experienced as particularly stressful.

This was attributed to lack of organization and bad time management, which the students

resolved to work on to avoid such stressful experiences.

Being more organised and knowing when stuff's gotta be in. I think it also makes it more real cos when someone says you miss a deadline it's not gonna be marked, you think 'well they might be more lenient' but they're not, cos obviously if everyone did it and they still marked them. I think just knowing when I've gotta hand stuff in and stick to it. (Gemma)

Negative experiences including underachieving and missing deadlines negatively affected the student's self-belief about coping with future academic demands. Conversely, students who felt satisfied with their academic performance felt that their confidence and enthusiasm increased.

I'm more nervous when I'm writing essays now...if I get a bad mark in an essay, the next few essays I'm like 'oh God I've failed it' (Michelle)

When you see the results like high grades, and er your self-esteem- not your self-esteem, your confidence grows that you can do that and your interest grows as well (Jane)

Self-belief and confidence was important for adjusting to university, and for coping with the course. This self-belief can be interpreted as representing self-efficacy, which refers to belief in ability to achieve desired results from behaviour (Bandura, 1997). Research indicates that self-efficacy is an important positive psychological strength for academic achievement (Multon *et al.,* 1991; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994), coping with stress (Karademas & Kalantzi-Azizi, 2004; Torres & Solberg, 2001), and for adjusting to university (Chemers et al., 2001). A central factor for self-efficacy development is the outcome of previous experience; specifically positive outcomes increase efficacy, whereas negative experiences diminish efficacy (Lamborn *et al.,* 1997). Participants often referred to previous experiences in relation to whether they could cope with demands, highlighting the importance of self-belief in this study.

Similarly to optimism, psychological strengths of self-control, self-efficacy and hope all act as moderators in the stress process in the transactional model. Specifically, such moderators

act upon the appraisal of stressful events. Research shows that greater self-efficacy in ability to handle a stressful encounter is associated with appraising an event as a challenge rather than a threat (Karademas & Kalantzi-Azizi, 2004). Self-belief in ability in university settings has also been supported by Meijer's model (2007) to be a central component to coping with stress in that it is linked with competence in handling difficulties (cognitive capacity).

Hope in essence acted as a protective disposition amongst the respondents. Having a strong goal focus enabled participants to not be as easily threatened or discouraged by setbacks. This is evident from Jane who emphasised a strong sense of commitment and maintained a positive outlook despite challenges.

For self-control, Tangney et al. (2004) specify that self-control refers to the ability to change and adapt the self in order to produce a better, more optimal fit between the self and the world. Thus, adaptively changing behaviour in accordance with the new demands of the academic environment facilitated greater coping ability.

Theme 4: Support network

This theme is concerned with the importance of developing a support network, and includes sub-themes of establishing a support network, and support for coping with problems.

Establishing a support network

Respondents generally experienced anxiety over meeting new people at university, particularly in their accommodation. Making friends was important for enjoyment, fitting in, avoiding isolation, and for encouraging interest and attendance.

From sort of a lifestyle perspective, I think erm if you're going to university you need to make sure you're making friends sort of fairly quickly, cos if you're living on your own rather then living at home and going to university you sort of you struggle, cos if you haven't got any friends you become a lot more isolated and lonely. (Michael)

Participants felt it was important to make as many friends as possible and acted, "'more friendly and more open than (they would be) normally". Being socially inhibited and shy made it difficult to establish a friendship network. Participants who lived at home found it challenging and, "'at first (they) did feel a bit left out", as other students had already made friends through their accommodation and through sharing the experience of leaving home. Starting university represented the first time some students had to establish a friendship network in a long time, which was a stressful experience.

It was so weird just to come up here and not know anyone, cos I've never known how that's felt because when you first start making friends sort of as soon as you start school like Primary School, like I've got friends I've known since I've started school and it's not a big deal because you're so young you don't think about it but now that I was put in that situation again now I'm older you think 'oh my God I have to actually get to know people now'. (John)

Not establishing a good support network influenced feelings of isolation and loneliness, and contributed to considering leaving university. Difficulty making friends also stemmed from the large lecture situations and the large numbers of students on courses. Respondents were used to much smaller classes and, "miss the intimacy of (their) old class".

On my last course everyone wanted to get to uni and that and everyone kept each other motivated and it was like a team sort of thing, whereas this one it doesn't feel quite as much. I'd say if you don't have a good support group you struggle more I'd say. (David)

Developing a support network can be particularly problematic for socially inhibited individuals (Asendorph, 2000) and for students living at home as found in this study. Kantanis (2000) found 49.1% of his sample had not successfully established a friendship group by the end of semester one. Development of a support network is a critical factor which facilitates successful adjustment to university (Kantanis, 2000; Lamothe *et al*., 1995;

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Paul & Brier, 2001). Without friends, students have fewer resources at their disposal to assist them in the transition to university, and are more likely to consider dropping out (Paul & Brier, 2001), as David reported in this study.

Support for coping with problems

Three main sources of social support were relied upon; university friendship group, family, and university staff. Support from family was important because it provided a means of reassurance, advice, and helped to put difficulties in perspective.

They just kind of put it (not getting on with housemates) into perspective and when you're like worrying about everything all at once they're kind of like just you know, 'don't worry about it, and it will get better' and it did get better, so it's just speaking to them anyway that really helps. (Claire)

Having a 'good friendship group' was significant for study-related problems and for general difficulties. Friends provided a source of enjoyment and humour in addition to constructive help. Also, having friends going through similar stressful experiences helped respondents feel understood and that others could relate to their situation.

What helps me a lot is cos I've been speaking to people who are going through the same stuff as well, especially one person, cos if I hadn't had that one person to speak to I probably would've been more crazy then I am, not crazy like but you know what I mean. She's had exactly the same experiences as I have so it's been quite useful, cos when I first got down here I thought 'oh God just me with bad luck' but it helped that I had someone else that was relating to me. (David)

Given the high levels of stress and change students are faced with when experiencing the transition and the pressure that is placed on their coping resources, support from family and friends is invaluable during this period (Moyle & Parkes, 1999). Social support maps directly

onto the transactional model as a constructive method of coping in response to the challenges of the transition.

Social support is also associated with constructive coping methods, such as problem-focused coping (Tao *et al.,* 2000), and the promotion of positive outcomes in response to stress (Halamandaris & Power 1997). David was unable to develop a support network at university which contributed to feeling unsettled, isolated, and considering leaving. Absence of social support is a risk factor for poor adjustment (Lamothe *et al*., 1995), while the presence of adequate support buffers people from the effects of stress (Cutrona & Russell, 1987).

Theme 5: Difficulties

Participants reported difficulties concurrent to the transition and throughout the first year which presented obstacles to adjustment, notably difficulties with housemates, financial and employment concerns, and study-related difficulties.

Difficult experiences with housemates

Difficult experiences with housemates were a common problem which caused considerable stress. Respondents had difficulty bonding with certain housemates. This made everyday life difficult, and is a concern for the adjustment of new students because it represents a problem that is difficult to avoid because students often have fixed tenancies. Respondents felt stressed and unsettled, and considered leaving university.

I had like quite a lot of issues with my accommodation and people I was staying with, and then also at home things were happening so I wanted to go back home quite a bit and it didn't, I suppose it didn't like really make my experience positive when I was here, I just always wanted to be at home. I suppose like with moving, like where I am now and where my accommodation is, there's someone in my flat that I didn't really get on with, we just didn't, I just hated being there all the time, and I think that's why (she wanted to leave). (Gemma)

Students who have moved away from home are required to establish new cooperative living relationships with peers they have often never met before. This has the potential for much conflict resulting from disagreements, miscommunications, and general interpersonal incompatibility issues (Hardy *et al.,* 1984). Students' housemates have a substantial effect on their university experience; poor quality relationships have been shown to be associated with students' dissatisfaction with their living situations, poor emotional adjustment, and negative perceptions of the university environment (Hawken *et al.* 1991;Waldo, 1989), discouragement, withdrawal, and/or the decision to leave university (McCorkle & Mason, 2009). David had decided to leave university at the end of the academic year due mainly to the problems he had with his housemates. The housemate in this instance presented a threat and caused damage and destruction to where the respondent was living, and he felt 'on edge', stressed, unhappy, and found university 'a bit of a strain'.

I live with people in different years they weren't erm wouldn't tend to socialise, like everyone lives their own life and then just like makes mess and make noise and it's just like an uneasy place to live...like everyone does like their own thing in my flat and it's like a bad environment, and there's a lot of damage being caused like carpets being burned, windows have been broken and stuff. (David)

Participants here tried various means to manage their situation, including seeking social and parental support, taking direct action by approaching the accommodation office, making other friends, confronting the difficult housemate/s, and planning to live with other people next academic year. Daily coping included avoiding contact as much as possible, staying calm, and rationalizing events. Although David decided to leave university, he viewed the experience in a constructive way by seeing it as an important learning experience. Reframing negative events in a constructive way is akin to positive reappraisal, which has been shown to be associated with increases in positive affect (a component of psychological well-being)

when used to cope with stressful situations (Moskowitz *et al.,* 1996). Folkman *et al.,* (1994) found positive reappraisal was an important strategy for positively and constructively dealing with stressful situations.

During the time it's made me feel quite bad, but erm now I'm trying to look at it a bit positive and just think 'well it happens' and going to have to try and get on with it and I'm probably a better person for going through it I would say, cos like my parents have said they're surprised like I've stuck it out as long, and I'm quite proud of myself even though like things have gone wrong I've stuck to it rather than give up which I've been tempted to. I'm just doing the first year and moving on. (David)

This approach to coping over time fits with Folkman's updated transactional model (2008); David, in response to distress and difficulty finding an effective strategy, engaged in meaning-focused coping by perceiving the benefits and learning from the experience. The stressful event was appraised as meaningful in its own way in the sense of character development. Positive reappraisal is similar to the meaning-focused strategy of benefit finding which has been shown to influence growth in competence and greater appreciation for life (Tennen & Affleck, 2002).

Research suggests that typical first year undergraduates are often not developmentally prepared to efficiently negotiate interpersonal conflict with housemates (McCorkle & Mason, 2009). There appears to be no easy solution due to the uncertainty of housemate compatibility (Ingalls, 2000); however, research has shown that education on conflict management techniques has helped students to negotiate interpersonal conflicts more effectively (Rawls *et al.,* 2004).

Finances and employment

Having limited finances was a constant worry, as was the potential for being in considerable debt in the future.

A disadvantage is the obvious financial burden of the debt that you're going to come out of university with, but at the same time you're not expected to pay that back until you're earning enough money to anyway. That's something that definitely does worry me having that hanging over you when you're trying to make a living and get a job. (John)

Research has consistently shown that financial difficulty is a considerable stressor that impacts on the strains typically associated with studying (Hodgson & Simoni, 1995). Increasing numbers of students take up employment during their studies (Robotham & Julian, 2006).

Respondents who had a job found it challenging trying to balance work, university, and social life. Effective time management was important to meet the various demands. For Jane, the nature of their job was a source of considerable stress in addition to trying to achieve a work-study balance.

It's the people you work with, it's the patients. They have brain injuries. It's-they are not normal people anymore, and erm, some of them-some of them feel frustrated because they are not the people they used to be anymore. They've lost their eyesight, or their ability to talk, or their ability to move, or their ability to eat, so because of the injuries you can imagine how they feel, and they express it on us. So you come to work, all excited you got good marks, good grades, everything is going well, and you come back from work feeling like a piece of-not worth anything yea. You know, it takes me a few days to get over it. By the time I get back to work, everything comes back again. (Jane)

Jane coped by framing the situation in a positive way by focusing on her academic achievement and through perceiving her job as temporary and an importantlearning experience, which is similar to the positive reappraisal coping David adopted. This can be interpreted to represent the meaning-focused strategy of benefit finding, which appeared to help provide a respite from the negative cycle that Jane's job represented.

Students in employment experience pressure from having to manage different roles, perform effectively, and meet academic and employment demands (Macan *et al.,* 1990).

Academic difficulties

Presentations and exams were identified as academic sources of stress. For presentations, the public speaking, evaluation, and potential for embarrassment provoked anxiety and respondents felt that the way they approached presentations and reacted to the situation made presentations worse.

They (presentations) stress me out. I hate it, I just hate it, I've always been like that. I just hate speaking in front of people. I hate public speaking. (Claire)

Presentations are an important means of assessment and an important skill. Anxiety over giving oral presentations is a commonly reported difficulty; for example, Bishop *et al.,* (1998) found in a survey of American college students that 35% identified moderate, high, or very high need for assistance with public speaking anxiety due to their perceived stress. Concerns about giving presentations include the ability to prepare and deliver the relevant material, the judgement of others, and the formal evaluation (Vitasari *et al.,* 2010). Exams are an appraised threat for many students, and albeit typically short-lived, substantial literature documents potential negative outcomes (Spangler, 1997). Yumatov *et al.,* (1999) report how exams can influence a strong psychoemotional reaction in students, with feelings of stress experienced before and during, that can persist for days afterwards, with many experiencing stress and anxiety over the outcome. Gadzella *et al.,* (1998) argued it is the anxiety and uncertainty which is the main cause of the stress rather than the actual test itself.

Michelle had a traumatic past experience at delivering a presentation which made her apprehensive about doing future presentations.

There's one time in French in school, and I memorised this speech and stuff, and I was so happy with it and I was like ready to do the presentation, and the teacher completely changed

it and I had to do the weather, and I didn't know anything and I was like 'oh good God' and it went awful and I got a really bad mark. (Michelle)

This relates to the discussion of self-efficacy mentioned earlier, in that previous difficult experiences contribute to lower belief in ability to handle the situation and perform well. Participants accepted, however, that presentations were part of the course and reported that they would cope by preparing as much as possible to help minimise their stress. As mentioned earlier, preparation is a problem-focused response to stress, which can help to facilitate adaptation when the situation is controllable (Endler & Parker, 1990).

Conclusions

The transition to university involved considerable change. Homesickness was a common response to leaving home which affected the adjustment at university. Other stressors in the transition were housemate difficulty, financial and employment concerns, and study-related difficulties. Students used various strategies to cope, and problem-focused strategies appeared to facilitate the management of difficulties. Positive reappraisal also seemed adaptive for situations that were uncontrollable. What was noticeable is that students often used a variety of coping behaviours. For example, when dealing with difficult housemates, respondents confronted the housemates, sought support from different sources, and took direct action to leave the situation by changing accommodation. This can be interpreted as adaptive coping, which involves using different responses to meet the demands of situations (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Adaptive coping has been reported to be an indication of effective coping, in that it achieves positive adjustment in the long-term (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). However, there were incidents where respondents did not cope adaptively, such as missing deadlines through not being organized, focusing too much on social life and avoiding responsibility.

A support network was important for adjusting to university and for coping with stress and seemed central for student well-being and absence of this led to the decision to withdraw in one case. The presence of positive psychological strengths could be interpreted from the adaptive behaviour and beliefs of the students which fostered adjustment. Optimistic expectations were linked to the use of effective coping strategies; self-efficacy, hope (goal congruent behaviour), and self-control were all related with academic focus and the likelihood of achievement at university.

The updated transactional model provided a useful framework to understand the transition to university and the role of psychological strengths. The updated transactional model is more consistent with a positive psychology theoretical orientation due to the revised emphasis on positive emotions and meaning-focused coping, whereas the original transactional framework did not account effectively for positive outcomes in the stress process (Moskowitz, 2000). The present study lends support for the updated transactional model and the emphasis on meaning-focused coping. In particular, students often adjusted over time to difficult stressors by revising and developing new coping strategies in an attempt to adapt effectively. It appeared students would often use meaning-focused coping to deal with overly stressful events that were problematic to negotiate, such as difficult housemates and employment difficulties. The updated model enabled more of a comprehensive explanation of experience, particularly how students revised and reassessed their coping in response to distress to develop more adaptive strategies.

Meijer's theory of student stress was also useful to help explain central issues in relation to stress, notably how students experienced academic demands in comparison with post-compulsory education and the role of teachers and the new environment. Meier's model provided a specific understanding for how stress amongst students can be influenced by how

much support from teachers is provided, and reasons why students found the academic transition from post-compulsory education to university challenging.

The current study provides understanding of a range of issues central to the students' experience based on their testimonies. Importantly, the current study locates positive psychological strengths within a transactional understanding of stress and provides depth and relevance to their role in facilitating adjustment. As Resnick *et al.,* (2001) claim qualitative research is evidently beneficial in complementing research efforts in positive psychology helping us to uncover how strengths are applied. The relatively small sample size could be seen as a limitation of this study although it was appropriate for the methodology used. This qualitative study provides a deeper understanding of the stress as experienced by students and their ways of coping that can usefully supplement the information provided in quantitative studies with larger samples.

Based on the findings, interventions designed to focus on promoting positive psychological strengths could play a significant role in facilitating coping with the adjustment to university and with academic demands. For example, Macaskill and Denovan (2011) applied positive psychology to promote autonomy amongst new students, demonstrating that this was emotionally and academically beneficial. Given the importance of a support network strategies designed to facilitate the creation of social ties for students are important (Pratt *et al.,* 2000). Preparation classes at the beginning of university could help (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007), which could address issues such as housemate conflict, autonomous learning, and general stress management. This would create realistic expectations, and prepare students for dealing with the challenges they encounter. Schools and colleges also have a role to play in developing autonomy and providing realistic expectations (Greenbank, 2007) to minimise the stress experienced by students and promote effective coping.

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