

BEYOND ACADEMICS: THE RELATIONSHIP OF ADJUSTMENT ISSUES, SELF-CRITICISM, AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

University students often face significant adjustment challenges as they transition into academic and social environments, which can impact their overall mental health. Self-criticism further exacerbates these difficulties, contributing to increased vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress. The present study was conducted to find out the relationship among adjustment problems, self-criticism, and mental health issues among university students. A correlational study was conducted on three hundred university students; age range from 18 to 26 years. Adjustment problem scale, Self-criticism scale, and General health questionnaire were used to collect data from the students. The total sample size included (N=300) university students. The results of this study revealed that adjustment problems have a significant positive correlation with self-criticism and mental health issues including a positive relationship between adjustment issues and self-criticism among university students.

Keywords: adjustment issues, mental health issues, self-criticism, university students.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of university life marks a pivotal transition for students as they navigate significant changes (Mahmood et al., 2023). During this period, students not only acquaint themselves with their academic disciplines but also actively engage in the socialization process (Naz et al., 2021). Research on student transitions highlights the critical nature of this phase, emphasizing that students who struggle academically in their early university years are at a higher risk of disengaging. This disengagement may stem from various factors, such as poor career choices, inability to secure

admission to their desired institution or financial constraints (Gibney et al., 2011).

University life is extremely critical for students because of its various dimensions (Tariq et al., 2024). At the point when the student starts their university life, confront academic/social tasks on a regular base. These include selecting areas of education/ choice of subjects from a wide variety as well as individual growth challenges such as interaction with different people, making new friends, time control skills, performance abilities, etc (Charalambous, 2020).

According to Ofem, (2023), adjustment is a psychological process to acclimatize, cope, and

manage the problems, challenges, and demands of everyday life. It is a continuous process in which an individual alters his/her behavior to create a sounder relationship between oneself and surroundings. Students' process of adjustment involves being capable of equally managing, and balancing academic and social life. It also entails variations in the way of thinking according to the demands of the situation (Hako et al., 2023). Every year many students face adjustment difficulties while entering college. The majority of students fail to accomplish and achieve the requirements of their academic courses (Kural & Özyurt, 2023). The first year of studies is often a critical and demanding period for college students, as they face numerous adjustment challenges during this time (Galve-González et al., 2024).

Self-criticism is a pervasive cognitive and emotional pattern characterized by harsh self-evaluation, excessive self-blame, and a heightened focus on personal flaws and shortcomings. Rooted in the fear of failure or rejection, self-criticism often emerges as a maladaptive coping mechanism, particularly among individuals striving to meet high personal or societal expectations (Blatt & Luyten, 2009). This tendency is associated with negative affective states, such as guilt and shame, which can hinder emotional resilience and lead to various psychological difficulties, including anxiety and depression. Within academic settings, self-criticism may arise from the pressure to excel, thereby compounding students' vulnerability to mental health challenges (Zuroff et al., 2016).

Research indicates that self-critical individuals are more likely to exhibit maladaptive behaviors, such as perfectionism and avoidance, which can impair their ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships (Dunkley et al., 2003). Furthermore, self-criticism has been linked to increased levels of stress, reduced self-esteem, and impaired psychological well-being, particularly during transitional phases like

university life. For students, the interplay between self-criticism and adjustment difficulties can exacerbate mental health issues, underscoring the importance of addressing this construct in interventions aimed at fostering resilience and emotional well-being (Mahmood et al., 2023; Shahar et al., 2012).

Mental health issues among university students have become a growing concern worldwide, with increasing evidence highlighting the psychological challenges faced during this critical life stage. Transitioning to university life often involves navigating academic pressures, social expectations, and financial stressors, which can lead to heightened vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Common mental health issues among university students include anxiety, depression, and stress, which not only impair their academic performance but also negatively impact their overall quality of life. The stigma associated with seeking mental health support further exacerbates the problem, as many students choose to endure their struggles in silence rather than seeking help (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Research indicates that various personal and environmental factors contribute to the prevalence of mental health problems in university settings (Tariq et al., 2020; Sabri et al., 2021). Students who lack effective coping mechanisms or social support systems are more likely to experience psychological distress, particularly during periods of adjustment or academic overload (Javed et al., 2021; Beiter et al., 2015). Additionally, mental health issues during university years can have long-term consequences, affecting students' career prospects, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being.

University life is a critical period characterized by numerous transitions and challenges that can significantly impact students' psychological well-being. Adjustment difficulties, coupled with self-critical tendencies, may exacerbate mental health issues such as anxiety, depression,

and stress. These interrelated factors not only hinder students' academic performance but also affect their social and emotional functioning. Despite the increasing prevalence of these challenges, there is limited research exploring the combined influence of adjustment issues and self-criticism on students' mental health. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the relationship between these variables, providing insights that can inform targeted interventions to promote resilience and mental well-being among university students.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

- There would likely be a significant positive relationship between adjustment problems, self-criticism, and mental health issues in university students.
- Adjustment problems and self-criticism would likely be the significant positive predictors of mental health issues in university students.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

A correlational research design and convenient sampling technique were employed to collect data from the 300 university students. All ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to in conducting this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process. The study was conducted in compliance with institutional and ethical standards. The total sample size was (N=300) and it was collected from 4 government and private university students located in Lahore Pakistan. The sample

was distributed into two categories i.e., (n=150) male students and (n=150) female students.

Measures

Demographic Proforma

Demographic proforma consisted of the basic information of the participants including gender (male and female) and type of university (government and private).

The Adjustment Problem Scale

The Adjustment Problem Scale, developed by Naseer and Mahmood (2018), assesses two key areas of adjustment in university students: academic adjustment and social adjustment. The scale consists of 27 items and demonstrates strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81.

The Self-Criticism Scale

The Self-Criticism Scale, developed by Shahzadi and Saleem (2016), is a comprehensive tool consisting of 61 items. It measures various dimensions of self-criticism, including hopelessness, lack of self-confidence, rejection, oversensitivity, anxiety, and lack of initiative. The scale exhibits excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95.

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), developed by Goldberg and Hillier (1979), is a widely used measure of mental health. It comprises 28 items divided into four subscales: somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, and severe depression. The GHQ demonstrates acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73.

Results

Table 1: The Cronbach's alpha values for the Adjustment Problem Scale, General Health Questionnaire, and Self-Criticism Scale

Factors	No of items	α
Adjustment Problem Scale	27	.81
General Health Questionnaire	28	.73
Self-criticism Scale	61	.95

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha

Table 1 presents Cronbach's alpha values for the three scales used in the study. The Adjustment Problem Scale, comprising 27 items, demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81. The General Health Questionnaire, with 28 items,

had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73. The Self-Criticism Scale, consisting of 61 items, showed excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95.

Table 2

Pearson Product Moment Correlation, Mean and Standard Deviation of Adjustment Problem, Self-Criticism and Mental Health Problems among University Students

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Adjustment Problem	300	36.73	11.41	---	.48**	.52**
2. Self-Criticism	300	86.15	37.90	---	---	.45**
3. Mental Health Problems	300	66.85	11.53	---	---	---

Note. M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, ** $p < .01$

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among adjustment problems, self-criticism, and mental health problems in university students. Adjustment problems were positively correlated with self-criticism and

mental health problems, while self-criticism also showed a positive association with mental health problems. These findings indicate that higher levels of adjustment problems and self-criticism are associated with increased mental health issues in this population.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Adjustment Problems and Self-criticism on Mental Health Problems among University Students

Variable	β	p	R ²
Adjustment Problem	.51	** ($p < .01$)	12
Self-Criticism	.47	** ($p < .01$)	40

Note. β = Standardized Coefficient of Beta; R² = R square

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of adjustment problems and self-criticism on mental health problems among university students. The

findings revealed that both adjustment difficulties and self-critical tendencies significantly predicted mental health challenges.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the complex interplay between adjustment problems, self-criticism, and mental health challenges among university students. Consistent with prior research, the results revealed that adjustment problems are positively correlated with self-criticism and mental health issues, and self-criticism also shows a significant positive association with mental health problems. These findings support the notion that both adjustment difficulties and self-critical tendencies are critical factors contributing to mental health vulnerabilities in this population.

Adjustment problems, such as difficulty adapting to academic, social, or personal demands, have long been recognized as significant stressors for university students. According to Yang and Yang (2022), challenges in adapting to university life can adversely affect students' emotional well-being, leading to heightened stress and anxiety. Similarly, recent studies have highlighted that adjustment issues often stem from an inability to effectively cope with academic pressures, new social environments, and autonomy-related changes (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). The positive correlation found in this study aligns with these observations, emphasizing that unresolved adjustment difficulties exacerbate emotional distress and increase susceptibility to mental health problems.

Moreover, the findings indicate that self-criticism is not only associated with mental health problems but also acts as a significant predictor of these challenges. Self-criticism, characterized by harsh self-evaluation and an inability to acknowledge personal achievements, has been linked to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem in prior literature (Dunkley et al., 2003). Research suggests that self-critical individuals are prone to ruminative thought patterns and feelings of inadequacy, which can perpetuate a cycle of emotional distress (Dunn & Luchner, 2022). The present

study's results extend this understanding, demonstrating that self-criticism plays a critical role in influencing the mental health of university students.

The interplay between adjustment problems and self-criticism further highlights a vicious cycle that negatively impacts mental health. Adjustment issues may amplify feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, fuelling self-critical tendencies. Conversely, self-criticism can impair coping mechanisms, making it more difficult for students to adapt to new environments and challenges (McIntyre et al., 2018). This bidirectional relationship suggests the need for integrated interventions that simultaneously address adjustment difficulties and self-critical behaviors to promote mental well-being.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with cognitive-behavioral frameworks that emphasize the role of maladaptive thought patterns in shaping emotional and behavioral outcomes (Beck, 1976). Both adjustment problems and self-criticism can be viewed as cognitive vulnerabilities that predispose individuals to mental health challenges. Interventions targeting cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and self-compassion may offer effective strategies to mitigate these vulnerabilities (Neff, 2003).

Furthermore, the study's results align with previous research emphasizing the role of social support and resilience in buffering the negative effects of adjustment problems and self-criticism. Trockel et al. (2000) found that students with stronger support networks and adaptive coping mechanisms reported lower levels of psychological distress. This underscores the importance of fostering a supportive campus environment that promotes peer connections, mentorship, and accessible mental health resources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature highlighting the detrimental impact of adjustment issues and self-criticism on the mental health of university students.

Implications and Future Recommendations

Addressing these factors through targeted interventions and institutional support can play a pivotal role in enhancing student well-being and academic success. Future research could explore the efficacy of specific therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and self-compassion training, in mitigating these challenges.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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