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Ego Development and Adjustment Status as Predictors of Psychological Distress Among First Year Assosa University Students

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to examine contributions of ego-development and adjustment status to psychological distress of first year Assosa University (ASU) students. To answer the research questions, the researchers used an institution-based cross-sectional study design. Twelve (12) departments were randomly selected from 36 departments across six colleges in the university; then, 374 students (143 females and 231 males) were selected from 1878 students in the 12 departments, using simple random sampling technique. The researchers used percentages, mean, standard deviation, independent t-test and multiple regression models for data analyses. The result of this study revealed that there was 59.6% prevalence of psychological distress (24% of which was severe) among first year students. Psychological distress was higher among females than males. Ego development and adjustment status explained 30.2% (R^2 = 0.302, $F_{(2, 371)}$ = 80.355, p < 0.001) of the variation in psychological distress. In conclusion, ego development and adjustment status significantly contributed to psychological distress of first year ASU students. There was a high prevalence of psychological distress among first year ASU students. Female students scored significantly higher in psychological distress than male students. The researchers recommended psychosocial supports such as counseling and life skills training to help the students develop healthy psychological well-being.

Keywords: /Adjustment status/ Ego development/Psychological distress/

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Mental health issues that could affect the progress of students were not considered (Miles, 2017). University students fall in the adolescence period of development; thus, they are highly exposed to several developmental changes, challenges and confusions. This developmental period is characterized by experiencing various rapid personal, mental, social, and identity challenges (Rascovar, 2015). For instance, a study conducted by Stallman (2010) in Australia University identified very high level of psychological distress among university students; the vast majority of students (83.9%) reported elevated distress levels, which was significantly greater than the one found in the general population (29%) suggesting that university students are a very high-risk population.

Prior research conducted in Nigerian tertiary institution explained that psychological distress due to academic stress was high among medical students (Abiola, Lawal & Habib, 2015). Study conducted byMelese, Bayu, Wondwossen, Tilahun, Lema, Ayehu, and Loha (2016) on Hawassa university medical science students revealed that one-third of medical students reported to have mental distress. The prevalence of mental distress among students was found to be 40.9% (Dachew, Azale,&Berhe, 2015). Mental health problems like depression and anxiety are the common problems that occur usually among university students. For example, some researchers explored that students can experience anxiety in their academic life due to personal and social factors (Vidanovicl & Andelkovic, 2006).

Besides, in this context, ego underlies the universal drive to explain everything and make individuals feel safe, important, and belonging. Ego represents the striving of human beings to understand themselves and the world they live in. It is the tireless organizer, interpreter, and synthesizer of experience (Cook-Greuter, 2018). Ego development represents an increase in internalized self-control, respect for the rights and individuality of others, and internalized moral principles. Higher levels of ego development are significantly associated with emotional self-regulation (John & Kevin, 2001). Further, ego development is the most noteworthy outline of personality to explain human difference, mental health status, individual strength and social competence (Rascovar, 2015). In addition, level of ego development can be investigated in relation to mental health status of human being if they could be exposed to negative life influences and interactions. For instance, Suchman, McMahon, DeCoste, Castiglioni and Luther (2009) confirmed that substance abuse can be allied to ego development status if it is not well managed. Still, ego related changes have been researched allied to mental health problems (Rascovar, 2015; Bonnett, 2016). Lack of sensible ego development may lead to mental health problems like psychological distress (Suchmanetal., 2009).

Moreover, adjustment status to college students involves a variety of demands differing in kind and degree and requiring coping responses. It is not only academics with which the students are concerned, but they are also affected by the social and emotional changes (Bharti, 2012). High level of psychological distress among first year university students might be due to adjustment problems resulted from exposure to an

unfamiliar social environment (Nakandalage, Kuruppuarachchi, &Madurapperuma, 2010).

1.2.Statement of the Problem

The issues of psychological distress and academic performance among first year university students have been well studied by previous scholars. For instance, previous researchers such as Verger *et al*.(2009), Presa, Martínez, Gandara, Villanueva, Casares, and Borrego (2014), Jaisoorya, Ranib, Menon, Jeevan, Revamma, Jose, Radhakrishnan, Kishore, Thennarasu, and Nair (2017), Tang, Byrne, and Qin (2018) conducted their studieson psychological distress among university students. Their research findings revealed that the prevalence of psychological distress was high and common among university students because of different stressors. Few researchers in Ethiopia conducted studies on the prevalence of mental distress and associated factors among undergraduate students. The findings showed that the overall prevalence of mental distress among university students was high (Dachew *etal*., 2015). These studies focused only on the prevalence of psychological distress and related factors among university students. They failed to examine how psychological distress was predicted by other variables such as adjustment status and ego development of first year university students. Further, Melese *etal*. (2016) conducted a research on the prevalence of mental distress and associated factors among Hawassa University medical students. This study considered only medical students. So, it is difficult to generalize the study's findings to students in other disciplines.

Even though few studies are conducted in Ethiopia and other parts of the globe on the issue of psychological distress among university students, they were not meticulous and comprehensive enough. Thus, this study tried to examine ego development and adjustment status as predictors of psychological distress among first year ASU students. As ego development is highly related with psychological make-up of an individual (i.e. internalized self-control, respect for the rights and individuality of others, internalized moral principles, and emotional self-regulation), the positive improvement of it may reduce the psychological distress of a person. Accordingly, the present study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of psychological distress among first year ASU students?

2. Is there significant gender difference in psychological distress among first year ASU students?

3. To what extent ego development and adjustment status predict psychological distress of first year students ASU?

1.3.Operational Definition of Key Terms

The following are few operational definitions of key terms used in this study:

Adjustment status: students' ability to balance their social and emotional needs during interaction with the external environment in the university (Sharama, 2012). It includes a social adjustment, academic adjustment, homesickness and emotional adjustments.

Ego development: refers to an individual's self-development, notably in relation to others, as in identifying with others and bonding with others (Wayment, & Bauer, 2008).

Psychological distress: refers to a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of lost interest, sadness, hopelessness, restlessness and feeling tense (Drapeau, Marchand, & Prévost, 2012).

2. Review of Related Literature

Psychological distress is a negative state of mental health that can affect first year university students. At any given point, a person can experience elevated levels of psychological distress (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2012). There has been increasing concern that university and college students are more vulnerable to psychological distress than the general population (as cited in Engen, 2008). Psychological distress was more prevalent among college students during this key transitional period as students adjust to the new demands that are placed on them during their freshman year (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2012). There are a lot of contributing factors for mental distress. For example, a study conducted in Somali Land investigated that being female, lower monthly income, not having close friendships, Khat use, and not having a satisfying relationship were associated with mental distress (Hersi *etal*., 2017). Social support has been shown to be a consistent protective factor in populations with high distress (CIHI, 2012), and improving resilience should be included as part of students' training (Abiola, Lawal & Habib, 2015).

Psychological distress was associated with disability and lower academic achievement (Stelman, 2010). A significant proportion of students at universities suffer from mental distress which might have a detrimental effect on their academic performance (Hersietal., 2017). Similar studies conducted in Jazan University foundout that 31% of undergraduate University students were psychologically distressed (Hakami, 2018).

There are significant relations between dysfunctional meta-cognitive beliefs and other constructs on the basis of gender (Lenzoa, Toffleb, Tripodia,&Quattropania, 2016). According to Engen (2008), females report higher levels of psychological distress compared to their male counterparts. Risk and protective factors for psychological distress among first year university students differed somewhat according to gender (Verger *et al*., 2009). For many women, experiences of self-worth, competence,

autonomy, adequate income and a sense of physical, sexual and psychological safety and security, so essential to good mental health, are systematically denied (WHO, 2007).

Adjustment to university life is considered one of the main indicators of success in university life as it is an indicator of the student's ability to face the problems resulting from fulfilling his or her academic, social and emotional needs (Al-Khatib, Awamleh, &Samawi, 2012). Adjustment is a kind of interaction between the individual and his or her environment. In other words, adjustment is a lifelong process and can be defined as a person's interaction with his/her environment (Krishna, 2015). Adjusting to college life immediately after school becomes a difficult transition for many students (Sharma, 2012). First year male and female students experienced transitional challenges in all the areas investigated—i.e. personal autonomy, social relationships, compatibility among roommates, accessing support services, feeding habits and adjustment to the academic program (Wangeri, Wangeri, &Mutweleli, 2012). First year undergraduate students have low levels of adjustment where social, emotional and educational areas are concerned. They are expected to encounter more adjustment related problems, especially in the social and emotional context (Sharma, 2012). The underlying factors that influence students' social and academic adjustment at the University influence students' behavior which determines the adjustment at the university (Kyalo & Chumba, 2011). One in four students may experience a mental health problem whilst in university. Thus, there might be need for studies that examine psychological disorders or psychopathological symptoms among students in a resource poor university (Julia & Veni, 2012).

The important functions of the ego have to mediate between the interests of the individual and the interests of others and to strike a balance between assimilating experiences into familiar knowledge structures and forging novel conceptions of the world (Wayment & Bauer, 2008). Ego development was associated with increasing ego resiliency, increasing personal integrity, increasing need regulation, and conformity peaked at the conformist ego stage(Wayment & Bauer, 2008).Individuals who have attained or maintained higher levels of ego development in adolescence reported more complex sharing of experiences, more collaborative conflict-resolution strategies, and greater interpersonal understanding, and their young adult peers rated them as less hostile and as more flexible (Hennighausen, Hauser, Billings, Schultz, & Allen, 2004). Ego-stage transition represents an accommodative response to specific types of life experiences and that the degree of exposure to such life experiences, as well as the perception of and response to the life experience is influenced by specific psychological characteristics (Manners & Durkin, 2000).

3. Research Methods

3.1. Study setting

This research was undertaken in Assosa University (ASU), Assosa town of Begnshangul Gumuz Regional State. ASUis one of the third generation universities in Ethiopia. This university enrolls more than 2,500 new students every year. In this university, students with diverse ethnic groups, religious beliefs and languages come from different corners of Ethiopia, and live together. As it is true with other universities

in the country, Assosa University is a little Ethiopia and thus, it can be more or less representative of other universities of the same generation. So, it was with this understanding that the researchers selected ASU to be our study site; also, one of the authors of this study is an academic staff in the university.

3.2. Design

An institution-based cross-sectional study design was used for this study to scrutinize contributions of ego development and adjustment status to the psychological distress of first year Assosa University students.

3.3. Participants

The study was conducted on randomly selected participants of 2018 first year ASU students. Twelve (12) departments were randomly selected from 36 departments across six colleges in the University; next, 374 students (143 females and 231 males) were selected from 1878 students in the 12 departments, using n = N/N+1(e^2) Yamane (1967) sample determination formula.

3.4. Measures

The following instruments were used for this study. All instruments were translated into Amharic language, and back translated into English language. Items in the instruments were written in the two languages and put one after the other—i.e. an item written in English language was presented first, and in Amharic next. The content and construct validities of the instruments were also well-assessed by experts in the area. Pilot study had been conducted on first year Jimma University students. Using the pilot data, reliability coefficients were calculated to be more than 0.75.

Ego Quietness Scale (EQS): A 14 items ego development scale adapted from the work of Wayment, Bauer & Sylaska (2014). The Quiet Ego Scale used to measure compassionate self-identity. The reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.78. This scale has 5 (five) response scales: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Somewhat disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Somewhat agree; 5 = Strongly agree. Question number 6, 10, 11, and 14 are reversely scored items. Different scholars used this scale to measure an individual's ego development. For instance, Rascovar (2015) used ego quietness scale to measure ego development during emerging adulthood. The reliability coefficient of this scale for our study, using Cronbach alpha, was 0.822. *College Adjustment Test (CAT):* The 19-item survey is used to assess the degree to which students have experienced various thoughts and feelings about coming to college during the previous week. This test is developed by Pennebaker (1990). College adjustment test has 7(seven) response scales: 1 not at all to 7 a great deal. The reliability coefficient, measured by Cronbach alpha, of the college adjustment test was 0.79. The researchers of this study added (six) academic adjustment test items to the original test developed by Pennebaker (1990). The reliability coefficient was then calculated to be 0.753.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). The K10 scale consists of 10 questions about emotional states, each with a five-level response scale. The measure can be used as a brief screen to identify levels of distress. Each item is scored from one 'none of the time' to five 'all of the time'. Scores of the 10 items are then summed, yielding a minimum score of 10 and a maximum score of 50. Low scores indicate low levels of psychological distress and high scores indicate high levels of psychological distress (Andrews & Slade, 2001). Cronbach's alpha value and Spearman-Brown coefficient of the K10 reached 0.92, Split-Half 0.85, indicating its good internal consistency (Dadfar, Lester, Vahid, & Esfahani, 2016). Based on the pilot study the researchers conducted, the K10 reliability coefficient for this study was 0.836.

3.5. Procedure

The psychological measuring instruments were priory translated to Amharic languages through the procedures of linguistic translation and back translated to English language, and reviews were made to check the cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of items. Then, the psychometric qualities (validity and reliability) of the instrument were checked following the pre-test administered to similar university students at Jimma University. The data were collected from participants at the end of teaching- learning time period in a study class by asking their permission. Instructions were read aloud to the respondents before they completed the tests. The participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions about any areas of confusion before and during completion of tests and scales.

3.6. Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were carefully entered into Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. After double checking the entered data, appropriate analyses were conducted. Accordingly, percentages, mean and standard deviation were calculated to check the prevalence of psychological distress among first year ASU students. Independent t- test was employed to detect gender difference in psychological distress among first year ASU students. Multiple regressions were conducted to examine the contributions of ego development and adjustment status to psychological distress of the students. For all analyses, the significance level was set to 0.05 and all tests were two-tailed. The researchers tested assumptions of multiple regression and independent t test, and, the assumptions were satisfying.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Written informed consents were received from all participants of this study. The respondents were told that participation in this study was on voluntary basis, and information they provide would be kept confidential. They were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time without explanation.

4. Results

4.1.Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Out of 374 participants, 231 (61.8 %) were male, while 143 (38.2%) were female students with an average age of 19.56 years old.

4.2. Prevalence of Psychological Distress

The prevalence of psychological distress among first year ASU students was more than average. As it is presented in Table1, from 374 participants151 (40.4%) were labeled as normal, 57 (15.2%) as mild psychological distress, 73 (19.5%) as moderate psychological distress, and the 93 (24.9%) were labeled as severe psychological distress. The average prevalence of psychological distresses among the first year ASU students was 23.41with a standard deviation of 9.01 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency, Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of Psychological Distress

	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Standard deviation (SD)
Levels of psychological distress	-	-	23.41	9.01
10 – 19 well/normal	151	40.4%	-	-
20 – 24 mild	57	15.2%	-	-
25 – 29 moderate	73	19.5%	-	-
30 – 50 sever	93	24.9	-	-

4.3. Gender Differences in Psychological Distress

To examine gender difference in psychological distress among first year ASU students, the researchers used t-test. As it is presented in Table 2, the results of independent *t*- test showed significant gender difference in psychological distress. Psychological distress was more reported by female students than by male students (t $(372) = -2.206$, $p = 0.026$).

Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation and T – test for Psychological Distress by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value
Psychological distress	Male	231	22.5974	8.77485	-2.234	372	.026
	Female	143	24.7273	9.25399	-2.206		

Note: N is number of participants, SD is standard deviation, t is t-test value, df is degree of freedom, p-value is significance level

4.4. Ego Development and Adjustment Status as Predictors ofPsychological Distress

To scrutinize the contributions of ego development and adjustment status top sychological distress of first year ASU students, the researchers presented R, R^2, standardized coefficient (β), and *t*-test results (See Table 3). To determine influences of ego development and adjustment status on psychological distress, ego development and adjustment status were entered into the regression model as predictor variables. Ego development was negatively related to psychological distress ($\beta = -.498$, t $(371) = -10.609$, $P < 0.001$), and adjustment status was also negatively related to psychological distress ($\beta = -.111$, t $(371) = -2.372$, $P = .018$).

The results of the multiple regression model have shown that first year ASU students' ego development and adjustment status explained 30.2% of the variation in their psychological distress ($R^2 = 0.302$, $F_{(2, 371)} = 80.355$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3: Ego development, adjustment status and psychological distress

	R	R^2	(β)	t	P-value	F	df
Regression model	.550	.302	-	-	.000	80.355	(2,371)
Ego development	-	-	-.498	-10.609	.000	-	-
Adjustment status	-	-	-.111	-2.372	.018	-	-

Note: R is regression, β is standardized coefficient beta F is F test value, t is t-test value, df is degree of freedom, Sig. is significance level

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to check the predictive levels of ego development and adjustment status on psychological distress of first year ASU students—i.e. providing comprehensive explanation on how psychological distress could be influenced by ego development and adjustment status.

The level of psychological distress among first year ASU students was found to be 59.6%. More specifically, 15.2 % of the students showed mild psychological distress, 19.5% moderate psychological distress, and 24.9% severe psychological distress. A similar study conducted in different countries revealed that psychological distress is a central problem with university students. For instance, a related study conducted in India reported that psychological distress among college students were common and associated with numerous negative correlates (Jaisoorya *et al*., 2017). Similarly, the vast majority of Australian university students were reported to have elevated psychological distress (Stallman, 2010). Likewise, students in a Pakistan University were at risk of psychological distress (Kumar, Shaheen, Rasool, &Shafi, 2016). Furthermore, a study conducted in Europe revealed the prevalence of psychological distress among university students (Verger etal, 2009). A study conducted in China also reported 40.7% of psychological distress among university students (Tang, Byrne, & Qin, 2018). In addition, previous study conducted in Ethiopia, support this study finding. For instance, one-third of medical students were found to have mental distress (Melese *et al*., 2016). The prevalence of mental distress among the students was found to be relatively high (Dachew *etal*., 2015; Tariku, Zerihun, Bisrat, Adissu, & Jini, 2017). One fifth of the students were found to be mentally distressed (Dessieetal., 2013). Nearly half of the students had psychological distress (Getachew & Tekle, 2018). In relation to this evidence, high prevalence of psychological distress highlights the need for a multilevel approach to the promotion of wellbeing of university students (Stallman, 2010). The high prevalence of psychological distress among university students might be due to adjustment problems erupted with the exposure to an unfamiliar social environment (Nakandalage, Kuruppuarachchi, & Madurapperuma, 2010).

The finding of this study also revealed that there was a gender difference in psychological distress; the psychological distress was significantly more among female first year ASU students than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with previous findings. For instance, studies conducted by Engen (2008) and Nurullah (2010) reported that psychological distress was more common for female students than for male students. Female students had higher psychological discomfort scores compared with male students (Cristina *et al*., 2014). Emotional socialization and self-salience suggest that the outcomes of the stress process depend upon gender and would predict that stressors increase distress more for women than for men (Elliott, 2013). This is mainly because 'internalizing' problems are more common among females than males, who are more likely to exhibit 'externalizing' problems (Hamblin, 2016). Further, for many women, experiences of self-worth, competence, autonomy, adequate income and a sense of physical, sexual and psychological safety and security are systematically denied (Afifi, 2007).

The third major finding of this study was that ego development and adjustment status significantly predicted the psychological distress of first year ASU students. The finding revealed that the variation in psychological distress of the students was explained by their levels of ego development and adjustment status. Ego development and adjustment status of first year ASU students were significantly negatively related to psychological distress. This finding is consistent with previous finding reported by Rascovar (2015), stating that ego development was negatively correlated with psychological distress. As the result of adjustment difficulties relating to the new university environment, students faced with psychological distress and sleeping difficulties (Biasi etal., 2018). High prevalence of psychological distress among first-year university students could be due to adjustment problems resulted from the exposure to new social environment (Nakandalage, Kuruppuarachchi, & Madurapperuma, 2010).

People's perception of having available emotional supports or positive social interaction opportunities was associated with experiencing improvements in distress levels (CIHI, 2012). Moreover, high level of psychological distress was associated with lower quality of life, low social support, high neuroticism, and high behavioral inhibition (Connor, 2004). Homesickness relating to adjustment difficulties (i.e. disliking the university) only had an indirect effect on students' sleep difficulties, through its effect on students' psychological distress (Biasi, Mallia, Russo, Menozzi, Cerutti, & Violani, 2018). Most people suffer from homesickness at some point in their lives at university, and feelings of sadness and distress can vary in severity and may manifest themselves in different ways (Etchells, 2015), and homesickness has negative effects on psychological wellbeing (Kegel, 2009). Quality of students' college adjustment has an effect in explanation of students' psychological distress (Dessie, Ebrahim, & Awoke, 2014).

6. Conclusion and recommendations
6.1. Conclusion

This study looked into ego-development and adjustment status as predictors of psychological distress among first year ASU students. Psychological distress was highly prevalent among these students, and the prevalence of psychological distress was higher for female students than for their male counter parts. Students who had higher ego development and higher adjustment status were less likely to report psychological distress compared with students who had low ego development and low adjustment status. Thus, ego development and adjustment were negatively related to psychological distress of first year ASU students.

The findings of this study could be significant because of the need for empirical evidence for understanding the influence of ego development and adjustment status on psychological distress of first year university students. Such thoughtful information can, in turn, guides the decision and actions of all stakeholders who are working for the wellbeing and success of first year university students.

6.2.Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were forwarded: ASU ought to provide appropriate interventions (including psychosocial support such as induction training, mentoring, counseling and life skills training) in psychological distress to help the students develop healthy psychological wellbeing. Also, ASU needs to organize advanced and equipped counseling and resource-center to tackle the students' psychological problems.

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Authors' contributions
1 Getahun Tadesse designed the study, reviewed literature, defined the research problem, analyzed data and prepared the manuscript.
2 Berhanu Nigussie Worku conducted fieldwork, analyzed data and edited the manuscript. Both authors read, edited and approved the manuscript.

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