Social Adjustment to College: The Case of Social Studies Freshmen

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ABSTRACT: Transitioning to college presents significant social challenges for freshman social studies students, including social anxiety and isolation. It also reveals various coping mechanisms, such as selective socialization and the crucial role of being socially adjusted in a college environment. This qualitative multi-case study, conducted at a State University and College in Leyte Province, explores the social adjustment experiences of three social studies freshmen. Using purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews, the study analyzes three key themes through Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings emphasize the importance of building trust, seeking support, and engaging in extracurricular activities to enhance social integration. This research is a testament to diverse learners with different college situations, and through this research, it can bridge the gap between socially struggling freshmen and supportive college environments. This research provides valuable insights for improving support systems in tertiary education and improving students' personal growth, academic success, and overall well-being.

KEYWORDS: Social Studies, Social Adjustment, freshmen, College, Social Anxiety, Support System

I. INTRODUCTION

The new environment in entering college, the freshmen period in general, is a significant milestone in students' educational journey. It marks a shift from a structured and familiar social environment to a more independent and unfamiliar one (Corcoran, 2021). It is a transformative journey that challenges freshmen students to evolve socially. However, according to Alipio (2020), freshmen can easily adapt to college life, both academically and emotionally, as well as their attachment to the institution. However, it takes some time for these freshmen to adjust to their new social environment. This shift is accompanied by major changes in development in a number of areas, including social school life (Larose, 2019).

Song (2017) believes that social support, interpersonal contacts, and college adjustment are significantly correlated. Adapting to college life is substantially influenced by aspects such as creating first relationships, asserting rights, mental support, and dealing with interpersonal disputes. Social, family, friends, and instructor support significantly affect the adaptation to college life. According to Sahin and Kilic (2016), kids who are unable to create positive relationships with their classmates, teachers, and school authorities, as well as those who dislike school, are more likely to be absent and drop out.

Furthermore, Lopez and Jones (2017) recommend that in order to improve their social adjustment at a four-year university, students should engage in more social activities. According to the findings, community colleges and four-year universities should encourage their students to form stronger connections with faculty members as well as their classmates during and after class.

However, common challenges include communication difficulties, accommodation-related stress, organizational culture, and friendship. If university students are unable to cope with these new challenges, their interactions with others suffer (Faisal & colleagues, 2022). To address these concerns, it is critical to understand the elements that influence university students' social adjustment.

Lee and Ahn (2020) state that it is vital to consider the relationship of adjustment with college students' ego-identities may evolve in several environments, including their family, friends, and professors. Students must learn excellent communication to think critically and maintain smooth interpersonal connections; they must also be able to actively cope with the social challenges experienced in college life. (Shek & colleagues, 2017).

In the Philippines, Hernandez (2017) revealed that freshmen students from a subset of Calapan City's higher education institutions experience difficult social adjustment. According to Gabriela (2010), a higher percentage of school dropouts can be attributed to a lack of school adaptability. Sixty percent (60%) of students who struggle to transition to college leave school early, according to her research.

The social adjustments among freshmen represent a pivotal period marked by numerous challenges. Recognizing the significance of this phase in students' lives, the researcher seeks to delve deeper into the experiences of freshmen since the start of

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the semester.

The study aimed to explore the social adjustment challenges of Social Studies Freshmen in a tertiary education environment. It specifically aims to respond to the questions that follow:

1. What challenges do freshmen social studies students experience in college?
2. What social adjustments do freshman social studies students have to consider in college?
3. How do freshman social studies students cope with social adjustments in college?
4. Why do freshmen social studies students perform social adjustments in college?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relational Theory

Relational Theory, rooted in psychodynamic practice, explores patterns of interaction and the development of the self in relation to others (Cait, 2016). It emphasizes the importance of interpersonal connections, particularly in college life, where relationships significantly impact the adjustment experiences of freshmen social studies students. Positive personal and academic relationships can enhance focus, motivation, and overall academic performance, influencing social adjustment.

Relational Theory underscores the critical support and connections formed during the transition to college, with family and friends playing pivotal roles in navigating the new social landscape. Song (2017) highlights the significance of interpersonal relationships and social support in aiding students' adjustment to the college environment. Programs promoting interpersonal relationships are essential in facilitating college students' adjustment processes.

Relational dynamics with peers shape the social fabric of college life, impacting feelings of belonging and social adjustment. Positive peer relationships foster a sense of community, while challenges may lead to feelings of isolation. Sollitto, Johnson, and Myers (2013) note that positive peer interactions enhance peer connections and academic engagement. Peer support initiatives align with Relational Theory, positively influencing the social adjustment of college freshmen.

Social integration, crucial for well-being, is central to Relational Theory. Freshmen who establish meaningful connections early in their college journey often experience smoother social adjustment. Noyens (2019) suggests that initial social integration correlates with academic success and ongoing social support. Strong relationships formed in the freshman year lay the foundation for continued social adjustment throughout college.

Behavioral Model of Adaptation

Apesteguia's (2023) Behavioral Model of Adaptation highlights behavioral changes in response to environmental shifts. Adaptive individuals balance effective responses with the costs of change, considering strategic engagements and peer responses. The model stresses the role of positive role models in shaping adaptive behaviors, impacting freshmen's social adjustment.

Wang and colleagues (2013) emphasize the importance of freshmen taking initiative for success in college. Adaptive behaviors, such as social engagement and friendship-building, are key to social adjustment. China (2015) notes a positive correlation between social adjustment and academic achievement, underlining the impact of supportive social encounters on adaptation.

Bowman et al. (2019) link social connection, roommate relationships, and class success with changes in well-being and belonging. Coping strategies, influenced by stress and family dynamics, play a role in social, intellectual, and personal-emotional development (Gefen and Fish, 2013). Understanding adaptive behaviors in varied social contexts is crucial for successful social adjustment in college freshmen.

The researchers utilized these theories to understand the processes of social adaptation of freshmen college students, its significance in the educational journey and can explain the questions of this study.

II. METHODS

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative multi-case study design with purposive sampling. Qualitative research aims to understand social and human problems by reporting detailed facts from informants in real-life settings (Creswell, 1994). A case study allows for an in-depth exploration of current phenomena in their natural environments (Yin, 2009). Purposeful sampling was used to select respondents who could provide relevant and useful information, maximizing research resource efficiency (Kelly, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2015). This multi-case study involved selecting and examining multiple cases with common and differing traits (Linkin, 2023).

Research Locale

The research was conducted at a State University and College (SUC) in Leyte Province, which offers a Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Social Studies. This location provided a relevant context for understanding the social adjustment experiences of Social Studies freshmen.

Research Participants

Participants were freshmen enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Social Studies program at the selected SUC. Three to five participants, along with at least one key informant, were chosen using purposive sampling. The

researchers used a social adaptation checklist to identify potential participants, selecting those who marked "never" on most items. Ultimately, three freshmen agreed to participate.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with predetermined and emergent questions. This method allowed for gathering qualitative, open-ended information, examining participant opinions and attitudes, and exploring personal experiences (DeJonckheere, 2019). Interviews were digitally recorded and included observations of nonverbal cues to enhance data validity.

Data Collection Method

Participants were identified using a pre-survey checklist assessing aspects of social adjustment, such as social engagement and support systems. Ten freshmen were invited, and three agreed to participate. Semi-structured interviews followed a thematic framework, focusing on the topic while allowing for exploration of related ideas (George, 2022). An interview protocol was developed and trialed to ensure it supported the study's goals. The data collection process included obtaining official approval, conducting the pre-survey, identifying participants, conducting interviews, and recording and observing interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were followed throughout the study:

Respect for Persons: Ensuring voluntary participation and protecting those with diminished autonomy.

Beneficence and Non-maleficence: Minimizing potential risks and emphasizing benefits.

Justice: Fair and unbiased participant selection and treatment.

Informed Consent: Providing clear information about the study and ensuring voluntary participation.

Confidentiality and Data Protection: Respecting anonymity and handling personal data confidentially.

Integrity: Adhering to recognized research standards and avoiding unacceptable practices.

Conflict of Interest: Disclosing potential conflicts of interest and ensuring unbiased research.

Research Reflexivity

Researchers acknowledged their potential influence on the study due to their own experiences as former freshmen. Efforts were made to minimize biases and ensure responses were interpreted based on participants' perspectives. Data were presented to participants for validation.

Data Processing Analysis

Data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach, which includes six stages:

1. Familiarization with data.
2. Generation of codes.
3. Creation of themes.
4. Review of themes.
5. Definition and naming of themes.
6. Production of the report.

Initial notes were made during transcription and used for coding. Codes were grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined in relation to the research questions. Themes were then defined, named, and aligned with the study's objectives. The final report synthesized the analytic narrative and data extracts, contextualizing the analysis within existing literature.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part of the study is the presentation and discussion of themes that emerged during the data analysis. This contains the information that drawn from the ideas, experiences, and knowledge of the participants to this study. Every theme and its sub- themes are described, explained and discussed.

Theme 1: Interpersonal Communication Challenges
Subtheme 1: Social Anxiety and Fear

The transition to college life brings about significant changes and challenges for freshmen, often leading to heightened social anxiety. This anxiety, stemming from fears of judgment and misunderstanding, is particularly common among students moving from the structured environment of high school to the more independent and socially demanding college setting. Participants described how social anxiety manifests in difficulties with communication and feelings of social awkwardness, impeding their ability to integrate fully into the college community. These difficulties hinder not only social integration but also academic engagement. The fear of being perceived negatively often leads socially anxious students to avoid class participation and group discussions, crucial components of the academic experience in college. This avoidance behavior exacerbates their anxiety and contributes to feelings of isolation.

Participants also showed a reliance on close friends while feeling uncomfortable with others. This reliance on familiar friends can limit opportunities for broader social integration and impede the development of a more diverse and supportive social network. These interpersonal challenges are crucial because positive personal and academic relationships are essential for enhancing focus, motivation, and overall academic performance (Song, 2017). However, socially anxious students tend to avoid interactions that are critical for building a diverse and supportive social network, limiting their ability to form new, meaningful relationships that could aid in their adjustment. Freshmen's social anxiety can be viewed through the lens of adaptation, where the anxiety-driven avoidance of social and academic interactions represents an adaptive response to the perceived threat of negative evaluation (Apesteguia et al., 2023). However, while these behaviors may temporarily alleviate anxiety, they are maladaptive in the long term as they hinder social integration and academic participation.

Subtheme 2: Trust Issues with Others

The trust issues described by participants has significant implications. Research by Braxton and colleagues (2014) indicates that trust between students and educators is crucial for effective collaboration and academic success. Trust issues may hinder students' willingness to seek help or collaborate with peers and educators, impacting their academic performance and overall learning experience. Participants' perception of the college environment as hostile and intimidating reflects a lack of trust in the intentions and behavior of others. Studies by Song (2017) emphasize the role of perceived social support and trust in fostering a positive college adjustment. Trust deficits can lead to feelings of isolation, pressure to perform, and reluctance to seek support, as observed in the participants' experiences.

The limited interaction of participants with teachers outside formal settings highlights a trust barrier that inhibits meaningful relationships and access to mentorship. According to Wang (2013), trust and communication between students and educators are essential for creating a supportive learning environment. Facilitating more informal interactions between students and faculty can help build trust and provide additional support. Relational theory emphasizes the importance of these relationships in helping students feel valued and understood, encouraging them to seek help and engage more fully in their academic pursuits (Pantic, 2012). Trust issues can hinder students' ability to seek guidance and mentorship, thereby affecting learning opportunities and peer collaboration, ultimately impacting academic success.

Participant's response: Pero that doesn't mean nga nagiging comfortable naak haira kay deri ak madali magtrust, (But that doesn't mean I'm becoming comfortable with them because I find it hard to trust easily.)

Subtheme 3: Difficulty of Initiating Conversations

As stated by participants, they experience a feeling of social awkwardness, which severely hamper their ability to communicate effectively. These participants often rely heavily on close friends for social interactions, creating a comfort zone that is difficult to step out of. This reliance is consistent with findings by Soet and Sevig (2016), who noted that first-year students often depend on familiar support structures. While this can provide immediate emotional support, it also limits opportunities for building new relationships and expanding social networks. Relational theory supports this, suggesting that meaningful interpersonal relationships are crucial for adjustment (Song, 2017). However, when students do not venture beyond their established social circles, they miss out on broader social integration, which is vital for a fulfilling college experience. Despite a strong desire for companionship, they feel incapable of initiating interactions due to a lack of knowledge on how to engage others. This reliance on others to take the first step in social settings can limit their opportunities for building new relationships and expanding their social networks.

These students often experience a shift from being active and confident in high school to feeling overshadowed by more skilled peers in college The inability to initiate conversations affects these students' academic experiences in significant ways. For those who can't properly converse, the instance of not knowing how to communicate with new people can lead to difficulties in collaboration and group work, resulting in missed opportunities for academic support and peer learning. For those intimidated by their peers, the heightened stress from feeling the need to catch up academically and avoid being perceived as a burden can further hinder their academic performance. This situation can result in students struggling silently with academic challenges, leading to poorer performance and missed learning opportunities. The need to stay on track without seeming overburdened can lead to a harmful cycle of stress and poor academic performance. (Sollitto, Johnson, & Myers, 2013). College is a critical period for developing communication and interpersonal skills that are essential for professional success. Students who struggle with initiating conversations may graduate without having fully developed these skills, which can affect their capacity to succeed in the workforce. Effective communication is vital for networking, collaboration, and leadership in any career, and lacking these skills can hinder long-term success (Consolvo, 2020).

Participant's response: Diri po kasi ako nakikipaginteract unless hira po it syahan na makig-interact haakon, kuan po kasi ako nag-- bagan ginlilimit ko tak self ha iba na tawo. (I don't interact unless they're the one to interact to me first, it is because-- like I limit myself towards other people.)

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Theme 2: Navigating Social Relationships
Subtheme 1: Seeking Support and Connections

Participants shared their coping strategy by seeking support and connections, prioritizing building bonds with others to navigate the challenges of college life. By actively engaging with peers, family, and teachers, they created a support network that provided emotional validation, practical advice, and encouragement. This network served as a buffer against stressors and enhanced their sense of belonging within the college community, recognizing the importance of social connections in fostering a sense of security and well-being

Relational theory emphasizes the significance of interpersonal connections in shaping individuals' adjustment experiences. Participants who actively sought support and connections aligned with relational theory's emphasis on the importance of positive personal and academic relationships in enhancing focus, motivation, and overall academic performance (Cait, 2016). By prioritizing meaningful relationships, these individuals demonstrated an understanding of relational dynamics and their impact on social adjustment. Positive relationships with peers and teachers led to collaborative learning opportunities, study groups, and mentorship, all of which contributed to academic achievement and overall satisfaction with the college experience. Prioritizing support and connections reflected a proactive approach to social adjustment and personal well-being. The social support that these students have has a statistically significant positive correlation to adjustment to college life (Jeong, 2020). These connections are not merely a passive backdrop to their college experience but an active and critical component of their overall adjustment and success. The emphasis on building a strong support network illustrates how students can harness relational and behavioral strategies for managing the challenges of academic life. Moreover, this proactive engagement with their social environment can mitigate feelings of isolation and stress, contributing significantly to their mental and emotional resilience.

Subtheme 2: Selective Socialization

Selective socialization allows participants to create social circles that offer emotional support, validation, and a sense of belonging. Through connecting with individuals who share similar interests, values, and experiences, they create deep connections that contribute to their overall well-being. This approach may also help alleviate social anxiety or fear of rejection by minimizing exposure to unfamiliar or challenging social situations. Participants who engage in selective socialization demonstrate a preference for forming connections with individuals who share similar characteristics and values. By surrounding themselves with like-minded peers, they create supportive environments where they feel understood and accepted. This selective approach to socializing may serve as a coping mechanism to manage social anxiety or fear of rejection, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of control over their social interactions and environment.

Participant's Response: Asya ginkikita ko anay it ira background para if ever magkameada ak hin sangkay deri naak maleleft out kay maybe damo na it amon similarities asya amo akon strategy. (I look into their backgrounds to see if we have similarities so that if I do befriend someone, I won't feel left out because maybe we share a lot of similarities.)

Selective socialization reflects participants' agency in shaping their social environment to meet their needs and preferences. By actively choosing their social interactions, they assert control over their social identity and interactions, enhancing their sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. However, while selective socialization may provide comfort and support, it may also limit exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities for personal growth. Thus, participants must strike a balance between seeking familiarity and embracing new experiences to facilitate holistic social adjustment

Theme 3: Personal Development
Subtheme 1: Self Improvement

The transition to college frequently incites freshmen to engage in self-improvement as they adapt to new academic and social environments. The shift from high school to college necessitates greater responsibility and self-reliance (Niu & colleagues, 2022), often driving students to set personal goals, develop new skills, and refine existing ones to meet the demands of college life. Participants discussed their efforts to enhance their communication skills, time management, and social adjustment strategies as part of their self-improvement journey.

Participant's response: having this effective relationship with others dako hiya nga epekto ha personal growth kay mas nabubuild ko it akon self because of these people and mas nagogrow ako." (..having an effective relationship with others has a significant impact on personal growth. I can build myself more because of these people, and I experience more growth.)

Relational theory emphasizes the significance of self-development in the context of interpersonal relationships. Cait (2016) asserts that the self evolves through interactions with others, indicating that the pursuit of self-improvement is closely linked to social experiences. Freshmen often seek to improve themselves to better integrate into the college community and succeed academically. This is evident in participants' plan on actively participating in class and campus activities to enhance their skills and confidence. The pursuit of self-improvement is not without its challenges. The constant pressure to improve and meet high expectations can sometimes result in stress and burnout, highlighting the need for supportive environments that encourage self-improvement without imposing unrealistic demands.

Subtheme 2: Going Beyond Comfort Zone

College life often necessitates that freshmen step out of their comfort zones, fostering significant personal growth.

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Participants shared experiences of pushing their boundaries by engaging in activities and social interactions they would have previously avoided. This process is essential for personal development as it helps students build resilience, confidence, and a broader perspective. Relational theory highlights the importance of stepping beyond one's comfort zone in the context of social interactions. Cait (2016) suggests that personal growth is facilitated through dynamic and sometimes challenging interactions with others. Participants described their plan of joining organizations, being with friends, and participating closely in group and class projects as ways to expand their social networks and gain new experiences. These activities not only enhance their social skills but also contribute to a sense of belonging and community.

The behavioral model of adaptation also emphasizes the benefits of stepping beyond comfort zones. According to Wang and colleagues (2013), adaptive behaviors that involve taking risks and embracing new challenges can lead to better social adjustment and academic success. Participants recounted instances wherein taking on leadership roles, such as being a club officer and exploring new interests, helped them overcome initial fears and build a more robust social support system. These experiences are crucial for developing the adaptability and resilience needed to thrive in the college environment. Participants often viewed challenging experiences as opportunities for growth, reflecting a proactive approach to personal development. This mindset is essential for navigating the complexities of college life and preparing for future challenges. The benefits of going beyond comfort zones extend beyond personal growth to professional development. Engaging in diverse experiences and taking on new challenges can enhance employability skills such as leadership, communication, and problem-solving. As students gear up for their future careers, the skill to adapt and flourish in unfamiliar situations becomes even more crucial. Encouraging freshmen to embrace opportunities for growth and learning can thus have long-term benefits, both academically and professionally (Leary et al., 2012).

The experiences and skills gained from stepping out of comfort zones during college have long-lasting effects on students' professional and personal lives. In the professional realm, the ability to adapt, take initiative, and engage with diverse teams is highly valued. These skills are directly linked to leadership potential and career advancement. In personal life, the resilience and confidence developed through overcoming challenges contribute to a person's overall well-being and life satisfaction. The ability to handle change and uncertainty positively influences one's capacity to pursue meaningful goals and maintain healthy relationships.

IV. CONCLUSION

Freshman social studies students encounter several challenges when transitioning to college, prominently including social anxiety and fear. This anxiety affects their communication and social interactions, leading to feelings of social awkwardness. The pressure to integrate into the college community, participate in class discussions, and form new relationships, while simultaneously managing academic demands, often exacerbates these issues. Trust issues further impede their willingness to seek help or collaborate with peers and educators, negatively impacting their performance and overall learning experience.

To navigate these challenges, freshman social studies students must effectively manage new social environments, establish supportive relationships with peers and educators, and build trust. Engaging in social support networks, collaborative learning experiences, extracurricular activities, and student organizations is crucial for their personal and academic development. These activities help students meet new people, foster personal growth, and enjoy their college life.

In coping with social adjustments, students often rely on strategies such as seeking support and connections. They prioritize building bonds with others and actively engage with peers, family, and teachers to create a support network that offers emotional validation and practical advice. Selective socialization, involving surrounding themselves with individuals who share similar interests and values, helps alleviate social anxiety and fosters a sense of belonging.

These social adjustments are essential for freshman social studies students to facilitate personal growth, academic success, and overall well-being. Building resilience, confidence, and adaptability are crucial skills for navigating college life and preparing for future challenges. Social adjustments also contribute to developing life skills, leadership qualities, and problem-solving abilities, aligning with the broader goals of personal development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made following a careful and rigorous analysis of the study's findings:

1. Future researchers should conduct comparative studies to explore social adjustment experiences across different academic disciplines and investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions. Research should consider the intersectionality of social adjustment challenges, examining how factors like cultural background, socioeconomic status, and academic discipline influence students' experiences and coping strategies. Additionally, investigating the correlation between social adjustment and academic performance is recommended.

2. Teachers should implement inclusive teaching practices to create a supportive learning environment, encourage social interaction through collaborative activities, and maintain a professional yet approachable demeanor. This balanced approach fosters trust, open communication, and a sense of belonging among students, helping them overcome shyness and hesitation in seeking academic or emotional support.

3. Freshmen students should actively engage in campus activities, seek opportunities to connect with peers, faculty, and support

services, and develop effective communication and interpersonal skills through group discussions, presentations, and extracurricular activities. Utilizing available resources like academic advising, counseling services, and student organizations is essential for navigating social challenges and enhancing overall well-being.

4. Educational institutions should implement and enhance peer mentorship programs, pairing incoming freshmen with experienced students for guidance and support. Establishing peer support groups or discussion circles can provide a supportive environment for sharing experiences and developing coping strategies. Additionally, enhancing counseling and support services to address social anxiety, trust issues, and other psychological barriers is crucial, offering individual or group sessions, workshops, and interventions to improve self-esteem and assertiveness.

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