Assessment of Social Competencies, Coping Strategies, and Academic Achievement of First Year Students

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The purpose of this research was to assess first year students' social competency and coping strategies against their overall first semester academic achievement (GPA) at Arsi University. A sample (N = 360) of first year students was selected for the study. Slightly adapted versions of Social Competency Scale (Silvera, Martinussen, & Dahl, 2001) and Coping Strategy Scales (Carver, 1999) were used to assess these aspects. The results revealed that the majority students were good and some of them were identified as average on social competency dimensions. On the other hand, it was noted that majority of the students use avoidance coping strategies. Social competency has strong positive connection with student's GPA but coping strategy has nonsignificant negative correlation with GPA. Both social competency and coping strategy slightly contributed to the variations in first semester GPA among first year students. Only college had a mediating role with partial mediation effect between social competency total and GPA. A significant difference was observed between male and female students in their GPA and social competency. Gender and religion had no mediation role between social competency, coping strategy, and first semester GPA of the students. In conclusion, it was implied that university students' personnel should work on first year students' adaptive coping strategies and social competencies.

Keywords. Social competency, coping strategies, academic achievement, university students

Traditionally, competency has been viewed as a concept related to solving logical and mathematical problems, which is more of intellectual capacity. As a result, some scholars approached it interims of one's capacity for logical and abstract thinking, understanding, communication, emotional knowledge, and problem solving

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(Stenberg, 1997). However, competency is a very controversial concept which is commonly defined in many different ways (Kremenkova & Plevova, 2019; Kurian & Prakasha, 2016).

Most commonly, social competency is defined as capacity to understand and manage other people and to get involved in enabling social interactions (Guimaraes, Lemos, & Nunes, 2012; Saxena & Jain, 2013). More specifically, social competency is defined as the capacity to comprehend the thoughts, feelings and activities of persons including one self. On the other hand, it is proposed that social competency is the capacity of a man to understand the feelings and emotions of others and react according to the circumstances (Anish, Divya, & Skaria, 2014; Han & Kemple, 2006). From this perspective, social competency enables human beings to develop a normal co-existence with other people, resolving personal and social problems in life and helps in tackling various social tasks (Perzigian, 2018; Praditsang, Hanafi, & Walters, 2015). Scholars assert that social competency is one of the factors that significantly predict and interpret human behavior in different social contexts (Frankovsky & Birknerova, 2014). Relating social competency to academic performance, Marquez (2006) contended that students with high Social competency commonly exhibit better pro-social behaviors and perform better in schools. Thus, it is assumed that social competency is an important developmental aspect of education.

University students are expected to perform a great deal of independent tasks such as taking lecture notes, writing individual and group assignments, referring from different sources and studying for tests and exams. All these tasks demand intellectual and emotional adjustment on the part of the learners. Furthermore, Yalew (2003) described university atmosphere as mainly characterized by comparable ability students, taught situation, discouraging grading systems and inadequate teacher-student relationships. Obviously, higher learning institution social and academic atmosphere exposes to anxiety and sense of incapability.

Coping to university academic environment requires the complementary processes of de-socialization and socialization. Concept wise, de-socialization is changing some selected previous values, traits, and beliefs one brings in response to the new environment exposition and taking on some of the new attitudes, beliefs, values and perspectives to which one is exposed at college. On one hand, the transition year of university education is commonly recognized as a stressful time of social and academic challenges (Hill, 2014; Iruloh & Ukaegbu, 2017; Wang, Chen, Zhao, & Yan, 2006; Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). During first year of college life, students

face many social challenges (e.g., isolation from home environment) and intellectual challenges (e.g., more challenging course works and assignments). On top of this, the transition year can expose to psychological barriers such as loneliness, homesickness and substance abuse or alcohol-related risk behaviors (Hildebrand, Johnson, & Bogle, 200; Yazon, Ang-Manaig, & Tesoro, 2017). According to Miller (2004), stress is a reaction that influences one's physiology, emotions, behaviors and thinking. Commonly, stress can arise from environmental factors such as task difficulty and internal factors related to coping skills, perceptions and genetic predisposition or from an interaction between the two. Particularly, the transition year of university life is a stressful period for the students because of role shift, identity change and other psychological factors (Monteiro, Shyngle, Balogun, & Kutlo, 2014). Similarly, scholars conceptualize stress as human beings' unique response to environmental demands and pressures (Monteiro et al., 2014). Specifically, stressors are again defined as situations/ events that threaten or affect one's normal functioning and force him/her to cope or make alterations (Auerbach & Grambling, 1998). Related with this, Kauts (2016) asserted that academic stress is a major factor accounting for differences in academic achievement among students.

Rationale

Leaving familiar home environment and friends for the first time may expose students to stress and strange feelings. As a result, the students are often expected to build new social relationships and adjust themselves to new social and academic climates. On the other hand, first year students are expected to cope with personal and interpersonal challenges, adjust them to campus life; manage to smoothly work through new and demanding teaching methods (Hill, 2014; Iruloh & Ukaegbu, 2017; Mason, 2017; Wang et al., 2006; Yazedjian & Toews, 2006). Whenever, there is stressful life experience, human beings naturally design mechanism to protect themselves. Most likely, these mechanisms are behavioral and mental strategies employed to deal with stressful situations aimed at minimizing negative consequence. In this sense, coping strategy involves using thoughts and actions to manage stressful situation and minimize the effect of the stress. In general, coping strategies can be classified as problem focused, emotion-focused or avoidance-focused (Bamuhair et al., 2015; Kariv & Heiman, 2005). Thus, the study was designed to assess how the students' social competency and coping strategies are related to their first semester academic achievement.

Objectives

The major objectives of the study are to assess the extent to which social competency and coping strategies predict first semester academic achievement of the students. It is also intended to assess the extent to which gender; religion and residence mediate the relationship between social competency, coping strategies and first semester academic achievement. In addition, to assess whether there are gender differences in social competency, coping strategies, and academic achievement.

Hypotheses

1. Social competency and coping strategies positively predict first semester academic achievement of the students.

2. Gender, religion and residence will mediate the relationship between social competency, coping strategies, and first semester academic achievement.

3. Male students are likely to express better social competency, coping strategies, and academic achievement as compared to female students.

Method

Sample

The population of this study was first year students at Arsi University ($N = 2,294$, male = 1,276, female = 1,018). By the time this data was generated, there were five colleges and one school in Arsi University. At the same time, there were different numbers of students in different departments of these colleges. From these five colleges and one school, four colleges were selected using simple random sampling technique to target study area. Accordingly, stratified random sampling technique had been applied to select the specific participants from each department of the respective colleges. Similarly, respective departments were randomly selected to identify the specific respondents. Thus, participants were selected from College of Health Sciences (men = 65, women = 52), College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (men = 57, women = 58), College of Social Science and Humanities (men = 40, women = 54), College of Education and Behavioral Science (men = 28, women = 9). Regarding age of participants, the majority of students were in the range of 19-20 years (264, 73.3%) followed by 17-18 years

(46, 12.8%) and 21-22 years (44, 12.2%); respectively. Initially, 189 males and 195 females (total = 384) students were selected as source of information. However, out of the administered questionnaire, 360 (177 males and 183 females) which constitutes 94% as return rate were found to be properly completed and used for the intended purpose.

Inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for this study were first year students who were officially assigned to public university by Ethiopia National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency in the 2019-2020 academic year.

Exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for this study were students who were readmitted by registrar office to take courses along with first year students.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was self-report scale, which was administered to first year students. The first part of the questionnaire was Social Competency Scale, which was adapted from (Silvera et al., 2001). The adapted scale has 24 items in a form of 4-point Likert rating with response options ranging from 1= *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* and used to measure the student's social competencies such as social skills, tolerance, persuasiveness, energy and empathy. The second part of the questionnaire focused on coping strategies. This instrument was also a 4-point Likert scale in a form of "*I haven't been doing this at all, I've been doing this a little bit, I've been doing this a medium amount and I've been doing this a lot*". The tool was mainly adapted from Carver (1997). The questionnaire was composed of 28 items related to task-oriented, avoidance oriented, and emotion-oriented coping strategies. The scales were pilot tested on 67 students from college of Health science and College of Agriculture and Environmental science, this test sample was excluded from the main study. Accordingly, alpha coefficient of .79 and .74 was computed for scales of social competency and coping strategies; respectively.

Procedure

The instrument was administered with the help of academic staff members in class rooms after regular class schedule. List of student identification number was collected from the registrar office of the University. Prior to tests administration, orientation was given to the respondents focusing on the purpose of the study, procedures and

responding strategies. Finally, the students completed the questionnaire independently to the best level of their comfort. As the intent of this research was to investigate the relationship between social competencies, coping strategies and academic achievement of first year students, the major data analysis technique applied in this study was descriptive and inferential statistics. Basically, Pearson correlation coefficient, regression and path analysis had been implemented. Furthermore, *t*-test had been used to identify similarities and differences observed as a function of gender and the college the students belong to.

Ethical Considerations

Before commencement of the actual data collection, all participants had adequately been pre-informed with regard to the aim and the implication of the study and oral permission was obtained from all participants. After explaining the importance of the study, verbal consent was obtained from each individual participant. They were given the freedom to withdraw from the process of the study at any point. This has also been approved by ethical committee of College of Education and Behavioral Sciences for the protection of participants of the study.

Results

Table 1

Dominant Social Competency Subscales (N= 360)

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	SE	ΔR^2	df1	df 2	p
1	.76[a]	.58	.58	5.32	.58	1	358	.00
2	.88[b]	.78	.78	3.82	.20	1	357	.00
3	.93[c]	.87	.87	2.92	.08	1	356	.00
4	.96[d]	.93	.93	2.19	.05	1	355	.00
5	.98[e]	.97	.97	1.42	.04	1	354	.00
6	1.00[f]	1.00	1.00	.00	.02	1	353	.00

Note. a = Predictors: (Constant), Social Skill, b = Predictors: (Constant), Social Skill, Ability To Read; c = Predictors: (Constant), Social Skill, Ability To Read, Persuasiveness; d = Predictors: (Constant), Social Skill, Ability To Read, Persuasiveness, Demonstrative Empathy; e = Predictors: (Constant), Social Skill, Ability To Read, Persuasiveness, Demonstrative Empathy, Tolerance; f = Predictors: (Constant), Social Skill, Ability To Read, Persuasiveness, Demonstrative Empathy, Tolerance, Energy.

From the results, it was observed that the overall status of students' social competency was regarded as good (57.8%, *N* = 208)

and an average (41.4%, N = 149). More specifically, as indicated in Table 1, social skills were found to be the most dominant sub-construct followed by ability to read, persuasiveness, demonstrative empathy, tolerance and energy, as self-rated by the students. At the very beginning, the students were asked whether they have encountered any stressful event during that semester. Accordingly, 81.9% of the respondents indicated that they had such experience whereas 18.1% responded that they have not experienced any stress. It was the second intention of this study to assess the major type of coping strategies students implemented to protect themselves.

Table 2

Types of Coping Strategies Used by First-Year Students to Adjust Themselves (N = 360)

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted ΔR^2	SEE	ΔR^2	df1	df 2	p
1	.81[a]	.66	.66	5.70	.66	1	358	.00
2	.94[b]	.88	.88	3.30	.22	1	357	.00
3	1.00[c]	1.00	1.00	.00	.11	1	356	

Note. a = Predictors: (Constant), Avoidance; b = Predictors: (Constant), Avoidance, Emotional; c = Predictors: (Constant), Avoidance, Emotional, Task Oriented.

As depicted in Table 2, the dominant type of coping strategy implemented by the students is known to be avoidance type. It was also noted that emotional and task oriented coping strategies had been registered, respectively. Beyond assessing the type of dominant social competencies and coping strategies of the students, it was the major interest of this study investigate the relationship of the variables. As a preliminary step, inter-correlational analysis of the result is summarized and presented as follows.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for Study Variables (N = 360)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	-	.01	.01	-.11	-.06	-.13
2. College		-	.10	.22[**]	.01	.40[**]
3. Religion			-	.13[*]	.02	.03
4. Social Competency				-	.43[**]	.18[**]
5. Coping strategy					-	-.05
6. GPA						-

[*]$p < .05$. [**]$p < .01$.

The relationship between social competency, coping strategies and academic achievement had been investigated using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient. As indicated in Table 3, there

is strong positive relationship between social competency and coping strategy. However, social competency was moderately and positively related to the students first semester GPA. Furthermore, it was analyzed in this study that coping strategy is negatively, but not significantly, correlated to academic achievement of the students.

Table 4

Regression Analysis for Predicting Academic Achievement From Social Competency and Coping Strategy (N = 360)

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p	F	p	R	R^2
Constant	1.77	.32		5.46	.00	12.03	.00	.18	.03
Social Competency	.01	.00	.18	3.46	.00				
Constant	2.21	.36		6.12	.00	9.71	.00		.05
Social Intelligence	.02	.00	.24	4.29	.00			.28	
Coping Strategy	-.01	.00	-.15	-2.68	.00				

Note. Dependent Variable: GPA.

It was further attempted to investigate the predictive power of social competency and coping strategies assuming their academic achievement, measured by first semester GPA, as dependent variable. As indicated in Table 4, the aggregate predictive value of social competency and coping strategy is found to be significant and 5.2% of the variations in the students' first semester GPA can be explained by their social competency and coping strategies. In the above Table, it was identified that social competency has made the relatively better unique contribution in explaining academic achievement.

In addition, direct, indirect and total effect of social competency and coping strategies on GPA as meditated by different demographic variables such as college, gender, and religion were tabulated. Results show that only college has partial mediation effect between social competency and GPA (.09, $p < .01$). However, other demographic variables failed to mediate between respective variables.

Furthermore, results show that there is nonsignificant difference between male and female respondents in relation to coping strategies. However, a significant difference is observed on their social competency and first semester GPA ($t = 2.63$, $p < .00$; $t = 2.12$, $p < .05$). In this study, it has been found that females scored lower mean on social competency and first semester academic achievement (GPA).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess first year university students' social competency, coping strategy against their overall first

semester academic achievement. Accordingly, the study has revealed noteworthy results for discussion. The priority of this study was the students' social competency status, as measured by self-report tool.

At concept level, social competency refers to a persons' ability to understand the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of persons, including one self and to live with others in a society (Chettri, 2016; Nazir, Tasleema, & Ganai, 2015; Saxena & Jain, 2013). Accordingly, a socially competent student knows how to build good relationships with others and can live harmoniously within the University with other students (Praditsang, Hanafi, & Walters, 2015). According to the interpretation guideline, the result indicates that the students are categorized as good in social competency status. Almost an equal number of these students are also categorized as moderate in their social competency status; while, no one scored below 30, which is defined as poor or very poor and therefore; no need for self-improvement plan in this respect.

Furthermore, it was intended to assess the most dominant social competency subscale at which the students are good at. Accordingly, social skills and ability to read were the two most dominant sub-construct of social competency. Among all others, it was analyzed from the data that the dominant social competency tendency was to be social skill. Scholars contended that social skills are predominantly important in unfavorable situations and to adjust to a new setting (Guimaraes, Lemos, & Nunes, 2012; Sharma, Goswami, & Gupta, 2016). Understanding others' feelings, ideas, needs, and adjusting to different social settings, initiating and maintaining friendship are some of the aspects of social competencies (Han & Kemple, 2006). Related with this, Perzigian (2018) asserted that students who demonstrate pro-social behaviors are typically regarded as students with high social competency and are more likely to get significant others approval.

Studying in universities, especially during first year, is naturally demanding and challenging. Thus, it is expected that some students develop unusual feelings and frustrations when facing such challenges. In this study too, a large number of the respondents indicated that they had experienced some sort of stress since they joined the university. This result is consistent with a study on medical students of Saudi Arabia, which reported that about 82% found studying stressful, 57.1% stressed by conflict with their friends, and 78.2% had worried about their future fate (Bamuhair et al. 2015).

It was also the intention of this study to assess the way the students attempt to cope with the stresses they encountered. As

depicted in Table 2, the students were known to basically implement avoidance type of coping strategy. This result is contradictory to a study which reported that the most commonly adopted coping strategies were active coping, searching for emotional or instrumental support (Bodys-Cupak et al., 2018). Similarly, Salam et al. (2019) found out that task-oriented coping is the most commonly implemented strategy first year medical students and was considered as a good sign of problem-solving skills.

First year of university life is stressful time for many students as they go through the process of adapting to new educational and social environments (Yazon, Ang-Manaig & Tesoro, 2017). In such stressful academic world, the students attempt to use different kinds of coping strategies to control over the stressful situation. Accordingly, their attempt could be seeking to solve the problems or manage the sources of stress (task oriented) or reduce the emotional distress (emotion oriented) associated with the event (Kweku, Yelkpieri, & Kobina, 2011). To effectively manage stressful situations, it is normal to exert cognitive, behavioral and social efforts (Kremenkova & Plevova, 2019). However, it is widely argued that emotion focused coping is directed towards internal state whereas problem-focused coping is directed towards altering the external stressors (Mason, 2017).

As the major purpose of the study was to assess the relationship of social competency, coping strategies and academic achievement of the students, Pearson moment correlation analyses was conducted and remarkable result was obtained among major and sub-constructs in the study. It was identified that social competency is positively and significantly correlated to both coping strategy and GPA. In this study, coping strategy is inversely correlated to GPA, even if the correlation is nonsignificant. The most likely reason for such result could be the type of dominant coping strategy implemented by the students. It was identified that about 66% of the respondents implemented avoidance coping strategies to cope with stressors. Thus, it is more likely to infer that the students might have ignored to overcome the situation. If the students totally avoid facing stressful situations, it is evident that academic performance is affected. By its nature, avoidance coping strategy is denying or avoiding the situation, which leads to losing hope (Kariv & Heiman, 2005). Previous study indicated that avoidance coping strategies were negatively related to overall first year GPA (Alarcon, Edwards, & Clark, 2013). Furthermore, Abdullah et al. (2010) contended that frequent use of escape-avoidance coping strategy decreases the students' level of adjustment, and hence affects their overall academic performance. The major technique used to assess the relationship was to conduct multiple linear regression

analysis to identify the contribution of predicting variables. It has been found that social competency and coping strategy significantly predicted academic performance. However, the prediction is not as strong as expected. It was also noted that social competency has relatively stronger contribution than coping strategies in the prediction.

In addition it was attempted to investigate the direct and indirect effect of major and demographic variables in predicting academic achievement of the students. On the premises of structural equation model path analysis has been conducted and when college was considered as intervening variable showed partial mediation effect. Nevertheless, college showed no mediating role between coping strategy and academic achievement of the students. In addition to college, gender and religion exhibited nonsignificant mediating role between social competency, coping strategy, and academic achievement.

Limitations

Social competency and coping strategies are highly intricate variables that could have been treated in a better way. Because of the nature of the study, only self-report tools, without further triangulation task, had been used. Therefore, in the future, it is suggested that these concepts need to be further investigated through advanced research design and triangulated measures.

Implications

The present study helps academicians and University student personnel to promote first year students' in adaptive coping strategies (task oriented coping strategies) and social competency, so as to improve their first semester GPA. The findings of this research may be used in designing interventions measures that benefit first year students.

Conclusion

It was confirmed that the students are categorized as good on the measure of social competency. Among social competency subscales, it was also confirmed that social skills were the most dominant type of competency the students exhibited. On the other hand, the study revealed that most of the students implement avoidance coping strategies. Social competency and coping strategy, collectively,

predicted only 5.2% of the variations in first semester GPA of the students. Among the demographic variables, only college has served as intervening variable, through partially mediating between the student's social competency and GPA. Gender and religion were identified to have no mediating role between social competency, coping strategy, and first semester GPA of the students.

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