

# RESILIENCE IN A GROUP OF FIRST-YEAR PSYCHOSOCIAL SCIENCE STUDENTS AT THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY (POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS)

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## Abstract

*First-year students entering university for the first time face considerable life changing challenges, from relocating to a new setting to adapting to a new learning environment. For the student to be successful, the level of resilience plays a vital role in the student's development and future growth. The fundamental aim of this research is to explore resilience amongst first-year students. The participants in this study were first-year Psychosocial science students who enrolled into the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) in 2011. Thirty-five students participated in the quantitative study that examined the level of resilience in first-year students. Data was analysed by means of the Perspective Training College program. The results revealed great amount of stress in first-year students; this stress was associated with academic stress, high expectations and the fear of fitting in. Social support resulted to be an important factor that aided the transition to university.*

**Keywords:** first-year student, psychosocial science, resilience, transition

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Success at university involves much more than taking notes, attending hostel events, memorising course material for exams and attending lessons. If a university student aims to have lasting value and benefit from his or her studies, he or she will have to develop the abilities to think critically, to deal with emotions, life changing events and to be able to be resilient and find ways to adapt to the new environment.

First-year students need to be resilient in order to overcome academic difficulties and to cope with academic life. They are the most vulnerable students, as they are not used to university structures and strategies, and are new to the university environment (Wasonga, Christman & Kilmer, 2003:62-75). These students are beginning a new academic life and furthermore they are in a position of shaping their future career. With good coping skills and a positive attitude it sure will lead to a positive outcome.

The purpose of this study was to examine the level of resilience in first-year psychosocial science students at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). The Personal Multi-Screening Inventory (PMSI) was used to collect data from 35 first-year students.

## 2. AIM OF THE STUDY

To examine the level of resilience in first-year psychosocial science students at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus).

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A literature study as well as empirical data collection was conducted to examine the level of resilience in first-year psychosocial science students at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus).

### 3.1 Research design

According to Mouton (2001:55) research design is a plan or blueprint of how you intend conducting the research. In social research three paradigms come into actuality, namely quantitative research, qualitative research and mixed methods. For the purpose of this study the researcher used quantitative research methods only. According to Creswell (2009:4) quantitative research is a means of testing objective theories by examining

relationships between variables, these variables, in turn, can be measured typically on instruments so that numbered data can be analysed using statistical procedures.

### **3.2 Participants**

Participants for the study were first-year psychosocial science students from the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). These students either had Psychology or Social Work as their major subject; they were also in their first year of study; academically and historically.

First year students (n= 35) from the school of Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences, North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) participated in this study. Based on initial data sets of 71, only 35 students completed the questionnaire.

### **3.3 Measuring instrument**

The Personal Multi-Screening Inventory instrument (PMSI) was used to administer the data from the sample. The PMSI is a paper and pencil self-report measure that is used to evaluate client's strengths and problems in 33 different areas of personal, emotional, interpersonal, spiritual and physical functioning. The PMSI contains 265 items and requires 30 to 45 minutes to complete. It can be scored manually in about 30 minutes and scoring by computer takes approximately five minutes. The 33 subscale scores are used to prepare a graphic profile for ease of interpretation and for use in assessment and strategic planning (Faul & Hanekom, 2007:6).

The PMSI is a self-report assessment tool that measures the degree, severity, or magnitude of a wide range of distinct and separate strengths and problems in personal, emotional, interpersonal, spiritual and physical functioning. Each subscale of the PMSI has the same format and structure, and they all have 4 to 12 items. This particular length was selected for three specific reasons: the subscales are long enough to produce acceptable reliabilities; they are short enough to keep fatigue to an acceptable level; and the use of 4 to 12 items leads to the construction of simple and rapid scoring procedures. (Faul & Hanekom, 2007:6).

The PMSI uses the different constructs to determine the functioning of the individual; this implies that from the positive and negative constructs, one is able to interpret if the respondents are coping and this gives an indication of the level of resilience present.

### **3.4 Procedure**

Due to time limitations and other challenges, the researcher sent each student a questionnaire by e-mail.

Seventy-one respondents were registered on the Perspective Training College website. Each respondent was given a username and password which logged them onto the system. An e-mail was sent after completion of each questionnaire to notify the researcher and to confirm completion and submission. Thirty-five (49.3%) of the 71 respondents fully completed the questionnaire during the period of May to November 2011.

Once the researcher received a notification that the respondents submitted their questionnaire, the researcher provided a voucher to the respondent for a complimentary cup of coffee.

### **3.5 Data processing**

The complete PMSI schedule was processed through an online computerised program developed by Perspective Training College (2006). This program provides the researcher with a group assessment report which includes all the questionnaires of all the respondents.

## **4. DESCRIPTION OF TERMS**

Terms that are of relevance to this study will be described below:

### **4.1 First-year student**

According to the Education Statistics in South Africa (2009) a student in the higher education sector is one who is registered mainly for courses offered in contact mode. A contact mode course involves personal interaction with lecturers or institution supervisors at institutions for higher education, through lectures, tutorials, seminars, practical's, supervision, or other forms of required work, and is presented on the institution's premises or at a site of the institution. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the term first-year student will be described as a student who has completed grade 12 the year prior to enrolling at an institution for higher education for the first time.

### **4.2 Psychosocial science**

The School of Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences forms part of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). The school includes Psychology and Social Work students. The mission of the School for Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences is to improve the psychosocial health, well-being and quality of life of the people of South Africa. The School also aims to promote Social Work and Psychology as academic disciplines by offering outcome-based learning opportunities of a high quality, conducting relevant and high calibre basic and applied research in the area of preventive and therapeutic interventions (NWU, 2011).

#### **4.3 Resilience**

Resilience is a theory that can inform action. It is a concept that changes our focus from the breakdown of the disorder attributed to exposure to stressful environments, to the individual's characteristics and social processes associated with either normal or unexpectedly positive psychosocial development (Liebenberg and Ungar, 2008: 21). Through gathering information on resilience in the literature study, the researcher is of the opinion that resilience is a complex phenomenon and different authors have different definitions, with the underlying essence of being able to cope in challenging situations. According to Hunter & Chandler (1999), resilience is to flourish unexpectedly well in one's career and at university, despite being exposed to a stressful environment.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher defined resilience as an individual's ability to cope during normal life experiences, crises and stressful situations in a positive and stable manner.

#### **4.4 Transition**

The student's experience of change involved in joining the university. Transitions can occur in different dimensions such as academic, personal, financial, social and students who manage one aspect may struggle in another (Johnston, 2010:4). This transition occurs between grade 12 and the first-year of higher education. The transition can be accompanied by challenges and difficulties. It's a new stage a student embarks on and it sets a foundation for a successful career and working environment.

### **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

As first-year students look forward to a new venture (that of university life) because of the new opportunities and independence it might bring, this venture also brings challenges and obstacles that might shape a student to be resilient and adapt to these challenges; but it might also drive the student to crave for support and guidance in order to survive.

First-year students face considerable challenges as they enter two significant phases of their life: the world of tertiary education and that of adulthood. At this important juncture, when it would appear that increased guidance, support and encouragement are most needed to assist students in making the transition relatively smooth, the move to a different educational environment sees these elements disappear; the infrastructure that had supported students at school is gone (Kantanis, 2000:100-110). University students in general experience stressful situations once they leave home and begin to adjust to the new life on a campus with its related academic and social demands. For most students, it's their first time away from home as a mature independent adult. At this point in time, they are challenged to adapt to the new environment with all its responsibilities and social demands.

Throughout a lifetime, humans confront a variety of life challenges. Challenges may include a combination of emotional, physical, or social stressors. Such stressors, also known as risk factors, are thought to endanger a child's ability to develop in a healthy, well-adjusted way, preventing them from productively contributing to society (Banatao 2011). As students, these challenges cannot be avoided, nor prevented; but students can try to change how they respond to these events and use constructive coping mechanisms in which they can function optimally in a distressed situation.

Resilience forms part of a successful first-year experience. Bates and Miles-Johnson (2010) explain that resilience is a component that is not only important for transition into University, but also through university life and then the transition from university into the world of work.

Resilience derives from the verb *resile*, which means that when something is compressed, stretched, or bent, it tends to spring back elastically, to recoil and to resume its former size and shape (Strumpfer, 2003). When resilience is fostered and engaged, students' internal assets, such as social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose, emerge, explains Banaoto (2011). It involves behaviour, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in any individual.

Resilient individuals have the capacity to bounce back from stressful experiences quickly and effectively. They use positive emotions to rebound from, and find positive meaning in, stress encounters (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004; Turner, 2001). However, students need not have to go through a life threatening situation to bring out resilience.

Resilience is a constructive mechanism to aid students in situations in which pressure is increased or a greater feeling of stress and anxiety is experienced.

In an academic environment, students face stress, pressure and adaptation from the school environment to the university structure. In modern times today, further social demands are exerted on the student such as peer pressure, academic performance, identity, drugs and alcohol. Even though today's undergraduates are talented and mature, literature proves that they present more social problems than ever before. However, each individual's coping strategy is handled differently and some are able to bounce back to stable life circumstances, whereas others are not inclined to be resilient.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the researcher will define resilience as an individual's ability to cope during normal life experiences, crises and stressful situations in a positive and stable manner.

## 6. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data was collected from 35 first-year students. Data collected from the PMSI proved that first-year university students experience challenges with regard to the transition from high school to university. Respondents have difficulty adapting to a new environment. This new environment of the university brings challenges but also opportunity for growth. These respondents have an inability to function optimally in an academic environment.

High levels of stress were reported for the first-year-students due to social and academic demands. This stress leads to a sense of helplessness and an increased level of frustration.

Respondents scored high for expectation; these students enter university with a high expectation to excel in university. With such high expectations, they soon feel frustrated and over time experience stress, because they cannot cope with the academic and social demands of university. These expectations are not fulfilled and the students begin to feel a lack of self-worth and helplessness.

Due to new friendships being developed, students lack trust in friendship networks. Due to increased social and academic demands, goals are not attained and students feel helpless and frustrated.

According to the negative psycho-social functioning construct, five of the six constructs were over activated. This indicates that respondents experience great amounts of stress, due to the social and academic demands, they feel a sense of helplessness. Feelings of helplessness leads to increased levels of frustration as they are unable to reach their goals.

According to the theory of Faul and Hanekom (2007), frustration, stress and helplessness are inter-related. When a respondent begins to feel frustrated they experience stress. This stress leads them to feel helpless and they need to depend on someone or something to cope. This dependence can be anything from sex, drugs, alcohol or people. Ross and De Jong (2008) explain that life transitions in general are times of risk for increased alcohol use and abuse, but many factors during university transition make it a particularly risky period. Chiauzzi, Brevard, Thum, Thurn, Decembrele and Lord (2008:555-572) also highlight that alcohol and drug use are particularly prevalent among university students. This could be related to the students' developmental level, associated vulnerabilities, as well as the various challenges facing them during the transition.

First-year students come to university filled with hope and a yearning to excel. With such high expectations, they soon feel frustrated and over time experience stress, because they cannot cope with the academic and social demands of university. These expectations are not fulfilled and the students begin to feel a lack of self-worth and helplessness. From the PMSI results it is clear that the respondents have high expectations of university life. These expectations might be related to academic demands or family expectations to excel. Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006:13) highlight several factors emerging from the changes and transitions of first-year students into the university environment. These include: predicting success; assessing performance; withdrawal and retention; adjustment and skill support.

According to a study by Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009:37-54) students in their first year explained that they experienced feelings of doubt regarding the perceived abnormality of academic life, and therein the appropriateness of both their expected learning styles and the curriculum design, as well as the freedom and isolation of student life. It is understandable that students might feel this way; they have been following a certain method of learning for 12 years while in school. The sudden change of environment and university norms as well as change in learning style can cause students to feel doubtful. Time management plays an important role in the student's first-year at university. Results from the PMSI indicated that students are unable to manage their free time in a constructive manner. High school has its own structure with a 6 hour academic schedule, while at university students spend the greatest part of their days on the university premises.

A recent study at a South African university reported that academic work and the fear of failure were amongst the biggest stressors for first-year students. This is probably related to the fact that the university curricula and demands are new to these students and more challenging than their previous secondary schooling careers (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010:232-240).

Pillay & Ngcobo (2010:232-240) further highlighted that most participants perceived their parents to be supportive, but it is worrying to note that one in ten participants viewed their parents as unsupportive. This would certainly be stressful to those students and likely to have a negative effect on the students' academic performance. According to the subscale of social support, the relationship with families' was under activated. This is a concern for first-year students as they need to be dependent on someone or something for effective social and academic functioning, in order to cope. It could be interpreted that students are away from home and therefore the relationship with their family has stagnated. It is also important that cognisance is taken of the students' fears of failure and perceptions of academic demands. These are very likely related to insufficient preparation of students at secondary school level, with the result that they find themselves overwhelmed when they begin their university education.

Respondents also experience a sense of senselessness of existence, and feel they lack purpose or meaning in life. The score for senselessness of existence was over activated. This indicates that at times they feel helpless and isolated. During Palmer *et al.* (2007:37-54) study, a respondent explained: "I didn't feel that I belonged. I sat in my room, not talking to anyone. I just went to bed to sleep to forget about my worries. This made me even more lethargic which meant I couldn't release any stress and find the energy to do my work." Some respondents wrote metaphorically about hanging onto a thread that would pull them into what they perceived as a normal place (incorporation back into the home life or forward into university life).

According to the above information it clearly states that students do not possess an adequate amount of resilience to be able to cope in a new environment with its social and academic demands.

Resilience is a long term attribute and cannot be learned or acquired in a day. It prepares individuals not only during their first-year at university but for a lifetime.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article was based on the resilience of first-year psychosocial science students at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). This study is limited to only the students of one school and this study cannot make a general assumption for all first-year students.

To summarise, the study showed significant high levels of stress in first-year students. The scores of the items of expectation, achievement and satisfaction were not in an optimal range of functioning. Students are prone to be dependent on someone or something for effective coping; this may lead to over excessive drinking.

Resilience appears to be at the background of every action a student takes. It acts as a moderator, motivation, compass and activates the mind. Resilient students are able to apply relevant techniques and skills to problems, and are intrinsically motivated to conquer difficulties without suffering lasting harm (Moleli, 2005). Therefore for effective first-year student functioning, it is vital for students to be resilient and to incorporate skills to build resilience in everyday life.

From the results it is clear that first-year psychosocial science students have an inability to function optimally in an academic environment. According to the positive psycho-social functioning construct, all the subscales were under activated, this indicates that respondents have difficulty adapting to a new environment. They fail to make use of constructive coping mechanisms and in order to maintain their academic and social life, they need something or someone to depend upon.

Thus the transition from high school to university can be unsuccessful for many. Students are faced with leaving home and entering a new environment of learning, academic stress, social demands and isolation. This can impact on the success and performance of the students during their first-year at university. The literature indicates that a wide range of issues, from social to individual factors, influence students' success during their first year.

Since the inception of support strategies for support first year students, the researcher has been intrigued by the importance of resilience as a factor in successful transition. Resilience is a component that is not only important for transition into university, but also through university life and then the transition from university into the world of work (Bates & Miles-Johnson, 2010). Young adults need to be resilient in order for them to survive adversity of any kind. The environment in which the young adults operate should interact positively with them.

A resilient individual displays resilience principles in every area that describes a person holistically, in the context of psychological, physical, social, economical and spiritual well-being. Resilient individuals can be identified through their outcomes, which are desirable behaviour and actions (Kaplan, 1999:110).

First-year students need to be resilient in order to overcome academic difficulties and to cope with academic life. They are the most vulnerable students, as they are not used to university structures and strategies, and are new to the university environment. The advantage of resilient first-year students is that they will be able to function on their own in a challenging environment, and be able to move on, even when faced with adversities, as the state of 'bouncing back' predicts academic achievement (Wasonga *et al.*, 2003:62-75). Resilience therefore pervades and influences how students respond to adversity.

Most first-year university students are faced with many new experiences and responsibilities on campus and in life in general. The students have to learn to cope with a variety of settings, including the university, community, the workplace and home. They also need to learn to cope with examination anxiety, financial difficulties, personal relationships and social ills like divorce. The above concerns necessitate students to be resilient in order for them to overcome difficulties and achieve success.

### 8. Brief biography

*Tasleem Hassim* completed her Bachelor of Social Work degree in 2009, B.A Psychology (Honours) degree in 2010 and Master of Arts, Social Work degree in 2012. Miss Hassim received an above 75% achiever in 2008 and has been part of the Golden key International Honours Society. Currently she is a Lecturer at the North-West University.

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