My Life's in Shambles: Examining Interpersonal Relationships as a Moderating Factor in Reducing Post-Graduate Stress

Iniki Franklin
iniki.franklin@students.cau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/cauetds

Part of the Clinical Psychology Commons, Counseling Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons, Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
Franklin, Iniki, "My Life's in Shambles: Examining Interpersonal Relationships as a Moderating Factor in Reducing Post-Graduate Stress" (2018). Electronic Theses & Dissertations Collection for Atlanta University & Clark Atlanta University. 131.
http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/cauetds/131

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Clark Atlanta University at DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses & Dissertations Collection for Atlanta University & Clark Atlanta University by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. For more information, please contact cwiseman@auctr.edu.
ABSTRACT

SOCIAL WORK

FRANKLIN, INIKI

B.A. UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA, 2015

MY LIFE’S IN SHAMBLES: EXAMINING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A MODERATING FACTOR IN REDUCING POST-GRADUATE STRESS

Committee Chair: Youseung Kim, Ph.D.

Thesis dated May 2018

This study examines whether interpersonal relationships serve as a moderating factor in reducing post-graduate stress. A researcher developed survey was used to gather data and examined three areas: interpersonal support, perceived stress, and self-optimism. Interpersonal support encompassed familial and peer relationships. Perceived stress encompassed anxiety and depression symptomologies. Self-confidence encompassed graduates’ individuation and optimism levels regarding major life tasks after commencement. Perceived stress and self-confidence levels were also used to identify how interpersonal relationships impacted graduates’ interpretation of stress. Further analysis of the study also examined whether interpersonal support impacted perceived stress and self-confidence across various racial groups. Findings of the study suggest that interpersonal support has an impact on post-graduate stress.
MY LIFE’S IN SHAMBLES: EXAMINING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A MODERATING FACTOR IN REDUCING POST-GRADUATE STRESS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY
INIKI FRANKLIN

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2018
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my awesome support system: God, my family, my friends, my colleagues, my supervisors, and my professors for helping me through this process. Without their encouragement, this project would not have been brought to completion. I would like to give a special thanks to my mother, father, and sisters who consistently uplift me. My entire graduate career would not have been the same without their love. I would also like to give a special thanks to my advisor and research professor Dr. Youseung Kim. Thank you for seeing greatness in my potential and nurturing it intentionally. This thesis is the beginning of many endeavors in my career as a social work researcher and practitioner. I am eternally grateful for every person that has impacted my life throughout the process of obtaining my Master of Social Work degree.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... v

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................ vi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
   Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................................... 1
   Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................ 3
   Research Questions and Hypotheses ...................................................................................... 4
   Significance of the Study ...................................................................................................... 5

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ....................................................................................... 6
   Historical Perspective .......................................................................................................... 6
   The Influence of Interpersonal Relationships on Graduates ................................................. 9
   Common Stress and Stressors among College Graduates .................................................... 11
   Afrocentric Perspective ....................................................................................................... 14
   Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................................... 16

METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................... 19
   Participants .......................................................................................................................... 19
   Procedures ............................................................................................................................ 20
   Measures .............................................................................................................................. 21
   Limitations of the Study ...................................................................................................... 23
CHAPTER

III.  PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS ................................................................. 24
   Demographic Analysis Results ................................................................. 24
   Analysis Results for Hypothesis Testing .................................................. 26
IV.   SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION ................................................................. 29
   Summary of the Study ............................................................................. 29
   Implications for Social Work Practice ..................................................... 30
   Implications for Social Work Policy ......................................................... 30
   Implications for Social Work Research ................................................... 31
REFERENCES ............................................................................................. 34
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Correlation between interpersonal support and perceived stress ..................... 26
2. Correlation between interpersonal support and self-confidence ....................... 27
LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Participant Demographics as Percentages of the Sample. .........................................19

2. Presence of Interpersonal Support on Self-Confidence and Perceived Stress ..........25

3. The Relationship between Perceived Stress among Non-Minorities and

Minorities..................................................................................................................................28
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Graduation from college is a traditional milestone that numerous students attain yearly. Individuals embrace graduation with excitement and uncertainty. During the 2016–2017 academic year, it is projected that colleges and universities will issue close to 1,863,000 bachelor’s degrees to students graduating from higher education institutions in the United States in contrast to the 1,853,000 bachelor’s degrees issued in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This displays an increase of individuals that will enter the transitional period of post-graduation during the current and upcoming year. Given the number of individuals that graduate each year, many people perceive life after graduation to be relatively simplistic, but studies have shown that the transition from student to graduate serves as a risk factor for psychological distress in the lives of individuals due to major life changes (Lane, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Numerous factors influence psychological stress during the transition from college. Graduates must secure sustainable employment and income, form new social groups, and develop a new sense of identity. Graduates may feel pressure to achieve each goal quickly and without adversity immediately following college commencement. Internal stress and external stress follows this transition. The state of society has shifted whereas in earlier generations individuals could emerge into adulthood sooner. Recent
graduates and young adults in modern society may have difficulty becoming independent from their families and other institutional support systems that impacted their lives over the years (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Graduates may also question future endeavors that do not center around student and college life. The transitional period after graduation may serve as a trigger of positive and negative stress. While stress is a normal and necessary part of development, increased levels of stress can do more harm than good. Prolonged periods of stress can have adverse effects in the body and can impact the quality of life of individuals both physically and mentally (Peer, Hillman, & Van Hoet, 2015). Recent college graduates are not exempt from this.

Interpersonal relationships may serve as a moderating factor in reducing stress associated with transitioning out of college and into post-graduate life. Interpersonal relationships consist of both peer support and familial support. Peer support encompasses friendships, social relationships, and work relationships. Familial support consists of both kin and fictive kin. Social support is an intricate factor in life. Interpersonal relationships serve as a necessary form of social support, and could possibly serve as a preventative measure against different illnesses and issues that are caused by negative stress. This topic is important because it examines how interpersonal relationships affect perceived stress levels in recent graduates while they explore a new phase of life. With the rising number of graduates, it can be predicted that there will be an increase in the number of individuals seeking counseling services and life planning regarding post-graduate transitions.

This area of research would be extremely beneficial within the field of social work because it provides an opportunity for effective therapeutic prevention and
intervention services for recent graduates. Recent graduates may need additional guidance regarding future planning and transitioning out of higher education institutions. The observation and utilization of major theoretical frameworks such as systems theory and strengths perspective are recommended for this population. There is current research on the transition from high school to college or the workforce. There is also ample research on the amount of stress and pressures students endure throughout college until they reach the point of commencement. Limited information exists for individuals that have graduated and are transitioning beyond secondary education. There is also limited information on the effects of interpersonal relationships as a moderating factor in reducing post-graduate stress. Overall, this project will produce new information for a demographic that may need services to better navigate life with stronger autonomy and confidence.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how interpersonal relationships serve as a moderating factor in reducing post-graduate stress. Interpersonal relationships are categorized as either familial or peer. The central focus of this study is to examine how interpersonal relationships serve as a buffer between stress and the graduate's interpretation of that stress. It will also examine if interpersonal relationships influence how graduates cope with stress. Three major questions arise within this study that examines the impact of interpersonal support on graduates’ perceived stress and self-confidence. The influence of interpersonal relationships on perceived stress will also be
examined across race between non-minority and minority groups. Implementation for this study will consist of quantitative methodology through electronic surveys.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study examines how interpersonal relationships affect perceived stress levels in recent graduates through examination of the presence of interpersonal support and whether it has a positive or negative influence on graduates’ coping with perceived stress. The following research questions and hypotheses were used for this examination:

**RQ1:** Do interpersonal relationships affect perceived stress levels in recent college graduates?

**Ho1:** Interpersonal relationships affect perceived stress level in college graduates.

**Ho2:** There is no significance between interpersonal support and perceived stress levels in recent college graduates.

**RQ2:** How does high interpersonal support affect self-confidence among recent graduates?

**Ho1:** Interpersonal support affects self-confidence toward the future among recent graduates.

**Ho2:** There is no significance between high interpersonal support and self-confidence among recent graduates.

**RQ3:** How do graduates’ perceived stress, self-individuation, and self-optimism levels vary by race?

**Ho1:** Interpersonal support has diverse effects across race.
Ho2: There is no significance between perceived stress, self-individuation, and self-optimism by race.

**Significance of the Study**

Many colleges and universities offer counseling services to students prior to commencement, but perhaps a linkage to counseling and planning services after graduation is necessary for recent graduates. This study is significant because it provides awareness for a growing population of individuals that may need social work services. It further investigates effective measures in reducing post-graduate stress regarding interpersonal relationships and also serves as a preventative measure by illuminating risk factors that contribute to high-stress levels. If graduates understand the contributors of stress, better problem-solving skills may arise to help this population. This study provides another perspective to a small body of research, and may provide another avenue of service for individuals in need of assistance.

Research currently exists on stress and the high school graduate or college student, but limited research exists for stress and recent graduates. Life skills, career skills, and personal skills are three areas in which the field of social work can help these individuals after commencement. Moreover, limited research expounds on the emotional transformation that graduates endure after college, and how those changes influence stress levels. These factors can affect recent graduates’ autonomy and quality of life. More awareness is needed in academia and social work to better prepare students before and after commencement. This study is significant because it proposes a solution to an underrated problem.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Current literature examined the influence of interpersonal relationships on student adaptation levels among graduates. Studies were typically longitudinal and examined groups of recent graduates from high school and undergraduate institutions. Gender, race, and social class were also taken into consideration within these studies. Literature existed for interactions among recent graduates from specific disciplines such as medicine and business. Common themes appeared within the existing literature that suggested a need for further examination of themes such as emergent identity, transitional periods, and attachment theory (Hammen et al., 1995; Lane, 2014; Saks & Ashforth, 2000).

Gaps in the literature also existed regarding services offered to recent graduates. These gaps provided an opportunity for further investigation of the effects of interpersonal relationships on stress levels among recent graduates. Social science disciplines and medical services may provide greater levels of support for individuals. More specifically, information on the transition from college, regardless of discipline, warrants further examination for generalizability of findings.

Historical Perspective

In contrast to previous decades, students are paying more for college tuition and fees (Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2012). After college graduation, students absorb the cost
of accumulated debt. This is outstandingly different than years prior where the cost of education was cheaper in price, and attainment of employment after college was more feasible. Higher academic standards exist as the job market becomes more competitive each year. Graduates face external pressure to stand out from the major population in relation to skills and experiences.

Contemporary graduates may possess higher levels of concern for financial security following college graduation. Recent graduates depart from college with more debt which could cause their economic stability to begin in the negative. Lower rates of job permanency are also an area of concern for recent graduates. Craig (2016) asserted that graduating students and employers display higher levels of dissatisfaction. Two major reasons for dissatisfaction for both groups include lower job offers prior to commencement and employers’ confidence in graduates’ competency. Such issues are reflected in workplace composition.

Moreover, employers are also opting for temporary workers with more years of experience to complete job-related tasks in contrast to permanent workers under contract (Aronson, Callahan, & Davis, 2015). Generational perceptions emerged regarding company loyalty and the way younger generations devote time to a place of employment (Brody & Rubin, 2011). Since the Great Recession of 2007, individuals still face issues of unemployment or underemployment, and many recent graduates have experienced the effects of economic downturn. Young adults who have recently graduated from college have almost doubled the unemployment rate in contrast to older, more established college graduates (Carter, Cox, & Quealy, 2009). This issue is alarming among recent graduates
as the desire for financial security lies at the cusp of college commencement and degree attainment.

The evolution of student support services in higher education remains constant with the needs of students diversifying over time. Support workers must engage in multiple roles to best meet student needs. In previous decades, an emphasis was placed on vocational training more so than personal counseling. Now, there is a consistent shift in the number of students seeking out student support services for personal needs. Over the last few decades, an increase in services for pathological disorders and mental health crises dominated student support services around counseling (Gallagher, 2012). There are noticeable changes in the number of students receiving inpatient and outpatient services from hospitals in relation to mental health. Counseling centers are now responsible not only for providing basic counseling but also for the support of proper care and maintenance for students living with mental health issues. Medicinal and technological advances have allowed student support services to aid student needs with greater success, but there are still instances that require more support.

Another changing portion of student support is reflective in career services. Aside from personal support services, there is still the dilemma of “career uncertainty” (Gallagher, 2012) due to the nature of modern-day society and economic shifts that influence employment. The late 20th century marked major changes in career and job services on college campuses. Between 1970 and 1980, college universities began utilizing career planning and counseling centers to help students discover career options. Prior to this change, faculty members typically possessed the responsibility of mentoring
students in relation to career readiness. Career centers became a space for guidance with higher emphasis on counseling, career planning, and job search preparation (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Student support services continue to be an intricate portion of student success before and after commencement. It serves as an external bond in the development of interpersonal relationships for college students and college graduates. Historical implications suggest that the use of student support services will continue to increase as time progresses.

**The Influence of Interpersonal Relationships on Graduates**

Saks and Ashforth (2000) presented findings on graduates’ temperament as it relates to the adjustment to new work environments. Numerous factors were examined within this study such as dispositional factors, behavioral plasticity theory, and entry stressors. Dispositional factors were largely related to graduates’ or new workers’ affect regarding work dynamics. Generally, individuals who possessed lower levels of self-efficacy and negative affects relating to jobs typically experienced more difficulty in job adaptation and performance (Saks & Ashforth, 2000). However, individuals presenting such behaviors previously possessed negative attitudes before emerging into new job roles.

Regarding behavioral plasticity theory, individuals who possessed doubts in work capability caused by issues such as role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and unmet expectations possessed higher levels of stress while transitioning into new work environments (Saks & Ashforth, 2000; Brockner, 1988). This phenomenon was best explained in terms of the individual’s self-efficacy levels. Those with low self-efficacy
had difficulties with work adaptability due to hyper-awareness of environmental cues. These individuals often questioned whether their behavior was appropriate or not. In contrast, those with high self-efficacy tended to have better behavioral plasticity in the workplace because they were not hyper-aware of environmental cues. Although literature within this study deemed self-efficacy as an intricate factor of behavioral plasticity, Saks and Ashforth’s (2000) research study did not yield significant results.

Another major aspect of the research focused on the interactionist perspective derived from symbolic interactionism, and can be defined as the personal and situational circumstances of an individual that influences their reaction to an environment or scenario (Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 2007). In other words, to fully understand an individual’s behavior and relationship toward work adjustment, both personal factors and situational circumstances must be taken into consideration. Both sets of researchers also recommended the use of interpersonal relationships in the form of training, counseling, mentoring, coaching, buddy systems and social support for stress regulation and coping among new workers.

Similar research emerged on interpersonal attachment cognitions and how such cognitions influence interpersonal stress as predictive measures toward various symptomologies. Although the research is mature, it provides a rich basis on which to examine possible indicators of pathology or stress due to interpersonal interactions and offers preventative suggestions for the study's target population. Hammen et al. (1995) utilized attachment theory to express how attachment serves as a critical factor in interpersonal relationship formation. The notion of relatedness emerged within this study.
Relatedness can be defined as one’s fundamental need for connection with others. The study also illuminated attachment theory as it relates to depressive symptomology. Individuals may possess lower interpersonal relationships due to insecure attachments. The researchers also examined transitional periods, family dynamics, romantic relationships, peer interactions, academic endeavors, and work-related events as possible triggers for life stress. The research emphasized the preexistence of attachment issues and interpersonal stress.

Moreover, the available literature indicates that belongingness is another intricate aspect of interpersonal relationship formation. Easterbrook and Vignoles (2013) described belonging as critical for adaptive psychological functioning. Membership to larger groups allows individuals to possess greater feelings of importance. The researchers found that rejection is a major hindrance toward belonging and the formation of interpersonal relationships. Individuals would rather interact through various networks as opposed to collective wholes. This means that individuals would rather engage with smaller groups that they can intimately connect with instead of society at large. In this case, intimacy precedes strong interpersonal bonds. Thus, belonging to interpersonal groups may serve as a prediction to how individuals interpret various stressors and how various interpersonal bonds impact the individual.

**Common Stress and Stressors among College Graduates**

Qualitative literature exists on common college stressors of students. Themes center on relationships, lack of resources, academic expectations, environmental factors, life expectations, diversity, college transitions, and other stressors. Interpersonal stressors
relate to family relationships, romantic relationships, peer relationships, and faculty relationships (Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2012). Although this study provided qualitative findings for students while in college, it does not present information on how these issues may influence students after commencement. The study does, however, illuminate individual and group levels as it relates to stressors. The research also provided information on relationships as an aggravate to college students’ stress instead of a helpful entity. Limitations were emphasized within the research centering on researcher bias and convenience sampling, as well as information type. The overall suggestion of the research is for university settings to provide more resources to help students cope and manage stress (Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2012).

Lane (2015) presented an interesting concept called the imposter phenomenon. Within this study, the imposter phenomenon is best described as overt feelings of incompetence even when evidence of competence is present. Some common themes emerged among recent graduates experiencing this phenomenon, particularly among those entering the workforce. Individuals experiencing imposter phenomenon typically possessed issues relating to low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, high neuroticism, lower conscientiousness, narcissism, and shame. Furthermore, individuals that performed well were most vulnerable to this phenomenon due to extreme internal pressures and high standards. This research is important because it provides insight on a phenomenon that could possibly increase levels of stress among recent graduates. Lane (2015) also used attachment theory as a theoretical basis for the further explanation of the imposter phenomenon. Emphasis is placed on the type of attachment as it relates to
imposter phenomenon. Individuals with insecure or anxious attachment types may formulate negative interpersonal bonds and possibly become dependent on the bond for self-affirmation.

Furthermore, workplace transitions contribute to some of the issues relating to the imposter phenomenon due to increased confusion, uncertainty, and lack of balance in interpersonal work relationships. Individuals may experience decreased levels in familial and peer support which reinforces the insecurities that encompass the imposter phenomenon. Limitations of this study include lack of empirical attention and focus on undergraduate demographics in oppose to working graduates. Racial limitations were also present within this study as it relates to methodology design. This study provides many opportunities for further exploration of this phenomenon as a crucial stressor among recent graduates.

Finally, Rossi and Merbert (2011) presented research on the overall existence of a quarter-life crisis. The study provides a definition for the idea of a quarter-life crisis through examination of evidence relating to midlife crisis and experimentation. The quarter-life crisis can be defined as “a time of transition which can trigger physical, mental, and emotional distress among emerging adults” (Rossi & Merbert, 2011, p. 141). The researchers explored whether a quarter-life crisis is specific to emerging adults or a mere reaction to life transitions. The research suggests that as transitional periods end stress diminishes. This idea was tested through examination of ego identity development, time perspective, social support, and ways of coping. The study also examined diverse variables such as depressive symptomology, anxiety symptomology, jobs satisfaction,
and life satisfaction. Overall, the research denies the existence of a quarter-life crisis due to a lack of strong empirical evidence and suggests that graduates experiencing crisis are merely experiencing transitional changes. This contrasts the other research articles within this examination of the literature as many studies suggested that life transitions are markers of graduate stress. Although stress is present, it may not incite an overall crisis.

In total, most of the research provided exploration on factors that evoke stress among graduates. The literature possessed limitations in descriptive demographics such as race, gender/sex, and class. Gaps in literature display the need for more in-depth investigations among this population to determine similarities and differences. Furthermore, current literature that is qualitative in nature provides a deeper understanding of existing research. Overall, the current review of the literature provides valuable insight to some of the experimentations and thoughts among researchers from various disciplines.

**Afrocentric Perspective**

The Afrocentric Perspective is a way of understanding individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is a paradigm which examines philosophical concepts of those of African descent (Schiele, 1996). The Afrocentric Perspective seeks to appreciate, value, and respect individuals from diverse groups. It also utilizes a strength-based approach for empowering individuals. The Afrocentric Perspective is useful for any cultural group that experiences disparity and oppression. The Afrocentric Perspective rejects Eurocentric frameworks that tend to focus on the dominant culture and limits the validity of minority experiences. For example, Hunn (2004) expressed that the
Eurocentric Perspective highly esteems individuals from European descent in a more privileged manner than those of other cultures due to collective worldviews, particularly among those in America. The Afrocentric Perspective is applicable to interpersonal relationships among recent graduates through the examination of the graduate's collective view of self and the significance of the graduate’s self-knowledge and personal experience.

The collective view of self is a concept specific to the Afrocentric Perspective which states that individual identity is never separate from corporate identity (Kim, 2017). In other words, how an individual identifies with the world largely relates to how they interact within their cultural, ethnic, and social groups. This concept can better explain interpersonal relationship interactions among recent graduates by examination of different cultural norms and practices that influence graduates’ thoughts and behaviors. Relating to collective view of self, social identity must be taken into consideration to help understand how graduates gain a sense of belonging to their own interpersonal groups (Feitosa, Salas, & Salazar, 2012). The graduate’s understanding of their cultural background regarding interpersonal relationships could influence how they interpret various life stressors.

Another important concept specific to the Afrocentric Perspective is the significance of self-knowledge and personal experience. The significance of self-knowledge and personal experience provides validation of the use of self (emotions, experiences, and values) as a basis for generating knowledge and effecting positive human transformation (Kim, 2017). Graduates possess unique life stories which impact
interpersonal relationships and how those relationships support or hinder their growth processes. The Afrocentric Perspective is a framework that allows for richer examination of graduates' experiences through consideration of various hindrances that may influence graduates daily. For example, graduates of diverse races may encounter instances of racism, prejudice, and/or oppression. The use of the Afrocentric Perspective regarding these issues will allow for an understanding of the graduate's personal experience and seeks to alleviate the pain caused by such issues.

Overall, the Afrocentric Perspective is a framework that empowers individuals. Concepts such as the collective view of self and significance of self-knowledge further reinforce the importance of this perspective in research. Regarding interpersonal relationships and various life stressors among graduates, the Afrocentric Perspective allows for further examination of cultural dynamics among diverse groups. Examination of cultural dynamics through the Afrocentric lens could provide an alternative perspective to that of the dominant culture. It could also provide a deeper understanding about some of the challenges recent graduates face in modern society.

**Theoretical Framework**

In social work practice, systems theory describes the way humans interact with various interrelated entities. Systems theory can be broken down into different subcategories to address diverse issues. For example, individuals working directly with families may utilize a family systems theory framework to assist that population. Moreover, systems theory comprises various tools to map out system malfunctions that
can influence the individual. Ultimately, systems theory allows social work practitioners to view clients in a holistic manner (Ashford & LeCroy, 2013).

Systems theory consists of five types of system structures. There are microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems. At its most basic level, interpersonal relationships serve as a type of microsystem within an individual’s life. The interactions between the individual and microsystem can in turn influence other system levels even if the influence is indirect. Systems theory can be applied to interpersonal relationships for further understanding on how various bonds influence an individual’s thoughts, behaviors, and perceptions. Moreover, the application of systems theory on interpersonal relationships can provide a deeper understanding of how individuals form and maintain interpersonal connections. For example, Interpersonal Systems Theory, according to Conner (2011), asserts the following:

In addition to families, all relationships and groups of people are systems with similar properties and dynamics…Interpersonal systems theory helps us see the living processes and patterns of relationships between people and groups. This theory explains the commonalities between relationships and groups with systems aspects of all life forms, and this will radically change the way one looks at them. Once we understand the basic elements, flows, and balances of systems, we have more tools for understanding all kinds of relationship phenomena. (pp. 4-5)

Interpersonal relationships may also apply to social systems that can have both direct and indirect influences on an individual. Social support serves as a way for individuals to cope with stress, and typically comes from friends or family (Civitci,
Application of systems theory in the family setting may examine family histories or dynamics that influence the individual. Systems theory may provide a lens for understanding how recent graduates cope with stress that could have been learned within the family system. Applications of systems theory regarding peer relationships could provide information on how the graduate interacts with others in the school setting, workplace, religious institution, and general society. These interactions may impact how the graduate processes stress within these institutions.

The strengths-based perspective can also serve as a beneficial framework for moderating stress in recent graduates. Strengths perspective allows the individual to illuminate their capabilities and not their deficits (Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Strengths perspective does not diminish the existence of problems or stressors but examines coexisting strengths to combat some of the effects of various problems or stressors (Parrish, 2014). Application of the strengths perspective for this population could highlight skills and assets that recent graduates may not be aware of. Shushok and Hulme (2006) examined the use of strengths as an alternative to the deficit model among college students. They expressed, “…We believe that intentionally enabling students to identify, understand, and leverage their talents, passions, and strengths allow their unique genius to emerge and sets them on a course for success” (p. 4). Helping recent graduates understand how interpersonal relationships serve as a strength in their lives could help reduce post-graduate stress and bring a sense of empowerment to those individuals that may need support following college commencement.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study sample consisted of 101 college graduates from various secondary educational institutions. Participants attended colleges within the United States and Europe. Respondents graduated within the last six years. Participant demographics were diverse. Most participants were female. Study participants’ ages ranged between 18-44 years of age (see Table 1 for participant demographics).

Table 1

*Participant Demographics as Percentages of the Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Demographics</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Demographics</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Asian</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution Type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Year</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Year</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Various participants opted out of reporting.

**Procedures**

This study employed quantitative research methods using a researcher-developed electronic survey. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for this study. Convenience sampling and snowballing techniques were used to collect study participants. Research findings were confidential and secure. Individuals received consent forms and the research measure during the summer of 2017 through the Qualtrics
database. Participants received bi-weekly reminders regarding the electronic survey. There was minimal risk involved with participation in this study.

The analysis tool for this study was a 30-question, researcher developed survey that measured: interpersonal support, perceived stress, and self-confidence. Perceived stress was measured by anxiety and depression symptomologies. Self-confidence encompassed how well the graduates handled new tasks following college commencement. A composite score was used to measure participant results across minority and non-minority groups.

Measures

Survey questions derived from three empirical survey measures: The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Cohen’s Perceived Stress Scale has been “empirically validated among populations consisting of college students or workers” (Lee, 2012, p. 126). Moreover, among the diverse versions of the scale, version-10 proves to be most superior for internal validity and reliability (Lee, 2012). The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support also contains empirically validated internal validity and reliability across diverse groups (Dahlem, Zimet, & Walker, 1991; Zimet, Powell, Farley, Werkman, & Berkoff, 1990). Finally, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale possesses confirmed internal validity and reliability of the CES-D Scale (Radloff, 1977). Interpersonal support consisted of 10 questions measuring the presence of interpersonal or social support for recent graduates.
Participants were prompted to answer their level of agreement to measurement questions on a scale from 1 to 5, 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree. Perceived stress consisted of reactions to self-optimism toward specific tasks, i.e. job attainment, securing housing, future planning, decision making, adjustment to life after college, and balancing of new responsibilities. Participants rated their difficulty on a scale from 1-5, 1= extremely difficult, 2= somewhat difficult, 3=neutral, 4=somewhat simple, and 5 = extremely simple. The last sections measured participants' internal processing of stressful life factors on a scale of 1-5, 1= never, 2=sometimes, 3=neutral, 4=often, 5= always and depression symptomologies on a scale from 1-5, 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=neutral, 4=often, and 5=always.

Each participant was prompted to answer questions relating to general feelings concerning their lives and futures. Self-reporting was used to examine individual life experiences of participants following college graduation. The information was evaluated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Frequencies were used to present the descriptive data of major ideas. Bivariate analysis through Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient tests were employed to examine participant responses relating to interpersonal support, levels of perceived stress, and graduates’ self-confidence levels. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was used to examine whether interpersonal support, perceived stress, and self-confidence levels varied among minority and non-minority participants. Lastly, composite scores were also used to further measure responses across minority and non-minority groups.
Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study consisted of the use of snowballing techniques. Due to this technique, demographics of the participants were skewed toward one racial group. The male to female ratio was also skewed as more females provided responses in the study. The initial goal of the study was to measure participant responses between the ages of 21-25 because individuals typically range between these five ages following college commencement. Due to such a restricted range, the age categories had to be expanded to gather data. There was respondent confusion toward the verbiage of the study which caused research participants to reject participation in the study. There were a few cases of missing data which impacted research findings. Data collection was impacted due to the time and season of year. Research findings were influenced due to missing and incomplete data responses.

Another limitation of the study consisted of participant motivation. This study did not use compensation for gathering data. Data collection for participant responses may have been limited due to the lack of compensation. The use of compensation could have impacted data collection and participant motivation to complete the research measure quickly yielding a larger sample size. Compensation could have also caused greater motivation toward snowballing techniques for a larger sample as well.
CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Results of the findings are presented in this chapter. The purpose of this study was to examine if interpersonal relationships were a moderating factor of perceived stress among college graduates, and whether the relationships influenced how individuals coped with perceived stress during transitions after college. The scope of the study focused on three major areas: interpersonal support, perceived stress, and self-confidence.

Interpersonal support comprises of familial, friend, and professional relationships. Self-confidence comprises of self-optimism toward future endeavors following college.

**Demographic Analysis Results**

Data collection was over the span of five months by electronic surveys with the option for self-reporting using the Qualtrics platform. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for processing survey results for bivariate analysis of the findings through correlations. Descriptive statistical data were used to analyze participant demographics. Study participants consisted of 101 recent college graduates. Ages of the participants ranged between 18-44 years. Ninety-five percent of sample ages were between 18-34 years while 5% were between 35-44 years old. Twenty-five percent of the sample were male while 75% were female. African-American participants accounted
for 80% of the sample size while 19% were of other races. Most the sample participants graduated between 2015-2017 and 76% of those graduates attended 4-year institutions (see Table 1, Chapter III).

Table 2 presents the mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation scores for the presence of interpersonal support, self-confidence, and perceived stress. Scores were calculated through the descriptive function in SPSS. The average interpersonal support score was 2.8, with a standard deviation of .91588. The average score for self-confidence was 2.44 with a standard deviation of .64468. The average for perceived stress was 3.49 with a standard deviation of .55825.

Table 2

*Presence of Interpersonal Support on Self-Confidence and Perceived Stress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Support</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.91588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Confidence</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.64468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Stress</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.55825</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table displays the presence of interpersonal support among the sample population, and all participants possessed some level of interpersonal support. The means for interpersonal support, self-confidence, and perceived stress were all close in number. The minimum and maximum indicates the level of interpersonal support and its influences on graduates’ self-confidence regarding the future and perceived stress. The total sample was 101, therefore some participants opted out of reporting. Means and
standard deviations for these measures were close in number, ranging between 2 and 3, which indicates low to average levels of interpersonal support.

**Analysis Results for Hypothesis Testing**

RQ1: Do interpersonal relationships affect perceived stress levels in recent college graduates?

Ho1: Interpersonal relationships affect perceived stress levels in college graduates.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between interpersonal support and perceived stress levels in recent college graduates.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was computed to assess the relationship between interpersonal support and perceived stress. There was a correlation between the two variables $r = -0.457$ and $p < 0.001$ (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Correlation between interpersonal support and perceived stress.](image-url)
RQ2: How does high interpersonal support affect self-confidence among recent graduates?

Ho1: Interpersonal support affects self-confidence toward the future among recent graduates.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between high interpersonal support and self-confidence among recent graduates.

Individuation and self-optimism encompasses the graduate’s self-confidence following commencement. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was computed to assess the relationship between interpersonal support and graduates’ self-confidence. The effects of interpersonal support on graduates’ self-confidence following commencement can be seen in Figure 2 where \( r = .367 \) and \( p < .001 \).

![Figure 2. Correlation between interpersonal support and self-confidence.](image-url)
RQ3: How do graduates’ perceived stress, self-individuation, and self-optimism levels vary by race?

Ho1: Interpersonal support has diverse effects across race.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between perceived stress, self-individuation, and self-optimism by race.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was computed to examine the relationship between interpersonal support, perceived stress, and self-confidence between minority and non-minority participants. There were significant correlations between the presence of interpersonal support, perceived stress, and self-optimism among minority populations (see Table 3).

Table 3

The Relationship between Perceived Stress among Non-Minorities and Minorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Non-Minority Participants</th>
<th>Minority Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Support and Perceived Stress</td>
<td>$r = -.363 \ (p=.302)$</td>
<td>$r = -.474 \ (p=.000)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Support and Self-Optimism</td>
<td>$r = -.149 \ (p=.681)$</td>
<td>$r = .374 \ (p=.001)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Summary of the Study

The present research aimed to investigate the influence of interpersonal relationships on perceived stress levels among recent college graduates. Interpersonal support consisted of both familial and peer support. Perceived stress encompassed measures that detected anxiety and depression symptomologies. Self-confidence was used to measure self-optimism and individuation following college. The results of the study are presented in the findings and further discussed for future implications.

Major findings of the study show that interpersonal support and perceived stress were correlated among the study participants in general. As interpersonal support increased, perceived stress decreased. Moreover, interpersonal support also correlated with graduates’ self-confidence (i.e., finding a job, formulating a new identity, obtaining employment). As interpersonal support increased, self-optimism also increased. Finally, interpersonal support had a direct impact on perceived stress and self-confidence across racial groups. Among the non-minority participants, interpersonal support displayed no significance. Among minority participants, perceived stress lowered when interpersonal support was present. Self-confidence also increased. This suggests that interpersonal relationships are crucial for minority populations’ perception of stress following college commencement.
Implications for Social Work Practice

Interpersonal support proved beneficial for moderating post-graduate stress among study participants. Social work practice heavily encourages the use of relationships during the helping relationship. College graduates benefit from support systems, and this reinforces various principles within the social work profession. Interpersonal support helped recent graduates feel more confident regarding the future. This suggests that interpersonal support provides a level of security for individuals following commencement.

For some individuals, it may be necessary to evaluate the type of interpersonal support. Within the study, it was not examined whether the type of relationship caused participants to report higher or lower levels of perceived support. It can be concluded that within social work practice the use of interpersonal support may be beneficial as a preventative measure for various disorders triggered by perceived stress. Moreover, the study showed that interpersonal support had a high impact on minority populations. This suggests that social work practitioners reinforce the use of systems as a means of support within the helping relationship. The use of such systems can help alleviate future difficulties for minority groups.

Implications for Social Work Policy

Policies related to mental health services on college campuses continue to circulate within legislative systems. Bill, H.R. 4374 was presented to congress in January of 2016, but was not enacted. The overall scope of the problem is an issue of supply and demand. There is a high demand for counseling services on college campuses, but not
enough counseling professionals to meet student needs. Within the congressional report, it was noted that students utilize counseling services on college campuses. The report also presented information regarding students who possessed mental health disorders or symptomologies not yet assessed (H.R. 4374, 2016). Study findings show that high interpersonal support lessens perceived stress, particularly among minority populations. This finding coincides with data from current policies.

Counseling services are an added layer of support, and this could help individuals with mental health issues. Recommendations for policy include revisions of this bill with an added component of referral services for partnering agencies for individuals after college commencement. Colleges and governing bodies may find value in providing services that enhance interpersonal support for individuals with mild levels of anxiety and depression symptomologies. It is also recommended that policy makers provide culturally competent services for minority populations in lieu of study results. The potential benefits of such support can enhance individuals’ autonomy and ability to thrive.

**Implications for Social Work Research**

Interpersonal support influences various aspects of postgraduate perceived stress. Interpersonal support was beneficial toward the graduates’ ability to thrive after college. Individuals generally felt more optimistic and confident regarding hard tasks such as securing employment or securing housing following college when interpersonal support was present. Interpersonal support also influenced graduates’ optimism scores. Further examination of interpersonal dynamics such as the type of support and duration of
support would be valuable for future social work research. The data display answers to researcher developed hypotheses, but other further analyses can derive from the data.

One research area that requires further investigation is interpersonal support among various races. Limitations in this area included a minimal number of non-minority participants due to snowball sampling. Gathering data from a larger sample would be beneficial for social work research to further examine the link between interpersonal support and self-optimism following college for minority populations. There appears to be a correlation between these two variables that could illuminate other factors that impact minority populations’ need for interpersonal support in contrast to non-minority groups. Continued research in this area could highlight other social factors that influence graduates’ perceived stress levels such as stereotypes, discrimination, prejudices, and racism. Investigations of scores relating to anxiety and depression should also be examined separately to evaluate participant responses by race. Investigations of the causes of perceived stress are also critical research areas. Social work practice consists of providing services in a culturally competent manner, and examination of perceived stress and interpersonal support across various groups would be beneficial to the field of social work.

Furthermore, some participants opted to provide a self-report. A few common themes derived from self-reports were transitional difficulties, adjustment issues, and needed support. These findings warrant further investigation within social work research. Self-reports showed that participants desired more support following college, particularly with finding jobs and navigating their profession. There appears to be a need for
mentoring and preparation for the realities of life following college commencement. Most of the participants possessed interpersonal support from family members, but needed stronger social support from their peers, their universities, and their jobs. These areas provide an opportunity for further investigation.
REFERENCES


