

Coping with Loneliness and Academic Success

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### **Coping with Loneliness and Academic Success**

This study examined the relationship between minority and non-minority status with the variables being: humor orientation, self-disclosure, perceived stress, emotional intelligence, loneliness, and academic success. Participants (n = 76) were asked to complete an anonymous survey on Qualtrics to determine the relationships amongst the variables. The results revealed that loneliness has positive effects on minority students.

## **Coping with Loneliness and Academic Success**

### **Background**

In this study, I will be researching the relationship between social support with humor orientation, loneliness, academic success, and self-disclosure on the campus of Bryant University. My independent variable being social support and my dependent variable being minority status. In the differences between minority and non-minority groups, this study is looking to see how the variables in these scales (e.g., humor orientation, self-disclosure, perceived stress, emotional intelligence, loneliness and academic success) may affect difference percentages of students, and if minority or non-minority students need more support in order to succeed academically.

Higher education causes a period of stress on young adults as they attempt to assimilate into college life. Young adults face challenges such as developing study habits for their academic environment, managing finances, and developing new patterns of mature interpersonal relationships with family members, professors, and classmates. Prior research suggests that not all students are able to adapt to their new environment (Calagus, 2011). Thus, some students may experience difficulties such as loneliness, problems with separation from family and friends, increased interpersonal conflicts, and psychological distress (Calagus, 2011). Poor adaptation to college is also thought to be the cause of academic failure and withdrawal from college (Calagus, 2011). The development of social support could help facilitate the transition into college life and thus help increase academic success. To investigate the relationship between social support and academic success it is necessary to define what academic success is defined as. Academic success can be defined as grade point average (GPA) of students. At Bryant University a 3.4 GPA is classified as Dean's List status, and a 4.0 is classified as President's List status. There

are multiple outside factors that can affect a student's academic success such as social support, humor orientation, loneliness, coping, and self-disclosure. How an individual views and deals with his or her social environment has a great deal to do with what it provides (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986), therefore this study will be conducted with Bryant University student's in order to determine the social environment that Bryant University provides to their students.

Social support is defined as one of the ways individuals help each other cope with difficult or challenging situations (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Social support can have an influence on factors such as humor orientation, loneliness, academic success and self-disclosure among college students. Perceived social support is the belief that support is available from others (Sarason et al., 1986). To develop social support there are other influencing factors such as self-disclosure and humor orientation that help build social ties and therefore social support. Investigating how these social support systems are built, it is important to look at humor orientation's effects on relationships.

Humor plays an important role in building relationships and relating to others (Merolla, 2006). According to a study done by Bekelja Wanzer, Melanie & Steve Booth-Butterfield (1996), humor-oriented people report less loneliness and are perceived as more humorous. Using this as a basis, those perceived as more humorous report less loneliness and have stronger social bonds than those who are not humor-oriented. Those with higher levels of humor orientation lead to reduced life stress (Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009).

Social support has also been studied as a coping strategy to manage stress (Burlison, 2003). A type of social support coping is emotional support in which others rely on peers for emotional comfort (Curtona, 1990). Emotional support is shown when one feels respected, cared for, loved, valued, and held in high esteem by others (Holmstrom & Burlison, 2011). Therefore,

social support plays an important role in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. When individuals feel that they can rely on family members, friends or a romantic partner the satisfaction in that relationship increases. When humor orientation is added to that equation, relational bonds are enhanced (Overholser, 1992), comfort and closeness between relational partners are increased (Bippus, 2002), and reduced feelings of loneliness and stress are experienced (Burleson, 2003).

Self-disclosure is defined as “any message about the self that a person communicates to another” (Wheless & Grotz, 1976, p. 338). Similar to humor communication, self-disclosure helps in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. For example, Graham (1995) found that people with a better sense of humor experienced reduced social distance in initial interactions. According to Graham (1995) “if someone is willing to share their sense of humor (i.e. self-disclosure), this might signal openness to sharing other aspects of their personality as well” (p. 165). Therefore, those with higher Humor Orientation should be more likely to self-disclose using humorous conversation.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 76 participants completed an online Qualtrics survey about their social support and other variables of interest. The majority of participants self-reported being female ( $n = 29$ ; 38.20%), Seniors in college ( $n = 20$ ; 26.30%), of non-Hispanic, Latino nor Spanish origin ( $n = 34$ ; 44.70%) and White ( $n = 32$ ; 42.10%). The overall mean GPA of participants was 3.84. Of the 14 students identifying as being of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin and a race other than White, the majority identified themselves as female ( $n = 5$ ; 35.7%) and Juniors in college ( $n = 4$ ; 28.6%), with an average GPA of 3.04.

## Procedure

Each participant was sent a link to a digital Qualtrics survey that measured coping with academic success with scales including (a) humor orientation, (b) self-disclosure, (c) social support, (d) perceived stress, (e) loneliness, (f) emotional intelligence and (g) academic success. A convenience sample method was used by sending the survey link via email chains and group messages (e.g., Facebook groups, Instagram messages) to reach larger populations of Bryant University students. Participants were required to be a current or past student at Bryant University and at least 18 years of age. Participation was completely voluntary and was approved by the Bryant Institutional Review Board. There was also a raffle to win 1 of 2 \$25 Amazon gift cards to thank participants for their time.

## Variables

The independent variable in this study was minority status and the dependent variable was social support. Other variables of interest were included.

**Humor orientation.** The Humor Orientation Scale was used to measure how funny someone is, and not what their sense of humor is (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). The scale is used for a self-assessment of humor orientation. Each item was along a 7-point Likert scale from 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree.” An example of a question from the humor orientation scale is: I regularly tell jokes and funny stories when in a group. Overall humor orientation was created with 14 items (Chronbach  $\alpha = .79$ ;  $M=5.28$ ;  $SD = .65$ ).

**Self-disclosure.** The Self-Disclosure Scale was used to measure how much one person discloses their personal life to other people. Each item was along a 7-point Likert scale from 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree.” An example of a question from this

scale is: When I wish, my self-disclosures are always accurate reflections of who I really am on the Likert scale 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree.” Scores on self-disclosure and disclosure dimensions constituted the “disclosure variables.” Scores on the individualized and the generalized trust scales constituted the “perceived trustworthiness” variables. The second conclusion drawn was that as increased self-disclosure and more favorable perceptions of individualized trustworthiness occur, then higher solidarity exists in the relationship (Wheless, 1977). A total self-disclosure scale was created with 10 items (Chronbach  $\alpha = .72$ ;  $M = 4.18$ ;  $SD = .58$ ).

**Social support.** The Social Support Appraisals Scale was used to measure the amount of support from peers one has. Social support is seen as a meta-construct (Cook & Campbell, 1979) comprising several components: support network resources, specific supportive acts, and subjective appraisals of support. Each item was along a Likert scale from 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree.” An example from this scale is: When I wish, my self-disclosures are always accurate reflections of who I really am on the Likert scale 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree.” A total social support scale was created with 23 items (Chronbach  $\alpha = .83$ ;  $M = 4.37$ ;  $SD = .49$ ).

**Perceived stress.** The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is the most widely used scale for measuring stress (Cohen, 1994). It measures the degree to which situations in an individual’s life are categorized as stressful. Items were designed to decipher how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives (Cohen, 1994). The questions in the PSS ask about feelings and thoughts during the last month. Respondents are asked how often they felt a certain way. An example from the PSS: In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly? On a scale from 0 to 4 with 0 being

never and 4 being very often. A total perceived stress scale was created with 10 items (Chronbach  $\alpha = .81$ ;  $M = 3.82$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ).

**Loneliness.** The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a 20-item general measurement of loneliness reported (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978). The Loneliness Scale indicates how often each of the statements is descriptive to the respondent. The questions were asked on the Likert scale from 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree.” An example of a question from this scale is: I am unhappy doing so many things alone. A total loneliness scale was created (Chronbach  $\alpha = .91$ ;  $M = 3.26$ ;  $SD = 1.25$ ).

**Emotional intelligence.** The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) is a method of measuring general emotional intelligence using four subscales: emotional perception, utilizing emotions, managing self-relevant emotions, and managing others’ emotions (Schutte, 1998). The SSEIT includes 33 item self-report using a Likert scale 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) scale for responses. The emotional intelligence variable was created with all 33 items (Chronbach  $\alpha = .85$ ;  $M = 5.00$ ;  $SD = .58$ ).

**Academic Success.** An academic success variable was created with 11 items (Chronbach  $\alpha = .91$ ;  $M = 5.54$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ).

## Results

Due to the small sample size and low percentage of students self-identifying a minority status (race or ethnicity), mean difference tests were not performed. Instead, the relationships between variables were assessed. These relationships are exploratory in nature to offer guidance on future programs that may support students at Bryant University.

### Relationships for Social Support for All Students



Several Pearson pairwise correlations were performed on the dependent variables of interest (i.e., humor orientation, self-disclosure, social support, perceived stress, loneliness, emotional intelligence and academic success) to assess significant relationships. As seen in Table 1, humor orientation was positively associated with social support ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ), and positively associated with emotional intelligence ( $r = .39, p < .05$ ). Self-disclosure was negatively associated with loneliness ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ). Social support was also negatively associated with loneliness ( $r = -.63, p < .01$ ), but positively associated with emotional intelligence ( $r = .61, p < .01$ ) and academic success ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ). Loneliness was negatively associated with emotional intelligence ( $r = -.52, p < .01$ ) and academic success ( $r = -.47, p < .01$ ). Emotional intelligence was positively associated with academic success ( $r = .54, p < .01$ ).

To further explore the relationships between social support, a multiple linear regression was performed with social support as the dependent variable. Social support was significantly predicted ( $F = 7.03, p < .00, R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .45$ ) by loneliness ( $B = -.39, p < .05$ ) and emotional intelligence ( $B = .31, p < .05$ ). There were no other significant relationships. Please see Table 2.

### **Minority Student Responses**

Of the students who self-identified as being of Hispanic, Latino and Spanish origin and a race other than White, the following are the means and standard deviations of the variables of interest: (a) humor orientation ( $M = 5.26; SD = .60$ ); (b) self-disclosure ( $M = 4.29; SD = .72$ ); (c) social support ( $M = 4.31; SD = .54$ ); (d) perceived stress ( $M = 4.78; SD = 1.75$ ); (e) loneliness ( $M = 2.99; SD = 1.36$ ); (f) emotional intelligence ( $M = 5.02; SD = .66$ ); and (g) academic success ( $M = 5.25; SD = .88$ ).

There were significant relationships between social support and the variables of interest (see Table 3). There were no significant relationships between humor orientation and perceived stress with the other variables of interest. Self-disclosure was positively associated with social support ( $r = .79, p < .01$ ), emotional intelligence ( $r = .66, p < .05$ ), and academic success ( $r = .63, p < .05$ ) and was negatively associated with loneliness ( $r = -.70, p < .01$ ). Social support was positively associated with emotional intelligence ( $r = .63, p < .05$ ) and academic success ( $r = .74, p < .01$ ), and negatively associated with loneliness ( $r = -.92, p < .01$ ). Loneliness was negatively associated with academic success ( $r = -.81, p < .01$ ). Emotional intelligence was positively associated with academic success ( $r = .58, p < .05$ ).

Table 1. *Summary of Intercorrelations among All Students (N = 76)*

	Humor Orientation	Self- Disclosure	Social Support	Perceived Stress	Loneliness	Emotional Intelligence	Academic Success
Humor Orientation	1						
Self-Disclosure	.07	1					
Social Support	.30*	.18	1				
Perceived Stress	.20	.10	-.11	1			
Loneliness	-.22	-.30*	-.63**	-.02	1		
Emotional Intelligence	.39**	.19	.61**	-.20	-.52**	1	
Academic Success	.18	.24	.42	-.20	-.47**	.54**	1

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2. *Regression Model for Predictors of Social Support (N = 76)*

<i>Model 1</i>			
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	$\beta$
Humor Orientation	.10	.09	.14
Self-Disclosure	.08	.10	.10
Perceived Stress	-.04	.05	-.10
Loneliness	-.15	.06	-.39*
Emotional Intelligence	.26	.13	.31*
Academic Success	.00	.06	.00
$R^2$		.45	
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$		7.03***	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 3. Summary of Intercorrelations among Minority Students ( $N = 14$ )

	Humor Orientation	Self- Disclosure	Social Support	Perceived Stress	Loneliness	Emotional Intelligence	Academic Success
Humor Orientation	1						
Self-Disclosure	.25	1					
Social Support	.12	.79**	1				
Perceived Stress	.30	-.04	-.30	1			
Loneliness	-.04	-.70**	-.92**	.55	1		
Emotional Intelligence	-.12	.66*	.63*	-.39	-.44	1	
Academic Success	.02	.63*	.74**	-.21	-.81**	.58*	1

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

## Discussion

By using these six scales, humor orientation, self-disclosure, social support, perceived stress, loneliness, emotional intelligence, and academic success, we were able to see relationships among these variables. Regarding minority status, those who reported themselves as self-identifying as being of Hispanic, Latino and Spanish origin and a race other than White, reported higher levels of loneliness. The enrolled student population at Bryant University, both undergraduate and graduate, is 74.5% White, 6.61% Hispanic or Latino, 3.68% Black or African American, 3.47% Asian, 1.44% Two or More Races, 0.373% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.133% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. Higher levels of minority loneliness on Bryant University's campus is not a shocking outcome with the population of Bryant being majority White. How an individual views and deals with his or her social environment has a great deal to do with what it provides (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986) and as seeing how significant minorities reported loneliness, the conclusion can be drawn that Bryant University needs to do more in order to provide more inclusion and supporting diversity on campus.

This loneliness can be contributed to the theory of "Otherness." The Other is a member of a dominate out-group whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subjected to discrimination by the "In-Group" which is the dominate population (Staszak, Jean-Francois 2008). These groups are formed in the difference among race, gender, age of a population (Staszak, Jean-Francois 2008) and being that Bryant is dominantly White, that is the in-group. How can this be fixed? By Bryant University's college recruitment recruiting students from higher minority schools and marketing the school towards these minorities to raise the percentage of minorities on campus. By raising the percentage gap of non-minority to minority,

the gap of Otherness will be filled there would be less of a dominate race on campus that creates these in-groups and out-groups.

### **Limitations**

Being that this survey was conducted during the summertime, students may not have access to their emails which is where most of the surveys were sent out. Also being that Bryant's population is majority White, it is harder to get an equal amount of non-minority students (White), and minority students (Hispanic, Latino and Spanish origin or a race other than White) to compare variables. We were still able to get significant results without a larger population, however it would have been interesting to compare with a larger population to see a more significant difference.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we researched the relationship between social support with humor orientation, loneliness, academic success, and self-disclosure on the campus of Bryant University. Our independent variable being social support and my dependent variable being minority status. In the differences between minority and non-minority groups, this study looked to see how the variables in these scales (e.g., humor orientation, self-disclosure, perceived stress, emotional intelligence, loneliness and academic success) affect difference percentages of students, and if minority or non-minority students need more support in order to succeed academically. In the conducted survey, we were able to see the differences amongst the variables between minority and non-minority students on Bryant University's campus, with loneliness being a major difference between the two.

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