

Changing Emotional Identity

The High School to College Transition and the Female Psychological Experience

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Abstract

This study examines the female student experience during the high school to college transition. By investigating the emotional and psychological distress during the freshman year, this research brings awareness to present stressors to further understand why female students are seeking health services more than men during post-secondary education.

Teaching Notes

This research was developed as a contribution to the health counselor community, specifically for those working in higher education environments. This study assists in pinpointing current stressors, the root of the distress and how the high school to college transition functions as a critical change in psychological development.

Keywords

female psychology; young adult psychology; post-secondary psychology; college transition; first-year experiences; adolescent emotional identity; mental health trends; collegial developmental trends; freshman year distress

Introduction

Students rate the transition from high school to college as the most difficult in their lives (Collins, 2009). The emotional health of college freshman has declined to the lowest level in twenty-five years. Out of all students who seek mental health services during their first year of college, women make up 60% or more of the clients (Lewin, 2011). This study examines the female experience of the college transition by investigating the root of emotional and psychological distress during the freshman year.

Literature Review

The current lifestyle in the collegial world

In recent years, we have been presented with a handful of popular issues that females experience during their first year of college; lacking identity, body image issues, struggles with relationships, etc. The majority of these young women fall into the stereotyped solution to alleviate and ignore their problems: partying. Seaman (2005) author of *Binge: What your college student won't tell you*, explains, "students talk a lot about stress... there is a tactic assumption that they have an irrevocable license to let off steam" (p. 15). In his research, Seaman found that most resorted to the relatively normal or "expected" college experience of risk-taking. Such examples include drug experimentation, binge drinking and experiencing multiple sex partners.

This recklessness is often fueled by college freshmen dealing with the stressors of embracing a new social circle. Most students are "engaging in fewer stress-reducing activities such as exercise and sports or reading... and are drinking and partying more often" (Barefoot, 2008, p. 30). Doctorial student at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, Mary Collins (2009) embarked on a study of psych education that examined students exiting high school and going to a University. She found that "students rate the transition from high school to college as the most difficult in their lives" (p. 3). Collins research pinpointed that the most common feelings associated with the college transition were loneliness, isolation, depression, anxiety, academic stress and poor socio-economical adjustments.

Emotional distress increases in female college freshman

Women experience many psychological stressors their freshman of college. Lewin (2011) of *The New York Times* recently reported that, "the emotional health of college freshman has declined to the lowest level in 25 years." This survey found a gender gap as well; first year female students have a significantly less positive view of their

mental health than young men. Educational professor at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Linda Sax was consulted during this study. She stated in *Times* that the gap between men and woman on emotional well-being is one of the largest in the survey. Out of all freshman students who seek out mental health services, women make up 60 percent or more of the clients (Lewin, 2011).

Barefoot (2008) reiterated this explaining that a “greater number of traditional college students are dealing with significant, often severe psychological problems and emotional health issues than in previous decades” (p. 30). It is clear we need to examine what is occurring within the young minds of females in high school that brings them into their first year of college with such heavy symptoms of emotional distress.

Young women in adolescence and the pre-college mind

There is an emotional shift amongst youth due to increased academic and personal pressures to get into college. In a recent educational film, *The Race to Nowhere*, fifteen year old Allison explains that she stopped seeking perfect grades because of these pressures. Allison claimed, “if you don’t try, you can’t fail” (Abeles, 2011). Similarly, student lifestyles explored in Pope’s (2001) *Doing School* described Eve Lin who “pushes pushes pushes” herself staying up until 4am to finish projects by living off of coffee and No-Doze. Each female had the same goal at the end of their high school journey: “To go to college.” (p. 32).

In addition to the pressure to pursue higher education, Carol Gilligan offers insight into the psyche of high school girls whom she claims are “going underground” during adolescence. She expresses that young women in high school suddenly acquire a silent lifestyle; an “inward flight into hiding [that] occurs in response to multiple layers of societal messages” (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 103). Gilligan (1993) tells us that adolescent girls are dealing with a problem of containment. She claims that young females, particularly during the teen years, use “silence for protection” as a way to disconnect from others (p. 152). There is a reoccurring dialogue regarding the current generation of teen girls who internalize much of what they feel as they try to meet the expectations of what they believe to be appropriate female behavior.

These academically pressured, silent young women are those who are coming into a university or college system. Gilligan (1996) further explains “girls are taking the strong and resilient ... part of themselves into an underworld for safekeeping.” (p. 247). Therefore, how are these young women fitting into their new college lifestyle if they previously resorted to silence during adolescence?

How the high school female transcends into freshman year

There are many young women who stay stagnant in a silent lifestyle. Gilligan (1996) explains “relationships bring the oxygen of experience into the psyche” but that “girls are losing connection [and] finding themselves psychologically alone” (p. 250). Young women grow through emotional self-disclosure and by being vulnerable with others (Wei, 2005). However, as these women enter the collegiate world, they may be lacking necessary mental growth if they remained “the silent type” or had the tendency to be antisocial.

Barefoot (2008) presents that the “peer personality” is much different today than it ever has been; she describes it as “a capacity to follow rather than to lead, an absence of true intellectual curiosity, excessive collectivism, [and] a lack of true self-awareness and relatively few psychological passions” (p. 28). We can imagine these impacts for the young woman who is seeking connection in a university of college system, but lacks the proper psychological development due to previous silent tendencies.

Evidence shows that women are experiencing a downfall in the way in which they view themselves; “every year, freshman women have a less positive view of their emotional health” (Lewin, 2011). Of those young women resorting to silence, we can connect internalization of emotions and feelings that could lead to the negative, viewpoint that young women are reporting. This creates a pathway to alternative ways of seek belonging and acceptance in a collegial community.

How risk-taking allow females to find community and belonging

There are many opportunities in college to be social and experiment. Toshalis (2008) explains high schoolers, “engage in risky behaviors... which offer concentrated moments and critical decision-making experiences” (p. 197). It is safe to say during the first year of college, young women, who are often still teens themselves, pursue the same risk-taking. Stories often glorified include binge drinking, exploring sexuality and drug experimentation. When this risk taking occurs in a group, a safe space forms where the young woman can solidify trust with new friends. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) tell us that development occurs through “interpersonal experiences” which have a “profound influence on lifelong development” (p. 80). Therefore, when young women interact with others in their newfound community, there is a powerful impact on their psychological growth.

As females experience young adulthood, they become thoughtful of various existential questions, pondering their purpose in life and curiosities of self-identity. Group conformity is one way females work through this. Noam (1999) presents that during adolescence, group conformity gives a wall in the creation for defining the self. He

explains, “identity is less self-chosen and individualistic and more a form of group identification” (p. 54). Often this communal feeling brings forth the sense of safety to indulge in risk-taking behaviors. Sadowski (2008) clarifies that identification with peer groups takes precedence over most other attachments. Perhaps more simply described, young women believe “I know who I am because I know where I belong” (Toshalis, 2008, p. 192). It is clear that finding the community where you “fit” and participating in risk-taking behavior demonstrates two crucial elements in psychological development during the freshman year.

Acclimating to college and adapting to other contributing factors

Young women in college are dealing with a combination of things that contribute to their emotional state of mind. Collins (2009) tells us that “the transition into college involves a separation from the past and a need to acquire norms and behaviors appropriate to the new setting” (p. 3). Therefore, we need to consider a variety of things influencing the female student; family back home, long held beliefs and new academic demands (Zaleski, 1998). There are multitudes of things that can make it difficult for the young woman to seek independence. Most commonly reported is moving away from family, which creates “high levels of attachment anxiety” bringing loneliness and depression (Wei, 2005, p. 610).

When considering stress factors that may effect female college freshman, we would ask what preparation is done for young women who are about to enter the world of higher education. Collins (2009) explains that lacking emotional support in assisting high school seniors is a problem as they transition to college. Specifically, that despite colleges offer orientations to freshman, they only encourage formation of the social and do not address the “skills for coping with the emotional transition” (Abstract V). The flux of students seeking emotional help has increased. Currently “18 percent of men say they have been frequently overwhelmed [in college], compared with 39 percent of women” (Lewin, 2011). There remains lacking clarity as to why females feel the burdens of freshman year more than men. These answers lie in the source: young women in college.

In this study, I will examine the female experience in the collegiate world. Through interviewing young women in a university or college system; those stuck in that state of post-adolescent, pre-adult period, I will ask a series of questions that will bring insight into the emotional distress experienced by the current female generation. This study assists in pinpointing current stressors, the root of the distress and how the high school to college transition functions as a critical change in psychological development for young women.

Methods

Participants. Participants include five females, ages 18 to 21 years old. Each young woman has completed her first year in an institution of higher education. An overview of my participants is shown (See Table 1).

Table 1

Overview of Study Participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Hometown (State of CA)	Institution of Higher Ed ¹	Housing
Julie	21	Mexican American	Santa Monica	State College A	Dormitory (shared room)
Natalie	22	Caucasian	Ventura	Private College B	Residence Halls (single room)
Mary	21	Caucasian	West Hills	Out-of-State College C	Dormitory (shared room)
Meredith	21	Italian American	Ojai	State College D	Dormitory (shared room)
Sarah	22	Caucasian	Westlake Village	State College D	Dormitory (shared room)

My first participant is *Julie*². She is currently attending State College A located in Southern California. She works part time on-campus as a student assistant and lives in a one-bedroom apartment near her University. She is 21 years old. She is Mexican American. Her parents are married. Her mother is Caucasian; her father is Hispanic. She has one younger sister. I have access to her because she is my previous roommate. I asked her to be a participant for this research and she agreed.

My second participant is *Natalie*. She was attending Private College B but dropped out. She is now working full time in Southern California as a massage therapist. She lives in a two-bedroom home with her sister.

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1. Institution of Higher Ed is defined as a 4-year university or college
 2. All names in this research are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

She is 22³ years old. She is Caucasian. Her parents are divorced. She has three sisters. I have access to her because she was a masseuse at my chiropractor's office. I told her about my research and she asked to be a participant.

My third participant is *Mary*. She was attending Out-of-State College C and has graduated. She is working full time at an insurance company. She lives in a one-bedroom apartment in the San Fernando Valley. She is 21 years old. She is Caucasian. Her parents are married. She has one older brother. I have access to her because she is an acquaintance of a friend. I asked her to be a participant in this study and she agreed.

My fourth participant is Meredith. She was attending State College D and has recently graduated. She is currently working full time as an administrative assistant for a construction company. She lives in a one-bedroom apartment with her boyfriend in the same apartment complex as myself. She is 21 years old. She is Italian-American. Her parents are married. Her father is from Italy and her mother is Caucasian. She has one older brother. I had met Meredith beforehand through a mutual friend 4 years ago. I asked her to be a participant for this research and she agreed.

My fifth participant, Sarah, attended State College D and has graduated. She is currently working three part time jobs; one as a retail clerk, one as a freelance writer for a publishing company and one as a part-time receptionist. She is 22 years old. Her parents are divorced. She is Caucasian. She resides with her mother in Los Angeles County. She has one older brother. She is a friend of Participant 4, Meredith. I asked Sarah if she would be willing to be a participant for this research and she agreed.

Site. Settings for my data collection varied. Julie, participant number one, was interviewed near her one bedroom apartment in a park located in Ventura County, CA. We sat on a blanket while I interviewed her. No others were present. This park is situated behind the state college she is attending in a rural residential community.

The second participant, Natalie, was interviewed in her parent's gated community also located in Ventura County, CA. We sat outside near the community pool. No others were present; but her mother did come by half way through the interview to notify Natalie she was running errands. It is a suburban residential area that is located across the street from the private high school Natalie attended near a county highway.

3. Although all participants were aged 18 – 21 for this research; my interview with Natalie was postponed by a month and during this time she turned 22.

My third participant Mary, came to my apartment located in Central California. We sat on my couch and I interviewed her in my living room. My boyfriend was present but was not in the room for the majority of the time. My apartment is situated within an industrial area near several business offices with a park across the street.

My fourth participant, Meredith, was interviewed in her apartment that is located in the same complex as mine. We sat on her couch with her boyfriend present. Her residence is located near the back of our apartment community near the pool.

My fifth participant, Sarah, came to my apartment just like participant three. This time we sat on barstools that face my kitchen. No others were present.

Methods. The data was gathered through a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods. My quantitative data was distributed to participants before each interview and filled out while I was on site. My qualitative data, a face-to-face interview, was conducted with each female participant. All were made aware of the confidentiality of this research and signed my Consent for Classroom Research (See Appendix A). I also informed each individual that I am certified to work with human participants per the National Institutes of Health - Human Research (see Appendix B).

The quantitative methods included a short survey that the participants completed (see Appendix C). This survey listed factors that could have contributed to psychological stress during each participant's freshman year. Each female marked factors appropriate to their experience. The purpose of this survey is to give insight into the primary stressors that occurred during their first year of college.

Following the survey is a brief questionnaire that requests participants to further explain the top three factors selected in the survey (see Appendix D). This questionnaire is given so that each female can elaborate as to why they chose these factors and how they contributed to their psychological or emotional distress.

In addition to the previous methods, my qualitative data included a one-on-one interview. I asked each female a series of questions (see Appendix E) and each participant was given the opportunity to respond and share their experiences as well as give personal commentary relative to this study. Because this interview was face-to-face, I recorded each question and answer and also included my own Interview Notes that tracked inferences throughout my questioning (see Appendix F). All data was housed on my personal computer and was password protected.

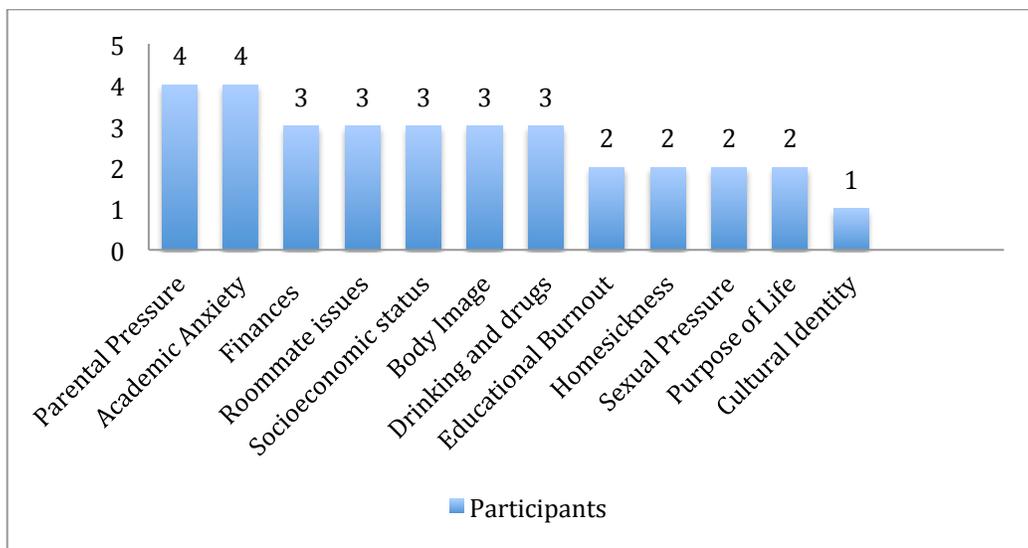
Data

Surveys: The data obtained in each survey reflects the main issues that contributed to psychological stress for each participant during their freshman year. They were to mark either “Highly Affected,” “Affected,” “Unaffected,” or “Undecided” per their own experience during their first year in college. Many of the factors I listed on my survey were marked “Unaffected” by each participant. Out of all five participants, no one selected “Undecided.”

Those that were marked as “Unaffected,” were eliminated for this research. I focused only on psychological factors that each participant marked as “Highly Affected” or “Affected.” The factors marked most frequently by each female are shown (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Stress factors affecting participants during their freshman year



Four out of five females reported that the two most significant stress factors during their freshman year were Parental Pressures and Academic Anxieties. Previously, I defined “Parental Pressure” as parents communicating to their student to get good grades or pursue good behavior. However, each participant interpreted “Parental Pressure” as a constant nagging, calling, texting or harassing via other media about their everyday lives. Academic anxiety was listed as a top stressor as well. This included pressures to get good grades, to keep scholarships or adjustments to course load and balancing college schedules.

Finances, roommate issues, socioeconomic status, body image along with drinking and drugs affected three

out of five participants. Two participants felt affected by: educational burnout, homesickness, sexual pressure and purpose of life. Only one participant, the female who attended Out-of-State College C, struggled with cultural identity which she described as feeling “out of place.”

Table 2

Common themes found during participant interviews

Julie	Struggles with parental relationship (seeking independence) Moving away from being shy to being social Getting passing grades / keeping up GPA Adjusting to risk taking (drinking and smoking weed) Issues with roommate and roommate confrontation
Natalie	Struggles with controlling finances, money and eating Getting passing grades / keeping up GPA Adjusting to a college schedule; balancing academics and athletics Issues with a fellow student and confrontation
Mary	Struggles with relationships and identity (seeking community) Moving away from being shy to being social Getting passing grades / keeping up GPA Getting comfortable in new lifestyle on out-of-state campus
Meredith	Struggles with mother relationship (seeking independence) Moving away from being shy to being social Adjusting to risk taking (drinking and smoking weed)
Sarah	Struggles with relationships and identity (seeking community) Getting comfortable in new lifestyle on multicultural campus Adjusting to risk taking (drinking and smoking weed) Issues with roommate and roommate confrontation

Questionnaires. This data follows a similar reflection of the surveys; however gives more insight as to why participants chose certain factors that contributed to their stress during their first year of college.

Participant 1, Julie, explained parental communication caused the most stress:

“The number one factor... was constant communication (texts, phone calls) from my parents making sure I was alive and well. This was the first time I had moved away from home and they were worried about me 24/7.”

Participant 2, Natalie, described her financial situation as uncontrollable:

“Money... that was the biggest stressor in my life. I found that I needed so much

control in my life that I wanted to control money. I had so much anxiety about money.”

Participant 3, Mary, explained that moving to Out-of-State College C was the most intense stressor:

“Moving... was a big culture shock! There are several differences in the style of living and the overall attitude of life. It took me several months to adjust to their culture.”

Participant 4, Meredith, paralleled with Participant 1 in regards to feeling distress from her parents:

“My mom called me multiple times a day always wanting to know what I was doing and who I was with. This caused me a lot of stress because I felt like she was constantly on top of my every move.”

Participant 5, Sarah, explained that she felt stress and anxiety from viewing the behavior of her roommate:

“One of my roommates who I became very close with entered into a really unhealthy relationship and it was hard for me to witness. I did not know when it was or was not appropriate to voice my opinion or intervene.”

Interviews. Although each participant expressed a different story about their freshman year, many paralleled and had similar experiences. A summarization of each face-to-face interview along with most common themes that arose is shown (see Table 2).

Data Analysis

Silent adolescence increases antisocial and anti-participatory behavior. It is clear from each interviewee that most young women fell into the idea of “going underground.” As previously discussed in the Literature Review, Gilligan (1996) explains this idea as young adult females who remain silent throughout adolescence because “they cannot say what they are feeling and thinking” (p. 250). The problem of containment was evident in three out of five participants.

Julie

“Anytime the teacher would call on me I’d turn bright red. I did not want to speak in class.”

“I never raised my hand or anything... I didn’t like talking in class at all... I didn’t want any attention like at all in high school...”

“[During freshman year of college] I was kind of a loner... I didn’t try to make friends in my classes because I was really shy; my high school self definitely came over with me my freshman year.”

Mary

“[In high school] I was usually pretty quiet unless I had one of the teachers who I was like, friends with. I was always pretty quiet in class, I never asked questions.”

“I was always like, really shy... I was intimidated. I didn’t want to ask questions that sound stupid. So I just never asked. I guess... I was more passive as far as being social in class. I was quiet...”

“During freshman year [of college] I’d say I was a little shy. Um, that was kind of before I came out of my shell. So I was a little quiet and I kind... like I really didn’t go to try to meet people...”

Meredith

“[In high school] I was just really shy. Quiet. I never um, raised my hand unless I really, really knew the answer.”

“I didn’t really interact with the kids around me. Just cause I was really shy. I mean I was really, really quiet. Really, really really quiet... I did not like when teachers called on me... didn’t like it. I would get anxiety if the teacher would even look at me.”

“During freshman year I wanted to start new and not be shy. Because I really really didn’t like being shy in high school – so I forced myself – I remember being nervous for my first few classes. I forced myself to sit with new people I didn’t know and introduce myself.”

If we look specifically at the comments made by Julie, Meredith and Mary, it is clear that the silent lifestyle they acquired in high school came with them into their freshman year. Gilligan (1993) claims that young adult females use “silence for protection as a way to disconnect from others” (p. 152). All three of these participants specified that they did not make any efforts to meet new people their first year of college, with the exception of Meredith who recognized her quiet behavior and wanted to change. I asked Meredith if her efforts to introduce herself to classmates provided growth for her socially. She explained that she became more interpersonal with interactions in the dorms, but continued to have anxiety in classes as well as in social events.

Community brings relationships and identity. Three female participants spoke of embracing the idea of community, identity and relationships during their freshman year. As discussed in the Literature Review, Noam (1999) tells us that group conformity gives a wall in the creation for defining the self. In addition, he claims that “identity is less self-chosen and individualistic and more a form of group identification” (p. 54).

Natalie

“I had so much pressure; from the team and then my grades and it was so hard to control... food was my control. I would go with this friend on my soccer team to get pizza, ice cream everything... she did have a problem with it later (binging and purging, participating in bulimia) I found out... but she saw someone for it. But, that’s what she was; she was my binge friend.”

Mary

“I typically hung out with other jocks... hung out with the girls that were on my softball team. They were kind of like out mentors; they took us around, told us what

to do, where to go. We'd usually just go to parties around campus... everyone would sneak in alcohol and I'd hang out with my teammates... always just like this circle of all the athletes and we just always hung out with them. We were always partying together."

Sarah

"I'd go to the smokers section a lot – it was kind of just the happening place on campus; anyone who was anyone was at the smoking section cause you know, that's where people got out of their dorm..."

Both Natalie and Mary expressed that they experienced growth by the community of their sports team. On the soccer team, Natalie became close with one particular teammate who could relate to her body image issues and could participate in self-destructive behavior together. However, for Mary, a player on the softball team, she found acceptance and belonging through partying⁴ with fellow athletes on campus. Sarah, similar to Mary, found community by hanging out in the smoker's section near her dorm room.

Natalie, Mary and Sarah found identity in various communities. In these peer groups they integrated, communicated and became social which gave life to their interpersonal relationships. It is evident that these participants fell into the idea of "I know who I am because I know where I belong" (Toshalis, 2008, p. 192).

"Helicopter" parenting cause distress and emotional conflict. Julie and Meredith both expressed concerns regarding the relationships with their parents during their first year. Briefly discussed in the Literature Review, it was mentioned that "family support makes it more difficult as the female attempts independence" or that one could experience "high levels of attachment anxiety" (Wei, 2005, p. 610). However, the Literature Review did not discuss how influential this theme claimed to be in participants' lives. Both Julie and Meredith spoke frequently about their parents. In fact, the majority of both interviews surrounded this relationship.

Julie

"Freshman year all I thought about was pleasing my parents... I wasn't lonely; I just didn't feel like I needed other people because I had my parents..."

"I was overwhelmed because of my parents... They still viewed me as this perfect little child. I would lie to my parents and then our relationship changed because then I would stop returning their calls and stop texting them."

"It is really hard to be yourself around a bunch of people like when you constantly have someone texting you and calling you and bugging like *where are you? What are you doing? Can you please text me the address of the friends house that you are going to...*"

"I did break down a couple of times... [a friend] would be like *come on relax*

4. Partying was defined by participant Mary as heavy alcohol consumption, smoking marijuana, drug experimentation.

they'll let up eventually." I even considered talking to the counselor about it; just how do I get my parents off my back. I'm in college now, like I deserve to be here you know? I applied, I got in, I don't need to have them on my case 24/7."

Meredith

"My mom called me multiple times a day always wanting to know what I was doing and who I was with. This caused me a lot of stress because I felt like she was constantly on top of my every move."

"My parents thought college was a waste of time. My mom wanted me to be a real estate agent or something like that."

"My mom really didn't want me to move away. She is really protective. And you know, always wanted to know what I was doing. So that was really hard for her more so than me."

"I never drank because my whole family really doesn't approve of drinking... I remember when [my mom] found out my brother drank she was crying and so I just never drank because of her. [My mom] got hit by a drunk driver in her car... she was always against drinking but I think that made her really, really against it... So when I started drinking just a little bit I was like *oh god, this would kill my mom... I'm just not gonna do it.*"

"I was used to being around my family for most of the time before I went to college. I found myself missing my parents a lot and would go home at least two times a month."

Parental communication was vaguely mentioned in the Literature Review regarding students adjusting to a new setting during their freshman year with the exception of considering other factors; "we need to consider a variety of things influencing the female student including family back home..." (Zaleski, 1998). However, there appears to be lacking research in how influential parent communication can be on students. More specifically, how this parental relationship of constantly nagging, calling, texting or harassing via other media about their everyday lives effects student emotion. Julie struggled intensely during her first year of college, so much so that she almost went to see the on campus psychologist to figure out how to "get her parents off her back". However, Meredith felt intense guilt for attempting to participate in a risk taking activity such as drinking. It appears there needs to be more research and investigation into the idea of "Parental Pressure."

Academics, course load and collegial schedules create reoccurring anxieties. Stress with academics followed as another theme among interviewees. In the Literature Review, academic adjustments, intense course loads and "an intense variety of academic demands" was mentioned (Zaleski, 1998). Two female participants, Natalie and Mary, were on a sports scholarship. Both expressed they felt pressure to perform not only athletically,

but to keep up their GPA so that they could stay on their team. Julie, however, struggled due to her previous study habits in high school, in addition to her Meniere's Disease⁵.

Natalie

"It was a lot harder than high school and I was always just *so* busy... [With my grades] I'd get so much anxiety."

"Sometimes I would say [grades] was the biggest stressor because I would think how I got good grades in high school and worked 40 hours and was so active, you know, class president... but I would get so overwhelmed my freshman year I was like *how did I do that before...*"

Mary

"I would say that I studied more than in high school because it was harder... also I had to keep up a certain GPA. Like with the athletes you couldn't, you had to get at least a C average, which for me was like a standard anyways."

"My first semester I signed up for way too many classes and um, I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I had 18 credits on top of softball so it was like I had no free time and I was always studying and I was *like I have way to much on my plate right now...*"

Julie

"I was a chemistry major actually... and I took the class and I got a straight F my first semester here and I was like *oh my gosh is it me?* Because I loved chemistry in high school and I got A's all the time. But coming here it was just way too fast and it just wasn't for me... so my grades slipped..."

"Senior year [of high school] I was diagnosed with Meniere's Disease... I realized I couldn't concentrate at all... so, freshman year I was like, well if this is really gonna affect my grades and stuff because of concentration in class then I'm gonna register with the disability services... they let me take tests inside [different] rooms and that helped but not much."

"I could have done better. I mean, my sister she studies 24/7 but you know... I didn't want to do that. I felt powerless, definitely about my grades."

Both Natalie and Mary shared similar anxieties about their grades, whereas Julie struggled to keep up in her classes – even the course that was her chosen major at the time. Deconstructing these comments, it appears that I underestimated how drastic academic stress functioned for young women during their freshman year. It is evident we need to be aware and emphasize how extreme academics, course load and college schedules can cause psychological distress. Moreover, how course loads and grades can affect the female psyche during the first year of

5. According to The National Institute on Deafness and other Communicative Disorders, Meniere's disease is a disorder of the inner ear that causes severe dizziness (vertigo), ringing in the ears (tinnitus), hearing loss, and a feeling of fullness or congestion in the ear.

college. This point is made clear by Natalie feeling such “anxiety,” Mary describing her first year as having “too much on her plate” and Julie explaining her poor grades made her feel “powerless.”

Risk taking allows developmental experiences and growth. In the Literature Review, it was explained that the current lifestyle in the colligate world includes students “engaging in fewer stress reducing activities... and drinking and partying more often” (Barefoot, 2008, p. 30). During their freshman year, female participants interviewed in this research reiterated this type of lifestyle is still present.

Julie, Meredith and Sarah had issues adjusting to social risk taking activities that included drinking, smoking cigarettes and smoking weed. Although Mary participated in these activities, she did not find it difficult to adjust being that she previously had been exposed and participated in such things in high school.

Julie

“I was introduced to um, smoking [weed]. They were like *come on, come on just do it* and having to be like *Um, no thank you*. And that was the first time; like the first peer pressure moment.”

“[My roommate] got totally high and I didn’t really know what it was to get high back then... so I was like *uh, what are you doing; you’re betraying me as a friend* and I was like *oh my god how could you do that it’s so bad for you* but I didn’t know anything about it ...”

“[There was] another party... and everyone was drinking and [my roommates friends] ... were just older and I felt really weird. Everyone was drinking and the guy I guess had a crush on my roommate. Another guy was like *oh you’re cute* and I was like *oh my god can we please leave...* there was more peer pressure... I felt a lot of pressure to drink; they pressured me.”

Meredith

“I never drank in high school or did drugs... but [my boyfriends] roommate, he was a big stoner. I was never around drugs, like ever. I’d never seen weed and we were just playing Nintendo and [my boyfriends roommate] came in and started selling marijuana from his room ...”

“[At parties] everyone else was drinking and I was the awkward sober kid...”

“My freshman year I was determined to drink... I had so much anxiety about getting caught... I got like, Smirnoff Ice or something like that and I literally drank half the neck of the bottle and I was like *I’m gonna stop*.”

Sarah

“[In high school] I rolled with a pretty conservative group of girls; some Bible followers. It was a very tame... kind of, um a [white washed] community... [During freshman year] I met this girl... who was totally someone I would never have hung out with. You know, a big stoner; really like raunchy sexual jokes. She was just from a different kind of background...”

“I mean I had never even smoked a cigarette... I was pretty tame. All that was really new to me. But I went to the smoking section a lot – I wasn’t actually like, a legitimate smoker but... I borrowed a lot from people. I was a moocher; big cigarette moocher.”

“I spent a lot of time going to house parties. I for sure drank; my roommates came with me. Um, I just remember getting super wasted... just getting a little sloppy. Smoking [cigarettes], smoking weed. I never did any hard drugs ever.”

Mary

“The president decided to make it a dry campus so there was no drinking on campus ... so everyone was always just kinda snuck alcohol into their rooms.”

“Everyone would sneak in alcohol... [my teammates and I] were always partying together. It was cool.”

“I mean, everyone drank but I already drank [in high school] so I never felt pressure to because I already did. And there was never anyone who was like *hey come on drink more* you know... my teammates were all drinking together so there wasn’t really any pressure – unless I did smoke weed – which everybody did in college...”

As described in the Literature Review, young women are still teens when they come into their freshman year. Therefore, they engage in a variety of risk taking behaviors as participants have described. If we examine the experience of Julie, who was pressured to either drink alcohol or smoke weed, she was given the opportunity to resist the urge. This parallels with Toshalis (2008) when he explains that “[risk taking] offers youth concentrated moments and critical decision-making experiences” (p. 197). Julie admitted to me that she was naïve because she didn’t know exactly what her friends were “doing”; also that she felt “unsafe” in these situations which was why she always said no when substances were offered. Meredith, however, did attempt to consume alcohol, but the thought of disappointing her mother brought her to stop. I asked Meredith how this affected her and she said she felt successful because she was able to “stay true to herself.”

Sarah and Mary, however, did participate frequently in what they described as “going to house parties” or “drinking together” with their fellow peers. When I asked Sarah about her behavior, she said that she “got a lot of experience” from parties because she was “out of the white washed community bubble” which made feel “worldly.” She explained she felt this way because she was partying with those who were of different lifestyles, backgrounds and upbringings than herself. Mary, however, found that drinking with fellow peers and athletes was normal because it was the same pastime that she experienced in high school; she explained, “we would go out on the weekends and we would party; go drinking.” Because of Mary’s previous tendencies, it is clear that she had already had the developmental growth through risk taking in her earlier teen years.

Student and roommate conflicts cause detachment. Within the Literature Review, it was discussed that some young women find community and identity through group conformity (Noam, 1999). On the other hand, some female participants described living with others as difficult; sometimes creating a wall between themselves and resolving conflict.

Julie moved into a dorm where she shared her living space with five other females. One girl was discourteous, one roommate disrespected her on the first day and another young woman who she shared a room with, was not warm to her whatsoever. Meredith also conflicted because her roommates' lifestyle of "partying" that was completely different from hers. She avoided her room and spent the majority of her time in her best friend's dorm. Sarah often found herself "in the middle" of a roommate relationship that caused her anxiety, describing that she felt stuck in an uncomfortable living situation. Natalie did not share a room with anyone. Yet, she had reoccurring conflicts with females on her soccer team. Additionally, one female student consistently harassed her and came into her late at night without her authorization. This led Natalie to isolate herself and later, leave her University all together.

Julie

"Upon moving into my new dorm my freshman year I was in charge of buying the living room decorations. When I dropped them off, met everyone, then stepped out for awhile. All the decorations I had bought were placed in front of my door for when I returned. The roommate who did it lied about the situation and never confessed."

"I had to share a room with this girl that clearly did not want to be friends... so I thought *okay I'll share a room with you but we don't have to be friends.* And then there was Caitlin. She was the worst roommate ever. It was really hard to get along with her... she was really promiscuous..."

Meredith

"I was nervous. I'd never lived with another girl before... and the second I met my new roommate... I knew we weren't gonna be like best friends forever, we were just so different. Yeah, like into partying... and I don't like parties."

"And because Angie [a previous friend from high school] moved into the dorms too I got to know her and her roommates... the first day of college we pretty much became best friends."

Sarah

"One of my roommates who I became very close with entered into a really unhealthy relationship and it was hard for me to witness. I did not know when it was or was not appropriate to voice my opinion or intervene."

"I roomed with two others I was not a fan of; one was super... judgmental. Would make out with her boyfriend on her bed... just weird. Like with the door open. She was just really, really weird."

Natalie

“I was on a scholarship but so were some of the other girls... I just didn’t want to be around [drinking] but the girls on my team would and I was like *what are these girls doing...*”

“There was a night where [a fellow classmate] got drunk and came into my room... she crawled into bed with me and started kissing my cheek. I could smell the alcohol on her breathe – I just couldn’t believe it; I was like *is this really happening?* I just jumped out of bed and told her I was sleeping, told her she was drunk... then a week later it happened again. I just told her like, *what are you doing, you’re drunk, you need to go back to your room.*”

“It was so weird and uncomfortable... I just called [my mom] and told her what happened... and that I couldn’t come back to school...”

Although these female participants removed themselves from conflict through avoidance or detachment, it appears that each individual still benefitted in some way. Julie admitted she was unhappy about sharing a room with a young woman who was “clearly” not willing to make a friendship with her. However, this student ditched so many classes that she eventually was asked to leave the University, which left Julie with her own room. Meredith isolated herself in her friends dorm room; a girl who she had known from high school. She told me she detached from her roommate situation and spent the majority of the time getting to know her best friends roommates that eventually became her closest group of girlfriends on campus. Sarah struggled with observing her roommates unhealthy relationship. She told me she never spoke of it, avoided the situation, and found community by spending a lot of time in the “smokers section” that was described previously. Here she met a variety of people from various backgrounds that she later became great friends with. Despite that Natalie ended leaving her college, she found her passions outside of the University system and believes exiting her undergrad career early was the best choice she’s ever made.

Although these situations gave young women the opportunity to learn how to resolve conflict, each female detached from the situation at hand. However, this lead them to attach onto something else that gave them more substance, and furthermore, a more beneficial relationship with others.

Implications

Students rate the transition from high school to college as the most difficult in their lives (Collins, 2009). This study specifically examined the female experience of the transition to better understand the most common elements of distress and the root of these psychological factors. The research displayed reoccurring themes that the current female generation experiences during their freshman year.

It is revealed that the tendency to “go underground” in high school discourages socialization during the first year of college. Carol Gilligan’s research provides insight into the adolescent silent female, yet there is lacking investigation as to how the young woman may function once placed into a post-secondary world. This study found that young women who embraced community and found relationships flourished. Therefore, these two contradicting psychological elements have not been fully examined or applied into a collegial environment. Specifically, we should ask how we can better prepare young women to pursue the path of community, rather than silence, to avoid antisocialization or isolation.

This study uncovered that participants who had communicative relationships with parents had difficulty adjusting to their new collegial lifestyle. Furthermore, that constant parental communication caused distress for students as they sought independence. This shows that we need to further investigate the severity of separation anxiety and “helicopter parenting” in post-secondary education and look for ways to better prepare parents and students who are about to “fly the nest.” This includes educating the whole family to understand the student perspective during the transition as well as how to appropriately communicate and foster the students emotional growth during their experience.

This study showed that females experience extreme anxieties about GPA, academics and intensive college schedules. Participants explained they lacked guidance and did not expect the difficulty of the curriculum. Those on sports scholarships struggled with creating an academic and athletic balance. It is evident there needs to be more preparation during the senior year of high school to help female students learn how to handle the extensive coursework that lies ahead during their first year of college, as well as direction for creating balance and stability when planning college schedules.

This research revealed that risk taking provides developmental growth and experiences for female youth. Some participants were successful in “staying true” to themselves by resisting urges of alcohol and drugs. However, others found that being a participant in parties and other social events provided healthy experiences that lead to fostering friendships and subconscious growth. The theory of risk-taking should be examined more closely. More specifically, how resisting temptation functions in female mind and how going forth with the risk taking activity provides psychological maturation.

Lastly, it was found that female students resorted to detachment whenever there was a conflict with a fellow student. Participants revealed situations of conflict are commonplace during the first year of college, however

described their lacking ability of how to approach, confront and maneuver through these conflicts. This shows a need to better prepare female students for future collegial disagreements and differences; by educating at the high school level, young woman can learn how to better assess and approach a confrontational situation that could arise.

Overall, it was found in this investigation that the emotional and psychological distress young women experience during their freshman year of college is mainly a combination of: a continuing silent adolescent lifestyle, learning to balance academic course load, adjusting to risk taking and coping with relationships (students, roommates or parents).

Collins (2009) explains that lacking emotional support in assisting high school seniors as they transition to college is a problem. Specifically, that despite colleges offer orientations, they only encourage formation of the social and do not address the “skills for coping with the emotional transition” (Abstract V). I believe it is crucial to mention that in each case, *all five participants in this research revealed at the end of their interview that they lacked guidance before entering their freshman year.* It is clear from this study that there is an absence of resources for young women transitioning into college. More specifically, that there is lacking emotional support during the high school senior year to assist in student awareness for the future stressors they may experience during the freshman year.

This research demonstrates the need for an organization or program to provide psychological preparation for the first year of college. The specifications and implementation of said program will be determined and discussed in future research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Anthony Collatos of Pepperdine University for his direction and guidance of this research.

Contact

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(805) 415-5970

Consent for Classroom Research
CHANGING EMOTIONAL IDENTITY :

The high school to college transition and the female psychological experience

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a project conducted as part of the requirements for a class project in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. For this project I will gather data from five female participants and conduct multiple interviews in order to examine the emotional and psychological processes experienced during the high school to college transition. The research will be supervised by course instructor Dr. Anthony Collatos.

The purpose of this research project is to help beginning researchers learn more about creating an ethnographic case study. The information generated will not be used for academic research or publication. Should I decide to do so as I pursue my studies, I will contact you again and obtain your permission to do so. For the moment, this is only for training purposes. All information obtained will be treated confidentially.

For this project, you will be asked to answer a series of interview questions. The entire interview should take between approx. 60 minutes. This will be done in-person. I will use visual and audio recording devices during our interview for accuracy, but at any point, you may ask me to turn off the device(s) or refuse to answer a question. After the recording has been transcribed, the tapes/videos will be erased and your identity will remain anonymous.

For this project, I will interview young females (ages 18 – 21) who are currently enrolled or have recently graduated from a four-year institution. I will take field notes based on observations during the interview process. I will specifically examine the participant bringing awareness to the stressors and “triggers” so we may better find solutions to assist the female psyche during the high school to college transition.

You are free to withdraw your participation at any time should you decide to do so. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at shay.davis@pepperdine.edu. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity. Thank you for your help. For questions about your rights, please call or write anthony.collatos@pepperdine.edu or 310-568-5671 or Dr. Yuyong Tsong, IRB Chairperson at yuying.tsong@pepperdine.edu.

Sincerely,

Shay Davis
Master of Education

Dr. Anthony Collatos
Assistant Professor of Education

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

CHANGING EMOTIONAL IDENTITY:

The high school to college transition and the female psychological experience

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Shay Davis** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 03/28/2011

Certification Number: 652743

CHANGING EMOTIONAL IDENTITY:

The high school to college transition and the female psychological experience

Name: _____

Graduating High School: _____

Age: _____

Current College Institution: _____

Below is a list of factors that could contribute to psychological stress during a female’s freshman year of college. Please mark the appropriate box as it applied to you.

	Strongly Affected	Affected	Unaffected	Undecided
1. Money and personal finances				
2. Job Pressures				
3. Homesickness				
4. Sexual Pressure				
5. Roommate issues				
6. Parental pressures				
7. Academic Anxieties				
8. Romantic relationships				
9. Body image				
10. Religion or Faith				
11. Drug experimentation or addiction				
12. Drinking				
13. Educational burnout				
14. Homosexuality/Heterosexuality confusion				
15. Ethnic background				
16. Race				
17. Cultural identity				
18. Socioeconomic status/social class				
19. Meaning or purpose of life				

CHANGING EMOTIONAL IDENTITY:

The high school to college transition and the female psychological experience

Please look at the previous survey. Take note of those factors that you marked as “Strongly Affected.” What are the top three factors that affected your psychological distress during freshman year?

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Please site a specific occurrence of each of the above three factors. Explain how it contributed to your stress. You may add or use additional paper if you need more space to write.

Psychological Factor 1:

Psychological Factor 2:

Psychological Factor 3:

CHANGING EMOTIONAL IDENTITY:*The high school to college transition and the female psychological experience***INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

High School: Senior Year

1. What was your social circle like? Did you have a best friend? What were your common activities?
2. How did you perform academically in high school/your study habits? What was your relationship like with teachers, educators, and administrators?
3. How was your in-class behavior in high school? Did you ask questions? Where did you sit? With whom?
4. Tell me about your ambition in school. Were you assertive or passive (academically and socially)?

Life before College: Pre-Transition

1. What stressors did you feel with applying to college? Why did you feel this way?
2. During your application period, as well as acceptance, what sort of college planning did you do? Did anyone assist you with this? Did anyone offer advice?
3. Did your college offer an orientation? If so, and you attended, do you any recall specific moments of excitement or nervousness? Was there any sort of psychological or emotional experience that you had during this event?

Freshman Year: A New Setting

1. Recall your first day on-campus. What was your experience? Did you meet people you felt would be good friends with?
2. During the first few weeks, what feelings do you remember? How did you interact with those around you?
3. When you were not studying, what activities did you partake in (reading, gym, running, social)?
4. What sort of eating habits did you acquire? Who did you spend your meals with or would you eat alone?
5. When observing peers in residence halls, were you surprised by what you saw? Was there anything you were not expecting?
6. Try to pull memories from your first few college parties. Did you drink? Did you try anything? Who came with you? Where was the event?
7. As you think back to these college parties, was there ever a moment either in private or socially in which you felt intense pressure to do something you rather not? How did you handle this?

Reflection: Comparing High School to College

1. What happened to your relationships with high school friends after you entered college life?
2. What happened with your relationship with your parents?
3. Once in college, how were your study habits? Were they any different from your high school ways?
4. Were there any difficulties in your academics? Explain.
5. Compare your social life in high school to college. What changes, if any, occurred?

Changes: Emotions during your Freshman Year

1. Did you notice any particular mental or psychological growth during your freshman year in college?
2. Was there a time where you felt a need to seek mental help? Did you ever feel compelled to see the on-campus psychologist? If so, what provoked these feelings? Did someone suggest this to you?
3. Once into your freshman year, how were your emotions? Do you recall any specific feelings of being overwhelmed? Powerful? Powerless?
4. Thinking back to your first year in college. What would you have wished you had known?
5. Are there any recommendations you would give to a young female who is about to embark into the collegiate world? Is there anything specific that you believe would have helped you during your transition?

CHANGING EMOTIONAL IDENTITY:

The high school to college transition and the female psychological experience

Interviewee: _____	Interviewer: _____
Date: _____	Observer Comments (see below)
Location: _____	

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