

BREAKUP EFFECTS ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEIVED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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The Problem: Problems that might be expected to affect perceived academic performance were studied in a sample of 283 university students. **Results:** Breakup Distress Scale scores, less time since the breakup and no new relationship contributed to 16% of the variance on perceived academic performance. Variables that were related to academic performance in previous studies including depression, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, controlling intrusive thoughts and sleep disturbances did not enter the regression equation. **Conclusion:** These results suggest that a breakup affects students' perceived academic performance including their concentration, homework and test scores.

Keywords: university students; breakup distress; academic performance

Relationship break-ups and poor academic performance are among the most frequent complaints at campus counseling and mental health centers (Oliveira, Dantas, Azevedo & Banzato, 2008). In another study, depression, anxiety and relationship problems were the most frequent complaints of students who sought campus counseling services (Holm-Hadulla & Soeder, 1997). Depression has been associated with as much as half a letter grade (.49) decrease in student grade point averages and treatment was associated with a protective effect of approximately .44

points in grade point averages (Hysenbegasi, Hass & Rowland, 2005). Although self-reported grade point averages may be unreliable, the literature generally suggests that depression negatively affects academic performance.

Academic performance has also been related to sleep problems. In one study, sleep problems accounted for the largest amount of variance in grade point averages (Trockel, Barnes & Egget, 2000). Studies in which sleep was actively restricted or optimized showed, respectively, a worsening and improvement in academic

performance (Curcio, Ferrara & Gennaro, 2006). Several cognitive functions have been negatively affected by sleep deprivation including attention and memory, (Durmer & Dinges, 2005) and restricting sleep can also cause a range of neurobehavioral deficits including lapses of attention, slowed working memory, reduced cognitive output, and depressed mood. (Banks & Dinges, 2007). Several days of less than seven hours sleep per night led to cognitive dysfunction at levels comparable to those found after severe sleep deprivation. The authors also noted negative effects on immune function, metabolic and inflammatory responses.

Other variables have been related to sleep disturbances and depression in university students but have not been assessed for their effects on academic performance including breakup distress, intrusive thoughts and controlling intrusive thoughts. (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds & Delgado, 2009). In this study, university students with high breakup distress scores also had high depression scores, (Field et al, 2009) and intrusive thoughts and controlling intrusive thoughts were significant predictors of depression in another sample (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2011). Thus, all of these variables have significantly influenced university students and appear to be inter-correlated but have not been explored together for their influence on academic performance. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to assess the relative effects of these variables on perceived academic performance. Relationship breakup distress, intrusive thoughts, depression and sleep disturbances were expected to significantly contribute

to the variance on the academic performance variable.

Methods

Participants

The sample was comprised of 283 university students (78% female) who averaged 21.3 years of age and had completed a mean of two years college education. The students had the following ethnic distribution: 70% Hispanic, 12% African-American, 10% Caucasian and 8% other.

Procedures

Following IRB approval for this anonymous questionnaire study, a convenience sample of university students was recruited from psychology classes at a southeastern U.S. university. The students were given extra credit for their participation. During one of their class sessions, the students completed a 120-item questionnaire comprised of demographic questions, a Breakup Distress Scale, an Intrusive Thoughts Scale, a Controlling Intrusive Thoughts Scale, a Sleep Disturbances Scale and depression (CES-D) and anxiety (STAI) scales.

Measures

Academic performance was assessed by the following questions: 1) "Has the breakup affected your ability to concentrate and learn new material in class?"; 2) "Has the breakup affected your ability to perform homework?"; and 3) "Has the breakup affected your test scores or grades?". A 4-point Likert scale was used including responses ranging from not at

all to very much. The students' responses were averaged for a summary academic performance score.

The *Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale* (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977) is a 20-item scale that assesses the frequency of depressive symptoms within the last week. The scores range from 0 to 60. The cut-off score of 16 is used for classifying depression. With only a 6% false positive and 36% false negative rate, the scale has been reliable and valid for diverse demographic groups (Myers & Weissman, 1980). This scale was included because depression has been related to academic performance in other studies (Hysenbegasi et al, 2005; Andrews & Wilding, 2004).

The *State Anxiety Inventory* (STAI) (Spielberger, Gorsuch & Lushene, 1970) is comprised of 20 items assessing the intensity of anxiety symptoms. The scores range from 20 to 90, and the cut-off score for high anxiety is 48. Research has demonstrated that the STAI has adequate concurrent validity and internal consistency (Spielberger et al, 1970). This scale was included because anxiety is frequently comorbid with depression.

The *Breakup Distress Scale* (BDS) (Field et al 2009) was adapted from the *Inventory of Complicated Grief* (ICG) (Prigerson, Maciejewski, Reynolds et al, 1995). The ICG was an outgrowth of research that found certain symptoms of grief to be distinct from symptoms of depression and anxiety symptoms including preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, crying, searching and yearning for the deceased, disbelief about the death, being stunned by the death, and not accept-

ing the death (Prigerson et al, 1995). The internal consistency of the 19-item ICG was high (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.94$). For the *Breakup Distress Scale*, the wording of the items was changed to be appropriate for university students and to be relevant for breakups rather than death.

The *Intrusive Thoughts Scale* (ITS) (Field et al, 2009) was comprised of 4 items rated on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so) including: 1) approximately how often per day would you say the intrusive thoughts occur?; 2) how distressing are the intrusive thoughts?; 3) how vivid are the intrusive thoughts?; and 4) how much does the event appear to be happening now instead of happening in the past? This scale was included because of the frequency of intrusive thoughts found among those who are depressed (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000).

The *Difficulty Controlling Intrusive Thoughts Scale* (DCITS) (Field et al, 2009) was adapted from the *Thought Control Questionnaire* (TCQ) (Wells & Davies 1994). The *Thought Control Questionnaire* (TCQ) was developed to measure individual differences on the use of thought control strategies. Items were selected from the TCQ (19 of 30 items), some of which were reworded to be appropriate for university students and were rated on a different scale, i.e. a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so) and included, for example, items like "I get angry at myself for having intrusive thoughts", "I tell myself not to think about them now", "I try to block them out by reading, watching T.V. or playing on the computer" and "I dwell on other worries". This scale was included because of the dif-

difficulty controlling intrusive thoughts by depressed individuals (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991).

The *Sleep Disturbances Scale* (Field et al, 2009) was comprised of 4 items rated on a Likert scale from 1 (none) to 4 (a lot), including: 1) trouble falling asleep last night; 2) trouble with disrupted sleep last night; 3) amount of sleep last night; and 4) amount of exhaustion this morning. This scale was included because sleep disturbances have been associated with academic performance in other studies (Trockel et al, 2000; Curcio et al, 2006).

Results

Scores on the above measures as well as the time since the breakup and having a new relationship were entered into a stepwise regression analysis using SPSS. As can be seen in Table 1, the stepwise regression analysis revealed that the Breakup Distress Scale scores explained a significant amount of the variance on perceived academic performance (11%). Other breakup variables contributed to signifi-

cant amounts of the variance including time since the breakup (3%) (the shorter the time, the higher the breakup distress score) and a new relationship (2%) (having a new relationship contributed to less distress).

Discussion

Surprisingly, variables that were related to perceived academic performance in previous studies did not emerge as significant variables including depression, (Hysenbegasi et al, 2005) anxiety (Holm-Hadulla et al, 1997) and sleep disturbances (Trockel et al, 2000; Curcio et al, 2006). Although these variables were significantly related to Breakup Distress Scale scores in our previous study, (Field et al, 2009) in the current study they may have been covaried out of the regression equation on academic performance by the more significant breakup distress variables.

The breakup distress variables that contributed to the variance, i.e. the Breakup Distress Scale scores, time since the breakup and a new relationship, should be

Table 1. Stepwise regression on Academic Performance Score

Step	R square	R ² change	F for change	p
1	.11	.11	21.16	.000
2	.14	.03	7.03	.005
3	.16	.02	4.38	.05

Predictors in order of their entry

1-Breakup Distress Scale

2-Time since breakup

3-New relationship

considered somewhat tenuous given the limited amount of variance they explained. Nonetheless, they highlight the significant negative effects that breakup stress can have on students' perceived academic performance. Students' concentration, homework, test performance and grades were apparently affected by their breakup experience. However, the question of whether the students' academic performance was affected awaits empirical validation using measures of academic performance such as GPAs, attendance, in-class participation and other more objective measures.

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