

“PEOPLE FORM THEIR OWN SUPPORT SYSTEMS – LIKE FORMING THEIR OWN FAMILIES”: THE ROLE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS IN THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

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Background

Transition to university is experienced as challenging^{1,2}. Difficulties may result in academic under-performance and withdrawal³. Much transition literature focuses on academic adjustment^{4,5,6}. There is also interest in the emotional aspects of transition^{7,8,9}. Studies have investigated the role which family and friends play in easing the transition^{10,11,12,13}. Literature highlights that first-generation students have specific challenges because they lack access to family expertise to initiate them into the ways of being and doing rewarded at university^{14,15,16}. In South Africa, the challenges for first-generation students are exacerbated by the legacy of apartheid education, and include differential academic preparation for higher education^{17,18}.

This study examines the role that friends and family play in the transition and draws on the experiences of a cohort of first-year dentistry and oral hygiene students at a Faculty of Dentistry in South Africa. The purpose of the study was to ‘unpack’ the mechanisms of this support so as to understand the ways in which this support is provided. The study examined whether – and if so, how – support mechanisms differed for first-generation students and for those with family familiarity of university.

Theoretical approach

The theoretical framework synthesised the concepts employed in psychology and sociology for examining the role that family and friends play in the transition. The psychology literature allows for exploration of issues such as attachment¹⁹ and friendship quality¹¹. It also highlights that university entrants are in transition from adolescence to adulthood²⁰, reminding that the challenges of this second transition may influence engagement with family and friendship support. The sociological concept of “social capital”²¹ allows for an exploration of how family and friendship support may differently support students in the transition. Social capital is understood as the resources (such as dispositions and information) accessed through relationship ties²².

Methodology

The study was qualitative. The cohort was selected from a single class of 138 first-year dentistry and oral hygiene students. At this institution, first-year students are randomly allocated to one of four smaller classes for the module, “Academic Literacy”. One of these classes, comprising 28 students,

was selected. The mini-class was representative of the first-year student body because of the random allocation. Fifteen students participated. Seven were of working-class origin. Eight were middle-class. Data was collected in the first term of the first academic year using focus group interviews and through individual interviews in the second semester of the second academic year. Interviews were transcribed and coded for the themes emerging from the literature.

Presentation of data and discussion

“Attachment”¹⁹ emerged as important. Transition was eased by students’ beliefs that family and ‘old’ friends supported their university attendance, “Last year my family was telling me, next year you’re doing first year. So coming here was easy”. Initial transition was eased by retaining attachment to supportive mechanisms from the ‘old’ environment, especially for students who were away from home, “They are helping me from home. They keep calling me”. For students remaining at home, relationships from the ‘old’ environment provided reassurance, “My father went to university. He tells me what I should do and how to go about that”.

Students highlighted how “friendship quality”¹¹ eased or exacerbated the transition. It was challenging finding friends with whom they could identify, “You are not sure whether people will be good friends – you don’t want to get involved in drugs”. Common identities eased emerging friendships, “We sat together because we were all Afrikaans-speaking”. Students spoke of the significance of new friendships, “People form their own support systems, like forming their own families”. In likening quality friends with family, they suggested that family support remained their baseline.

Students described a shift from ‘old’ friendships to ‘new’ ones¹¹. Differences in life experiences shaped the shift, “Most of my friends are studying easy courses. They only study now and then. I can’t. I am writing a test tomorrow and the day after. Always work”. New friendships provided emotional support, “We are a group of friends studying together. If it wasn’t for them – they help me focus”. Friendships also provided academic support, “We study together and motivate each other”.

Students experienced the tensions of the adolescent-early adult developmental interface¹⁰. University demanded independence, “You grow up and take responsibility”, but they remained ambivalent about the role that parents should play, “Being a teenager I get annoyed with my parents for doing that but I am fortunate as I know that my parents are still constantly on my case”.

While all students referred positively to family and friendship support during transition, middle-class students signalled that family and friends provided insider-information which was 'convertible' into successful academic behaviour (Bourdieu, 1986). They had been prepared for university, "Before I left home I had all the family and friends telling me you are going to university to study. Don't spend your time loafing. Sit down and study". Drawing on experience of university, parents provided insight, "My dad knows what dentistry's like. He's putting pressure on me. I like the fact that he's doing that".

The study suggests that the social relationships which students have access to during the transition provide emotional resources which ease transition and practical information about appropriate ways of being and doing. The findings also suggest that some of these resources were more 'valuable' and could be 'spent' at university with greater benefit.

Significance

The existing literature regarding family and friendship support is predominantly quantitative¹¹ and thus has limited ability to describe the processes that underlie social relationships. Drawing on qualitative data elicited through extended self-generated testimony over two academic years, the current study shows how the support of family and friends works as a mechanism to facilitate transition. It provides a theoretical framework showing how some social relationships provide capital which is better matched to the requirements and reward systems of university life. Findings might be used to develop mechanisms (such as peer mentors, study buddies, online friendship groups) for disseminating social capital in ways which are accessible and acceptable to students in the transition from school to university.

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