Student Emotional Adjustment: A New Model of Student Development Theory, Emotion, and Hardiness

Anthony Masseria

Literature in student development theory reveals that emotional responses tied to cognitive, identity-centered, and psychosocial phenomena point toward issues of student attrition. The theory of psychological hardiness further elucidates the centrality of cognition, identity, and social adjustment to the overall emotional adjustment of college students to common stressors of the undergraduate experience. Careful consideration of these three areas reveals a number of practical implications for student affairs professionals and directions for further research into student emotional adjustment.

In historical psychological literature, emotions have been viewed in two different lights. In 1930s and 1940s, Young described emotions as "acute disturbance[s] of the individual as a whole," causing a "complete loss of cerebral control" with "no trace of conscious purpose" (as cited in Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 2). On the other hand, Leeper found emotions to be linked with motivation as "processes which arouse, sustain, and direct activity," while Mandler believed that emotions are vital for directing and shaping cognitive activities (as cited in Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 2). These opposing opinions allude to the fact that emotion is a dynamic, forceful phenomenon impacting college student development more deeply than present literature reveals. As such, a novel application of the literature will ultimately reveal new practical applications. Considering all of this, the following is the final research question that has guided this paper. What developmental processes are most influential over the ways in which students respond to the stress of collegiate life, and what kinds of psychological theory can help the student affairs practitioner understand the convergence of said processes in order to support and promote student success and satisfaction?

In order to address this research question, I attempted to take a series of steps that would hopefully lead to a logical, practical solution. The first step involved examining existing literature supporting the idea that emotions impact college student development in a number of ways, presuming that it may be necessary to look outside the field of student development theory for assistance. The next step involved seeing how student development theory and other supplemental literature outside the field of student affairs complement each other to address the research question. Finally, I sought to identify implications for practice to help students who are and are

not emotionally prepared to manage common college stressors. I laid out the present paper to mirror this methodological process.

Through following this process, it is my hypothesis that analysis of literature on cognitive development, identity development, and psychosocial development when paired with a novel application of the psychological theory of hardiness will extrapolate how transitional students cope emotionally with the challenges they face. In turn, this fusion of theories should spark new ways of thinking about student emotional adjustment to begin creating a holistic set of practices for the student affairs profession.

Literature Review on Emotion and Student Development

Cognitive Development

Several researchers have contributed to the body of literature on the notion of cognitive development as it relates to the emotional development of college students. Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004) addresses this concept when she constructs her theory of self-authorship. According to Baxter Magolda (2001), the student faces certain crises during which he or she re-evaluates various dimensions of their thinking, the resolution of which will ultimately guide them toward self-authorship. She identifies the epistemological dimension of self-authorship as most closely related to the depth of the student's cognitive development. By examining their epistemological perspective, the student is able to address the question of "how to know" (2001, p. 38). In examining this dimension, the student is able to shift away from acquiring others' ways of thinking and developing a sense of cognitive maturity which Baxter Magolda (2001) defines as "characterized by intellectual power, reflective judgment, mature decision making, and problem solving in the context of multiplicity" (p. 38; cf. Baxter Magolda, 2004, and King & Kitchener, 1994). King and Baxter Magolda (1996) assert that advanced cognitive development will extend the student's ability to manipulate emotion in order to assist in critical thinking, reasoning, and decision making processes. In the present literature, there seems to be a general consensus that cognitive development is necessary to understand emotion and to manage it in order to facilitate processes of thinking and learning.

Identity Development

Researchers who have studied identity development have acknowledged that emotion is essential to acquiring a complete sense of self. Baxter Magolda (2001) addresses the connection between emotion and identity development, particularly in the intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship. According to Baxter Magolda (2004), identity development is "characterized by understanding one's own particular history, confidence, the capacity for autonomy and connection, and integrity" (p. 6). Erikson (1968) asserts that

the greatest emotional crisis of traditional age college students is identity confusion, exacerbated by the college experience itself in delaying occupational and ideological identity. Marcia's (1980) contention is that successful identity development will result in stable, favorable emotions and emotional processes, such as the capacity for intimacy, empathy, and vocational industry. The relatively new field of research on emerging adulthood validates the conclusions that Erikson and Marcia reached. Arnett (2000) states that exploring a sense of self in the late teens through the early twenties is necessary to acquire an understanding of love, work, and worldview. The general presumption among these identity theorists is that developing a strong sense of identity leads naturally into a state of positive and stable emotionality.

Psychosocial Development

Erikson (1968) recognized the role that social context plays in the development of personal identity in that one's surroundings largely dictate the manifestation or the impediment of identity development. In terms of psychosocial development, Chickering and Reisser (1993) name managing emotion as the second vector of their comprehensive student development theory. The goal of this vector lies in recognizing reactions to the environment and regulating one's responses so as to externalize emotion in a positive, self-controlled manner. Part of the process of learning to manage emotion is recognizing the role emotions play in a social context and how emotion affects not just the self, but the other as well. Specifically, Chickering and Reisser (1993) assert that managing emotions involves "participatory tendencies, which involve transcending the boundaries of the individual self, identifying or bonding with another, or feeling part of a larger whole" (p. 47). In his life course paradigm, Elder (1995) explains that social context is essential for the development of the whole person in terms of self-regulation of emotions and behaviors and in terms of agency in the environment itself. According to Elder (1995), a well-engaged and well-developed individual has a strong sense of both human agency and self-regulation. The individual is always engaged in society, and as such, the individual's emotions have social context.

Hardiness: A Model of Stress and Health

Each of the theory families mentioned above recognizes the value of examining emotion in the development of various components of the whole student. However, these are observational models, and as such, there is no explanation of how students learn to manage emotions, what happens as the student learns to manage emotions, or the conditions required for learning to manage emotions.

Since student development theories are merely descriptive of student behavior, a theory outside of student development may elucidate the role

emotions play in adjustment to the undergraduate experience. Suzanne C. Kobasa's theory of hardiness, which comes from the psychological field of stress and health, could help to fill in the gaps and answer the question of how emotion affects the college student's experience. After studying literature and research on the relationship between stress and health, Kobasa (1979) proposed that some people possess what she calls hardiness. She observed that in all of the literature on stress and health, certain people seemed more resistant to negative somatic responses to external stressors than others. This led her to the conclusion "that persons who experience high degrees of stress without falling ill have a personality structure differentiating them from persons who become sick under stress" (p. 3). Hardiness is this personality structure that she identifies in the hypothesis of her seminal study.

Although it is referred to as a single personality structure, hardiness is in reality a three-pronged phenomenon. One who is said to be a hardy person will be psychologically advantaged in three areas: control, commitment, and challenge (Kobasa, 1979). A strong sense of control consists of (a) decisional control, or the ability to discern among alternatives when faced with a stressor, (b) cognitive control, or cognitive powers of interpretation and appraisal, and (c) coping skills, or a set of techniques for successfully coping with a stressor. On the other hand, an individual who lacks a sense of control is often nihilistic, powerless, and low in motivation. A strong sense of commitment refers to depending on one's own sense of identity to give value to the stressor and to elicit a positive response. Strong commitment means a commitment to self and to one's own values, beliefs, and relationships. Finally, a sense of challenge takes a more external focus than the other two components. A person with a strong sense of challenge responds positively to stressors, views them as an opportunity for change, and knows how their environment can both aid in the facilitation or impediment of a resolution. Kobasa's (1979) overarching hypothesis is that those individuals who lack in any of the above areas are more susceptible to physical illness and emotional distress than those who are developed fully in each area.

Theoretical Comparisons

How is this theory of hardiness helpful in complementing the question of the role that emotions play in student development? Looking at the above definitions of hardiness, control, commitment, and challenge, one can see that various other psychological functions and processes come into play. Where do control, commitment, and challenge originate? Cognitive development, identity development, and psychosocial development correlate with control, commitment, and challenge, respectively, and successful development is necessary for an individual to be considered a psychologically hardy

person. In accordance with my hypothesis, psychologically hardy students will be most successful in college in terms of academic achievement, acquiring a sense of self, and engagement in the campus community. The next piece is examining how developmental processes converge in relation to the hardiness of the college student, and the following is an interpretation of how these bodies of theory blend together.

First, a student's sense of control correlates directly with their cognitive development. According to Kobasa's (1979) definition of control, a higher level of cognitive ability is required to differentiate among alternatives when presented with a stressor, to interpret the meaning of the stressor, and to choose a coping mechanism. Baxter Magolda's (2004) definition of cognitive maturity – intellectual power, reflective judgment, mature decision making, and problem solving in the context of multiplicity – is almost directly parallel with Kobasa's characteristics of a person with a strong sense of control. Other literature on cognitive development (cf. Baxter Magolda, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 1996; King & Kitchener, 1994) also point to the connection between advanced cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking, logical reasoning, and problem solving, and Kobasa's sense of control.

Second, Kobasa's sense of commitment refers directly to identity development. Kobasa (1979) states, "staying healthy under stress is critically dependent upon a strong sense of commitment to self," and an ability to recognize and to understand one's values and priorities in the context of identity is "essential for the accurate assessment of the threat posed by a particular life situation and for the competent handling of it" (p. 4). A strong, healthy sense of personality identity is the goal of every theory in the identity development family (cf. Arnett, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 2004; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). A person with a well-developed sense of identity according to any of these developmental theories possesses all of the characteristics of a person with a strong sense of commitment.

Finally, psychosocial development can be linked to Kobasa's sense of challenge. A person with a strong sense of challenge seeks out new experiences in the environment and views stressors as an opportunity for growth that is both personal and social in nature. People who have positive responses to challenge are those who catalyze change in their environments and are quick to adapt to opportunities, crises, and problems (Kobasa, 1979). People who are advanced psychosocially are heavily engaged in their environments and can see the role that their actions play in a broader, social context. This is the basic premise of Elder's (1995) life course paradigm. In addition, Chickering and Reisser (1993) view managing emotions as necessary for responding not just to one's own emotions, but also to the emotional responses that situations elicit in other people. Operating fluidly in one's environment

and social context is the goal of psychosocial development, and is also the basic characteristic of a person with a strong sense of challenge.

Student Emotional Adjustment:

Implications for Student Affairs Practice

An examination of current student development theory and Kobasa's model of hardiness fused together create a new way of looking at student development and potentially predicting student success based on their level of hardiness. I call this fusion the student emotional adjustment model, which I define as an application of student development theory that gauges the ability of a traditional-age college student to confront and to cope emotionally with stressors and decisions related to the undergraduate experience. I propose that an emotionally adjusted student will be able to confront events, decisions, and stressors related to the undergraduate experience (e.g. orientation, residential living, choosing a major, career counseling, graduation, etc.) depending on how developed they are cognitively, socially, and in terms of identity. Conversely, a student lacking in any of these areas will have difficulty adjusting emotionally to the common rigors of the undergraduate experience, and in turn, the maladjusted student will encounter challenges in these areas (e.g. homesickness, roommate difficulties, changing their major, career confusion, fear of graduation, etc.). Since undergraduate students' experiences are so diverse, student emotional adjustment must take into consideration three basic aspects of student development: cognition, identity, and social adjustment. Each element of the student emotional adjustment model correlates directly with Kobasa's concept of hardiness.

The first element for consideration is cognition. A student with well-developed cognitive abilities ought to be able to make sound academic decisions, to succeed scholastically, and to earn high grades in their courses. Such a student will view academic challenges as rich and valuable and view new avenues as opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. A student with low cognitive abilities will suffer academically, might struggle with choosing a major, and will likely harbor feelings of helplessness and frustration. Because of such negative emotions, the cognitively underdeveloped student may also be hesitant to seek out help with their academic endeavors, they might challenge their sense of self-worth, and they may be resistant to advice and help from their instructors.

Identity is also central to the student emotional adjustment model. Students with a strong sense of personal identity ought to be able to seek career counseling in a field that they find interesting, to maintain integrity when faced with peer pressure, and to seek out clubs, organizations, and activities that are important to them personally. A student with a well-developed sense

of self will not just know who they are but also be able to recognize and appreciate the diversity in those they encounter. Students with an underdeveloped sense of identity will struggle with peer pressure and will not be able to find extracurricular activities that they find engaging. Since identity is also connected with career choice as indicated by Marcia (1980), this student may not be satisfied with their major or may have problems in selecting a distinct career path.

Finally, psychosocial factors complete the model. A student that is well adjusted socially will be invested in the campus culture, will feel a sense of school pride, and will be concerned with social issues that impact the school and the student body as a whole. This will perhaps be a leader among other students and who will garner respect and influence among their peers. A student with poor social adjustment will have trouble finding a niche on campus, and will feel disengaged from the campus culture. Feelings of dissatisfaction have the potential of running high, and attrition is a severe risk. Clearly further research will be required to determine how to utilize this model more precisely, but for now, I merely present a speculative sample of ways it can pinpoint possible problems students may encounter.

The goal of the student emotional adjustment model is to provide a framework for student affairs professionals to help students who are at risk of experiencing difficulties in coping with college life and perhaps dropping out of school. Finding the extent of a student's emotional adjustment has several practical implications to help improve student success, satisfaction, and retention. First, if the practitioner were to discover that a student is underdeveloped cognitively, then academic support programs, such as tutoring, learning communities, or mentoring, could help the student improve. Also, if a student came to a counselor with identity issues, further psychological assistance or a typology analysis could help the student explore who he or she is and find activities or organizations that align with the student's personal interests and values. Finally, a student who feels disengaged from the campus presents a larger problem. The job of the practitioner in this case is finding a way to get the student engaged with the campus community, perhaps again through student organizations or one-on-one mentoring programs. Certainly, the range of practical implications is much wider than is currently presented, but this hopefully helps to demonstrate the possibilities for further inquiry into student emotional adjustment.

Future Research

Further investigation into student emotional adjustment would be required to connect it with a broader range of current literature, to examine the impact of developmental disabilities and other environmental and biological factors, to test the validity of this model, and to ascertain the full scope of

its practical applications. In terms of literature related to this model, Salovey and Sluyter (1997) have produced an entire body of work based on research into emotional development, emotional intelligence, and the educational implications of both. Their research could contribute great insight into how students perceive common challenges and how their emotions guide their decisions. Further research into hardiness and the question of whether or not the practitioner may instill it in students would also expand the uses of the student emotional adjustment model. As of now, no information is included in this paper that addresses such a possibility, and additional investigation will help answer this question.

Another idea to consider is how mental disorders and disabilities fit into this model. All research in this paper presupposes that developmental processes are what primarily influence emotional adjustment. However, mental disorders and disabilities are real problems that affect how students respond to their academic and social environment, and further investigation would be required to see how such phenomena play into this model, if at all. Consideration of environmental factors will be necessary to examine the full application of this model, as I have thus far assumed that emotional adjustment is an internal process. Study of literature in the field of environmental theory may provide more insight into how students adjust to college life.

In order to test this model, I propose a mixed-methods, exploratory design to gain a broader understanding of how students perceive themselves and to quantify measurements of hardiness. I would begin with a qualitative study during which several students are interviewed to gain insight into their perceptions of self in terms of cognitive, identity and psychosocial development. A multiple-step quantitative analysis including a measurement of academic achievement, a self-report personality inventory, and a social adjustment rating scale would follow the interviews to connect student perceptions and measureable development. Deeper inquiry into student emotional adjustment could potentially produce a longitudinal study to trace one group of students all the way through their college experience.

As more investigation occurs, there will be more opportunity to develop new methods and techniques of individualizing attention to the students to improve their success, satisfaction, and retention. Consultation with various functional areas, such as advising, counseling, academic support, and student activities, could produce a strong list of services to help students who are underdeveloped in cognition, identity, and social adjustment.

References

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. American Psychologist, 55, 469-480.

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). Self-authorship as the common goal of 21st century education. In Baxter Magolda, M. B., & King, P. M. (Eds.), Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship (pp. 1-35).

Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). Education and identity (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Elder, G. H., Jr. (1995). The life course paradigm: Social change and individual development. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, Jr., & K. Luscher (Eds.), Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development (pp. 101-139). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). Identity, youth and crisis. New York: W.W. Norton.

King, P. M., & Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1996). A developmental perspective on learning. Journal of College Student Development 37(2), pp. 163-172.

King, P. M., & Kitchener, K. S. (1994). Developing reflective judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37, 1-11.

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), Handbook of adolescent psychology. New York: Wiley.

Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. In Salovey, P., Brackett, M. A., & Mayer, J. D. (Eds.), Emotional intelligence: Key readings on the Mayer and Salovey model (2007, 2nd ed., pp. 1-27).

Salovey, P., & Sluyter, D. J. (Eds.). (1997). Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications. New York: Basic Books.

Anthony Masseria is currently a student in the Indiana University HESA program, and is expected to graduate with a Master of Science in Education in May 2009. He earned a B.A. in Spanish Language and Theological Studies from Hanover College in 2003, and continued undergraduate studies in Anthropology at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis. His academic interests include first-year and transitional students, academic affairs, and GLBT issues in higher education.

Meaning Making Processes
The Roles of Dissonance, Influencers, and Reflection

Robert F. Stagni

Building off of research performed on service-learning courses and theories of reflection and intervention, this paper suggests a comprehensive model for meaning making processes involving students. The roles of dissonance, the influence of others, and self-reflection are discussed; and implications for a new, comprehensive theory are examined.

Dissonance, as it is defined in social science research, occurs when a person or group undergoes internal change, growth, or development (Brehm, 2007). Dissonance manifests as a catalyst, reference point or major event that prompts a person to develop new ideas of self, understandings of society, knowledge of systems or a number of other outcomes (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Some of social science's most-cited theories of psychosocial (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and moral development (Kohlberg, 1972) acknowledge the presence of dissonance in the transition between stages. Chickering and Reisser (1993) specifically refer to dissonance, declaring that it may be "dramatic and sudden," but acknowledge that "most occur gradually and incrementally" (p. 43).

The literature lacks a comprehensive, holistic understanding of exactly what dissonance offers to meaning making, how it must be facilitated and how the individual undergoing change focuses it internally. One possible idea is that dissonance serves as a central component of significant meaning making, and that with influencing guidance and reflective introspection, dissonance is the most powerful tool to foster personal development. To this end, the following questions will be examined in this article:

- What is the precise role of dissonance in meaning making processes?
- What are the roles of influencers, such as teachers and advisors, in channeling and facilitating dissonance?
- What are the roles of self-reflection in making meaning of dissonance?

Examining these questions requires a number of sources from the areas of social theory, psychology, project facilitation, and service learning. Service learning research, particularly the work of Jones & Abes (2003; 2004), stands out to provide an excellent example of how dissonant experiences can be purposely planned and used to promote growth and understanding. While service learning is certainly not the only source of dissonance for students,