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Brief report

Relationships among grit, academic performance, perceived academic failure, and stress in associate degree students



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationships among grit, academic performance, perceived academic failure, and stress levels of Hong Kong associate degree students using path analysis. Three hundred and forty-five students from a community college in Hong Kong voluntarily participated in the study. They completed a questionnaire that measured their grit (operationalized as interest and perseverance) and stress levels. The students also provided their actual academic performance and evaluated their perception of their academic performance as a success or a failure. The results of the path analysis showed that interest and perseverance were negatively associated with stress, and only perceived academic failure was positively associated with stress. These findings suggest that psychological appraisal and resources are more important antecedents of stress than objective negative events. Therefore, fostering students' psychological resilience may alleviate the stress experienced by associate degree students or college students in general.

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Although stress is common in all aspects of modern daily life, the stress levels of college students are particularly intense because students have to face many new challenges (Pedersen & Jodin, 2016). These challenges include getting along with new peers, adapting to a new living environment, and facing financial pressure (Larson, 2006). Studies have also found that prior academic performance moderately predicts college transition and success (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). However, the association between prior academic performance and college students' stress levels is relatively underexplored. Given the advent of positive education and the need to foster student well-being in tertiary education, such research has become important (El Ansari & Stock, 2010).

Although the role that stress plays in an academic context has been clearly established (Krammer, Sommer, & Arendasy, 2016), examining the antecedents of stress remains a burgeoning interest in the field and suggests that the mechanism may be complex. Folkman (2008, 2013) argued that different levels of stress could be explained by the subjective psychological appraisal of an event as threatening or not. The present study followed Folkman's line of conjecture, by differentiating between actual objective events (academic performance) and perceived subjective threats or failures (perceived academic failure). This study examined whether actual academic performance or a student's appraisal of their performance as "failing" is correlated with stress. Folkman's appraisal theory hypothesized that perceived academic failure is not contingent upon academic performance, and that perceived academic failure has a greater effect on stress levels than actual academic performance.

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Furthermore, Folkman (2013) suggested that the availability of psychological resources may influence one's appraisal of an event. This study explored the influence of grit, as one form of a psychological resource, on students' perceptions of failure and hence the level of stress they experienced. According to Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007), grit has two dimensions: consistency of interest refers to a person's ability to maintain a similar interest level over a relatively long period; and perseverance of effort refers to a person's ability to exert durable effort to overcome setbacks. Grit has been found to positively predict an array of accomplishments in school settings, including academic achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007), general sense of well-being (Von Culin, Tsukayama, & Duckworth, 2014) and meaning of life (Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan, & Riskind, 2013). Based on previous findings, this study hypothesized that the two dimensions of grit correlate negatively with perception of academic failure and experience of stress.

1. Objective of the present study

The premise of this study was to examine grit as the psychological resource that influences both actual (prior) academic performance and perceived academic failure, and hence stress levels. Based on Folkman's appraisal theory, perceived academic failure may have a greater influence on one's stress level than actual (prior) academic performance.

Unlike the system in the United States, the associate degree program in Hong Kong is for secondary students who have not qualified (due to different criteria) for a university place upon completing a secondary school diploma (Katherine, Janet, Sally, & Juhanie, 2013; Tung, 2000). This context provides a common external event (prior academic performance) for subjective appraisal (perceived academic failure) to test our hypotheses. Path analysis was used to test the following hypotheses simultaneously: 1) interest is negatively associated with stress and perceived academic failure, but positively associated with academic performance; 2) perseverance is negatively associated with stress and perceived academic failure, but positively associated with academic performance; 3) academic performance is negatively associated with stress and perceived academic failure; and 4) perceived academic failure is positively associated with stress.

The hypothesized path model is shown in Fig. 1.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Using convenience sampling, 345 associate degree students from a community college in Hong Kong were invited to participate in the study. All of the students were ethnically Chinese. Of these students, 125 (36%) identified themselves as male, 166 (48%) were freshmen, and their ages ranged from 18 to 21. At the beginning of the academic year, the core subject lecturers administered our questionnaire to students, following standardized procedures. The students took approximately 15 min to complete the questionnaire.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Grit

An eight-item brief version of the Grit Scale was used (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). The scale measures two dimensions: interest (sample item (R): "I often set a goal, but later choose to pursue a different one") and perseverance (sample item:

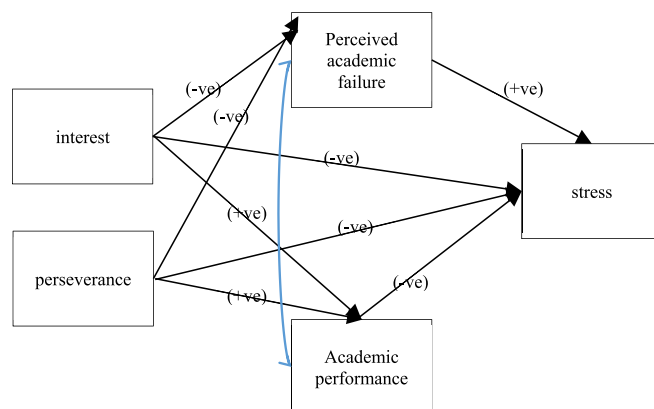


Fig. 1. The hypothesized Model.

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