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Learning Context and Undergraduate Students' Needs for Autonomy and Competence, Achievement Motivation and Personal Growth Initiative

Valeria Negovan^{a,*}, Corina Bogdan^b^aUniversity of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Bucharest, Romania,^bTitu Maiorescu University, Faculty of Psychology, Bucharest, Romania,

Abstract

This study aims to identify the learning context (public vs. private university, regular vs. distance programs, year of study) differences and relations between undergraduate university students' needs for autonomy and competence, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative. The participants in this study were 400 undergraduate university students, from two universities in Bucharest, Romania (a public and a private one), aged 19 to 40 ($M = 24.48$, $SD = 5.926$). Data were collected with 3 self-report scales. The research results contribute to the development of an empirical database for a better understanding of nowadays university student populations.

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Keywords: learning context; regular and distance learning; basic psychological needs, motivation achievement; personal growth initiative.

1. Introduction

One of the most significant changes in tertiary education during the last two decades has been the increase of the number of public and private universities or colleges and of the alternative educational programs in both public and private universities. Bjarnason et al. (2009) in a publication on Private Higher Education (one of the background documents for the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education) highlighted that “the private sector was making a significant contribution to plugging the gap that exists in many countries, between the demand for and the supply of higher education by the state” (p.48).

Private universities are, in comparison with public institutions, more accessible, more flexible and less discriminating in their admission and expulsion policies. Distance education is, in comparison with regular

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: negovan.val@gmail.com

education, more flexible but less definite in their “organizational and administrative arrangements” (Moore and Kearsley, 2005, p. 2).

The proliferation of public and private higher education institutions (Bjarnason et al. 2009) and of distance education programs is associated with an increasing diversity of those who are enrolled in accomplishing their educational goals. The role played by students’ characteristics is acknowledged in many adult learning theories (Knowles, 1985; Weindog, 2005), but more information about the learner’s internal attributes that can contribute to success in tertiary learning environments is needed. Some of the individual’s characteristics such as basic psychological needs, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative are more and more important for the nowadays students’ psychological profile.

Self Determination Theory describes three innate basic psychological needs: the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The authors defined the need for autonomy as the individuals’ need to feel as the origin of their choices and decisions, the need for competence as the need to feel a sense of mastery and the need for relatedness – the feeling of being accepted and respected by the group.

Achievement motivation was conceptualized in terms of “a relatively stable and learned personality disposition that compels the individuals to fulfill their own internalized standards of excellence and strive for success” (McClelland, 1961, p.78), which support individuals to engage in activities and facilitate learning.

Personal growth initiative was defined as a person’s “active intentional engagement in the process of personal growth” (Robitschek, 1998, p.184) and was associated with the individuals’ proactivity, the understanding of the opportunities for the personal development and with intentionality and awareness of the occurring changes in own life.

This study aims to identify the learning context (public vs. private university, regular vs. distance program, year of study) differences in university students’ needs for autonomy and competence, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative and to examine the relationship between these variables. In accordance with these objectives, it was predicted that: 1) the students from public and from regular classes will show a higher level of need for competence compared to the students from private and distance learning programs; 2) the students from private and distance learning programs will show a higher level of need for autonomy compared to the students from public university and from regular study programs; 3) the type of faculty, study program, year of study, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative will differently predict the students’ needs for autonomy and competence.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants in the study were 400 undergraduate university students, 194 from a public university and 206 from a private university. 207 were enrolled in regular courses and 193 in distance learning courses, 234 from the 1st year of study and 166 from the 2nd year of study, 99 males and 301 females, aged 19 to 40 years ($M = 24.48$, $SD = 5.926$). The study was conducted in 2010 – 2011 academic year. Participation was voluntarily, students were informed about the aims and the nature of the study and confidentiality was assured.

2.2. Instruments

Data were collected with: 1) *The Basic Psychological Needs Scale* (Deci et al., 2001); 2) *The Ray-Lynn Achievement Motivation scale* (Ray, 1979) and with the *Personal Growth Initiative Scale* (Robitschek, 1998). An additional Questionnaire about students’ gender, age, year of study, type of university and study programs they carry out was used.

2.3. Data Analyses

In order to examine the presumed differences and relationships a series of inter - groups comparisons with the Independent T – test and correlation and regression analyses were carried out.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

As described in Table 1, the mean score for students' need for autonomy is higher than the mean score for basic psychological need for competence. Overall, students in this sample reported a moderate level of achievement motivation and personal growth initiative.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the measured variables

Scale	No. of items	Alpha reliability	Mean	SD
Need for autonomy	7	.89	3.78	.778
Need for competence	7	.76	2.85	.803
Achievement motivation	14	.83	3.38	.553
Personal growth initiative	9	.72	3.71	.662

N= 400

3.1.1. Differences in undergraduate university students' needs for autonomy and for competence, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative

The Independent *t*-tests indicate that the students from the public university reported higher scores on need for competence and achievement motivation and lower scores on need for autonomy compared to the students from the private university. No differences according to the type of faculty as far as the personal growth initiative is concerned was found (table 2).

Table 2. Learning context (type of faculty) differences in undergraduate university students' need for autonomy and for competence, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative

Scale	Faculty	Item mean	Std. Deviation	T
Need for autonomy	Public	3.52	.640	7.384**
	Private	4.06	.807	
Need for competence	Public	3.17	.597	8.241**
	Private	2.56	.859	
Achievement Motivation	Public	3.51	.581	4.701**
	Private	3.26	.496	
Personal Growth Initiative	Public	3.77	.672	1.893
	Private	3.65	.648	

**p<0.001, Public (n = 194); Private (n = 206)

As described in Table 3, the students enrolled in the regular program reported higher scores on need for competence and lower scores on need for autonomy and achievement motivation compared to the students from

the distance-learning program. No difference as far as personal growth initiative is concerned according to the study program was found (table 3).

Table 3. Study program differences in undergraduate university students' need for autonomy and for competence, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative

Scale	Faculty	Item mean	Std. Deviation	T
Need for autonomy	Regular	3.45	.814	9.883**
	Distance	4.14	.548	
Need for competence	Regular	3.27	.439	11.740**
	Distance	2.46	.866	
Achievement Motivation	Regular	3.27	.530	4.303**
	Distance	3.50	.553	
Personal Growth Initiative	Regular	3.72	.664	1.808
	Distance	3.61	.655	

** $p < 0.001$ Regular (N = 207); Distance (N = 193)

3.1.2. Relationships between undergraduate university students' need for autonomy and for competence, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative

The correlation analysis showed statistically significant correlations between achievement motivation and students' need for autonomy ($r = .51$, $p < .001$) and for competence ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) and between students' need for autonomy and personal growth initiative ($r = .43$, $p < .001$).

The needs for autonomy and then the need for competence were subjected as dependent variables to a regression analysis with the gender, age, type of faculty, study program and year of study, achievement motivation and personal growth initiative as independent variables. The regression equation was significant (for the need for autonomy: $R^2 = .52$, $F_{(7, 392)} = 61.350$, $p < 0.001$ and for the need for competence: $R^2 = .50$, $F_{(7, 392)} = 56.512$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4. Determinants of undergraduate university students' needs for autonomy and competence

Predictors	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	t	p	p
	autonomy	competence	autonomy	competence	autonomy	competence
Gender	-.013	.029	-3.56	.786	.722	.432
Age	-.287	-.324	-6.263	-6.919	.000	.000
Type of faculty	-.358	.445	-9.146	-11.13	.000	.000
Study program	.566	.647	12.320	13.783	.000	.000
Year of study	.,006	.,026	-.176	.707	.860	.480
Achievement Motivation	.246	.188	5.878	4.393	.000	.000
Personal growth initiative	.230	-.054	5.708	-1.303	.000	.193

The clearest effects on both basic psychological needs were determined by the study program and by the type of faculty (stronger for the need for competence). Achievement Motivation explained more of the variance of students' need for autonomy than of the variance of students' need for competence. Personal growth initiative explained .23% of the variance of students' need for autonomy and it was not revealed as a predictor for students' need for competence (table 4).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The study proved that the dimensions related to the students' learning context differentiate their needs for autonomy, competence and achievement motivation, but not their level of personal growth initiative.

One of the most interesting results of the study was the proof that the students from private universities and from distance learning programs are more motivated by the need for autonomy and less motivated by the need for competence or achievement motivation, which are higher amongst the students from distance learning programs (in both, public and private universities). The findings of the study are consistent with the findings of other studies (Little, 1991; Darnon et al., 2008; Hashemian & Soureshjani, 2011).

The results highlight direct positive relations between achievement motivation and students' need for autonomy (stronger) and competence, as well as between students' need for autonomy and personal growth initiative. The clearest effects on both basic psychological needs are determined by the study program and by the type of faculty (stronger in the case of the need for competence), as well as by achievement motivation. Similar results are reported in studies conducted on online learning motivation (Weindog, 2005; Rice, 2009).

A possible limit of this study comes from the investigation of participants belonging to a single category of students (psychology students). Another possible limitation of the study is the fact that the research data were collected with the help of self-report scales. Therefore, further efforts with the use of different scales and methods may expand these findings.

Despite these limitations, the present study could have many implications for practice, especially for counseling in higher education sector. The results contribute to a better understanding of nowadays university student populations and to the development of an empirical database for intervention programs aiming to sustain both the students in their effort for an efficient academic education and the universities administrations in their efforts to improve educational opportunities provided to students.

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