

The Effects of Multiple Social Roles on College Students' Mental Health and Perception of Stress

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Abstract

This quantitative study aimed to examine the impact of multiple social role occupancy, such as being a parent, employee at the same time, on the well-being of college students. Research sample consisted of 210 students from various faculties who filled out a questionnaire booklet that assessed life satisfaction, general health and stress perception. Results showed that female students with multiple social roles experience higher levels of perceived stress and poorer mental health, supporting the Role Stress Theory. For male students no significant results were found.

Introduction

The third level education sector is growing every year. Financial burdens are amongst the main worries of students and many have to work in order to finance rising tuition costs (HEA, 2010). Mature students often return to college in order to improve prospects of getting a job. Therefore, many students are in employment and often have to fulfill other roles such as being a parent and employee while attending college.

Whether the occupancy of multiple roles is positive or negative for an individual's well-being is not clear. There are two opposing theories, one arguing for negative outcomes on one's well-being, the Role Stress Theory (Home, 1998), and the Role Expansion Theory arguing for positive consequences (Nordenmark, 2004). Evidence for both theories exist.

Much of the research focus was on the family and work relationship with much emphasis on women in particular (Barnett, 2004; Lee & Powers, 2002; Glynn & Ansara, 2004). Little attention has comparably been paid to students and the relationship between the multiplicity of social roles and mental health as well as stress levels, possibly due to the assumption that students generally only hold one role, that of being a student. However, more and more students are increasingly involved in the labour market due to financial difficulties and have other roles to fulfil while attending college. How does this impact on Irish third level students?



Method

Quantitative survey design was used for this study applying questionnaires and research design was of a non-experimental correlation approach. 210 college students (N = 210) were the participants of this study which were selected from a number of different faculties of a Dublin third level college. Three questionnaires used were the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).

Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous which was clearly communicated to participants prior to handing out questionnaires. Ethical guidelines of the college were strictly followed. Sampling method used was stratified random sampling, strata based on college students from year 1, 2 and 3 from different college faculties.

Data analysis was conducted with statistics software SPSS 18, and correlations were run through Pearson R Correlation analysis.

For this correlation research, Predictor Variable (PV) were number of social roles held by a student, which included that of being a parent, spouse, family caregiver to an elderly relative and employee. General health, life satisfaction and level of stress perception were Criterion Variables (CV).

Results

Results indicated that overall women do hold more roles compared to men and have poorer mental health and higher perceived stress levels. Women were more likely to take care of family members, stated more often that they have children, were more often in part-time employment and more often enrolled as part-time students. Correlational analysis showed that there was a significant positive correlation for females between number of roles occupied and general health scores. It further showed a negative correlation for females between number of roles and life satisfaction. A non-significant negative relationship was found for males when roles were correlated with perceived stress levels. For female students, however, a highly significant positive relationship was found.

Discussion

There was a strong positive correlation between number of social roles and General Health scores, for females, but not for male students. These findings are in line with the Role Stress Theory which argues that the occupancy of multiple roles is detrimental to an individual's health and well-being due to potential role overload and role conflict of clashing demands from numerous social roles (Home, 1998). Further, a highly significant negative relationship between number of roles and Life Satisfaction was found for female students, but not for male students. Thus, findings were concurrent with results from Glynn, MacLean, Forte and Cohen's (2009) study, who found that women who experienced the perception of role overload suffered from poorer mental health levels as demands from multiple social roles affected their well-being. Results for Perceived Stress were in line with Buda and Lenaghan (2005), who found that multiple roles caused higher stress levels and role strain which negatively impacted on students' well-being. One explanation for gender difference could be less secure and lower paid employment of women.

References

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