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**Examining the Influence of Adaptability and Social Support on Students'
Psychological Wellbeing in a Sixth Form Setting**

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Abstract

The present paper examines the relationship between adaptability and psychological wellbeing by focusing on the potential moderating role of social support. In total, 202 students aged 16-19 years from a sixth form setting in England, completed measures of their adaptability and social support, as well as their psychological wellbeing. Analyses revealed that adaptability was the strongest independent predictor of psychological wellbeing, although social support was also found to make a significant independent contribution. Further, and to address some mixed findings in the field, social support was found not to moderate the association between adaptability and psychological wellbeing. These findings have important implications for educators and researchers seeking to promote psychological wellbeing (via adaptability and social support) among sixth formers.

Keywords: adaptability; social support; psychological wellbeing; sixth form; college.

Declarations

Funding: Not Applicable.

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests: We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Ethics approval: The research was approved by a Faculty Research Ethics Committee (REC) and adheres with the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct.

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Consent to participate: Gatekeeper permission to carry out this study was received from the participating schools/colleges; individual participants provided informed consent to take part.

Consent for publication: Participants provided informed consent for their data—in the form of anonymous overall findings—to be included in journal outlets.

Availability of data and material: Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Code availability: For the main analyses, we used SPSS Version 26 and PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013).

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Introduction

In England, a sixth form college is a post-16 educational institution typically comprising pupils aged 16 to 19 years of age who are studying for advanced school-level qualifications. Sixth form education is markedly different from earlier education levels; for example, there are often changes in locale (students may need to change to a different school in a new area), social networks (new social circles emerge while previous social circles may cease), subject focus and depth (students are able to choose new subjects that might not have been offered previously), and independence, autonomy-control, and responsibility (learning becomes more self-guided and self-determined). As such, sixth form education can be emotionally challenging and associated with a decline in psychological wellbeing (e.g., Princes Trust, 2018). Research is warranted to uncover the factors that influence psychological wellbeing among sixth form students. Two factors which have received increasing attention in the recent literature, that are often located within the Conservation of Resources (COR) model (see Hobfoll, 2001), are adaptability and social support.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Model

Psychological wellbeing can be accounted for via the Conservation of Resource Theory (see Hobfoll et al., 2018). According to the COR model, individuals 'conserve' resources to protect themselves against future stress and strain, and potential loss of future resources (Hobfoll, 2001). It follows, that a surplus of resources is associated with positive psychological wellbeing (Cohen & Willis, 1985) while insufficient resources are associated with increased vulnerability (Hobfoll, 1989). These 'resources' have been typically classified into 'personal resources' which are internal to the individual and 'conditional resources' (also called 'situational') which are external to the individual within their environment and context. It has been argued that both

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‘resources’ are important for positive psychological wellbeing (e.g., Cohen & Willis, 1985); this has been corroborated by recent findings in educational contexts (see Holliman et al., 2021; Zhou & Lin, 2016).

Adaptability and psychological wellbeing

It has been argued that adaptability (that is, one’s adjustment of thoughts, behaviours, and emotions in the face of new, changing, or uncertain situations [Martin et al., 2012; 2013]) might buffer against new, challenging educational environments and promote positive psychological wellbeing. Aligning with the self-regulation framework (Zimmerman, 2002) and the lifespan theory of control approach (Heckhausen et al., 2010), adaptable students would be more able to monitor and modify their cognitions, behaviours, and emotions to optimise functioning in novel academic situations. In contrast, less adaptable students may experience heightened vulnerability and engage in self-handicapping actions such as procrastination (Holliman et al., 2018). Indeed, longitudinal studies (see Martin et al., 2013) and other recent work among adolescent samples (see Holliman et al., 2021) has shown that adaptability is predictive of psychological wellbeing (although see Putwain et al., 2020, who found that subjective wellbeing predicted adaptability but not vice versa). Thus, adaptability, as a personal resource, is likely to be associated with psychological wellbeing among sixth form students.

Social support and psychological wellbeing

Another (conditional) resource that has recently been considered alongside adaptability is social support, which refers to one’s perception (or actuality) that one is cared for and esteemed within a social network (Wills, 1991) and subjective awareness of assistance offered by family, friends, and significant others (e.g., Cauce et al., 1994). Social support (e.g., practical and emotional support) might also buffer (moderate)

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against the adverse influence of stressful events, promote a positive sense of value, and help to promote the effectiveness of coping strategies and reduce distress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Indeed, a converging literature has shown that social support is positively related to psychological wellbeing among college (e.g., Berndt, 1989) and other educational samples, such as sixth form and university students (e.g., Holliman et al., 2021). Thus, social support, as a conditional resource, is likely to be associated with psychological wellbeing among sixth form students.

Adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing

Given that both adaptability (personal) and social support (conditional) might assist with the conservation of resources and impact upon psychological wellbeing, it would seem probable that these constructs—adaptability and social support—are related, and this has been supported by findings in the area (e.g., Burns et al., 2018; Holliman et al., 2021). It is important therefore, to consider adaptability alongside social support, so that their unique relations to wellbeing can be estimated. Only a handful of studies have, thus far, examined this. Using a Chinese undergraduate (university) sample, Zhou and Lin (2016) found that adaptability and social support were independent (unique) predictors of psychological wellbeing but also that social support moderated (strengthened) the positive association between adaptability and psychological wellbeing.

However, in a multi-study article, one of which included a sixth form sample, Holliman et al. (2021) reported the failure to replicate this moderating effect of social support. In line with prior work though, adaptability and social support were related, and each explained unique variance in psychological wellbeing. Taken together, there is evidence that adaptability and social support are associated with psychological wellbeing. However, only a single published study (see Holliman et al., 2021) has

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examined these relations—adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing—among sixth form students in England, and this also had a limited sample size ($N = 73$).

The present study

In the present study, we adopt the COR model, to examine the role of relationship between adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing among a sixth form sample. In line with prior work in this area (see Holliman et al., 2021; Zhou & Lin, 2016), we consider ‘adaptability’ as a personal resource and ‘social support’ as a conditional resource, each of which has been associated with psychological wellbeing. Findings have important implications for educators and researchers seeking to promote psychological wellbeing among sixth form students.

Taken together, the current study addressed two major research questions:

1. Do adaptability and social support contribute significantly, and independently, to psychological wellbeing outcomes among sixth form students?
2. Is there an interaction effect between adaptability and social support on psychological wellbeing among sixth form students, specifically, a moderating role of social support?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants in this study ($N = 202$) were recruited from several sixth form education settings across England. Almost two-thirds of the sample identified as female ($n = 129$; 63.9%), aged between 16 and 19 years ($M = 18.08$; $SD = 2.93$), and were enrolled on range of advanced school-level qualifications, such as A-Levels and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), or combined pathway programmes. The study was advertised on school intranet pages and sixth form websites. Those who were interested to find out more were able to follow a link to the

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present study. Participant information sheets and consent questions were made available prior to completion of the online questionnaire. The online questionnaire itself comprised questions about demographics (e.g., age and gender) along with the substantive constructs in this study (i.e., adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing), as detailed in what follows.

Measures

Adaptability

To assess students' adaptability, we used the Adaptability Scale (Martin et al., 2013). This scale comprises items relating to cognitive adaptability (e.g., "I am able to revise the way I think about a new situation to help me through it"), behavioural adaptability (e.g., "To assist me in a new situation, I am able to change the way I do things if necessary"), and emotional adaptability (e.g., "I am able to reduce negative emotions (e.g., fear) to help me deal with uncertain situations"). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For analysis, the scores were combined and averaged, providing a global estimate score of adaptability for each participant ($\alpha = .90$), where higher scores correspond to higher adaptability. The scale had been used in similar samples (e.g., Holliman et al., 2021) and demonstrates adequate psychometric properties (see Martin et al., 2012; 2013).

Perceived social support

To assess students perceived social support, we used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). This scale comprises items relating to support from family (e.g., "My family really tries to help me"), support from friends (e.g., "My friends really try to help me"), and support from significant others (e.g., "I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me"). All items were rated of a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very

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strongly agree). In adherence with other work in this area (e.g., Holliman et al., 2021), scores were combined and averaged to provide an overall estimate of perceived social support ($\alpha = .91$), where higher scores correspond to higher social support.

Psychological wellbeing

To assess students' psychological wellbeing, we used the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007). The scale comprises 14 items aimed to assess wellbeing in feeling (e.g., "I've been feeling optimistic about the future") and daily functioning (e.g., "I've been dealing with problems well"). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). Scores were again combined and averaged to create an overall estimate of psychological wellbeing ($\alpha = .91$), where higher scores correspond to higher psychological wellbeing.

Results

Data Analysis Strategy

The data were first screened for assumption checking. The scores for adaptability and social support in particular were found to be not normally distributed (see Table 1). Therefore, we present Spearman's Rho bivariate correlations for this paper. Moreover, given the violation of normality, we present the Kruskal-Wallis test to examine differences by gender for the key constructs. Given the high proportion of females in the sample it is common to examine significant effects by gender within the key constructs assessed (e.g., See Waldeck et al., 2017). The descriptive statistics were obtained using SPSS v26 software. Finally, we report the results of a moderated linear regression analysis which was obtained using the PROCESS macro v3.5 (Hayes et al., 2017). There were no problems detected with auto-correlation, multi-collinearity, or heteroskedasticity. It is important to note that the results are presented following the

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forced-entry rather than as a hierarchical regression method as per PROCESS procedure (Hayes et al., 2017).

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 1. As indicated, adaptability and perceived social support were significantly positively and strongly associated with psychological wellbeing. Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed no significant differences in adaptability ($H [2] = 5.02, p = .08$), social support ($H [2] = 2.27, p = .32$), or wellbeing ($H [2] = 2.564, p = .27$) by gender.

<<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

Moderated Regression Analysis

A moderated regression analysis was conducted to examine perceived social support as a moderator of the relationship between adaptability and psychological wellbeing. The average scores of the key predictor variables (i.e., Adaptability) and the moderator (i.e., Social Support) were first mean-centred and an interaction term computed by multiplying the centred variables (Aiken & West, 1991). The overall model was significant ($F [3,197] = 70.87, p < .001$). It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between adaptability ($B = .58, t = 10.50, p < .001, 95\%$ CIs [.47, .69]), and perceived social support ($B = .22, t = 5.79, p < .001, 95\%$ CIs [.14, .29]), on psychological wellbeing. However, there was no interaction effect observed ($B = .00, t = 1.41, p = .16, 95\%$ CIs [.00, .00]). The variance explained by the predictors was 52%.

Discussion

The current study examined the relationship between adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing among sixth form students. It was found that adaptability was the strongest independent predictor of psychological wellbeing,

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although social support was also found to make a significant independent contribution. These findings were consistent with previous work showing that students' adaptability and social support were significantly related to psychological wellbeing outcomes (Holliman et al., 2021; Zhou & Lin, 2016). Moreover, our findings support the conservation of resources (COR) model (e.g., Hobfoll, 2001) which holds that personal and conditional resources, such as adaptability and social support respectively, are important for protecting oneself against current and future stress and are associated with positive wellbeing (e.g., Cohen & Willis, 1985; Reis et al., 2015). Further, and to address some mixed findings in the field, social support was found not to moderate the association between adaptability and psychological wellbeing. This was consistent with other work using English samples (see Holliman et al., 2021) but conflicts with studies using samples that are non-English (in this case, Chinese students), (see Zhou & Lin, 2016).

Implications

These findings suggest that sixth form providers might focus on students' adaptability and social support as a means to promote their psychological wellbeing. On adaptability, Martin et al. (2015) proposed an intervention strategy that might involve: 1) teaching students to recognize new and uncertain circumstances that might require a particular regulatory response; 2) teaching students how to make appropriate cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adjustments; and 3) helping students to notice the positive effect of these adjustments and process the regulatory responses to help guide future responses. However, intervention working in this area is lacking. On social support, sixth form providers might focus more on promoting positive parent and peer relations. New students could, for instance, be paired with students who have existing friendship groups to share information and build new relationships (Rosenfeld et al., 2000).

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Moreover, as social support is also received from parents, sixth form providers must consider how to better engage parents as their role is often limited (Mangan et al., 2001). This could be achieved through educating parents on the challenges of sixth form study, advertising opportunities for positive behavioural engagement (such as clubs, societies, and academic interventions) and providing strategies to support wellbeing.

Limitations and further directions

There are some limitations of this study that need to be addressed. First, as this research did not utilize any qualitative techniques, it is unable to explore the nuances associated with the lived experience of sixth form education. Future research might therefore adopt more qualitative approaches: this might take the subject in new directions and/or help uncover the complex dynamics concerning the reported associations between adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing. Second, the current research focused on ‘individual-level variables’; however, other factors beyond the individual might be important, such as those at the teacher or institution level, which might also impact upon psychological wellbeing. Indeed, the most effective intervention efforts are likely to consider both the development of individual capabilities (such as adaptability) and the ways in which organisations can ‘adapt’ to support a diverse student population with different needs.

It is likely that wellbeing and adaptability are positively related in a bidirectional fashion as a virtuous cycle. The ability to effectively deal with uncertainty and novelty leads to a more positive and fulfilling experience that is reflected in higher wellbeing scores; higher wellbeing promotes flexible thinking that is a critical element of adaptability. The present study, as with other studies using cross-sectional designs cannot unpick the directionality of relations. One study to test directionality found,

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contrary to the above theorising, that school-related wellbeing positively predicted subsequent adaptability; adaptability was positively correlated with concurrent, but not future, school-related wellbeing (Putwain et al., 2020). Additional studies to examine bidirectional relations are clearly required.

Conclusion

The present study showed that sixth form students' adaptability and social support operate largely as independent positive predictors of psychological wellbeing. Social support was also found not to moderate the association between adaptability and psychological wellbeing. Taken together, and in spite of some acknowledged limitations, the findings from this study may have important implications for educators and researchers, who are seeking to promote psychological wellbeing among sixth form students, where psychological wellbeing reported to be of concern.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations between Study Variables (N = 202)*

Variables	1	2	3
1. Adaptability			
2. Social Support (PSS)	.36**		
3. Psychological Wellbeing	.66**	.50**	
<i>M</i>	4.84	5.07	3.02
<i>SD</i>	1.06	1.18	.70
Skewness	-1.07	-1.00	-.11
Kurtosis	2.15	1.67	-.12

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.