

Homesickness in the first-year college students: The role of personality and attachment styles

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the role of basic personality traits and attachment styles in predicting homesickness among first year college students. The study was conducted with 177 preparation class students who have moved to another city away from their family. Data was collected through "Utrecht Homesickness Scale" developed by Stroebe, Vliet, Hewstone, and Willis (2002), "The Big Five Inventory" by Benet-Martinez and John (1998) and "Relationships Scales Questionnaire" developed by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994). Fearful and pre-occupied attachment styles and neuroticism were found as significant predictors in explaining homesickness. Attachment styles and personality traits were found to explain 15% of variance in homesickness.

Keywords: Homesickness, personality, attachment styles, college students

1. Introduction

In today's world more and more people are leaving their home and moving to other places for the sake of studying at a university, getting a new job and for many other various reasons. The experience of such a move has the possibility to bring certain levels of stress to the person who may face with the challenges of adjusting to this new environment. Following such a move from home and the familiar environment, some individuals may experience a distressing psychological process namely called homesickness in the literature as the challenging and dysfunctional amount of stress and difficulty among those people who leave their home and find themselves in a new and unfamiliar surrounding than they have (Tilburg, Vingerhoet and Heck, 1996).

Homesickness is a complex emotional-cognitive process including ruminations for home, an extensive desire to turn back home accompanied by depressive feelings and somatic symptoms (Fisher, 1989). Specifically, the key psychological characteristics of homesickness are an intense preoccupation with the thoughts and desire to turn back to home, a state of grief for people, place and things at home and the common feelings of unhappiness, disease and disorientation in the new environment. The onset and duration of homesickness is affected by various factors so the experience of this process can be claimed to vary according to certain agents (Tilburg and Vingerhoets, 2005). Based on the emerging homesickness studies, the factors that can be regarded as operative in the homesickness process can be classified through familial, social level as well as personal contexts and agents.

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Regarding the role of social factors on the experience of homesickness, perceived social support from the environment is indicated to be a contradictory factor in the development of homesickness (Halamandaris and Power, 1999, Newland and Furnham, 1999). In other words, individuals who perceive the people in their surrounding as supportive cope with the homesickness process better than other individuals. In contrast, Fisher (1989), also underlined that social support may also have the potential to contribute positively to the homesickness process due to the tendency of those individuals to seek support from ones with similar experiences. Pittmann and Richmond (2008) also claimed that a sense of belonging to the university and the quality of friendships are also important contradictory factors to the homesickness in the college students. The results of their study also showed that university belonging and nurturing friendships are important markers of the positive changes over self-perception (e.g., self-worth) and hence facilitate adjustment. In other words, feeling belongingness to the new environment helps individuals to heal and organize their self-concepts positively in a way to promote a healthy adaptation process.

Family structure and relations are also indicated to be a crucial social determinant holding considerable reflections for the personal vulnerability to develop homesickness. Nijhof and Engels (2007) studied the role of parenting styles as interacting the emergence of homesickness in the first year college students. The results of this study emphasized that individuals who raised in authoritarian and permissive parents exhibit more homesickness and related processes than those who raised in authoritative families. At another study examining the role of parental attachment in homesickness, Mattanah, Hancock and Brand (2004), also underlined the role of family in the painful experience of college adjustment by showing that secure attachment style is a significant factor in predicting distress among college population. At another study, Stroebe, Vliet, Hewstone and Willis (2002), studied antecedents and consequences of homesickness in two different cultures. Exploring the effects of personality and family situational factors on homesickness was a part of the study. Results concerning the variable of family situational factors showed that insecurely attached individuals are more likely to be less emotionally stable, more alone and depressed. The results of this study indicate that many aspects of homesickness is evident in individuals who have insecure attachment style toward others. Similarly, Shal, Sharbaf, Abdekhodae, Masoleh and Salehi (2011), also found that secure attachment style predicates homesickness in a way that it can reduce homesickness. Results of this study additionally indicate that avoidant and anxious attachment styles positively predict homesickness.

Turning back to the possible effects of personal characteristics and attributes on the homesickness experience, studies that focused on the relations between personality traits and homesickness discovered that negative personality factors such as neuroticism increases the tendency of individuals to develop homesickness while positive personality factors such as being extravert and open to new experiences may become protective factors for the college students in their psychosocial adaptation to university life (Halamandaris and Power, 1999, Tilburg, Vingerhoet and Heck, 1999, Khademi and Aghdam, 2013). Regarding the influential personal characteristics and attributes facilitating homesickness, Flett, Endler and Besser (2009) found out that low perceived controllability is positively associated with anxiety level and also homesickness of first year college students. At another study, Ward and Kennedy (1993), in their cross-cultural study, compared psychological and socio-cultural adjustment of secondary students overseas and at home. The relations between locus of control and homesickness, which was a part of that study, revealed that individuals with external locus of control are more likely to develop homesickness compared to those with internal locus of control. Tilburg, Vingerhoets and Heck (1997), in an extensive study,

also examined the role of coping style in predicting homesickness in chronic homesick individuals. The findings of their study disclosed that mental escape is the most important facilitator of homesickness for those experiencing chronic homesickness.

In the recent literature of homesickness, it is noteworthy to underline that contemporary studies mainly turned their focus to understand homesickness in multiple domains through personal characteristics predisposing on homesickness as well as the characteristics of the environment. Those studies on personal factors included the variables such as age, gender, culture and personal characteristics (etc., attitudes, personality) while the focus of the studies on the role of environmental factors are the relations of such variables to social environment and parental characteristics influential in psychosocial resilience of college students. As evident in many studies, homesickness is related to the hurting experiences of depression, anxiety, self-impairment and ruminations that all have the potential to negatively interfere with the individual functioning and health status. In spite of the rising interest to understand the destructive experience of homesickness in a broad perspective, homesickness literature is still not having much attention from psychological researchers and this subject is only under the interest of those who have experienced this condition personally in their lives (Tilburg, Vingerhoet and Heck, 1996).

In this direction, this study is assumed to both nationally and globally contribute to the current homesickness literature as studying a part of personal variables of traits and attachment styles related to this phenomenon. Studying homesickness through these lenses is expected to encourage similar studies and interventions that aim to open different viewpoints and channels in helping these individuals with such negative and distressing experience of leaving their houses. All in all, the aim of the present study is to understand the role of personality specifically as named in Big Five Personality factors (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience) and attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied, dismissing) in predicting homesickness among first year college students. The research question to be answered in the present study is;

Do the basic personality traits and the attachment styles predict homesickness among first year college students?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 177 students studying in the Preparation School of a private university; who have been living at another city away from their family for seven months at average. Participants were 77 girls (44%) and 100 boys (57%) with the average age of 20.04. Purposeful sampling method was utilized in the study to select the sample because the participants were selected based on the criterion of leaving home (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2011). Data for the study was collected through standard instruments and demographic form.

2.2. Instruments

Utrecht Homesickness Scale was originally developed by Stroebe, Vliet, Hewstone, and Willis (2002) to measure homesickness through the sub-dimensions of; missing family, loneliness, missing friends, adjustment difficulties and ruminations about home. The questionnaire is composed of 20 items in that there are four questions on those five dimensions. In the original scale, internal consistency of the scale was found satisfactory with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .94. For the

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subscales Cronbach's alpha levels range between .80 and .90 for each dimension. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Duru and Balkıs (2013) and their results disclosed similar levels of overall Cronbach alpha coefficient to the original study. In this study, Cronbach's alpha level was found to range between .74 -.91 for the five subscales.

The Big Five Inventory was developed by Benet-Martinez and John (1998) to measure five basic personality traits. The scale that is in five-point Likert type has 44 items to measure personality in following domains; neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. In reliability analysis, overall Cronbach alpha level of the scale was found .83 for the English-language scales and .78 for the Spanish translations that are both substantial.

Big Five Personality Inventory was translated and adapted to Turkish culture by Sümer and Sümer (2005) as a part of an international study that focused on personality traits in different cultures. In this study, Cronbach alpha level was found between .64-.77 for the subscales of the inventory.

Relationships Scales Questionnaire was developed by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) to measure adult attachment styles. The scale is in seven-point Likert type with 30 items measuring four attachment styles; secure, fearful, preoccupied and dismissing. Test-retest reliability of the scale was found .53 for women and .49 for men. Cronbach alpha level was found to range between .41 and .71 for the subscales.

Sümer and Güngör (1999) translated and adapted Turkish version of Relationship Scales Questionnaire. In their study, test-retest reliability of the scale was found to range between .54 and .78 and Cronbach alpha level was found to be between .27 and .61 for the subscales.

3. Results

In the first part of the results, pre-analyses of assumption testing for multiple regression will be summarized.

First of all, histograms and normal P-P plot of the residuals were utilized to check the assumption of normality of errors. Both of these figures have enough evidence for meeting the assumption for the normal distribution of errors. Then, scatter plot of the predicted value and residuals were utilized to examine the assumption of homoscedasticity. In the scatter plot, there was no apparent pattern that is the cause of homoscedasticity problem. For checking the independence of errors, Durbin-Watson test was utilized and found as 1.94, a value between 1.5 and 2.5, which is acceptable to meet this assumption (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2000).

After that, multi-collinearity was addressed by checking the correlation between independent variables in correlation matrix and also through VIF and tolerance values. In the correlation matrix presented below, there is no a correlation coefficient above .90 between independent variables. Moreover, there is no any independent variables with VIF value above 5 or 10 and tolerance value less than 0.2 or 0.1. These indications show that there is no any problem of multi-collinearity for the variables (Field, 2000; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2000).

In the second step, influential observations of residual plots, Cook's distance, Leverage statistics, DFBeta and Mahalonobis distance were examined to decide on the outliers. Cook's distance was checked and 2 of the cases were found having a value above 1 indicating the existence of an outlier (Cook and Weisberg, 1982). There were 3 cases with leverage values higher than 3 and

one case with DFBeta value above 2 (Stevens, 2002) that were considered to be checked as outliers. In addition, critical χ^2 value for Mahalanobis distance analysis indicated 3 problematic cases (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2000). All of those observations were evaluated together and both analyses were conducted with those four outliers and without them. Moreover, those four cases were also evaluated in terms of the demographic variables that they presented. In the final decision, none of these four cases were included in the major analyses and regression analysis was conducted with the remaining 173 participants.

In the third step, multiple regression analysis was conducted. First of all, descriptive statistics for the variables (mean, SD and correlation matrix) were summarized and presented in Table 1.

From the correlation matrix presented in Table 1, it can be concluded that there is a significant positive correlation between homesickness and fearful attachment style, preoccupied attachment style and personality trait of neuroticism. Moreover, homesickness is seen to be significantly and negatively correlated to secure attachment style and personality trait of extraversion. In addition, in the correlation matrix, there is no a correlation coefficient above .90 between independent variables. This indicates that there is no any problem of multicollinearity for independent variables (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2000).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Inter-correlations for Homesickness and Predictor Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Homesickness	49.9	13.35	-.12*	.05	.21*	.29**	-.18**	.03	.11	.26**	-.05
Predictor Variables											
1. Secure Attachment	20.73	4.08	-	-.09	-.36**	.03	.15*	.13*	.01	-.24**	.00
2. Dismissive Attachment	21.99	4.96		-	.57**	-.17**	-.04	-.03	.05	.01	.08
3. Fearful Attachment	15.66	5.06			-	-.12	-.18**	-.09	.11	.16*	.04
4. Preoccupied Attachment	15.08	4.32				-	-.08	.01	-.03	.19**	-.11
5. Extraversion	21.19	6.14					-	.09	.03	-.24**	.33**
6. Agreeableness	33.77	4.89						-	.3**	-.21**	.28**
7. Conscientiousness	31.98	5.9							-	-.2**	.25**
8. Neuroticism	21.91	6.3								-	-.12*
9. Openness	37.47	6.39									-

Note. N = 177; *p < .05, **p < .01

At the next step of the analysis, significance of regression coefficients, squared semi-partial correlations, R^2 and adjusted R^2 values, unstandardized and standardized weights summary of multiple regression analysis for independent variables predicting homesickness were checked and results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 displays that the model significantly predicts homesickness in the first year college students ($F(9, 167) = 4.5, p < .05$). The adjusted R^2 value of .15 shows that secure attachment style, dismissive attachment style, fearful attachment style, preoccupied attachment style and basic personality dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to new experience account for 15% of the variance in the homesickness experience of

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students. When individual variables were checked against their unique contributions shown in beta coefficient values, fearful attachment style, preoccupied attachment style and neuroticism significantly predict the variance in the homesickness level. Preoccupied attachment style has the highest contribution for explaining the variance ($\beta = .26, t = 3.62, p < .05$) in homesickness followed by neuroticism ($\beta = .19, t = 2.44, p < .05$) and fearful attachment style ($\beta = .19, t = 2.07, p < .05$).

Table 2. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for personality and attachment style variables predicting Homesickness (N= 173)

Variable	B	SE	B	T	P	ΔR^2	R^2
(Constant)	16.18	13.13		1.23	.22	.15	.2
Secure Attachment	-.05	.25	-.01	-.19	.85		
Dismissive Attachment	-.07	.23	-.03	-.32	.75		
Fearful Attachment	.51	.25	.19	2.07	.04		
Preoccupied Attachment	.81	.22	.26	3.62	.00		
Extraversion	-.17	.17	-.08	-1.01	.31		
Agreeableness	.16	.21	.06	.79	.43		
Conscientiousness	.28	.17	.13	1.65	.10		
Neuroticism	.4	.16	.19	2.44	.02		
Openness	-.06	.16	-.03	-.37	.71		

Notes. $F(9, 167) = 4.5, (p = .00)$.

All of the significant predictors; that is fearful attachment style, preoccupied attachment style and neuroticism positively predicts the variance in the dependent variable of homesickness. In other words, participants with preoccupied and fearful attachment style and those having the personality trait of neuroticism significantly exhibit higher levels of homesickness compared to the other participants.

4. Discussion and directions for future research

The aim of the study was to understand the role of basic personality dimensions and attachment styles in explaining homesickness among first year college students. Align with the purpose, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine how participants' basic personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience) and attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied and dismissing) predict homesickness in college students in their first year. Results of the multiple regression analysis partially supported the research question presented above showing that fearful attachment style, preoccupied attachment style and neuroticism are the significant predictors for explaining homesickness.

According to Bartholomew and Shaver (1998), individuals with preoccupied attachment styles anxiously expect being accepted and confirmed by others' opinions to ensure safety in a way that other individuals react them properly. They exhibit a negative view of their self-image and a positive view of others. Similarly, individuals with fearful attachment styles have the tendency to be dependent on getting validation from others but they also avoid relationships to prevent the pain of loss or being rejected by others. Those individuals have a negative view for their image and also others. As Fisher (1989) emphasized in the four model theory of homesickness, at the early stages of development, infants who lose contact to their mothers show anxious and fearful reactions and they start to form some behavioral patterns to express those negative feelings. In a similar way, individuals at later stages of development experience a partial loss when they leave their families, friends and the environment they live in. This experience of leaving home brings

anxiety, anger and intensive depressive symptoms especially to the individuals with fearful, anxious and preoccupied attachment styles (Tilburg, Vingerhoet and Heck, 1996). The results of the present study indicating that individuals with fearful and preoccupied attachment styles experience more levels of homesickness than others are also consistent with other studies in the literature (Stroebe, Vliet, Hewstone and Willis, 2002; Shal, Sharbaf, Abdekhodae, Masoleh and Salehi, 2011).

Another finding of the study related to the homesickness and basic personality traits showed that neuroticism positively predicts homesickness among first year college students. This specific result of the study is parallel with the studies finding out a strong relationship between neuroticism and homesickness (Tilburg et. al, 1997). According to Benet-Martinez and John (1998), neuroticism is a trait dominated by the negative feelings of anxiety, sadness, irritability and nervous tension. Individuals with the neurotic personality trait have a tendency to easily experience anger, impulsiveness, depression and vulnerability as a reaction to a stressful situation. Fisher (1989), also emphasized that following their move from home, individuals exhibit psychoneurotic and somatic symptoms. In this perspective, it is emphasized that individuals eventually face with the challenges of coping with the requirements of their new environment after their move. This stressful process means a threat to the self-concept resulting in depressive and painful feelings for individuals who are surrounded by helplessness due to their ineffective coping skills. These theoretical standings have the implication that individuals with neurotic personality trait hold the tendency to be emotionally disturbed by the stressful experience of leaving their home.

One of the limitations of the study is related to the sample in that all preparation class students at a private university who left their home for studying at the college were included. Although the sampling procedure was conducted align with the purpose of this study, examination of the same variables with different and larger groups may create different results. Random selection methods can be used with diverse student populations and various backgrounds for reaching a better understanding of this experience. Thus, researchers should be cautious with the results of the present research when studying with other groups having different demographical characteristics (ethnic group, socio-economic status, etc.). Another limitation of the study is the variables included in the study. As the results of the study pointed out, all of the predictors explain 15% variance in the homesickness level of the first year college students and there is still a big proportion of unexplained variance for the variable of homesickness. Theoretical framework or logical inferences should be made with caution when studying with the same set of variables. Interpersonal skills, psychological needs, culture and family relations are some of the variables that can also be taken into consideration within the scope of homesickness literature.

Based on both limitations and possible contributions of the current study, it should be speculated that personality factors and attachment styles could be regarded as important direct or indirect factors in explaining the experience of homesickness for the first year university students. Given this assumption, future studies and also counseling interventions targeted at college students especially with adaptation problems should take personality traits and attachment styles into account when working with homesick students. Understanding dominant attachment issues and core personality dynamics influential in the homesickness level of students may help professionals to intervene with those areas more effectively and reach a broader perspective over this phenomena. As well, college counselors may also set effective individual and psycho-educational interventions to understand and facilitate the adaptation process of their students by assessing or

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intervening with the similar personality traits and attachment characteristics of these specific students that they are trying to help.

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