

FITTING IN: BEHAVIORAL CONFORMITY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN KENYA

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Abstract

When a person joins a social organization, it is imperative that they adapt to prosper. Change of values ordinarily occurs through compliance where one entertains and accepts the influence of comrades as they hope for favorable reactions from peers. This study was an examination of behavioral change in response to customary university values and roles among students of Moi University main campus. The key objective was to examine factors determining behavioral change among students in Moi University. The paper argues that students are disposed to adopt negative behavior at the University due to negative university customs and environmental challenges. Majority of students have inadequate fortitude and emotional intelligence to confront challenges inherent in the university environment. University rules and administration have range bound consequences on the behavior of students. The paper recommends the re-structuring of freshman orientation programs, peer mentorship, increased facilitation of student clubs and extracurricular activities, recognition and awarding of outstanding students and reconstitution of the university counseling program.

Keywords: *Behavior Change, Peer Influence, Social Conformity, Student Culture*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Human behavior is dynamic. It varies in different contexts and with differing individuals with whom one is interacting. Behavioral change is inevitable; the individual undergoes a multiplicity of metamorphosis due to among others social, psychological, cultural, environmental, and economic factors. The nature and frequency of behavior are constrained and confined by specific role interactions. Research has shown that human beings are bound to change when they interact with others and with their shifting experiences in life. The rate and level with which individuals adopt change is different, despite exposure to the same situations depending on their personality, socio-economic background, and the length of time of contact with the change agent(s) (Sharma, 2007).

Behavior change is an interminable process which proceeds from childhood to adulthood. The shared norms, values, customs, laws, and attitudes usually determine individuals' thoughts and feelings. When a person becomes part of a new social organization, it is paramount for him/her to adapt to fit in (Sharma, 2007). Adaptation in most cases occurs through compliance where one accepts the influence because they hope for a favorable reaction from other persons. Satisfaction from conformity is derived from the rewarding social effect(s) of accepting the influence. Adaptation also occurs through identification with individuals accepting behavioral cues and influence due to desire to establish satisfying relationships with others in the group. Satisfaction is derived from conforming and the person feels that he/she is like the other members of the group.

Adaptation may also occur through internalization especially when one accepts influence because the content of the new behavior is directly rewarding and congruent with his/her existing value system.

This study conceptualizes behavior as the observable, measurable, and repeatable actions of an individual. The key elements in the definition of behavior are observability - a behavior must be seen or heard, measurability - an observer can identify its rate of occurrence, and repetition - it must occur more than once.

In universities, customs serve as standards – as ideals towards which the students aspire. Customs are inferred from regularities in behavior and a change in values has implications for subsequent behavior. In Moi University, like any other national institution of higher learning in Kenya, students have to adjust the views, values, attitudes, and general behavior to fit in the dynamic university community. Whereas some values that students are expected to uphold are outlined in the Students' Handbook, most of the norms are left for students to infer from common sense and values of the University. Behavioral transformation is believed to have occurred when newly admitted, or continuing students comply to, identify with, and internalize new behavioral characteristics to fit their definition of an ideal university student and a comrade.

Behavior change among students in universities is ideally intended to facilitate students in coping with the challenges in campus. This is not always the case as many students end up learning and adopting negative and self-destructing behavior. The study seeks to understand the extent to which students' behavior change at Moi University constitutes their adaptation to the university socio-cultural environment.

Sources of influence to change in the University

Change does not only arise from that which is communicated verbally to the individual but also from intentional and unintentional actions and interactions. In a society as diverse as a university, change results from all aspects of daily interaction. It may be from observation or association where the company an individual keeps influences them to change, or from media content that one is exposed to on campus. Change may also result from preconceptions and stereotypes of how a university student is supposed to behave as students strive to achieve the 'ultimate university character' and to fit into different circles and cliques.

Behavior change process

The factors that influence adaptation of behavior by individuals include attention, comprehension, and acceptance. New and seemingly novel values initially capture individuals' attention, the individual has to understand and assign meaning to the message communicated and eventually, the individual accepts (knowingly or not) to take up the aspects of change communicated to them. When the change occurs, the individuals may even develop complementary habits on the new ideas (Tyson, 2013). Change may also simply be a public expression of agreement with the ideas despite the private, personal rejection of them; University students exhibit both levels of change (Rosenberg & Turner, 2004).

Learning and behavior change

Learning results in a relatively permanent change in behavior. It translates into meaningful and observable behavior change. The change must not necessarily occur immediately following the learning experience and individuals show signs of change at disparate rates. Changes are not always positive in nature and do not result only from learning but also by motivation and maturity of individuals (Tyson, 2013). The stimulus to change among university students is the new environment made up of individuals from different backgrounds and

minimal supervision by authorities and parents. The response that results from this stimulus is a marked change in attitude, values, and behavior.

According to Barlow (1976), "...in each behavior adjustment there is always both a response and a stimulus or a situation which calls out the response. The responses always follow relatively immediately to the stimulus." The stimulus to change by university students comes from the new environment (diverse community made up of persons from widely varied backgrounds), relative economic self-determination, and minimal (if any) supervision by authorities and parents. The response that results from this stimulus is change in attitude, values, and consequently general behavior.

Role of society in influencing behavioral change

According to the Idealist School when social norms apply to a person, he/she naturally occupies the social role(s) attached - with a subsequent set of attitudes, duties, and expectations (Moberg, 2013). As students matriculate to and undertake to fit into the Moi University society, they are expected to adjust their behavior to fit the new roles assigned to them. The Moi University student society is significantly permissive, and behavior such as smoking, alcoholism, examination cheating, and cohabitation among others are loosely defined as immoral. This makes it more likely for students to engage in such behavior, as they perceive them to be the norm and to complement their role in the university.

Talcott Parsons argues that society must have systems that function together to keep the social system running. The first system is goal attainment - the ways in which the members as individuals and as role occupants are facilitated to achieve their objectives (Rogers, 2010). In the Campus, this is done through the formation of study groups, clubs, cliques, and other associations geared at promoting academic performance and general life on campus. The second system is adaptation - the way(s) in which individuals become habituated to their material environment by fitting in it and using it to their advantage. The third system is integration - the various devices through which individuals come together in organized relationships with minimized conflict. In campus, this is largely the role of the administration and the university rules and regulations. Lastly, there is pattern maintenance - methods of ensuring that individuals internalize and voluntarily adhere to the norms of the society in which they have become members. In the Campus, this is achieved through socialization and peer influence among newly admitted and continuing students.

Behavioral adaptation of newcomer students

In an article titled "socio-psychological behavior changes among students: a case study of first-year students in Moi University, Main Campus" Sorre (2008) notes, "... such young people are curious, adventurous and easily tempted which makes them vulnerable to change." New students are tempted to try the things that were previously forbidden in secondary schools. From institutions where rules govern every waking moment and suddenly into one where they are in charge of their own conduct (Sorre, 2008). Change in behavior is most drastic among first-year students but continues through the entire stay of the students in the university. Changes later in campus life such as the award of bursaries and student loans, frustration by persistent poor academic performance, change in religious beliefs among others may cause a change in the conduct of a continuing student.

Self-esteem and student behavior change

A study by King & McGinnis (1972) explored the influence of self-esteem on influence that occasions behavior change. They noted that persons with high self-confidence are less susceptible to influence and are assertive

in trying to influence other members of society. Individuals with high regard for their self-worth are better placed to resist reacting to the expectations communicated to them but which they do not agree with. Persons with low self-esteem, on the other hand, are likely to be less critical of ideas presented to them. They are susceptible to seek approval and acceptance of peers by adopting any practice that they presume portrays them as “cool” and indicates that they fit with the ‘cliques’ that are dominant in their society. It is for this reason that the more confident urban born students are probable to influence their rural counterparts than vice versa.

Personality and behavior change

Studies show that some individuals are more prone to behavior influence than others. Some people tend to be indiscriminately influenced by the innumerable persuasive communications in society while others are generally unresponsive to such influence. There are notable differences between persons who easily change and those who are consistent in their behavior. Changers do not form their own basis of judging situations and do not deliberately resist influence. They crave for social approval, participate in social activities, and succumb easily to peer pressure, focus on other people. Such persons have high respect for parental authority, high admiration of power, tend to feel inadequate and inferior, have little assertiveness, have a weak self-image, and are unimaginative (Irving & Field, 1966).

Counseling as a tool for facilitating positive change

Counseling is widely recommended as a strategy for aiding students and young people cope with changes and transformations in their lives. A survey by Crabbs (1979) showed that counseling had a positive impact on self-acceptance, school attitudes, adherence to school rules, and even relations in the family. Students who go through counseling recognize and appreciate their mistakes and are open to the advice that the counselors give them. Moi University main campus has an established counseling department that is open for access by students. Counseling is a tool employed by the university administration to rehabilitate errant students. The dean of students refers such students to the counselor who then assigns them mandatory counseling sessions.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Universities are free societies characterized by freedom, growth and development, personal responsibility, accountability, and dignity. However, it is also a place of self-questioning, confusion, immorality, fixation, and self-destruction and in extreme cases; death (Taub & Robertson, 2013). Many students have fallen victim to destructive habits and conditions including substance abuse, suicide, stress, and depression (Whitaker & Pollard, 1993). Others engage examination malpractices and cheating and, in some cases, drop out of the programs altogether.

The Moi University fraternity has witnessed an increase in the cases of attempted suicide among the students as many others are hooked on drugs and alcohol. Increased crime has been reported with claims that the perpetrators could be students. These maladjustments have severally been attributed to stress and psychological dysfunction among students especially during examination periods (Whitaker & Pollard, 1993). Observation indicates that there is a trend among students to casually engage in anti-social behavior that includes fighting, aggressive behavior, disrespect and insubordination of staff members, and lecture room misconduct. As a result, cases of students applying for special examinations and sitting supplementary exams indicate an upward trend.

Most studies, such as Sorre (2008) focus on recommending solutions to the problem of adoption of destructive behavior especially recommending the guidance and counseling option. Few studies focus on revealing

underlying factors that occasion and explain changes in the individual students' behavior. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the ways in which student conduct is a product of the students' adaptation to the social and cultural environment in Moi University main campus. It will be instrumental in the formulation and revision of university policies and prediction of student behavior. It is also instrumental in apprising stakeholders on the dynamics of student behavior and behavior change at the university.

Objectives of the study

The key objective of the study was to examine behavioral adaptation of students at Moi University. More specifically, the study investigates the impact of University rules and regulations on student behaviour. Second is to describe the customs influencing student behaviour. Third is to evaluate the implications of substance use on student behaviour. Finally, is to recommend effective intervention strategies to enhance the positive adaptation of students to university life.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of planned behavior and Theory of reasoned action

The theory of reasoned action proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen is based on the premise that intentions determine behavior. Stronger intentions, therefore, lead to increased effort to perform the behavior and increase the chances that the behavior is sustained (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Intentions precede actions and are the strongest predictors of behavior. The theory of planned behavior is based on a cognitive perspective of explaining behavior. It centers on individuals' beliefs and attitudes (Appiah & Eighmey, 2012). The theory borrows heavily from that of reasoned action and proposes that intention is the strongest predictor of actions and, ultimately, behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Behavior is a product of attitudes and opinions on the behavior. According to this theory, an individual evaluates behavior/actions as being positive or negative depending on his norms, values, social pressures, perceptions of others in the community, the inclination to comply, and expected outcomes (Appiah & Eighmey, 2012). Social contexts play a central role in determining behavior trait selection and are especially influential in determining behavior of university students who are at an age (between 18 and 25 years) when persons are vulnerable to peer-influence. There is an intrinsic desire to be popular and fit in for students. They experience a period of rapid self-discovery and maturation that often leads to confusion and negative behavior adaptation. The (seemingly) unlimited freedoms of self-determination, lack of consequences for behavior, and endless free time that typically characterize undergraduate studies exacerbate the behavior change.

The two theories are suitable in predicting student behavior and analyzing behavior trends. They explain variations in behavior among students despite standard customs and traditions in the University. These theories, however, are criticized for emphasizing the role of individuals in determining behavior and disregarding the role of past behavior – often-significant influence on future behavior even among young adults (Frishman, 2008, Sanderson, 2010). The models are tools for identifying behavioral influences to target for adjustment/change at the university and determining the suitability of intervention programs.

4.0 STUDY MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1 Study area

Moi University was established in 1984 as the second public university in Kenya. Its vision is “to be the university-of-choice in nurturing innovation and talent in science, technology, and development.” It has several

campuses among them; Main campus, Annex campus, Nairobi campus, Kitale campus, and Narok campus. The study area was The Moi University main campus. Located approximately thirty-eight kilometers South of Eldoret town in a serene rural setting, the campus is widely regarded as conducive to learning. The campus constitutes 3,000 acres of land and approximately ten thousand students enrolled in the various undergraduate and post-graduate courses. The Joint Admissions Board (JAB) makes admissions to the university's undergrad regular program and direct application is used for those admitted in the Private Sponsored Students Program (PSSP). There is no particular differentiation in learning and living between students of the two programs.

According to the Moi University Students' Handbook (2003) a student is "any person registered as such in the university during a current academic year for a first or higher degree, diploma, certificate or such other courses of the university as may be approved by the Senate. "The Campus offers accommodation in hostels for the majority of student but some students live outside the institution in their homes, in Eldoret town or rental houses located near the campus. There are separate hostels for male and female students, but there is free movement of both sexes into all hostels (with a loosely implemented 10am to 10pm rule against visiting opposite sex hostels being outlined in the University rules). Being located a long way town, students mostly occupy themselves with the locally available activities such as games and sports, theater/plays, movies, parties, clubs, religious associations, regional associations, among others. Students develop and nurture their leadership skills in the numerous clubs and associations especially the Moi University Students Organization (MUSO).

The University has formal rules and regulations that govern student conduct within and outside the university. These rules also include all crimes and other offenses under the laws of Kenya. They include being drunk and disorderly, drug abuse, drug trafficking, fighting, possession of dangerous weapons, assault, arson, theft, kidnapping, sexual harassment, impersonation, illegal/unlicensed trade, trespass, aiding suicide and attempted suicide, concealing birth, and abortion, subversion among others. The university, through the Senate and disciplinary committee, reserves the right to take any sanction deemed necessary against any student found behaving in violation of the rules.

4.2 Methodology

The target population was undergraduate students at the Moi University main campus. Undergraduates face numerous barriers in their adaptation to the university environment. Many end up adapting negative habits such as drug use and abuse, alcoholism, examinations cheating, among other undesirable behaviors. The study universe included all current regular undergraduate students in the university irrespective of their course, program, or year of study.

The sample size was 200 students. It was assumed that these participants, having been randomly selected gave a good representation of the population. Random sampling afforded every member of the population an equal chance of inclusion in the sample, it eliminated sampling bias, and was simple to implement. Purposive sampling was used to select the study area due to its stature as one of the biggest (in physical size, program diversity, and student population) public universities in Kenya and accessibility to the researcher. Undergraduate population – who are assumed to have characteristics and information central to the study were also selected purposefully.

Data was collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Two hundred questionnaires were issued to sampled respondents. Interviews were conducted with key informants included ten lecturers, a university counselor, and ten university administrators. Seven focus group discussions were held with homogenous participants from the seven schools represented in the campus. Data were analyzed using SPSS.

Qualitative information from interviews and focus group discussions verified the reliability and validity of findings from questionnaires. Data was collected between September and December 2015.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic and personal factors

The average age of respondents was 22.6 years. At this age, they are susceptible to peer pressure as they come into their newfound freedom at the University. Students above the age of twenty-five are typically referred as mature entrants are less liable to experience behavior change owing to their character maturity and life experience. 52.2% of participants were male.

Government sponsored students (60% in the study), are more likely to have experienced profound culture shock after joining the University than their self-sponsored (admitted through the Private Sponsored Student Program started by Nairobi University in 1998 to allow qualified students who fail to secure admission to government sponsored institutions) colleagues. Self-confidence and self-esteem are central factors that influence susceptibility to change. Privately sponsored students whose backgrounds are typically privileged are more likely to be the influencers of change.

Behavioral trends also vary with time and intensity of semester activities. Higher Education Loans (HELB) are disbursed at the beginning of the semester before students settle into the semester and become engaged with tests and term papers. The average loan amount for respondents was 45,000 Ksh. During this period, therefore, there is a marked increase in drinking and partying at the Campus. Informants stated that at this time students are drifting towards any events and activities to occupy their time.

The area of origin of students determines the level of exposure students have had before joining campus and, consequently, their predisposition to change at the University. Students from rural areas (62% of sample) are more liable to behavior change influence compared to those from urban areas. The pressure to change is more intense on students from rural areas; the community expects them to change drastically to fit in.

University rules and regulations

During orientation, first-year students are issued with a hand book which is a guide for behavior and conduct at the University. The study found that 40% of the students had not read the handbook. This indicates that the freshman orientation process, which ideally would enable the University administration to instill positive values in the new students, was ineffective. University rules are intended to influence positive behavior on the campus. Fifty two percent of participants were found to be conversant with the general university rules, but none of the informants were confident that they knew and understood all the said rules. Despite this, 70% of participants do not consider their behavior in campus as being guided by the rules but rather by personal values and common sense. Students who rely on their opinions and those of their peers to determine the desirability of behavior are likely to learn negative behavior. In summary, it can be said that most of the students in campus are aware of the rules but do not follow them.

Academic customs

Among the habits that students picked up when they joined the campus is that of skipping classes. While 47% of respondents attended all their classes, 35% skipped at least two classes in a week, 10% skipped at least four, and 8% skipped at least five classes every week. Students in the campus were noted to have adopted an attitude that did not emphasize the significance of duly attending lectures and thought it inconsequential to miss them.

Those who skipped classes spent their time in social activities with their peers mostly within the campus. Such students engage in examination irregularities and cheating to cover up for the lost time. Techniques such as mwakenyas (illegal hand-written notes taken into examination rooms for consultation), handouts, and copying from friends are used to cheat in examinations. Eight percent of respondents had sat at least one supplementary exam in the last academic year.

Personal schedules and timetables support students to cover and supplement semester work. The study found that only 22.5% of students had a personal study timetable. This left them vulnerable to engage in non-constructive activities with no time limitation. As one informant stated, “you only live once, so party while you still can.” This is in agreement with proposition of the theory of planned behavior - students have a powerful desire to have a good time and sacrifice their studies to achieve this.

Substance use

In most cases, behavior such as substance use is adopted after entering institutions of higher learning due to strict secondary school rules and close parental supervision of teenagers. The research found that 65% of the respondents did not use any substances before joining the University. Fifty five percent of the respondents admitted to using intoxicating substances since joining the university - a 20% increase from the 35% who used before joining the campus. Alcohol was the most commonly used at 85.7% followed by cigarettes at 14.3% with marijuana (commonly referred to as Mary-Jane) also being popular. This is attributed to the increased freedom in the campus, peer influence, easy access to the substances, and availability of finances (especially from the Higher Education Loans) and other environmental enablers.

Alcohol is a common drug and when consumed responsibly may not have adverse effects on the performance of duties (Hanson, Venturelli, & Fleckenstein, 2012). Several students at Moi University main campus were observed to drink excessively in times that they should have been attending to their academics. Informants expressed concern that alcoholic students spend most of their money on alcohol and have to live on a shoestring budget for the rest of the semester often going without meals.

The research found that 83.3% of those who use substances do so for fun and socialization. Since students at the University enjoy a lot of down time, they are vulnerable to influences to engage in substance use occupy themselves in activities that peers consider to be fun. However, 55% of respondents did not use any intoxicants and gave varied reasons for this. These include family values and Christian upbringing, lack of interest in the party scene, lack of funds, to maintain a positive image with their peers, health reasons, to maintain good academic performance, fear of addiction, and conservative personalities.

In conclusion, students are under immense pressure to use drugs and intoxicants. Many of the students who previously did not use are influenced to do so to occupy free time, please their peers, and fit in.

Intervention strategies for positive behavioral adaptation

Counseling: The Counseling Department at Moi University main campus is well established and has a permanently placed student counselor with services are accessible to students all year round. The department has the duty of helping students adapt positively to campus life, however, students have to be willing and motivated to utilize its facilities. Sixty percent of the respondents strongly disagreed with the use of university counseling services stating that they were of no benefit to them. Students did not appreciate counseling as a viable adaptation tool for behavioral adaptation.

Clubs, games, and sports: 72% of respondents belonged to at least one club with the majority focusing on hobby-based clubs and school associations. Student clubs provide an arena for the positive socialization of students in the campus. There are over 50 student clubs in Moi University main campus whose activities and themes vary from first aid, presidential awards, politics, international affairs, and environmental conservation to entrepreneurship. Belonging to a club creates a sense of responsibility in the student and occupies free time constructively. Games and sports available to students include football, basketball, hockey, handball, rugby, netball, lawn tennis, and athletics. Sports nurture students' talents while occupying them and building their character through commitment and competition. Eighty percent of participants do not take part in any game or sport.

Social activities: Students spent most of their free time watching movies, listening to music, and attending parties. These events often become habits and preoccupations and attend to formal responsibilities when they have no 'plot' for such social engagements. Socialization and 'hanging-out' are an important part of students' life. However, when this becomes the primary occupation during free time, it becomes counter-productive - a waste of time. Students spend much time in hostel rooms watching movies, listening to music and attending parties especially in their first two years on the campus.

University disciplinary committee and behavior control: The university disciplinary committee consists of the Senate and representatives from the student council. The committee deals with extreme cases of indiscipline. The university security team is, however, hesitant in forwarding offenders to the council instead recommending local arrangements in solving conflicts. The student fraternity interpreted this as tolerance of 'small crimes' by the administration. Only 7% of the respondents knew of anyone that had been summoned by the disciplinary committee despite there being numerous reported cases especially of drunken disorderliness, fighting, theft, and examination cheating.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that students in Moi University main campus are liable to negative behavioral adaptation for various reasons. Institutional factors include poor familiarity with university regulations, inadequate good will and support for from university administration, inadequate occupation by formal/academic activities, and permissive university culture. Personal factors include poor self-discipline, ignorance, and poor personal planning and prioritization. The quintessential self-defeating habits adopted by students include substance use and abuse, missing classes, clubbing, and partying, cohabitation, violence and aggression, and compulsive engagement in excitement seeking activities. Adaptation of students to challenges and conditions in the campus has a direct effect on their personality. Those whose personality and support system are solid enough to hold on to their real principles develop strong and fulfilling personal character.

Recommendations include re-structuring of the freshman orientation program to improve its effectiveness, enhanced investment in student mentorship and character guidance; facilitated student- student peer mentorship to give new students exposure to positive peer role modeling. Increase the social facilities to boost socialization and to give learners low-risk pass-time activities, and voluntary institutional rehabilitation of alcoholics and other substance users. Formal recognition and rewarding students for exemplary character and academic excellence is also recommended. This can be implemented as Dean's lists and Valedictorian awards as is common in universities around the world. Employment of more counselors and their deployment to the various halls of residence or schools to facilitate interaction and rapport building between students and university counseling system is also recommended.

Further research into university-based structural determinants of behavior adaptation in university campuses is proposed.

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