

# Difficulties in Adjusting to College Life Experienced by Students with Pervasive Developmental Disorders: Comparison with Schizophrenic Students

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Difficulties in adjusting to college life experienced by four students with pervasive developmental disorders were categorized by theme (Sung & Puskar, 2006) and compared with those experienced by schizophrenic students. Difficulties in three of the six categories used in this study were found not to affect the students with PDDs to the same extent as they impacted schizophrenic students. “Experiences involving interactions with friends,” one of the six categories, encompassed the themes of the more serious difficulties faced by the students with PDDs. Many of the difficulties they confronted, however, could not be classified into any of these categories. Such difficulties involved “restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities” (DSM-IV-TR), one of the diagnostic criteria of PDDs, or other characteristics of PDDs not included in diagnostic criteria. These results suggest that students with PDDs experience difficulties in college life that differ greatly from those faced by schizophrenic students, and that consideration of the characteristics of PDDs is critical in supporting students with these disorders.

**Key words:** pervasive developmental disorders, schizophrenia, college students, adjustment

## Introduction

In recent years, student counseling centers at Japanese universities have faced an increasing number of consultations regarding students with developmental disorders (Tokunaga & Sato, 2005). In particular, individuals with pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs) including Asperger’s disorder and high-functioning autistic disorder tend to have serious problems with college life. Passing scores in Japanese university entrance examinations can often be achieved by solving problems using a certain system or pattern. For this reason, many students with PDDs are able to pass the examinations and enter universities. Actual college life, however, requires substantial social skills, and the students must structure their lives on their own. For students with PDDs, therefore, disorders associated with social skills often pose particular difficulties in college life. Among PDDs, Asperger’s disorder often goes undiagnosed prior to a student’s entry to university in USA (Glennon, 2001), and the situation is speculated to be the same in Japan. Because many of the students with PDDs appear normal and their diagnoses are not recognizable

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by others, their behavioral characteristics are unlikely to make sense to other people, hence exacerbating the difficulties they confront.

In many cases, students with PDDs perceive what normal students take for granted as being highly stressful and therefore speak and behave as if they are in a state of panic. They also have a unique cognitive style that others find very difficult to understand. Thus, students with PDDs face many characteristic challenges in college life.

I speculated that the difficulties in college life experienced by these students could be clearly characterized by comparing them with the difficulties confronted by students with other disorders. In this study, difficulties arising from PDDs were compared with those previously shown to be experienced by students with schizophrenia.

Sung and Puskar (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with 21 college students with schizophrenia, thereby identifying the difficulties they faced in college life and classifying them into 25 themes (see Table 1). These themes were then divided into six categories of experiences: “experiences involving family interactions,” “experiences of everyday life,” “experiences of social role performance,” “experiences of school life,” “experiences of a mental illness,” and “experiences involving interactions with friends.” These 25 themes and six categories summarized well the difficulties schizophrenic students faced in college life. This study aims to characterize the difficulties confronted by students with PDDs by assessing four such students in terms of the themes and specific details of their difficulties and comparing these with those faced by schizophrenic students.

## Method

Three students with confirmed PDD diagnoses and one student with a suspected PDD were interviewed and observed after visiting the university counseling center where the author was in charge of counseling. It was examined whether they faced any difficulty under the themes identified by Sung and Puskar (2006); any difficulty was either subjectively felt by the students. Based on her experience as a counselor, the author evaluated the severity of difficulties and determined the presence or absence of relevant information. The students’ perceived difficulties with life experiences were compared with those of the schizophrenic students in the above-described study by Sung and Puskar (2006).

## Results & Discussion

The difficulties students experienced are shown in Table 1. The symbol “–” indicates that there was no difficulty, whereas “±,” “+,” and “++” demonstrate that the difficulties were mild, clearly present, or serious, respectively. Blank columns represent the absence of relevant information.

Among the difficulties experienced by the four students with PDD, only a few fell into the following three categories. This is in contrast to the findings in schizophrenic students, who had problems in all six categories. As shown in Table 1, almost all results within the category,

**Table 1** Difficult life experiences of college students with PDD

Categories	Themes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Experiences involving family interactions	Contact deficiency with family	-	-	-	-
	Verbal interaction deficiency with family	±	-	-	-
	Conflict with family	±	±	±	±
	Support of family	-	-	-	
Experiences involving interactions with friends	Loneliness in interaction with friends	+		+	
	Difficulty making friends	+	++	+	++
	Withdrawal from friends	++	++	++	++
	Feeling comfortable around friends	+	++		
	Seeking intimacy		++	+	++
Experiences of school life	Difficulty of academic performance	+	++		++
	Motivation loss with school life		++		
	Feeling of isolation from peers		+	++	
	Satisfaction with academic performance	±		±	
	Urgent need for continuing academic performance		±		
Experience of everyday life	Loss of interest				
	Loss of feeling of reality	+			
	Maintaining a balanced lifestyle	±	±		
Experiences of social role performance	Powerlessness with social role performance				
	Enhancing self-esteem	-		-	
	Sense of belonging as a social member	±	±		
Experiences of a mental illness	Denial of self-identification as a mental illness patient		+	±	
	Despair due to mental illness				
	Feeling of being out of touch with reality				
	Accepting a mental illness	±			
	Attaining new identity as a mental illness patient	±		+	

※ Categories and Themes are classified by Sung & Puskar (2006): for schizophrenic students.

“experiences involving family interactions,” were “—” for all four students examined. This suggests relatively good relationships with, and good support from, their family members. However, probably because their parents had supported them since childhood, the students tended to perceive their parents as still being slightly overprotective or excessively controlling.

“Experiences of everyday life” and “experiences of social role performance” also did not pose particularly great difficulties for the students with PDDs. The severity of their problems in these categories was considered to be equivalent to or lower than that of students without any disorders who visited the same counseling center.

Students with PDDs did tend to face moderate-level difficulties in the category of “experiences of school life.” One such difficulty was associated with the students’ adaptation to the abstract conceptualization required by college coursework. Another difficulty was lack of interest in particular subjects due to unbalanced interests and concerns. Still another difficulty was caused by students’ inability to borrow lecture notes or to collect information concerning examinations due to small numbers of friends.

Within the category of “experiences of a mental illness,” the students with PDDs subjectively experienced little or no difficulties. This was because they did not fully accept their disorders as illnesses and instead considered them to be aspects of their personalities.

The greatest difficulties confronted by the students with PDDs were those associated with “experiences involving interactions with friends.” Difficulties in this category are used to characterize PDDs and the students described many problems in this area. Although they somewhat preferred to be alone, the students sought support from, or interactions with, other people to a certain extent, without success in most cases, at least at the beginning of college life. Some of the students entered into romantic relationships which did not last, suggesting that they needed support and education regarding this type of relationship.

Many difficulties the students with PDDs experienced did not fall into the above six categories. Some of these difficulties involved “restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities,” one of the diagnostic criteria of PDDs, while others were associated with characteristics of PDDs not included in any of their diagnostic criteria. Unbalanced interests or fixations gave rise to serious problems when they affected students’ interpersonal relationships or future careers. In addition, negative emotions associated with such difficulties tended to persist because recollection of negative experiences (flashbacks) often occurred. For this reason, the counseling for these difficulties that was normally provided was not possible for these students.

The above results suggest that students with PDDs experienced difficulties with college life that greatly differed from those faced by schizophrenic students, and that consideration of the characteristics of PDDs is critical in supporting students with these disorders.

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