UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL: A PILOT STUDY COMPARING SUBJECTS WHO SOUGHT PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP WITH SUBJECTS WHO DID NOT

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The study aims to explore three semantic domains (My Self, My Family, and Social Perception) tied to emotional daily life experience. A semantic differential (SD) scale was administered to a sample of 799 Italian college students: 387 of them had sought psychological help, 412 had not. The original Osgood, Suci, and Tanebaum (1957) three-factor structure (Evaluation, Potency, and Activity) was imposed and a mean score for the three domains was calculated. MANOVAs were conducted for all factors and their mean scores, comparing the two samples in each domain. Significant differences were found in all three factors in each domain as well as in their mean scores. The most negative attitudes were expressed by students who had sought psychological help: moreover, our analysis highlighted a specific effect tied to gender. Results also suggested female predisposition to emphasize judgments, particularly being more negativistic than males in the counseling sample and more positivistic in the non counseling sample.

Key words: Semantic differential; Self-perception; Family perception; Social perception; Clinical and nonclinical university students.

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THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

University is considered a "natural environment" for young adults, providing them with a comforting and protective context where to grow into responsible adults (Giusti, 1995; Montgomery & Côté, 2003). A sound community network can provide guidance and financial assistance for education and extracurricular activities; it can also facilitate healthy development, particularly during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Heard, 2007; Jekielek & Brown, 2005; Willis & Martin, 2005). However, some types of experiences, such as relational problems, school dropouts, failing to find a job or getting into trouble with the law, can turn into developmental setbacks and cause psychological problems. These negative experiences can have a long-term impact by compromising the potential resources of young adults, increasing the risk of social and environmental maladjustment.

More specifically, university students have to come to terms with a wide range of new emotions and face up to new social contexts, because this is the time when they assume new roles, develop new friendship networks and, more often than not, leave their parents' home for the first time (Di Riso et al., 2011; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Negative emotions, failed expectations, relational difficulties or a real crisis happening in their lives are all plausible stress scenarios at a time when instability and stress could contribute to increasing psychological distress or alcohol and drug use during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2005).

Most researchers have examined academic and cognitive factors supporting academic success and success persistence in post-secondary students (Astin, 1993; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Hall & Webster, 2008; Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Vogel & Adelman, 1992), previous junior university experiences (Johnson, Zascavage, & Gerber, 2008), behavioral factors (DaDeppo, 2009), or metacognitive abilities (i.e., knowledge of effective learning strategies and the ability to use them) (Hall & Webster, 2008). Some studies (e.g., Bradley & Lang, 1994; Cambra, 1996; Palacio, Meneses, & Pérez, 2002) on young adults, particularly on university students and their representations of the university educational environment, have shown that students' success in post-secondary education is closely related to their perception of their social and academic involvement in a post-secondary setting. Low self-esteem, low social satisfaction and/or inadequate family support can overwhelm students and cause psychological distress. Support from family members and peers is one of the most important factors for adolescents and young adults, and plays an important role in academic outcomes (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). A perceived good relationship with parents has been shown to be important for university students for the maintenance of their psychological well-being (Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003).

In literature, women are consistently identified as the more emotional gender, because of their tendency to amplify their perceived emotions. Psychological research on self-report of emotions has confirmed this idea: women report more intense experience of emotions than men and a more intense emotional expression across their life span (Simon, 2014). Women's greater emotional responsiveness has emerged in self-reports of specific emotions, both in the domain of positive and negative emotions (Grossman & Wood, 1993; Wood, Rhodes, & Whelan, 1989).

Studies on specific emotions with self-report scales found that women reported both more intense positive and more intense negative emotions than men in their daily lives. However, it was also demonstrated that gender differences in self-reports of global emotionality were strongly influenced by gender role expectations; still, gender differences in self-reports of emotion regulation may be influenced by gender differences in self-perception of emotionality and perception of the stressfulness of the environment (Barrett, Robin, Pietromonaco, & Eyssell, 1998; Gohm, 2003).

Other studies reported gender differences in self-perception of depressed high-school students: female students reported more depressive symptoms and more negative self-esteem than their male counterparts (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Hicks & Miller, 2006); when in a depressed mood, women are more likely than men to focus on themselves and their self-perception, showing that they pay more attention to their affective states (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Sethi, Foster, & Best, 2004). In their study on university students' self-concept, Zhang and Li (2010) suggested that males' perception of one's self was higher than that of females'. Another study, focusing on the quality of life perceived by college students,

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highlighted gender differences: female students reported a significantly poorer quality of life than male students showing differences in their perceived and expressed dissatisfaction (Tolor, 1983). A study investigating gender differences when judging emotions showed that women were more accurate than men in judging emotional meanings (Hall & Matsumoto, 2004).

Since university students' personal perception and social life representation play a role in personal and academic adjustment, more extensive research is needed to explore these characteristics. The main areas in which university students may seek support to better cope with new demands and skills required from the new context are: family, friends, social network, and inner self-images, which are important for a good emotional functioning and life satisfaction (Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012; Wills, 1990). Some Italian studies on university students have focused on the investigation of self-representations as a student and on positive and negative emotions related to academic success (Lis et al., 2010; Mega, Moè, Pazzaglia, Rizzato, & De Beni, 2007). A study on a sample of 201 Italian students investigated the level of well-being by applying a self-report scale: it was shown that social well-being, as well as a better sense of the self, was significantly and positively correlated with some variables such as perceived social support (Cicognani, Albanesi, & Berti, 2001).

Assuming that there is a relationship between internal resources (i.e., self-esteem) and external resources (i.e., social support), high levels of social support from parents and peers do lead to higher self-esteem and better self-perception (Huurre, 2000; Teoh & Nur Afiqah, 2010). On account of the important relationship between the self, family and social support, this paper was aimed at exploring the representations university students have of these domains. Specifically, we will consider a failed or negative adjustment as a symptom of the emergence of psychological difficulties requiring clinical counseling and support during the university period.

THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL

Language-related responses have long been used as a means to measure emotions and behavioral tendencies. One of the most commonly used tools in this field is semantic differential (Masucci, Kalampokis, Eguíluz, & Hernández-Garcia, 2011). The semantic differential scaling makes it possible to define meaning, intensity, and quality related to any specific research concept, therefore proving to be a very useful tool to measure important psychological dimensions, such as self-image, social life, and family support.

Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) introduced the idea that concepts could be universally evaluated through semantic dimensions. They developed the semantic differential (SD), a tool designed to measure the connotative affective meaning of concepts. This tool provides an interesting insight into the area that borders between linguistics and psychology. With SD, the semantic space is defined by a finite number of orthogonal semantic dimensions. Each concept is evaluated on a 7-point scale defined by a pair of polar (opposite-in-meaning) adjectives (e.g., bad-good). To establish the universality of the three-factor structure of affective meaning, Osgood and colleagues created parallel versions of the major scales in many languages, and these were developed and validated (Capozza, 1977; Osgood, May, & Miron, 1975). To identify major semantic dimensions, Osgood et al. (1957) applied factor analysis finding three factors: Evaluation, Potency, and Activity. The Evaluation (E) dimension assesses how a concept is evaluated positively

or negatively (e.g., bad-good, nice-awful). The Potency (P) dimension measures whether an issue is perceived as powerful or not (e.g., powerful-powerless, big-little). The Activity (A) dimension assesses whether a given concept is regarded as active or passive (e.g., fast-slow, active-inactive). These three dominant (EPA) factors do not exhaust the dimensions along which objects are judged (Garland, 1990). Despite this, pan-cultural multivariate analyses demonstrated that these EPA dimensions were clearly recognizable in multiple cultures and a variety of languages (Heise, 2001; Osgood et al., 1975).

Further studies were carried out using the scales to assess subjects' perceptions, attitudes and representations in various semantic domains. Among others, the SD scale was used to assess patterns of attachment and self-image in adolescents belonging to either broken or intact homes (Zavattini, Tambelli, Volpi, Chiarolanza, & Mancone, 2002). Additional studies were meant to assess parents' representations of their children during pregnancy and the first year of life (Ammanniti, Baumgarten, Candelori, & Perrucchini, 1992; Zennaro & Lis, 1997), and parents' representations of their adoptive children (Salcuni, Mazzeschi, Di Riso, & Lis, 2007); to investigate the concept of the self and the group in cultural samples (Nathan, Marsella, Horvath, & Coolidge, 1999), and to investigate college students' expectations about their future (Maggino & Mola, 2007).

The SD scale was also used with students obtaining low self-esteem scores (Nielsen & Metha, 1994) as well as low scores in social skills' perception (Allan & Gilbert, 1995). Additionally, the SD score on the "perception of parents" scale, showing a negative evaluation of parents, was significantly associated with several measures of depression (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979). In another study, SD was used to map the reactions of depressed and non-depressed college students — as evaluated by a psychiatrist — to global concepts of self-reference (the self, the past, the future) versus external reference (friends, the family, the school). Compared to their non-depressed peers, depressed subjects rated all concepts as significantly less powerful, less active, and less positive (Karoly & Ruehlman, 1983). SD is a simple and economical tool for obtaining data on emotional reactions in many different situations or cultural contexts. From the methodological point of view, the SD flexible structure makes different evaluations possible while maintaining the same list of bipolar adjectives on a broad range of samples. Moreover, the SD was useful in investigating emotions deeply (Tomko & Munley, 2012). In most cases, the questionnaires measuring psychological constructs provide items which must be answered on a Likert scale and this response format may often introduce an acquiescence bias because self-report scales meet a person's need to offer a socially desirable image; this acquiescence bias may be reduced with semantic differential (Friborg, Martinussen, & Rosenvinge, 2006). Finally, the SD scale was chosen for its easiness of administration for a sample as large as the one selected for this study, for its scoring, and face validity (Bhagat & Fraser, 1970).

THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

The semantic differential scale is one of the main scales normally used to assess attitudes: in fact, it is a simple and versatile tool. Specifically, it can be very useful to investigate university students' semantic evaluations of their self, their family, and their social life (Wills, 1990).

The aim of this paper was to compare semantic judgments in a wide sample of university students with reference to their self-image, their family perception, and their perception of

society. More specifically, a comparison was made between students who had asked for psychological help and students who had not. How students describe themselves, their family, and their social life might be very important to understand differences in subjective representations and highlight suffering in students who asked for psychological help in counseling centers. We hypothesized we would come to understand how students, transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, face this step according to the meaning they give to their social life, family support, and self-image. In fact, these three evaluation domains can be seen as mediators of better/worse adjustment. We also decided to examine gender differences both in the counseling sample (CS) and non counseling sample (NCS) group as we thought they might contribute to different perceptions.

Students who had never sought psychological help ($N = 412$) were compared with university students who had used university counseling services ($N = 387$). With SD, we investigated three concepts (My Self, My Family, and Social Perception) using the same 31 SD bipolar items. On the 7-step scale, 1 was given to the negative and 7 to the positive pole. Thirty-one items represent the Evaluation, Potency, and Activity dimensions.

According to the literature (Allan & Gilbert, 1995; Karoly & Ruehlman, 1983; Nielsen & Metha, 1994), it was expected that students who had never taken advantage of university counseling services would consider their self, their family, and social life as resources (Wills, 1990). On the other hand, students recruited in psychological counseling centers were supposed to show lower levels of satisfaction with regard to self-perception, family, and social perception of context. We also assumed gender would play a role since female participants — compared to males — tend to express more extreme judgments, both positive and negative (Barrett et al., 1998; Gohm, 2003; Hall & Matsumoto, 2004; Simon, 2014; Wood et al., 1989).

METHOD

Participants

Four hundred and twelve students (296 females and 116 males), who had never sought university counseling services (non counseling sample: NCS) and 387 students (88 females and 299 males) who had taken advantage of university counseling services (counseling sample: CS) took part in the study. Students recruited at the Psychological Counseling Service were chosen among those who had decided to ask for help because of relational problems, coping problems, or distress. All students were European, lived in Northern Italy, and belonged to a medium-high socioeconomic status (Hollingshead, 1975). Their age ranged from 18 to 29 years ($M = 22.12$, $SD = 2.22$): more specifically, $M = 21.54$ and $SD = 1.79$ within the NCS, and $M = 22.75$, $SD = 2.45$ within the CS (for the descriptive statistics of the sample, see Table 1).

Measures

In the present study, 31 bipolar, semantic differential items were administered following the results of previous Italian studies (Capozza, 1977; Zennaro & Lis, 1997). Participants were asked to evaluate three concepts: My Self, My Family, and Social Perception. These three

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TABLE 1

Descriptive statistics of nonclinical and clinical sample

	Nonclinical sample	Clinical sample	Total
N Female	296	88	384
N Male	116	299	415
% Bachelor degree program	75	25	100
% Master degree program	64	36	100
% Psychology	43	52	95
% Information technology	22	10	32
% Political sciences	16	23	39
% Biology	11	10	21
% Educational sciences	9	5	14
N exams	6	7	13
Mean mark (18-29 range)	21.54 (SD = 1.79)	22.75 (SD = 2.45)	

concepts were chosen according to important factors relevant for young adults during the university period. Particularly, it was observed that self-perception, family, friends, and perception of social context play an important role in academic outcomes and life satisfaction (Dennis et al., 2005; Wills, 1990).

All participants were given the following instructions: "The purpose of this study is to better understand how university students evaluate themselves, their family and their social life. You will be asked to judge specific terms against a series of scales. Please make your judgment on the basis of what the proposed term means to you. In the following pages you will find the terms to be judged and a set of scales beneath them. Please rate each term on each of the scales one after the other, according to the given order." Further on, in order to analyze data, we created three new variables for each concept: the composite score of Evaluation, the composite score of Potency, and the composite score of Activity (Table 2). Our reliability analysis showed an adequate internal consistency for the three factors: for Evaluation, alpha ranged from .758 to .923; for Potency, from .718 to .846; for Activity, from .692 to .782.

Procedure

Participants were randomly recruited by the authors from various Italian universities in Northern Italy: tests were administered in a group setting. First of all, participants were requested to fill in a brief, anamnestic self-report where they were asked to indicate — among other things — whether they had sought psychological help during university. Students who had never done so were included in the NCS. Students included in the CS were recruited in public university counseling services, and semantic differential was administered as a default assessment battery on the first session day of the service, prior to the first counseling session. Participants were asked to judge separately the concepts My Self, My Family, and Social Perception.

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TABLE 2
Semantic differential scales in this study

Evaluation factor	Potency factor	Activity factor
1 unlovable-lovable	4 tense-relaxed	6 passive-active
2 untouchable-touchable	7 hard-soft	9 exciting-calming
3 insane-sane	11 fragile-hardy	13 rational-emotional
5 ugly-beautiful	12 weak-strong	15 cold-hot
8 bad-good	14 sad-happy	17 nervous-calm
10 rough-smooth	18 bitter-sweet	27 submissive-reactive
16 undesiderable-desiderable	19 heavy-light	
20 profane-pious	21 sharp-dull	
22 hazy-clear	23 insecure-sure	
24 meaningless-meaningful	25 shy-expansive	
26 unpleasant-pleasant	31 angular-rounded off	
28 unsociable-sociable		
29 inaccessible-accessible		
30 cruel-loving		

Statistical Analyses

Because MANOVA's assumptions were met, we applied MANOVA for each concept (My Self, My Family, and Social Perception), gender and sample being used as between-subject variables and the three factors (Evaluation, Potency, and Activity) as dependent variables. Therefore, three MANOVA were performed, one for each concept (My Self, My Family, and Social Perception); another MANOVA was performed for a concept that was the average of all three concepts (Total score).

RESULTS

For each concept, results revealed multivariate significant effects of gender and sample; also the Gender × Sample interaction was significant.[1] We will now analyze findings for each factor.

Evaluation Factor

As seen in Table 3, a significant interaction was present between gender and sample group for the three variables: My Family, Social Perception, and Total score. NCS females reported higher scores than all other groups and showed more positive judgments on family, social perception, and the total evaluation (see Table 4). A main effect of gender and a main effect of sample for My Self were found (Table 3). All in all, female participants showed higher scores than male participants in self-evaluation (M for females = 4.88, M for males = 4.57). Furthermore, NCS participants perceived themselves more positively than CS ones (Table 3).

Potency Factor

A significant interaction between gender and sample was found for Social Perception (Table 3). Female NCS participants gave significantly higher evaluations than male NCS participants and CS samples, proving to perceive themselves as more powerful in the social context. The sample variable had a significant main effect in the Potency factor for all the concepts (Table 3). NCS participants showed higher means than CS participants with a higher, more powerful representation in these domains. For instance, the mean for My Self was 4.47 in the NCS sample, and 4.05 in the CS sample. For My Family the mean was 4.80 for the NCS sample, and 3.75 for the CS sample. Finally, the mean for Total score was 4.65 for the NCS sample, and 4.01 for the CS sample. No main gender effect was found in Potency across the concepts (Table 4).

Activity Factor

An interaction between gender and sample was found, specifically for My Self, Social Perception, and Total score (Table 3). In each single case, female NCS participants reported higher scores than all other groups, proving to possess a more active, dynamic, and vital representation of themselves, and their social perception. A main effect of sample for My Family was found. Compared to CS participants, NCS participants perceived their family as more active. The mean for My Family was 5.18 for the NCS sample, and 4.03 for the CS sample (Table 4).[2]

TABLE 3
MANOVA effects for the semantic differential factors

	Gender		Sample		Gender × Sample	
	$F(3, 376)$	η^2_p	$F(3, 376)$	η^2_p	$F(3, 376)$	η^2_p
Evaluation						
My Self	8.06**	.007	14.22***	.015	2.78	.004
My Family	0.31	.002	68.57***	.102	4.38*	.008
Social Perception	1.25	.006	23.02***	.052	10.08**	.019
Total score Evaluation	4.41*	.008	54.63***	.085	9.61**	.017
Potency						
My Self	0.69	.000	12.95***	.015	0.24	.001
My Family	0.60	.002	134.50***	.172	0.18	.002
Social Perception	0.18	.002	28.29***	.058	4.27*	.012
Total score Potency	0.48	.002	80.88***	.123	1.78	.008
Activity						
My Self	4.55*	.007	48.39***	.051	4.65*	.016
My Family	0.80	.002	97.72***	.127	3.07	.012
Social Perception	1.06	.006	28.36***	.056	11.35***	.023
Total score Activity	3.35	.009	97.11***	.127	10.94***	.030

$* p \leq .05. ** p \leq .01. *** p \leq .001.$

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TABLE 4

Means, standard deviations of concepts for the three semantic differential factors

	Clinical sample (CS)		Nonclinical sample (NCS)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Evaluation				
My Self	4.36 (1.05)	4.45 (1.20)	5.07 (0.63)	4.65 (0.71)
My Family	4.35 (0.76)$_b$	4.47 (0.74)$_b$	5.18 (0.85)$_a$	4.57 (0.81)$_b$
Social Perception	4.30 (0.87)$_b$	4.49 (0.90)$_b$	5.01 (0.80)$_a$	4.63 (0.90)$_b$
Total score Evaluation	4.41 (0.65)$_b$	4.47 (0.69)$_b$	5.09 (0.58)$_a$	4.75 (0.63)$_b$
Potency				
My Self	4.02 (1.08)	4.08 (1.31)	4.54 (0.78)	4.40 (0.81)
My Family	3.75 (0.80)	3.76 (0.75)	4.83 (1.04)	4.77 (0.92)
Social Perception	4.08 (1.00)$_b$	4.24 (0.98)$_b$	4.79 (0.90)$_a$	4.35 (0.90)$_b$
Total score Potency	3.98 (0.71)	4.03 (0.74)	4.72 (0.65)	4.58 (0.70)
Activity				
My Self	4.16 (1.24)$_b$	4.26 (1.45)$_b$	5.33 (0.89)$_a$	4.33 (0.99)$_b$
My Family	3.98 (1.03)	4.08 (1.04)	5.38 (1.22)	4.98 (1.07)
Social Perception	4.27 (1.13)$_b$	4.56 (1.40)$_b$	5.35 (1.06)$_a$	4.60 (1.23)$_b$
Total score Activity	4.17 (0.86)$_b$	4.30 (0.88)$_b$	5.32 (0.81)$_a$	4.57 (0.88)$_b$

Note. The different letters on the same line indicate that the difference between the averages is significant, $p < .05$. These comparisons are only reported for significant interactions.

DISCUSSION

According to Brockman (2003), early adulthood and the university experience are characterized by specific development and adjustment issues extending over a long period of time, from the late teens through the mid- to late twenties and beyond (Canestrari, 1984; Danon-Boileau, 1984; Marhon, 1998). Young adults find themselves in a most intense developmental stage (De Beni, Lis, Sambin, & Trentin, 1997): they need to integrate and cope with new goals (Willis & Martin, 2005), while also being challenged to create a social group, find a job, find a clear gender identity, and a sexual partner. This developmental stage can turn into a time of growth and personal accomplishment. At this very time, support from parents or other adults as well as a supportive social life context contribute to higher self-esteem and self-efficacy while guaranteeing lower subjective stress (Wills, 1990). Boys and girls becoming adults intensify their differences when expressing and describing their emotions (Allgood-Merten et al., 1990; Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Sethi et al., 2004): moreover, young women show a specific ability to perceive and express satisfaction and dissatisfaction more intensely than young men (Tolor, 1983).

The SD scale has been used in many different studies investigating perceptions, attitudes, and representations of different populations (Ammanniti et al., 1992; Maggino & Mola, 2007; Nathan et al., 1999; Salcuni et al., 2007; Xiong, Logan, & Franks, 2006; Zavattini et al., 2002; Zennaro & Lis, 1997). Fewer studies have been carried out on the administration of SD to university populations with the aim to compare students who had asked for psychological help with students who had not, analyzing their representations of the self, the family, and their social perception. Osgood et al.'s (1957) original three-factor structure (Evaluation, Potency, and Activity) was applied separately to the following three semantic domains: My Self, My Family, and Social Perception, while also taking into consideration any possible gender differences. As expected, university students who had never sought psychological help perceived themselves, their family, and their social life more positively, showing a more dynamic, active, and powerful perception than university students who had asked for psychological counseling.

Compared to the CS group, university students belonging to the NCS group showed a more positive, powerful, and active perception of themselves: this result indicates that they possessed greater ability to cope with adulthood issues and challenges. It is important to note how the family was perceived as more powerful, more positive, and more active by students who had not asked for psychological counseling. It is likely that this "closeness" with their families provided them with moral support, which in turn facilitated the development of a better self-image. These results confirm the hypothesis according to which support from parents or other significant adults is consistently related to higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, and also predicts lower subjective stress and fewer negative events (Dennis et al., 2005; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Wills, 1990).

Major differences appeared when comparing females and males in both NCS and CS groups. With respect to gender differences, women who had never asked for psychological counseling obtained higher means than any other group of participants in the Evaluation factor for My Family, Social Perception, and Total score; the same trend was found in Potency factor for Social Perception. Also, a gender difference was found in the Activity factor for My Self, Social Perception, and Total score, where NCS women gave higher means than all others. Women who had never asked for psychological counseling perceived their family and their social life in a more positive way, their social life as more powerful, and themselves and their social life as more active. This result is present in other studies in which nonclinical women reported higher levels of social competence and psychological well-being than men of the same sample, and than men and women of the clinical sample (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Simon, 2014).

Observing means' scores, it may be noted that women's semantic judgments always fall at the two ends of each bipolar continuum: not considering the significance of the differences, we note that if women who had never asked for psychological counseling felt more positive, active, and powerful than all samples, women who had asked for psychological counseling obtained lower means than all other groups, judging their experience of self, family, and social life in the most negative way. Even if our hypothesis about gender's role is not fully confirmed, this finding could be considered consistent with women's tendency to amplify their judgments and perceptions: they express extremely positive judgments when their perceptions are positive and this is a point of strength; however, their negative perceptions usually are extremely negative,

which in turn becomes a weak point and causes suffering (Barrett et al., 1998; Gohm, 2003; Hall & Matsumoto, 2004; Simon, 2014).

Our results support the idea that university life, with the transition into adulthood, can challenge an individual's self-confidence, one's need for acceptance (Blimling & Miltenberg, 1981; Mannarini & Boffo, 2014), and social support (Beck, Taylor, & Robbins, 2003) particularly in students who had asked for psychological counseling because of relational problems or an experienced state of distress. Results of this paper also suggest that the institutions should identify social integration issues by assessing psychosocial factors and associated academic outcomes for students who asked for psychological counseling. This kind of intervention might possibly favor a better knowledge of individual differences among students (e.g., motivation, propensity for social engagement, and self-perception) while offering greater support to cope with everyday difficulties. As to students who did not ask for psychological help, findings confirm the importance of family as a supportive factor even when students are living away from home. For students who asked for psychological counseling, counseling centers could be seen as an important resource for elaborating separation from a "not active and not powerful family." They should foster a better integration in university social life and a higher investment in self-perception.

This study offers a contribution for a better understanding of the perception university students have of themselves, their family, and the available social support, discovering differences between students who had turned to counseling and students who did not. Knowing the perception of CS university students might help to better define the requests for help that are collected by counseling services and to define what paths of support should be offered. On the other hand, a better understanding of NCS university students and their representations of these three domains might possibly allow the development of programs and initiatives to prevent difficulties tied with the transition into adulthood.

This paper is rather innovative in that it investigated three relevant young adults' life areas with special reference both to students who had asked for psychological counseling and students who had not. In the light of these results, we can assume that students who turned to counseling demonstrated greater awareness of their self-perception and distress: they may have expressed higher sensitivity than others in the compilation of the SD scale, a tool which is able to capture the emotional experience. Since this is, in fact, a first study, further research should be carried out. More specifically, it will be necessary to administer — to an even smaller subsample — some instruments that investigate the perception of self, family, and social support; for example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; see also, Mannarini, 2010) for the evaluation of self-esteem; the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimmet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) for social support; and the Family Functioning Style Scale (Trivette, Dunst, Deal, Hamby, & Sexton, 1994) for the evaluation of family functioning.

Some limitations of the study are the following. First, criteria for inclusion and exclusion of participants were not defined in detail; moreover, it would be desirable to use measures assessing the possible presence of psychopathology to differentiate the scores of clinical samples from those of nonclinical samples. Efforts should be made to recruit male and female students with a larger age gap in order to explore the age effect. On account of the differences between the two groups of university students, it would be interesting to test whether the SD scale could be used as a clinical measure to better understand the role of family dynamics when

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working with college students who are living far away from their families. A final limitation of this study concerns the samples. In order to evaluate differences, the percentage of males and females should be approximately the same in the two sample groups.

NOTES

1. The multivariate effects were the following:
   My Self gender: $F(2, 794) = 6.02, p \leq .003$
     sample: $F(2, 794) = 29.53, p \leq .001$
     Gender × Sample: $F(2, 794) = 10.56, p \leq .001$
   My Family gender: $F(2, 794) = 7.34, p \leq .038$
     sample: $F(2, 794) = 35.29, p \leq .001$
     Gender × Sample: $F(2, 794) = 5.31, p \leq .005$
   Social Perception gender: $F(2, 794) = 2.35, p \leq .002$
     sample: $F(2, 794) = 8.18, p \leq .001$
     Gender × Sample: $F(2, 794) = 4.25, p \leq .014$
   Total score gender: $F(2, 794) = 1.99, p \leq .028$
     sample: $F(2, 794) = 318.97, p \leq .001$
     Gender × Sample: $F(2, 794) = 2.84, p \leq .003$.
2. In the case of significant interactions, the average of the four groups was compared considering student's t-test with Bonferroni correction.

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