

Learned Helplessness among young adults with academic difficulties. The predictive weights of family functioning, locus of control and self-respect

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Abstract: Learned helplessness among young adults facing academic difficulties can undermine their motivation, resilience, and academic success. Understanding the psychological and familial factors contributing to helplessness is essential for designing effective interventions. This study investigates the relationships between family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control, and learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda, using a correlational research design. The sample consisted of 119 young adults, who completed standardized measures with established psychometric properties for each construct. Specifically, the scales demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.80 to 0.89. Multiple correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships and predictive power of the independent variables on learned helplessness. Results indicated significant positive correlations between learned helplessness and family functioning ($r = 0.30, p < 0.05$), self-esteem ($r = 0.28, p < 0.05$), and locus of control ($r = 0.24, p < 0.05$). Regression analysis showed that family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control together accounted for 12.2% of the variance in learned helplessness (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.122, F_{(3,115)} = 6.479, p < 0.01$). Family functioning ($\beta = 0.241, p < 0.05$) and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.228, p < 0.05$) emerged as significant predictors, while locus of control did not ($\beta = 0.034, p > 0.05$). These findings suggest that family dynamics and self-esteem play critical roles in the development of learned helplessness, with potential implications for interventions aimed at fostering resilience and academic persistence. Future research is recommended to examine additional factors, such as socio-economic challenges and mental health, to better understand learned helplessness in this context.

Keywords: learned helplessness, family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control, young adults, Uganda, academic difficulties, correlational design

Introduction

Learned helplessness, a psychological phenomenon in which individuals perceive their actions as ineffective in influencing outcomes, has profound implications for academic, personal, and career success (Mohanty *et al.*, 2015; Kemp, 2016). Seligman (1972) originally conceptualized learned helplessness through animal experiments, where animals exposed to uncontrollable events, such as inescapable shocks, developed a sense of powerlessness. This helplessness persisted even when control was later possible, suggesting that repeated exposure to uncontrollable circumstances could inhibit future attempts at goal-directed action. Mohanty *et al.* (2015) later expanded on this idea, describing learned helplessness as a state in which individuals develop negative expectations about the efficacy of their efforts. These expectations often lead to disengagement, reduced motivation, and diminished performance, as individuals come to believe that their efforts will not result in success, even when success is achievable.

Among young adults navigating university life, learned helplessness is commonly associated with students facing academic difficulties (Gomez, *et al.*, 2015). Academic challenges, such as poor grades or learning difficulties, can significantly exacerbate stress and self-doubt, leading students to attribute their struggles to stable, internal factors like low ability or intelligence. This creates a self-fulfilling cycle of helplessness, as students may begin to avoid academic tasks or disengage from their studies, believing that no amount of effort will improve their situation (Tolman & Kremling, 2023). Research indicates that between 15-20% of university students experience symptoms consistent with learned helplessness, which can be exacerbated by various psychosocial factors such as social isolation, financial instability, and a lack of academic support (Ellis *et al.*, 2020). In Uganda, a country where higher education is increasingly accessible but still fraught with economic and systemic challenges, university students experiencing academic difficulties often exhibit symptoms of learned helplessness, such as low motivation, withdrawal from academic tasks, and diminished expectations of success (Chen *et al.*, 2023). These factors can critically impact their academic performance, career aspirations, and overall life achievements, potentially contributing to a cycle of academic failure and psychological distress.

Despite the extensive body of research on learned helplessness, significant gaps remain in understanding the unique dynamics of young adults facing academic challenges, particularly in culturally specific contexts like Uganda. While much research has explored the predictors of learned helplessness, such as personality traits, family dynamics, and educational environments, there remains limited focus on the roles of family functioning, locus of control, and self-respect in predicting learned helplessness, especially in regions with distinct socio-cultural factors (Alharbi, 2022). These three variables family functioning, locus of control, and self-

respect are highly relevant to young adults struggling academically, as they directly influence personal beliefs about control, self-worth, and the perceived availability of support systems. Such research could offer insights into more effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of Ugandan students, fostering academic resilience and reducing the incidence of learned helplessness.

Family functioning encompasses the quality and effectiveness of interactions, support, and structure within a family system, which can have a profound impact on the psychological and emotional development of its members (Syakhrani & Aslan 2024). Paley *et al.* (2022) further defines family functioning as the extent to which a family provides emotional, social, and structural support to its members, enabling them to effectively cope with challenges. Healthy family functioning is marked by open communication, adaptability, emotional support, and stability qualities that create a nurturing environment essential for members' well-being (Izzo *et al.*, 2022). Studies have shown that young adults who grow up in well-functioning families are better equipped to handle stress and are approximately 40% less likely to exhibit severe stress responses in academic settings compared to their peers from low-functioning families (Izzo, *et al.*, 2022). This indicates the critical role family functioning plays in fostering resilience and psychological security during formative years.

A supportive family environment serves as a buffer against stress and other external pressures, facilitating emotional regulation and increasing self-efficacy in young adults (Scannell, 2020). Family support can be instrumental in helping young adults develop problem-solving skills and a positive self-concept, both of which are necessary for academic and personal success (Gonzalez, 2021). Family systems that encourage open communication and adaptability can create a sense of security that allows young adults to approach challenges more confidently and with a stronger belief in their own capabilities. Conversely, families marked by poor communication, rigidity, and lack of support often contribute to increased stress and anxiety among young adults, affecting their ability to cope effectively in academic settings (Gonzalez, 2021).

The connection between family functioning and learned helplessness is particularly significant, as studies show that young adults from dysfunctional families are more likely to experience heightened helplessness. Deng *et al.* (2022) notes that inadequate emotional and instrumental support within families can increase vulnerability to academic and personal struggles, as individuals may internalize a sense of powerlessness and lack of control over their circumstances. In academic contexts, students from low-functioning families may be less likely to persevere in the face of difficulty, as they lack the reassurance and motivation that a supportive family provides. For instance, a dysfunctional family environment may contribute to maladaptive beliefs, leading individuals to attribute their struggles to inherent deficits rather than seeing them as challenges that can be overcome with effort and resilience (Ghanouni *et al.*, 2023). This lack of adaptive beliefs may contribute to learned helplessness, reducing motivation and increasing the risk of academic failure.

In Uganda, family structures and support mechanisms can vary widely, impacting the degree of emotional and instrumental support young adults receive. Cultural expectations, economic challenges, and familial responsibilities often shape family dynamics, which may either bolster or undermine young adults' resilience and persistence in academic settings (Firmin *et al.*, 2022). In contexts where family support is limited due to socio-economic factors or cultural norms, students may experience higher stress levels and reduced motivation, further increasing the likelihood of learned helplessness. A strong, supportive family structure can help mitigate these challenges by fostering an environment that encourages young adults to view setbacks as temporary and surmountable, rather than as fixed barriers (Colvin & Knight, 2023).

Locus of control is a psychological concept that refers to an individual's belief system regarding the degree to which they can control the outcomes of events in their lives (Francis, 2020). Rotter's theory divides locus of control into two primary orientations: internal and external. Hamzah & Othman (2023) elaborates on this concept, explaining that individuals with an internal locus of control believe that their own actions, choices, and efforts directly influence outcomes. This belief often fosters a sense of agency and responsibility. In contrast, an external locus of control is characterized by the tendency to attribute outcomes to forces beyond personal control, such as luck, fate, or the influence of others. Those with an external locus may feel that no amount of personal effort will alter their circumstances, potentially leading to passivity and disengagement.

For young adults, especially those facing academic pressures, an internal locus of control is associated with numerous psychological benefits. According to Strong & Gore (2020), individuals with an internal locus of control are generally more resilient, motivated, and adaptable, as they see challenges as within their capacity to influence and control. This belief often contributes to higher academic persistence, as students with an internal locus of control are better equipped to view setbacks as temporary and manageable rather than insurmountable (Bolelli & Ekizler, 2022). In fact, research shows that young adults with a strong internal locus of control are approximately 30% more likely to continue striving toward academic goals in the face of challenges than those with an external orientation (Bolelli *et al.*, 2022). This finding underscores the importance of fostering an internal locus of control to enhance resilience, self-efficacy, and motivation in academic settings.

The relationship between locus of control and learned helplessness has been extensively documented, with an external locus often linked to higher levels of helplessness. Wang and Lv (2020) found that individuals with an external locus of control are more susceptible to feelings of helplessness because they perceive a lack of personal influence over their environment. This perception can result in a diminished sense of agency, reducing the likelihood that individuals will attempt to change challenging situations. When applied to academic settings, an external locus of control can be particularly detrimental for students who are already struggling academically, as it may reinforce the belief that success is out of reach regardless of effort. For instance, young adults

facing persistent academic difficulties might attribute their struggles to innate abilities or uncontrollable circumstances, such as challenging coursework or unsupportive instructors, rather than their own capacity to learn and adapt.

For university students in Uganda, who may confront a range of academic and socio-economic stressors, an external locus of control can intensify feelings of helplessness. Financial instability, limited access to resources, and restricted family support can exacerbate a sense of externality, as students may feel that their success is contingent on factors beyond their control. This feeling of helplessness not only impacts academic motivation but may also affect mental health, as persistent feelings of helplessness are linked to anxiety and depression (Buzzai, *et al.*, 2021). Research in African contexts suggests that students with an external locus of control are more vulnerable to stress and often experience lower academic outcomes due to a belief in limited personal agency (Wang & Lv, 2020). Addressing locus of control is thus critical in research on learned helplessness, particularly among young adults experiencing academic difficulties. Fostering an internal locus of control may be essential for building resilience in challenging academic environments, as it encourages students to view their efforts as meaningful and impactful. Studies have shown that interventions focused on developing an internal locus of control, such as cognitive-behavioral training and resilience-building programs, can significantly enhance students' sense of self-efficacy and academic persistence (David *et al.*, 2021). For Ugandan university students, promoting an internal locus of control could empower them to better navigate academic obstacles, enhancing both their educational attainment and broader life satisfaction.

Self-respect can be conceptualised as the regard one holds for oneself, is essential to overall psychological well-being, influencing motivation, resilience, and interpersonal relationships. Clucas (2020) describes self-respect as the evaluation of one's worth and competence, making it a crucial aspect of one's self-concept. According to Tanyi (2022), individuals with high self-respect are characterized by confidence, resilience, and a robust sense of self. This positive self-regard allows young adults to face setbacks and challenges without being overwhelmed by them, often perceiving such difficulties as manageable and within their control (Berg *et al.*, 2023). Studies show that young adults with high self-respect tend to be better equipped to handle stress, show greater persistence in challenging tasks, and are less prone to feelings of learned helplessness (Boham, 2020).

Research indicates that self-respect plays a significant role in reducing the vulnerability to learned helplessness, particularly among young adults experiencing academic difficulties. Low self-respect often correlates with increased susceptibility to helplessness, as individuals with low self-respect may internalize academic and personal struggles as reflections of personal inadequacy, rather than as external challenges to be overcome (Birni & Eryılmaz, 2024). This attributional style can reinforce feelings of powerlessness and reduce motivation to try again after a setback, creating a cycle of diminished self-efficacy and learned helplessness (Wan *et al.*, 2022). In academic contexts, students with low self-respect may be more likely to give up on challenging tasks or to experience greater anxiety and self-doubt in testing situations (Stanislav *et al.*, 2020).

In Uganda, young adults face a variety of socio-economic challenges that can heighten their stress levels and create additional pressures on academic performance and self-perception. Considering economic instability and limited job opportunities can amplify self-doubt and discourage perseverance among students, making self-respect particularly important for building resilience (Noble, 2023). Studies on self-respect in African contexts have found that young adults who report higher levels of self-respect tend to show stronger resilience in the face of social and academic challenges, ultimately leading to more positive educational and career outcomes (Ngina *et al.*, 2024; Noble, 2023). These findings suggest that fostering self-respect among university students in Uganda may be vital to breaking cycles of helplessness and promoting persistence, adaptability, and achievement.

Moreover, self-respect is integral to internal motivation and the pursuit of personal goals (Dillon, 2021). For Ugandan students navigating high-stakes academic and career pathways, having a strong sense of self-respect can be a buffer against external stressors, reducing the impact of setbacks and promoting a problem-solving approach to challenges. This resilience is particularly relevant to combat learned helplessness, as self-respect can enhance individuals' perception of control over their environment, shifting focus away from external attributions of failure (Thornton, 2020). As a result, young adults with high self-respect are more likely to perceive themselves as agents of change, enhancing both their academic success and broader life satisfaction (Makelele, 2024).

Understanding the predictive weights of family functioning, locus of control, and self-respect on learned helplessness among young adults with academic difficulties in Uganda offers a unique and culturally relevant perspective. These factors family support, personal control, and self-regard are fundamental to coping strategies, yet they have been relatively underexplored in Sub-Saharan contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how these psychological and social variables interact to impact the experiences of young Ugandan adults facing academic challenges, providing insight that may inform targeted interventions to mitigate learned helplessness and improve academic outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control, and learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda. Specifically, the study aimed to: (1) examine the nature of the relationships between these variables, (2) assess the combined influence of family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control on learned helplessness, and (3) determine the individual contributions of family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control in predicting learned helplessness.

Research Questions

1. What type of relationship exist between family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control and learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda?
2. What is the joint contribution of family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control on learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda?
3. What is the relative contribution of family functioning, self-esteem and locus of control on learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda?

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationships between family functioning, locus of control, self-respect, and learned helplessness among university students in Uganda. A sample of 119 undergraduate students, selected through stratified random sampling, represented various academic disciplines across public and private universities. Participants were aged 18–30, enrolled full-time, and experiencing academic difficulties, defined as a GPA below 3.0.

Data were collected using standardized instruments: the *Learned Helplessness Scale* (Peterson et al., 1993) to measure perceptions of academic inefficacy; the *Family Functioning Scale* (Epstein et al., 1983) to assess family dynamics; Rotter's (1966) *Locus of Control Scale* to evaluate attributions of academic outcomes; and Rosenberg's (1965) *Self-Respect Scale* to gauge self-worth. Each scale employed Likert-style responses, with higher scores indicating stronger expressions of the respective construct.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarised demographic characteristics and levels of family functioning, locus of control, self-respect, and learned helplessness. Pearson's correlation assessed the relationships between the independent variables and learned helplessness. Multiple regression analysis identified the predictive weight of each variable, accounting for confounding factors such as age, gender, and academic discipline.

Result

Research Question 1: What type of relationship exist between family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control and learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda.

Table 1: Zero order correlation summary of variables under investigation

Variables	Mean	St.dv	1	2	3	4
Learned Helplessness	47.68	9.35	1.00			
Family Functioning	26.25	8.02	0.30	1.00		
Self-esteem	35.05	8.39	0.28	0.18	1.00	
Locus of control	32.34	8.96	0.24	0.62	0.24	1.00

Table 1 reveals that there is a significant relationship between learned helplessness and family functioning ($r=0.30$, $p<0.05$), self-esteem ($r=0.28$, $p<0.05$) and locus of control ($r=0.24$, $p<0.05$). This implies that high influence of family functioning, self-esteem and locus of control will increase learned helplessness among youths in Uganda.

Research Question 2: What is the joint contribution of family functioning, self-esteem, locus of control on learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda.

Table 2: Regression summary showing the joint contribution between the independent variables and the dependent variable

R=0.380		Adj R²=0.122			
R²=0.145		Std. error=8.76			
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1492.937	3	497.646	6.479	0.000
Residual	8832.928	115	76.808		
Total	10325.866	118			

Table 1 reveals that there is a joint contribution of family functioning, self-esteem and locus of control to the prediction of learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda. Regression coefficient $R=0.380$, $R^2=0.145$, $\text{Adj } R^2=0.122$. The three factors, when combined, accounts for 12.2% variance in learned helplessness. However, the remaining percentage (87.8%) accounts for the change in learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda that are beyond the study. Therefore, family functioning, self-esteem and locus of control jointly predicted learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda; $F_{(3,115)}=6.479$, $p<0.01$.

Research Question 3: What is the relative contribution of family functioning, self-esteem and locus of control on learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda.

Table 3: Regression summary showing relative contribution between the independent variables on the dependent variable

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	30.247	4.203		7.197	0.000**
Family functioning	0.281	0.128	0.241	2.198	0.030**
Self-Esteem	0.254	0.099	0.228	2.564	0.012**
Locus of control	0.036	0.116	0.034	0.308	0.759

Table 3 reveals that two out of the three factors (family functioning and self-esteem) are significant predictors of learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda while locus of control is not a significant predictor. The most potent predictor is self-esteem ($\beta=0.228$, $t=2.564$, $p<0.05$) and family functioning ($\beta=0.241$, $t=2.198$, $p<0.03$) except locus of control ($\beta=0.034$, $t=0.308$, $p>0.05$). This implies that self-esteem and family functioning will increase the tendency of learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda by 22.8% and 24.1% respectively

Discussion of Findings

The first research question examined relationship between Family Functioning, Self-Esteem, Locus of Control, and Learned Helplessness. The positive correlations between learned helplessness and family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control suggest a complex interplay in how familial and personal factors may contribute to helplessness among young adults in Uganda. The finding that family functioning is significantly related to learned helplessness aligns with research indicating that certain family dynamics can either foster resilience or, conversely, dependency (Xue, S., et al, 2023). Supportive family environments are typically protective; however, when young adults become overly reliant on family for decision-making or problem-solving, it may reduce their sense of self-efficacy, potentially leading to learned helplessness (Demirbilek & Atila 2021).

The positive relationship with self-esteem, while somewhat unexpected, may reflect a nuanced interaction where young adults maintain a sense of self-worth but still feel powerless to change their circumstances due to external barriers, such as academic challenges or systemic limitations (Westbury, A., 2024). This aligns with findings that self-esteem can coexist with helplessness in certain contexts where external constraints are perceived as overwhelming (Aghatabay, R., et al, 2023). Such environments could inhibit the ability to exercise agency, despite self-regard, contributing to a sense of helplessness.

The relationship between learned helplessness and locus of control aligns with Van Liew's (2020) theory, suggesting that those with an external locus of control may feel outcomes are largely beyond their control, fostering helplessness. However, some studies (e.g., Wu et al, 2020) suggest that locus of control might vary in its influence across cultures, implying that societal values or environmental factors could either moderate or amplify its relationship with learned helplessness. In this case, the cultural emphasis in Uganda on community and familial support might mediate this effect, making locus of control a less direct predictor of helplessness. The positive correlations suggest that interventions to reduce learned helplessness should consider family-based strategies that promote autonomy and encourage self-directed coping skills. Enhancing self-efficacy within academic settings may help young adults better manage external barriers, thereby reducing feelings of helplessness (Sherif, et al., 2024).

The second research question examined the joint contribution of family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control on learned helplessness. The regression results indicate that family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control together explain 12.2% of the variance in learned helplessness. This relatively modest explanatory power suggests that while these factors are significant, other

variables likely contribute more substantially to learned helplessness. This aligns with findings from studies showing that family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control contribute to helplessness but are part of a broader constellation of influences (Wang & Lv 2020). Prior research has highlighted the role of external stressors, like socio-economic challenges and educational pressures, which are known to exacerbate learned helplessness but were not directly measured in this study (Fu, 2024). Additionally, societal expectations and cultural attitudes toward personal agency and success may play a significant role, as found in cross-cultural studies (Pishghadam, *et al.*, 2023).

The third research question examined the relative contribution of family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control on learned helplessness. The finding that family functioning ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < 0.05$) and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.05$) are significant predictors, while locus of control is not, suggests that the influence of family dynamics and self-esteem on learned helplessness is stronger than that of perceived control over outcomes. This aligns with findings from Ingram *et al.* (2023), who observed that self-esteem and family support are critical in shaping young adults' psychological responses to adversity, as high self-esteem can sometimes buffer against helplessness. In contrast, the lack of significance for locus of control could suggest cultural differences in how control beliefs influence helplessness. Studies on locus of control in collectivist societies like Uganda have shown that an external locus of control may not predict helplessness as strongly as in individualistic cultures, where personal agency is more emphasized (Heinecke-Müller, *et al.*, 2022). This may reflect cultural norms valuing familial and communal support over individual agency, thus moderating the role of locus of control in fostering helplessness.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that family functioning and self-esteem are significant predictors of learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda, while locus of control does not significantly predict helplessness in this sample. Specifically, higher levels of family functioning and self-esteem were associated with increased levels of learned helplessness, suggesting that while supportive family environments and positive self-esteem are generally beneficial, they may inadvertently contribute to dependency and a diminished sense of personal agency when faced with challenges. The joint contribution of family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control explains 12.2% of the variance in learned helplessness, indicating that other unmeasured factors such as socio-economic stressors or mental health concerns likely play substantial roles in shaping helplessness within this population. These findings underscore the need for interventions that not only support family dynamics and self-esteem but also encourage independence and resilience to better equip young adults for academic and life challenges.

Recommendations

1. Since family functioning is associated with learned helplessness, interventions should focus on fostering supportive family relationships that also encourage young adults to develop independence and self-reliance. Parent and family workshops could emphasize ways to provide emotional support without fostering excessive dependency, helping young adults build the skills to handle challenges autonomously.
2. Although self-esteem positively correlated with learned helplessness, programs designed to enhance self-esteem should include components that strengthen resilience and problem-solving skills. By incorporating resilience-building strategies, these programs can help young adults gain confidence not just in their worth but also in their ability to navigate academic and personal setbacks.
3. To address the portion of helplessness unexplained by family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control, schools and community organizations should offer mentorship and academic support programs. Such programs can provide tools for overcoming academic difficulties, enhancing young adults' capacity to engage proactively in their studies rather than feeling helpless in the face of challenges.
4. Although locus of control was not a significant predictor, fostering a balanced sense of control could still be beneficial within the cultural context of Uganda. Programs that integrate community values while promoting adaptive control beliefs can help young adults feel empowered without compromising cultural norms that emphasize family and community support.
5. Given that family functioning, self-esteem, and locus of control explain a modest percentage of learned helplessness, further studies should explore other potential contributors, such as socio-economic challenges, mental health, peer influences, and societal expectations. This additional research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of learned helplessness among young adults in Uganda, informing future intervention efforts.

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