
INFLUENCE OF STRESS ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LIVES: A CASE OF A PRIVATE COLLEGE OF KARACHI

Sukaina Shaukat Ali

Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of Education, Institute of Business Management,
Sindh, Pakistan.
Email: sukainanoorani@gmail.com

Zehra Habib

Associate Professor and Senior Fellow
Department of Education, Institute of Business Management,
Sindh, Pakistan.
Email: zehra.habib@iobm.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the stressors for college students and the influence of these stressors on their academic and social lives, highlighting the differences in perceptions of both genders. As a remedial measure, this research also examined perspectives of a psychologist on stress management strategies for college going students. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten male and ten female students, as well as a psychologist of an intermediate college of Karachi. Findings revealed stressors such as family issues, financial instability and academic pressure as significant stressors that impede students' academic as well as social lives. Data further indicated that students suffer from trust issues and loneliness due to constant suffering from stress. The study indicated that both male and female students experienced similar stressors, but exhibited them differently. The psychologist's perspectives regarding coping with stress indicated parental support as a main stress alleviator. By highlighting the challenges for adolescents, and by underscoring responses of the psychologist regarding coping strategies, this study will aid in the effectively handling adolescent stress by parents.

KEYWORDS

Academic and Social life, Adolescents, College students, Coping strategies, Stressors

INTRODUCTION

Irrespective of one's gender, age, or cultural background, the phenomenon of stress is recognized as one of the usual features in a person's life (Hamaideh, 2011). Stress is

the constant consequence caused by various repetitive tasks of life and is perceived as discrepancy between stressors arising from environmental demands and one's competences to cope with those requirements (Aikens et al., 1992; Rehmani et al., 2018).) People recognize stress when they encounter danger, or a situation exceeding their resources which places them in a disturbing situation which can lead to emotional and physical health problems (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Joseph, 2009; Yaribeygi et al., 2017). In such situations, stress creates a submissive and negative approach in an individual rather than the will to overcome it (Ajmal & Ahmed, 2019).

Although stress is a usual phenomenon which every person experiences in his/her life, the severity of stress is considered to be greater at pubertal age as this period is considered as demanding and nerve-wracking (Ajmal & Ahmed, 2019; Zhou et al., 2023). Adolescence is a phase of one's life ranging from 12-25 years which is a crucial time of human development featured by rapid physical, social, psychological, and neurological changes (Krapic et al., 2015). In the schooling system, adolescents are those young ones enrolled in junior and senior high schools, vocational schools, colleges or universities. Psychological issues such as stress are becoming common among college students universally (GAO Et Al., 2020; Limone & Toto, 2022). Reasons such as escalated workload in college, changes in the life style, personal relationships, vocational choices, individuality and identity crisis are thought to be some of the stressors in college students' lives (Khan et al., 2013; Krapic et al., 2015).

The World Health Organization (WHO) presents the concept of mental health as a position of health and prosperity in which an individual comprehends his/her potential and copes with the normal stress of life. WHO has characterized stress as a 21st-century epidemic considering it as a global issue. Furthermore, adolescents' well-being is considered a universal difficulty due to the high occurrence of psychological conditions. Researchers agree that adolescents encounter stress throughout their time spent in colleges (Fauzi et al., 2021; Khan, 2013; Wen, 2009). The spring health assessment by the American College of Health Association (2019) indicated that 34.2% of college students had labeled stress indicated as the major impediment to learning (Lederer, 2020). According to Ramachandiran and Dhanapal (2018), Gen Z in Malaysia experience adequate level of stress affecting their academic performances. Arbués et al., (2020) confirmed the occurrence of stress in college students in Spain. The situation is not different in our country. Pakistani students suffer from the burden of academics, fear of failure, competition resulting in suicide amongst adolescents (Masood et al., 2018). Although mental well-being is crucial for students' education and overall quality of life, stress is causing extensive consequences on the learning competency and general life of students (Bashir et al., 2019; Mahmood et al., 2019). Therefore, there is critical to explore the stress factors, and be proactive by offering timely involvement to work on the mental health of Pakistani students (Asif et al.,

2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Canon (1929) introduced the concept of stress when he devised the term “homeostasis” denoting to a static dynamic process that can alter internal conditions to survive external threats. Canon believed in the idea that several hormones contribute to the sentiment of stress in individuals and introduced the concept of fight or flight. However, the initial definition of stress was given by Seyle (1973) as the state in which the body exhibits a generic but unvarying reaction in a biological system in response to any demands. Seyle used the term ‘nonspecific’ to denote a set of shared response elements regardless of the specific nature of the triggering agent, or stressor.’ Seyle’s definition was so compelling that it gained the widespread acceptance as the standard definition of the word ‘stress.’ Although Seyle’s research was a significant contribution towards stress researchers, yet his concept was limited to physiological factors and he did not take into account psychological aspects causing stress (Krohne, 2002). As a result of this criticism, an insightful argument emerged suggesting that stress experienced by humans is often the consequence of cognitive processes mediating their experience (Arnold, 1960; Janis, 1983; Lazarus 1966). It was Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who were proponents of the viewpoint that stress is best perceived as an association between an individual and their surroundings. They believed, “Psychological stress refers to a relationship with the environment that the person appraises as significant for his or her well-being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, p. 63). Cognitive appraisal and coping are the two essential procedures identified playing a central role in the person-environment relationship (Krohne, 2002).

Coping is a dynamic process that includes intentional actions employed by an individual to appraise a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies are cognitive and developmental struggles that are used to sustain an equilibrium between the internal and external strains upon an individual and to deal with emotional and maladjusted stressors (Neupert, 2016). Coping techniques play a substantial part in overcoming or reducing the stress experienced by people. In order to effectively deal with stress, individuals employ diverse coping mechanism (Ganesan et al., 2018).

According to the World Health Organization, the phase of life between childhood and adulthood from age 10 to 19 years is termed Adolescence (WHO, 2022). Adolescence is considered to be a fragile transitional period of one’s life characterized by rapid growth where an individual leaves his childhood behind and moves toward adulthood. In this transitional phase, adolescents face many challenges including developing meaningful relationships, setting personal directions, a shift from being dependent on

parents to independent functioning and most importantly developing self-identity. These challenges often lead them to stress and strain (Aziz & Tariq, 2019; Winsor et al., 2010; Zaman & Naqvi, 2018). This stress may bring feelings of depression and negativity among these youngsters (Moeini et al., 2019). An adolescent meets various challenges, and at times, due to lesser social support or inadequate skills in his or her personality to cope with such challenges, he or she undergoes substantial psychologically painful states of anger, anxiety, depression (Myers, 2008; Stikkelbroek, et al., 2016). Though most mental health problems occur at the adolescent level, youngsters rarely get support from their environment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the factors creating stress in Pakistani college students.
2. To explore the influence of stress factors on students' academic and social lives.
3. To examine the differences in the perceptions of Pakistani male and female college students regarding stress factors and their influence on students' academic and social lives.
4. To seek the college psychologist's perceptions regarding the coping strategies that can be used to overcome college students' stress.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the factors creating stress in college students?
2. How do stress factors influence the academic and social lives of college students?
3. What are the differences in the perceptions of male and female college students regarding stress factors and their influence on students' academic and social lives?
4. What are the perceptions of a psychologist regarding the coping strategies that can be used to overcome stress factors in college students?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method was best suited to answer the research questions of the current study as in this method the researcher endeavors to interpret the phenomenon in its natural setting and "in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005, p.3). It is an inductive approach to the inquiry, where the researcher generally discovers the insights of a phenomenon in a particular context (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Levitt et al., 2017). Case study as a qualitative tradition was adopted. Case Study Research is a study of a present phenomenon, which incorporates a dense depiction of a subject through numerous sources of data leading to a holistic inquiry (Bassey, 1999; Cheek et al., 2018; Myers, 2015; Stake, 1995). Hence this approach allowed the researcher to explore the perceptions of students and the college psychologist to gain a holistic view of college students' stressors.

The research was conducted in an intermediate college located in Karachi. The college

offers intermediate (HSC) education to both girls and boys in separate campuses and is affiliated with the Board of Intermediate Education, Karachi. The study was conducted in both campuses as the boys were interviewed in their respective campuses and so were the girls. For conducting interviews, a quiet and isolated place was also ensured so that the participants feel safe and comfortable during interviews and other students of the college remained unaware.

Participants

Twenty students of grade XII were selected through purposive sampling technique. These were ten male and ten female students, who frequently reported their stress either to the academic coordinator or to the college psychologist. Along with the students, the college psychologist holding an M.Phil. in Psychology and having five years of adolescent counselling experience was also a participant.

Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews with each key informant were conducted using self-developed interview guides which were verified by the expert. Separate interview guides for students as well as the psychologist were used. Each interview was held for about 25-30 minutes in the college premises for which prior consent from each participant was obtained.

Analysis

The researcher used two cycles of coding recommended by Saldana (2013) for qualitative data analysis. In the first cycle, after the transcription of data, the researcher highlighted the fundamental words, concepts and in-vivo codes were developed using phrases from participants' actual language. Later, Constant comparison of emergent in-vivo codes from different interviews was done by listing in-vivo codes in separate columns and based on the logical relationship, commonalities and patterns were identified. Through this, the final in-vivo codes were developed which were grouped into themes in the second cycle (Saldana, 2013).

DATA ANALYSIS

Major themes that emerged from the analysis of data from students' interviews pertaining to research question one regarding the stress factors in college students' lives are discussed below:

Parental Issues

One of the key factors creating stress in college students' lives was associated with their homes and families. Almost 90 % of the students lamented separation between parents, unhealthy relationships between their parents and parental attitude towards them which affected students' mental health. One of the students in this regard shared,

"My parents are never on the same page....and in all their married life, it is us who suffered badly. When I see my friends' parents living happily, I feel envious... because of all this unhappiness around me, I do not feel like studying or even talking to anyone around."

Lack of trust and rejection from the families was found as one of the factors creating stress for adolescents. A female student shared, *"The only responsibility of my mother it seems, was to give me birth....she left..... not left home, but she handed me to my elder sister who raised me.... my mother never knew what was happening in my life, it was my sister who always attended my school parent teacher meetings.... why should I excel in academics when I know I won't get any love from my mother anytime in my life?"*

A male student lamented, *"My father did not talk to me for seven months... and this is not the first time, whenever someone says anything about me, he stops talking to me... he has always rejected me, never trusted me...now I feel like running out of my house and dying."*

Most of the adolescent students believed that parental attitude towards them, as well as parental relationship with each other was one of the most significant factors impacting their academic and social lives. If the conditions at home were not conducive, students faced stress and anxiety leading to poor academic performance, social withdrawal and difficulty forming healthy relationships with peers.

Financial Instability

Another core stressor for adolescents was financial volatility of their families. Approximately 90% of the students reported that financial uncertainty in the family was a significant stressor for them. Most of the participants were on need-based scholarships and they shared that paying college fees was not possible for their parents. One of the students shared that her parents had warned her to achieve good results for her scholarship to continue else they would not be able to pay her tuition fee and would have to withdraw her from college. Some of the students shared that they did not get pocket money from their homes and seeing their friends' carefree spending, caused them inferiority complex. They felt isolated, hopeless, and embarrassed due to their financial situation which made them hesitant to engage with peers or join in social activities at the college. Continuing with this, one of the students shared, *"I do not eat anything at the college during lunch break as I do not have money for that.... but I never shared this fact with any of my friends, all I've told them is that I avoid junk food. This makes me so depressed."*

A few participants also shared that they could not join any coaching or tuition centers

for additional academic support in the evening as their parents could not afford the fee and the transportation charges. They also shared that at times, buying handouts or books got difficult for them due to financial constraints which impeded their academic progress.

Academic Pressure during College Life

Since the college level is the transition stage for students where they face a multitude of challenges, academic pressure surfaced as another main cause of pressure and stress. Participants opined that academic pressure during the two years of college was a substantially more than the academic challenges faced at school. Moreover, the high parental as well as social expectations from a college student were also a factor causing considerable stress. Additionally, competition amongst the class fellows also compelled them to do well in studies irrespective of their aptitude.

Influence of Stress on the Academic and Social Lives of College Students

Findings from students' interviews relating to the second research question regarding influence of stress on students' academic and social lives are discussed below:

Stress impedes Academic Progress

Almost all participants were of the view that stress disturbed their academic life and they were unable to focus on their studies. They considered the stressful surroundings they were living in as a major factor disrupting their academic life at the college. Due to this, they could not focus on classroom lectures and assignments which impeded their academic performance and they were unable to secure desired grades. Moreover, a few participants also shared the fear of failure from the beginning of college due to which they were unable to perform in academics.

However, interestingly, two female participants viewed stress as a productive indicator of their academic achievement. They opined that it was the stress which motivated them to perform better in academics and achieve desired goals.

Trust issues and Loneliness

Adding to the social influence of stress, college students underscored that they have developed extreme trust issues as people in their surroundings had failed to empathize with their problems. Most of the participants shared that they wanted to isolate themselves and maintain silence when they felt stressed. A student shared:

"Though I need someone to listen to me when I am under stress, I've had bitter experiences when I've tried to gain a sympathetic ear.... People here perceive you wrong and they do not understand what is going on inside you and what you need at the moment.... Isn't it better to keep your feelings to yourself rather than share with anyone? I don't trust anyone anymore!"

Psychological Influence of Stress

All participants shared that stress has disturbed their daily lives. Sleeplessness (insomnia), unwillingness to eat and intentions to self-harm such as slashing of wrists were found to be some common aspects. Suicide ideation was found a common escape for many participants.

One of the participants even confessed to taking her father's sleeping pills to get rid of family stress. Moreover, damaged self-efficacy, extreme sensitivity, shivering hands, binge eating and overthinking were found to be some common influences of stress on college students.

Differences in the perceptions of male and female college students regarding stress factors and their influence on students' academic and social lives

The findings of research question three regarding the gender differences in stressors are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs:

There were no substantial differences found in the stress factors of both the genders. Parental relationship, financial instability, academic burden, were common stressors for both male and female college students.

However, a difference in the expression of stress was noted. Girls had a different attitude towards expressing their stress which significantly included crying and isolating themselves in their homes. All boys, however, reported that they preferred staying out of the house in case of stress. Moreover, a few male participants also shared that they had terrible fights with people around when they felt stressed. Girls, on the other hand preferred remaining quiet when in stress.

However, all female participant students shared that they felt strongly that girls were not valued in our society. The only objective of being a girl was to get married and raise a family. Due to this mindset, girls were not given the importance that boys were given in a typical patriarchal society. One of the girl students in this regard lamented: *"My mother gives undue importance to my older brother... just because he is a boy and will be an earning member of the house in the future. She tries to fulfill all his wishes whether justified or not...in our family, boys have all the liberty to go out with friends whereas girls cannot go out with friends or choose a career for themselves. My brother also has the liberty to go to any foreign country and study whereas I cannot even choose a university that is not near my house."*

Psychologist's Perspectives Regarding the Coping Strategies

Findings of the fourth research question from the interview of the psychologist related to the coping strategies that could be practiced to overcome stress factors in college

students. The findings from her interview are discussed below.

Appropriate & Vigilant Parenting

The psychologist asserted that parents should be vigilant enough to notice any change in their adolescent's behavior. She further asserted that parents should be able to read their teen's body language. Any unusual or disturbed behavior of adolescents should not be neglected. An excerpt from her interview is noted below:

"Adolescents need unconditional love and acceptance from their parents... as a parent, one needs to learn to be a facilitator for the teen and not a judge...strict behavior at all times can be a stressor for college students and this can drive adolescents away from parents."

Continuing with the discussion of parental attitude as a coping mechanism, the psychologist emphasized that parents should have a balanced parenting style and that sometimes even parents needed counselling as they too were struggling with stress which they transferred to their children.

In her words:

"I think parents are the first entity who need support...we cannot leave parents unaided. Parental awareness sessions and their therapies should be conducted in all educational institutions, which will ultimately help in dealing adolescent stress."

She also asserted that parents should be taught to work on their own relationship with their spouse and needed to put an end to domestic violence if they were well-wishers for the next generation to be stress free.

Adolescent awareness and support

Another significant coping strategy discussed by the psychologist was providing adequate awareness and training college students in order to make them self-sufficient in dealing with their stress. In this aspect, she suggested:

"We (parents, teachers, psychologists) need to teach our adolescents certain skills which include problem identification, self-realization, time management, critical thinking, problem solving, and emotional stability... moreover, teaching positive side of the stress is also needed to be inculcated in college students. Along with this, in this rising age of social media, it is our responsibility to teach certain coping tools to our college students for their own stress management."

She continued further:

"We are still living in an era where parents have focused on providing all the necessary physical aspects to their adolescents and that too the branded ones be it food, clothing or educational institution. What we as parents and teachers are ignoring today is the aspect of nurture (tarbiyat) in our adolescents. Today our teenagers are

learning to deal with their emotions through media... the aspect of tarbiyat has many hidden coping tools in it."

Religious and Sports Activities

Talking about the religious aspect, the psychologist suggested inculcating the habit of prayers in adolescents so that students involved themselves in religious activities. Moreover, she also asserted the importance of engaging college students in physical activities like sports which could help minimize their stress levels. The psychologist continued discussing coping mechanisms by sharing the importance of having productive hobbies for college students. She also cautioned that there should be restrictions on teens regarding use of social media, because this could also be a source of stress.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current research identified family issues, financial instability and academic pressure as the major stressors in college students' lives. The findings of this study corroborate the findings of existing literature. Majeed (2022) reported family issues, relationship with parents and parental relationship with one other as their spouse as the significant stressor in students' lives. Moreover, the author also discussed financial instability as one of the crucial stress factors for students. This study's findings reported that financial uncertainty hampers students' academic as well as social lives. Similar findings were discussed by Moore et al. (2020) where the authors concluded that financial instability often lead to parental difficulties in fulfilling the academic expenses of their children and due to which college students with struggling backgrounds suffer both academically and socially as they compare themselves with their peers leading them to frustration. The study also highlighted parental behavior as one of the stressors in students' life. These findings are parallel with the findings of Mendo-Lázaro et al., (2019) where the researchers found family dynamics as one of the key stressor in adolescent's life. Parental rejections and criticism were found to be significant contributor to adolescents' psychological and behavioral issues. The authors also considered the family unit as the key element determining adolescent mental health.

The researchers also found the intention for suicide common in almost all participants. College students reported that they do not prefer living and look for ways to die. These findings replicate the findings of Khan et al., (2020) where the authors reported a significant positive relationship between emotional distresses with suicide ideation in adolescents. The present study highlighted similar stressors for both male and female students as well as similar influences on both genders. Nonetheless, the study found gender differences in the manifestation of stress, but not in the stressors themselves. These findings, resonate with the findings of Yikealo et al, (2018) and Reddy et al,

(2018) where the authors did not observe any substantial difference in the stress level of male and female students. The findings also replicate the findings of Kaushal et al., (2018), Kim et al., (2014), and Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner (2010) where the authors advocate both genders experiencing similar stressors. These findings contradict the research conducted by Wenjuan et al, (2020) in China and Aziz and Tariq (2019) in Pakistan. These authors concluded that girls tend to have higher stress levels than boys. Another significant finding of this research is the psychologist's view regarding the coping strategies where talking to parents, family and friends, indulging in sports as well in spending time in prayers or meditation were suggested as the most effective coping strategies. These findings align with the results of the study conducted by Ganesan et al, (2019) where the authors suggested talking to friends, involving in sports or recreational activities or having productive habits works well in coping with stress. The findings also echo the findings of Amponsah (2020) as the author also considered prayers as one of the most significant stress coping strategies. Another research study conducted in Pakistan by Abbasi et al. (2020) reported nearness to God as one of the most influential stress management strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current research underscored the exploration of factors causing stress in college students' lives. It also aimed at investigating the influence of stressors on the academic and social lives of college students. Another key aspect of the research was to explore the perceptual differences in male and female students regarding the stressors and their influence on students' lives. The research finally attempted to outline some coping strategies as a remedial measure for students' stress. The study attempted to make a small contribution in the field of adolescents' research through a close investigation of adolescents' stressors. Through this research, the role of parents, as well as educators was highlighted. The study also attempted to raise awareness among today's parents about their role and responsibilities in raising their adolescents. They need to realize that today's generation should be treated as per today's needs and not as they were brought up by their parents. Though this study highlighted the role of parents as well as their lacking in upbringing.

For this, it is suggested that educators should take the extra mile in educating parents and helping them if they are struggling psychologically because working with parents is one of the most significant ways to help reduce adolescent stress and nurture a happy and mentally healthy generation. Moreover, college administration is also suggested to take measures in teaching effective coping strategies to students so that they become independent human beings in dealing with their stress. Therefore, there is a way forward for all the important stakeholders in an adolescent's life. The current study was limited to students only, future studies in this area can be conducted where parental perceptions can be taken regarding the circumstances that impact their parenting style

with adolescents. Moreover, in the context of Pakistan, future studies can also look into the current economic conditions of the country and its influence on the parental style and challenges that they face and its influence on their relationship with their adolescents.

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