

ACADEMIC STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG MARRIED INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The number of married international students in Malaysia is on the increase every year. However, upon completion of an academic session, students are faced with various challenges, such as financial instability, academic work load, and culture shock, which lead to stress. This study focuses on stress and the coping strategies among married international students at the international Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). A total number of 100 married male and female students were selected randomly for the study. Two instruments namely Perceived Stress Scale Inventory (PSSI) and Spanish Version of Coping Strategy inventory (SCSI) were administered to the selected sample. The data gathered were analysed using descriptive statistics. Result indicates that there is no significant difference between married male and female international students with respect to their coping skills and perceived stress.

Keywords: Academic stress, coping strategies, married international students

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia as a key player of economic, social, and educational developments of South-East Asia was colonized by the British and got her independence in 1957. Currently, there are thirteen states in the country. Its population, economy and education have become important indicators for its progress in all ramifications (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2009). The drastic development of the country has earned it an international recognition. It is commonly known that human and material resources have been put together to address the challenges of humanity as a whole. In the context of Malaysia, one of the recent research has been on stress and coping strategies in helping married couples, workers and students. In recent decades, the focus of various studies in Malaysia has been on how people, especially international students manage and cope with stress. This is so because they have to adjust to so many situation such as the environment, food, local language, and meeting new friends.

CONCEPT OF STRESS

Generally speaking, stress is considered as the most significant problem in the modern world, which leads to many systemic complications. Simply put, stress implies a condition where an organism's homeostasis is threatened (Rajaram et.al, 2012). History have it that the term 'stress' was first coined in 1822 by a French

mathematician called Augustine Cauchy. He defined 'stress' as the pressure per unit area and 'strain' as the ratio of the increase or decrease in the length of an object to its original length. In the twentieth century, the stress concept was used in the field of the biological sciences, when Walter Cannon (1914) conducted physiological research which resulted in his describing the stress response as a 'fight or flight' response. After him, Hans Selye (1936), a Canadian endocrinologist, continued this work and devised the General Adaptation Syndrome, a model of how the body responds to stressful situations in the short and long term. He began the trend to describe pressures with the term 'stressors' and the biological response as 'stress'. He defined biological stress as the sum of non-specific changes in the body. Although, physical scientists use the term 'stress' to indicate a force, pressure or stimulus, whereas, biological scientists and psychologists use the term 'stress' to connote a change or response. The opposite use of the term by these two groups is unfortunate because it confuses the meaning of the concept for the scientific community as well as the general public (The Science Museum, 2004). Yahaya and Husain (2007) stated that stress is a perception phenomenon which exists from a comparison between the command given and ability of a person to execute his/her task successfully. Unbalanced situation in this mechanism will lead to stress and ultimately, to stress reaction. It has been a subject that interests researchers worldwide. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health of America defined stress as "the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. But however it is defined, stress is a serious problem among students in academic settings like university campuses and colleges (Salahudin, et.al,2006), because stress as a biological and psychological term, refers to the consequences of the failure of a human to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats, whether actual or imagined. It covers a huge range of phenomena from mild irritation to severe problems that might result in a real breakdown of health. All of these can lead to poor or reduced academic performance because stress can come from any situation that can make persons feel frustrated, angry or anxious.

However, a condition which is considered stressful to one person may not necessarily be stressful to another. While distress is often associated with negative effect, eustress includes "good stress" which is based on external and internal stimuli. Such situations rely on adequate motivation to achieve goal-directed outcomes (Labib, et.al, 2010). Prolonged, frequent, or intense stress reactions can also cause permanent stress-related health disorders such as ulcers, high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, arthritis, kidney disease, and allergic reactions (Mills, et.al, 2008). The effect of stress on married university students needs to be recognized, and strategies developed to improve it should focus on both individual and situational factors because the effective and appropriate coping strategies may buffer the impact of newly encountered stressful situations on mental and physical health, thereby improving students' academic performance. Consequently, utilizing coping strategies effectively and appropriately will help the students in decreasing their stress levels (Yusoff, 2010), since stress pathology is not due to the physical characteristics of the stressor; rather, it relates to the psychological appraisal of the stressor in terms of its controllability and predictability, as opined by Koolhaas (2008).

UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE STRESS

The life in a university campus can be described as a transition from a period of dependence on parents/guardians to a time of independence. Seaward (1999) enumerated the more common stressors that university students frequently encounter on campuses: **Roommate Dynamics Professional Pursuits, Academic deadlines, Financial Aids and school loans, Lifestyle Behaviour, Peer group and Peer Pressure (drugs and alcohol) Exploring Sexuality, Friendships, Intimate Relationships Starting a professional career path**

ACADEMIC STRESS

Academic stress is the stressful condition of students taking examination, midterm etc.; and this can be considered as a good model of naturalistic stress in human beings as compared to laboratory-induced stress situations. Academic stress is an objective, discrete, short-term, and non-social stress (Gopal et.al, 2011). In a study conducted on examination stress among medical students, findings demonstrated a significant increase in the pulse rate and blood pressure among the students during examinations as compared with the baseline non-stressful states (Gopal, et al, 2011). Additionally, Gopal, et al (2011) stated in their study that examination stress was consistently shown to cause changes in catecholamine levels, whereas the changes in cortisol and Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone (ACTH) were somewhat contradictory, with some studies showing an increase and others showing no relation. The authors then concluded in their study that stress is associated with increased latent viral reactivation, upper respiratory tract infection, and delayed wound-healing time, indicating that stress causes significant immune response dysfunction.

Busari (2012) stated that one form of stress that is constantly being experienced by university/college students is stress in relation to academic concerns. "Academic stress is the product of a combination of academic-related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual" Wilks (2008). Academic stress is a concern that must not be taken for granted because it adversely affects the overall adjustment of students. Hussain, Kumar, and Husain (2008); Busari (2012) and several studies have already documented the effect of stress on students. University students have many obstacles to overcome in order to achieve their optimal academic performance. It takes a lot more than just studying to achieve a successful college/university career. Different stressors such as time management, financial problems, sleep deprivation, social activities, and for some students even having children, can all pose their own threat to a student's academic performance. Additionally, learning and memory can be affected by stress; although, an optimal level of stress can enhance learning ability (Kaplan & Sadock, 2000). Too much stress can cause physical and mental health problems and reduce students' self-esteem (Linn & Zeppa, 1984). Although some level of stress is not harmful and little bit of stress is necessary for motivation, high perceived level of stress is dangerous because it causes reduced concentration and attention and higher cognitive impairment that a university student cannot afford to lose. To reiterate, the consequences of high level of perceived stress include: depression, burn-out, anger/irritability, anxiety, poor sleep, fatigue and substance abuse (Levey, 2001) and all of these can drastically reduce a student's academic performance.

MARRIED STUDENTS' STRESS

Being married has often been associated with improving people's health and at the same time, marriage can be pretty stressful (The University of Chicago News, 2010). Being married has been reported to make easier for people to handle stressors in their lives; because marriage has a dampening effect on cortisol responses to psychological stress (The University of Chicago News, 2010). In today's society, an increasing number of people decide to return to the university/college after being out in the work force. Meanwhile, coming back to university/college puts high demands on older people, who sometimes have family already (Womble, 2010). What helped these students was the support they found within the University, such as childcare services, and also courses in how to hone superior studying skills (Hammer, Grigsby, & Woods, 1998)

Regarding married university postgraduate students, Repak (2012) reported in his study that a potentially oppressive environment of graduate students is among the factors that contribute to graduate married students' emotional fatigue. Repak (2012) enumerated factors that make married graduate students become vulnerable to stress. These are: **Lack of time, Financial pressure, Lack of faculty contact** – Here, Repak (2012) stated that faculty involvement was an important ingredient in academic success. He found that one third of the students surveyed in the study said they desired a deeper personal relationship with their supervising professor. Nonetheless, he lamented that the students in his study stated that the need for individual support and affirmation often goes unmet, due to a lack of faculty availability. Consequently, this situation contributes to the sense of helplessness that graduates feel as they strive to shape their academic environment.

COPING STRATEGIES

Coping are the well adopted positive ways in handling a stressful events. Toyin and Akoraro (2009) assessed academic stress coping mechanisms adopted by married female students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The aim of the study was to explore the influence of academic stress on married female students' academic performance and the coping strategies they use in a bid to enhance their academic performances. The quantitative data for the study was collected from 250 stratified and purposively selected married female students from 6 randomly selected faculties in the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, through a simple random sampling technique. The quantitative data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The Qualitative data collected through In-depth Interviews was analysed using the Text Base Beta. Findings from the study revealed that there was no significant relationship between years of marriage and high academic performance among married female students. The study also revealed that age had no significant influence on the married female students' high academic performance and finally, the study discovered that there was a significant relationship between adjustment strategies adopted and high academic performance of married female students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (Toyin & Akoraro, 2009). Thus, the authors concluded that academic activities and pursuit by married female students are stressful period in their academic training. Also, many married female students experience substantial level of stress as a result of role conflict, which contributes to poor academic performance, academic dishonesty, cynicism, and substance abuse. Finally, the authors stated that the various adjustment mechanisms used by the married female students contributed greatly to their high academic performance and achievement (Toyin & Akoraro, 2009).

Hence, this study aims to investigate in-depth and then find out the sources, impact of stress, and coping strategies as experienced by the married international students at the International Islamic university Malaysia in a bid to come up with recommendation on how married university students stress can be reduced and or controlled.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted among married international students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). A quantitative approach was adopted; hence, data was gathered with survey questionnaire. A quantitative research study is a description of trends or an explanation of the relationship amongst variables (Creswell, 2008). The participants in this study were married male and female international students from different parts of the world, who are based in Malaysia and studying at the International Islamic university Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak campus. Stratified random sampling was used to select participants for the study, and a total of 100 questionnaires were administered. This was accomplished by dividing the participants into strata on the basis of their gender (male and female) and marital status (married students). This method was considered appropriate for the study, as Creswell (2008) asserts that it guarantees that such sample will include the specific characteristics and or salient features that the researcher wants included in the sample. The researcher obtained permission from the academic committee and international student division-t IIUM. A brief instruction about the study, the time frame for completing/filling the questionnaires was given and the participation on the survey was however voluntary and confidentiality of information was assured. Self-administered questionnaires was utilize for the study. The questionnaire was divided into sections: Section A captured the participants' demographic features such as gender, age, year of study and country of origin. Section B was designed to obtain information regarding participants' stress and coping strategies. It is pertinent to mention here that the questionnaires are in 5-Likert scale type which ranges from "Not at all" to "Completely".

To ascertain the validity of the items in the questionnaire, the researcher used a Panel of expert in IIUM to check and verify the construct validity before they were distributed. The reliability analysis of the items was tested using the Cronbach's Alpha test, and result revealed a Cronbach's alpha value of .839, which indicates that the questionnaire items are reliable. Data entry and analysis were done using SPSS version 18.0.

RESULTS

From the analysis, result shows that 31.5% (n=63) of the respondents were females, while 18.5 % (n=37) were male. Majority of the respondents (47.5%) were between ages 19-25, which indicate that most of them are youth, possibly in their early years of marriage. Majority of the participants are from Asia continent 28% (n=56), followed by those from Africa 8% (n=16), Europe 7.5% (n=15), and Australia 6.5% (n=13) respectively.

Independent-samples t-test was carried out to compare the mean of perceived stressors between male and female married international students reveals that the mean for the male group (M=2.1722) is higher than that of female group (M=2.1390). Looking at Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, we find that the value under Sig. is greater than .05 (.586). This implies that the Levene's Test is insignificant. That is, the two variances are not significantly different. In other words, the two variances are approximately equal. This implies that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of the two groups (male and female married international students) regarding their perceived stress. Male (M=2.1722, SD=.43915), female (M=2.1390, SD=.51245), the P-value is greater than .05 (P=.743).

DISCUSSION

It was discovered majority of the respondents are between ages 19 and 24. It is believed that youth are energetic and stronger and are not likely to be susceptible to stress, unlike the older people. Therefore, there is age advantage among the study respondents. . The implication of this is that education at early part of one's life could positively influence the stress level of married students. As a result, it is advisable to seek education during early period of one's life

Equally, it was discovered that most married students from nearly every part of the world are presently studying in Malaysia. This may be an indication that the Malaysian environment is a peaceful and friendly, and as such, considered suitable for learning by most people from different parts of the world. This is because if the environment is not friendly, many people could have left for their countries or to other countries of their choice. More so, the result of the T-test shows that there is no significant difference between male and female married international students with respect to their coping skills and perceived stress. This result indicates that both male and female international students in Malaysia could easily and

positively cope with their perceived stress. Equally, the coping strategies mechanism employed by both male and female is effective for their healthy living.

CONCLUSION

The present study has looked at the perceived stress in relation with coping strategies among the married international students in International Islamic university Malaysia. This study found that both male and female married students are positively coping with their perceived stress. This may be due to the enabling environment they found themselves, as well as the cultured and friendly local citizens of Malaysia. This study has implication for both married citizens as well as the local citizens in the sense that it brings about peaceful coexistence among the people of the world and create the avenues for peace and securities for both local and international students.

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