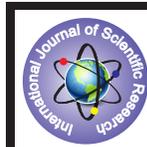


Exploring Stressors and Stress Among University Undergraduates in Nigeria



Education

KEYWORDS : Stressors, stress, psychological stressors, awareness, academic achievement

Igbo Janet Ngozi

ABSTRACT

This study examined the awareness and the extent of stressors among undergraduate students. In the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Two research purposes and two research questions guided the study. Random sampling technique was adopted in selecting 400 undergraduates from the faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Data was collected using 20-item questionnaire. Mean (X) and standard deviation (SD) were used to analyze the data. The data enumerated the major stressors experienced by the students. The extent emanating from these stressors as students struggle to carry out their study under pressure were equally indicated.

Introduction

Generally, stressors have become global problem, due to the fact that stressors lead to stress which can manifest in different negative forms such as aggression, depression, anger and, in more serious case, suicide. The products of individuals stressors partly depend on the individual's pattern of thinking or feeling and the general perception people have about themselves, their environment and the entire world in which they found themselves. Martin, Catlson and Buskist (2007) have observed that stressors are significant life changes that cause stress and disruption on daily basis. For Myers (1995), stressors can have positive effect by arousing and motivating individuals to conquer problems. There are three types of stressors and they include catastrophes, significant life changes and daily hassles. Catastrophes have to do with war and natural disasters. Significant life changes involve the death of a loved one, the loss of a job and divorce while daily hassles involve things like everyday annoyances, rush hour traffic, gratifying letter, and birth of a child in the family.

According to Myer (2002), accumulated stressors usually affect individuals' health and wellbeing as well as their psychological, social and cognitive lifestyle. Often times, stressors threaten our resources, our status and the security of our job, our loved ones, our deeply held beliefs, and our-self-image. Therefore, stressors can help to worsen individuals' situations and threaten their responses and performances. Generally, negative events are more likely than positive events to be perceived as stressful and to have impacts on physical and psychological health (Sarason, Johnson and Siegel, 1978). This is because negative events or stressors are likely to threaten individuals academically, socially, psychologically and morally. In the end, the personality which individuals ascribed to themselves as high or low self-esteem will definitely affect their achievement as students or teachers. For instance, any student that perceives himself or herself as low self-esteem student, is bound to perform low in the class room because psychologically, the student believes that academic achievement is meant for a particular set of students. On the other hand, any student that operates with high self-esteem is likely to perform even beyond his or her expectations. Therefore, the perception of a student's self-esteem will either affect the student positively or negatively. This means that how one thinks affects the individual's personality and can equally affect the individual's feelings.

There are also the psychological components of stressors. Unhealthy thinking is one of the psychological components of stressors. Mangal (2002) stated that unhealthy thinking reflects our repressed desires and are the type of wishful thinking that occur when the inner needs cannot be fulfilled under normal life situation. In school situation, this may lead to the students not performing as expected. Thinking can affect the students mode of learning. The way individuals think determine the way they perceive challenges ahead of them.

Thinking is an aspect of cognitive abilities Mangal (2002) states that the powers of thinking and reasoning are considered to be the essential tools for the welfare and meaningful existence of

individuals as well as the society. This implies that if students have psychological stressors such as unhealthy thinking and feeling, definitely these might affect their performance. Thinking is related to an individual's psychological mind-set which has to do with the inner cognitive behaviour of the person or persons involved. Usually, thinking is done purposefully, it is not done unconsciously. For Mangal (2002) unless there is a definite purpose, thinking cannot proceed on the right track. Therefore, there must be a motive behind any useful thinking. It becomes necessary that individuals need to think properly. However, there are times when individuals channel their thoughts towards unhealthy thinking and feeling to enable them escape from the requirements of the real world.

According to Nolen-Hoeksema (2001), psychologists have identified three characteristics of stressors that contribute to stress. These include uncontrollability stressor such as natural disasters and bereavement, unpredictability stressor, such as earthquakes and accidents, and challenge capabilities stressors such as examination and new relationships. The present researcher will limit this study to challenge capabilities; which lays emphasis on students and the stressors they undergo under the school environment which invariably manifest to stress. It is believed that the effect of stressors that cause fear or anxiety, depending on the individual's perceptions and emotional reactivity (Martin et al 2007). Psychologically, stress is caused when the perceived demands of individuals exceed their resources to acquire those demands (Gurung, 2006). This implies that situations or conditions have important role to play psychologically in individuals. This is simply because the way individuals perceive particular situations differ according to the individual psychological component. To Gatchel, Baum and Krantz (1989), situations that permit some control are less likely to produce signs of stress than situations which do not permit control. In agreement with this, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) state that individuals' perception of stressors determine the stress they experience.

Miller and Cohen (2001) carried out a study on the effect of different types of intervention on immune system functioning. The findings indicate that stress management interventions altered immune responses very little. Stress and coping are strongly influenced by the interaction of cognitive and environmental variables. In support of this, Martin et al (2007) stated that individuals experience stress to the extent that they appraise the stressors as an environmental variable. This is when psychological stressors, such as negative or positive thinking of the individual's mindset, come in.

In another study carried out by Kaprio, Koskenvis and Rita (1987) on widowed individuals, the result indicates that the risk of stress doubled in the week following their partners' death. This implies that stressors such as life changes are likely to affect individuals negatively.

In a similar study by Rubonis and Bickman (1991) on the effect of catastrophes, the researchers found that the rate of psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety increased by 17 percent. This implies that stressors can cause anxiety which

reduces the level of students concentration and could affect their academic achievement.

In another study carried out by Oboegbulem (2007) on types of stressors, the researcher identified some environmental stressors to students such as poor living arrangement, distance of students home to school, hostel accommodation, broken homes and financial deprivation are stressors that can influence students in their academic achievement. This implies that stressors can manifest in different forms.

Weiten (1989) found that stress creates distractions to students as well as hinder and impair their performance in the classroom and also affects their cognitive ability, creates poor concentration and reduces flexibility in different forms ranging from, registration, exercise, class attendance, accommodation in the hostel or outside hostel, coping with school assignments, irregularities in power and water supply, poor network services to financial problems. Kobasa (1979) carried out a study on how business executives coped with long-term stress. The findings indicated that some individuals become ill while some did not while operating under stressful conditions. The study further found that the hardy individuals perceived stressors as normal life challenges and did not avoid or become anxious about them. This implies that individual's response to stressors are dependent on the way they appraise the stress or their cognitive appraisal pattern in handling stress.

In a similar study carried out by Folkman and Lazarus (1991) on stress, the researchers developed hassles scale items, and a wide range of daily activities were included in the scale. The result indicated that the more stress people report as a result of the daily hassles, the poorer their psychological well-being. Therefore, stress seems to be related with individuals' psychological health which definitely might affect their cognition and their academic performance.

In another study carried out by Kiecolt-Glaser, Marucha, Malarkey, Mercado and Glaser (1995) on HIV-infected men and stress, the findings indicated that stress and negative emotions or psychological stressors correlate with a progression from HIV infected to AIDS. This might be because these infected people are faced with stressful conditions such as the loss of close friends, relations, and in some cases the loss of spouse. In the process of being stressed up, the tendency to loose their immune system capacity is not left behind. Therefore, they suffer immune suppression which is capable of allowing the HIV diseases to quickly and easily mature to AIDS.

Zeegers (2001) carried out a study on how students learning style changes across a course in chemistry in an Australian University. The findings indicated that the deep approach to learning was the one most closely related to good grade while the achieving approach was one linked with the fluctuation across the course. This means that for a student to perform in classroom work, the student required a healthy thinking to enable

him/her to perform better. When students are not well co-ordinated as a result of stress definitely this might affect their academic achievement or the achievement.

Farsides and Woodfield (2003) carried out a study on personality and academic success. The findings among others was that openness to experiences and agreeableness was found to be significant predictors to academic success. This means that unhealthy psychological stressors such as unhealthy thinking, talking and feeling might create problems in the process of achieving academic success.

From the numerous literature reviewed, the emphases were mostly on stress and stress management rather than stressors which breed stress. Therefore, in Nigeria, more especially in the universities, studies on awareness of stressors and the extent of these stressors on students and their academic performance are ignored. It becomes relevant to create awareness of stressors which students undergo in the process of learning and to determine the extent of these stressors to students performance. Basically this is to enable the government to react positively towards addressing this ugly situation that seems to damage the potentials of students in our school system. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the perception of undergraduates students on the awareness of stressors? To what extent do stressors affect undergraduate students' academic performance?

Method and data collection: This study adopted a descriptive survey design. This design is capable of eliciting information from respondents opinions on students awareness of stressors and the extent to which these stressors have affected them in the process of learning. Four hundred undergraduate (400), students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, from the Faculty of Education, constituted the sample of the study. The sample was made up of 400 level students. The researcher adopted the stratified random sampling technique to get 190 male and 210 female students who are studying Educational psychology courses in the university.

Data for the study were collected using a - 20 item questionnaire designed by the researcher. The questionnaire handled data relating to students awareness and extent of stressors in the process of learning. The questionnaire required students to respond by making their choice in the options that best suit their knowledge of the stressors and the extent to which these stressor have affected their academic performance. The following values were assigned to the responses Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and strongly disagree for the awareness of stressors and Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE) and Very Low Extent (VLE) indicating the extent of the stressors.

The bench mark mean score of 2.5 and above indicated that the particular item is exhibited while a mean score below 2.5 indicated that the particular item does not exist as stressor to the students.

Result and Discussion

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation scores of students' awareness and the extent of stressors

s/ n	Item statements	Awareness of Stressors				Extent of Stressors		
		N	Mean X	SD	Remarks	Mean (X)	S.D	Remarks
1	Concerned about getting school fees	400	3.19	0.83	Agree	3.18	0.84	VHE
2	Fear of confrontations by lecturers	400	3.20	0.79	Agree	3.13	0.75	VHE
3	Poor study environment	400	3.13	0.75	Agree	2.90	0.98	VHE
4	Concerned about getting assignments done	400	3.17	0.90	Agree	3.48	0.69	VHE
5	Irregular power supply	400	2.90	0.99	Agree	3.19	0.83	VHE
6	Irregular network services	400	3.40	0.79	Agree	3.20	0.91	VHE

7	Interruptions of school calendar by the lecturers' strike	400	2.88	0.97	Agree	3.34	0.80	VHE
8	Problem with increase in school fees	400	3.40	0.78	Agree	3.04	0.93	VHE
9	Troublesome roommates	400	2.65	0.99	Agree	3.31	0.91	VHE
10	Missed scripts	400	3.40	0.79	Agree	3.34	0.80	VHE
11	Missed scores	400	3.17	0.56	Agree	3.16	0.74	VHE
12	Missed examination	400	3.70	0.62	Agree	3.70	0.70	VHE
13	Crowded classroom	400	3.45	2.01	Agree	0.81	0.78	VHE
14	Frustration arising from studying a course that is not my choice course	400	3.08	0.84	Agree	3.33	0.81	VHE
15	Long cue/line at the registration point	400	3.54	0.70	Agree	3.27	0.77	VHE
16	Fear of exporation from the university	400	3.00	0.93	Agree	3.06	0.92	VHE
17	Fear of refection from school	400	3.48	0.68	Agree	3.41	0.78	VHE
18	Frustrations experienced whenever some of my lecturers are lecturing	400	3.18	0.92	Agree	2.60	0.93	HE
19	Natural disasters	400	2.14	0.82	Agree	2.30	0.88	LE
20	Death of a loved one	400	2.26	0.65	Agree	2.15	0.84	LE
	Cluster mean X	400	3.16			3.18	0.84	VHE

Key: Very High Extent = VHE

High Extent = HE

Low Extent = LE

Very Low Extent = VLE

The data on the awareness of stressors indicate that out of the 20 items, 18 items have mean scores between 2.65 to 3.71. Items 19 and 20 have mean below 2.50. The results indicate that undergraduates are aware of most of the stressors. The results also indicate that undergraduates are being affected by stressors in the process of learning. The items Very Extent (VHE) with mean (X) ranging from 2.90 to 3.48. Item 18 recorded High Extent (HE) with mean (X) of 2.60 and items 19 and 20 have mean (X) of 2.30 and 2.15 respectively and fall within Low Extent (LE) category.

Generally, the data obtained from the results, as indicated in the table, are instructive and educative. Interestingly, the results reveal that the undergraduates are aware of the stressors which they experience in the process of learning in the university. The results further revealed the forms or types of stressors that they are going through such as poor study environment, irregular electricity supply, irregular network services, irregular water supply, congestion in the hostel, too many assignments within a short period of time, out-dated books in the library, early morning lectures, crowded classrooms, lack of public address system, missed scripts, missed examinations, among others. These findings are in consonance with that of Oboegbulam (2007) who listed some of the stressors the students undergo to include concern over feeding money, lack of enough rest, problem of coping with classmates and frustration arising from congested hostel accommodation. The undergraduates' awareness of stressors that manifest in the university might help to guide on the extent to which these stressors can affect the learning and performance of students. In the same vain, Myers (1995) identified stressors such as death of a loved one, everyday annoyances, rush hour traffic, gratifying letter, among others. These

are in line with the categories of stressors as identified by Myers (1995) and Hobfoll (1989) which include daily hassles, natural disasters, rush hour traffic and aggravating spouse, teacher and students.

Going by the data acquired from the study, there are evidences to show that stressors influence the self-esteem and academic performances of the undergraduates. Out of the 20 item statements, 17 items indicate the view that these stressors affect the academic performance of the students to a Very High Extent (VHE) in the process of learning. One item statement out of the 20 items shows evidence of High Extent (HE) while two items indicate evidence of Low Extent (LE). This means that the undergraduates in the study did not agree that items 19 and 20 (natural disasters and death of a loved one) are stressors that can affect their academic performance. Therefore, among the 20 item statements, only 2 items show Low Extent (LE) of the stressors by the students. The other item statements indicate Very High Extent (VHE) while only one indicates High Extent (HE). Generally, one can conclude that these stressors show tremendous influence on the students.

The result of the study is different from the findings of Kaprio, Koskenvu, and Rita (1987) study which indicated that the level of psychological disorders increased as a result of catastrophes. These catastrophes were stated as stressors that arise as a result of natural disasters.

Concluding Remark

Stressors breed stress. Stress reactions can be influenced through thinking and feeling. This is simply because stress reactions depend on whether or not individuals feel that they have control over the stressors in their day-to-day activities. Along the same direction is the findings of Martin and Osborne, (1993) and Weiten (1989) who found that stress create distractions. In the same view is the findings of Cohen, et al (1998) whose study indicated that the greater the stressors the more stressful individuals become and the more illness they accumulate.

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