

IMPACT OF ACADEMIC STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES ON SELF-CONCEPT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAWI

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Received: 16 March 2020 Revised and Accepted: 17 June 2020

ABSTRACT: “Academic stress is the body’s response to academic-related demands that exceed adaptive capabilities of students” (Alsulami et al, 2018). “Coping-strategies are specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful situations”(Passer and Smith, 2004).“Self-concept is the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is.To be aware of oneself is to have a concept of oneself”(Baumeister, 1999). The present study was undertaken to find out the impact of academic stress and coping strategies on the self-concept of secondary school students of Malawi. The study included 200 government students from five secondary schools in South West Education Division in the city of Blantyre in Malawi. Each school contributed 40 students in the sample (20 male students and 20 female students). The study indicated a positive relation in academic stress, coping strategies and self-concept of secondary school students. Furthermore, academic stress and coping strategies jointly contributed to the self-concept of students. Further, recommendations have been put forward as educational stakeholders’ food for thought.

KEYWORDS: Academic-Stress, Coping-Strategies, Self-Concept

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is an integral part of every human being. Whatever that creates a challenge or a threat to one’s comfort is stress. All types of stress are not considered to be bad, as some types help people to perform well. In academics, stress is inevitable and influences students' performance in all academic activities (Britz and Pappas, 2010). Academic-stress, coping strategies and self-concept are obvious and inevitable condition, efforts and perception respectively in any real learning environment of a society. Therefore, understanding and establishing how academic stress and coping strategies impact or influence the self-concept of students can help different educational stakeholders to appreciate that the manner in which certain factors influence and contribute to students behavior and consequently academic performance. In any attempt to understand adolescents for attaining positive outcomes, rests on understanding the actual stressors faced by them, the ways they make sense of out the stressful events, and how they react to and cope with those stressors (Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner, 2010).

Academic stress

Stress is explained as “the inability to cope with a perceived, real or imagined threat to one's mental, physical, emotional or spiritual well-being which results in a series of physiological reactions and adaptations” (Seaward, 2008). Alsulami et al, (2018) defined “academic stress as the body’s response to academic-related demands that exceed adaptive capabilities of students.” “Academic stress may be considered as a demand related to academics that tax or exceed the available resources (internal or external) as cognitively appeared by the student involved” (Bisht, 1989). Further in 2015 Sarita defined that “academic stress is the unpleasant psychological situations that occur due to the educational expectations from parents, teachers, peers and family members, pressure of parents for academic achievement, present educational and examination system and burden of homework.” According to Xia and Sha (2005) academic stress not only has direct effects on negative feelings, but also indirect effects through the adoption of negative problem-solving strategies. Hall and Murff (2006) explored the effects of academic stress on college students and found out that it made the students fulfill their educational goals with difficulties.

Coping strategies

“Coping-strategies are specific efforts both behavioral and psychological that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful situations” (Passer & Smith 2004). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980), there are two general coping strategies namely, (i) “problem-solving strategies (these are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances), and (ii) emotion-focused coping strategies (which involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events).” While in 2018 Park and Kim identified four characteristics of coping with academic stress in Korean adolescents, viz. creation of coping strategies in physically active way, in non-physical and positive form, using maladaptive coping mechanisms; and depending upon spiritual power and religious belief. While Al-Dubai et al, (2011) observed that “students adopted active coping strategies rather than avoidance”.

Self-concept

According to Baumeister (1999), “self-concept is the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is. To be aware of oneself is to have a concept of oneself.” Self-concept has three components, viz. “self-image” (the way one sees himself or herself), “self-esteem” (the value one places upon himself or herself), and the “ideal self” (the self an individual would like to be), (Viney, 2018). Shaikh et al (2004) undertook a study to find that the ability to handle responsibilities, misunderstandings or any other difficulties in a gentle and logical way reduced stress and revealed that it too created pressure on students which made them to have stress in one or more ways. Xhakollari (2016) investigated the relation in academic stress and coping strategies and found a positive relationship in academic-stress and coping styles, viz. task-oriented, emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented. Further it was found that the most frequently used coping style by students was task oriented coping style. While the relation in academic stress and emotion-oriented coping style was found to be moderate and that of academic stress and avoidance coping style was found to be weak. While Thenga, Mutshaeni and Mashau (2017) carried out a study to investigate what caused stress in secondary school students and the strategies they used to cope up with those stressors. The study revealed that major stressors the students encountered were academic in nature and the frequently used coping means by learners were both negative as well as positive strategies (i.e. adaptive/positive and maladaptive/negative). Cocoradă and Mihalescu (2012) investigated secondary school adolescents' coping strategies and found out that students were very much into using productive coping strategies (behavioural disengagement) than using non-productive coping strategies (emotional discharge). Further, it was found that gender, age and locus of control had an influence on the choice of a particular coping strategy. Yumba, (2008) investigated the major agents of academic stress among male and female students and found stress emanating from academic sources was the most severe among students and female student's levels of stress were higher than that of male students. Academic stress had a significant and unique contribution towards predicting self-concept of secondary school students (Narad and Mchizi, 2019). Stark et al. (1989) carried out a study to establish difficulties commonly encountered by adolescents of different age groups and the ways they used to cope with those difficulties and found that adolescents had common stressors across the age groups and gender. Further it was found that despite having common stressors, the coping strategies used to tackle the problems were different across gender. Griffith, Dubow and Ippolito (2000) investigated different strategies of coping adolescents adopted to manage academic and peer stressors and revealed that approach strategies of coping were being more used than avoidance strategies by many adolescents when dealing with academic and peer stressors. Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (1999) examined the sort of strategies adopted by adolescents to cope with different situations and found that gender had no influence with respect to adoption of coping strategies; adolescents in the late stage were multi-strategists and mainly used strategies which directly reduced the effects of stressor which also included a mental aspect than the younger adolescents. Further, adolescents in during varied adolescence stages changed their ways of coping in regard to the type of stress causer. While Eschenbeck, Kohlmann and Lohaus (2007) conducted a study to find out how gender was related to coping strategies under stressful situations in adolescents and revealed that girls employed strategies which were seeking social support and which aimed at solving problems whereas boys employed strategies which were coping through avoidance. Chapman and Mullis in 2000 conducted a study to investigate if racial differences, self-esteem and gender had an impact on coping strategies of adolescents of different races and revealed that there were racial differences in adolescents' choice of coping strategies. The study will provide an insight to the educational stakeholders to come up with effective ways of mitigating the influences of academic-stress and coping strategies on self-concept such as (i) parents as educational stakeholders will be able to understand hence assist in shaping the self-concept of their children while at home, (ii) teachers as educational stakeholders will be able to select and use the right and appropriate teaching, guiding and counselling techniques to help the students achieve their goals, (iii) educational managers as stakeholders will be on their toes to see to it that the right and appropriate teaching, guidance and counselling techniques are implemented in schools so that conducive learning environments are developed which can take care of any sort of influences of academic stress, and (iv) educational policy makers as stakeholders will be better placed to know and to develop educational policies that will be addressing the needs of students bearing in mind the influences of academic-stress on students' self-

concept. Thus in order to provide a healthy life to students of Malawi full of self-confidence, self-esteem and ability to overcome varied stressors in life, inspired the investigator to undertake the present study. Therefore, the study was directed to fulfill the given objectives:

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To find relationship in academic stress, coping strategies and self-concept of secondary school students.
2. To determine the joint contribution of academic stress and coping strategies on self-concept of the students.

III. HYPOTHESES

1. There exists no relationship in academic stress, coping strategies and self-concept of secondary school students
2. Academic stress and coping strategies will not jointly predict self-concept among students.

IV. METHOD AND PROCEDURE OF STUDY

The method employed in the study was descriptive survey method. Collection of data was done from male and female students studying in five Government secondary schools of south west education division of Malawi in Blantyre by using simple random sampling. The sample consisting of two hundred students (forty students from each school i.e. twenty male and twenty female students) was selected by employing simple random sampling. In order to collect the data, three psychological tests were used, one tool was "Scale for Assessing Coping Strategies (BRIEF COPE)" by Carver, C.S.(1997), the second tool was "Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PIERS-HARRIS, 2nd Edition)" by Piers, Herzberg and Harris, (2003) and the third was "Scale for Assessing Academic Stress (SAAS)" by Sinha, Sharma and Mahendra, (2001). Statistical package for social science (SPSS) software was used to analyze the data. To analyze the relationship between the independent variables academic stress and coping strategies of students with the dependent variable self-concept, correlation was applied and multiple regression was used to determine joint contribution of the two independent variables on the dependent variable.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As per the objectives, the following section presents variable wise analysis and interpretation of data.

(I) Results relating to the relation in academic stress, coping strategies and self-concept

Table 1

Variables		Self-Concept
Academic Stress		.444**
Coping strategies	Problem focused	.055
	Emotional focused	.179*
	Avoidance focused	.272**
	Social focused	.012

** significant at 0.01 level

* significant at 0.05 level

Table 1 displays the coefficient of correlation of self-concept of secondary school students with academic-stress and coping-strategies (problem-focused, emotional-focused, avoidance-focused and social-focused). The correlation coefficient of self-concept with academic stress was found to be positive and moderate. The correlation coefficient of self-concept with coping-strategies (emotional focused and avoidance focused) indicated a positive weak relationship. It was also found that a positive relationship existed between self-concept and coping strategies (emotional focused and avoidance focused). Thus, it can be concluded that there exists a significant positive relationship in the self-concept, academic-stress and coping strategies of secondary school students of Malawi. This indicates that if students perceive high academic stress, their self-concept will improve as also found by Yang et al, (2014) showed a positive relation in self-esteem and endocrine stress responses to Tier social stress Test (TSST). By considering the thin differences in self-esteem and self-concept and academic stress and stress, it reveals a possibility and support to the finding of academic stress being positively related to self-concept. Also, if the students adopt more coping strategies, their self-concept will improve. Therefore the hypothesis "There exists no relationship in academic stress, coping strategies and self-concept of the students" stands rejected.

(II) Results relating to the joint prediction of self-concept by academic stress and coping strategies

Before checking the relationship between the predictor variable and response variable, in case of multiple regression, it is important to check multicollinearity. One of the important assumptions of regression is that there should be no multicollinearity among the variables i.e. variables should not overlap. Variance inflation factor is a robust measure to check multicollinearity. If the variance inflation factor value is more than 4.0 or

tolerance is less than 0.2, then there is a problem with multicollinearity (Hair et al, 2010). The values of VIF and tolerance do not exceed the permissible limit which indicates that predictor variables are not correlated. Further the correlation values between response and predictor variables also do not exceed 0.7 which indicates that predictor variables do not overlap.

Table 2 (a)

R	R-Square	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
.504 ^a	.254	.235	4.1545

a. Predictors: (Constant), Coping Strategies - Social focused, Avoidance focused, Emotional focused, Problem focused and Academic stress

c. Dependent: (Constant), Self-concept

From table 2 (a) it is clear that academic-stress and coping strategies are significantly related to the self-concept of students. The coefficient of correlation value reveals that all the three variables are related to each other. The value of regression coefficient R square reveals that 25.4% of variability in self-concept can be accounted to academic-stress and all the four types of coping strategies namely; problem focused, emotional focused, avoidance focused and social focused or 25.4% of variation in self-concept is explained by academic-stress and all the four types of coping strategies.

Table 2 (b)

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	1141.030	5	228.206	13.222	.000 ^b
Residual	3348.470	194	17.260		
Total	4489.500	199			

a. Dependent variable: Self-concept

b. Predictors: (constant), Coping Strategies- social focused, avoidance focused, emotional focused, problem focused and academic stress

It is clear from table 2 (b) that the regression model is statistically significant (df 1= 5, df 2 = 194, F = 13.222) with p value = 0.000 which indicates that overall, the model applied is statistically significant and can predict the dependent variable (self-concept).

Table 2 (c)

Model	UnStd. coefficients		Std. coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
	β	S.E	β				Tolerance	VIF
Coping Strategies	(Constant)	17.633	2.285		7.716	.000		
	Academic stress	.437	.067	.425	6.525	.000	.905	1.105
	Problem focused	.090	.081	.084	1.123	.263	.686	1.457
	Emotional focused	.100	.083	.088	1.209	.228	.725	1.379
	Avoidance focused	.205	.080	.166	2.554	.011	.912	1.097
	Social focused	-.012	.113	-.008	-.109	.913	.790	1.266

a. Dependent Variable: self-concept

Table 2 (c) shows regression coefficients which denote mean change in response variable for one unit change in predictor variable, while holding other predictors in the model constant. The β value for academic stress was found to be .437. This shows that self-concept score would increase by 0.437 for every unit increase in academic stress (i.e. one unit increase in academic stress (total) will lead to 0.437 increase in self-concept). Since the value of coefficient is significant at 0.05 level, so it can be indicated that academic stress would predict the self-concept when other variables are constant. Further, the β values for the four types of coping strategies shows that one unit increase in coping strategy (problem focused) will lead to 0.090 increase in self-concept but since the value of coefficient is not significant at 0.05 level, coping strategy (problem focused) would not predict the self-concept when other variables are constant. Also, self-concept score would increase by 0.100 for every unit increase in coping strategy (emotional focused) but due to the fact that the value of coefficient is not significant at 0.05 level, coping strategy (emotional focused) could not predict the self-concept when other variables are constant. Furthermore, the findings show that self-concept score would increase by 0.205 for every unit increase in coping strategy (avoidance focused) and since the value of coefficient is significant at 0.05 level, coping strategy (avoidance focused) could predict the self-concept when other variables are constant. It has also been shown that self-concept score would decrease by -.0120 for every unit increase in coping strategy (social focused) but owing to the fact that the value of coefficient is not significant at 0.05 level, coping strategy (social focused) would not predict the self-concept when other variables are constant. The unstandardized coefficient β value indicates that academic stress and coping strategy (avoidance focused) make a unique and significant

contribution towards predicting self-concept of secondary school students. Further, the unstandardized coefficient β value indicates that academic stress (total) and coping strategy (avoidance focused) are making a unique and significant contribution towards predicting self-concept of secondary school students.

The regression equation for “relationship between academic-stress, coping strategies and self-concept” of students can be written as;

Self-concept (Y) = 17.633+ (.437) Academic-stress + 0.090 Coping strategy (problem focused)+ .100 Coping strategy (emotional focused) + 0.205 Coping strategy (avoidance focused)+ (-.0120) Coping strategy (social focused). Therefore, the hypothesis “academic stress and coping strategies will not jointly predict self-concept among students” stands rejected.

VI. CONCLUSION

- A significant positive relationship exists in the self-concept, academic-stress and coping strategies of secondary school students
- Academic stress and coping strategy jointly make a unique and significant contribution towards predicting self-concept of secondary school students. Academic stress and coping strategy (avoidance) were found to be significant predictors of self-concept of secondary school students.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Before dealing with any problem concerning students’ achievement in class, an understanding of their self-concept, coping strategies and academic stress is important, as these influence (may create hindrances) the overall personality and performance of an individual. Further, while guiding students with respect to coping strategies, it must be born in mind that some coping strategies have a positive relationship while others have a negative relationship with self-concept (though the relation is also influenced by socio cultural context), hence the choice of coping strategy to be used has to be well understood.

VIII. REFERENCES

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