

GENDER DIFFERENCE IN THE PERCEIVED LEVEL OF STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KENYA: A CASE OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Gender influence on perceived stress level and coping strategies of under graduate university students in Kenya. The sample comprised (97 male and 90 female) students drawn from three public universities in the western part of Kenya. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. A biographical form and a perceived stress scale questionnaire were used to collect data. Both descriptive and inferential (t-test) statistics were used to analyse data with alpha level set at .05. Results of the analyses showed a significant difference between the

stress mean scores of males and females ($df = 185$, $t = 0.235$, $p < 0.05$). Female students reported higher stress levels ($M = 42.23$, $Sd = 5.90$) than males ($M = 40.13$, $Sd = 6.45$). Female participants also reported positive stress coping skills such as seeking help from counsellors and friends. Whereas male participants reported negative coping strategies such as taking alcohol and drug use. The findings of this study may be useful in understanding the psychological needs of university students and help university administration put in place strategies that may mitigate against this problem.

Key Words: *Gender, perceived stress level, university students, Kenya*

INTRODUCTION

The transition of students from high school to university or college is a major experience in their lives. It accords them many opportunities of psychological development and learning experiences. However, this transition also causes a number of stressful circumstances in their lives Tao (2000).

Previous studies have revealed a prevalence of stress among students in higher education (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Steckler, 2004). Literature has also reported gender difference in the perception of stress. Tajularipin, Visata and Salfuddin (2009) found out a significant difference in the level of stress attributed to gender. Ng and Jeffrey (2003) noted that females are more likely to be stressed than men. Thawabien, Qausy (2012) also found out that female students experienced more stress than male students, and that financial problems affected more male than female students.

Franzier and Schauben (1994) found out that female college students experienced stress related to financial problems, Examination pressure, rejection, dissolutions of relationships, depression, and feelings of low self-esteem. Sarafino (2002) reported that women faced a number of chronic burdens in everyday life as a result of their social status and roles relative to men, and these strains could contribute to their higher rates of depressive anxiety as prolonged stress can lead to depression. Nolen-Hoeksema (1990) and Weissman. (1996) noted that across many nations,

cultures and ethnicities, women are twice as likely as men to develop depression which is associated to anxiety and stress.

On the contrary, other studies have revealed that male students report higher levels of stress. According to Chen, Wong, Ran and Gilson (2009) male students reported higher levels of stress, worse psychological well-being, and having fewer inclinations towards using positive coping strategies. Sitz and Poche (2006) found out that women displayed more optimism than men and have lower levels of perceived stress compared to men. From the reviewed studies therefore, there is inconsistent findings regarding the levels of stress among males and females, prompting further investigation of this phenomenon.

With regard to coping strategies, Gender differences have also been found (Matheny, Ashby & Cupp, 2005). Females use social support and help seeking behaviour to cope with stress. Men on the hand, respond to stressful situations by choosing either active coping strategies or avoidant strategies such as alcohol or drug use (Aldwin , 2007; Desmarias & Alkisanis, 2005; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Tennen, Etal, 2000). Women often choose emotionally focused coping strategies such as seeking support or positive re-framing (Desmarias & Alksnis; 2005 Dyson & Renk, 2006).

However, studies by Donaldson, Prinstein, Danorsky and spirits (2000) revealed that there were no gender differences in coping with stress. Thoits (1995) reported that although gender is thought to have an effect on the relationship between stress and the type of coping skill chosen, these results are not always consistent.

Whereas, studies indicate that universities and colleges students face high levels of pressure and stress, few empirical studies have examined stress experienced by students in these environments (Conner et al., 2010). Moreover, little research particularly in the developing countries have sought to find out between female and male students, which gender is most affected by stress, and the coping strategy adopted by male and female students.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of gender on the perceived influence of stress among university students. It also investigated the strategies that male and female students use to cope with stress.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate gender differences in perceived levels of stress among university students.
2. Investigate gender differences in coping with stress among university students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are there gender differences in the perceived levels of stress among university students?
2. Are there differences in stress coping strategies between male and female students?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was conducted in public universities in the western part of Kenya. This study was a quantitative research which involved the use of a cross-section survey design. This design was used to find out the perceived stress levels of female and male students in our universities.

Population and Sample

The research population constituted Fourth Year Students from three public universities in Western Kenya. Stratified and simple random sampling technique was used to select a sample which comprised 187 respondents. Only participants who were present during lectures in class on the day this study was carried out were selected.

Instruments and Procedures

Two research instruments were used in data collection a biographical and a perceived stress scale adopted from the biographical form contained item which generated data on gender and mode of study. The perceived stress questionnaire contained 14 items which measured the stress levels in the respondents on a 5-point likert scale. The two research instruments were administered to the participants by the researcher. Permission to collect data was obtained from course lecturers and the participants.

Data analyses

The completed instruments were coded and the responses scored and keyed in to a computer data file. All the statistical analyses were run using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) computer programme. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in data analyses. The descriptive statistics used in this study were mean scores and standard deviation. While the inferential statistics used was a t-test for independent samples. The alpha level was set at 0.05.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers explained the reason of the study to the reason of the study to the participant. The researcher requested them to read and sign the informed consent letter. Participants were

also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and they were not required to write their names on the research instrument used to collect data.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Gender and perceived stress level

The first objective of this study was to investigate the influence of gender on perceived stress level among students in public universities. To achieve this objective, the following research question was raised. Do male and female students in public universities differ in their level of stress? To answer this question the participants were asked to indicate their gender on the biographical form and respond to the items in questionnaire measuring their stress level. Their responses were calculated and reported in table 1.

Table 1: Gender and Perceived Stress Level

Gender	N	Perceived stress level	
		Mean	SD
Male	97	40.13	5.90
Female	90	42.23	6.45
Total	187	41.1	6.24

The mean scores of male and female participants were compared using a t-test for independent samples. The results of the analysis showed a significant difference between the stress mean scores of males and females ($df=185$, $t= -235$, $p<.05$). More specifically, female students scored significantly higher ($M=42.23$, $Sd=5.90$) than males ($M=40.13$, $Sd=6.45$).

The second research objective was to investigate gender differences in stress coping strategies among students in public universities. To achieve this objective the following research question was posed: Are there gender differences in stress coping strategies between male and female students in public universities? To answer this question, the participants were asked to respond to the items in a questionnaire measuring their stress coping strategies. Their responses were scored and mean scores calculated and reported in table 2.

Table 2 reveals gender differences in the various stress coping strategies. The findings showed a significant difference between taking alcohol coping strategy mean scores of males and females ($df =185$, $t=3.286$, $<.05$). More specifically, male students scored higher ($M=1.72$, $Sd=1.01$) than females ($M=1.31$, $Sd=.65$). Likewise, the results showed significant difference in crying to let feelings out strategy mean scores of males and females ($df =185$, $t=-3.097$) $p<.05$). With female student scoring higher mean scores ($M=2.56$, $Sd =3.44$) than male students ($M=1.44$, $Sd=.816$).

This study also revealed a significant difference between dating or romancing coping strategy mean scores of males and females ($df=185$, $t=2.01$, $p<0.05$). Male students who used dating and

romancing as a strategy for reducing stress had a higher mean score ($M=2.02, Sd=1.02$) than female students ($M=1.73, Sd=.92$).

Table 2: Gender and stress coping strategies

Coping strategy	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Socialization with friends	Male	97	3.13	.862
	Female	90	2.99	.893
Creating leisure activities	Male	97	2.73	.836
	Female	90	2.69	.907
Going to church	Male	97	2.54	1.019
	Female	90	2.58	1.153
Absenting self from lectures	Male	97	1.61	.873
	Female	90	1.50	.753
Insult others	Male	97	1.47	.843
	Female	90	1.64	2.189
Taking alcohol and drug use	Male	97	1.72	1.008
	Female	90	1.31	.647
Exercise	Male	97	2.35	.101
	Female	90	2.23	.108
Stay by self	Male	97	2.34	.923
	Female	90	2.46	1.121
Watching TV, play on the computer	Male	97	2.45	.094
	Female	90	2.57	1.050
Crying to let feelings out	Male	97	1.44	.816
	Female	90	2.56	3.435
Seek counseling	Male	97	1.55	.736
	Female	90	1.62	.801
Going for disco	Male	97	2.02	1.016
	Female	90	1.73	.939
Dating or romancing	Male	97	2.02	1.016
	Female	90	1.73	.939
Seeking counseling from friends	Male	97	2.11	.844
	Female	90	2.31	.984

The findings of this study showed that male students had higher mean scores on the following adaptive stress coping strategies: socializing with friends males mean scores ($M=3.13, Sd=.862$), female students mean scores ($M=2.99, Sd=.893$), creating leisure activities male mean scores ($M=2.73, Sd=.836$), female mean scores ($M=2.69, Sd=.907$). Exercising, male mean scores ($M=2.35, Sd=.989$), female mean scores ($M=2.33, Sd=1.03$).

Whereas female students scored higher mean scores on the following strategies: Going to church, female mean scores ($M=2.58, Sd=1.01$), male mean scores ($M=2.54, Sd=1.15$), seeking

counseling, female scored ($M=1.62, Sd=.80$), male mean scores ($M=1.55, Sd=.74$). Seeking counseling from friends, female students mean score ($M=2.11, Sd=.844$). Doing something quiet like watching Television, playing on the computer, female students mean score ($M=2.57, Sd=1.05$), male students mean score ($M=2.46, Sd=.936$). With respect to maladaptive stress coping strategies ,female students scored higher mean scores on : insulting others ($M=1.64, Sd=2.19$), whereas males ($M=1.47, Sd=.843$),and staying by self females mean score ($M=2.46, Sd=1.121$), whereas, male students scored higher means on absenting self from lectures ($M=1.61, Sd=.873$)than female student ($M=1.50, Sd=.753$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate gender influence on perceived level of stress and coping strategies specially, whether or not students there were gender differences in the perceived levels of stress, differences in stress relate psychological problem and differences in stress coping strategies among university students in Kenya. Results showed that male and female students reported higher levels of perceived stress than their male peers. These findings are consistent with previous studies studies which revealed that women report higher levels of stress than men (Hogan, Carlson & Dua, 2002; Ptacek, smith & Zanas, 1992; Tamres,Janick;&Helgeson ,2002). Ng and Jeffrey (2003) who reported that females are more likely to be stressed than men. Jajularipin, Visata and Salfuddin (2009)also reported a significant difference in the level of stress attributed to gender .The argument advanced by Nolen-Hoeksema (1990) that women face a number of burdens in everyday life as a result of social status and roles relative to men and these strains contribute to higher stress perhaps could explain the finding of this study. Findings regarding gender and stress coping strategies revealed that male and female participants significantly differed on the following strategies: Taking alcohol and drug use and dating and romancing than female students. Whereas, female students reported higher mean scores on crying to let go feelings. These findings by (Aldwin, 2007;Desmarais,& Alksnis,2005; Dyson&Renk,2006) which revealed that men often respond to stressful situations by adopting avoidant strategies such as alcohol or drug use.

Although this study did not find any significant gender difference in adaptive stress coping strategies. It revealed that female students used emotionally focused coping strategies such as seeking psychological help such as seeking counseling services from both trained counselors and friends. These findings concur with Desmarais &Alksnis,2005;Dyson & Renk,2006). These findings could perhaps be explained by Sharir ,Tanasesu , Turbow and Maman (2007) and Cumsile and Epstein (1994) who posited that females have been found to receive more social support from friends and significant others , than their male counterparts. Female's are more emotional as compared to males; thus share feelings more freely and readily with friends.Whereas males are expected to live up to certain social expectations that have been set and that sharing feelings is a sign of weakness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found gender differences in the perceived level of stress. Female had high levels of stress than male undergraduate students. The findings of this study also indicated that female participants had adaptive coping scores than male participants. This study revealed that female students are more likely to seek support from counsellors and friends than male students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for university administration to increase counselling services to help reduce the level of stress facing students. Appropriate coping skills should be taught to students to help them avoid maladaptive coping skills.

Whereas this study has made some contribution to the existing literature, the findings of this study are only limited to undergraduate students. Further research is needed on other samples such as secondary schools and middle level college to determine whether there is support for this study.

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