

Stressors Faced by University Students and Their Coping Strategies: A Case Study of Midlands State University Students in Zimbabwe

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Abstract-The study examined coping strategies used by students at a medium size developing country university. Participants constituted two hundred and eighty one Social Sciences students at the Midlands State University in Zimbabwe [49% female, 51% male]. A questionnaire was used to collect data. The results showed that the seven most common clusters of stressors were Finance, Library resources and study material, Accommodation, Food, Transport, Inadequate infrastructure and Lecturer related problems respectively. These stressors were rated as most common and most difficult by both sexes as well as by resident, non-resident students and students in different academic years. The students mentioned thirty-four coping strategies, which were divided into various categories. Strategies categorised under Direct positive coping strategies were considered to be the most effective while those categorised under Ad hoc coping strategies were considered least effective. Sex, residence status and academic year differences were evaluated using Mann Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis - rank order analysis of variance. There were no significant differences in the generic categories of coping strategies applied with respect to the three demographic variables. The findings of the study have implications on institutionalisation and strengthening of the student support system at state universities in Zimbabwe.

Index Terms- coping strategies, university students, stressors.

BACKGROUND

Literature suggests that there are common stressors among students and student cohorts. Some researchers have categorised these stressors as either vocational-academic or personal-social [1]). However, some stressors could not easily be categorised. For instance, finance induced stressors

permeate through both vocational-academic and personal-social stressors. Lack of finance to meet basic needs is a major stressor for university students in developing countries [2] [3] [4]. Other stressors include adjusting to university life [5], peer pressure [3], time management and task management [6]. Those staying off campus face the additional stressors that include that of transport, reading resources and accessing other university services [2] [7].

A study on South African Universities students' own assessments of the most stressful events in their first year of study revealed that students' stressors were related to financial difficulties, demands of university environment and administration processes [5]. The same study [5] reported significant differences with respect to sex in the assessment of the most stressful experiences with various aspects of the University life.

Reference [4] found that university of Zimbabwe female students on campus faced financial stressors and challenges of resisting seduction by material goods potentially accessible through salaried men off campus. On the other hand, male students on campus faced challenges to their masculinities because of the competition for female students with salaried men off campus [3]. These stressors can be understood within the framework of the cognitive-relational theory that emphasises the relationship between the affected person's appraisal of environmental demands and personal resources [8]. In terms of coping strategies, the theory identifies two major functions: problem focused coping and emotion focused coping. Problem focused strategies actively engage the stressor to overcome it [8]. They are considered to be more adaptive particularly in situations where the stressor is changeable. Emotion focused strategies, on the other hand, are efforts directed at minimizing the negative effects of the stressor [8][9]. They insulate the individual by focusing on changing thoughts and feelings about one's situation. Emotion focused coping strategies are used where the stressor is perceived as extremely threatening and uncontrollable. Generally, Emotion focused coping strategies and Problem focused coping strategies are often used in combinations [10].

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METHOD

Literature on sex differences on the use of coping strategies has been inconsistent. Those who found some differences [11][12] reported that men appear to use more direct and active coping strategies, while women engaged in more passive coping strategies such as relaxation techniques, religion, social support, and distraction. These results are consistent with the postulation of the socialization theory which contends that men and women approach stressors according to their differential upbringing [13]. Reference [13] noted that some researchers whose participants occupied the same social role such as students [14] did not differ in their use of coping strategies. Lack of sex differences is consistent with role constraint theory which posits that when differences occur they can be explained by the differential constraints that accompany the different social roles that men and women occupy [13].

It has been argued that strategies used in the face of stressors may be chosen depending on a variety of factors such as perceptions of control over one's circumstances as well as past experience with a strategy. This subjective reappraisal of coping may not measure the effectiveness of the coping strategy used [8]. Effectiveness is not easy to measure objectively because [a] the stressor with which one has to cope is given a personal meaning by the affected person and [b] the effectiveness of the strategy cannot be stated in absolute terms without referring to the situation on the ground [10], which is a result of a complex interplay of situational and individual factors. Success is judged by the degree to which coping – related reappraisal is perceived by the person. However, what seems to be more important is the effectiveness of the coping strategies in improving the person's capacity to adapt in terms of morale, physical health and social functioning [8]. In this study we consider coping strategies as effective if they are likely to bring about personal well being without violating the law or ethical principles. Generally direct strategies are more effective than indirect strategies because they deal with the source of the problem rather than accommodating it [15].

From the foregoing, it is apparent that, students develop some form of coping strategies to deal with the realities of the given situations. However, the question is; to what extent do these students effectively use the coping strategies? The other question is; are all the coping strategies developed by students effective in state universities of less resourced countries?

Given the above scenario, the main objectives of this study of the Midlands State University students were therefore:

- To identify common stressors faced by university students
- To analyse different coping strategies used by students
- To compare coping strategies used by sex of students
- To compare coping strategies used by residence status of students
- To compare coping strategies used by year of study

Participants and Settings

Two hundred and eighty one students participated in this study. The participants were sampled from a population of 1 500 conventional students registered with the faculty of Social Sciences in 2005 August to December semester. The sample consisted of students from first year [45.9%], second year [40.6%] and fourth year [13.5%]. More than 30% [N=143] of the male participants were in residence compared to 25% [N= 138] of the female participants who were in residence.

Instrument

A four - part questionnaire was used. Section A looked at demographic data. Section B requested the participants to list five challenges [stressors] they were facing, rank ordered according to difficulty. Section C requested participants to state the coping strategies they used to deal with each of the mentioned stressors. Section D requested participants to state other stressors they might have left out from the five mentioned. Different Social Sciences lecturers administered the questionnaire to their students at the end of their lessons or any other time convenient to them.

Measures

The identified stressors were scored in terms of commonness and difficulty. Commonness was measured by counting the total number of times a stressor was mentioned [frequency] irrespective of the ratings. Thus, if every respondent were to mention a stressor once, the highest score would be 281[equal to the total number of participants] which also give the highest rating of commonness. However, some stressors were mentioned more than once in different forms. Such incidences were very few and the researchers concluded that the general picture of the results will not be affected.. The difficulty of the mentioned stressor ranged from the number of times a stressor was mentioned and rated number 5 to each time a stressor was mentioned and rated as number one.

To determine the overall difficulty of each stressor, the five levels were weighted by giving them a value, assigned when presented in reverse order. Thus the rating of 1 was given a weighted score of 5; rating of 2 was given a 4 in that order so that the rating of 5 scored 1. The corresponding weighted score multiplied the frequencies with which a stressor was rated at each of the 5 levels then the resultant 5 products were added together to give an overall measure of difficulty of a mentioned stressor. Since the expected highest time a stressor would be rated in any one of the five levels was 281; the greatest value of difficulty was 281multiplied by 5, giving a score of 1405.

For coping strategies, each total frequency was converted to relative frequency percentage by dividing it by 1405 [total number of participants multiplied by the total number of

possible ratings of each stressor i.e. 281 x 5]. The result gave a measure of rating of commonness for each coping strategy.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using frequencies, frequency percentages, Mann Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis - Rank Order Analysis of variance. The Mann Whitney U test was used to evaluate sex differences and residence status differences while the Kruskal-Wallis- rank order analysis of variance was used to examine academic year differences in coping strategies.

RESULTS

Common Stressors Faced by University Students

Twenty-three clusters of stressors were identified from the students' responses. These clusters were further categorized as follows [1]:

-Vocational –Academic: Library resources and study material, Lecturer related problems, Learning skills related problems, Work related learning, and Flexible packaging,

-Personal –social: Financial problems, Accommodation, Food, Transport, Adjusting to University life, Harassment by fellow students and security guards, Lack of privacy and security, Poor entertainment and recreational facilities, Tribal issues, and Peer pressure

-Administration Processes: Poor hygiene and sanitation, Poor service at dining hall, Submission of Vocational Training Loan [VTL] forms, Inadequate infrastructure, Student affairs related problems, and Student Representative Council [SRC] related problems.

Although it was expected that each respondent would mention a stressor once, there were few occasions where stressors belonging to the same cluster were mentioned more than once and hence a commonness of above 100% was obtained for one of the clusters.

Table 1 presents clusters of stressors in order of their difficulty. The top seven are: Financial problems, Library resources and study material, Accommodation, Food, Transport, Inadequate Infrastructure, and Lecturer related problems with each getting a difficulty score above 28% and a commonness score above 14%. Since their ratings were considered relatively high, they were not presented in their more generic terms while the rest were presented in the broader categories suggested by [1].

TABLE 1
COMMON STRESSORS FACED BY STUDENTS [N = 281]

Stressors	The frequency (f) with which a stressor is rated					Total F	Commonness of stressor		Difficulty of stressor	
	1	2	3	4	5		f%	f	f%	
Financial related	92	62	53	45	40	292	103.91%	997	70.96%	

Library resources and study material	41	56	61	52	42	252	89.68%	758	53.95%
Accommodation related	83	48	23	12	9	175	62.28%	709	50.46%
Food related	17	40	42	49	23	171	60.80%	492	35.02%
Transport related	26	23	23	17	16	105	37.375%	341	24.27%
Inadequate Infrastructure	8	13	18	28	33	100	35.59%	235	16.73%
Lecturer related problems	6	15	19	17	23	80	28.47%	204	14.52%
Administration processes	3	6	17	19	26	71	25.27%	152	10.82%
Non specific stressors	0	5	12	23	50	90	32.09%	152	10.82%
Vocational-academic stressors	4	8	7	8	5	32	39.51%	94	6.69%
Personal-social stressors	1	5	6	11	14	37	13.17%	79	5.62%

Coping Strategies Used by Students

Table 2 summarizes thirty-four clusters of coping strategies that was recorded without immediately considering the appropriateness of the strategies to given stressors. The coping strategies were further categorised, according to the following headings: Direct action, Palliative, Ad hoc strategies, Defence mechanisms and No strategy suggested. Twenty seven fall under Direct action category.

Table 3 matches stressors to the coping strategies for which they were reported to have been applied, and according to the total frequency with which each strategy was reported to be used on different stressors. The highest relative frequency percentage was 29.54% for the coping strategies labelled Confrontational positive action. The lowest relative frequency percentage was 2.49% for the coping strategies labelled Compromise negative action

Sex Differences in Use of Coping Strategies

Table 4 shows frequency percentage of coping strategies used in terms of sex, residence status and academic levels. Female students used relatively more palliative and compromise positive strategies than male students who used relatively more confrontational positive action.

TABLE 2
CATEGORIES OF COPING STRATEGIES

Direct Action	Confrontation	Compromise	Withdrawal
	-Engaging in income generating projects -Using other libraries and internet services	-Walking and using alternate transport -Sacrificing lunch hour -Using alternative	

TABLE 4
COPING STRATEGIES BY VARIOUS DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES

Coping strategies	SEX		RESIDENCE STATUS				ACADEMIC LEVELS				Total		
	Female (N=138)	Male (N=143)	Total [N=281]		Residents (N=83)	Non- residents (N=198)	Total [N=281]		1 st year [N=129]	2 nd year [N=114]	4 th year [N=38]	Total [N=281]	
	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i> %	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i> %
Confrontational positive strategies	28.69	30.35	415	29.54	25.72	31.12	415	29.54	27.95	30.53	31.94	415	29.54
No response and blaming others	22.46	26.29	343	24.41	25.97	23.77	343	24.41	25.00	23.33	25.65	343	24.41
Non specific coping strategies	18.55	17.06	250	17.79	17.96	17.72	250	17.79	19.88	15.09	18.85	250	17.79
Compromise positive strategies	12.89	10.49	164	11.67	11.89	11.58	164	11.67	10.87	13.33	9.42	164	11.67
Palliative	6.08	4.20	72	5.12	4.37	5.44	72	5.12	6.37	4.56	2.62	72	5.12
Confrontational negative strategies	4.20	5.45	68	4.84	7.28	3.83	68	4.84	3.42	6.32	5.24	68	4.84
Withdrawal	4.92	3.36	58	4.13	2.91	4.63	58	4.13	4.35	4.56	2.09	58	4.13
Compromise negative strategies	2.17	2.80	35	2.49	3.88	1.91	35	2.49	2.17	2.28	4.19	35	2.49
Median	9.49	7.97		8.35	9.59	8.51		8.35	8.56	9.83	7.33		8.35
Total	99.96	100	1405	99.99	99.98	100	1405	99.99	100	100	100	1405	99.99

DISCUSSION

Findings are discussed around the 5 objectives stated earlier. The first objective identified common stressors faced by university students. The results are generally compatible with the literature where financial difficulties featured as the greatest cluster of stressors [2] [5] [7] with other stressors such as, Library resources and study material, Transport problems [7] Adjusting to university life [5] Learning skills related problems [6] coming in at various stages down the ladder. Finance induced stressors; Library resources and study material; Accommodation; Food; and Transport were rated as most common and most difficult by both sexes as well as by resident, non-resident students and students in different academic years.

The second objective analysed coping strategies. Considerations were made as to whether strategies were direct or indirect and whether they were negative or positive. Out of 34 clusters, 26 were direct problem focused, thus potentially effective [9] [15]. However, ten of these direct strategies were categorised under Ad hoc and negative strategies, and hence regarded as immoral, illegal, damaging, short lived and likely to lead to some undesirable consequences. For instance students who succeed in cheating in assignments may face difficulties with examinations and may suffer from a guilty conscience later. If they go on to cheat during examinations, they risk being caught and perhaps end up jeopardising their academic career.

The encouraging aspect is that out of the 26 strategies, 8 were categorised as confrontational positive strategies. These

are likely to effectively solve the presenting problem without leading to negative consequences. In dealing with finance induced stressors, the coping strategies used include; Reducing food intake, Engaging in income generating projects and Obtaining money from guardians. Literature on coping strategies shows that, these are potentially effective [9] [15].

For lack of Library resources and study material, potentially effective coping strategies include using, other library resources and internet services, and Sharing resources. Staying off campus appears to be the only logical coping strategy to deal with Accommodation problem. However, more information is needed to enable one to determine the effectiveness of the coping strategy to the individual concerned. Some direct negative strategies include: Prostitution to solve financial problems, Ignoring as a strategy to deal with lack of Library resources and study material and Squatting in hostels to deal with lack of accommodation.

Palliative and Defence mechanism categories were regarded as indirect and less effective [9] [15]. However, the social support components of the Palliative category of coping strategies are potentially effective [10]. Thus enlisting assistance from the Student affairs department, from fellow students and from friends may lead to effective resolution of the problems. On the other hand, Adjusting to the situation as a coping strategy can either be confrontational positive strategy or can just be a matter of 'blundering on'. Hence its effectiveness cannot be readily determined, the strategy is not dependable. Finally defence mechanism was regarded as ineffective as it does not address the cause of the problem.

Objective number 3 compared coping strategies used by female students with those of male students. Results of the

Mann-Whitney U test indicated that there was no significant sex difference in the use of generic categories of coping strategies. These results are consistent with the role constraint theory [13]. However there were some strategies that applied to one sex more than the other. For instance, only female students resorted to prostitution while only male students resorted to blaming SRC for incompetence. However, very few students were involved. In general, coping strategies used by female students were relatively more palliative and compromise positive strategies than male students who used relatively more confrontational positive strategies. The direction of these results is in keeping with some research evidence [11] [12 and the socialization theory [13].

The fourth objective compared coping strategies by resident status. Non-resident students used relatively more positive confrontational strategies and palliative coping strategies than resident students who used relatively more negative confrontational strategies and negative compromise strategies. We found no apparent reasons for these differences. One possibility is that resident students are with many other students most of the time in the absence of adults; hence they are exposed to more peer pressure encouraging them to use negative coping strategies including hooliganism [3]. The other plausible explanation is that, the type of stressors and the amount of stress induced may be situational leading to differences in coping strategies used [8] [10]. However, percentages of those who used negative coping strategies were relatively very small. Further, results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicated no significant difference in the overall use of coping strategies between the two groups.

Lastly we compared coping strategies used by students in different academic years. Fourth year students used more confrontational positive coping strategies than those in the two lower years. This suggests that coping strategies such as Sharing resources, using the Internet, Enlisting the assistance of lecturers are implemented as one move up the academic levels. First years used relatively more Non specific coping strategies than second and fourth year students. Since these coping strategies are ineffective, the results support the literature that revealed that first years students significantly need more counselling than their senior counterparts [5]. However, the Kruskal-Wallis – rank order analysis of variance found no significant differences in the overall use of coping strategies among the three academic years

The findings suggest that students know about potentially effective coping strategies, but that was no guarantee that they would appropriately engage them. There is need to provide them with information as to when and where, as well as how, to apply certain coping strategies. Linked to this observation is the fact that many participants used Adjusting to the situation as a panacea for stress. This indicates that some students were reactive rather than proactive in dealing with problems. As a result there is need to institutionalise and strengthen a support system to empower students with life skills that they would routinely and systematically use. Thus, there is need to identify and maximise locally available professional counselling and

related services. Departments such as that of psychology could be incorporated to widen the support base.

On accommodation, the institution should develop a partnership with Gweru residents and encourage them to stop exploiting students. More importantly, there is need to work with property developers in Zimbabwe as a whole and encourage them to build flats for the university perhaps on rent to buy basis. Pertaining to the inadequate infrastructure, prefabricated building could be erected for office space and lecture rooms. As for the transport problems, an all stakeholders’ meeting with transport operators plying the route to the university could lead to a lasting solution. In addition there is need to revive subsidised transport systems for students. A long term solution will be for the university to buy more big buses for students. One bus will not cope.

The results of the present study are encouraging and could be used as the base for more vigorous research examining each of the identified stressors and reported coping strategies. This in turn could lead to a development of a manual covering all areas of needs including stress management and survival skills.

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