

By Hook or by Crook: Married Students' Outlook in Coping Academic Stress

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Abstract This study aimed to explore the views of married students in coping academic stress. The participants of the research consisted of 10 married students who are now enrolled in College of Teacher Education-Bachelor of Elementary Education at Quirino State University Main Campus. Employing a phenomenological analysis, it explored the opinions of married students in coping academic stress. Revealed in the study was they concurred in majority that in coping academic stress is someone who possesses time management, income generating, personal attributes and spiritual qualities. Time management was the first strategy that participants described to successfully fill the roles as married student. This held constant across the groups and within each group. The strategy of time management emerged as the “premier” and leading effective strategy for participants. Participants also identified generating extra-income, wise budgeting as various systems of support that helped participants, attitude and a strong religious belief or faith in God. These strategies which top the list in coping academic stress rendered substantial standpoints in developing policies and intervention program in academic performance of students.

Keywords: *academic stress, outlook, married student, coping, Phenomenological Analysis*

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1. Introduction

We are subject to feelings of tension and stress. Stress came in several forms and affected people of all ages and walks of life [1]. This implies that stress is a part of life and has many causes, and that the degree of stress in our lives is greatly dependent on factors such as the physical health of the individual, the quality of interpersonal relationships, the number of commitments and responsibilities we shoulder, the degree of others' dependence on and expectations of us, the amount of support we receive from others, and the number of changes of traumatic events we go through. This means that life itself is stress related, depending on the individual's lifestyle and the level of cultural development.

Education is contemporary regarded not only as a tool for development, but also a right. Such right has been enshrined and strengthened in national and international laws, conventions and protocols such as the Human Rights Act, 1998. Education agreements, conventions, policies and laws. These include education policies, poverty reduction and economic development strategies, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) campaigns.

Marriage before education is completed and become an accepted practice since the second World War. Married students have formed an important part of the student

body in any colleges in the country. Many people are concerned as how these married students meet the pressures which both college and married life impose upon their limited time, money and effort.

Furthermore, academic stress refers to 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.

Moreover, academic stress among students have long been researched on, and researchers have identified stressors as too many assignments, competitions with other students, failures and poor relationships with other students or lecturers.

Also, academic stress as a condition which emerge because of the pressures in facing the academic challenging situation among the students, it is lead the students to have a subjective perception toward the incapability of between the environmental demands and the students' actual resources [2,3].

However, academic demands and self- imposed stressors collide, tipping the balance and resulting in disequilibrium and excessive stress [4]. Coping has many purposes and is a function of the person, situation, and perception of the situation ($C = f(P+S+PS)$) [5].

In the educational setting, academic stress has been one of the most thought-provoking topics in academic issues. There are many sources of academic stress and the way of students cope the stress may differ. Thus, this study

further explored the views of married students in coping academic stress in College of Teacher Education-Bachelor of Elementary Education at Quirino State University Main Campus.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore the views of married students in coping academic stress.

1.2. Research Question

1. What are the experiences in coping academic stress?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study made use of a qualitative design of research. The researcher used the phenomenology study method in which lived experiences of several individuals are described as related to a phenomenon they have in common. The participants were asked to narrate their experiences in coping academic stress on blank sheets of paper. The participants' responses were carefully analyzed in words. A list of strategies in coping academic stress was generated from the analysis made.

2.2. Research Participants and Sampling

This study involved a purposive sampling to determine the respondents who are Bachelor of Elementary Education students of Quirino State University Main Campus [6]. There were 10 participants (2 males and 8 females)

2.3. Data Gathering Procedure

The participants were instructed to answer an open-ended question by narrating and describing in their own word their experiences in coping academic stress. The researcher administered the data gathering procedure personally and most of the participants completed the activity in about an hour. Finally, the researcher collected the outputs and serialized them as ready for analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis

In analyzing the data collected from the participants' outputs, the researcher used the content analysis process. Content analysis is suitable in capturing the words of participants in text or written documents.

In addition, the use of content analysis especially when a researcher uses gist and analyses in a study [7]. Gist analysis is appropriate for qualitative research since it enables the researcher to capture the meaning of the statements made by the participants concerning the phenomenon being studied. The gist analysis was used to identify the strategies in coping academic stress as perceived by the participants.

The completed sheets of paper were read several times

to get an overview of their contents. The reading was done closely, repeatedly, and intently until they become familiar with its contents and were in positions to conceptualize statements made by the participants. The researcher came up with notes about the statements made by the participants. Key concepts and ideas were identified in the notes.

The researcher then re-read data and highlighted significant statements, sentences, or quotes. This process provides an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Related statements were grouped together to form meaning units for emerging themes from the significant statements.

Key events in the participants' histories and stories were chronologically sorted [7]. The coding and themes determined from the data analysis were not predetermined by the researcher but emerged through the analysis process. After coding was complete, relationships were created between categories by comparing and contrasting coding from the different cases [8]. The themes that emerged were derived from the students' experiences.

2.5. Validity

The researcher also utilized peer review of coding to decrease bias, with the initial coder sharing analysis with another to ensure that prior experiences with the topic did not influence the analysis process.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Advantages of Academic Stress

Assessment of various determinants of academic stress is essential to frame most suitable remedial measures for the benefit of the affected. Also, lacking their previously learnt support system such as banking on their family members and childhood friends during difficult times, as also observed [9]. However, academic stress was significantly more among those living at their houses compared to those at dormitories [10]. Furthermore, some amount of academic stress is beneficial as it brings about healthy competition with peer group, promotes learning and helps to excel in academics [11].

3.2. Disadvantages of Academic Stress

Excess of academic stress adversely affects academic performance, class attendance and psychological well-being of students [12]. If it is not identified early and managed, it can cause depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, irritability, social withdrawal and physical illnesses [13,14,15,16].

Likewise, academic stress has been reported to be the most common mental state that medical students experience during their training period [17]. It is on the rise among them probably due to increasing course requirements [17,18]. The issues known to precipitate academic stress were excessive assignments, peer competition, examinations and problems related to time management [19].

3.3. Coping Mechanism

Stress coping skills as “the ability to apply strategies that minimize and manage the stress response [20].” However, it is believed that certain factors may allow some students to succeed academically, such as stress coping skills. Coping skills are factors that determine how a person responds to a task and how well they succeed [21].

Two main coping strategies have been outlined; problem-focused and emotion-focused coping [1]. Problem-focused coping seeks to solve or change the source of problems by gathering information, analyzing and making rational decisions to deal with a problem or challenge. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping employs aims to reduce or manage the emotional distress associated with problems by seeking emotional support.

Problem-focused coping as “individuals directly confronting and managing the source of their stress. Individuals prefer to deal directly with the stress by confronting, controlling, or managing stressful tasks [22].”

Coping behavior were grouped as active emotional coping, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping behaviors. Active emotional coping behavior involved individuals adopting the attitude of emotional adjustment like positive thinking emotions and self-encouragement, when faced with academic stress. Active problem coping behavior involved dealing academic stress by focusing at the center of the problem and finding a solution themselves by being calm and optimistic or by searching assistance from external sources. Passive emotional coping behavior involved constraining emotions, self-accusation, getting angry, blaming others or God or by giving up. Passive problem coping behavior involved procrastinations, evasive behaviors or going into alcohol or drug abuse while facing academic stress [23].

The link between coping strategies and academic performance has been documented. The relationship between stress coping skills and Grade Point Average (GPA) was not strong [24]. This is in contrary to the results of the study which revealed that coping strategies can help undergraduate students to enhance their academic performance [25].

Coping skills improve class attendance, participation, persistence even when faced with setbacks or failure in general, and arm them with stronger more resilient self who can lead to a much more positive learning experience [26].

Similarly, academic coping strategies helped undergraduate students to perform in their academic through academic coping strategies factors i.e. approach, avoidance, and social support [27].

In addition, academic coping strategies was also design to help undergraduate students to cope their life those that include physical well-being, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being [28]. Normally, emotional coping strategy is usually practiced in the first year of undergraduate students while in later years the trend is changing towards cognitive, confrontive and painful problem solving [29].

On the other way, students themselves have opined that social support from teachers and peer groups, consulting

services, and various extracurricular activities are the most useful strategies to deal with stress [30]. As opined by the student community themselves, every institution needs to offer them psychotherapy sessions, trainings for reducing emotional tension and opportunities to improve social intelligence [31]. However, unpleasant social coping behavior was found to reduce social support and increase loneliness [32].

3.4. Gender Issue

Males are expected to deal stressful situations by their outward actions while females are expected to focus on emotions and seek social support. Women usually choose health-promoting behaviors while men prefer health-risky behaviors [33].

4. Results and Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of married students in coping academic stress. The findings revealed that the students who participated in this study are experiencing academic stress. The identification and emerging of the interesting themes relative to their views which the researcher classified into different categories:

Coping Academic Stress

Theme 1. Time Management

Time management is the process of organizing and planning how to divide your time between specific activities.

The participants revealed, “*Ginagawa ko na ang mga requirements ko sa school bago ako umuwi para magawa ko ang mga dapat gawin ng isang mabuting ina*”. (Before going home, I have to finished all my requirements in the school so that I can do what a good mother should do)

The participants said, “*Kulang na kulang ang oras ko para gampanan lahat ng ito, pero dahil sa kagustuhan kong makatapos ng pag-aaral natuto akong magbalanse ng oras*”. (My time was not enough to accomplished my tasks, but because of my desire to finish school I learned to balance time).

The participants said, “*Nagagawa ko lang ang mga assignments ko kapag tulog ang mga anak ko kasi tahimik at nakakapag-isip ako ng maayos*”. (I only do my assignments when my kids are asleep because it is quiet and I can think clearly).

The above responses of the participants emphasized the value of time. Managing time is an issue that draws attention of married students. Time management is a great challenge on the part of married students in doing household chores, school assignments, requirements and other activities.

This supports the claim that, meeting individual students’ needs [34], to find out the reason for missing classes, time scheduling of activities and providing constructive feedback to students [35] are the other recommended strategies advised by previous researchers.

However, poor time management was found to be associated with academic stress by other researchers [36].

Good time management skills involve prioritization of activities and judicious usage of time available for organization of the tasks to be completed. Time management was found to determine academic performance [36]. Moreover, those with sound time management behavior were found to have fewer psychological and physical symptoms related to stress [36]. Close to half of the students had notable weaknesses in their time management skills [37].

In addition, female students had significantly better active problem scores under coping behavior. They were hence more mature and composed than the male in analyzing the center of the problem in a calm and optimistic manner, and in finding solutions for the same. Females were also found to be better at time management compared to their male counterparts [36,38]. Males therefore need to be counselled about healthy coping behaviors in dealing with academic stress.

Theme 2. Income Generating

Income generating simply means gaining or increasing income or money that an individual or business receives in exchange for providing a good or service after investing capital.

The participants cited, “*Gumagawa ako ng paraan para kumita ng pera gaya ng pagtitinda ng turon sa baryo namin para may maipon akong perang pandagdag na pantustos ng aming pangangailangan*”. (I make a way to earn money such as selling banana roll in our village so that I can save money to supplement our needs).

The participants mentioned, “*Kadalasan, kailangan ko munang gumising ng maaga at mamasada ng tricycle upang magkaroon ng pera. May karunungan din ako sa pagmemekaniko at kapag kapos sila sa tao ako ay kanilang ineeekstra ng aming katabing talyer*”. (Usually, I have to get up early and ride a tricycle to have money. I also have a knack for mechanics and when they are short of people they take me out of our adjacent studio).

The participants said, “*Naisip ko pong magmiyembro ng direct selling gaya ng MSE at Natasha at isa rin po akong BHW sa aming barangay*”. (I thought of becoming a member of direct selling such as MSE and Natasha and a barangay health worker in our village).

The above statements signify and aims at creating a financial income, and also aims at positive effects in terms of self-reliance, household satisfaction, empowerment and community development as a whole. Income generating initiative help people to provide adequately for their families, provides badly needed income for sustenance. The role of women in income generating activities is of paramount importance to economic development in our country [39].

Theme 3. Personal Attributes

Personal attributes are character or personality traits. Personal qualities were found to be desirable being a responsible student. These qualities include being persistent, sacrifice, strong, industrious, courageous, self-realization and self-esteem.

The participants stated, “*Minsan, nararamdaman ko na lang ang katawan ko ay nanghihina at nangangailangan ng tulong ngunit kailangan kong magsakripisyo*”.

(Sometimes I just feel like my body is weakening and needs sleep but I have to sacrifice).

Two participants said, “*Kailangan kong maging matapang, masipag at hindi mawalan ng pag-asa na balang araw makakatapos rin ako ng pag-aaral*”. (I need to be brave, hardworking and not despair that one day I will also be able to finish school).

The male participant said, “*Sa nakaraang Intramural Meet ay sumali ako at nanalo ako. Kaya lalo po akong nagkaroon ng pag-asa na makatapos ng pag-aaral dahil kahit matanda na ako ay nasubukan ko pa ring manalo*”. (At the previous Intramural Meet I joined and I won. So I had more hope of finishing school because even when I was older I still tried to win).

The above responses of the participants emphasized personal characteristics that must possess in coping academic stress.

Resilience manifests differently in each individual; however, it can be generically described as occurring when the accumulated protective factors such as care and support, high expectations, meaningful roles, pro-social bonding, clear boundaries, and life skills outweigh the negative accumulated effects of stressors, adversity, and risks [40,41].

Studies have demonstrated that youth benefit by having at least one positive relationship with an adult, particularly if the adult is an educational agent, such as a teacher, counselor, or principal [42,43,44,45]. Youth possessing healthy relationships with at least one teacher or school official improved development and academic achievement [46]. School mentors counterbalance negative incidents by inspiring optimism and self-confidence in students who are overloaded [47].

Adolescents with high self-efficacy are committed to goals providing them with a purpose and a sense of accomplishment. To meet objectives, the student participants organized their lives in ways to accomplish the end results, despite enduring troubles along the way [48].

Theme 4. Spiritual Qualities

A good student is integrating values in life, with spiritual activities and faith in God.

The participants stated, “*Manalangin palagi sa Panginoon sa lahat ng gagawin upang makamtan ang mga pangarap*”. (Pray always to the Lord for anything you do to attain dreams).

The participants uttered, “*Kahit nahihirapan ako nandiyan si God na lagi kong pinag-iayakan ng problema tuwing nagigipit ako dahil hindi tayo bibigyan ni God ng problema na hindi natin kakayanin*”. (Even though I'm having a hard time, there is God to cry on whenever I am stressed because God will not give us trouble which we can not afford).

The above statements imply a strong faith in God. This finding approves which indicate that spiritual maturity is an important attribute [49] But then again, church going also benefited students because churches often offer positive role-models for students [50].

Furthermore, in a study, the most affected factor of the subjects' academic stress is their worries. Their worries are weakening their character on doing the assignment and

copied with stress. Moreover, in coping with the stress, they used to find comfort feeling in their religion. They already learn to live with the stress because of the acceptance of the reality.

Likewise, immigrants often used religion as a way to cope with different types of stressors and challenges [51]. The belief in a higher power, or God, gave student participants a sense of control to deal with the challenges they faced. Religiosity and spirituality were accessible constructs to the student participants because these beliefs were integrated into their daily lives by their families of origin.

5. Conclusion/Recommendation

This study revealed that the participants perceived important themes when it comes to identifying their experiences in coping academic stress. These are time management, income generating, personal attributes and spiritual qualities.

University can benefit if they are able to provide and identify the informal and formal systems of support for married students. Married students in college would benefit from the identification of mechanisms that foster within the student an understanding of how to navigate the formal and informal systems within the institution. These support systems could include intrusive advising, identification of an office to address problems or concerns, or the identification of an advocate or a problem solver or go to person.

Use of curriculum (orientation to services) designed to inform married students as to how they may successfully navigate, explore, and access university resources. This fluid curriculum could be in the form of a web site that married students can access on an "as needed" basis.

Programs on mentoring, tutoring, study skills workshops, focus groups, in place to assist the married students in addressing barriers endured as they attempt to persist in college.

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