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**ACADEMIC STRESS AND STRAIN
AMONG MUSLIM STUDENTS:
THE MODERATING EFFECT OF
RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION**

BY

SHADIYA MOHAMMED

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzes academic stress and strain among the undergraduate students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It aims at investigating the effect of religious orientation on level of stress and experience of strain among those students.

The sample consists of 218 bachelor's students studying in different departments of this university. The sample was composed of around 75% of Malay students and 25% of non-Malay. In terms of gender, it was 55% female and 45% male.

Data were collected from the stressful situations questionnaire (SSQ) and role strain measures. Frequency analysis was used to examine the level of stress, strain, and religious orientation in the students. The results indicated that all the students in general experienced stress and strain and they also used religious orientation as coping mechanism, but they differed in degree of stress, strain, and religious experience.

A series of analysis were done to examine the relationship between criterion and predictor variables, such as gender and nationality. With regard to gender differences, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in the perception of male and female toward stress and religious orientation, but they are not different in their level of strain. Female students reported more stress and they tended to use more religious orientation than do male students. Moreover, there appeared no significant main difference in the perception of Malay and non-Malay students toward stress, but it did appear on strain and religious orientation. Malay students were found to experience more strain and they made more frequent use of religious orientation than did non-Malay students.

The analysis also indicated that religious orientation has nothing to do with stress and strain level. That is, whether the students were religious or not they did experience stress and strain.

ملخص البحث

يحلل هذا البحث التوتر الأكاديمي و درجه الانفعال بين الطلبة في مرحلة البكالوريوس في الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية بماليزيا . و الهدف هو معرفة تأثير التوعية الدينية في مستوى التوتر و درجة الانفعال عند هؤلاء الطلبة .

تتكون العينة من 218 طالب و طالبة في مرحلة البكالوريوس في مختلف الأقسام في هذه الجامعة . تتكون العينة من 75% من الملايين و 25% من بقية الأجناس ، كما تتكون من 55% من الإناث و 45% من الذكور .

جمعت البيانات باستخدام استبانة مواقف التوتر ، و مقياس توتر الدور . و استخدام التحليل التكراري لمعرفة مستوى التوتر و الانفعال و التوعية الدينية عند الطلبة . أشارت النتائج إلى أن جميع الطلبة عانوا بشكل عام من التوتر و الانفعال ، و أنهم جميعا استفادوا من التوعية الدينية في معالجتها ، ولكنهم اختلفوا في درجة المعاناة من التوتر و الانفعال و مدى الاستفادة من التوعية الدينية.

هناك تحليلات متتالية للبحث عن العلاقة بين المتغيرات التنبؤية و المعيارية ، كمتغير الجنس و متغير الجنسية . فمن ناحية الجنس ، أشارت النتائج إلى وجود اختلاف في وجهة النظر بين الذكور و الإناث في التوتر و التوعية الدينية و لكن في الوقت نفسه لم يظهر أي اختلاف بالنسبة إلى درجة الانفعال . و أظهرت النتائج أن الإناث أكثر انفعالا و أكثر ميلا إلى التوعية الدينية من الذكور . أما من ناحية الجنسية فليس هناك أي اختلاف بذكر بالنسبة للتوتر ، ولكن هناك اختلاف يسير بالنسبة إلى الانفعال و التوعية الدينية . و الطلبة الملايويون أكثر انفعالا من بقية الأجناس من الطلبة و لذلك فهم أكثر ميلا إلى التوعية الدينية . وأشارت التحليلات أيضا بأن التوعية الدينية ليست لها أي علاقة تذكر بدرجة التوتر و الانفعال . و لهذا يلمحظ وجود التوتر و الانفعال بغض النظر عن التزام الطلبة بالدين أو عدمه .

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised/read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Science in Psychology.



.....
Mahfooz A. Ansari

Supervisor

Date: 13/6/2000

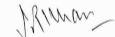


.....
Mohammad Abdur Rashid

Examiner

Date: 13/6/2000

This thesis was submitted to the Department of Psychology/Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Science and accepted as a partial requirement for the degree of Master of Human Science in Psychology.



.....
Syed Ashiq Ali Shah

*Head, Department of
Psychology*

Date: 14/6/2000



.....
Mohammed Aris Othman

*Dean, Kulliyah of Islami Reveald
Knowledge & Human Science*

Date: 28/7/2000

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by proper citation given explicit reference and bibliography is appended at the back.

Name: Shadiya Mohammed Saleh

Signature:

Date:

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Academic Stress and Strain Among Muslim Students: The Moderating Effect of Religious Orientation

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Background

Since World War II, there has been a growth in higher education—growth in the size and complexity of institutions and increased diversity among students. A consequence of this rapid growth has been a loss of personal attention to students. One measure of excessive stress, i.e., distress, in college students is the use of mental health services. Although some students may bring psychiatric problems to college campus, symptoms commonly reported by campus psychiatrists portray a general picture of school-related stress—for example, the inability to do school work and the fear of academic failure (Ellis, 1969).

A second measure of distress in college students is the dropout rate. Although nationwide figures are difficult to obtain in the United States, it is estimated that 50% of entering freshmen do not finish college four years later (Hirsch & Keniston, 1970). Studies on college dropouts relate them to the aversive side of the “fight or flight” formula; that is, students, feeling a mismatch between themselves and their college, wish to distance themselves from the source of stress, the college environment (Falk, 1975; Hirsch & Keniston, 1970; Katz, 1969).

Change and transition are common features of life, often associated with upward mobility, but the process of change may have powerful negative effects on well-being and health. Since the number of places available for applicants to university are limited, the chance to go to university is a privilege. However, even so, many students suffer in terms of mental and physical health, following the transition.

Until recently very little was known about the experience of students making the transition from school or home to university. For most first-year students, this also involves leaving home to take up residence in a different location. The stresses that this creates for the student has been investigated relatively recently (Fisher, 1989; Fisher & Hood, 1987) and there is a background of research on the effects of moving home that is relevant.

In historical perspective, there are a large number of research publications concerned with the association between residential transition and mental or physical ill health. For example, for immigrant and migrant groups there is evidence of higher hospitalization rates for mental disorder and for chronic and infectious diseases (Holmes, 1956).

A recent series of studies conducted with boarding school pupils, student nurses and university students, have shown that about 60% to 70% of students and school pupils report the experience of homesickness during their first term at university. For some students, the experience is mild and self-limiting, for others it is a profound state of grief, anxiety and depression (Fisher, 1994). According to Fisher, homesickness, as self-reported by resident students, was found to be highly frequent in the first term but diminished as the academic year progressed. For some students, however, the effect of homesickness remained throughout their academic lives.

All students have to face the demands of attaining academic standards. Proof of ability is usually tested by written examination papers or by assessment in an oral examination. Although continuous assessment plays a part, its drawbacks seem to be the demand on the students to remain competent throughout the teaching year and the difficulties of staff-student relationships under these conditions.

In spite of the focus on the examination as a means of assessment, there has been very little research in this area. All students seem to be more emotionally vulnerable at examination times. Mechanic (1966) showed that within the American University system, examinations had a profound negative effect on candidates and their families. Hamilton (1955) argued that one of the possible explanations of the debilitating effect of test anxiety is that it generates trains of "internal" information or worry directed towards the likely effects of failure and that this detracts from task activity. When information generated by worrying about the test reduces the capacity available for performing the task, the result is that performance breaks down and the result becomes self-confirming. Breaking the test anxiety loop is therefore very important and may indicate that examination training should be an essential ingredient of undergraduate or graduate programs.

Individuals cannot remain in a continuous state of tension and emotional strain. Even if a deliberate and conscious strategy is not adopted to deal with stress, some strategy is adopted; for example, to leave the conflicts and stress to take care of themselves. The concepts of stress and coping are neutral. Although people commonly see stress as negative and coping as positive, the relationship is not that simple. Stress can be psychologically positive or negative, and the means of coping can be effective or ineffective in meeting the challenge presented by the stressful situation.

Psychologists (e.g., Pestonjee, 1992) have identified two major ways in which people cope with stress. In the first approach, a person may decide to suffer or deny the experienced stress; this is the passive approach. Or, a person may decide to face the realities of the experienced stress and clarify the problem through negotiations with other members. This is the active approach.

Researchers have grouped the ways students cope with stress into four categories. First, students may decide to fight the realities of experienced stress; they try to struggle in order to achieve what they want. Secondly, they may decide to flight or leave what makes them feel stressed. Thirdly, they may reduce their stress through religious activity. Finally, they may decide to accept their life as it is.

Since the present research examines the effect of religious orientation on the relationship between stress and strain among the students, the focus will be on the third category. That is, individuals may use religion as a buffering process to reduce the level of stress and strain. According to Pargament (1985), religion has three roles in the coping process. Religion can serve (i) as a part of the elements of coping, (ii) as a contributor to coping, and (iii) as a product of coping.

The present study would provide an insight into the effect of religious orientation on the relationship between stress and strain among the students. Specifically, the present study is expected to explore the way religious orientation influences the level of stress in students, and the way it reduces the effect of strain on their health. Several studies have been conducted on stress in students. But little or no study is available as to stressors among students with intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations.

For the student with an intrinsic orientation, religion is the master motive with all aspects of life referenced to it. It is an expression of the perennial search for ultimate truth. On the other hand, extrinsic faith is utilitarian, a means to an end rather than the end in itself. The latter may be status, friendship, or economic gain (Hunt & King, 1971).

Different environments elicit different religious responses, and these responses have different effects on different people. Hence, the present research was conducted at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) to understand the effect of religious orientations on the relationship between stress and strain among the students.

Islamic orientation is relevant to all aspects of human endeavor, which include all thoughts and all sciences. The holy Quran is the guidance and the best treatment for the intellectual stability of the Muslim ummah. Ibn Arabi describes how a lady in distress was cured by the effect of surah al-Fatiha, recited by creative individuals, as the mystics undoubtedly are. The inference is that it is possible to effect a change in the external world by prayer, and that creative energy is released by concentrated prayer (Karim, 1984).

Statement of the Problem

This thesis rests on the effect of religious orientation on the relationship between academic stress and strain among the students. It attempts to determine the prevalence and sources of academic stress as perceived by the undergraduate students of the IIUM.

Many studies have been conducted on stress in students and the way they cope with it. But little or no study is available as to stressors among students with different religious orientation (intrinsic/extrinsic). Thus, this study is an endeavor to bring about clear understanding of behavior and attitude of students toward religious activities. Moreover, this attitude would influence the way they cope with academic stress. The study has used primary data from Muslim students at the main campus of IIUM Gombak. The data were collected by means of structured questionnaires.

Significance of the Study

As stated earlier, the plethora of studies on student stress and its correlates has been restricted to mostly Western-European cultural settings and industrialized nations. Therefore, what has been written about student stress is primarily based on the data gleaned from the context of the Western world. Whether the findings and suggestions are applicable to Asian countries and developing nations in general, and Malaysia in particular, is open to question. What is evident in the existing literature, despite its abundance, is that very little is known about student stress outside the world of industrialized nations. This study hopes to partially redress this imbalance.

The present study examines student stress within the IIUM context, taking into account the different religious orientations of the students. It emphasizes the effect of religious orientations in influencing the stress level and the experiences of strain among the students. The findings, which have been discussed in reference to the existing international literature, and more specifically in terms of the IIUM educational context, added to the existing data on student stress. It is hoped that the results and discussion would help to instill more understanding of the relationship between religious orientation and stress/strain experiences among the students. In addition, the findings of the study may have significant implications to the Malaysian policy and system of education. To that end, the study concludes with some policy recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Studies and writing on the various aspects of stress especially student stress and strain are innumerable. In this chapter, a review of the related literature is presented in two parts. Part 1 presents the theoretical framework on which the study was based, and is divided into five sections. Part 2 contains studies related to academic stress and strain, the prevalence of stress among students, the identification of stressors, and the effect of religious orientations on stress and strain. Studies, which highlight the role of religion as buffering process to reduce level of stress and experience of strain among the students, are also discussed.

Theoretical Framework

This part deals primarily with basic concepts and ideas about religious orientation, stress, and strain. It is divided in to five sections: definition of academic stress, sources of stress (stressors), the concept of strain and its types (somatic problems and psychological depression), the concept of religion and religious orientation, and the relationship between religious orientation and mental health.

Definition of Academic Stress

There is no agreement regarding the derivation of the term "stress." Some sources suggest that the term be derived from the Latin word stringere meaning to "bind tightly." Other sources contend that the term is derived from the French word destress (English-distress) and suggest that the prefix "dis" was eventually eliminated because of slurring, as in the case of the word because sometimes becoming cause (Humphrey, 1993).

Stress is a term that almost everybody from all walks of life knows and uses, yet understanding and assessing stress is a complex task. It is often loosely used to refer to any situation that evokes negative thoughts and feelings in a person. The same situation is not evocative or stressful for all people, and all people do not experience the same negative thoughts and feelings when stressed (Whitman, 1984).

A common generalized literal description of the term is a "constraining force or influence." When applied to human beings, this could be interpreted to mean the extent to which the body can withstand a given force or influence. In this regard, one of the most often quoted descriptions of stress is that of the Hans Selye (1936), who described it as the "non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it."

Selye's definition means that stress involves a mobilization of the bodily resources in response to some sort of stimulus (stressor). These responses can include various physical and chemical changes in the body. Saying that it involves demands that tax and/or exceed the resources of the human body could extend this description of stress. This means that stress not only involves these bodily responses, but that it also involves wear and tear on the body brought about by these responses.

In essence, stress can be defined as any factor that acts internally or externally and makes it difficult to adapt and that induces increased effort on the part of a person to maintain a state of balance within him or her and the external environment. It should be understood that stress is a state that one is in, and this should not be confused with any stimuli that produces such a state (stressor) (Humphrey, 1993).

Stress may also be defined as a situation wherein factors interact with a person to change (i.e., disrupt or enhance) his or her psychological condition, such that the person is forced to deviate from normal functioning (Beehr & Newman, 1978).

Although the literature on stress is vast, most researchers agree that an interaction perspective, where stress is seen as a product of the relationship between a person and his or her environment, is relevant to the study of both occupational and academic stress (Caplan, Cobb, French, Van, & Pinneau, 1975; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1987; Lazarus, 1991; Stogdill, 1974; Whitman, Spendlove, & Clark, 1984). Person variables include both aspects of individual personality and methods of coping, while environmental variables are depicted as a range of potential stressors. The eventual outcome of the person-environment interactions is likely to affect, in turn, the person and his or her environment (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Cooper, 1986; Cooper & Payne, 1978; Cooper & Baglioni, 1988; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1987; Robbins, 1993).

According to Hinkle (1973), stress was equated with "force, pressure or strain" exerted upon a material object or person which resists these forces on attempts to maintain its original state. The use of the concept in this manner encouraged physicists and engineers to adopt it to suit their ends. The popularity of this concept has dwindled in the physiological field where it was first introduced, and the use of stress terminology continues to flourish in the psychological and social sciences.

Mason (1975) reviewed literature on stress and concluded that there was confusion and a lack of consensus regarding its definition. The term "stress" has been used variously to refer to (a) stimulus (external force acting on the organism), (b) response (changes in the

physiological functions), (c) interaction (interaction between an external force and the resistance opposed to it, as in biology), and (d) more comprehensive combinations of the above factors.

Agarwala, Malhan, and Singh (1979) believe that the confusion in definition is primarily due to the fact that the same term is used variously by scholars of different disciplines. Our focus in this study was on the stress that refers to a state of the organism resulting from some interaction with the environment.

Stress is ever present in life, and simply refers to the fact that individual's resources are continually being upon (Selye, 1976). When problems are not easily resolved, stress is likely to be present, and this commonly occurs. Even the relatively protected setting of the college environment has been shown to be fraught with stress (Bloom, 1975).

One model that is useful in understanding stress among students is the person-environment model. According to one variation of this model, an individual can appraise stressful events as "challenging" or "threatening" (Lazarus, 1966). When students appraise their education as a challenge, stress can bring them a sense of competence and an increased capacity to learn. When education is seen as a threat, however, stress can elicit feelings of helplessness and a foreboding sense of loss.

A classic study of stress among students defines stress as discomforting responses of persons in particular situations (Mechanic, 1978). This definition de-emphasizes stress in terms of the nature of the event and emphasizes it according to the meaning individuals give to it.

According to some Muslim scholars like Sadiq Hussain (1984), stress is in the nature of human being. And it is perhaps best regarded as a healthy and normal reaction only likely to produce illness when it is too prolonged, too severe, or the individual does not have the capacity to adapt himself or herself to it.

The mystic of Islam had made an intensive study of stress and had a refined terminology. They used words like "Qalaq" (worry), "Ya's" (despair), and "Qunut" (helplessness) to explain the psychological term of "stress."

Worry (Qalaq). It is a universal human experience, a normal concomitant of living in a world which threatens existence and which struggle against environment, both internal and external, is part of man's lot. Thus it is conditioned response to fear (Almothwahi, 1990). Allah (swt) said:

"But for such as fear the time when they will stand before
(the judgement seal of) their Lord, there will be two Gardens" (Quran, 9:46)

Whatever the type of fear is, it is always connected with worry. This worry will disappear by the time, if it does not disappear the stress will occur and the person will fail to get the certainty of its life. And, according to Almothwahi (1990), our prophet's (saw) advice was the best to explain this point. Our prophet (saw) said:

"Leave what makes you suspicious to what makes you not."

Almothwahi (1990) added that Salat and dhiker are the best way to prevent such feelings like worry. Therefore, Allah said:

"For those who believe and work righteousness, is (every) blessedness, and a beautiful place of (final) return" (Quran, 13:28)

Despair (Ya's), Despair not only directs man on the wrong path, but also affects the powers of the mind, and weakens them gradually, to the point of their destruction (Hussain, 1984). To make this point more clear, Allah (swt) said:

"And despair not of Allah's mercy; surely none despair of Allah's mercy except the unbelieving people" (Quran, 12:87)

A person, who is in state of disorder and illness, is one from whom good is not expected. Allah fearing man, who is mobbed on all sides by the calamities, and misfortunes, and does not find any way out of them, he does neither loose heart, nor does he feel desperate. He rather takes the situation as an outcome of physical and material exigencies; he does not allow the inferiority complex to enter his mind. He is the man who never gets desperate of Allah's mercy, and who is sure that his share in life is attainable.

On the other hand, a man of materialistic concept of life, who finds himself in such a situation, loses heart, and gets totally frustrated, he often commits suicide, for seeing no value in life. He totally depends on the material or external causes and means of life. So, when he loses every thing, he is frustrated. But the possibilities of human mind have no bounds. Thus a man believes in the gift of the divine mercy, never thinks that he can do nothing now. This, in fact, is the abnegation of his own self. Man should never bow to the exigencies of material conditions (Hussain, 1984). Allah (swt) said:

"Such days (of varying fortunes) we give to men and men by turns" (Quran, 3:140)

Helplessness (Qunut), Hussain (1984), explains that the man experiences "helplessness" when he or she gets totally frustrated, and has no hope of getting any thing good.