

Theoretical Orientation of Academic Stress among Students: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Higher secondary school education is an important stage that could result in the increased incidence of psychological problems in the academic life of any student. The present study presents a review of past studies and presents the theoretical orientation of academic stress among students. The theoretical orientation to the concepts such as stress and academic stress, different types, sources, and factors of stress are reviewed. The causes of academic stress on students as well as symptoms and effects of stress are also discussed. The relation of stress with other factors such as frustration and anxiety are elaborated. The different kind of techniques for measuring academic stress is discussed. In view to reduce the academic stress among the students, a section on guidance for students having academic stress and the role of family, teachers & stakeholders in overcoming stress are highlighted. The present study helps the researcher in designing the research study in such a manner that recurrence/reappearance of the limitation and drawback observed in past research studies may be improved and unexplored areas can be taken for further studies.

Keywords: Education, Academic Stress, Theoretical orientation, review

Now a day, stress has turned out to be a critical subject matter in the academic circle as well as in our society, probably because of the fact that life, in general, is flooded/swamped by many hassles. The changing competitive society has put additional and new pressures and stresses on the youth due to which higher stress and anxiety among students are visible. One and the foremost form of stress that is stress in relation to academic concerns is constantly being experienced by the youngsters during their higher secondary and college days. However, as per Jogaratnam and Buchanan (2004) 'stress can be viewed as a positive or negative experience that affects their lives and performances'. This is so because some researchers argue that 'academic work is never without stressful activities' (Agolla and Ongori, 2009, p. 69) and 'college students are at a critical period where they will enter adulthood' (Cheng, 2009, p. 2). The experience of stress among college students is considered normal but "if stress is severe and/or prolonged, it can reduce not only the academic performance but also interfere with a student's ability to participate and contribute to campus life, and increase the likelihood of substance abuse and other potentially damaging behaviors" (Richlin-Klonsky and Hoe, 2003). Stress occurs

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when an individual meet head-on by a situation that they perceive as distressing and cannot manage up with. As mentioned earlier, excessive stress results in increased prevalence of psychological problems like depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide ideation (Bansal and Bhave, 2006; Arria, et al., 2009). Many scholars from the fields of education, behavioral science, psychology have carried out the research on stress and some methods are developed to measure stress. With this background this paper is an attempt to review the studies and present the theoretical orientation of academic stress.

Stress: Concept and Definition

The term stress was first cited by Professor Hans Selye from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec Canada in 1936 (Balamurugan and Kumaran, 2008). “Stress is generally defined as the body's non-specific response or reaction to demands made on it, or to disturbing events in the environment” (Selye, 1974, Rosenham and Seligman, 1989). “It is a process by which one perceives and copes with environmental threats and challenges” (Myers, 2005). Personal and environmental events that cause stress are known as ‘stressors’ (Lazarus, 1990). Therefore, stress is simply defined as ‘emotional disturbances or changes caused by stressors’.

While the definition of stress Campbell (2006) as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them”. Some of the researchers (Vermunt and Steensman, 2005; Topper, 2007; Malach-Pines and Keinan, 2007) have defined stress as “insight of incongruity between environmental burden (stressors) and person’s ability to fulfill these demands”. Stress occurs when a person deals with a situation that person distinguishes it as uncontrollable and cannot manage. Stress can be considered as “any factor, acting internally or externally, which makes adaptation to environment difficult and which induces increased effort on the part of the individual to maintain a state of equilibrium between himself and herself and the external environment” (Humphrey, et al., 2000). Additionally, “Stress is a physical and mental response to everyday demands, particularly those associated with change” (Richlin-Klonsky and Hoe, 2003). In fact, any change in the body’s equilibrium is also known as stress and any kind of negative stress is also known as distress. A condition like distress occurs when there is no longer any fun in doing a particular task. Such a continuous situation may lead to poor decision-making as well as possible actions. The general characteristics of the person in distress are, over tense, unable to relax, over sensitive, getting upset easily and annoyed, scary, and intolerant of interruption or delay.

Thus, “academic stress is the product of a combination of academic-related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual” (Wilks, 2008). While Gupta and Khan (1987) defined academic stress as “it is mental distress with respect to some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure or even unawareness of the possibility of such failure”.

Stress and Academic Stress

The present period is the age of competition and every parent wishes that their child should score at the top and must stand out among other children in each and every academic and sports activity in the school. This has resulted in a race kind of situation in student’s life. Therefore, the first and foremost stress in a student’s life is created by threalat or family pressure. Thus, when children feel that they cannot rise up to that parent’s expectations, or during the process of achieving it, children may suffer from frustration, physical stress, violence, undesirable complexes, and sadness. The students who are under-performers,

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develop negative qualities such as shyness, unfriendliness, and jealousy, and may move away into their own world to become loners. Besides, over-scheduling can also put them under stress. Therefore, it has been emphasized that the activities carried out in school and after-school should be carefully arranged to give children some breathing time and space. Most of the parents want that their child should learn everything e.g. music, painting, or be outstanding in a particular sport. Thus, so many things are unwillingly added into their schedule, often unmindful of the children's choices and ability that puts a lot of mental pressure on children. Besides having the pressure to fulfill parents' wishes, school systems also pack the students with a tremendous amount of homework, which they usually have to complete spending their evenings, playtime, weekends, and most of the period of vacations. When a student finds himself/ herself unable to have enough time for his/her own activities, he/she loses interest in studies and ultimate results is underperformance. They frequently feel stress by being asked to do too much in too short/less time without taking in account their difficulties and capability. Adolescent depression or growing up tensions adds to their academic pressures. If any students are unable to adapt to the transition and change, such students often carry enormous amount of anxiety, negative personal character and suffer from attention problems. Erkutlu and Chafra (2006) opined that, when these events take place, an individual becomes dis-organised, disoriented and therefore less able to cope up, thus resulting in stress related health problems. When 'effortless' learning does not take place, these students lose self-confidence, impulse and interest, and that create more and more stress.

There are many studies which have undertaken research on various aspects of academic stress among students and have identified stressors, such as many assignments, competition with other students, failures, lack of pocket money (Fairbrother and Warn, 2003), poor relationships with other students or lecturers, problems at home. However, overcrowded lecture halls, semester system and inadequate resources to perform academic work are identified as the stressors at College/Institutional/University level (Ongori, 2007; Awino and Agolla, 2008). The pressure to perform well in every examination or all the tests and less time allocated for same makes academic environment very stressful (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2006; Polychronopoulou and Divaris, 2005; Misra and McKean, 2000). This is likely to affect the social relations both within the College/Institutions/University and outside (Fairbrother and Warn, 2003) since there is conflict with the social aspect of individual life. This is not the only effect the social relations within or outside the College/University, but this goes to affect the individual person's life in terms of commitment to achieving the goals. Knowing the causes of student stress will help the University administrator to monitor and control the stress factors that are responsible for the students stress.

Academic stress is a concern that must not be taken for granted because it adversely affects the overall performance and behavior of students (Hussain, et al., 2008) and several studies have already documented the effect of stress on students (e.g. Agolla and Ongori, 2009; Hussain, et al., 2008; Masih and Gulrez, 2006; Shaikh et al., 2004; Sulaiman, et al., 2009). In 2005, Kumar and Jejurkar found that 'academic factors were responsible for higher level of stress among undergraduate students'.

Thus, the factors which cause a significant stress in students are such as difficult and many classes, poor time management, repeated homework overload, poor study skills, travelling to school, revision of syllabus and examinations, difficulties in meeting up with the expectations of family members, dis-satisfaction with syllabus taught, poor relationship with teachers, significant people's expectations, fear of failure, financial difficulties at home,

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feelings of inadequacy, fear of unknown assessments, unsatisfactory accommodation, friends, roommates, poor communication skills, adverse body image, lack of diet and nutrition, lack of exercise, serious illness, death or tragedy in family, etc. (Balamurugan and Kumaran, 2008).

Reasons of Academic Stress among Students at Schools

Adolescence is a stage where transition occurs from childhood towards the adulthood. Adolescence can be generally defined as the period of life when a child develops into an adult generally seen during 12-19 years. In an education system, adolescents are receiving education in junior and senior high schools. During this phase of development, they face rapid physical and mental changes due to which they can sometimes feel incompatible with the changes around their physical and social environment. Adding to this are academic factors which causes further problems (Kai-Wen 2014). The educationist Dewey once said “education is a pursuit of a perfect life”. However, school teachers and parents use academic achievement as the sole criterion for evaluating a student’s performance. This criterion causes double stress on adolescents. Stress from high expectations of teachers, parents, and self is usually an agony for students studying in schools (Cheng, 1999). Barbayannis *et al* (2022) reported that academic stress on college is significantly correlated to psychological well-being in the students.

As per the statistics of various countries, the number of suicide (including self-injury) cases is highest among the college/university students, and female students take a much larger proportion of the suicide cases. Among the causes of suicide or self-injury, relationship problems are the leading cause, followed by depression and academic stress.

Components of Academic Stress:

Many factors contribute to the stress being experienced by students but specifically, the following are associated with academic stress based on literature: time management issues financial burdens, interactions with teachers, personal goals, social activities, adjustment to the campus environment, lack of support networks (Wilks, 2008), admission procedures, high standards of parents, curriculum being highly concept laden, inappropriate school timings, high student-teacher ratio, non-conducive physical environment of classrooms, the absence of healthy teacher-student interaction, irrational rules of discipline, physical punishment, excessive or unbalanced school-work, teaching methodology, indifferent attitudes of teachers, overemphasis on weaknesses rather than strengths (Masih & Gulrez, 2006), expectations of students themselves, expectations of parents, and expectations of teachers (Ang & Huan, 2006). Additionally, the following were recognized to be associated to academic stress based on studies: academic workload, attending lectures (Agolla & Ongori, 2009), examinations, school curriculum (Shah, Hasan, Malik, & Sreeramareddy, 2010), inadequate learning materials (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Shah et al., 2010), performance in academic work, academic difficulties (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Johnson, 2009), overcrowded classrooms (Agolla & Ongori, 2009), subject-related projects (Conner, et al., 2010), uncertainty in getting a job after graduation/ worrying about the future (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Shah et al., 2010), self-expectations (Misra & Castillo, 2004), expectations of peers, expectations of friends (Agolla & Ongori, 2009), expectations of family members/parents (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Shah et al., 2010), financial limitations (Johnson, 2009), and college admission procedures (Conner et al., 2010).

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Causes of Student Stress:

Feeling stressed is a normal reaction to a situation which feels out of control or overwhelming. Any problem can cause stress but students do face particular worries which are based on pressure. Some of the main reasons blamed for student stress are: burden of course work, debt, Exam pressure, financial worries and relationship problems. University students, especially freshmen, are a group particularly prone to stress (D'Zurilla and Sheedy, 1991) due to the transitional nature of university life. They must adjust to being away from home probably for the first time, maintain a high level of academic achievement, and adjust to a new social setting. University students, regardless of year in school, often face pressures related to doing well in studies another finding a job. These stressors do not cause anxiety or tension by themselves. Instead, stress results from the interaction between stressors and the individual's perception and reaction to those stressors.

Stress is simply the body's non-specific response to any demand made on it. Stress is not by definition synonymous with nervous tension or anxiety. Stress provides the means to express talents and energies and pursue happiness; it can also cause exhaustion and illness, either physical or psychological heart attacks or accidents. The important thing to remember about stress is that certain forms are normal and essential. As the body responds to various forms of physical or psychological stress, certain predictable changes occur. These include increased heart rate, blood pressure (systolic and diastolic), and secretions of stimulatory hormones. These responses to stress will occur whether the stress is positive or negative in nature. In lay terms, it is known as the "fight or flight" mechanism. Continual exposure lowers the body's ability to cope with additional forms of psychological or physiological stress.

Techniques of Measuring Academic Stress

The researchers have developed the techniques to measure the stress among the adolescences. Gadzella's Student-life Stress Inventory (SLSI) (1991) is designed to assess the students' perceived academic stress and reactions to stress. There are 51 items arranged on a Likert response format (1=never true to 5=always true) that assessed five categories of academic stressors (frustrations, conflicts, pressures, changes, and self-imposed), and four categories describing reactions to stressors (physiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive). Validity and reliability of the instrument have been reported earlier (Gadzella, 1991; Gadzella, Masten, & Stacks, 1998).

Busari (2011) constructed and validated Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS). The SASS is a self-reported scale through which individual students describes his areas of stress regarding his/her academic work, according to the extent to which he/she is willing to disclose them. It is essentially a precise and time-saving method providing information about the major concerns of individual students or group. The SASS is a measure of stress response developed specifically for quantifying stress on university students in the stress response domains, physiological, behavioural, cognitive and affective. This scale has two sub-sections. Section A consists of demographic information such as sex, course, level, the type of secondary school attended, age, while section B consist of 50 items in various domain of academic stress. One model that is useful in understanding stress among students is Person - Environment Model (PEM) (Menaga and Chandrasekharan, 2014).

Guidance for Students having Academic Stress

Stress is considered to be a part of students' life and can impact the students coping strategies in accordance with the demands of academic life. This is so because academic

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work is always accomplished with stressful activities (Agolla & Ongori, 2009). Students reported their experience of high academic stress at predictable times in each semester which results from preparing and taking exams, class ranking competition, and mastering huge amount of syllabus in a comparatively very small amount of time (Rawson, Bloomer, & Kendall, 1999).

Donald Meichenbaum (1979) developed a cognitive restructuring procedure called Stress – Inoculation Training (SIT). Meichenbaum's SIT is described as a prototype of the cognitive restructuring approaches since it incorporate elements of the other cognitive approaches along with other treatments that are cognitive in nature. Stress inoculation training is described by Meichenbaum as a three-phase therapy process. The phases are: conceptualization, skill acquisition and rehearsal, application and follow through.

Role of Family, Teachers & Stakeholders in Overcoming Stress

There has been argument is that students stress has not gained much attention since most scholars were preoccupied with the conventional work-related stress as opposed to academic students stress. Besides, institutions have not taken serious steps to find out the health of students, this could be attributed to the fact that students who stay at the institutions/college/university is based on short period, and therefore their stress have little direct impact on the activities or operations of the academic institution. Another reason why little have been done on student's stress could be due to the fact that students' presence in the institution have no direct relationship to the quality of education they get. It is argued that, unless the university puts appropriate measures that take care of wellbeing of the students, the student's health may compromise the quality of education they are supposed to get (Daniels and Harris, 2000; Smith et al., 2000; Finlayson,2003). Gibbons and Gibbons (2007) and McCarty et al. (2007) have carried out extensive research on stress and found out that stress is associated with how an individual appraises situations and the coping strategies adopted. The negative effect of stress on students is likely to pose challenge to the individual students, their colleagues, and the institution as a whole (Siegrist, 1998; Cartwright and Boyes, 2000). The outcome associated with stress such as suicide, violence, and drug abuse among others have been witnessed in the institution often, and are worth paying attention. In fact, stress poses a great threat to quality of life for students (Danna and Griffin, 1999; Dyck, 2001).

Stress management techniques include self-management, conflict resolution, positive attitude, self-talk, breathing, meditation, exercise, diet and rest. Effective stress management also involves learning to set limits for the issues that create stress.

CONCLUSION

The study presents a review of past studies and presents the theoretical orientation of academic stress among students. The theoretical orientation to the concepts such as stress and academic stress, different types, sources, and factors of stress are reviewed. The causes of academic stress on students as well as symptoms and effects of stress are also discussed. The relation of stress with other factors such as frustration and anxiety are elaborated. The different kind of techniques of measuring academic stress is discussed. In view to reduce the academic stress among the students, a section on guidance for students having academic stress and role of family, teachers & stakeholders in overcoming stress are highlighted. This will help the researcher in designing the research study in such a manner that recurrence/reappearance of the limitation and drawback observed in past research studies may be improved and unexplored areas can be taken for further studies.

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Conflict of Interest

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