

Stress Levels Among University Students And Their Coping Strategies. A Case Of Public Universities In Kenya

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Abstract: This study examined the perceived levels of stress among university students and their coping strategies. The sample comprised (103 privately sponsored students and 137 government sponsored) students selected from public universities in western part of Kenya. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to select these participants. Across sectional survey research design was adopted for this study. A bio data form and a perceived stress scale instrument which contained both closed ended and open ended items were used to collect data. Both descriptive and inferential t-test statistics were used to analyse data at 05 alpha levels. The findings revealed university students reported high levels of stress. However, no significant difference was found between the stress mean scores of the government and privately sponsored students ($df=238$, $t=-492$, $p<.05$). This study reported that university students attributed their high levels of stress on financial and accommodation challenges, insecurity, romantic relationship problems and work –over load. Results showed that privately sponsored students were more likely to use adaptive stress coping strategies such as going to church, exercise and seek support from counselors than government sponsored students. The findings of this study will be useful in helping university administration in mitigating problems facing university students.

Keywords: Perceived stress levels, stressors, coping strategies, Kenya.

I. INTRODUCTION

University students' life is full of excitement and memorable experiences. They establish new relationships, meet new friends, and course instructors, engage in exiting social activities, and Stimulating intellectual discourses. However, they also face challenges which consequently lead to stress which impact on their psychological well being and academic performance. According to Angola and Ongori (2009), stress occurs when one is confronted with a situation which is perceived to be overwhelming.

Studies have also revealed that college experience is the most stressful years in a student's life. Towbes and Cohen (1996) reported that the need for the students to adjust to a new social environment, deal with leaving away from parental authority, and heightened academic demands may contribute to stress among university students. Markrides, Veinoit, Richard, Mckee and Gallivan (1998) noted that college students had high levels of stress. Markrides et. al. found out that 60% or more college students in Malaysia are subjected to high levels of stress.

A study by Pierceall and Keim (2007) revealed that 75% to 80% of college students experience moderate stress, whereas 10% to 12% are severely stressed. According to the American college health association (2014) report, mental health problems were at higher rates in campuses with 30% of the students reporting poor grades and dropping out due to stress.

Studies have shown that different groups of people are known to have different stressors (sarafino & Ewing, 1999; Morrison & O'Connor, 2005). Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) reported that college students are unique group of individuals who face certain intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental, and academic stressors. Hashim (2007) college students stress is not restricted to their studies but it could also be caused by health, financial, academic and romantic relationships. Womble (2003) found out societal activities, job demands or romantic relationships affected student's academic achievement. According to Calderon, Hey and Seabert (2001) found out that having a full or part time job has been found to be a constant source of stress to college students.

Redhwan, Sami, Karim, and Zeleha (2009) found out that the most important cause of stress was: financial, lack of sleep, and family problems. Gatonye (2014) study revealed that year students in public universities in Kenya performed dismally in their academics due to poor sleeping patterns. The insufficient sleep among these students due to stress, which was caused by family problems, inadequate pocket money, broken relationships, drug abuse, and poor social relationships.

Perceived stress is not actual stress but what we tell ourselves we are experiencing. Studies have shown that perceived stress and stressors are not necessarily consistent across all college students. Morris, Brooks and May (2003) reported that this construct had been shown to differ between traditional and non-traditional students. Traditional are unmarried and are not employed and are in school full time. Conversely, nontraditional students may be married, have children and go to school in the evenings.

Majority of the university students use maladaptive coping behaviors such as drinking, drug abuse and risky sexual activity (Weschler, Lee, Kuo, Nelson & Lee 2002; Kelly Rollings and Harmon, 2005; Field & Powel, 2007; Suldo et-al, 2008). Prendergast (1994) reported that in an effort to cope with stress many college students are likely to drink at higher levels than young adults who are not in college.

Sarafina and Ewing (1999) found out that if students do not learn appropriate coping strategies to deal with stressors, they are likely to suffer from physical and psychological ailments and distress. Tolan, Gorman Smith, Henry, Chung and Hunt (2002) noted that coping strategies that serve to increase perceived stress place adolescents at higher risk for experiencing mental health.

Research has also revealed that adaptive coping strategies such as: optimistic appraisal and support from friends and relatives often relieves stress in students (Blake & Vandiver, 1988). Tamres, Janiek and Helgeson (2002) found out that women tend to use social support and helping seeking behavior to cope with stress than men.

Though research on stress among college student is not a new phenomenon, the bulk of these studies have been done in the western world and very little has been done in Kenya. According to Ward, Jones and Philips (2003), the difficulty in stress research is that stressors are perceived differently by different individuals. Thus students in Kenya have different experiences from the west hence their level of stress perception is likely to be different.

Moreover, no study was found in the literature review which has empirically examined how university students in Kenya manage stress. This study therefore, sought to provide empirical findings on the perceived levels of stress among university students and their coping strategies

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived level of stress among university students in Kenya. Secondly, to identify the diverse sources of these students face and how they cope with this stress.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following objectives guided this study:

- ✓ To investigate the perceived levels of stress among government and privately sponsored public university students.
- ✓ To identify the stressors that affect government and privately sponsored university students.
- ✓ To identify the coping strategies used by government and privately sponsored university students to manage stress.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions which were derived from the research objectives were answered in this study:

- ✓ Are there differences in the levels of perceived stress between government and privately sponsored students?
- ✓ What is the stressors that affect government and privately sponsored students?
- ✓ Are there differences in stress coping strategies between government and privately sponsored students?

III. METHOD

This study was conducted in public universities in the western part of Kenya. The research method adopted a mixed methods approach. It involved the use of both ex post facto and survey research designs.

The ex-post facto design was used for the first objective that sought to compare the stress levels of government, and privately sponsored students, and the third objective which investigated the differences in stress coping strategies among these two groups of university students. The survey design was used to achieve the second objective which involved finding out the stressors that affected government and self-sponsored public university students.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The research population of this study comprised fourth year university students whose fees is subsidized by the government (government sponsored) and those who privately sponsor their university education (self-sponsored). The students who were being sponsored by the government and those who privately sponsored their education were included in this study mainly for comparison purpose.

This study used simple random sampling procedure to select participants from four public universities involved in this study. A total of respondents 240 (137 government sponsored and 103 privately sponsored students) participated in this study.

DATA COLLECTION

Permission to collect data from the participants was sought from the course instructors. The participants were requested to read and sign the informed consent letter before participating in the study. A questionnaire used to collect data contained 4 sections. The first section was a biographical form

containing 4 items which were used to collect personal data from the participants. The second section was the perceived stress scale adopted from Cohen (1985). The perceived stress scale (PSS) is a 14-item scale which measures the degree to which situations in one's life are deemed to be stressful.

These items are scaled from 1-5, with a continuum ranging from 1 indicating that a student "never" felt a certain way during the last semester to 4 indicating that the student felt a certain way "very often". The scores were reversed on the four positive items (1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 4=2, and 5=1) and then summed them across all items. The positive items included 4, 5, 7 and 8. Individual score ranged from 1-70 with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress. Scores that range from 1-28 were considered low-stress. Scores that ranged from 29-42 were considered moderate, whereas those that ranged from 43-70 were considered high perceived stress levels.

The third section contained an opened question that required participants to write the sources of stress that affected them during the semester. The fourth section contained different strategies of coping with stress as used by the students anchored on a likert-type scale ranging from 1=never to 4=almost always. They were asked to circle how often they used these strategies in coping with stress during the last semester.

DATA ANALYSES

The filled questionnaires were coded, responses scored, and keyed into a computer data file. All the statistical analyses were run using the statistical package for social science computer programme. The numerical data collected in this study were analyzed using both the descriptive and inferential statistics.

The descriptive statistics which were used in this study were mean scores, while the inferential statistics used were t-test for independent samples. The alpha level was 0.05. The qualitative data was analysed using the horizontalization process (Moustakas, 1994)

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher explained the reason of the study to the participants. The researcher requested the participants to read and sign the informed consent letter. Participants were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and they were not required to write their names on the research instrument used to collect data.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

Mode of sponsorship and perceived level of stress. The first research objective of this study was to investigate the influence of mode of sponsorship on perceived stress level among public university students. The following research question was raised: "Do government and privately sponsored students in public universities differ in their level of stress?" To answer this question the participants were asked to indicate their mode of sponsorship on the biographical form and

respond to the items in questionnaire measuring their stress level. Their responses were calculated and reported in table 1.

Mode	N	Mean	S D
Government	103	41.094	4.941
Private	137	41.402	6.619
Total	240	41.248	5.701

Table 1: Mode of sponsorship and perceived stress level

The mean scores of government and privately sponsored students were compared using a t-test for independent samples. The result revealed no significant difference between the stress mean scores of the government and privately sponsored students (df=238, t=-492, P<.05). This implied that both government and privately sponsored students experienced high levels of stress.

The second objective of this study was to identify the various stressors facing university students in public universities. The research question posed was: "What are the stressors facing university students?" A thematic analysis was used on the transcripts of the interviews. It was found that the participants' views about stressors facing them could be classified into six major domains: Financial problems, accommodation challenges, insecurity, relationship problems and work overload. In the following sections each stressor will be elaborated with the illustrations from the interviews.

Financial problems: The theme of financial problems was strong in the interview. Majority of the university students in both government and privately sponsored programmes reported that financial challenges contributed a lot to the stress that they faced.

ONE STUDENT OBSERVED:

I faced financial constraints during the semester. I could neither buy food or pay my rent. I was so stressed.

ANOTHER ONE STATED A SIMILAR VIEW:

I delayed in paying rent and I could not be allowed to sit examinations because of lack of fees

ACCOMMODATION CHALLENGES

Most Kenyan public universities no longer peg their admission of students on the availability of accommodation. Both government and privately sponsored students are expected to look for their own accommodation. Scarcity of accommodation in the universities and their environments pose a major challenge to students regardless of their mode of sponsorship.

ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS COMPLAINED:

The hostels are crowded and there is no privacy. Somebody stole my laptop and phone at the beginning of the semester.

ANOTHER ONE SAID:

I experience a lot of stress from roommates who have queer behaviours. This is the source of my misunderstanding with them.

ANOTHER FEMALE PARTICIPANT STATED A SIMILAR VIEW:

I am always quarrelling with a room mate and friend.
INSECURITY

Insecurity is a major concern of students in public universities. Majority of the students reported that they feared for their own security and of their property in the university campuses. They reported lack of security especially in their residential areas.

ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS STATED:

*Due to insecurity where I stay,
I lost my valuable assets mysteriously.*

ANOTHER ONE REPORTED:

Cases of insecurity are rampant within and outside university premises at night. This scares me stiff.

RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES

Infidelity and broken relationships is one of the greatest source of stress among majority of the university students.

ONE OF THE FEMALE PARTICIPANTS REPORTED:

I was stressed last semester because of the infidelity and unfaithfulness of my boyfriend. He is always cheating on me.

ANOTHER MALE PARTICIPANT ALSO STATED A SIMILAR VIEW:

The most disturbing problem facing me is that my girlfriend broke up our relationship. I feel rejected and useless.

V. WORK OVERLOAD

Many of the participants complained that they experienced a lot of pressure of work during the previous semester. Most of them reported that they were given too much work that they did not even have time to rest during the semester.

ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS OBSERVED:

I experienced a lot of pressure and stress to study, compounded with the complex and unpredictable semester dates.

ANOTHER ONE COMMENTED:

*Semester dates should be made predictable.
Lecturers should begin their classes on time to avoid too many lecturers at the end of the semester. Some of these lecturers give us too much work which made me feel too exhausted.*

The third research objective was to investigate the differences in stress coping strategies between government and privately sponsored students. The research question posed was: Are there differences in stress coping strategies between government and privately sponsored students? Participants responded to the items in the instrument measuring their stress coping strategies. Their responses were scored and meanscores calculated and reported in table 2.

Coping strategy	Mode of sponsorship	N	Mean	SD
Socialization with friends	Government	103	3.121	.889
	Private	137	3.044	.859
Creating leisure activities	Government	103	2.807	.833
	Private	137	2.566	.864
Going to church	Government	103	1.066	1.066
	Private	137	1.093	1.093
Absenteeing self from lectures	Government	103	1.602	.883
	Private	137	1.500	.740
Insult others	Government	103	1.482	.875
	Private	137	1.485	1.809
Taking alcohol and drug use	Government	103	1.482	.875
	Private	137	1.485	1.809
Exercise	Government	103	2.121	.903
	Private	137	2.334	1.004
Stay by self	Government	103	2.334	.892
	Private	137	2.313	1.037
Watching TV, play on the computer	Government	103	2.434	1.002
	Private	137	2.493	.9888
Crying to let feelings out	Government	103	1.566	.886
	Private	137	2.169	.875
Seeking counseling	Government	103	1.518	.786
	Private	137	1.618	.721
Going for disco	Government	103	1.602	.9363
	Private	137	1.429	.8335
Dating or romancing	Government	103	1.827	.905
	Private	137	1.873	.999
Seeking counseling from friends	Government	103	2.301	.894
	Private	137	2.194	.9134

Table 2: Mode of study and coping strategies

The findings of this study revealed that there was a significant difference in creating leisure activities coping

strategy between Government and Privately sponsored students ($df= 238, t= 1.783, <.05$). Government sponsored scored higher ($m=2.807, sd= .833$) than privately sponsored ($m=2.566, sd=.864$). This study showed that government students scored higher mean scores on the following coping strategies: socialization with friends, government sponsored students mean scores ($m =3.121, sd = .889$), privately sponsored students mean scores ($m = 3.044, sd= .860$), absenting self from lecturers, government sponsored mean scores ($m= 1.602, sd= .883$), privately sponsored students mean ($m= 1.500, sd= .740$). going for disco, government sponsored mean scores ($m= 1.602, sd= .936$), privately sponsored mean scores ($m=1.429, sd = .833$).

This results also showed that there was a significant difference in dating and romancing stress coping strategy between government sponsored students and privately sponsored students ($df= 238, t= -.338, <.05$). With privately sponsored students scoring higher mean scores ($m= 1.827, sd = .905$) than government sponsored students ($m= 1.873, sd = .999$). Privately sponsored students scored higher mean scores on the following strategies: Going to church, privately sponsored students mean scores ($m=1.093, sd = 1.802$), government sponsored students mean scores ($m = 1.066, sd = .878$), insulting others, privately sponsored students scored higher mean scores ($m = 1.482, sd = .875$), exercise, privately sponsored students mean scores ($m = 2.334, sd = 1.003$), stay by self, privately sponsored students mean score ($m = 2.313, sd = 1.037$), government sponsored students mean scores ($m = 2.493, sd = .989$), seeking counselling privately sponsored students mean scores ($m = 1.618, sd= .721$), government sponsored students mean scores ($m = 1.827, sd = .786$). Taking alcohol and drug use, government sponsored students mean scores ($m= 1.518, sd = .875$), privately sponsored students mean scores ($m=1.485, sd= 1.809$).

VI. DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to investigate the perceived level of stress, stressors and coping strategies among students in public universities. Especially, whether or not there were differences in stressors and differences in stress coping strategies between government and privately sponsored students in public universities in Kenya.

The results of this study showed that there was no significant difference in the stress levels between government and privately sponsored students. Interestingly, both groups of students reported high levels of stress. This is consistent with previous studies on stress levels among university and college students (Markrides, Veinolt, Richard, McKee, and Galivan 1998), who found out that college students had high levels of stress.

The results from the qualitative study revealed that university students attributed their high levels of stress on the following stressors: financial and accommodation challenges, insecurity, romantic relationship problems, and work-overload. These findings were in consonance with Ross, Niebling and Hekert (1999) who reported that college students are a unique group of individuals who face, interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and academic stressors. Similar findings were

also reported by Hashim (2007) who found out that college students stress is not only restricted to their studies but also caused health problems, financial constraints, academic and romantic relationships. They were also consistent with Gatonye (2014) who also reported that university students' high level of stress was a result of family problems, inadequate pocket money, broken relationships and poor social relationships.

Intriguingly the present study did not find significant differences between government and privately sponsored students on most of stress coping strategies, apart from leisure activities, and dating and romancing. It is interesting to observe that the two groups of students reported differences on other coping strategies. For instance government sponsored students mainly employed maladaptive stress coping strategies such as: Taking alcohol and drug use, absenting self from lecturers, and going for discos. On the other hand, privately sponsored university students employed adaptive stress coping strategies such as going to church, exercising, crying to let feelings out, and seeking counseling services.

This finding could be explained by Gonzales, Tein, Sandler and Friedman(2001) who reported the relation between active coping and lower depressive symptoms was reduced when stress levels increased. This explanation is fitting for this study because privately sponsored students reported high stress levels than the government students.

Moreover, the cost of living of the government sponsored students is relatively cheaper compared to privately sponsored students. Whereas the privately sponsored students fully fund their studies and fend for themselves, the government sponsored students' education is subsidized by the government and are also supported by parents. Therefore they can afford to engage in maladaptive stress coping behaviour such as taking alcohol and drugs, and going for discos.

VII. CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study add to growing extant knowledge about high levels and coping strategies of students in institutions of higher learning. This study found out that university students in Kenyan public universities experience high levels of stress. The findings of this study also revealed that both the government and privately sponsored students faced financial, security, accommodation, broken relationship and work over load challenges in our public universities.

It also revealed that privately sponsored students were more likely to use adaptive stress coping strategies such as going to church, exercise and seek support from counselors than government sponsored university students.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should explore the role of general daily hassles in relation to working students who attend evening classes in our public universities, their psychological adjustment in comparison to full time students. Further research is need on private universities in comparison to public universities with regard to stress levels and coping

strategies. Knowledge about stress, stressors, and coping strategies and adopted by university students will provide further guidance for preventing mental health problems and promoting wellbeing among university students, which is important for their success in their academic pursuits.

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