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The Types and Incidence of Stressors of Students in the University of Ghana-Legon

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Introduction

Background to the Study

Hans Selye, the first major researcher of stress coined the word 'stress' in 1936 and defined it as "a non-specific response of the body to any demand for change". Selye (1974) is of the view that stress is a facet of life which human beings cannot avoid. In fact he confidently declares that "total freedom from stress is death" Selye (1976) stated that stress in moderate levels enhances function. Kaplan and Sadock (2000) in their study on students also found out that moderate stress among students enhances learning ability. Pfeiffer (2001) emphasizes that stress helps students to peak their performance. However, stressors become a problem when they are excessive and tend to decrease the function of the individual.

Stress has become an important topic in the academic circle as well as in our society. Many scholars in the field of behavioral science have carried out extensive research on stress and its outcomes, and have concluded that the topic needed more attention, (Rees & Redfern, 2000; Ellison, 2004; Ontari & Angolla, 2008; Angolla, 2009). Stress in academic institutions can have both positive and negative consequences if not well managed (Smith, 2002; Tweed et al., 2004; Stevenson & Harper, 2006).

College students, especially freshmen, are a group particularly prone to stress (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991). The stressors come in forms such as the pressure to earn good grades and a degree (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996). Others come in the forms of excessive homework, unclear assignments and uncomfortable classrooms (Kohn and Frazer, 1986), as well as relations with faculty members and time pressures (Sgan-Cohen & Lowental, 1988). Added to these are stressors of relationships with family and friends eating and sleeping habits and loneliness, (Wright, 1967). However, the question which group of students experience these stressors the most- Is it males or it is females? married or single? This present study aims at finding out the incidence of stress among the students and the types of stressors they encounter.

Statement of the Problem

Even though the university is a place for higher intellectual development, it is also a place filled with all kinds of stressors. Some of these stressors are academic in nature; for example, the pressure to earn good grades and earn a degree (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996). Other academic stressors that university students encounter are excessive homework, unclear assignments and uncomfortable classrooms (Kohn & Frazer, 1986). In addition to academic stressors, university students also encounter financial, interpersonal and also time-related stressors.

This academic year has witnessed a major change in the University of Ghana's academic grading system. The major change is the grading of the first year's academic performance which was not so in the past (as level 100 was 'non-scoring'). This has resulted in students studying more seriously right from the first year. Besides this, facilities for learning are inadequate and cannot meet the large number

of students at the university. The problem of accommodation on the university of Ghana campus cannot be over-emphasized because of the “in-out-out-out accommodation policy”. Even among the fortunate students who are offered accommodation on campus still encounter problems with roommates and water shortages. In addition, students are stressed financially as those in the hostels have to pay such bills as electricity bills and also buy gas for cooking. Furthermore, Students’ loans are also usually delayed.

On campus, students are faced with the hassles of life on a daily basis. They walk long distances to their lecture theatres where they struggle among themselves to get seats or places to stand for lectures. They cue at the washrooms, restaurants, bus stops, photocopy shops, libraries, study rooms, and virtually everywhere because of inadequacy of facilities. Students who are married have to combine the stressors of school with those of the marriages. Those students seeking some particular major (which is based on first and/or second year performance) have to learn extra hard to meet minimum cut-off points. These include those seeking to enter the medical school, to major in accounting at the business school and economics among others.

A number of researches have been conducted on the sources of stress among undergraduate students (Gadzella, 1994) as well as graduate students (Rocha-Singh, 1994). Towbes and Cohen (1999) also created the College Chronic Life Stress Survey to look at the frequency of chronic stress in the lives of college students. However, a review of relevant literature reveals that not much has been done on the incidence of stressors of students except a few done on medical students. A majority of these studies have been done in the U.S.A., Europe, and Australia and very little has been done in Ghana on the topic.

This research therefore seeks to find out what the types of stressors among students of the University of Ghana and the incidence.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the study is to find out the types and incidence of stressors that University of Ghana students encounter during their stay on campus. Specifically, the research aimed at;

1. Investigating the types of stressors that are most prevalent among University of Ghana students.
2. Finding out which groups of students encounter these stressors most.
3. Determining the times in the semester that these students encounter these stressors the most.

Relevance of the Study

This study comes at a time when there seems to be an increase in stress levels among students with the introduction of the new grading system. This study represents a first step in understanding the major sources of stress encountered among the University of Ghana students in their academic life.

The study would therefore benefit various sectors of the University of Ghana, especially, the Academic Affairs Division, the Counseling and Placement Center, and the Student representative council in their planning and in their programmes. These groups will all put in measures to help reduce stress among students and organize programmes that will help reduce the impact of stress among students. The

effect will be an improved performance among students as well as a better image for the University as a convenient place for higher learning which is line with the recent moves to place the university as a world class status.

It is hoped that the research will in the end bring relief to the poor student who encounters these stressors each day of their academic life on campus. This is because the research will sensitize the student body about the key stressors they will encounter, when they occur and who they usually affect most.

Literature Review

According to Weiten (2005), Stress is any circumstance that threatens or is perceived to threaten one's wellbeing and tax one's coping abilities. According to Lane, (2010), the proportion of people enrolling in university is increasing. These trends indicate that stress and related issues are likely to become an even more notable phenomenon amongst university students.

Meichenbaum (1995) says that stressors come in many forms, of which some may be catastrophic in nature. Some identified sources of stress among university students include; interpersonal conflicts, self-esteem problems, and money problems (Towbes & Cohen, 1996); environmental, academic, family/money (Rocha-Singh, 1990); time constraints, feedback from specific faculty, financial constraints, help from faculty, emotional support from friend, feedback with regard to status in program, administrative issues, (Cahir & Morris, 1991).

A frequently reported source of stress that most undergraduate students experience is receiving a lower grade than they expected (grade pressure) (Ratana & Saipanish, 2003; Evans & Fitzgibbon, 1992; Kohn & Frazer, 1986). Students also have a fear of failure in relation to their grades and academic work.

Towbes and Cohen (1996) created the College Chronic Life Stress Survey in which they focused on the frequency of chronic stress in the lives of college students. This scale contains items that persist across time to create stress, such as interpersonal conflicts, self-esteem problems, and money problems. They evaluated these stressors in relation to how many times a student had to deal with them on a weekly basis. They found that in regard to chronic stress, first-year students scored higher than other students. Similar studies have examined sources of stress among both undergraduate (Gadzella, 1994) and graduate students (Rocha-Singh, 1994).

Those studies carried out with medical students show that in the academic area, heavy work load, examinations and meeting deadlines for assignments were the most common causes of stress (Evans and Fitzgibbon, 1992; Kohn & Frazer, 1986). This is further supported by Ratana Saipanish (2003) who conducted a study on 686 medical students in the Faculty of Medicine; Ramathibodi Hospital, Thailand and finding has also shown that academic problems were found to be a major cause of stress among all students. The results indicated that the most prevalent source of academic stress was test/exam.

Academic stress pervades the life of students, and tends to impact adversely their mental and physical health, and their ability to perform schoolwork effectively (Clark, & Rieker, 1986; Felsten & Wilcox, 1992). Epstein and Katz (1992) found that stress is often self imposed by students. These come in forms like setting unrealistic expectations and putting pressure on oneself to get good grades.

All these researchers are of the view that stress if not well managed will have a negative consequence on students. These scholars assertion needs attention if the needed stress management in university has to be effective. It is important for the university to maintain a well-balanced academic environment, conducive for better learning.

Statement of Hypotheses

The study tested the following hypotheses:

1. Students encounter more academic stressors than they encounter environmental stressors.
2. There will be a significant difference between the number of stressors encountered at the beginning of the semester than at the middle and end of the semester.
3. There will be a significant positive correlation between the number of years in the university and the number of stressors encountered.
4. Non-resident students are more likely to face more stressors than resident students.
5. Female students are likely to face more stressors than their male counterparts.
6. Married students are likely to encounter more stressors than unmarried students.

Methodology

Research Setting

The research was conducted in the main campus of the University of Ghana, Legon. This comprised all students who either lived in the five traditional halls of residence or the hostels (Akuafu, Legon, Sarbah, Volta, and Commonwealth halls; as well as Bani, Evandy, T.F, Pentagon, and Hilla Limann Hostel). This setting was chosen to help the researcher sample a large number of students towards the achievement of the objectives of the study.

Population and Sample Size

The study had a sample population of all students of the University of Ghana which was about thirty-two thousand. The sample size comprised one hundred participants in all, with twenty-five (25) percent of this number coming from each of these four categories of students. The selection of participants was done based on a stratified random sampling process. This was done so that differences between the distinct subgroups of males and females, as well as resident and non-resident students would be easily identified.

Research Design

The research used a cross-sectional survey design in collecting the data since the aim was to sample the views of the students on the types of stressors they experience in their academic life.

Data Collection Technique

A structured self-administered questionnaire was adopted from Burge (2009), as a means of data collection. This was distributed to students in the traditional halls of residence, as well as those in the private hostels within the confines of the University of Ghana main campus. A stratified random sampling technique was used in that one block was randomly chosen from each of the five traditional halls, as well as the hostels of residence. In all, 100 students were sampled. Of this number, the questionnaire was administered to ten students from each of the halls and hostels. This comprised twenty-five male-resident and twenty-five non-resident male students, as well as twenty-five female resident and twenty-five non-resident female students. Their level ranged from 100-600, of which some were married and others not.

Respondents were required to read the introduction, to get an idea of what the research is about, as well as instructions before answering. This lasted for a whole week.

Instrument

The instrument used for this study was the University Student Stress (USS), in identifying the types and incidence of stressors on the University of Ghana main campus. This instrument was modified to meet the objectives of the study. This was developed by Burge (2009). It consisted of 47 items which were grouped under academic, environmental and social stressors. The questionnaire comprised of three sections:

Section A of the questionnaire was used to collect biographic data of the subjects which included the genders, levels, residential and marital status of students as well as their programmes of study. Section B measures the types of stressors encountered by university students which comprised of academic, social and environmental stressors. Section C was designed to measure the time of the semester that students encounter these stressors the most. These stressors were rated on a five-point likert scale on how stressful the students found these stressors. Reliability coefficients were obtained for each of the three factors; for Academic-related Stress, the alpha level was, $\alpha = 0.74$. Social or Interpersonal Stressors had an alpha level being 0.81, and Environmental-related Stressors had an alpha level of 0.79.

Analysis of Data

The main aim of the study was to find out the various types of stressors, as well as the incidence of stressors among University of Ghana, Legon students and six hypotheses were formulated which have been tested below:

The first hypothesis states that students will encounter more academic stressors than environmental stressors. It was tested using the independent t test because it compares two independent groups, academic stressors and environmental stressors. The results are presented below in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of independent t test of Academic Stressors and Environmental Stressors

Stressor	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig
Academic Stressor	100	56.74	12.48	98	.44	.00

Environmental Stressor	100	37.53	9.10			
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The results from table1 indicate that there is significant difference between academic stressors and environmental stressors ($t= 0.44, p=.000, p < 0.05$). The mean and standard deviation of academic stressors being 56.74 and 12.48 respectively and environmental stressors ($M= 37.53, SD= 9.10$). This means that the hypothesis that students will encounter more academic stressors than environmental stressors has been supported by the results obtained.

The second hypothesis stated that students would encounter more stressors at the beginning of the semester than at the middle and end of semester. This was analyzed using One-Way ANOVA, because there is one independent variable (period of semester) with three levels (beginning, middle and end). This is shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the time of semester of ANOVA results

Time of semester	N	Means	S.D	df	F	Sig
Beginning of semester	33	112.30	23.84	2,96	.076	.93
Middle of semester	34	110.88	25.62			
End of semester	33	110.88	16.75			

The results from Table 2 above indicate that there is no significant difference between stressors encountered at the beginning, middle and end of the semester [$F=0.076, p=0.93 > 0.05$], with the corresponding means and standard deviations of the beginning of the semester ($M=112.30, SD=23.84$), at the middle of the semester ($M=110.88, SD=25.62$) and end of the semester ($M=110.88, SD=16.75$). This result implies that the hypothesis has not been confirmed by the results obtained.

The third hypothesis states that there would be no significant difference between the level of students in the university and the number of stressors encountered. The One-way ANOVA was used to analyze the above hypothesis because it is comparing the stressors of the levels of study which range from 1-6. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Summary table of One-Way ANOVA of Stressors on the various levels

Level	N	Mean	S.D	df	F	Sig
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100	19	37.58	5.59	4,95	.147	.964
200	12	38.17	8.72			
300	17	36.53	9.38			
400	7	35.86	6.15			
600	45	37.98	10.79			
Total	100	37.53	9.11			

The results obtained in table 4 above showed that there is no significant difference between the level of education and number stressors encountered by the students. [$F = .147, p = 0.964 > 0.05$], with the corresponding means and standard deviations of Level 100 ($M = 37.58, SD = 5.59$), Level 200 ($M = 38.17, SD = 8.72$), Level 300 ($M = 36.53, SD = 9.38$), Level 400 ($M = 35.86, SD = 6.15$) and Level 600 ($M = 37.98, SD = 10.79$). The hypothesis was therefore supported by the results obtained.

The fourth hypothesis tested was that non-resident students are likely to face more stressors than resident students. The independent t test was used to determine the difference in the number of stressors encountered between non-resident students and resident students. The independent t test was used because it measures the difference in terms of number of stressors between two independent groups, resident and non-resident students. This is summarized in table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of Independent t Test of Stressors Encountered By Resident and Non-Resident Students.

Residential Status	N	Means	SD	df	t	Sig.
Residential	56	110.57	22.52	97	0.24	0.40
Nonresidential	43	111.67	22.32			

The results in table 4 indicate that there is no significant difference between the numbers of stressors encountered by resident and non-resident students. ($t = 0.24, p = 0.40, p > 0.05$). The mean and standard deviation of residential students ($M = 110.57, SD = 22.52$) and non-residential students ($M = 111.67, SD = 22.32$). It is therefore concluded that hypothesis 4 which states that non-resident students are likely to face more stressors than resident students, is not supported by the results obtained.

The fifth hypothesis stated that female students are likely to face more stressors than male students.

The independent *t* test was used to compute the difference in number of stressors encountered by male and female students. The independent *t* test measures the difference in performance between two independent groups, males and females. Table 5 below summarizes the results obtained.

Table 5: Summary of Independent *t* Test of Male And Female Students on the Number of Stressors Encountered

Gender	N	Means	S.D	df	<i>t</i>	Sig
Males	50	112.18	20.24	98	0.48	0.636
Females	50	110.06	24.22			

Observing from table 5 above, it can be seen there was no significant difference between male and female students on the number of stressors encountered ($t= 0.48, p= 0.636, p > 0.05$). The mean and standard deviation of males ($M=112.18, SD = 110.06$) and females was ($M=110.06, SD=24.22$). This therefore implies that the hypothesis that female students are likely to face more stressors than their male counterparts, has not been confirmed by the results obtained.

The last hypothesis states that married students will encounter more stressors than the unmarried ones. The independent *t* test was used to test the hypothesis because two independent groups were compared (married and unmarried students) with regards to their stress levels. The results are shown below.

Table 6: Summary table of independent *t* test of married and unmarried students stressors

Marital status	N	Mean	S.D	df	<i>t</i>	sig
Married	28	119.11	19.58	98	2.29	0.012
Unmarried	72	108.01				

From table 6 above the results showed significant difference between married ($M=119.11, SD=19.58$) and unmarried students ($M=108.01, SD= 22.54$) on the number of stressors they encounter ($t=2.29, p= 0.012, p < 0.05$). Therefore the hypothesis which states that married students will encounter more stressors than unmarried students has been supported by the results obtained.

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The study was aimed at investigating the types of stressors that are most prevalent among university of Ghana, Legon students. In addition, it wanted to find out the groups of students that encounter these

stressors most, as well as determine the time of the semester that students encounter these stressors the most. Basically descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data collected.

The first aim was to find out the most prevalent stressors among students. Academic stressors were the most prevalent stressors that university of Ghana students encounter. The group of students that encounter stressors the most was the same for all students irrespective of their level, gender, or whether they are resident or non-resident. However it was found out that married students encountered more stressors than unmarried students. The time of the semester that students encounter these stressors the most was the same throughout the semester; from the beginning of semester, through the middle to the end of the semester.

The main findings were that; academic work proved to be the major source of stress for university of Ghana students, while relationship or social stressors were the least type of stressor encountered by students. In addition, all students encounter equal numbers of stressors, except for married students who encounter more stressors than unmarried students. Lastly, the results obtained showed that students encounter equal number of stressors irrespective of the time of the semester they are in.

These findings are in agreement with the literature review. First of all, the finding that academic stressors are the most prevalent stressors among university of Ghana students, is consistent with the research by Ratana (2003) who conducted a study on 686 medical students in the Faculty of Medicine; Ramathibodi Hospital, Thailand and found out that academic problems were found to be a major cause of stress among all students. Furthermore, it is consistent with studies by Evans and Fitzgibbon (1992), and Kohn & Frazer (1986), who say that a frequently reported source of stress that most undergraduate students experience is receiving a lower grade than they expected (grade pressure). Also, this finding agree with the research of Clark and Rieker (1986), as well as that of Felsten and Wilcox (1992), who found out that academic stress pervades the life of students, and tends to impact adversely their mental and physical health, and their ability to perform schoolwork effectively.

Nevertheless, the finding that all students are equal with regards to the number of stressors encountered by students, irrespective of their level, gender, or their residential status, is not consistent with the literature review: particularly the study by D'Zurilla and Sheedy (1991), who found out that freshmen were a group among college students, particularly prone to stress. Also, it is not consistent with the findings of Towbes and Cohen (1996), who created the College Chronic Life Stress Survey in which they focused on the frequency of chronic stress in the lives of college students. They evaluated these stressors in relation to how many times a student had to deal with them on a weekly basis. They found that in regard to chronic stress, first-year students scored higher than other students. Also the American Psychological Association's release of the 2010 Stress in America Survey, showed that women were more likely than men to report a great deal of stress.

This disagreement could be due to the reason that Ghanaian students, unlike their counterparts in the Western World, take no entrance exams before they enter into the University of Ghana. Hence, there is not much difficulty in gaining admission into the University of Ghana and as a result, students have fewer problems with transition to university, as compared to those in the West who have to write TOFFEL, SATT and others before they can get admitted into the university to read a course of their choice. In addition, it could be that different groups of students have the things that stress them; while level 100 students may encounter less academic stressors, there may be another type of stressor that they face most. This may be so for the level 200, 300, 400, and 600, who may face more academic

stressors, and less relationship or environmental stressors, as well as for male and female students. Hence the number of stressors encountered by each group would balance each other. This could account for the equal number of stressors encountered by all students.

Limitations of the Study

The study had two main limitations and the main one was that a limited sample size of 100 out of thirty-two thousand was used which limits generalization. The extent of this research was also limited in the areas of financing and time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: Stress is a facet of life which human being cannot avoid Selye (1956), it is therefore important to help students to manage it. It is therefore suggested the source of stress identified as the most prevalence among students (academic stressor), should be discussed with incoming freshmen. Furthermore, the Counseling and Placement Centre (CPC) in Legon should incorporate more stress management training in their programmes. This should include time management, relaxation and other ways of coping with stress, which should be organized once every semester. These programmes should be highly publicized so that all students can participate in them as the stressors are encountered by all students.

In addition, new sporting activities should be added to existing ones to bring enable all students get involved in sports. Gym centre should be constructed in each hall, so that students can get access to them. This will go a long way to reduce stress in student.

Finally, the Academic Affairs Directorate in consultation with the Heads of Departments should restructure the syllabi to reduce students' workload.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the limitations identified, the following areas should be considered by future researchers:

1. A more diverse sample should be used, which in students from different universities, so that results can be generalized.
2. Graduate and undergraduate students, as well as student in the sciences and those in the humanities should be compared on the number of stressors encountered and the effects of the stress on the students.

Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to find out the types and incidence of stressors among University of Ghana, Legon, students. One hundred students were randomly chosen to participate in the study. They were from the five traditional halls and five private hostels of residence on Legon Campus. A stratified random sampling technique was used in which ten (10) students were selected from a block in each of the halls and hostels of residence.

A standardized questionnaire adapted from Burge (2009), made up of forty-seven items was used to

collect data. The main findings were that all students encounter equal numbers of stressors irrespective of their gender, level of education, and residential status. It was also found out that married students encounter more stressors than unmarried students and they encounter equal numbers of stressors throughout the semester. Finally, academic stressors were the most encountered stressor encountered by the students in the sample. It is recommended that programs should be organized by the counseling and placement center on stress management for all students especially freshmen's orientation.

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