



## **Stress and coping skills among university students: A preliminary research on ethnicity**

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to evaluate stress level and identify coping skills among students of Universiti Malaysia Sabah according to their ethnicity. A total of 252 subjects were involved in this research which comprised 124 females and 129 males. This study used the survey method by administering Mental Health Index (MHI) and Adolescent Coping Scale questionnaires to measure mental health and coping skill among students. The result from this research shows that ethnic Chinese had higher stress level as compared to students of other ethnic groups. Analysis on mean scores of Coping Scale show that students who were Sarawak Natives had higher mean scores compared to other ethnic groups.

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### 1. Introduction

Stress or pressure is a phenomenon experienced by every individual. An infant expresses stress by crying after wetting his diaper, while an adult may present with depressed mood, uneasiness, sweating and other symptoms when he is in distress. Stress or pressure is an issue that has drawn the attention of many researchers. Stress is one of the most widely researched topics in psychology with about 40,000 researches that have been conducted until currently (Carlyle & Woods, 2004). The concept of stress was initiated by Hans Seyle (Cox, 1981). Seyle defined stress as the body's reaction towards demands which involves physiological responses known as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS).

Stress among students has been associated with their workload and environment. D'Zurilla and Sheedy (1991) reported that conditions where students lack stress or are overly stressed, can negatively affect their learning process. Apart from that, Case (1985) found that an educator who is fierce and uses physical punishment frequently can be a source of stress to students. Along the same line, Carlson (1999) viewed stress as a manifestation of psycho physiological reaction towards the demands of excessive workload. Students of a higher-learning institution are expected to perform with excellence to ensure their competency once they complete their studies and along the way, they may encounter difficulties and problems. Some students, unlike others, would be able to cope and manage through, depending on the individual. The intensity of stress experienced by an individual may be affected by the individual's ability to effectively manage the stressful situation or incident (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991).

A research by Archer and Lammin (1985) found that factors including examination, competing for a good grade, time constraints, lecturer and environment of the lecture halls are the main contributors to academic-related stress. As for personal-related stress, the main contributing factors are intimate relationship, parental conflicts, financial problems and interpersonal conflicts with friends. Suriani and Suriani (2005), in their research involving 94 students of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Indris, found stress due to academic, lecturer, personal and university factors are experienced by 70 to 91 percent of the students, while stress in relation to co-curriculum activities, friends, family and parents is experienced by less than 60 to 70 percent of the students.

Several researches have shown significant associations between stress and the sources of stress (Abouserie, 1994; Diane & Misty, 1997; Bojuwoye, 2002; Mahadir, Shazli Ezzat, Normah & Ponnusamy, 2004; Najib, Che Su, Zarina & Suhanim, 2005; Najeemah, 2005). Among others is a research by Najib, Che Su, Zarina and Suhanim (2005) that found a significant association between workload and academic stress experienced by students. This means, as more workload is placed on a student, the higher the stress that is experienced by the student. While, another study by Najeemah (2005) found that as students experience higher stress level, their examination result would deteriorate further. Based on this elaboration, it can be concluded that sources of stress are directly associated to stress among students.

Research by De Anda etc., (2000) reported that white students reported experiencing personal and school-related stressors more often than African American or Latino students. Latino students experienced family stressors more often than their cohorts in other ethnic groups. A sample of 333 tenth and eleventh grade students in the Los Angeles area were surveyed to determine the degree of stress experienced, the stressors encountered most frequently, and the frequency with which specific coping strategies were employed along with their perceived effectiveness. Gender and ethnic differences were found with respect to specific adaptive coping strategies.

Malaysia in general is known for its diversity in races including ethnicity specifically in the state of Sabah. There are three major races in Malaysia which are Malay, Chinese and Indian. The native community who live in Sabah and Sarawak are comprised of several ethnicities including Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Iranun and Malay-Brunei in Sabah, while in Sarawak, ethnic groups include Iban, Melanau, Dayak and Sinos. Universiti Malaysia Sabah is one of the universities in Malaysia that have several ethnic groups especially from Sabah and Sarawak. Each student has a difference level of stress because they come from a different background.

### **Research Problem**

Stress is a condition experienced by everyone. However, the level of stress experienced by an individual differs from others as it depends on the individual's ability to cope with their problems or difficulties. Certain individuals may be able to deal with problems in a calm manner while others may panic and become anxious. Due to these differences, the consequences also differ and hence it is not a surprise to find discrepancies of Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) among students. Students who take up stress positively would regard their problems as challenges. On the other hand, students who take up stress negatively would regard their problems as additional burdens, rendering them to become demotivated in their studies.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this research are :

1. To obtain the student's background profile
2. To assess stress level among students according to ethnic groups
3. To identify coping skills of students according to ethnic groups

## **2. Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study was conducted by questionnaire.

### ***Subjects***

A total number of 252 students from School of Psychology and Social work of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) were involved as the subjects of this study and they were chosen by random sampling. From the total number of subjects involved, 124 (49.2%) were females and 129 (51.2%) were males.

### ***Research Tools***

#### **Section A: Mental Health Index (MHI)**

The Mental Health Index (MHI) consists of 10 items using the Likert scale with 4 options of response to choose from: (1) never, (2) sometimes, (3) usually, and (4) always. The total number of score reflects stress experienced by the respondent, whereby higher scores reflect higher stress level and lower scores reflect lower stress level.

#### **Section B: Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS)**

The Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS) consists of 18 items using the Likert scale with 5 options of response to choose from: (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) occasionally, (4) frequently, and (5) very frequently. The total number of scores reflects the subject's coping skill, whereby higher scores reflect better coping skills and vice versa.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15.0. Descriptive analysis was done to obtain the mean, percentage, frequency and standard deviation of the subjects' demographic and background profiles. Inferential analysis which is one-way ANOVA was used to analyze differences between stress and coping skills of the subjects according to ethnic groups.

## **3. Research Findings**

### **Subjects' Profile**

Distribution of respondents among students based on genders, ethnic groups and religions are as stated in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on demographic factors

Demographic Data (n = 248)	Frequency	Percentage
1. Gender		
a) Female	127	51.2
b) Male	121	48.8
2. Ethnic group		
a) Malay	112	45.2
b) Chinese	47	19
c) Indian	10	4.0
d) Sabah Natives	65	26.2
e) Sarawak Natives	14	5.6
3. Religion		
a) Islam	142	57.3
b) Buddhism	36	14.5
c) Hinduism	10	4.0
d) Christianity	60	24.2

As shown in Table 1, a total of 248 students was involved in this research. The majority of the respondents were Malays (45.2%), Sabah Natives (26.2%) and Chinese (19%). Respondents were mostly Muslims (57.3), followed by Christians (24.2%), Buddhist (14.5%) and Hindus (4%).

### ***Outcome of Inferential Analysis***

#### **Stress Level According to Ethnic Groups**

Findings of analysis on stress level according to ethnic groups showed that students of the Chinese ethnicity had higher stress level as compared to students of other ethnicities. This was followed by the Malays, Sabah Natives, Sarawak Natives and Indians. However no significant differences were found between the stress levels of each ethnic group. Detailed results are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Stress level according to ethnic groups

Ethnic	N	Mean	STD
Malay	112	21.4643	3.55885
Chinese	47	21.5957	3.39992
Indian	10	18.3000	3.97352
Sabah Natives	65	21.1077	3.51391
Sarawak Natives	14	20.6429	3.73357

Based on one-way ANOVA, there were no significant difference between stress levels of each ethnic group,  $F(4,243) = 1.64, k > .05$ .

#### **Coping Skills According to Ethnic Groups**

Analysis on mean scores of coping skills according to ethnic groups found that students who were Sarawak Natives had higher mean score of coping skills as compared the other ethnic groups. This was followed Sabah Natives, Malay, Chinese and Indian. Significant differences in mean scores of coping skills were found between the Indians and three other ethnic groups Malay, Sabah Natives and Sarawak Natives. Results of analysis are as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Coping skills according to ethnic groups**

Ethnic	N	Mean	STD
Malay	112	58.3839	7.87429
Chinese	47	55.5745	8.47694
Indian	10	50.2000	5.07280
Sabah Natives	65	59.3231	7.06246
Sarawak Natives	14	60.0714	7.11947

Result of one-way ANOVA showed significant differences on the mean score of coping skills between ethnic groups,  $F(4,243) = 4.56$ ,  $k < .05$ . Post Hoc Sheffe analysis, showed coping skills of students from the Malay ethnicity (Mean = 58.4, S.D. = 7.87) was significantly higher than students of the Indian ethnicity (Mean = 50.2, S.D. = 5.07). Significant differences were also found between coping skills of students of the Indian ethnicity (Mean = 50.2, S.P = 5.07) which was significantly lower than coping skills of students of Sabah Natives (Mean = 59.3, S.D. = 7.06) and Sarawak Natives (Mean = 60.1, S.D. = 7.12).

#### 4. Discussion

##### Distribution of Respondents

Based on research findings, the distribution of respondents based on ethnicity was not equally balanced but is still considered within normality. This is because the proportionate of this distribution is equivalent to the proportionate of the Malaysian population. Based on the distribution of the Malaysian population, Malays are majority followed by Chinese and Indian. As for Sabah and Sarawak the population is further categorized into ethnicity.

##### Stress Level According to Ethnic Groups

Analysis on the level of stress based on ethnicity showed that students of the Chinese ethnicity had higher mean stress level as compared to the other ethnic groups. This is followed by the Malays, Sabah Natives, Sarawak Natives and Indians. As stated by Carlson (1999), stress is an individual's manifestation of psycho physiological reaction towards the demands of an excessive workload. These students of higher learning institutions, are obligated to perform well academically to ensure excellent performance; hence they endure stress due to their workload among other factors. As found by Archer and Lammin (1985), factors that contribute to academic-related stress include examination, competing for a good grade, time constraints, lecturer and environment of the lecture halls. Kohn and Frazer (1986) in (Ferlis, Rosnah and BalanrathaKrishan, 2009) stated that university students are often stressed out in their daily lives due to sources such as workload assigned by lecturers, stressful college environment, conflicts and competition in academic performance. High mean of stress level of Chinese ethnic group maybe because of their need to achieve. Most of the highest CGPA scores are student's of the Chinese ethnicity.

As a conclusion from the above analysis, Chinese students are deemed to endure with higher stress level as compared to others due to their stronger commitment to their studies in order to obtain a higher CGPA. This would include completing all assignments assigned by their lecturers, taking examinations and others.

##### Coping Skills According to Ethnic Groups

Analysis on the coping skill according to the students' ethnicity found that students of Sarawak Natives were found to have higher coping skills as compared to others. This is followed by Sabah Natives, Malays, Chinese and Indians. Significant differences were found between mean scores of coping skills of the Indians as compared to three other ethnic groups which were the Malays, Sabah Natives and Sarawak Natives. Survey shows that students of Sarawak native are always in their minority group. This factor can affect their value as a group. Their relationship is close and more effective. A minority group consists of members who share one or more characteristics. Minority groups are often stigmatized and include racial/ethnic minorities. Established

membership in the minority group enables the individual to disregard the opinions of outsiders as non-significant and only incorporate the positive appraisals of significant others within one's own group.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the overall finding of this study, it was found that students of Chinese ethnicity has higher stress level as compared to the other ethnic groups, although no significant differences were found. As for the usage of coping skills, this study has shown that there is a significant difference between students of Indian ethnicity and three other ethnic groups which are Malays, Sabah Natives and Sarawak Natives. Besides that, students of Sarawak native have higher coping skills as compare to others.

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