PREVALENCE OF STRESS AMONG STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA SARAWAK (UNIMAS): A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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Statement of Originality

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled "Prevalence of Stress among Students in University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS): A Cross-cultural Study" is to the best of the author's knowledge that of the author except where due reference is made.

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ABSTRACT

PREVALENCE OF STRESS AMONG STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA SARAWAK (UNIMAS): A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

Lee Ming Ming

This study aims to identify the prevalence of stress among the first year students in University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). One hundred sixty first year students (Malay = 40, Chinese = 40, Indian = 40, and Others = 40) involved in this study. To identify the relationship between the level of stress and the contributing factors (academic workload, study environment, individual lifestyle and finance problems) among the first year students, a set of questionnaires were given to each of the respondent. The questionnaires were divided into three sections, demographic sections, student-life stress inventory, and contributing factors toward experienced of stress. Descriptive statistic were used to measure the demographic background of the respondent. Inferential statistics were used to identify the relationships between demographic variables and four contributing factors toward the level of stress. Result shows that there is no significant difference between races and level of stress among the students. However, there are significant relationship between the four contributing factors and the level of stress among the students. It indicates that academic workload, study environment, individual lifestyle and financial problems experienced by first year students are among the causes toward the moderate level of stress. The significance of this study, limitations, as well as directions for future research are discussed.
ABSTRAK

KELAZIMAN TEKANAN DI KALANGAN PELAJAR UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK (UNIMAS): SATU KAJIAN SILANG BUDAYA

Lee Ming Ming

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti kelaziman tekanan di kalangan pelajar tahun satu Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Seramai 160 pelajar tahun satu (Malayu = 40, Cina = 40, India = 40, dan Lain-lain = 40) yang terdiri daripada kaum yang berlainan dan mempunyai cara kehidupan yang berbeza akan terlibat dalam kajian ini. Untuk mengenal pasti hubungan antara tahap tekanan dengan faktor-faktor penyumbang (tugas akademik, persekitaran pelajaran, hubungan individual dan masalah kewangan) dalam mengalami masalah tekanan bagi pelajar tahun satu, borang soal selidik akan diedarkan kepada setiap orang responden. Borang soal selidik tersebut mengandungi tiga bahagian iaitu bahagian demografi, ujian tekanan dan faktor-faktor penyumbang dalam mengalami masalah tekanan. Kaedah statistik deskriptif digunakan untuk mengukur taburan responden berdasarkan demografi seperti bangsa, jantina, fakulti dan program pengajian. Kaedah statistik inferensi pula akan digunakan untuk melihat perhubungan di antara ciri-ciri demografi mereka dengan tekanan. Hasil daripada kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa tiada perbezaan di antara bangsa dengan tahap tekanan yang dialami oleh pelajar. Walau bagaimanapun, keputusan pengujian hypothesis menggunakan korelasi Pearson menunjukkan bahawa apabila pelajjar mengalami masalah dalam tugas akademik, persekitaran pelajaran, hubungan individual dan masalah kewangan, tahap tekanan secara langsung juga akan meningkat. Beberapa kepentingan kajian batasan-batasan kajian dan cadangan untuk kajian akan datang telah dibincangkan di dalam kajian ini.
1.0 Introduction

People all face different challenges and obstacles almost everyday, and sometimes the pressure is hard to handle. At home, workplace, school, even when interacting with others, out of the ordinary demands impose on our minds and bodies. When people feel overwhelmed or unsure how to meet the demands placed on them, they would experienced stress.

Stress affects almost all of us at some point in our lives. According to Sayiner (2006), stress is not affected individuals in working places, but it is also common in educational environments experienced by students. Therefore, every one of us is actually facing stress problems from time to time.
The impacts of stress on college students are similar with other general population. Uncontrolled stress can lead to negative impacts to various aspects. Stress not only can cause psychological problems but can also lead to physical illnesses ranging from the common cold to heart attacks. Emery and Oltmanns (2000) defined stress as, “challenging events that requires physiological, cognitive, or behavioral adaptation” (p. 217).

In other words, people feel stress when they are required to react out of their expectations. However, if the stress level is under the right conditions, it can give advantages especially in promoting toughness when dealing with the problems they face during by giving them the push they need, motivating them to do their best and to stay focus and alert. Nevertheless, when the life’s demands exceed their ability to cope, stress becomes a threat to both their physical and emotional well-being.

Basically, the potential causes of stress are numerous and highly depend on the individual. What an individual consider stressful depends on many factors, including their personality, general outlook on life, problem-solving abilities, and social support system. Something that is stressful to a person may not upset someone else, or others may even enjoy it. Therefore, it is crucial to study stress among our college’s students since they might experience different factors that influence the level of their stress.

1.1 Background of the Study

A disturbing trend in college students’ health is reported in which the level of stress was found to be increased nationwide (Sax, 1997 as cited in The Free Library, 2000). College students today feel pressure and stress coming at them from all different levels (Methods of Healing, 2009). It cannot be denied that students have encountered several educational stresses, as they need to do lot of homework and studying hard to get excellent results.
According to Hamza Mohammad Abdulghani (2008), high levels of stress may have a negative effect on mastery of the academic curriculum that can lead to mental distress. It might cause negative impact on cognitive functioning and learning. In fact, stress is potentially very destructive and can deprive people of physical and mental health, and at times even of life itself (Bryce, 2001). Distress refers to the stress that brings negative effects to an individual, which not only affects health, but also affects academic achievement at different time points during the study period.

Many studies were conducted investigating the problem of stress among university students (Hamza Mohammad Abdulghani, 2008; Catharina & Gadzella, 2006; Li Ming Hui, 2008). However, in Malaysia, there are still limited studies investigating the level of stress among university students. As college years were of utmost importance for the development of a positive identity and learn to become more introspective and independent, study about the stress level among college students is important to understand various contributing factors.

Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the prevalence of self-perceived stress among undergraduate students in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and the contributing factors.

1.2 Statement of Problems

Assessment of stress levels in college students is a topic often examined by researchers. 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 describe some factors that may lead to stress, such as interpersonal conflicts, self-esteem problems, and money problems. They found that in regard to chronic stress, first-year students scored higher than other students.
Another study was carried out by Beck (1997), findings from the questionnaire revealed that nursing students experienced greater perceive levels of stress than students pharmacy, medicine and social work students (as cited in Ganzales et al., 2008). As the researcher only studied within these categories of students, then, another type of research should be conducted in order to determine the level of stress among the University students who studied in different programs.

Many researchers had proved that women experienced more stressful conditions than did the men in their research (Gadzella, 1994; Gadzella & Guthrie, 1993; Gadzella, Fullwood & Ginter, 1991; Gadzella & Baloglu, 2001). Riley (2000) as cited in Gadzella et al (2006), in a Report for National College Week had indicated that women represented 57 percent of the enrollees in colleges and universities. Due to this reason, the percentage of female students facing the problems of stress was higher than the male students did. In this study, the number of students based on their gender was equal. It is hoped that the fact is that the higher percentage of female students’ enrollment would not affect the outcome of the study.

On the other hand, Webster’s New World College Dictionary (1996) as cited in Greenberg (2002) defines minority as a racial, religious, or ethnic group smaller than and differing from the larger and controlling group in the community. It had been stated that minorities probably elsewhere in the world, are disadvantaged in significant ways that result in a great deal of stress (Greenberg, 2002). As Indian students belong to the minority group in UNIMAS, it was predicted their stress level are higher than other students.

From the research done by Beck (1997) as cited in Li Ming Hui (2008), the number one contributor of stress among the college students is the amount of class material presented, followed by the long hours studying and examination or grades. In other words, it means that academic workload indirectly had become one of the factors in contributing toward the stress level among the college
students. As for this reason, in this current study, one of the contributing factors that are going to be investigated is the academic workload in relation with the stress level experienced by the students.

Although study about the stress level among college students has received some empirical attention, no work has specifically examined a cross-cultural study about the stress level among college students. In addition, Greenberg (2002) mentioned that by entering a new culture, it often requires a great deal of adaptation, which will often result in stress. From this statement, first year student who just came to university might faced lots of problems as they need to adapt with the new environment as it was totally different from their previous school’s level.

In conclusion, the primary objective of this research is to extend the literature in the area of stress by specifically examining the prevalence of stress among the first year students in UNIMAS who come from different ethnic background as well as the contributing factors towards their level of stress. Some contributing factors of stress among college students included in this study are academic workload, study environment, individual relationship and financial problems.

1.3 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the prevalence of stress among the students in UNIMAS that specifically focus on different ethnic background.

1. To find out the prevalence of stress among UNIMAS students in the contexts of cross-cultural.
2. To study the means of stress score in different demographic characteristics (gender, races, and faculty) among students in UNIMAS.

3. To determine the relationship between the stress score and various contributing factors (academic workload, study environment, individual relationship, and financial problems) among students in UNIMAS.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of stress among UNIMAS first year students?

2. What is the mean difference of the stress score in various demographic factors (gender, races, faculty, program and college) and among UNIMAS students?

3. What is the relationship between the stress score and various contributing factors (academic performance, study environment, individual relationship, and financial problems) among UNIMAS students?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were tested in this study:

Hypothesis Null (Ho1) : There is no significant difference between the means of stress score and gender.
Hypothesis Null 2 (Ho2) : There is no significant difference between the means of stress score and races.

Hypothesis Null 3 (Ho3) : There is no significant difference between the means of stress score among students from different faculties.

Hypothesis Null 4 (Ho4) : There is no significant relationship between stress score and the academic workload.

Hypothesis Null 5 (Ho5) : There is no significant relationship between stress score and the study environment.

Hypothesis Null 6 (Ho6) : There is no significant relationship between the stress score and the individual relationship among UNIMAS students.

Hypothesis Null 7 (Ho7) : There is no significant relationship between the stress score and financial problems.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

This is a quantitative study of the two way relationship between demographic variables and four contributing factors toward the level of stress among the UNIMAS students.
Demographic Characteristics:
- Gender
- Race
- Faculty

Contributing Factors:
1. Academic Workload
2. Study Environment
3. Individual Relationship
4. Financial Problems

The level of stress among the UNIMAS students

This conceptual framework explains the interrelationship among independent and dependent variables which will be considered in this study. The independent variables are demographic variables (gender, race and faculty) and four contributing factors (academic workload, study environment, individual relationship and financial problems) toward the dependent variable which refers to the stress score among the students.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Based on the previous studies investigating stress amongst higher education students in the last 25 years, most of the research focused on subject areas with a strong vocational element such as nursing students, hospitality students and social work students (Robotham, 2008). This study focuses on the
first year students who studied in different eight faculties. This is to explore if students different faculties significantly have different stress score.

A significant number of studies have examined student stress and they indicated that levels of stress are high amongst the higher education student population (Robotham, 2008). It seems that the higher level of stress tend to lower the academic performance among the students.

By understanding the stressors that cause the students feeling of stress during their campus life, it might give an advantage in translating those stressors into an intervention programs that could help students in reducing their stress level. Lecturers and counselor could work together in identified the most appropriate intervention program that suit for the students in coping with the problems that they faced during their campus lives.

This study may offer valuable insights on university students through given an idea to the students where they should concern about their stress level. If they failed to control their level of stress, they might face several difficulties such as perform poorly in their study, physical and mentally being distorted. Consequently, students can prepare earlier in terms of the mentally in coping with their level of stress that should be always in control.

Finally yet importantly, the findings of this research provide new or additional information to those who are involved directly or indirectly in the field of stress. Students, counselors, lecturers and administrators will gain benefit from such research, where the results can be analyzed to maximize the awareness of stress level among the university students. The findings might spark off additional interest among researchers in pursuing matters related to this research.
1.8  **Definition of Term**

1.8.1  **Stress**

i)  **Conceptual:**

According to Lazarus & Lazarus (1994), stress came to be defined as environmental demands on a biological, social, or psychological system, which is analogous to the load that a bridge might carry. The greater the imbalance between the environmental demands and the person's resources, the higher the stress will be. However, when the person's resources exceed the environmental load, stress will be low or absent.

ii)  **Operational:**

In this study, stress refer to the feelings which are upset, anxiety, and angry because of certain aspects such as academic workload, study environment, individual relationship, or financial problems that mainly experienced by the students as measured by Student-Life Stress Inventory.

1.9  **Conclusion**

This chapter explains the background of the study, research problem, objectives of the study, hypothesis, research questions, implications of the study, limitations of the study, as well as the definition of terms in order to give a clear understanding to the society about this current study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the related literature that informs about this study. It begins with a brief discussion on the concept of stress. This is followed by the discussion on the theory that are related to stress, model of stress, types of stress, stress classification, and factors that cause stress among the students.
2.1 The Concept of Stress

Today, stress is viewed by professionals from different sectors as modern society’s illness. What is stress? In fact, Hans Selye (1952) while searching for female hormones first defines stress. Before Selye, the term “stress” was used to describe a mental strain or unwelcome happening (Sayiner, 2006).

Stress has generally been viewed as a set of neurological and physiological reactions that serves as an adaptive function. Traditionally, stress research has been oriented toward studies involving the body’s reaction to stress and the cognitive processes that influence the perception of stress. However, social perspectives of the stress response have noted that different people experiencing similar life conditions are not necessarily affected in the same manner. Research into the societal and cultural influences of stress may make it necessary to re-examine how stress is defined and studied (Ingrid, 1997).

However, too many researchers had studied about stress. Different experts define the stress differently. Some define stress as the stimulus, others as the response, and still others as the whole spectrum of interacting factors (Greenberg, 2002). According to Hans Selye as cited in Greenberg (2002), stress means “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. Robbins (1996) defined stress as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be uncertain and important. It means that an individual experiences stress when he or she wishes to achieve something, which is not easy to get, as there will have certain things that they need to cover before attain what they want.

In general, stress can be defined as a negative emotional experience that accompanied by predictable physiological, cognitive and behavioral changes that are directed either toward altering stressful circumstances or toward accommodating to its effects (Sayiner, 2006). Stress not only takes form in an
individual’s thoughts, but at the same time, it influences in terms of physiology and the behavior that behave during the stressful conditions.

Stress may not only result from the physical threatening conditions but also from misinterpretations or misunderstandings of the information’s coming from outside world (Baltas & Baltas, 2000). For example, having an ineffective communication will tend to get the wrong information that might result in feeling of tension as a result of such information which is not true. This negative feeling eventually result in feeling of stress due to unable in coping with the problem. Stress cannot only be studied in laboratory conditions, as it results in physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms. Therefore, it could also be studied through the distribution of questionnaires or conducting an interviews session.

There are two types of stress, which are eustress and distress. Eustress refers to the stress that is good to an individual after facing it. Robbins (1996) mentioned that although stress is generally discussed in negative side, but it also has the positive value. In fact, adaptive stress level is necessary for a human being to have action in terms of the improvement. However, if we feel stress because of something which is not good such as the death of a loved one, then the situation could be considered as distress.

Based on Greenberg (2002), stress had been defined as the combination of a stressor and stress reactivity. Without both of these components, there will be no stress. Stressor referred to the factors with the potential to cause stress. However, the stress reactivity refers to the fight-or-flight response to the stress. Additionally, Lazarus (Greenberg, 2002) has offered a definition of stress that encompasses a whole spectrum of factors, which consists of stimulus, response, and cognitive appraisal of threat, coping styles, psychological defenses, and social milieu.

The word stress also include references to such things as strains, life difficulties, life problems, the even more ambiguous life situations, and the