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GENDER DIFFERENCE IN COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY IN-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS GOING THROUGH STRESS IN ILORIN, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Coping has been a subject of considerable interest to behavioural scientists who always attempt to predict the behaviours an individual will adopt when confronted with a threatening situation. The choice of coping strategy depends upon the appraisal the individual makes of the situation and their coping resources. This study investigates gender differences in the coping strategies of in-school adolescents in Ilorin, Nigeria. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 600 in-school adolescents from 20 secondary schools in Ilorin, Nigeria. Two research questions were raised and answered while one null hypothesis was formulated and tested. The instrument for data collection was an adapted questionnaire on coping strategies of in-school adolescents. Data analysis was done using t-test statistical method of analyses. The finding revealed there was a significance difference in the coping strategies employed by male and female students. It was recommended among others that effective communication between students and teachers, parents and older adults should be established to maintain cordial relationship.

Keywords: Gender Difference; Coping Strategies; In-school Adolescents; Ilorin

Introduction

Gender difference is increasingly becoming very important when dealing with issues. These include gender differences in coping with stress. Gender is the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioural characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity (Haig, 2004 ; Nobelius, 2004). Stressful life events affects everyone almost on a daily basis. For the in-school adolescents, stressful life events can weigh and impact heavily on their lives as they are faced with stress such as time, financial problems, sleep deprivation, social conflicts, dating and relationship uncertainty (Monteiro, Balogun & Oratile 2014). These stressful

life events most often jeopardise their academic performance and affect their physical and psychological health if a healthy coping strategy is not employed (Monteiro et al).

Stress and In-school Adolescents

Adolescence according to Adegoke (2003) is one of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the life span of man: a time of accelerated growth and change second only to infancy; a time of expanding horizons, self-discovery and emerging independence; a time of metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood when biological, cognitive, moral as well as social development occurs (Thaker & Verma 2014). The period of adolescence according to Thaker and Verma (2014), can be identified as one of the most vulnerable periods of life when the various mental and physical health problems may lead to stress. Lakshini (2009) viewed adolescence period as a period of creative madness for sexual activities. A period of heightened heterosexual awareness often accompanied by extremely high degree of sexual drive which tends to get the adolescent into intense stress (Lakshini, 2009).

Avoiding stress among in-school adolescents like in adults is almost impossible. Adolescents are faced with certain fundamental tasks he must fulfill. These tasks can be referred to as goals or desires or ideas. Just like the adults must confront the tasks of earning a living, providing for his family, or changing jobs when it becomes necessary, the foremost task that confronts the adolescent is growing up. He must have to grow up physically, physiologically, emotionally, socially and psychologically (Lester, 2002). The physical changes of puberty which includes acne, growth and genital maturation enlarged breasts, cracked voice can be a source of misery and stress particularly if they are not prepared for them or are made to feel conscious by peers or parents. Though adolescents go through almost the same type of stressors, the stress response that they show depends on their individual differences or gender or culture. While some will be feeling very worked up, others will be more relaxed. In-school adolescents go through a lot of stress which is capable of destabilizing their wellbeing.

Gender Difference in Stress

The importance of gender influence on stress have in recent studies been recognized. The study of Tamare, Jamicki and Helgeson (2002) identified differences in levels of chronic and daily stressors among male and female. Jang and Williams (2002) also highlighted that stress goes hand in hand with emotional experiences. The emotional regulation of male and female is different as the emotional impact they fell of a situation. The term gender according to Birke (2009) is used to exemplify the attributes that a society or culture constitutes as "masculine" or "feminine". It was further explained that, although a person's sex as male or female stands as a biological fact that is identical in any culture, that specific sex mean in reference to a person's gender role as a woman or man in a society varies cross culturally according to what things are considered to be masculine or feminine. Hawkesworth (2005) further conceived gender as an analytic category within which human think about and organize their social activity. Awosolu and Esugboohungbe (2002) explained that gender are those characteristics of men and women which are socially determined in contrast to those which are biologically determined. It is

everything men and women do and everything expected of them, with the exception of their sexually functions which can change and does change overtime and according to changing and various cultural factors. Matud (2004) reported a significant difference in the stress level between male and female. Females were reported to be more stressed than males when dealing with general life events and changes. This was as a result of the fact that females feel that major life events and changes were less within their control.

Gender Difference and Coping Strategies

In-school adolescents differ in their response to how they withstand, react and most importantly cope while facing the various environmental factors, economic uncertainty and so many other stressful condition (Thaker & Verma, 2014). Monteiro et al states that coping is a dynamic ability to prevent or control stress by applying appropriate methods to manage interpersonal, intrapersonal and environmental demands. Coping was further explained as involving the cognitive and behavioural efforts to overcome or reduce stress-related conflicts and demands. According to Eschenbeck, Kohlmann & Lahous (2007), coping is the problem solving efforts made by an individual when he/she is faced with a demand that is highly taxing. The choice of coping strategy depends upon the appraisals individuals make of the situation in which they find themselves and their own coping resources. There is clear evidence that coping skills are related to self-regulation in young people and self-regulation is a core component of healthy adaptation (Eschenbec, Kohlmann & Lahous, 2007). Coping with stress is a dynamic process because the anxiety and physiological arousal created by stressful situations are highly uncomfortable; the individual is motivated to do something to alleviate the discomfort. The process by which a person attempts to manage stressful demands is called coping and it takes two major forms, one focuses on the problem. The individual evaluates the stressful situation and does something to change or avoid it. The other focuses on the emotional response to the problem, the individual tries to reduce anxiety without dealing directly with the anxiety-producing situation. The former is referred to as focused coping and the latter as emotion focused coping (Folkman & Moskonwitz, 2004).

The apparent increase in psychological and psychosocial problems among in-school adolescents obviously indicates increase in stress among them. Several studies have been carried out on gender differences and in coping strategies among in-school adolescents and other related issues. Matheny, Ashby and Cupp (2005) found a significant difference in coping strategies employed by male and female. Females according to the study use social support and help seeking behaviours to cope with stress. This may be protective factors against the incidence of depression and anxiety disorders. The male on the other hand were more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies such as consuming alcohol or get involved with drug abuse. Eschenbeck, Kohlmann and Lohaus (2007) studied gender differences and coping strategies in children and adolescents. It was found that gender differences in coping strategies could be more related to the different types of stressful conditions experienced by boys and girls. Furthermore, Gembeck and Skinner (2008) discovered that adolescent girls most often use emotion – focused and remainative coping styles whereas boys used problem focused and

Gender Difference in Coping Strategies Employed by In-School Adolescents

distractive coping styles. This findings could be the reason why girls are associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms whereas the boys are associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms. Other findings revealed that adolescent boys are more likely to employ more negative coping strategies and direct problem solving distraction, avoidance or disengaging strategies while girls tend to seek social support in order to cope with their stressful conditions (Digiuseppe and Fioh, 2006 ; Lawrence, Ashford and Dent, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate gender differences in the coping strategies of in-school adolescents going through stress in Ilorin, Nigeria. In line with the purpose of this study, two research questions were raised;

1. What are the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents going through stress in Ilorin, Nigeria?
2. Are there differences in the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents going through stress on the basis of gender?

One null hypothesis was tested;

1. There is no significant difference on the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents going through stress on the basis of gender.

Methodology

A descriptive survey method was adopted for this study. The population for this study consisted of all in-school adolescents in both public and private senior secondary schools in Ilorin Metropolis. Proportionate sampling technique was used to select 10% each of public and private senior secondary schools. A total of 20 senior secondary schools (11 public and 9 private) were randomly selected. Also simple random sampling technique was used to select 30 students from each school. The instrument that was used for this study was a self-assessed questionnaire adapted from Joda (2008) titled Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies. The questionnaire was divided into two sections (A and B). Section A sought information on the respondents' age, gender, school type, class and family. Section B consists of information on coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents going through stress. The statements were responded to with Very True of Me (VTM), Fairly True of Me (FTM) and Not True of Me (NTM) response format. Experts in the field of Educational Psychology, Measurement and Evaluation and Counselor Education subjected the instrument to both face and content validity. To establish the reliability of the instrument, an equivalent sample was tested using a test-retest method with a time interval of two weeks. A reliability coefficient of 0.87 was obtained. The instrument was therefore adjudged to be suitable enough for the study. A letter of introduction was taken to the selected schools for the principals' approvals and also, the respondents gave their consent in participating in this study. The researchers personally administered the questionnaire with the help of three research assistants. The questionnaires were collected by the researchers after they had been filled. Data collected for the study were analyzed using percentage to answer research questions while t-test was used to test research hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: *What are the possible strategies employed by in-school adolescents in coping with stress in Ilorin, Nigeria?*

Table 1: Mean Ranking Order Analysis of Stress Coping Strategies employed by In-school Adolescents.

COPING STRATEGIES			
S/N	One cope with stress by:	Mean	Ranking
1	Exercising regularly	2.01	5 th
2	Increase intake of coffee	1.43	8 th
3	Taking illegal drugs or alcohol	1.15	10 th
4	Becoming more aggressive	1.44	7 th
5	Talking to my parents or other adults about the problem	2.26	4 th
6	Talking to my friend about the problem	2.44	1 st
7	Avoiding those things that can cause stress	2.34	3 rd
8	Withdrawing to myself	1.82	6 th
9	Staying away from home	1.25	9 th
10	Staying away from school	1.13	11 th
11	Eating regularly	2.44	1 st

Table 5 indicates that 600 respondents participated in this study. The major possible strategies employed by in-school adolescents in coping with stress in Ilorin, Nigeria was that Talking to my friend about the problem and Eating regularly which has a mean score of 2.44 (1st), while Talking to my parents or other adults about the problem with a mean score of 2.26 comes 4th, Exercising regularly which has a mean score of 2.01 was (5th). Other statements have mean score below the benchmark of 2.0.

Research Hypothesis 1: *There is no significant differences in the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents on the basis of gender.*

Table 2: Details of t-test analysis of the differences in the Coping Strategies employed by In-school Adolescents on the Basis of Gender.

Gender	No	Mean	SD	DF	Calculated t-value	Critical t-value
Male	278	1.43	0.44	598	14.54	1.96
Female	322	2.01	0.52			

Significant $p < 0.05$

Table 2 shows that the calculated t-value of 14.535 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that; there is no significant difference in the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents on the basis of gender is rejected at the 0.05 level of significance when degree of freedom (df) is 598. Thus, there was significant difference in the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents on the basis of gender.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of this study revealed that 50% of in-school adolescents going through stress will cope by talking to their parents or other adults about the problem, while 57% of them would prefer to talk to their friends about the problem. However 62% of the in-school adolescents would rather avoid the things that can cause them stress and 62% of them would result to eating regularly in order to cope with the stressful situation.

Hypothesis one shows a significant difference in the coping strategies employed by in-school adolescents on the basis of gender. This is true to the fact that male adolescents in secondary schools are more likely to result to negative coping strategies. In the cause of coping with stress, male adolescents are more likely to get involved with substance abuse or drink which can result in some form of physical illness or poor academic performance (Andre-Pertersson, Hedbled, Jamzon & Oslergen, 2006). Adoption of negative coping style by male adolescents also result to antisocial and aggressive behaviours and eventually dropping out of school. On the other hand, adolescent girls would rather employ the positive coping strategies. Several studies have highlighted the greater tendency among girls to seek and establish relationships and friendships with their peers as well as social support when coping with stress, like that of Rose and Rudolph (2006), Eisenberg, Fabes and Cuthrie (1997) and Uyanne (2010), highlighted that girls have greater tendency to establish relationships and friendships with their peers in search of social support and in a way to cope with stressful situations by discussing their problem with their friends or other older adults.

The studies of Rose and Rudolph (2006); Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner (2008); Ziliuseppe and Froh (2008) all discovered that adolescent girls tend to seek social support which is a positive coping strategy. However, Matud (2004) stated that despite the fact that adolescent girls have a better coping strategies than male adolescents. Females are more likely to develop depressive or anxiety disorders when overwhelmed with stress. While coping with stressful conditions, females were also found to result to eating regularly, talk to friends and families as well as praying in order to cope (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Female adolescents were also more likely to avoid situations that can cause them stress. Monteiro et al (2014) view coping strategies as wishful thinking and problem focused disengagement. Females exhibits reluctance to symbolically alter the situation and instead hoped and wished that the situation would improve. This approach of avoiding the stressful situation fails to initiate any action that may change the stressful circumstances. Monteiro et al (2014) further stated that this type of coping is not considered healthy approach for long-term adaptation but may provide a short-term relief particularly when one feels helpless or lacks control in the face of stressors. According to Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner (2008), males were more likely to engage in instrumental

coping which involves actively fighting the source of stress, distractions as well as avoidance or disengaging. In general, female adolescents are more likely to use adaptive coping strategies which includes emotion-focused and ruminative coping in form of social support and wishful thinking while the male adolescents would rather use the maladaptive coping in form of social withdrawal and substance abuse.

Conclusion

In-school adolescents no doubt go through a lot of stress and are struggling with issues, conflicting messages and urges, restrictions and pressures (Uyenne 2010). The findings of this study shows that the ability of in-school adolescents in Ilorin, Nigeria is influenced by gender. From early age, children should be made to know that several situations that come their way are normal and they will survive them if only they adopt the positive coping strategies and discuss their situations no matter how bizarre they look. According to Eisenberg and Fabes (2000) ; Uyenne (2010), coping skills are related to self-regulation which is a core component of healthy adaption. In-school adolescents should therefore learn how to plan their activities and have self-regulation with the help of a time table as well as associate themselves with positive friends as this will go a long way to reduce stress and encourage positive coping.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- a. Effective communication between students and teachers, parents and older adults should be established to maintain cordial relationship.
- b. Teachers and school personnel should be well equipped with optimall knowledge and skills to cope and develop cognitive, physical, psychological and socio-emotional abilities of adolescents.

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