

SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG GENDER AND CLASSIFICATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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The purpose of this study was to examine sources of stress among African American college students at a private historically black college and university (HBCU). A convenient sample ($N = 95$) of students from classes in the Department of Health and Human Performance at a private southeastern historically black college and university were used for this study. Data was collected using the Inventory of College Students' Recent Life Experiences Survey. Independent t-test and analysis of variance were used to test for differences at the .05 level. Significant differences were found between gender and classification and their sources of stress. The top five reported sources of stress were 1) "Important decisions about your education"; 2) "Peers respect what you have to say"; 3) "Too many things to do at once"; 4) "A lot of responsibilities"; and 5) "Financial burdens". Females scored higher than males for the following questions: Too many things to do at once, Separation from people you care about, Financial burdens, and Important decisions about your education. Freshmen and juniors scored higher than sophomores in regards to having difficulty with transportation. Implications and suggestions for further research for sources of stress among African American college students are discussed.

Introduction

It is well documented that African American students are more likely to drop out of college than their nonminority counterparts (Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Wilson, 1994). According to Cross (1993), historically black colleges tend to have a highly disappointing student graduation rates. It has been suggested that minority students, in general, are more likely to express apprehension about the academic

rigors of college compared with their minority counterparts (Eimers & Pike, 1997). Moreover, minority students tend to encounter common experiences that are different from those of nonminority status (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Experiences such as financial problems, academic integration, and parental encouragement may interfere with the attainment of the desired goal of a college degree.

A growing body of research focusing on

stress and its implications on the health of individuals has emerged over the last few decades (Edwards, Hershberger, Russell & Markert, 2001). These research studies show that a strong relationship exists between stress and cognitive abilities and a weakened immune system (Cohen & Herbert, 1996). College is a transitional period when young people undergo new experiences, meet new people, as well as face the opportunities that may compound the stress in their lives. Hudd, Dumlao, Erdmann-Sager, Murray, Phan, Soukas et al. (2000) argue that adolescents and college students face a variety of negative health outcomes including smoking, drinking, experimenting with illegal drugs, suicide ideation, and unhealthy lifestyle habits such as poor diet and lack of sleep. This increase in exposure to perceived stress levels has led to an extension of therapeutic culture not only in the general public, but in college and university campuses nationwide.

Rimer (2004) discusses the importance of addressing stress among college students and examines the strategies taken by colleges and universities to address stress in a holistic manner. For the college student, stress can take on many forms in his or her daily life. The pressures of maintaining a balance between interpersonal relationships, academic demands, one's own expectations and maintaining personal relationships can be an extremely daunting task. A few examples of the myriad of difficulties that college students face are: academic load, being away from home, family obligations, work, maintaining personal relationships, time management, financial obligations, and becoming accli-

mated to a new environment (Negga, Applewhite, & Livingston, 2007).

Negga et al. (2007) compared sources of stress for students attending predominantly white institutions to those who attended historically black colleges and universities. Their research found that the top five reported sources of stress were: 1) Death of a family member (Intrapersonal Stress) - 82%; 2) Low grades (Academic Stress) - 69%; 3) Time management (Academic Stress) - 61%; 4) Boyfriend/Girlfriend problems (Interpersonal Stress) - 57% and missed classes (Academic Stress) 55%.

Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler (2003) examined the role of life event stress on African American college students attending a historically black college and university. Their study found that individuals who scored high on levels of optimism tended to report less global or perceived stress. They also found that underclassmen tended to report more academic stress than upperclassmen.

While stress and health outcomes have been studied extensively among college students in general, there is a limited amount of empirical research that concerns itself with the role of these variables in the African American student population. Researchers have addressed stress among African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004; Neville & Heppner, 1997). Fewer studies have undertaken the important task of revealing the types and sources of stress among students attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine sources

Table 1 **Demographics**

Demographics	<i>n</i>	%
Classification		
Freshman	37	38.95
Sophomore	33	34.74
Junior	16	16.84
Senior	9	9.47
Ethnicity		
White (Non-Hispanic)	1	1.05
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	1	1.05
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.05
Black	88	92.63
Other	4	4.21
Gender		
Male	46	48.42
Female	49	51.58

N= 95

of stress among African American college students at a private historically black college and university (HBCU).

Methods

Subjects

The subjects for this study were undergraduates 18 to 24 years of age. The sample was taken from six sections of Personal Health, one section from Junior Seminar and one section of Psychology and Descriptive Statistics from a private southeastern historically black college and university. Of the 100 students that were

given a survey in each class, 5 students chose not to participate because they did not want to or they had filled out the survey in an earlier class (N = 95).

The demographics for this study were classification, race, and gender. There were 37 freshman, 33 sophomores, 16 juniors and 9 seniors. In regards to ethnicity, there was one Caucasian, one American Indian, one Asian/Pacific Islander, 88 African Americans, and four reported as other. In regards to gender, there were 46 males and 49 females. The complete demographic data is shown in Table 1.

Instrumentation

Data was collected using the Inventory of College Students' Recent Life Experiences Survey. The survey was designed to be used by institutions interested in assessing the impact on stress among college students (Kohn, Lafreniere, & Gurevich, 1990). The questionnaire consists of several sections with 60 questions related to the importance and quality of stress among college students. Reliability and validity for the survey was established in a previous study (De Jong, Timmerman, & Emmelkamp, 1996). Subjects were asked to rate how much 57 events have been a part of their lives in the past month on a scale from 1= not at all part of my life to 4= very much part of my life. The first three questions were used to determine the demographics of the students. The remaining 54 questions contained questions addressing stress levels of students. Questions on the survey that the subjects responded to included: conflicts with boyfriend's / girlfriend's / spouse's family, financial conflicts with family members, dissatisfaction with school, and finding courses too demanding.

Data Collection and Analysis

The subjects in this study were chosen from a convenient sample of an undergraduate student population of a private southeastern historically black college and university. Students in personal health, psychology, and junior seminar courses were utilized for this study. These courses were used because they were considered to be representative of the undergraduate student population with its racial and ethnic makeup. Eighty participants was

determined necessary to achieve a power of .80.

This approach was implemented due to the availability of students and the low cost of administering the questionnaires. Prior to administering the questionnaire, the investigators obtained approval by the University's Institutional Review Board. The investigators then contacted the instructors of the personal health, psychology, and junior seminar classes offered in the 2008 Spring and Summer semesters. After the investigators were granted permission to administer the questionnaire during class time, the investigators arranged a time at which they could administer the questionnaire. The subjects were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their responses were anonymous.

Independent t-test and analysis of variance were utilized to determine the differences between demographics and stress level. Demographics items that were utilized for this survey included classification, gender and ethnicity. Demographics data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data was analyzed using a .05 level of significance.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Subjects were asked to rate how much 57 events had been a part of their lives in the past month on a scale from 1= not at all part of my life to 4= very much part of my life. Subjects were asked to respond to questions and indicate for each experience how much it has been a part of your life over the past month. Among the findings were, 73% of the subjects responded

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Question	% Response of distinctly a part/very much part of my life
5. Too many things to do at once	72.64
7. Peers respect what you have to say	77
16. A lot of responsibilities	70
21. Important decisions about your future career	64.21
22. Financial burdens	67.37
24. Important decisions about your education	78
29. Not enough time for sleep	63.16

N= 95

distinctly or very much to Question 5, "Too many things to do at once". Seventy-seven percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 7, "Peers respect what you have to say". Seventy percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 16, "A lot of responsibilities". Sixty-four percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 21, "Important decisions about your future career".

Seventy-eight percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 24, "Important decisions about your education". Sixty-three percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 29, "Not enough time for sleep". The data for descriptive statistics is located in Table 2.

Gender and Stress Level

This study examined the hypothesis whether there was a significant difference between the gender of the student and their sources of stress. Independent t- test revealed a significant difference between gender and Question 5, "Too many things to do at once" ($t = 5.23$, $p = .0244$), Question 10, "Separation from people you care about" ($t = 7.91$, $p = .0060$), Question 22, "Financial burdens", ($t = 6.71$, $p = .0112$), and Question 24, "Important decisions about your education", ($t = 6.16$, $p = .0148$). The data for gender and stress level is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 **Gender and Stress Level***Question 5 Too many things to do at once*

Gender	N	Mean	t	p
Male	46	2.91	5.23	.0244*
Female	49	3.37		

** p<.01

* p<.05

Question 10 Separation from people you care about

Gender	N	Mean	t	p
Male	46	2.30	7.91	.0060**
Female	49	2.89		

** p<.01

* p<.05

Question 22 Financial burdens

Gender	N	Mean	t	p
Male	46	2.63	6.71	.0112**
Female	49	3.16		

** p<.01

* p<.05

Question 24 Important decisions about your education

Gender	N	Mean	t	p
Male	46	3.13	6.16	.0148*
Female	49	3.55		

** p<.01

* p<.05

Classification and Stress Level

This study examined the hypothesis whether there is a significant difference between the classification of the student and their sources of stress. Analysis of variance revealed significant differences between classification and Question 41, "Difficulties with transportation", ($F =$

3.06, $p = .0320$), Question 45, "Interruptions of your school work", ($F = 3.12$, $p = .0297$), and Question 52, "Failing to get expected job" ($F = 3.01$, $p = .0345$). The data for classification and stress level is shown in Table 3.

Table 4 **Classification and Stress Level***Question 41 Difficulties with transportation*

Classification	N	Mean	F	p
Freshman	37	2.59	3.06	.0320*
Sophomore	33	1.96		
Junior	16	1.93		
Senior	9	2.78		

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ *Question 45 Interruptions of your school work*

Classification	N	Mean	F	p
Freshman	37	2.00	3.12	.0297*
Sophomore	33	2.21		
Junior	16	1.50		
Senior	9	2.66		

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ *Question 52 Failing to get expected job*

Classification	N	Mean	F	p
Freshman	37	1.83	3.01	.0345*
Sophomore	33	1.66		
Junior	16	1.37		
Senior	9	2.55		

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ **Discussion**

This study was designed to examine sources of stress among African American college students at a private historically black college and university (HBCU). Seventy-three percent of the subjects responded distinctly or very much to Question 5, "Too many things to do at once". Seventy-seven percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 7, "Peers respect

what you have to say". Seventy-percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 16, "A lot of responsibilities". Sixty-four percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 21, "Important decisions about your future career". Seventy-eight percent responded distinctly or very much to Question 24, "Important decisions about your education".

This study found significant differences

for gender and sources of stress. Females scored higher than males for the following questions: Too many things to do at once, Separation from people you care about, Financial burdens, and Important decisions about your education. This study also found significant differences for classification and sources of stress. Freshmen and juniors scored higher than sophomores in regards to having difficulty with transportation. In addition, sophomores and seniors scored higher than juniors in regards to interruptions of their school-work being a source of stress.

This study provides additional information to the literature about the sources of stress among African American college students. In addition, these results are fairly consistent with the results of previous studies examining levels of stress among African American students. Negga et al. (2007) found that the top five reported sources of stress were: 1) Death of a family member (Intrapersonal Stress); 2) Low grades (Academic Stress); 3) Time management (Academic Stress); 4) Boyfriend/Girlfriend problems (Interpersonal Stress) and missed classes (Academic Stress). Baldwin et al. (2003) found that individuals who scored high on levels of optimism tended to report less global or perceived stress. They also found that underclassman tended to report more academic stress than upperclassman.

Limitations and Conclusion

It is important to note the limitations of this study. The first is the generalizability of the results. Comparisons should only be made to institutions with a population

of similar size. The university that was utilized for this study is a private HBCU with an undergraduate enrollment of 1600. The second is that a convenient sampling method was utilized. Researchers seeking to replicate this study need to develop a more random method of drawing a sample. The third is that the sample size is less than 100. The results of this study can be strengthened with a larger sample size.

This study provides information to the literature about sources of stress among African American college students at a private historically black college and university. However, more studies are needed to further investigate sources of stress among African American college students.

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