



Stress coping strategies and job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine the extent to which problem-solving, social support, and Avoidance stress coping strategies predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State, Nigeria. Correlation design was adopted for the study. Two research questions and two corresponding hypotheses guided the conduct of the study at 0.05 alpha level. A sample 220 participants was drawn from the population through cluster sampling technique. Two instruments namely; Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ) and Lecturers' Job Performance Scale (LJPS) were used for data collection. Simple and multiple regression analyses were used for data analysis. All data were subjected to analysis using statistical package for social science (SPSS). Results showed that; stress coping strategies (problem-Solving, social-support, and avoidance) statistically significantly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. When taken independently, the contributions of problem-solving and social-support were significant while that of avoidance was not. Finally, it was found that social support had the highest contribution, followed by problem-solving, and lastly by avoidance strategy. Based on the findings, recommendations were made which are: Academic staff of universities should seek counselling whenever they go through occupational stress. Counselling will expose them to effective stress management strategies like social support and problem-solving techniques. Government should create opportunities for the employment of more academic staff into our universities to reduce lecturers' workload and also enhance their productivity.

Keywords: stress, coping, strategies, job, performance, academic staff

Introduction

The roles played by academic staff of universities are well defined. They are teaching, research, and service; with primary emphasis placed upon the teaching and research aspects and secondary upon service or administration. However, new challenges have imposed on them more administrative tasks such as entrance of private sector universities as competitors, research based performance pressures, rankings and the requirement of quality certifications to attract and retain a talented pool of faculty. This may have increased their level of stress and burnout. No wonder Barkhuizen and Rothmann (2008) ^[3] stated that universities have been considered as stress factories. University academic staff does the complex work in an increasingly demanding environment.

Administratively, the university lecturers work as counsellors, examination officers, postgraduate coordinators, departmental heads, directors, deans and many other positions of responsibilities. With regard to their teaching responsibilities, some teach extremely large classes especially education courses, supervise students' theses, dissertations and project work. Indeed, in some cases, some lecturers supervise extreme up to 30 students per semester, owing to the running of both undergraduate and post-graduate or regular and part-time programmes. Despite these responsibilities, lecturers are expected to publish high-quality research in reputable local and international journals to be promoted within the institution. Thus, the lecturers work under increasing pressure

to meet targets set by the university. Universities are the only organizations focused on dual core functions of knowledge creation and knowledge transmission through the processes of research and teaching. The work life of university academic staff is predominantly framed and shaped by commitments and performance in these functions.

The present researchers are of the view that the way academic staff of universities (lecturers) manage their stress will affect the quality of service they deliver to their students at a particular time. Lecturers' job performance entails the effectiveness of the lecturers based on students' performance results, attendance, communication skills, syllabus coverage, professionalism, decision making, interpersonal skills and classroom management. Academic staff job performance can be viewed or assessed through these dimensions: goal consensus, empowerment, student support, affiliation, professional interest and resources adequacy and work pressures.

Stress is not necessarily bad in and of itself, while it is typically discussed in a negative context. It is an opportunity when it offers potential gain. Workload may create an opportunity for the university lecturers to learn and prosper more quickly. As university lecturers do their jobs they gain more work experience, which enrich their exposure. More so, lecturers who have enough work to do remain more active and energetic while work-less ones remain inactive, lazy and perish eventually. Workload pressure can be positive leading to increased productivity. Under-utilization of human skills or

failing to reach the full potential of the lecturers is also one cause to increase stress. University lecturers who possess the capabilities to perform a job enjoy workload. However, when this pressure becomes excessive it has negative impact. For instance, the individuals may realize that they don't possess necessary skills and abilities, required to affray with the stress (Nayak, 2008) ^[12].

However, occupational stress is only discomfort at a personal level when it exceeds a person's coping capabilities and resources to handle them adequately. Stress is acknowledged to be one of the main causes of absence from work. Another contributing factor is the nature of the job, which might amount to an immense amount of physical and emotional exhaustion.

In universities, reaction of people towards stress could be very different. Some may tackle it better while others suffer in destructive consequences. Just as stress differs as a function of the individual, it also differs as a function of one's type of occupation. Some occupations are, inherently more work loaded than others. Lecturers' stress coping strategies are the specific efforts, both behavioural and psychological, that lecturers employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events (academic stress). They are classified into active and avoidant coping strategies. Active coping strategies are either behavioural or psychological responses designed to change the nature of the stressor itself or how one thinks about it, while avoidant coping strategies, lead people into activities (such as alcohol use) or mental states (such as withdrawal) that keep them from directly addressing workload related stressful events. Active coping is considered a better way to deal with stress, while avoidant coping is considered as a psychological risk factor for adverse responses to stressful life events including schooling and working at the same time (Holahan & Moos, 2003) ^[11].

Carver (2009) ^[6] explained that active coping strategies include "active coping", which means taking action or exerting efforts to remove or circumvent the stressor; "planning", thinking about how to confront the stressor and planning one's coping efforts; "acceptance", accepting the fact that the stressful event has occurred and is real; and "positive reframing", making the best of the situation by growing from it or seeing it in a more positive light. Avoidant strategies include "denial", defined as an attempt to reject the reality of the stressful event; "behavioural disengagement", giving up or withdrawing efforts from the attempt to attain the goal with which the stressor is interfering; "venting", an increased awareness of one's emotional distress and a concomitant tendency to ventilate or discharge those feelings; and "humour", making jokes about the stressor.

However, within the university environment lecturers may adopt different coping strategies to deal with workload related stress. Desmond, Shevlin, and MacLachlan (2006) ^[7] distinguished between three main coping styles; namely, problem solving, seeking social support and avoidance. Problem solving coping involves a direct problem-orientated approach to actively manage stressors. It seems to be associated with reduced psychological distress, while avoidant coping is associated with increased distress. Seeking-social-support coping takes place when a person turns to others for help, advice and support (Desmond *et al.*, 2006) ^[7]. It is

associated with both increased and decreased distress (Folkman, 2010) ^[8].

Consequently, it is therefore, imperative to closely examine the extent stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support, and avoidance) predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State.

Empirical Review

Akbar and Akhter (2011) ^[11] assessed the association between academic stress, reaction to stress, coping strategies and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) among 1365 undergraduates in Nigeria. The study was a cross-sectional study conducted in a Nigerian university at the beginning of the 2010/2011 academic session with the same group of participants. The Life Stress Assessment Inventory, Coping Strategies Questionnaire, and Short Musculoskeletal Function Assessment were administered as tools of data gathering. The results of the study indicated that students' stress level and associated MSDs were higher during the examination period than the pre-examination periods. Stressors were significantly associated with increased risk of MSDs in both sexes were those related to changes (odds ratio (OR) = 1.7, $p = 0.002$) and pressures (OR = 2.09, $p = 0.001$). Emotional and physiological reactions to stress were significantly associated with MSDs in both sexes, with higher odds for MSDs in females, whereas cognitive and behavioral reactions showed higher odds (though non-significant) in males. The risk of MSDs was higher in respondents who adopted avoidance and religious coping strategies compared with those who adopted active practical and distracting coping strategies.

Nayak (2008) ^[12] explored the components of academic workload among the post graduate management students in India. The study further tried to make an in-depth investigation into each component of academic stress such as curriculum and instruction, team work related issues, assessment, and placement, to identify the micro issues that are causing stress. Around twelve micro issues have been identified under the curriculum and instruction component while four stressors were prioritized related to team work; five sub issues regarding assessment and three micro issues under placement components of academic stress. The sample comprised of 500 postgraduate management students from various management institutes spread across the Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh in India. Data was collected through self-designed academic workload questionnaire based on previous models available.

The results showed that, the components of academics, in general, are curriculum and instruction, team work, assessment and placement. Among these components, curriculum and instruction aspects were found to be largely responsible for workload (86%) among the management students. Placement related issues followed suit with 63% and assessment related matters at 41% and the team work issues accounted for around 24%. Further, the in depth analysis of each component of the above resulted in identifying various micro issues responsible for stress among the management students. The study could list out twelve sub issues related to curriculum and instruction component of academic stress ranging from regular attendance for the class work (68%) and achieving academic goals (64%) to keeping up with regular

reading (19%) and learning all material at 16%.

Among the team work related stressors, adjusting with the group mind set was given high score by 61% of the students followed by communicating with the members of the group (52%). Meeting deadlines of assessment was the highest stressor (82%) among the issues of assessment. Other major issues responsible were lack of clarity (72%), high weight age components (66%), and getting good grades (62%). When it comes to the aspect of placement related issues, 88% of the sample felt that facing interview was the cause of stress whereas around 50% gave next priority to the pay package and job location issues. Thus, by identifying the sub issues of each component of academic stress among the postgraduate management students, the study could provide better insights to the academic administrators for initiating efforts to reduce the intensity of academic stress the article concluded.

Kausar (2010) carried out a study on academic work load and coping strategies of university students in Pakistani. The overall findings of the study reported that students used practical coping, avoidance focused coping, religious coping and active distractive coping in their respective order of frequency when facing perceived stress and academic workload. In addition, academic workload encountered by students was perceived as having a positive relationship with practical coping strategies and negative relationship with distractive coping strategies and avoidance coping used by students. Also conclusions in the study showed that students who had more academic workload used more practical coping strategies to deal with academic stress such as discussions, taking reading notes and reading material whilst students with less academic stress used active distraction coping strategies such as visiting friends, movie watching and indulging in recreational activities.

According to a qualitative study at Monash University in Malaysia carried out by Butt (2005) ^[5] on second year students, students used a variety of strategies to cope with workload including academic related stress. The coping strategies included; counseling, talking with their friends, mediation, sharing problems, sleeping well and exercising. In this study, the students also used mediation such as yoga to deal with stress, as the majority of the students who participated in the study were Indians for whom yoga is commonly practiced; taichi was reported among Chinese and prayers among Malays. Furthermore, Kang, Choi and Ryu (2009) reported that a workload coping programme based on mindful mediation was an effective coping intervention for nursing students in Korea to minimize stress and anxiety. In the same study Kang *et al* (2009) revealed that talking to friends was the most common stress relieving factor and similar findings were reported in Ireland talking with friends, peers and relatives was the most common method with stress.

In a study carried out at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe by Richards (2012) ^[15], a greater percentages of students did not have problems with coping with academic workload at the campus about a third of the students were failing to cope with stress. In this quantitative study confrontative positive coping strategy had the highest frequency of 25% whilst the lowest frequency percentage was 2.49% for compromise negative coping strategy. The sample of the population comprised of first years, second years and

fourth years. Female students were found to use more palliative and compromise positive coping strategies whilst male students were more relatively using more confrontative positive strategies. The Midlands State University also faced stressors such as financial difficulties and library materials as the greatest sources of stress. Other academic stressors that the students faced included library material, lecturer related problems, work related problems and learning skills related problems.

Bhagat, Allie and Ford (2010) ^[4] findings, among Black and Latinos students in China at the University of Huwai, also showed that the most frequent coping strategies by students were talking with friends, parents and participation in social activities. In the same study, Chiang *et al* (2004) found out that students used religious coping activities as a coping strategy in their academic studies. In a research carried out in the United Kingdom on coping strategies used by Missouri University students in their studies, students generally reported using proactive behavioural coping strategies such as managing time, solving problems and seeking information or help (Misra & Mckean 2000).

Sofolowe, *et al.* (2015) carried out a research examining the relationship between academic workload, anxiety, time management and leisure satisfaction among university students and the research predicted that students reported experiencing the aforementioned stressor during their academic studies were involved in leisure activities to deal with the stressors they encountered. In the same study by Misra and Mckean, female students benefited less from leisure activities than male counterparts did in coping with stress however, female students had more effective time management or coping strategies than males and profited from them. In this light it can be viewed that leisure activities were used as coping strategies to deal with academic stress.

In addition, another study was carried out in China on first year students and the purpose of the study was to view how the students cope with academic workload (Paulse, 2005) ^[14]. In a bid to deal with academic and social experiences that might pose threat to the students, the study revealed that efficacious beliefs through hard work and determination and social networks to communicate with other peers were used as coping strategies by the students. Moreover, in survey study carried among overseas students, Fang (1996) distributed a questionnaire to 527 overseas Chinese university freshman students studying in Taiwan. The study revealed that students selected to use different coping strategies to adjust emotional physical and mental stress. Positive attitudes and active approach were seen to produce better outcomes. Thus this supports that problem focused coping strategies have been proposed as a way to improve academic adjustments and academic performance, thus dealing with academic stress.

Gold and Roth (2003) ^[9] explored the perceived academic workload, and the coping strategies among B.Sc Nursing students of Jimma University. A cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey of 193 students, who were selected by a proportionate stratified random sampling technique from regular batch of Generic B.Sc Nursing students, was done. The results revealed that the prevalence of perceived academic workload among Generic B.Sc nursing students of Jimma University was 47.7%. The most common stressor was from

intrapersonal factors. Unhealthy coping strategies were used by students irrespective of ethnicity, marital status and educational levels. A very strong association between source of stressor such as intrapersonal stressor, environmental stressor and academic workload and unhealthy coping strategies were also observed ($p < 0.005$).

Omoniyi and Ogunsanmi (2012) ^[13] investigated on workload and coping strategies among Premedical and Undergraduate Basic Science Medical Students in a Caribbean Medical School. The study was carried out to obtain information about sources of stress and coping strategies among different groups of students and note differences, if any, among subgroups of respondents. Sources of student stress and coping strategies were studied using the medical student stressor questionnaire (MSSQ) and the brief COPE. The study concerned premedical and basic science undergraduate medical students during June 2014. Demographic characteristics like gender, semester of study, age and nationality were noted. Mean scores of different groups of stressors and coping strategies were calculated and compared among various subgroups of respondents using appropriate statistical tests ($p < 0.05$). Ninety-two of the 108 students (85.2%) participated. Cronbach alpha values for various categories of stressor scores were high. The major categories of stressors were academic related and group activity related. Certain stress scores were higher among female respondents and undergraduate medical (MD) students especially those studying in the fourth and fifth semester. The main coping strategies employed were planning, active coping, positive reframing, and acceptance. There were differences in use of certain coping strategies among subgroups of respondents. Academic related stressors were high especially among fourth and fifth semester students.

Hanif (2004) ^[10] explored the academic workload among undergraduate healthcare professional students in India, before and after implementing specific Coping strategies. Academic stress plays an important role in mental health. It is essential that stress intervention programs be designed to address stress among college students. One group pre-test post-test, research design was used in the study. This quasi-experimental study was performed in 106 undergraduate healthcare students. A modified version of "College student's stressful event checklist" was used to assess the academic stress and social readjustment scale was validated by research experts. The results were that there was a significant decline in the stress level among 31% of students, after implementing various coping measures. A positive relationship was found between the medium of instruction and Academic stress. There is significant relationship between pre-test and post-test academic stress scores ($p < 0.001$). Specific coping measures like breathing and relaxation exercises certainly help students to overcome various types of stresses that influence the academic program and improve their self-coping the article concluded.

Akbar and Akhter (2011) ^[1] investigated the sources of academic workload among students in the dSental school environment, their perceived levels of stress and effective coping strategies. The study was conducted during the first

semester of the academic year, 2009–10, at the College of Dentistry, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. The eligible study group consisted of 556 undergraduate dental students from all five class years; they were surveyed with a detailed assessment tool. The validated and translated questionnaire comprised the modified version of the dental environmental stress (DES) survey, the perceived stress scale (PSS) and the brief coping scale (BCS). The overall findings substantiated with multiple regression indicated that, out of 20 factors of both DES and BC instruments, six factors were significantly and independently related to perceived stress scores ($F = 34.638$; $p < 0.0001$). Especially, the factors self-efficacy and workload of DES and the factors behavioural disengagement, denial, positive reframing and venting of BC were positively and independently related to perceived stress scores.

Review of empirical literature revealed separate studies on stress management strategies and lecturers' job performance. Such studies were mainly conducted by foreign authors with a few related local studies. Most importantly, none of the studies reviewed (foreign and local) dealt with joint contribution of stress coping strategies (problem-solving, avoidance, and social support) to the prediction of job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State. Hence, it became very pertinent to carry out this present study in this part of the world to bridge the existing gap.

Research Methodology

Correlational research design was used for the study. A sample of 220 academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State was chosen for the study through cluster sampling technique. Two instruments namely Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ), and Lecturers' Job Performance Scale (LJPS) were used for data collection. The instruments were presented to two experts in the area of measurement and evaluation who vetted the items to ensure both face and content validation. All the corrections will be incorporated before making the final draft. For the purpose of the present research, the reliabilities of the two instruments were determined by the researcher through Cronbach Alpha and test-retest. The overall reliability coefficients of 0.72 and 0.70 were obtained for CSQ and LJPS respectively.

Multiple regression was used to answer research question 1 while simple regression was used to answer research question 2. ANOVA table for regression was used to test hypothesis one, while t-values associated with the respective beta values were used to test hypothesis 2. All data were subjected to analysis using statistical package for social science (SPSS).

Results and Discussion of Findings

Research question 1: To what extent do stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support, and avoidance) jointly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?

Hypothesis 1: Stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support and avoidance) jointly do not significantly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Stress Coping Strategies (problem-solving, social support, and avoidance) to the Prediction of Job Performance of Academic Staff of, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State, $R = 0.53$ $R^2 = 0.281$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.321$ Std. Error of Estimate = 10.48

Model	Sum of Sq	Df	Mean Sq	F	P-Val	Result
Regression	0.589	3	0.589	3.926	.000	Sig.
Residual	45961.097	216	120.950			
Total	45961.686	220				

Table 1 shows that $R = 0.53$, $P < 0.05$. This means that there is a positive relationship between stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support and avoidance) and job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State. The table further shows F ratio of F (2, 216) 3.926, and $p < 0.05$. Hence, hypothesis one is rejected. The implication is that stress coping strategies taken jointly significantly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State.

Research question 2: To what extent do stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support, and avoidance) individually predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?

Hypothesis 2: Stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support and avoidance) independently do not significantly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

Table 2: Relative Contribution of Each Stress Coping Strategy to the Prediction of Job Performance of Academic Staff of Ignatius Ajuru University, Rivers State

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T Value	Sig. Levels	Result
	β	Std. Error	β			
Constant	44.171	2.370		18.635	.000	
Problem solving	1.427	0.052	.625	3.056	.000	Sig.
Social support	2.201	0.018	.743	4.187	.000	Sig.
Avoidance	1.054	-.431	.319	.345	4.792	Not Sig.

Table 4.2 shows the relative contribution of each stress coping strategy (problem-solving, social support, and avoidance) to the prediction of job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State. In order to test the corresponding null hypothesis two that each stress coping strategy taken independently does not significantly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State, t-values associated with the respective beta values were used. Hence, significant t-value indicates that the relative contributions of problem-solving strategy ($\beta = 0.625$, $t = 3.056$, $p < 0.05$) and social support ($\beta = 0.743$, $t = 4.187$, $p < 0.05$) to the prediction of job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State were significant while the reverse is the case for avoidance strategy ($\beta = 0.319$, $t = .345$, $p > 0.05$).

Discussion of Findings

Table 4.1 showed that $R = 0.53$, $R^2 = 0.281$ $p < 0.05$. The result is that stress coping strategies (problem-solving, social support, and avoidance) significantly predict job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State. Result also indicated that there is a moderate positive relationship between the predictor and criterion variables. The Table (4.1) further revealed that $R^2 = 0.281$ which means that stress coping strategies accounted for 28.1% of the variance in job performance, and this is statistically significant $p < 0.05$.

Using percentage, with reference to Table 4.2 problem-solving coping strategy accounted for $(0.625^2 \times 100)$ 39.06% of the total variance in job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State; social support $(0.743^2 \times 100)$ 55.2%, and avoidance strategy $(0.319^2 \times 100)$ 10.2%. This means that social support is the major contributor to the prediction of job performance of academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State, followed by problem-solving, and lastly by avoidance strategy.

These present findings lend credence to Fang (1996) who clearly found that problem focused coping strategies have been proposed as a way to improve academic adjustments and academic performance, thus dealing with academic stress. More so, Desmond *et al.* (2006) [7] explained that seeking-social-support coping takes place when a person turns to others for help, advice and support. It is associated with both increased and decreased distress (Folkman, 2010) [8].

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. Academic staff of universities should seek counselling whenever they go through occupational stress. Counselling will expose them to effective stress management strategies like social support and problem-solving techniques.
2. Government should create opportunities for the employment of more academic staff into our universities to reduce lecturers' workload and also enhance their productivity.

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