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Academic Stress in relation with Optimism and Resilience

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Abstract

The stress that results when students are unable to meet their academic demands is known as academic stress. In present times academic stress has become more evident because this is an era of rapid changes and a cutting edge competition. Academics and material achievements have come to define happiness and success in life rather than values and virtues. The aim of this study was to understand the relationship of academic stress with certain positive variables like optimism and resilience. The sample consisted of 300 students, age ranging from 16 to 18 years from the Jaipur city. The tools used were Life Orientation Test – R (Scheier et. al. 1994), Resilience Scale (Wangnild and Heather 2009) and Academic Expectation Stress Inventory (Ang and Huan 2006). For the analysis of data correlation and regression analysis were used. The result obtained indicated that academic stress correlated negatively with optimism and resilience and both the variables significantly predicted academic stress.

Key Words: Academic Stress, Stress, Optimism, Resilience, Adolescents.

Introduction: Researches in the area of education have highlighted that issues related to school are major concern among adolescents, especially in Indian society where students are pressurized to perform in school. In India students are competitive as well as more focused in gaining educational brilliance. To perform well in their academics students face enormous amount of pressure from their families. According to studies, students have reported issues related to school as one of the major source of pressure. Findings from these studies indicate that examination results are so cause a lot of stress because students feel they would not be able to achieve the level that is considered to be satisfactory. Researches on Indian students show a close relationship between negative consequences like too much stress and focus on achieving academic brilliance. Studies also indicate that from the various type of stress a student faces, academic stress has become a major mental health problem (Rangaswami, 1995). Academic stress can be defined as a form of stress that students face when they are unable to meet their academic demands. In other word, it can be seen as a continuous pressure to study all those things that are set by the school (Shah, 1988). Common problems faced by students suffering from academic stress are weak performance, depression, sleep disorder, somatic complaints, lack of concentration (Sinha, 2000) without knowing how to deal with them. Research in this field has so far focused on academic stress with respect to life events and coping strategies in general. However coping strategies are not only affected by situational factors

but also by the impact of individual personality traits. Secondly, the focus of the existing literature has been on the negative aspect of stress and coping. The present study took into consideration the positive aspect of personality and inter personal relationships in understanding the phenomena of academic stress. Positive variables such as optimism, and resilience, add to students comfort by reducing the stress and encouraging them to deal effectively and involving them in healthy practices.

Optimism is perhaps best regarded as an individual's characteristic that reduces distress. According to research conducted on people who were facing difficult situations, it was seen that optimism is more connected to low distress and pessimism to high distress. Studies also indicate that there is significant negative relationship between optimism and academic stress (Huan et. al. 2006). This indicates that students with high optimism level show less academic stress whereas pessimists show higher academic stress. It has also been found that optimism is a significant predictor of academic stress.

Resilience refers to the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks. A study by Wilks (2008) examined the relationship between academic stress and perceived resilience among social work students, and to identify social support as a protective factor of resilience on this relationship. The sample consisted of 314 social work students. Results revealed that there is a negative relation of academic stress with social support and resilience. There is positive influence of social support over resilience. Academic stress accounted for the most variation in resilience scores.

Since there is an acute paucity of research findings relating to the role of positive personality and interpersonal factors in academic stress amongst adolescents especially in Indian context, this study tried to fill the void.

Objectives:

- To investigate the relationship between Optimism and Academic Stress.
- To study the relationship between Resilience and Academic Stress.
- To study the interaction of variables of the study in relation to Academic Stress.

Hypotheses:

To fulfill the above objectives the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H₁: Academic Stress will be negatively related to Optimism.
- H₂: Academic Stress will be negatively related to Resilience.
- H₃: The two measures of the study will significantly contribute to predict academic stress.

Method :

- **Sample:** The sample of the study consisted of 300 senior school students (both boys and girls) drawn from public, private and missionary schools, affiliated to Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), of the Jaipur city, based on the following criteria of inclusion and exclusion.
- **Criteria for Inclusion:**
 - a) Age group between 16yrs to 18yrs.
 - b) All subjects from grade XI and XII.
 - c) All subjects from science stream.
 - d) All subjects from co - educational school.
 - e) All subjects from middle and upper middle class.

- Criteria for Exclusion:
 - a) Subjects studying in non-recognized schools and government schools.
 - b) Subjects studying in boards other than CBSE.
 - c) Subjects suffering from psychological ailments and physical disabilities.
 - d) Drop outs of previous years.

Probability sampling was employed to select the sample.

- **Design:** Design of study was Correlational Research Design.
- **Tools**
 - Life orientation test revised (LOT-R) (Scheier, Carver and Bridges, 1994)
 - Resilience Scale (RS – 14) (Wagnild and Heather, 2009)
 - Academic Expectation Stress Inventory (Ang and Huan, 2006).
- **Procedure:** In order to study the relationship of optimism and resilience with academic stress, data was collected from science stream students by the means of questionnaires. For data collection the first step was to take permission from the selected schools. Once the permission was granted, the date and time for test conduction were finalized with the schools. The questionnaires were distributed in classrooms and the students were given necessary instructions. The tests were conducted in one sitting.

Results and Discussion: The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship of optimism and resilience with academic stress. Pearson’s product moment correlation coefficients were computed to determine whether a relationship existed between the variables and academic stress, then regression analysis was carried out to identify the variables significantly predicting academic stress. The results of correlation and regression analysis were in expected direction.

The result of the correlation indicated that academic stress had significant negative correlation with optimism and resilience. The results support first two hypotheses of the study. This indicated that adolescents with high resilience and optimism reported less academic stress.

Table 1
Pearson Correlation of Optimism and Resilience with Academic stress

	Academic Stress
Optimism	-.687**
Resilience	-.417**

** Correlation is significant at .01 levels

The regression analysis indicates that 61.3% of the variation in academic stress is accounted for through the combined linear effects of the predictor variables and the overall equation is found to be statistically significant ($F = 234.9, p < .000$). Table 3 shows that both optimism and resilience are significant predictor of academic stress ($b = -.664, p < .000$ & $b = -.376, p < .000$).

Table 2
Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.783	.613	.610	6.12610

Table 3
Regression Analysis

MODEL	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
	b	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	67.929	1.622		41.882	.000
Optimism	-1.704	.093	-0.664	-18.34	.000
Resilience	-0.163	.016	-0.376	-10.38	.000

Optimism acts as buffer for life stressors. Generally optimistic people have more positive view of life, analyze majority of life situations with positive outlook and expect positive consequences where as pessimists analyze majority situations as negative and expect negative outcome. It has been found that students with high optimism experienced less stress and higher psychological well being. Optimistic individuals generally look for good outcomes from difficult situations and try to acquire something out of them. (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Scheier & Carver, 2002). Optimistic not only use different stable coping from pessimists as well as also differ in coping responses when facing a stressful situations. Another study highlighting that optimists are more stress resistance than pessimist was conducted by Seligman and Schulman (1986). The findings of the study indicated that pessimists report more physical illness and symptoms than optimists in their high stress period like during final exams.

Another explanation for such results can be that optimists and pessimists differ in their attributional style. Seligman (1990) has described a “pessimist” explanatory style that involves a tendency to attribute failure to internal, permanent and pervasive causes and success to external, temporary and specific causes. In contrast “optimistic” explanatory styles are biased towards the exact opposite pattern of attributions for success and failure.

Optimistic thinking affects people’s perception of various life events which influences their experiences when they confront problems. In difficult times optimists exert sustained efforts for positive future outcomes; on the other hand, pessimists try to temporarily escape the situation without finding a permanent solution which eventually leads to stress. Optimists and pessimists also use different approaches to deal with problems and challenges (Carver and Scheier, 2002). Studies indicate that optimist students use more problem centered coping like actions that focus more on reducing or removing the source of stress than pessimists. Optimistic not only use more stable coping behavior as compared to pessimists but also differ in coping responses when facing a stressful situations.

Similar way resilience reduces the effects of stress (Li, 2008), it also develops a positive attitude for stress among individuals which stimulates positive coping towards stressful situation. According to Li, a stable resilience resists the effect of stress among people. In another study by Dumont and Procost (1999) with adolescents, found that adolescents with higher resilience level use more problem solving coping strategies as compared to adolescents with low resilience level. A study by Steinhardt and Dolbier (2010) also showed that the resilience programme may be useful in managing as well as in preventing the stress among college students. Research have indicated that people with high resilience employ positive emotions to reduce the effect of stress and show different physiological reactions while dealing with stress. When they come across stressors, they bounce back very fast as well as develop stronger during the course. Generally resilient people look

for the positive side in the face of adversity. Resilience has a greater side in reducing the wrong coping & stress but enhance coping mechanism.

The results are also supported by transactional stress theory. According to this theory when an individual face stressor, he/she evaluates the potential threat. During this evaluation individual first appraises the significance of the situation and then he/she makes the assessment of his/her coping resources. This theory further states that personality characteristics such as optimism, resilience etc affects the appraisal process which mediates the stressor stress response relationship i.e. a person with high optimism and resilience will appraise a situation as less stressful and vice versa.

Conclusion: Various studies have indicated that optimism and resilience fosters resistance to stress. Current study was aimed at understanding the relationship of positive psychology variables such as optimism and resilience with academic stress. Results revealed that there is a significant negative correlation of academic stress with optimism and resilience as well as both the variables significantly predicts academic stress.

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