

THE COPING STRATEGIES USED BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS TO MANAGE SOCIAL ANXIETY IN ZANZIBAR UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: This study sought to examine the coping strategies used by undergraduate students to manage social anxiety in Zanzibar Universities. The study used descriptive cross-sectional design which was complimented by a mixed method approach. But in this objective only qualitative method was applied. propulsive sampling was used to obtain 20 respondents who were used to collect qualitative data. In addition to that, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews from three key informants. Upon accrual, qualitative data was analyzed by using content analysis process, thus, data was prepared and organized upon collection, data was then reviewed by the researcher, the researcher then created initial codes that were combined into themes, and lastly themes were presented in a cohesive manner as quotations. the findings of the study revealed that both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies are used by Zanzibar undergraduate students in dealing with social anxiety. Adaptive coping mechanism used are: seeking counseling services available in university, managing negative thoughts, and emotion, facing one`s fear by taking risks while other students used maladaptive method such as isolation behaviors, substance abuse and avoidance of academic setting. The study concluded that social anxiety is highly prevalent among university students in Zanzibar and students are struggling with different coping mechanism which other affect their academic performance. Therefore, it was recommended as per findings that among others, instructors should be capacitated to identify and refer social phobic students for therapy.

Keywords: undergraduate students, manage social anxiety, qualitative data.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety is among the problem that faced many students in their academic life. Remarkable number of students are faced with problem which hinder their academic performance. Academic to Sadock, Ruiz, Kaplan and Sadock (2015) reported that the prevalence of social anxiety ranges from 3% to 13% in the general population and therefore it becomes the most third most common disorder after majordepression. In university, the literature indicates the prevalence of social anxiety is even higher where speaking in public considered as common symptoms that affects notable portion of students. American Psychiatric Association (2013) described social anxiety as psychopathology which is characterized by strong desire to make favorable impression of oneself on others, conjunction with marked insecurity about one`s ability to do so. Factors associated with SA such; family history, genetic,condition and ethological factor, temperament, birth order and social demands (Hudson & Rappen, 2000; Lie *et al.*, 2000; Mussen *et al.*, 1990; Ost, 1985). Literature indicates that 13% of population meets the criteria for diagnosis of social anxiety in worldwide (America Psychological Associational, 2013). Which also include undergraduate students in their academic setting.

A study that involved Canada and the United States of America revealed that lifetime prevalence of social anxiety among students is ranging from 1.7-3% on Diagnostic Interview Schedule Instrument (Chavira & Stein, 2002). In Europe, a study that was conducted in Sweden revealed that the prevalence of social phobia among Swedish university students were 16.1%, comparable with 15.6% previously reported for the general population. One previous study in Asia found that 6.9% of Chinese primary school students experienced severe social anxiety symptoms as measured by the Social Anxiety Scale for Children (SASC; Cai, 1998). With the same assessment tool and cutoff point, one more recent study reported a rate of 26.3% in a similar population (Gao *et al.*, 2013) These findings reveal that there is increasing social anxiety in recent times and put at risk a remarkable number of students. Bella and Omigbodun (2009) in Nigeria University reported that the lifetime prevalence of social phobia among university students was 9.4% and 8.5% respectively. in Tanzania. Kambuga indicated that 35.9% of students who had poor performance agreed with the statement that anxiety contributed to their result. This prevalence associated with different effects include poor academic performance and prematurely leaving school.

To avoid such sever effects, students have been reported to use both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanism to cope with social anxiety and foster their resilience. This occurs particularly when students experience social anxiety during the learning situation which involves exposure to public and there is higher chance for being negative evaluated including seminar presentation, debate, group discussion and others. Different students use different methods in coping with social anxiety. however, the use of safety behaviors, such as acting to minimize conspicuousness and rehearsal were the most reported strategies by many students (74%) to calm anxiety down. Also, this is the coping method used to free or even minimize the intensity of social anxiety during performing any academic activities (Russell & Topham, 2012). In the same study, it was further revealed that 64% of students use other diverse coping strategies including taking “Calms”, and using relaxation techniques when they have social anxiety. The aim of using the coping mechanism is to minimize the level of social anxiety and create the comfortability when these students do presentations or any other academic activities that expose them to social anxiety.

While this adaptive coping mechanism can be very useful to help students cope with social anxiety, other students have been reported to used maladaptive way in dealing with social anxiety. According to Russell & Topham, (2012) Avoidance of learning activities and use of substance abuse including drinking alcohol to calm nerves were reported as another way for students to cope with social anxiety. 37% of students who experience social anxiety use avoidance behavior which includes avoiding those social academic activities that involve them or expose them to the publicity. Such coping put students in more risky of poor academic performance and may result even legal and ethical issues for students. Yet there is no enough empirical evidence particularly in Tanzania Zanzibar that study coping mechanism used ny social anxious students so that to recommend better mechanism for improving well-being of students. For that matter, the paper sought examine the following question

- i. What are the coping strategies applied by undergraduate students in Zanzibar Universities to deal with social anxiety?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed descriptive cross-sectional survey design under mixed method approaches but in this objective, only qualitative approaches was used. The reason for using descriptive cross-sectional survey design is because it is effective for gathering and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted population of three Zanzibar universities namely state university of Zanzibar, Zanzibar university and SUMAIT university. 230 undergraduate students were sampled through stratified random sampling technique. Out of the 230 sampled respondents, only 20 respondents were used for qualitative data which presented in this paper.

Instrumentation

The study employed semi-structure interview tool for collecting qualitative data. This is the form of interview whereby the interviewer asked closed-ended questions that indeed elicit valuable information from the respondents but also makes them comparable with what other respondents are saying (Kothari, 2004). In this interviews method, the researcher had to identify a prospective source of information and design the meeting to elicit relevant information from the respondent

Validity and Reliability of the Study

Reliability is a measure of degree to which research instruments produce same results or data after repeated trial (Bryman, 2001) To ensure the study remains reliable. researcher provided clear explanation about the nature of tools that were adopted in this study and ensure that there is no vagueness of tool. Also, the appropriateness of the tools was checked after the pilot study and added some required information that were needed. Other hand, to ensure the validity of the study. Researcher was consistently having consultation with supervisor to ensure that the research methodology adopted in this study and data collection instruments were relevant for the study.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles in conducting research include acquiring research clearance from university and requesting consent from the participants as well as maintaining confidentiality. Willingness to participate in the study was a main concern. No special consideration was offered, no use of force or any conditions was imposed to make subjects respond. Informed consents were significant conditions for doing the research. Confidentiality of the finding from the study was greatly important and has been published in a way that protects the anonymity of the participants, and all data were kept and stored safely to protect against future abuses of the information

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: What are the coping strategies applied by undergraduate students in Zanzibar Universities to deal with social anxiety

The study was to determine the coping mechanisms used by Zanzibar undergraduate university students in managing their social anxiety. Data was obtained through a semi structured interviews help with 3 key informants and findings are presented herein.

Avoidance of Situations

findings indicated that majority of student's cope in a maladaptive way by avoiding situations that could trigger intense anxiety. These include avoiding walking into busy library halls, avoiding eye contact, lowering voice when speaking to an audience, lying about being ill to avoid situations that involve audiences focusing attention towards them such as seminar presentations. The finding are supported by an interviewee who said "Often times, I find it hard to walk into the library to read especially if it is full of people so I haven't gone to read in the library for a very long time... yes, I avoid the library, I keep having bad thoughts of what they might think about how I look, how I have dressed, how I walk". In a psychological perspective, avoidance behaviours, in the context of social anxiety, are things that students do or do not do to reduce anxiety about being in social situations. These behaviours are problematic because in the long run they only serve to increase fear and reinforce social anxiety. Similarly, Tori *et al* (2022) noted that community college students are particularly likely to use avoidance coping mechanisms which are correlated with anxiety and depression symptomatology. In addition, Jordan *et al* (2014) also noted avoidance of learning activities was reported by 37% of students with 64% reporting other diverse coping strategies. Therefore, the findings of this study and other literature have shown that students are struggling with different mechanisms which put them at higher risk of failure to cope with social anxiety.

Managing Negative Emotions

Another coping mechanism that was discovered during the interview with responds was managing negative emotions. many students reported when they stay emotional positive, they act less anxious and therefore managing negative emotion remain very useful coping mechanism. The findings are supported by One interviewee who said" I have discussed the use of relaxation techniques such as deep breathing with my counsellor and applied it during one of my presentations and it relieved my stress significantly". The findings indicate that majority of students who do not seek professional help to manage the negative emotions attached to social anxiety are unlikely to develop effective coping mechanisms on their own. On the other hand, those who attend therapy are likely to explore some skills such as using relaxation techniques prior to engaging in an anxiety provoking activity. Also, university students who attended professional help are trained with techniques to control negative thoughts with the aim of indirectly controlling negative emotions. This proved by one interviewee who said "My counsellor also told me that I can manage my negative emotions by first managing my thoughts. He explained to me how these emotions are caused by negative thinking, so when I find myself feeling bad, I quickly start evaluating my thoughts" the reason for This is because Emotion regulation is a necessary component of successful social and emotional functioning.

In line with these findings, an intensive study by Singh et al (2020) assessed social anxiety, and identified how social support, emotion regulation and mindfulness uniquely impact social anxiety among adolescents in Birgunj, Nepal. Results show that there was a positive correlation between social anxiety symptoms and age, and girls reported more symptoms. Traits such as non-acceptance of emotions, lack of clarity and lack of awareness of emotions were related to increased social anxiety; while acting with awareness, non-reactivity, and better ability to describe emotions was related to decreased anxiety. Results suggest that improving emotion regulation, dispositional mindfulness, and social support may be helpful for students who are at risk of, or are suffering from, social anxiety.

Using Substances

The study also revealed that students with social anxiety use substance abuse to cope with the situation. This was supported by one interviewee who said “Well, I do not know if smoking is also categorized as a drug but I usually feel the urge to smoke and I do so outside the university” however One interviewee had this to say which is contrary to first interviewee “No, amidst all these problems caused by my anxiety I have never considered using drugs or anything like that to cope, my religion forbids me from using substances” Another interview added up “ No never, as a Muslim I could never use drugs or any form of alcohol to deal with this problem. I have heard people say that cannabis manages anxiety but no”

The majority interviewees revealed that alcohol and substance use was not one of methods they would consider using to manage their social anxiety. This was attributed to the strong Islamic background that prohibits substance use. However, one of the interviewees stated that they smoked out of the university premises to manage anxiety. Interviewees seemed to also understand that the use of substances to cope can also result in addiction, which would be a much more difficult condition to manage. The belief and practice of a religion were also more evident among family members of nonusers (74%) than those of users (33%) according to a study by Lekarski (2012). These results indicated that religion may be a relevant protective factor for the sample studied and implications for studying the role of religiosity in coping with mental health problems such as social anxiety among students.

Contrary to these findings however, Li (2018) found that most university students in China use alcohol to cope with symptoms of social anxiety. For example, they may use substances to feel more sociable, to lessen their concerns about other people’s perceptions of them, or to feel more at ease in uncomfortable social situations. Although young adults with social anxiety may engage in alcohol use to experience what they may perceive as positive effects, they may also be more vulnerable to negative social and other consequences because of their substance use, which in turn can lead to more alcohol use to cope with stress.

Social Isolation

the findings revealed that the majority of interviewees had self-isolated from their classmates in response to their fear of being poorly evaluated or perceived by their mates. Among the few with positive professional help seeking behavior, strategies to prevent self-isolation had been explored and implemented, and in turn minimized the severity of social anxiety. Students who experience social anxiety commonly withdraw from social situations to reduce their stress. This supported by one interviewee who said “I find it hard to approach my teachers and brilliant students in my class, I simply choose to study on my own and if a subject is difficult, I often perform poorly in it” However, over time this can make their anxiety even worse, which only makes them more isolated. This finding supported by one interviewee said “making friends is always hard for me so I just keep to myself” In a psychological perspective, socially anxious students who take the risk to establish relationships are in part building a support system that will help them build resilience against anxiety. They are also better able to restructure faulty cognitive thoughts regarding the fear of perceived negative evaluation by others, since socializations help them to disapprove negative irrational thoughts that others perceive them negatively. Social isolation may also be associated with poor academic performance as joint efforts may result in better outcomes.

Comparing this finding with existing literature, Elliot (2021) explored the prevalence of social isolation in social phobic college students at a Christian college in West Texas and examined various factors to determine whether any protective factors or at-risk factors existed. The findings indicated that social isolation prevalence in social phobic college students is 54%. Also in the spring of 2012, 57% of students surveyed felt lonely, which increased by 6.2% by the fall of 2018 (ACHA, 2012, 2018). These data show a 3% increase in social isolation among college students and other hazards linked to social isolation, such as social anxiety (CDC, 2020). This study and published literature findings raise the concern that a considerable number of students suffer with isolation which easily can lead to depression and substance abuse due to social anxiety. Such a situation jeopardizes a university student’s academic journey and increases the chance for poor performance.

Sought Professional Counselling Services

Seeking for counseling was among the coping methods reported to be used by students to cope with social anxiety. Notable portion of students reported to attend session in order to foster resilience and cope with anxiety. The findings supported by interviewee who said “I have been seeing counselor for helping me with my psychological problem include social anxiety” in contrary, findings also revealed that students rarely sought professional counselling services, even when they were readily available in their universities. This was attributed to the fact that social phobia does not present with actual physical ailments and the imagined stigma associated with seeking mental health services. This supported by one interviewee who said “In our university we have a counselling facility and a department of psychology. When I was in first year, we were oriented to counselling services offered in the university. But it was until second year that I made the decision to seek counselling services” Another remarked that “I have not tried the university facilities yet as there is nothing physically wrong with me” However, those who sought such services reported gradual reduction in social anxiety symptoms. This supported by interviewee who said “counseling played vital role in how I manage my anxiety, I find continuing with session very necessary for now” Psychotherapy improves symptoms in most students with social anxiety disorder. In therapy, students learn how to recognize and change negative thoughts about themselves and develop skills to help them gain confidence in social situations. Other therapeutic approaches may also help students address underlying childhood conflicts associated with social anxiety, this is particularly true since upbringing is characterized by excessive criticism and hardly any acknowledgement of efforts, various forms of abuse in children can result in social anxiety over time. Although therapy is associated to significant reduction of social phobic symptoms in students however, due to the nature of the disorder, socially anxious adolescents may not seek help due to potential stigma associated with mental health issues and fear of negative evaluation as was revealed in this study.

Kearns *et al* (2019) also noted that despite a high prevalence of suicide ideation and mental health issues such as social phobia amongst university students, the stigma of help-seeking remains a barrier to those who are in real need of professional support. This puts a lot of students in danger of developing more disturbing and distressing symptoms and puts their academic journey at risk. According to Batterham *et al* (2013), the single most commonly cited barrier to professional help-seeking is stigma. Mental health stigma can be conceptualized as a set of negative attitudes that represent prejudice or negative stereotypes about people with mental ill health, and in some cases can lead to significant discrimination

Facing One's Fear by Taking Risks

The study also revealed that a lot of students take risky to be in situation that can prove social fear and anxiety in order to overcome their fear. It is believed by students that when they expose to things that cause social anxiety, they start to learn how to manage the situation till they get used to situation. This finding was supported by interview who said “You know in our department we are given therapists to help us address our problems. My therapist once told me that the best way to face your fears is to take risks and face fear. Since than I have faced my fear” other students find taking risk is very useful in coping with social anxiety than avoidance of social situation. This proved by one interviewee who said “ I used to try and avoid situations where I could be put on the spot, but it never worked and it sometimes magnified the negative feelings ...now I just try and get on with it and if I'm making a presentation I don't hide that I'm nervous” The findings indicate that students who attend counselling services are likely to be encouraged by their therapists to take the risk, face their fears and prove to themselves practically that their fears are mostly irrational. Findings however also show that those who don't seek professional help are less likely to take the risk to face their fears, but rather devise strategies that enable them in avoiding active involvement in anxiety provoking activities. This avoidance may instantly and temporarily decrease anxiety because students do not have to put themselves in a distressing situation.

In supporting these findings, Catrinel (2019) also investigated longitudinally the mediator role of self-compassion in the relation between coping and social anxiety in late adolescence, with emphasis on the first months of adjustment to college life. The finding revealed that a considerable number of students cope with social anxiety by using a number of mechanisms which include facing their fear. Also the finding revealed that avoidant coping decreases self-compassionate attitudes, which in turn increase social anxiety symptoms. These findings of both this study and literature give alarming signs that students with social anxiety are struggling with the problem and put them at risk of failing and dropping out of school without getting help.

4. CONCLUSION

It was concluded that students in Zanzibar Universities apply both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms in managing social anxiety depending on their professional help seeking behavior. It is conclusive that those with poor help seeking behavior mainly use maladaptive coping mechanisms such as avoidance of both actual academic activities and those requiring social engagement. Some of the maladaptive coping mechanisms used by students with poor help seeking behavior include: avoidance of academic situations to manage negative intrusive thoughts and emotions triggered by social situations in the academic environment. On the other hand, socially anxious students with appropriate help seeking behavior manage their triggers by taking risks to face their fears such as participating in class, initiating conversations with strangers whenever possible, cognitively challenging intrusive negative thoughts associated to social anxiety, engaging in relaxation exercises and meditation to manage negative emotions, all of which are skills imparted through therapy. Overall, amidst their experiences with social anxiety, the majority Zanzibar students are unlikely to consider coping through substance abuse and religiosity is one of the protective factors against use of substance.

5. RECOMMENDATION

As per findings, it was recommended that There is a need to conduct a mass campaign against stigmatizing those who seek counselling and therapy as weak or mentally ill. This will help in normalizing and encouraging students to personally seek professional counselling services whenever they feel that they need help. There is a need for greater sensitization about mental health to eradicate myths associated with it that consequently prevent students from seeking such services. Also Instructors should be capacitated with skills that encourage even those that have social anxiety to take appropriate risks, build confidence and engage more in their academic activities. Instructors should be equipped with basic behavioral theory strategies that encourage learning of helpful behavior such as class participation by giving students rewards such as praise and compliments to reward the efforts of shy students for moving out of their comfort zones. Instructors should also express empathy and patience rather than harshly responding to distressed socially anxious students during presentations, since harsh response reinforces social phobic behavior.

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