



## Stress and Coping Strategies as Predictors of Psychological Wellbeing Among Nigeria University Students

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study surveyed students' psychological wellbeing as predicted by college stress and coping strategies from three universities (University of Jos, Benue State University Makurdi, and Baze University, Abuja) in north-central Nigeria.

**Materials and Methods:** The sample used in this study was 375 students (male = 247, female = 128) with a mean age of 24.22 years. College Stress Scale [1], Coping Strategies Inventory – Short [2] and Psychological Wellbeing Scale [3] were used to measure students' stress, coping and wellbeing respectively.

**Results:** The regression results showed that: (1) college stress is a statistically significant predictor of psychological wellbeing  $F(3,371) = 11.09, p = .005$ ; (2) coping strategies is a statistically significant predictor of psychological wellbeing  $F(7,367) = 21.86, p = .001$ ; (3) after controlling for possible effect of stress, coping strategies predicted a significant amount of variance in students' psychological wellbeing,  $R^2$  change = .21,  $F$  change (4, 367) = 27.56,  $p < .001$ .

**Conclusion:** Academic and personal hassles domains of stress were positively related to psychological wellbeing, except negative life event, which was negatively related to the psychological wellbeing, while coping strategies positively related to psychological wellbeing.

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### Introduction

The goal of university education is to train knowledgeable and competent professionals who will utilise competencies in different work settings after graduation for personal, community and national development. Unfortunately, studies suggest that the current educational process may have an unintended negative effect on students' psychological wellbeing, with a high frequency of stress and ineffective coping strategies [1,4-7].

The wellbeing of university students is an important research endeavour. Experiencing high levels of psychological wellbeing is considered a central criterion of positive mental health [8]. In addition to this, wellbeing has been found to not only be an outcome of favourable life circumstances, such as academic success and satisfying relationships, but also a predictor and component cause of these outcomes [9]. Consequently, the wellbeing of students at university is important not only for influencing students' later attitudinal and career outcomes, but also produces outcomes that benefit communities and society at large.

University life is unavoidably challenging and stressful. According to Chao [10], college students' stresses have increased

tremendously over the past decade. Arguably, undergraduates need to experience high psychological wellbeing to adapt effectively to university environment and actualize their full potential. This notwithstanding, such desirable state of health is disrupted by stress. Unless, appropriate coping strategies are engaged to reduce the stress, students become overwhelmed by its effects. Similarly, coping strategies used by university students have implications for their psychological wellbeing, making it a research focus for several years [11]. This study is therefore designed to justify the imperative to understand health factors that impact university students' psychological wellbeing.

### Statement of the Problem

To implement a systematic approach to campus wellbeing, Nigeria universities need to understand the health factors that impact negatively students' wellbeing. or now, the management of most Nigerian universities had established counselling services and health clinics to cater for the wellbeing of students. Students, who experience severe stress and cannot cope effectively, are expected to approach the health clinic or counselling services unit for help. But very often, only the presenting symptoms are addressed. If Nigerian university

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managements continue to respond reactively to students' wellbeing problems, they will miss the probable health factors responsible for low psychological wellbeing among students. In addition, students who are overwhelmed by such health factors will not perform well academically and consequently drop out of school. This will lead to a waste of human resources, as well as defeat the purpose of universities to produce high-quality manpower. The study of health factors that negatively affect students' psychological wellbeing will not only enable students to understand the causes of stress and effective ways of coping but also provide data for evidence-based interventions. In addition, through this study, the management of universities will understand and identify at-risk students among the population and target them for prevention programmes.

Relying on the theory of stress coping [12], we therefore, examined how stress (Personal hassle, Academic hassle and Negative life events) and coping strategies (problem-focused engagement, emotion-focused engagement, problem-focused disengagement, and emotion-focused disengagement) predict psychological wellbeing among students in select North-central Nigeria universities to answer the following questions: 1) which aspect of stress predicts students' psychological wellbeing most? 2) What types of coping strategies predict students' psychological wellbeing most? 3) If we control for the possible effect of stress, Will coping strategies still be able to predict a significant amount of variance in psychological wellbeing? To achieve the study aim and answer the questions, the following hypotheses are formulated: H1: Stress will jointly and independently predict significantly psychological wellbeing among university students; and H2: Coping strategies will jointly and independently predict significant psychological wellbeing among university students.

## Review of Related Literature

### Students' Stress and psychological

Stress in academic institutions can have both positive and negative consequences, but if not well managed, can adversely affect the health of students [13-15]. Academic institutions have different work settings compared to non-academic and therefore one would expect the difference in symptoms, causes, and consequences of stress in those two setups [16]. Stress has become an important topic in the academic circle as well as in our society. Many scholars [17-19] have carried out extensive research on stress and its outcomes and concluded that the topic needed more attention.

### Coping Strategies and Psychological Wellbeing

Coping has been a central focus in the vast amount of studies when it comes to learning about stress [12,20-23]. Numerous studies [12,24] suggest that although a combination of coping strategies may be used to deal with any one stressor, coping adaptive strategies tend to be more problem-focused (e.g., planning, active coping, seeking social support) and less emotion-focused (e.g., venting emotions or disengagement). The differences in coping strategies warrant further study.

## Methods

### Participants

The study design was an ex-post-facto cross-sectional survey, in which 375 participants were drawn through a stratified sampling technique from three select universities (University of Jos, Benue State University Makurdi, and Baze University Abuja) in the North Central Geo-political zone of Nigeria. The mean age of students was 24.22 years (SD = 4.36); Most of the participants were male (65.9%, n = 247), and female (34.1%, n = 128). The majority of the students were from the Federal University of Jos (49.3%, n = 185), and Benue State University (40.3%, n = 151), while the private university Baze University (10.4%, n = 39) had the least. Students were also categorized according to the level of study, with the fourth year as the largest group (33.9%, n = 127), closely followed by third-year (26.7%, n = 100), first and second-year groups (19.2%, n = 72) and (14.4%, n = 54) respectively, and lastly fifth year group (5.8%, n = 22) was the least. Again the majority of students were Christians (89.3%, n = 335), and (10.7%, n = 40) Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds. Other minority ethnic groups were highest (61.1%, n = 229), over the major three ethnic groups, Hausa (7.7%, n = 29), Yoruba (14.4%, n = 54), and Ibo (16.8%, n = 63). Showing that the over 250 ethnic minorities in Nigeria put together are the majority numerically against the entire major ethnic groups.

### Instruments

Three standardised psychological scales with acceptable psychometric properties were used for this study, and all scales display excellent internal reliability. These include:

*The College Stress Scale (CSS)* developed by Li and Boey [1] is a 30-item scale used to assess the perceived stress experiences of university students. All items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 = not at all to 3 = high, and total scores range from 30 to 90 with higher scores indicative of higher levels of stress. The overall reliability of the scale in this study was  $\alpha = .82$

*Coping Strategies Inventory – Short (CSI-S [2]):* The CSI-S is a 32-item abbreviated version of CSI [2]. The original version consisted of 72 items, which is designed to assess coping thoughts and behaviours in response to a specific stressor. All items are scored on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much, and total scores range from 32 to 160 with higher scores suggestive of higher levels of coping. The overall Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) reliability for the 32-item scale used in this study was  $\alpha = .84$

*Psychological Wellbeing Scale (SPW – [3]),* which is widely used in the world by researchers are used to assess students' psychological wellbeing. All 18 items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 = disagree very much to 6 = agree very much, and total scores range from 18 to 108 with higher scores indicative of higher levels of psychological wellbeing. The overall reliability of the scale in this study was  $\alpha = .78$

### Procedure for Data Collection

To satisfy the ethical conditions for research with participants, permission was sought in writing and obtained from the Ethics

Committees through the management of the three universities. Only participants who were currently undergoing a full-time undergraduate course in any of the selected universities for the 2018/2019 academic session were recruited for the study. Consent was sought from prospective participants and privacy of information assured via questionnaire instruction. Faculty members in the respective universities assisted in administering and collecting questionnaires from students.

**Data Analysis Technique**

Descriptive statistics is used to describe demographic characteristics of the respondents, while hierarchical multiple regression analysis, was used to test research hypotheses.

**Results**

**Descriptive analysis**

The following Tables 1 to 4 below show descriptive statistics of the means and standard deviations for college stress, coping strategies and psychological wellbeing scores and correlation matrices as well as the hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

**Descriptive Statistics**

The Pearson correlation analysis (r) Table 1 above shows the means and standard deviations associated with the dependent (psychological wellbeing) and each domain of the independent variables (college stress and coping strategies). The results show that all the variables, except negative life events, correlated significantly with psychological wellbeing.

A hierarchical multiple regression was carried out to investigate whether college stress jointly and independently predict significantly participants’ psychological wellbeing. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. The results of the regression when personal hassle, academic hassle, and negative life events were entered in the first model indicated that college stress jointly (Table 2)

explained 8.2% of the variance in psychological wellbeing and that the ANOVA (Table 3) result (model 1) confirms college stress as a statistically significant predictor of psychological wellbeing  $F(3,371) = 11.09, p = .005$ . This result supports the first part of hypothesis 1, that college stress will jointly predict significant psychological wellbeing among university students.

Independently, results in the coefficients (Table 4) shows academic hassle and negative life event significantly predicted psychological wellbeing, while personal hassles did not. Academic hassle positively predicted psychological wellbeing and made the highest contribution ( $\beta = .33, t = 5.37, p < .001$ ). The positive beta and t values in the relationship between college stress academic hassle and psychological wellbeing imply that as academic hassles increase, so does the psychological wellbeing of students. Negative life events significantly predicted negatively psychological wellbeing ( $\beta = -.16, t = -2.69, p < .007$ ). The implication of the negative beta and t values indicates an inverse relationship between negative life and psychological wellbeing scores. This means that the lesser the students encounter negative live life events stressors, the higher their psychological wellbeing and vice versa. Personal hassle positively correlated with psychological wellbeing but failed to significantly predict psychological wellbeing ( $\beta = .01, t = 0.23, p = .82$ ). The second aspect of the first hypothesis which stated that college stress will independently predict significantly psychological wellbeing among university students, is therefore accepted.

Similarly, the regression coefficient summary, (Table 4) explains the second hypothesis, which states that coping strategies will jointly and independently predict psychological wellbeing. The results of the regression when problem-focused engagement, emotion-focused engagement, problem-focused disengagement, and emotion-focused disengagement were entered in the second model show that coping strategies jointly (table 2) explained 21.2% of the variance in psychological wellbeing and that the ANOVA (table 3) result (model 2) justifies coping strategies as a statistically significant predictor of psychological wellbeing  $F(7,367) = 21.86, p = .001$ . This

**Table 1:** Summary of zero correlations, means, and standard deviations of study variables.

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Total psychological wellbeing	65.11	13.37	-							
2	Personal hassle	18.73	7.78	.103*	-						
3	Academic hassle	12.61	5.95	.254**	.427	-					
4	Negative life event	3.96	3.20	.018	.323	.519	-				
5	Problem focused engagement	23.22	5.42	.488**	.066	.228	-.055	-			
6	Emotion focused engagement	23.89	5.45	.327**	.051	.159	.002	.543	-		
7	Problem focused disengagement	23.09	5.28	.371**	.137	.148	.079	.462	.520	-	
8	Emotion focused disengagement	21.06	4.65	.252**	.237	.192	.182	.202	.246	.497	-

\*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 2:** Regression Model Summary

<b>Model Summary<sup>c</sup></b>										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.287 <sup>a</sup>	.082	.075	12.85834	.082	11.086	3	371	.000	
2	.542 <sup>b</sup>	.294	.281	11.33736	.212	27.555	4	367	.000	

**Table 3:** ANOVA Summary.

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5498.544	3	1832.848	11.086	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	61339.973	371	165.337		
	Total	66838.517	374			
2	Regression	19665.909	7	2809.416	21.857	.000 <sup>c</sup>
	Residual	47172.608	367	128.536		
	Total	66838.517	374			

**Table 4:** Regression Coefficients Summary

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1	(Constant)	57.963	1.909		30.363	.000
	Personal hassle	.022	.095	.013	.232	.817
	Academic hassle	.741	.138	.330	5.373	.000
	Negative life event	-.661	.246	-.158	-2.691	.007
2	(Constant)	27.108	3.659		7.409	.000
	Personal hassle	-.022	.085	-.013	-.254	.800
	Academic hassle	.403	.127	.180	3.166	.002
	Negative life event	-.334	.223	-.080	-1.497	.135
	Prob focus eng	.875	.138	.355	6.355	.000
	Emot focus eng	.031	.137	.013	.227	.821
	Prob focus diseng	.346	.150	.136	2.304	.022
	Emot focusdiseng	.266	.149	.092	1.781	.076

a. Dependent Variable: Total psychological wellbeing

result again is consistent with the first aspect of hypothesis 2, that coping strategies will jointly predict the psychological wellbeing of students.

Independently, results in the coefficients (Table 4) show that all coping strategies subscales were positively related to psychological wellbeing, but only problem-focused engagement and disengagement significantly predicted psychological wellbeing, while emotion-focused engagement and disengagement did not. Problem focused engagement made the highest prediction ( $\beta = .36, t = 6.36, p < .001$ ) over problem focused disengagement ( $\beta = -.14, t = 2.30, p < .02$ ) to psychological wellbeing. However, emotion focused engagement ( $\beta = .01, t = 0.23, p = .82$ ), and emotion focused disengagement ( $\beta = .09, t = 1.78, p = .08$ ) both failed to significantly predict psychological wellbeing. The implication of the positive relationship between coping strategies dimensions and psychological wellbeing scores suggests a proportionate increase in both variables and vice versa.

Finally, the same hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the capacity of coping strategies dimensions (problem-focused engagement, emotion-focused engagement, problem-focused disengagement, and emotion-focused disengagement) to predict university students' levels of psychological wellbeing (Scales of psychological wellbeing), after controlling for the influence of college stress dimensions (personal hassle, academic hassle and negative life event). The result provided support for the third research question.

Personal hassle, academic hassle and negative life events were entered at Step 1, explaining 8.2% of the variance in

psychological wellbeing. After the entry of the coping strategies dimensions in Step 2 the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 29.4%,  $F(7, 367) = 21.85, p < .001$ . The four coping strategies dimensions explained an additional 21.2% of the variance in psychological wellbeing, after controlling for the personal hassle, academic hassle and negative life event,  $R$  squared change = .21,  $F$  change (4, 367) = 27.56,  $p < .001$ . In the final model, only academic hassle ( $\beta = .18, t = 3.17, p < .002$ ) and as noted earlier, the two coping strategies measures were statistically significant predictors of students' psychological wellbeing.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study set forth to test the predictive effects of college stress and coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of students from three universities (University of Jos, Benue State University Makurdi, and Baze University Abuja) in North-central Nigeria. Results reveal that both college stress and coping strategies jointly predicted significantly psychological wellbeing of students. Again, after controlling for the effect of college stress on psychological wellbeing, coping strategies still made a larger significant contribution on students' psychological wellbeing. However, independently, some domains of college stress and coping strategies failed to significantly predict psychological wellbeing.

In the first instance, the research hypothesis explored the joint and independent influence of college stress (personal hassle, academic Hassle, and negative life events) on students' wellbeing. The result supports the hypothesis, and was accepted, but with reservations. That is, while both academic

hassle and negative life events both independently predicted the psychological wellbeing of students, the direction of the relationship differed. Furthermore, the personal hassle was positively related to but failed to significantly predict psychological wellbeing. These research findings have implications for practice and policy decisions. The joint effect of college stress on the psychological wellbeing of students in this study was positive, implying that the higher the level of stress students experience, the higher their psychological wellbeing. This result is at variance with earlier position [25] that stress negatively influences students' wellbeing. This notwithstanding, when considered independently, negative life events significantly predicted negatively psychological wellbeing, and the result agrees with [26]. This indicates that higher negative encounters with negative life events impair students' wellbeing. The implication of negative life events on students' wellbeing is huge and requires positive appraisal and positive emotional coping strategies, which are amenable to accepting certain circumstances students are unable to change. For example, in Nigeria, parents or relations are major sources of students' financial support for educational purposes. If the negative life event involves the loss of the family breadwinner, a student would become financially distressed aside from emotionally hurt. And in such circumstances, it would take extra emotional stability and courage to accept the event. Some students who cannot adjust to the circumstance might resort to negative coping strategies which will further exacerbate their already dwindling wellbeing.

Whereas academic hassle significantly predicted positively students' psychological wellbeing, personal hassle was positively related but didn't predict significantly the psychological wellbeing of students in the three universities under study. In my opinion, this positive correlation is not accidental because stress is required as a natural response to alert individuals of any potential threat that can have negative and positive consequences. For instance, if we define stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it [27], it is appropriate to situate academic stress as a stimulus for personal development and creative problem-solving. Thus, the stress – wellbeing relationship is dependent on cognitive appraisal [12]. If perceived as a challenge, the more students are exposed to academic hassles that hold potential for self-development, the more they would be predisposed to respond by translating the experience into higher levels of psychological wellbeing. Taken together, the amount of personal control over stress stimuli, as well as self-efficacy, outcome expectations and effective coping strategies [28,29], can suppress or overturn stress stimuli into exciting activities that can improve wellbeing.

Secondly, this study examined whether coping strategies (problem-focused engagement, emotion-focused engagement, problem-focused disengagement and emotion-focused disengagement) jointly and independently predicted the psychological wellbeing of students. As expected, the results showed a statistically significant joint positive correlation to psychological wellbeing. This result implies that the use of effective stress-coping strategies assures psychological wellbeing, and is consistent with earlier studies [11,12,24,30].

These referenced studies corroborate the findings from this study that certain coping strategies were found to be significantly positively correlated with students' wellbeing, while others had significant negative relationships.

From the foregoing, the independent results clearly show that only problem-focused engagement and problem-focused disengagement significantly predicted psychological wellbeing, with problem-focused engagement making the highest contribution, while emotion-focused engagement and emotion-focused disengagement did not. Besides, problem-focused engagement was shown to positively influence wellbeing of students significantly. This result implies that students whose efforts are directed at dealing with their problems would equally experience a high sense of wellbeing and vice versa. This goes further to explain the fact that those who adopt emotion-focused strategies may be unable to reduce their stress. Previous studies have also shown that problem-focused coping is seen as an adaptive way of dealing with stress, and that these strategies often are positively related to wellbeing [12,30]. Conversely, some researchers, believe that when stressors are more or less uncontrollable, for instance when the stressor is a societal threat, problem-focused coping can sometimes create more distress and, thus, be associated with low wellbeing.

It must be realized that the concepts of stress, coping strategies and psychological wellbeing are not permanent physical, psychological and behavioural states or responses but relatively stable to warrant measurement in real-time. Furthermore, the relationship between them is not always linear as depicted in this study but rather interactional. For instance, likely, students with mastery over their environment and a definite life purpose (features of psychological wellbeing) may not appraise academic or personal hassles as stressful. Even when perceived as such, the psychological stability will empower such students to adopt more positive stress-coping strategies that will in turn increase their wellbeing. Again, the strategies for coping with the particular stress that a specific problem or situation creates differ from those that need to be implemented in another problem or situation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that when used jointly as composite variables, both college stress and coping strategies are predictors of psychological wellbeing. However, college stress, when considered domain-specific, academic hassle significantly predicted positively psychological wellbeing, while negative life events significantly predicted negatively psychological wellbeing but personal hassle did not significantly predict psychological wellbeing. Problem-focused engagement and problem-focused disengagement positively predicted significantly psychological wellbeing but emotion-focused engagement and emotion-focused disengagement did not predict psychological wellbeing. This study reveals that not all aspects of stress are negatively related to students' wellbeing and that not all coping strategies are effective in reducing stress and increasing students' psychological wellbeing. Students should understand the dynamics of the stress coping and wellbeing relationships to identify early

experiences of difficulty and when to seek help. We suggest that psychologists, policymakers and other professionals responsible for students' welfare to utilize the findings for effective decision-making and service delivery.

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