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CAMPUS LIFE: THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL FACTORS ON EMOTIONAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS

Abstract

This research explored the perceptions of students at a university campus in Gauteng South Africa on external factors that may contribute to their emotional (psychological) and academic functioning.

During a preliminary investigation, three students at a residential university voluntarily came for psychological counseling sessions because of stress related issues. They were interviewed and it was provisionally determined that six external factors contributed to their stress and burnout. Although it started off with a qualitative instrumental case study approach the research developed into a pluralistic study. Group counselling was introduced to the three students as it was anticipated that sharing painful experiences might be more effective. An action research methodology was followed: factors realized as themes or categories during discussions, and the research was followed up by a quantitative method. Participants (89) from four universities were selected by convenient sampling to complete a questionnaire.

The discussion and conclusion on results will reflect some findings of the quantitative research where it may be considered in support of the qualitative research.

This article seeks to make both a theoretical and practical contribution to the knowledge of factors that impact on emotional well-being and academic performance of students. I will argue that the clarity of the association between a university learning environment and students' perspectives are often limited, because students' perspectives are seldom adequately considered.

Key words: Campus disruptions, learning environments, acute stress syndrome, burnout

Background

A study led by Gary Evans (2009), a professor of human ecology at Cornell University, N.Y., USA, recently linked childhood stress to reduced working memory function in late adolescence: "When a young person had high levels of stress-related hormones, they demonstrated reductions in working memory (basically short-term memory)".

According to another study done in Australia on students' perceptions (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons 2002, 23) reported students' strongest predictors of satisfaction in learning as the following: "A learning environment which was perceived as involving good teaching, clear expectations (clear goals), and allowing a degree of choice to pursue individual interests (independence)...". Basically, these include all factors conducive to teaching and learning. Yet many students all over the globe drop out annually because of personal experiences not related to the academe: most of them are highly intelligent and competent to achieve academic goals, but

emotionally unable to sustain their performance. Many blame this on negative personal experiences on campus.

Disruptions on campus goes back at least to the early nineteenth century in Europe and America when students complained about racism on campus, sexism on campus, no accessibility to certain courses and high fees (Williamson 2003, 22). Some students initiated disruption and others became vulnerable as disruptive behaviour on campus persisted. Only when they developed stress-related behavioural patterns, felt emotionally unsupported, did not attend classes, or developed health problems, would they either see a medical doctor or just dropped out. During 1807, more than half the learners on the Princeton University in the USA were suspended for “violent rebellion”. Since federal funding made it possible for the enrolment of more learners, America moved from a few small colleges serving only the wealthy and social elite, to an egalitarian system of higher education. This prevented many human right violations, but on the other hand changed the cultural and social environment on campus to such an extent that it brought along emotional and social problems for students (Nichols 1997, 4-5).

In South Africa there have been numerous changes in the education arena since 1976 and in some cases, violent reactions and power struggles that almost paralysed higher teaching institutions during the years that followed: free expression against discrimination, protests, theft, physical attacks and sexual harassment. The merging of different universities and colleges caused many students and lecturers not being able to settle in to new campuses, time schedules, increased registration fees and new academic standards. To prevent chaos, the Green Paper’s release allowed the government to send *independent assessors* to troubled campuses to investigate disruption and corruption (MacGregor 1997, 11).

According to Lizzio, Wilson & Simons (2001), university students’ perceptions of their academic environment has a high impact on their learning approaches and outcomes. According to Brehm (1998, 40), the stress impact of not feeling safe in one’s own study environment has a negative effect on concentration (cognitive ability and motivation), health and lifestyle. When people feel stressed they are less likely to stay according to their exercise programs, eat well, get enough sleep and be able to focus on a learning task. They may be more likely not to exercise, eat too much, abuse alcohol, caffeine and other drugs. Physically, they are more prone to high cholesterol levels, hypertension, artery disease and human immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV). Brehm (1998, 43) emphasised that stress may lead to depression, anxiety and phobias if people do not develop better ways to cope with it.

Earwaker (1992, 25) states that every situation of change could be considered as an experience of loss and understood on the analogy of bereavement: “...whether the event impacting upon the personality is loss of a loved one, or loss of a lifestyle...”. The stress factors of a learning environment can thus be explained in terms of the analogy of bereavement.

The early-twenty-first-century brings a set of new experiences and personal and psychological problems that may predispose students to mental illness. It is not unusual for a university counselling and mental health center to diagnose students with anxiety, mood disorders, eating disorders, and lack of impulse-control, personality disorders, substance-related or other mental disorders (Sharkin 2006).

Student experiences in higher education

Disruptive students' behaviour directly or indirectly is visible in the influence it has on attendance of classes, quality of teaching and overall security on campus (Lamplugh & Pagan 1996, 3-11). Disruptive student behaviour in any form is often to the detriment of students who are preparing for their future, their examinations and their professions.

Lipset (in Siggelkow 1992, 12) describes students as vulnerable and often powerless, as they are "...in transition between having been dependent on their families for income, status and various forms of security and protection, and taking up their own role in the working (studying) community".

Acute stress reaction and burnout

Acute stress reactions are transient reactions to severely traumatised experiences that usually subside spontaneously once the stress is over within a few days or weeks (Van Niekerk & Vogel 2008, 9). Burnout is an intense form of prolonged stress with the result of emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment and affects the person to feel depleted of emotional resources (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 1994). Both acute stress reaction and burnout can be manifested in skin conditions, gastrointestinal disturbances, and upper respiratory tract infections as well as reactive depression, anxiety attacks and somatic symptoms like headaches, sleeplessness and other complaints for which no obvious organic cause could be found (Brom 2001).

Research methodology

The question to the factors contributing to stress in higher education, developed. The research was initially described as a case study: Observations on one campus over a period of nine months were made and three participants from the same university, who had personally experienced disruptive or violent behaviour, were interviewed. According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delport (2003) interviews can be seen as follows: "Purposeful conversations, essentially a technique or method for establishing or discovering that there are different perspectives on events other than those of the person who initiating the interview".

The aim was to determine the external factors that impacted negatively on students' experiences and perspectives. Individual counselling sessions were initiated by the students and the researcher was the psychologist. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were discussed when the need for group counselling seemed to be a better option. According to Buss (2000 in Shechtman 2007, 13) the greatest obstacle to happiness for young people is a lack of intimacy, loneliness and alienation. During group counselling members realized that they are not alone, unique or abnormal in their distress. According to Shechtman (2007, 13) group counselling can be defined as a group of at least 3 individuals and include any intervention that is designed to alleviate distress. The three individual students gave consent to participate in the action research.

External factors that were identified and demarcated as themes during group sessions were: sexual behaviour such as stalking; vandalism to personal belongings such as motorcars, stealing of cell phones, books and other personal items; loud

noises and interferences during lectures, resting hours or in the library; and a lack of respect for private space due to cultural differences.

With the themes identified, a questionnaire was compiled for further investigation of the topic by making use of a larger group: 89 university students from three universities in South Africa completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained structured and semi structured questions regarding language, gender, religion, free association, alcohol abuse, noise, hygiene, physical abuse, theft, smoking, culture, intimidation, table manners, privacy, vandalism, a healthy environment, physical attacks and sexual behaviour. The data capturing was done by the statistical research department at Unisa.

The questionnaire consisted of Section A: biographical information (such as gender, academic status and home language) and Section B where the participant had to respond to questions on possible violations in the following way: (one example)

Religion

(Structured question):

Do you think that people's religious rights are being violated on campus?

Yes/No

How seriously do you consider the problem?

Serious 6 5 4 3 2 1 not serious at all

(Semi-structured questions):

Explain the problem and provide us with a typical example, incident or scenario.

Additional problems you would like to bring under our attention.

Findings and discussion

During my observations and interviews with students I found that problems were rarely simple and those interfering with successful studies were difficult to identify. However once a student was a victim to violence or disruptive behaviour, he or she would describe it as an emotional experience: "...violating my personal space" (Student A); "since being a victim of car theft, I am still a victim as I no longer have a car" (Student C); or: "I cannot get up in the morning ...I have no motivation" (Student B). They described stress and burnt-out syndrome symptoms (DSM IV 1994).

In the case of all three participants in this study, their experiences on campus were received negatively and impacted their studies. After student A met a student on campus who shared her bathroom in the hostel since the beginning of the year, she saw this student wearing her blouse she thought was stolen. Her trust in her fellow-students changed. Later she found the blouse in the bathroom and confronted the student who said she only borrowed it (without permission) and in her culture one should share. When student A missed more of her clothes, her purse and even class notes, she felt harassed and complained with the hostel body. Her experiences made her anxious; she developed sleeping problems and eventually felt unsafe in her environment. During the group discussions she received support from others in the group that shared her experience while group members could empathise with each other, although they had different stories to share. During group counselling, she

realised that campus life is only a mini-cosmos of the larger society, and she developed social coping skills to handle similar situations in future without stress.

Student B indicated physical attacks when she was walking from the library to her hostel one evening. Her purse was stolen and she was raped. The months that followed were described by her as: "...disastrous, I am unable to concentrate on my studies even though I had debriefing sessions at the police station".

Student C was driving on campus, when stopped by two male students who indicated they were lost. One opened her back door, grabbed her and took off with her motor vehicle. According to the questionnaire results, stealing, personal attacks (including rape) and harassing on campus seems to be some of the main reasons for female students experiencing disempowerment to such an extent that they suffer from stress reactions.

From the literature review two conclusions can be made. Firstly, human right violations experienced by students at university campuses are not isolated cases. In other countries where strong diversity of cultures exists, similar problems are experienced. However, the intensity and frequency of problems might differ to those in some of the residential universities in South Africa. Secondly, much of what the public know about human right violations on campuses, especially in South-Africa, are vague opinions of politicians or the reports of journalists in newspapers, which are seldom based on empirical evidence (MacGregor 1992, Ndlyana 2000, Mackay 2002, Letsoko 2005).

According to the remarks and examples of participants in the quantitative study, 38% felt they could not engage in high-level academic activities and/or develop into quality academics because of disruptive and violent behaviour of other students. For some (25%), stolen motor vehicles or the fear of vehicles that could be stolen prevented them from attending important lectures. For others (27%), loud music or other noises interfered with their levels of concentration and sleep. Although alcohol abuse and smoking were mentioned as average levels of interference by most, those who did not smoke or abuse alcohol themselves saw it as infringements on a healthy environment and it affected them seriously. For most of the participants, the main problems were the day-to-day irritations.

Conclusion

Some students may experience cultural differences as disruptive, invasive and even as violations to their human freedom, which make them feel disempowered. Some students' views of *self-actualisation* (to socialize, having fun, enjoying parties) may impact negatively on another's safety.

Often a student involved in family problems has less tolerance to interferences of personal space and disruptive campus behaviour than those from supportive families. Also, one student may have a personality that adapts easily to changes in social settings, while another may find this harder.

Gender, race, culture and language are not the only aspects which relate to campus disruptions. Factors such as noise, alcohol abuse and a lack of privacy do not draw much media coverage but have an impact on students' academic progress and emotional well-being on a daily basis.

Perceptions of teaching environments influence learning outcomes both directly (perceptions of experiences) and indirectly (perceptions on support services). Thus,

changes in teaching environments may have an impact on students' motivation and learning outcomes.

Generic academic and workplace skills are perceived to be best developed in learning environments characterised by safety and independence.

Comprehensive initiatives that incorporate the domains of psychotherapy, treatment, prevention, and outreach, should be utilised in institutions of higher education to sufficiently ensure that services are meeting the diverse personal and psychological needs of students (Langford 2004). Group counselling done by professionals, addresses issues related not only to campus disruptions but also to family relationship and personal dynamics, and is often more effective than individual counselling. Group counselling is an opportunity for practical training in social skills (Shectman 2007).

It is recommended that universities should prepare students by advertising support services. Colleges and universities should also disperse self-help and educational materials as well as employ standardized programs and interactive computer systems that support students who need information. Universities should outsource counselling services and develop a referral system to direct students to professional services offered in the community.

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