



College Student Stress: Relationship Anxiety, Negative Affect, Self-Esteem, and Morality-Conscience Guilt

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Introduction

✓ In addition to surviving academically, young students are faced with decision making, perhaps for the first time as independent adults, which can be overwhelmingly stressful. Those without adequate social skills may find college life intimidating (Oppenheimer, 1984).

✓ The desire to form romantic relationships on campus can be both seductive and stressful; being overly anxious in relationships can lead to despair and dysfunction in students (Baumeister, 1995).

✓ Faced with social rejection by peers, stressed students can experience negative affects such as anxiety, fear, shame, or a host of other mental health problems, which can further exacerbate their stress. (Simpson, 2007). Being rejected romantically by others may erode a student's self-esteem, particularly if their self-esteem is grounded on being in a romantic relationship (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

✓ Students confront new moral dilemmas (e.g. substance use and sexual behavior) on campus that may challenge their moral standards. As a result, unresolved guilt may lead to chronic stress and depression (Symes, 1995).

Behavioral Model

Stress-Coping Model, Lazarus & Folkman (1984)



Hypotheses

1. Higher relationship anxiety is positively associated with higher perceived stress
2. Higher negative affect is positively associated with higher perceived stress
3. Lower self-esteem is negatively associated with higher perceived stress
4. Higher morality-conscience guilt is positively associated with higher perceived stress
5. Collectively, relationship anxiety, negative affect, self-esteem, and morality-conscience guilt will account for a significant portion of perceived stress in students

Method

- IRB approval obtained
- Participants recruited from a large state university
- Paperless (cross-sectional correlation survey; computer-based)
- Participants received academic credit

Measures

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983)

- 14 items measure degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful
- Good construct validity (Cohen & Williamson, 1988)
- 5-point likert-type scale: (0-never; 4-very often)
- "In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?"
- Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$

Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment (MIMARA) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)

- 36 items measure adult romantic attachment orientations (anxiety, avoidance)
- Convergent & discriminant validity (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998)
- 7-point likert-type scale (1-strongly disagree; 7-strongly agree)
- "I worry a lot about relationships"
- Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$ (anxiety)

Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)

- 20 items measure both positive and negative affect
- Convergent & discriminant validity (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)
- 5-point likert-type scale (1- not at all; 5- extremely)
- - "irritable"
- - "distressed"
- Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989)

- 11 items measure global self-esteem
- Convergent validity (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001)
- 4-point likert-type scale (1 - strongly agree; 4 - strongly disagree)
- - "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure"
- Cronbach $\alpha = .78$

Revised Mosher Guilt Inventory (RMGI) (Mosher, 1998)

- 114 items measure sex-guilt, hostility-guilt, and morality-conscience guilt
- Convergent & discriminant validity (Mosher, 1966)
- 7-point likert-type scale (0 - not true for me; 6 - extremely true for me)
- "I punish myself..."
- Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$

Results

N=324

Demographics

	Mean	SD
AGE	20.87	5.30
GENDER	N	%
Male	78	24.1
Female	246	75.9
ETHNICITY		
European-American	192	59.3
African-American	62	19.1
Latino(a)	30	9.3
Other	40	12.3
EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Full-time	28	8.7
Part-time	135	41.8
Unemployed	160	49.5

Univariate Statistics

	Mean	SD	Poss. Range	Study Range	Calculated α
PSS	26.98	7.16	0-76	7-42	.84
MIMARA	3.79	1.14	1-7	1-6.65	.87
PANAS	21.95	6.92	20-100	10-46	.88
RSES	28.73	2.71	11-44	20-43	.73
RMGI	66.06	14.13	0-132	31-114	.87

Bivariate Statistics

	Age	Gender	Ethnic Background	Relationship Status	PSS	MIMARA	PANAS	RSES	RMGI
Age	—								
Gender	-.06	—							
Ethnic Background	-.02	-.03	—						
Relationship Status	.06	.05	.03	—					
PSS	-.03	.13*	.05	-.05	—				
MIMARA	-.09	.12*	-.03	-.09	.42**	—			
PANAS	.03	.07	.08	-.10	.61**	.36**	—		
RSES	-.04	.01	-.09	.06	-.62**	-.43**	-.32**	—	
RMGI	.00	.08	.02	-.05	.43**	.29**	.33**	-.47**	—

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Variables	β	t	Tolerance	VIF
Age	-.04	-1.13	.98	1.02
Gender	.09	2.17**	.97	1.03
Relationship Anxiety	.10	2.17**	.97	1.03
Negative Affect	.36	7.72***	.98	1.03
Self-Esteem	-.34	-6.78***	.99	1.01
Morality-Conscience Guilt	.12	2.61**	.99	1.01

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$ F (6, 318) = 58.46***, Adjusted R² = .52

Dependent Variable: PERCEIVED STRESS

Discussion

This study confirms the findings of other investigators that psychosocial factors such as anxieties over romantic relationships (Baumeister, 1995), negative emotions (Simpson, 1997), low self-esteem (Stinson, et. al, 2008) and guilt burdens (Symes, 1995) can cause stress in college students.

The college student can experience stress both inside and outside the classroom. Often, stressors in the personal-social environment can profoundly affect the student's academic performance. Typically, students arrive on campus with minimal training on how to cope with stress. In frustration, some turn to dysfunctional coping strategies (White-Chaleff, 2005) such as substance use, risky sexual behaviors, denial, and depression, to name a few.

To promote mental health and to facilitate academic excellence, colleges should proactively provide educational /counseling resources to help students cope with the stress of life on campus.

Clinical Implications

□ Clinicians working with this population may develop interventions that target these correlates of stress -- relationship anxiety, negative affect, self-esteem, and morality-conscience guilt -- which may provide tools to improve the quality of life in students.

□ Future researchers should examine these constructs further in prospective studies, since the direction of causality is important when developing interventions with aims of reducing stress in students.

□ Additional research is necessary to identify other variables that may moderate the relationship between stress and our specific variables of interest

Design Limitations

□ The generalizability of results is limited by our use of a convenience sample.

□ Due to the cross-sectional, correlational study design, causal relationships cannot be inferred.

□ A highly unequal gender distribution of our sample size.

References

□ Please refer to handout.

