Roles of Students' Religious Groups in Stress Management among Undergraduates of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State

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Abstract

The study identified sources of stress among students of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife and assessed forms of support students' religious groups provided to the students in assisting students in stress management. Primary data were used for the study. Qualitative method which made use of in-depth interview guide was employed to collect data from 30 Students' Religious Groups Leaders. The data were collected from undergraduates of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, and selected through stratified and purposive sampling techniques. The study concluded that students' religious groups played vital roles which complemented the statutory functions of stress reduction and management by the university.

Keywords: Latent functions; Stress management; Students' religious groups.

1. Introduction

Educational systems, nowadays especially at tertiary level, make university students to be exposed to stressful conditions. This was recognised by Agolla and Henry (2009) that, stressful situation usually imposed negative influence on students' health, academic performance and general wellbeing. The factors responsible for this among university students are daily hassles such as academic pressure, that is, anything that has to do with studying for classes, projects, oral and written examinations, challenging courses, unannounced tests and information overload. It has also been noted that inadequate leisure time, overcrowded lecture halls, insufficient resources to execute academic work and making of decision about future career plans are causes (Agolla and Henry, 2009; Oku *et al.*, 2015; Shkulaku, 2015). Besides, Ross *et al.* (1999) as reported by Bataineh (2013) argued that changes in lifestyle and values are other crucial factors responsible for stress. They cover changes in sleeping and eating habits, living with roommates, developing new friends as well as becoming familiar with new ethnic and social-class groups. They also raised the issue of social acceptance, peer pressure, managing time and money by themselves. As well as institutional (university) level of stressors such as overcrowded lecture halls and transition from senior high school to university. Such transition can be challenging and difficult for a new student (Omoniyi and Ogunsanmi, 2012; Ross *et al.*, 1999).

Some previous studies have failed to address self-imposed stress which students self-inflicted upon themselves through abusive use of social networks. Among females (chatting), while male counterparts engaged in excessive watching of Europeans football (soccer) matches, which continue to consume their limited available time. Thus, high level of stress is not a normal condition that one may discountenance. Negative effects, need to be given utmost attention from the very start of the symptoms. Embarking on proper action in order to alleviate its effects is a must in order to avoid its worst consequences (Mazo, 2015).

Religion plays an important role in the ways human beings integrate and reduce problem of loneliness, isolation, depression, anxiety, fears and so on. It has been proven in extant literature that increase in stress-related ailments among undergraduate students is having effects on the individual health, interaction and total wellbeing (Duque, 2007; Oku *et al.*, 2015). Merton (1957) stated that, social institutions have a tendency to perform intended, manifest and un-intended latent functions and either or both may be functional and/or dysfunctional. Student religious groups (SRG) might be established to appeal to the spiritual needs of members but they provide avenues for realisation of other unintended needs as well. Future marriage, business or occupational partners may be linked and functions of intervention in other areas are being performed by the religious groups. In this study, however, focus will be on support roles that are directly linked to stressful situations/needs of members (students).

It seems that sources of stress among students are numerous; they can be generated in almost every area of life which usually relates to everyday experiences, worries and challenges of daily activities. Due to the nature and

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effects of stress, it may necessitate affected students to respond and resolve stress differently. This confirmed finding by Colbert (2008), he contended that stress is an individual experience which is very cumbersome to identify in another person. Through participant observation, it has been observed that, in order to curb both psychological and physical effects of stress on students, Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) students' religious groups design series of activities which they engage their members in especially whenever stress become threatening to their well-being. These religious activities are diverse and are believed by the students to be effective ways of curbing stress effects among students' religious groups of Obafemi Awolowo University students.

One wonders why students embrace religion-based programmes when they are confronted with social and academic challenges. Perhaps these religion-based programmes establish, maintain, and strengthen a connection with the academic and social improvements. The origins of these activities (management mechanisms) are vast and abundant. Religious and academic enhancements (instrumental role) are a few of many mechanisms employed by Obafemi Awolowo University students' religious groups to minimise the negative effects of stress among their members. The needs to be explored and discovered serve as motivation for this study.

On campus, students' religious groups have been appraised for providing various kinds of support to students especially freshmen and returning students to alleviate the stress they may encounter in pursuing the academic/social activities. The manifest function of student's religion groups (SRG) is to recruit more membership to their fellowship for religious activities such as evangelism, singing, ushering, and praying. Still, latent functions (unintended functions) provided by students' religious groups play vital roles in alleviating stress among university students. This is a major concern of this study since such roles have not been documented adequately enough by researchers especially in Nigerian universities. Previous studies which focused on stress management have been mostly based on therapy or psychotherapy and pharmacological management with no attention paid to the role of students' religious groups in the management of stress among the students.

1.1. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to provide analysis of the latent functions of students' religious groups in stress management among undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile – Ife. This is with a view to documenting and appraising various supports mechanisms provided by the students' religious groups in alleviating stress among students. The specific objectives were to

i. Identify sources of stress among students of Obafemi Awolowo University Ile - Ife;
ii. Assess forms of support students' religious groups provide to the students.

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1. Concept of Stress

The original definition of stress was coined by Selye in 1936 as a non-specific response of body to environmental demands. He discussed dual variants of stress: eustress and distress, the former regarded stress as positive while latter indicates stress as negative. For this study, stress is defined as condition or an experience such as economic, social, educational or environmental that mounts pressure on the ability of students to perform optimally.

Going by various definitions discussed so far, it may be conveniently agreed that stress emerges as a result of people interaction with an environment, while environmental pressures both in physical and psychological reactions exceed individual ability to cope thus necessitating adaptive response for survival. The implications are that university students tend to have lots of challenges with reference to stress and they need to develop strategies to manage it.

2.2. Stress Management

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), expressed stress management as designed programmes to ameliorate stress for people. They further mentioned eight coping strategies that can be used to reduce stressful events such as confrontation, seeking social support, planned problem-solving, self-control, accepting responsibility, distancing, positive reappraisal, and escape/avoidance. Also stress management regarded as universal treatment designed to handle variety of adaption and health problems (Monat and Lazarus, 1991).

Sutherland and Cooper (2000), expressed three models that are associated with stress management in an organisation as thus: Primary level stress management which focused on preventive measures to ameliorate the causes of stress such as participation in sport activities. Secondary level stress management refers to reaction that focused on strategy that helps individual's reaction to stress in a manner that is not dangerous to them. Stress management at tertiary level focused on integration of stressed person through counselling.

Gembeck and Skinner (2008), grouped coping strategies of stress management into four: (i) Approach-oriented coping, (2) Avoiding or minimising the stress, (3) Coping, which involves other people as resources, and (4) Escaping or becoming helpless and doing nothing. Also, Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) identified twelve families of coping strategies of stress management as problem- solving, information seeking, support seeking, delegation, social isolation, accommodation, negotiation, submission and opposition, helplessness, escape, and self – reliance. Considering various definitions reviewed so far on stress, this study defines stress management as various actions/programs designed by students' religious groups to lessen stress negative effects and to keep the symptom of stress within manageable bounds.

2.3. Student's Religious Groups

Student's Religious Groups refer to organisations that serve the interest of students who belong to the faiths, and provide spiritual growth and social support to members in order to ensure their wellbeing morally, socially and academically. These groups have diverse rituals, practices, and programs designed to integrate their members in order to eliminate problem of loneliness, isolation, depression, fears and anxiety for their members. Examples of these religious groups are the United Christian Joint Movement (UCJM), Muslim Student Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Ahmadiya Students' Society, Association of Visiting Secretaries, Evangelical Christian Union, Methodist Student's Union, Muslim Students Society, etc.

2.4. Effects of Stress

Stress has ability to affect students' general health as well as elimination of excitements of learning. Various scholars in the field of behavioural science conducted studies which focused on stress and its effects, and they agreed that the concept needs more concentration (Agolla and Henry, 2009; Ellison, 2004; Ongori and Agolla, 2008; Rees and Redfern, 2000).

Students' performance is usually influenced by high level of stress. This expression is supported by findings from various studies: Al-Kandari and Vidal (2007); Wells (2007); Dixon and Robinson (2008) as reported by Shkulaku (2015), emphasised that excessive stress affects students' memory, their concentration and ability to solve problems. Behavioural changes such as depression, headache, inefficiencies, substance misuse, withdrawal from friend and social situation emerge as a result of stress. This view, associated with studies carried out by Duque (2007), Oku *et al.* (2015) expressed that stress pushes student to involve in behavioural changes like withdrawal from peers and social situation. Besides, exposure to stressors exerts negative impact on student's activities such as academic, social and health thus, exposing them to more susceptible and compulsive behaviour which could lead to destructive attitude (Goebert *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, extensive studies by behavioural scientists agreed that stress and its consequences necessitated more attention.

2.5. Functional Components of Social Support

Some studies attempted to appraise the functional components of social support which consist emotional support, instrumental support, information support, affective as well as social companion Wright (2000). This led to examining of five different forms of social support mentioned by Schaefer *et al.* (1981) as thus:

One, emotional support involves caring, love and empathy as well as expression of cares though expressions of emotional support. These are not direct solution to problems but these enhances individual mood. For example, sending text messages like ''Hope you are feeling better?", the expression would be considered as emotional support.

Two, esteem support is a form of social support that cheers up individual's instinct to embark on needed actions by encouraging a person. Such encouragement will strengthen the ability to confront the problem and perform a needed task effectively. This type of support refers to cheering up individual to embark on needed actions as well as undoubted ability to confront the problem.

Three, network support refers to kind of social supports not interested on emotion, but focused on affirming individual's belonging to a network. It is a mechanism which expresses assistance available to render social support to the people who are involved in any problem that given them concern.

Four, information support is another type of social support that provides useful information. When people are facing challenging situation, they need vital information as "compass" for direction in order to make right decision about the situation.

Five, tangible support is a form of assistance that emerges from other people. It may come in form of material goods given during period of challenges such as provision of food for sick person or giving free ride to sick person.

3. Methodology

The study is a descriptive survey design and exploratory in nature, involving collection of cross-sectional data. In-depth interview guide was used to secure relatively dependable information. The study was conducted in Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) Ile- Ife Osun State among undergraduate students because of their assumption of relative youthfulness, inability of most students to avoid or cope with stress and many of them are new to the university environment. The study population consisted of all the students' religious groups existing under United Joint Christians Movement (UJCM), Muslim Student Societies of Nigeria (MSSN) and independent religious groups in OAU Ile Ife Osun State.

Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted, first stage involved a random selection of 6 groups drawn to represent UJCM and 1 independent group respectively among other Christians, while all the Muslim groups, (MSSN and 1 independent groups) were purposively selected. The reason for these selections was some of these students' religious groups have student-oriented programmes. Second stage involved the use of proportional sampling to select four respondents from each of selected groups. The sample size for this study was then 30 respondents for in-depth interviews were conducted with executive/designated officer of UJCM and MSSN as key informants comprising the following: one Pastor, one Imam, and one Secretary/ financial secretary/welfare committee officer. The reasons for the selections were based on the preliminary investigations which revealed that: they were spiritual leaders in their domains, and were responsible for the welfare of their members. They mobilised resources (people and materials) for any programme, and they represented their group in religious affairs with Directorate of Student Affairs (DSA) and public functions.

In-depth interview guide was adopted to collect qualitative data from respondents. The qualitative data collected, a content analysis method was used while interesting quotations were reported verbatim where necessary.

4. Results

Table-1. Socio- demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency Distribution	Percentages
	N=30	%
Gender		
Male	24	80.0
Female	06	20.0
Total	30	100.0
Age Groups		
18 - 20years	04	13.3
21 – 23years	18	60.0
24 and above	98	26.6
Total	30	100.0
Level of Study		
200 Level	02	6.7
300 Level	10	33.3
400 Level	14	46.7
500 Level	04	13.3
Total	30	100.0
Religious Association		
Christianity	18	60.0
Islam	12	40.0
Total	30	100.0
Residence		
Hostel	20	66.7
Off campus	06	20.0
Both	04	13.3
Total	30	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2019.

4.1. Sample Characteristics

Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in table 1 showed the predominance of male over female leaders among students' religious leaders. Male students' religious group members constituted 80 per cent while the female counterparts accounted for only about 20 per cent of the total population. This implied males dominated leadership of students' religious groups.

Age distribution showed that the ages of respondents ranged between 18 and 29years, with mean age of 23.5years. Age group 21 and 23years was in the relative majority accounting for 60% of the total respondents. This was followed by those between the ages of 24 and 29years (26.6%) while respondents who were younger (18 and 20 years) constituted 13.3.4% of the total respondents. The significant finding from these data was that elderly and experienced men were elected to control activities of student religious groups.

On the level of respondents' education, findings revealed that 46.7% of the respondents were 300 level, followed by 33.3% who were in 400 level of their education and 13.3% who were in 500 level of their studies, 6.7 % of the respondents were in 200level. This finding implied student religion executive members were dominated by "stalites" (old students).

The Christians in this study were 60.0% while Muslim constituted 40.0%. This finding suggested the predominance of Christianity in the study area. Information on the religious affiliations of the respondents was deemed important because its influence could affect the perception of the respondents. Majority of the religious leaders, (66.7%) stayed on campus, followed by 20.0% who resided off campus while 13.3% had dual dwelling places. This implied majority of religious leaders stayed on campus.

Table-2. Factors responsible for Stress among OAU Students

INFORMANTS/PARTICIPANTS				
Factors responsible for the causes of stress for students	Christian		Muslim	
	UJCM	CIG	MSSN	MIG
Inadequate social amenities	* - - -	* - -	-	+
Financial constraints	+ + + -	* - -	*	+
Inability of students to manage their time	+ + ++	+ +	*	* -
Academic workload	+ + * -	+ +	*	+

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The findings showed that virtually all the participants identified inability of students to manage their time and academic workload. Other factors given by participants, most especially, the UJCM and MING were financial constraints and inadequate social amenities respectively.

A key informant described this situation thus:

> *"Causes of stress are numerous; one of it is the distance between academic areas and hostel which is too far. That is a little bit of stress on its own. Also time management, most of us cannot balance our time and that has been one of major issues because students move from class to laboratory and from library to hostel".*

(KII with a 25 years old Male, UJCM Prayer Coordinator)

Another key informant corroborated same sentiment asserting that:

> *"Some students belong to many organisations such as social club, welfare issue, political and religious activities. These secondary assignment activities consumed major part of limited time of the students, such engagement expose many of us to unnecessary stress".*

(KII with a 23 years old Male, Leader of Christian Independent Group)

4.2. Forms of Support Students' Religious Groups provide to their Members

The finding revealed that regular tutorial classes for difficulty courses, provision of material aids (past questions) and organised periodical academic seminal to ensure primary assignment of their members well-tailored and achieving. Other factor given by interviewees most especially among the Christian religious groups was division of students into group discussion for better performance. A key informant expressed that:

> *"For every fellowship it always has academic secretary, this office looks into academic plight of students, by conducting tutorial class for them, giving them assessment card, in order to monitor the progress of students. If students read weekly, tutorial master will mark the number of hour they study, through this, tutorial master will be able to assess the progress of students. Not only that, they organised group discussions where students come together toward the time of test and examination, rob minds together so that they can help those are not academically sufficient".*

(KII with a 22 years old Female, UJCM Assistant Secretary General)

Another key informant upheld same sentiment asserting that:

> *"We have time to time regular tutorial being organised by MSSN and such tutorials are handled by students adept in such field. Also, there is personal tutorial for those students who find it difficult to cope with general tutorial class".*

(KII with a 29 years old Male, MSSN Faculty Coordinator)

On mechanisms adopted to attract and integrate fresher students. The findings showed that mechanisms adopted to attract and integrate fresher students were regular visitation of fellowship members and free transportation on resumption and provision of daily/weekly information on religious/academic matters as well as free registration and printing of necessary documents. Other factor given by interviewees most especially among the Christian religious groups was provision of recreation activities.

On accommodation problem, the finding revealed an existence of brotherhood relationship among student's religious groups. Majority of the interviewees expressed the following assistances: provision of temporary accommodation, compel their members, especially final members who have accommodation to accommodate parts 2 and 3 students and allowed members to stay in religion secretariat. The following extracts are related to the findings:

> *"As brethren we accommodate ourselves apart from that, church set aside 6 rooms apart which our members who have accommodation problem can stay temporary in church premise pending the time the problem of accommodation will be solved".*

(KII with a 23 years old Male, Leader of Christian Independent Group)

Another key informant corroborated same sentiment asserting that:

> *"Accommodation problem is a big issue we are having, the spaces available are not enough for all students; and university admits more students than what it can really support. MSSN compelled final year students that are privileged to have accommodation to squat parts 2 and 3 students while those final year students that are not staying on campus release their bed spaces for those students who are not accommodated by the university".*

(KII with a 24 years old Male MSSN OAU)

The qualitative analysis on the type of assistance religious groups provided for members with financial problem. The results indicated that majority of interviewees expressed donation (money) from congregation to needed students. Other supports were provision of welfare packages and availability of cash gift from religious groups' purse most especially among the Christians Independent religious groups. The following extracts:

"If such financial request is huge, most the time the congregation may be asked to contribute money, which congregation used to, because in Islam is allowed and permissible and it is regarded as one of the best of the deeds to assist our brothers in needs. This is in line with Prophet Muhammad (SAW) saying that: "You are not a Muslim expect from the fact that you love for your brother what you love for yourself". So people donated generously, though Allah promised in the Quran that ''whoever do a good deed, He is going to reward such person in ten folds" when students understand this they try to donate generously".

(KII with a 25 years old Male, Leader of Muslim Independent Group)

A key informant explained that:

"We found out that as semester runs to an end and students get ready for examination most often, they run out of provision and food stuff, they have little or nothing to eat for sustenance. This pushes fellowship to organise welfare packages to help students that are not financially sufficient to take care of themselves. Fellowship buys rice, spaghetti, gaari and beans to give students that are out of provision/food that are really in need of it".

(KII with a 25 years old Female UJCM Assistant Secretary General)

In addition, the qualitative analysis of the description of respondents' views on the efforts of students' religious groups in relation to relationship affairs. The findings showed the supportive role played by Students' Religious Groups (SRGs) to students in order to ensure smooth relationship. Majority of interviewees expressed organisation of periodical seminars on relationship. Other variable mentioned were advice from sister coordinator on friendship issue as well as availability of marriage counselling section mostly among Christian religious group.

5. Summary and Discussions

Findings revealed that the various types of supports/assistance were rendered by students' religious groups for their members. For academic activities, students' religious groups' played instrumental (psychology role) which occurred at dual periods namely: beginning of semester and toward end of semester. At the beginning of semester in order to ensure smooth take off academic activities, they provided buffer mechanisms such as organised tutorial classes for difficult courses, organised group discussion, personal tutorial and academic seminars to enhance academic performance of students, and this is called instrumental support. Also, toward examination period Students' Religious Groups (SRGs) provided academic rituals and religious rituals to ease tension and increase confidence of students in preparation for examinations. Academic rituals involved conduct of mock examination and treatment of past questions while religious rituals included organising joint fellowship and special anointed service. These two activities were carried out in order to ease tension and other stress associated with academic stress. This has earlier been noted by Malinowski (1954) who argued that religion performed psychological function such as easing emotional stress through religious rituals (canoe magic rituals) which helps in stress management.

The morale booster provided by SRGs was provision of esteem support through sending of inspiration messages from religious group's leaders or designated personnel, these messages cheer up individual instinct and boost their morale to embark on needed actions, such encouragement strengthened the abilities of students to confront the examination and performed effectively during the examination period. This has been earlier noted by Schaefer *et al.* (1981), argued that, expression of cares though expressions of emotional support was not directly solution to problems but enhanced individual mood.

Furthermore, SRGs ensured proper integration of new students through daily provision of information on religious and academic activities. This has earlier been noted by Schaefer *et al.* (1981) who argued that when people are facing challenging situation, they need vital information as "compass" for direction in order to make right decision about the situation. They also embarked on regular visitation to halls of residence, provision free transportation to church, organised film shows and drama shows as well as recreational activities like picnic and walkout (mountaineering) to enhance physical fitness of their members. All these activities allowed both freshmen and returning students mixed up and interact with one another, thus capable of minimise home sickness if not eliminate it, as well as reduce problem of loneliness especially among freshmen.

In addition, SRGs provided tangible supports to students, tangible supports such as temporary accommodation, and financial assistance and welfare packages to students. Students' religious groups usually gave temporary accommodation mostly for returning students who have no accommodation, apart from that; they also implored their members especially finalist students who have accommodation to accommodate part two and part three students who had no accommodation. Provision of welfare packages involved selling of food stuff (gaari, beans, rice) at cheaper price toward examination period in order to relieve students of financial constraints. On financial issue, few students' religious groups gave financial assistant to indigent students while scholarship was given to best students to encouragement them. On relationship matter, students' religious groups looked after the health of sick members not only through prayer alone, they also provided feeding to sick members who happened to be hospitalised.

Finally students' religious groups played counsellor role through organisation of various seminars on academic, relationship and marriage counselling as well as availability of committee among Christian groups handled relationship matter under supervision of sister committee. Thus, this method has greatly contributed to making students maintain balance between academic and social activities such as dating and mate selection which reduced emotional stress that might emerge from friendship, relationship and dating among students. This study proposes that this positive attitude of Student Religious Groups (SRG) which has been contributing to stress reduction or alleviation should be encouraged. As a matter of fact, with the increasing number of students now living outside of Obafemi Awolowo University Campus due to space problem, a research of this nature could be carried out among the students living within Ile-Ife and its environs.

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