

OPEN ACCESS: “EPISTEMOLOGY”

eISSN: 2663-5828;pISSN: 2519-6480

Vol.12 Issue 13 June 2023

ROLE OF RELIGION IN STRESS AND ANXIETY COPING MECHANISMS DURING DISSERTATION PROCESS IN DOCTORAL STUDENTS - A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: Doctoral students often experience stress and anxiety during their entire degree. The purpose of this study was to access the factors and different strategies for coping with stress and anxiety among students during the dissertation writing process. The study was conducted by a qualitative method, through purposive sampling, 10 Ph.D. students were selected. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants. The obtained data was categorized in themes. Physical Activity, Practicing religion and Seeking Social Support were recognized as Coping Mechanisms. There are various factors that trigger stress among doctoral students. Students use different methods for coping with stress and anxiety. The study identified physical activities such as exercise, walking, swimming, etc. as the strategies helpful in reducing the intensity of stress. Staying active helps to forget daily problems. The study has also demonstrated that Offering Namaz, recitation of the Holy Quran, and Zikar helps to reduce stress and anxiety during the dissertation process. Religious beliefs and practices act as the most effective coping strategy.

INTRODUCTION

For obtaining Ph.D. degree, it is compulsory for all doctoral students to complete the dissertation. In the doctoral program, the dissertation is considered a multidimensional task. From student to a scholar, many people consider dissertation as being the rite of passage. The dissertation is the final and hectic part of the doctoral program, after that a person is recognized as an expert in the field of study (Gray, 2014). Chaudhary (2016) identified that about 10 private and 11 public sector universities in the country have failed to confer a single Ph.D. degree annually for the last five years, which is a matter of concern.

The percentage of M.Phil and Ph.D. students at Punjab University has raised from 1.1% in 2008 to 14.89% in 2015 (Fact-Book University of the Punjab, 2015). About one-third of the doctoral students failed to complete a dissertation, although they have completed the required coursework. It has been observed that students who have a sense of frustration, stress, loneliness, and self-doubt might led them to a negative attitude toward the dissertation process (Johnson & Conyers, 2001).

For the successful completion of the doctoral degree, students face many challenges and hurdles on the journey to the dissertation (Blum, 2010). Pritchard and Wilson (2003) identified stress and self-efficacy as the most essential social cognitive factors that help in the completion of tasks. For many doctoral students, dissertations generate a certain level of fear and stress that often seems to be caused by inadequate training in research, lack of previous research experiences, and negative attitudes toward research. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the student's progress at the dissertation stage within the framework of the self-efficacy theory (Rakow&Ethington, 1999).

An appropriate response to stressful circumstances or events is anxiety. Nonetheless, a person's behavior, eating and sleeping habits, overall well-being, and academic achievement may all be impacted by this experience (Farrer et al., 2016). It has been demonstrated that students' health behaviors are significantly impacted by their failure to manage stress, frequently leading to exhaustion, Sleep disorder, and eating problems (Oliver, Reed, & Smith, 1998). Moreover, negative effects on health status also include impaired immune system function, increased susceptibility to infection, recurrent herpes virus infections, high blood pressure, autoimmune illness, and stroke (Hicks & Heastie, 2008). The tensions and strains that doctoral research students deal with are substantially different from other university students (Ahmed, Umrani, Pahi, & Shah, 2017).

There are several levels of stress. Meeting typical stresses in everyday life can cause stress to fluctuate in intensity. In some of these situations, stress levels could even be motivating and advantageous. (Davis, Eshelman, &

McKay, 1982). For instance, stress can occasionally be beneficial for doctorate students and is associated with improved focus, scholarship, excellence, and advancement (Sosin & Thomas, 2014).

It is crucial to assist and support students in managing their stress for a good dissertation. The negative emotions can harm students' welfare and, as a result, impede, and sometimes stop the process of dissertations. (Badenhorst, 2010). Relationship problems, perfectionism, and personal circumstances are among the factors which further make the dissertation process stressful.

Kazmi and Muazzam (2017) conducted a survey of a sample of university students and identified a number of factors that contributed to the students' poor adjustment in Pakistan. Those circumstances increase the risk that students, particularly those engaged in research, would experience mental health problems, notably depression.

Higher education students have to simultaneously execute a variety of roles. Each role takes a lot of time and effort to complete. Students may feel role conflict and role overload because, for example, they must handle their financial obligations and must find employment. They also must fulfill many of their family obligations. According to Akpotor (2018) the role conflict that married female students had to deal with led to low educational outcomes, and that couldn't be used as a justification; instead, appropriate management and modification were needed to deal with this role conflict.

Moreover, studies have found that stress is inversely associated with dissertation completion. It is also found that an optimal level of stress enhances the task-completion process (Kaplan & Sadock, 2000; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Russell & Petrie). Conversely, a high level of stress is related to a low level of academic satisfaction (Pinugu, 2013).

It is generally believed that Ph.D. students tolerate more stress and anxiety in thesis writing than in other stages of life. Among few of the many reasons are thesis supervisors' personal time, work field, role conflict, and social support (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Kamler, 2008). Emotional weariness, and reduction in the attainment of one's life aims are common symptoms of anxiety and stress. Moreover, if these problems remain unsolved consequences may include educational and emotional burnout (Cotterall, 2013). Several studies have identified that stress and anxiety can be the earliest causes of improper academic performance in undergraduate students (LeBlanc 2009). It is expected that different students can undergo different stages of stress and tension, but generally, there are significant differences in the amount of stress, stress coping styles, and availability of social support among different students (Abdulghani, 2014). Vasegh and Mohammadi (2007) findings in Tehran University of Medical Sciences provide evidence for the protective role of religion against anxiety and depression.

In Pakistan, I am not able to find any study conducted to explore the factors that contributed to increased stress and anxiety among Ph.D. students. This study aimed to explore Ph.D. students' experience of stress and anxiety while writing their thesis and how they cope with it. This study might be helpful for academic institutions, advisors, and also for faculty that how can they reduce the stress level of doctoral students during the dissertation process.

METHODS:

A qualitative study was conducted to give participants the chance to share their experiences and strategies that may act as a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety. To collect data from the participant's Semi structured interviews were conducted. The data was collected from 10 Ph.D. students from two different departments of Punjab University (Institute of Social Sciences and Sheikh Zaid Islamic Centre) using non-probability purposive sampling and it was continued until there is saturation in data.

A consent form was signed by the participants and then the interview was started using general questions like "what are the problems and challenges you faced during research writing" then to know the in-depth point of view of participants and the factors and coping mechanisms related to stress and anxiety probing questions were asked if required. The participants gave time to conduct the interview individually, the interview lasts from 30 minutes to 1 hour asking them open-ended questions, and audio recordings and field notes were taken during the interview.

The interview was conducted in both Urdu and English, Urdu was translated into English and transcription was made of the interviews. Thematic Analysis identifying codes and themes (or patterns within data) were conducted to analyze data. To identify common concepts, words, and phrases the transcription of the interview was compared with one another. Based on the similarity codes were extracted and categorized and then themes were determined.

Codes were summarized and categorized into themes. These were related to the factor associated with stress and anxiety and to coping strategies. The main themes include Thesis writing a major stressor, Challenges with supervisor, Job as a stressor, Other Factors and the coping mechanism themes for stress and anxiety that emerged from data are Physical Activities, Practicing religion as a coping mechanism, Seeking Social Support as shown in Table 1.

Ethical consideration:

The purpose of the study was informed to each participant, that the interview will be recorded and field notes will be taken, also the time duration of the interview was informed that it might last from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Moreover, they were also informed that this interview will be kept confidential and none of the information of the participants will be shared with anyone and

kept anonymous in the process of research at any point in time they can quit the interview or skip any question, their decision will be highly regarded.

Table 1: Themes and Sub Themes from the Collected Data

Main Themes	Sub Themes
<p>Factors: Thesis writing a major stressor</p> <p>Challenges with supervisor</p> <p>Job as a stressor</p> <p>Other Factors</p> <p>Coping Mechanism: Physical Activities</p> <p>Practicing religion as a coping mechanism</p> <p>Seeking Social Support</p>	<p>Research Topic Selection</p> <p>Management of Time: Job as a Stressor: Management of time Scarcity of resources Lack of guidance and unavailability of supervisor Poor support from supervisor High expectations of supervisor Job workload Job first priority Family Time Lack of financial resources</p> <p>Exercise Walk Sports Offer Namaz Recitation of Quran Supplication to Allah (S.W.T) Spending more time with family members, friends, and professionals</p>

RESULTS:

Despite of the differences and variances in the participant's demographics and social factors like gender, social class of family, the status of a family, etc., their experiences were similar and overlapped. They all agreed that the level and depth of stress experienced by each individual varied but they also have certain differences.

The process of thesis writing is a major stressor

One of the most important result that was executed from the participant's data was the thesis writing process itself, subthemes from this main theme include thesis topic selection, Ambiguity in the steps of the thesis, Management of time, Scarcity of resources during the thesis writing process.

Research Topic Selection

Selection of a good research topic is the first step that is considered to be the most challenging part and needs proper concentration and attention. According to the participants', this part of the research is the major factor that creates stress among students, in selecting the topic of the thesis some factors

that influence it includes: difficulty to understand what the supervisor is expecting, a topic should be unique enough so that it can contribute in the research field, a topic should be selected keeping in mind the available resources like finances, time and people.

One of the participant said the topic he was interested in doing research on, did not appeal to the supervisor. Another participant said that the topic suggested by the supervisor was not according to his interest, so acted as a stress factor for them.

Planning and Management of Time:

Between choosing a topic and writing a dissertation, time management is by far the biggest problem that researchers encounter. Whatever the situation, writing a dissertation is always a tiring process. Despite of this, many researchers feel scared and hesitate when comes to tackling the challenges involved in the thesis process.

Dissertators are usually aware of the value of management of time but when it comes to its application they find it very difficult to manage and handle. One frequent issue in early thesis writing is accurately predicting the amount of time required in completing a thesis. One of the participants stated that: thesis writing required lots of time, and the time taken on the work is always more than what is expected. Suppose the time bounded for thesis writing of each part is one week it takes two or sometimes three weeks to complete.

This kind of frustration can undermine writers' confidence in their capacity to complete a thesis. This increases their risk of stress and reduces their productivity.

Job as a Stressor:

Another problem that acted as a major stressor in the thesis process is the burden of the Job. Participants share their experiences that stress in job is directly proportional to stress in every aspect of life. One of the participants stated:

... It is a difficult task to give time to the thesis due to the busy working hours of the job, Sometimes I had to do office work even after coming home, due to which I used to get tired often... (Student no. 1)

Many participants stated that giving time to the job is always a priority as it is a source of income, and many students declared that they are doing Ph.D. for a salary increase, for a higher designation, and for better job prospects. One more student shared his experience:

...Due to busy job schedule, it is often impossible to give thesis after leaving time... (Student no. 3)

Challenges with Supervisor:

The supervisor plays a very important role in the thesis process. If the supervisor is positive and if the supervisor is supportive and helpful, then

the thesis process becomes easy. Supervisor poor communication skills, noncooperation with the students, giving time for meeting with students, and lack of proper guidance from the supervisor are the major problems faced by the participants and become a major factor of stress among students.

Lack of Guidance and Unavailability of supervisor:

Most of the participants shared their experiences that there is a lack of guidance from their supervisors, this is mainly because they do not have enough time to explain what is needed in the work and what is unnecessary, supervisors usually haphazardly carry meetings.

Some students identified this issue as a major one that the supervisor does not provide enough time for guiding the student. One of the participants said:

...whenever my supervisor set the date for the meeting, he was often not available that wastes a lot of my time and money due to traveling...(Student no.5)

Unhelpful Supervisor / poor support from supervisor:

Some participants stated that there is a lack of supervisory skills in supervisors; the supervisors are mostly concerned with the format and least concerned about the main part methodology. Participant no. 7 stated:

...my supervisor rejected my thesis many times by just pointing out the punctuation mistakes and does not focus on the methodology and other main work done by me...

High Expectations of Supervisor:

The expectations of supervisor about work to be done by the students are too high, supervisors usually provide very less guidance and gave very less time for consultation but they expects a lot from the student and if the student couldn't meet their expectations they get rigid with the students which is very stressful behavior of supervisor. One participant stated that:

...my supervisor expected a lot from me, you can say he was over pessimistic and if I couldn't provide him the results he wanted because of my job nature and other workloads my supervisor was very harsh with me and because of that I often feel burned out... (Student no. 4)

Other Factors:

Family concern:

Finding time for the thesis is difficult with job and family responsibilities. Spending time with kids and family is also important after a job. Managing the affairs of the family requires more time. Participant no. 8 stated:

... It is important to give time to the family after getting free from the job, so not giving time to the thesis due to other priorities creates frustrations

...

Financial constraints:

Finances are another major factor that triggers stress. If the thesis is getting late due to any reason and spending a huge amount each semester is also a major factor that increases the stress level of the students, as at this stage of Ph.D. many students are having family responsibilities. One of the participants said:

... I was very stressed when my thesis was rejected again and again and I was paying a huge amount as a fee... (Student no.5)

STRESS AND ANXIETY SYMPTOMS:

All the participants agreed that they faced stress and anxiety to some extent. Some of the common symptoms that every participant felt during the process were Fatigue, restlessness, aggressiveness, and sleeping disorder. Other symptoms include feeling depressed, hopeless, poor eating habits, and Inattentiveness and one of them pointed out being moody and irritable.

COPING MECHANISM WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY:

There are multiple factors that trigger stress during the dissertation process and there are several strategies that students used to cope with stress and anxiety that includes physical activities, practicing religion as a coping mechanism and seeking social support.

Physical Activities:

Many participants experienced that physical activities helped them in stress resilience. It also helped them to improve their mood when they feel stressed. According to the participants, physical activities acted as an effective coping strategy. Physical activities include workouts, exercises, sports, doing the walk. Participant 1 said:

... whenever I felt stressed due to work overload I start doing exercises like walking on the treadmill for at least one hour and I usually watch a movie while doing the treadmill...

... I enjoy swimming, sometimes it helped me to lower the level of stress level... (Student no.4)

Participant 3 stated:

... doing exercise and walking in the park pleasure the mood and I feel relaxed and fresh...

Practicing religion as a coping mechanism:

According to the participants, religion plays a vital role in lowering the symptoms of mild depression and anxiety. Religious beliefs and practices helped the students to lower the intensity of stress when they felt burnout and drained. One of the participants stated:

... I do offer namaz five times a day but whenever I feel more stressed I try to go to the masjid to offer namaz, which gives relief to me... (Student no.6)

Participant no. 5 stated that:

... *Supplication to Allah (S.W.T) Dua is the best way to relax, I have experienced that dua gives you inner satisfaction and I often offer Salat-al-Hajat during my research...*

Recitation of the Quran and Zikar is another activity that paves the way to reduce the intensity of stress and anxiety. One of the participants beautifully explained the verse of the Quran:

... *"INDEED, AFTER HARDSHIP THERE IS EASE" (94:6)...*

Seeking Social Support:

While dealing with the stressors the majority of students stated that they seek social support in a variety of ways like speaking with family members, friends, and professionals. One of the students told:

... *to make myself calm, I talk with my fellow scholars who have already faced this situation, their advice and counseling gives helpful recommendations and soothing effect...* (Student no. 8)

Student no.2 said:

... *I try to spend more time with my family and kids, sometimes making dinner or coffee plans to make myself relaxed as I enjoy and feel fresh in an outing with my family ...*

Other coping Mechanism of Stress:

Reading Books/ Novels:

Participants acknowledge that reading is a productive coping mechanism of stress. Reading a book or any novel reduces tension in your muscle that relax you, make your mood better, and lower the stress intensity. Respondent no. 7 stated:

... *reading is my passion whenever I feel overburdened or feel anxious I start reading any book or a novel that makes me calm and divert my attention...*

Conclusion:

Dissertation process is the most important and crucial part of PhD program, while going through these process researchers faces many problems, these problems are the factors that trigger stress and anxiety among students. Stress and anxiety causes many physical and psychological issues among students that hinder the process of research. These issues includes panic attacks, Exhaustion, mood swings, Poor eating habits, Frustration, Sleeping disorder etc. the factors that promote stress and anxiety among students during dissertation process includes selection of a research topic, Planning and Management of Time, job work load, relationship with supervisor, lack of financial resources and Family time. It is important to reduce stress while performing research, some of the strategies that can be helpful in reducing the intensity of stress can be doing physical activities such as exercise, walk, swimming etc. Staying active helps increase your happy hormones and help you forget about daily problems. Offering Namaz, recitation of Quran and

Zikar helps to reduce stress and anxiety to a great extent during dissertation process. Religious beliefs and practices act as the most effective coping strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

The researchers would like to highly acknowledge all participants of The University of Punjab, who took time and participated in the study.

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