Exploring Students' Perspectives of Social factors in Academic Stress Experience

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of effective social factors on students' academic stress. An attempt has been made to focus on the sources of social stress in education from the perspective of students. For this purpose, inspired by Brown and Clark (2006), a thematic analysis method to analyze the research data. The study's statistical population consists of male and female students of Qom Technical and Vocational University in the 2020-2021 academic year. A purposive sampling method has been adopted to collect the data, using the semi-structured individual interview. Based on the theoretical saturation, twenty-one students were interviewed. According to the findings of the present study there are some serious concerns about the verbal violence, psychosocial environment of classrooms, unfair comparison of students with each other, procrastination, social anxiety, family tensions, multiplicity, expectations, and lack of a sense of self-efficacy as sources of academic stress in the social environment of the classroom that can considerably intensify academic stress.

Keywords: Academic stress, social dimensions, academic expectations, perceived stress.

Introduction

Unpleasant life situations that disrupt a person's physical health and psychological stability, causing him/her to use methods to deal with or get rid of, are known as stressful situations (Pickle, 1987: 17). The stress symptoms are usually determined through the individuals' reactions to different situations. These reactions are classified into cognitive, psychological, behavioral, and physical dimensions: blood pressure, stress, depression, and sleep-related disorders (Saliyeh, 1950: 150). Given the correlation between the stress and social stimuli, some theorists believe that one of the most important areas of research is goal-oriented studies on academic stress (Lohas et al, 2004: 39). In this respect, improving the education system is considered the most effective component in the development of countries (Zang & Rosson, 2015). Of note, a majority of individuals may experience difficulty succeeding in educational atmospheres in most countries and with the transformation of nations and increasing competition in all aspects, personal goals may become even harder to achieve. Excessive stimulation of the growth stimuli of the ODs can undermine individuals' psychological and social well-being (Dan et al, 2010: 20). Halinka (2015) defined stress as a maladaptive feeling associated with suspicion of confrontation. This description seems to be synonymous with that of stress in the field of education where learners are usually assigned multi tasks and are expected to successfully undertake them. In this regard, educational stress can sometimes turn into a psychological obstacle that is caused by a large number of academic tasks and high expectations from different groups of people from teachers and parents to classmates. For instance, they may experience high degrees of stress caused by the expectations and demands of some of the influential people in their lives such as their teachers, parents, etc. Great deal of effort has been made so far to identify such learning-related obstacles as the most significant sources of stress. Youth and adolescents worldwide face it (Ang et al, 2007: 136). Accordingly, it can be concluded that academic stress is one of the most significant education-related factors and for this reason, the need for addressing the influential parameters has gained significance over time. Evidently, identification of such

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social factors affecting the academic stress can expand the experts' knowledge about how to ensure the students' mental health, self-esteem, self-reliance, positive self-concept, and role-playing. The major role of stress in the individuals' mental health, performance, and self-esteem was taken into account in this study to logically address and identify its causes from different points of view. Since social matters are closely intertwined with different aspects of individuals' lives, the present study delved into identifying the social factors closely associated with the individuals' experience of academic stress.

Review of Literature

According to Makara and Kara Bing (2017), the fundamental mission of countries' education systems is to nurture individuals for the development and expansion of society. Universities, as the main base for extending the capacity of specialists, play a valuable role in this regard (Blashil, 2016: 75). Sarita (2015) considers academic stress as an unpleasant psychological state that is achieved by the expectations of others in the field of education and leads to psychological lethargy. They have also defined stress as a stimulus event. They state that changes in person-centered relationships, professions, economic status, etc., seem stressful. This factor (academic stress) occurs when a person has a strong desire to achieve academic success but encounters some problems. The description of academic stress implies the individual's interpretation of the imbalance between underlying expectations and in-person possibilities. Sachs (1997) explains that academic stress is greatly increasing. Quartz & Gregory (2004) in interpreting the differences between the tension felt by individuals in different contexts pay attention to the large role of cognitive interpretations, which are undoubtedly influenced by personality traits. The stress exchange model examines a map of the relationship between the individual and the situation that is considered a two-way relationship (Lazarus, 1998: 186). The individual source interprets itself further. In the exchange approach, attention is paid to the individual's interpretation of environmental expectations (or stressors) or personal source of confrontation (for example, social advocacy), which is considered the most effective factor in selecting well-being. Ang & Huang (2006) also explained the theoretical underpinnings of stress assessment in cultural situations in line with some of the evidence tested by emphasizing the relationship between the individual and culture. These theorists emphasize that in the individual-centered cultural contexts, human beings are seen as independent and self-reliant organisms whose actions are determined by a different set of characteristics. This is while in cultural contexts, human pluralism is seen in two-way communication with others. And on this basis, the action is a result of reacting to social tasks and interpersonal relationships. They explain that one of the forms of academic stress that needs proper attention originates from the demands and expectations of other people. In an Asian context, academic stress is shown as the result of the demands of oneself and others, such as parents and pedagogues. This claim by Ang and Huang in 2006 is in line with the results of a study by Gwit & Zhi (1997) in the United States, who explain that "parental demands play a significant role as a construct explaining the high demands of Asian students compared to Other students also state that Goyt and Zhi (1997) state in their theory that Asians are more interested in attending college than their white peers, which results in access to high-paying careers. Along with this, racial differences can be seen both in the academic aspirations and in the professional demands of individuals. It can be said that the demands among Asian students are high, whether the expectations are from the person himself or others affect his life (Kalags, 2013: 48). Therefore, the source of academic stress on the individual scale can be divided into two parts: academic stress due to the expectations of parents and pedagogues, and academic stress due to their expectations (Dan et al., 2010: 23). In the biological-psychological-social model, stress is considered in three categories: external categories including background events, internal categories including a group of neuro-physiological reactions, and the third category includes the relationship between these two categories, i.e. cognitive procedures of individuals. According to Selieh (1950), the reaction to stress factors in different individuals includes alert changes, resistance, and fatigue, respectively. In the theory based on stress stimulation, social status, community atmosphere, work environment, and relationships are emphasized as stress factors. In this theory, stress involves an event or hierarchy of situations that rereads a person's reaction (Hart & Cooper, 2001: 98). The explanations mentioned, for example, by Lazarus & Folk man (1998), Ang et al (2006), and the bio-psychosocial model clearly show the role and impact of social environmental factors on stress and consequently reduce the performance of individuals, especially in the field of education. Is. Also, based on the obtained information, it is clear that academic stress in addition to psychological origins originates

from social resources such as the expectations of parents, pedagogues, and professors. Huan (2006) has been used to advance research and study its dimensions on students' academic stress. As mentioned earlier, in this theory, in line with the theory of Goethe & Zhi (1997), social factors such as the expectations of parents and teachers in line with personal expectations are effective in creating academic stress. Researchers in the field of educational psychology and people involved in educational topics, including educational and social planners, are always looking for appropriate solutions to enhance the ability of students in the face of stressful positions, so that they can use scientific evidence-based coping methods to Provide people with application formats Some of this research is mentioned below. In particular, many studies have explored the role of various factors in describing stressful structures in education and training and responding to these factors. Musania (2021) in his research showed that 36% of the variance of academic stress is explained by the lack of perceived control and growth mentality. Joseph et al. (2021) showed that worries about the future and poor self-esteem are independently related to academic stress. Trigros et al. (2020) showed that test anxiety and academic stress are negatively predicted by resilience. Park et al (2020) showed that major satisfaction has a statistically significant negative correlation with academic stress. Celine et al. (2020) in a study entitled "Academic stress, coping and socio-cultural adjustment of mental health among Indonesian graduate students showed that academic stress, coping and socio-cultural adjustment have a significant impact on the mental health of Indonesians." Osban et al. (2019) showed that the levels of psychological resilience, academic stress, and social support are moderate among nursing students. Bagman et al (2019) in a study entitled Medical students' perceptions of stress from college and its interactions with other areas of life: A qualitative study showed that constant stress leads to emotional fatigue that spreads to other areas of life. Ancillary occupations also increase stress, resulting in poorer academic performance. Deb et al (2015) in a study on academic stress, parental stress, anxiety, and mental health among Indian high school students found that academic stress was positively correlated with parental stress and psychiatric problems, while test anxiety was also associated with Psychiatric problems were positively related. Academic stress is a serious issue that affects approximately two-thirds of high school students in Calcutta. Goloza (2013) in the study entitled The effect of academic stress and perceived social support on adolescent mental health in Ghana showed that perceived social support reduces the effects of academic stress on psychological well-being. The results of ShahirTabarestani et al (2002) show that there is a relationship between irrational demands of parents and job and educational anxiety of their children. In general, studies in the field of stress can be thematically divided into several general categories. Claimed. Some studies have focused on the role of various factors in creating academic stress. The results of these studies indicate that a set of social and psychological factors are effective in creating academic stress. In this regard, a group of studies has independently examined the effect of psychological dimensions on the development or exacerbation of stress. The study of the role of coping styles with stress, self-esteem, neuroticism, individual differences, and internal anxiety are among these studies. Also, another group of studies focuses independently on the social factors affecting stress. Examining the role of parents 'expectations, teachers' expectations, and society can be considered the results of these studies. Researchers have examined the relationship between academic stress and negative emotions such as depression and suicidal ideation. According to the theoretical foundations and empirical background mentioned, it can be concluded that academic stress is not only affected by individual and psychological factors but also environmental and social variables are effective in creating and intensifying it.

Methodology

This study employed a Qualitative approach to Explore students' perspectives of social factors in academic stress experience. Research data in this study were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. The research questions were mainly about the experiences students had in terms of academic stress and environmental pressure as well as the other underlying factors. The statistical population were selected from 21 male and female students at Qom Technical and Vocational University in the academic year 2020-2021. The method employed in this study was based on purposive sampling. The opinion of the experts and other relative theoretical foundations were taken into account in designing the questions. Finally, several open-ended questions were prepared in line with the objectives of this research followed by receiving the experts' approval. After resolving the ambiguities, several additional questions were asked other than the main ones. The interviews and further analysis of the

results continued until the stage of theoretical incorporation was completed. The participants were 21 students; however, more four students were also interviewed to validate the obtained data. The sentence-by-sentence analysis was carried out in the process of data coding. To be specific, after reading each sentence, the initial concept corresponding to it was incorporated into the relevant section. The internal validity was confirmed by the researchers, indicating that no more new information could be obtained. The acquired information corroborated each other with no difference observed between them, thus confirming the reliability of this research. Given that the coding process was performed by three different researchers, the similarity of the codes obtained from the findings gave credence to the research results. The novelty of the current study lies in its simultaneous consideration of coding by three different researchers and application of a semi-structured interview as the research tool.

Table 3. Demographic information of the participants

Percentage	Frequency	Specifications
		Gender
0/51	11	Female
0/49	10	male
		Occupational area
0/71	15	self-employment
0/29	6	state job
		Parents' education
0/67	14	Diploma
0/19	4	Bachelor and Master
0/14	3	PhD
		birth order
0/52	11	The firstborn child
0/24	5	The second child
0/14	3	The third child
0/10	2	The youngest child
100	21	**Total**

Data validation

The Intra-thematic agreement percentage used as an indicator of the reliability of the analysis has been evaluated by researchers. In this evaluation, the agreement indicates common and identical codes between researchers. The total number of codes is the sum of the extracted codes between the researchers of this research.

Table 2- Estimated coefficients of the reliability calculation

Interview title	Total number of codes	number of codes that researchers agree on them	Reliability result
Code3	16	7	./87
Code14	13	6	./92
Code20	11	5	./90
Total	40	18	./89

Findings

Concerns about verbal violence: Research findings indicate that students' academic stress is partly due to fear of verbal violence. This violence is due to incorrect estimates made by those around the students. For example, a student of Code 3 states: "Most of my family and relatives are well educated, they have good jobs and sufficient incomes…They always tease me that you cannot get a good job and income." Code 8 states: "My father always says that someone who does not study is worthless, he/she has to work for others for the rest of his/her life, and it does not matter to anyone." According to findings of this category, people often expect to be evaluated positively and efficiently by those around, including

family and friends, and they do not expect to be ridiculed and humiliated and be judged by negative judgments such as nicknames, insults, and misjudgments. Further, the expectation that others will always deal with their issues properly and rationally creates stress. Verbal violence related to academic topics has detrimental effects on the individual and their social interactions, leading to an aversion to the educational environment, a decline in learning performance, and even a flight away from the learning space (Solomon, 1990: 505). Verbal violence in learning environments includes a wide range of actions, including humiliation, insult, ridicule, violation of the rights of others, labeling, and injustice (Karimi, 1390: 88).

The unfavorable psycho-social environment of the classroom: Among the concepts made based on the interview data is the non-intimate atmosphere of the classroom, referring to the relatively unfriendly and intimate relationships of students with each other. The role of the classroom environment is vital in improving student performance. Research has considered the role of classroom psychological atmosphere, support received by teachers and friends in the learning and classroom environment, feeling of independence, and personal growth in the learning environment to improve individual performance (Cornell et al., 2016).

Lack of self-efficacy in the classroom social environment: The data indicate that lack of self-efficacy leads to academic stress in students. Poor/lack of self-confidence, as well as doubts in the ability to understand the subjects, do homework, and achieve academic success among competitors, is the concept included in the above category. This shows that inefficiency can be caused by various reasons, including high expectations, strict criteria, unachievable criteria, vague goals, and on the other hand, can be due to psychological components, such as fear of having a weak social influence in related learning and teaching environments.

Comparison: This category includes concepts such as comparisons of students by themselves in terms of academic achievement, comparisons of students by parents and professors, and comparisons of students by themselves in terms of living conditions. Code 21 states: "My parents always compare me with other children in the family or friends," making me nervous or worrisome. Inefficient comparisons can be a very important factor in reducing interpersonal relationships and an effective factor in creating conflict in individuals in educational and family environments.

Procrastination: According to the findings, concepts such as lack of motivation to do homework, delay in completing homework, and not attending classes are under the category of procrastination. The data indicate that this issue is due to the environment of the classrooms, the student's relationship with the teacher, and his/her relationship with other students.

Social anxiety: This anxiety is a chronic problem characterized by high fear of the executive and social contexts. Several participants stated that fear of attending class, talking in the classroom, responding in public, and being supervised by other students leads to academic stress. Code 1 states: "If you want to speak in front of everyone and see a hundred eyes looking at you, you will be very anxious. Whenever the teacher wants to ask me, I become anxious."

Family factors: Family factors are also among the categories made by the researcher based on the research findings. Family tensions, differences in the tastes of students and parents in choosing a field of study, parents' inattention to educational needs, and concerns of parents towards students are among the concepts included in this category. Code 2 states: " In a house where there is conflict, you should think more about not getting hurt. I am all in my bunker (my room)."

Multiple roles: Some students consider the simultaneous employment and education, the simultaneous roles of parent and spouse as a reason for their academic stress. One of the factors in creating academic stress is having different roles. If people cannot recognize their priorities and enter different professions and positions with the right assessments, they will face many consequences in different areas of their individual and social life.

Expectations: Findings show high expectations of parents to get the desired grade, business owners to have a proper resume and education, teachers to do high-volume homework, others to earn money from the field of study, as well as not paying attention to individual differences in the classroom, to be the factors of academic stress. Code 13 states: "My parents think I should follow up like them and choose their favorite field of study and occupation, making me nervous and anxious."

Table3. Levels of social stressful resources in education

Basic themes	Organizing themes	Comprehensive themes
Fear of being labeled by others Unfair evaluations Being insulted by friends Ridicule Fear of judgment Humiliation in the presence of others	Incorrect social estimations	**Concerns about verbal violence**
Intimate relationships in the classroom Biased relationships in the classroom Existence of unhealthy competition in the classroom Inflexible conditions in the classroom Strict curriculum	The Social environment of teaching and learning	**The Unfavorable psycho-social environment of the classroom**
Doubt in being able to understand the subjects Doubts about being able to do homework Weak self-esteem Lack of self-confidence Hesitation in achieving academic success among other students	Fear of playing a weak social role	**Lack of self-efficacy sense In the social environment of theClassroom**
Comparison of students with each other in terms of academic success Comparison by parents Comparison by professors Comparison by the student with others in terms of educational and living conditions	Concerns about social status	**Comparison**
Lack of motivation in performing class tasks Delays in completing homework Absence of continuous attendance in the class	Lack of proper social communication	**Procrastination**
Fear of participation In the class Fear of talking Fear of not answering Master's questions Being supervised by other students Fear of giving wrong answers Anxiety about presenting conferences	Social stress arising from educational status	**social anxiety**
Family tensions Differences in student and family goals about education Lack of parents 'attention to students' educational needs Parents concerns about future student income	Family social context	**Family factors**
Employment and education Simultaneous educational and parenting roles Simultaneous Spouse and parenting roles	Existence of conflict between the roles	**Having multiple roles at the same time**
Parents' expectations arising from comparisons with others Parents' concerns about the income of the field of study Employers' expectations of job seekers about their resumes Expectations of professors High expectations of others from students about earning money through the field of study	Strict social expectations	**expectations**
Lack of attention to students living conditions by professors Inconsistencyof University course Low quality of interpersonal relationships of university staff Rely on a single teaching approach The Inefficient university admission system Non-practical training	Social mechanisms of the educational environment	**Socio-educational factors**

Educational-social factors: Research findings show that part of the stress of education depends on educational-social factors. Lack of attention to student living conditions by the university, inconsistency between courses offered by the university, lack of staff social and interpersonal skills, and a single teaching method used for all students are the reasons students report. Code 11 states: "Maybe the answer is that you can't train an elephant, a crocodile, a lion, and a mouse in the same way! By this teaching method, I feel to be stupid in understanding math; this is the cause of my frustration, fear, and sadness."

Conclusion

The main objective of the current study was to identify social stressors in students' experiences in terms of academic stress. According to the findings in this study, several causes can trigger stress and its symptoms among students including anxiety about verbal violence, unfavorable psycho-social environment of the classroom, lack of self-efficacy in the social atmosphere of the classroom, procrastination, comparison, social anxiety, family factors, and multiple roles. The first finding is related to concerns about verbal violence, cited by students as a reason for their academic stress. This finding is in line with those of Oleus (1998), Solomon (1990), Karimi (2011), Sadeghi & Lava Sani (2006), Bazargan et al (2008). Psychological and social effects of verbal violence in school, family, and friendship groups can affect the cognition, feelings, and academic behaviors of individuals and their educational achievement and efficiency. The second finding, estimated through interviews with students, is in the context of the unfavorable psycho-social environment in the classroom. It is in line with the research of Lorenz (1987), Brockover (1982), Wang & Hartel (1993), AmanElahi Fard et al. (2009), and Khajeh et al. (2011). If the psycho-social environment of the classroom is interactive, positive, skillful, and supportive, the educational outcomes will be efficient. In contrast, the classroom environment filled with competition, discrimination, injustice, and bias has inefficient educational outcomes associated with academic stress. Effective communication and empathy can challenge the results of even effective and up-to-date training. The results also show that lack of self-efficacy plays a role in students' academic stress. This finding is in line with those of calligraphers et al. (2011), Bandura (1997), Jour Salem & Mitg (1995), Ogun Yami & Mabakoji (2007), and Kim (2003). Also, another result of the research shows that comparison could cause academic stress. This finding is in line with those of Nouri (2010) and Leo (2000). Comparing students with each other causes abnormalities in their thoughts and feelings. Another important point is that procrastination can often lead to many cognitive and behavioral consequences for individuals by preventing them from progressing and achieving their goals. Some procrastinators experience major setbacks at work, university, and home in social relationships. Many factors can lead to procrastination, such as lack of commitment and support, unrealistic goals, time management problems, communication /social issues, and stress. Another finding of the present study is about the role of social anxiety in academic stress. It is consistent with those of Coles (2001), Mansell (1999), Weeks (2008), and Matza (2003). Social anxiety is the intense fear of negative evaluation coupled with a person's avoidance behavior in social situations. However, despite the unpleasantness of being in society for socially anxious people, they are present in such situations because being social is an inevitable reality. A further result is about the role and contribution of family factors to academic stress. This is consistent with the research of RezaKhani et al. (2008), Hooman (1998), Dosti (2016), Ali Mohammadi (1996), Abdolmohammadi (2016), and Silborn (2006). People's behavior and emotions are affected by various factors, including their family. If the family performance is desirable in all its dimensions, people will meet their needs more desirably, showing more appropriate social, personal, and educational performance. The present study also shows the importance of the multiplicity of roles. The addition of multiple management roles in different aspects of life may be problematic. Personal, professional, family, parental, and educational responsibilities can be effective when a person learns the necessary skills to deal with stressors and can have a problem-oriented approach and realistic confrontation with emotions and different topics to achieve better self-management. This result is consistent with those of Ghaffari et al. (2006), RafatJah et al. (2015), and Taybinia et al. (2017). Also, this study emphasizes the role of expectations in academic stress. This finding is consistent with those of Hu and Yip (2003), Michi et al (2001), Ang (2009), Dan et al. (2010), and Callas (2013). High or unrealistic expectations of individuals can affect their academic health. The last finding of this study is the contribution of social-social factors to academic stress. This result is consistent with those of Shakib et al. (2015), Nouri (2010), Okada (2010), and Kalhernia Golkar et al. (2015). Coordination between different parts of the educational system, having a positive attitude to the educational process, improving the interpersonal skills of employees, involving people in school goals, having an effective infrastructure, order in actions, and affairs related to the university can reduce academic stress to some extent.

Suggestions:

Teaching emotion regulation skills to students in universities.

Educating families and university staff on interpersonal skills and having realistic expectations and effective goals for students.

Research on other influential factors in the field of academic stress and follow up on similar studies in this field.

Using social planners and social policy makers in determining effective and executive policies in universities in the field of mental health.

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