Perceptions of University Strictness and Coping Styles of College Students

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Abstract

Nearly all college students today experience stress, but not all deal with it in healthy ways (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2006). Learning how to properly manage stress is important for college students because researchers have found that stress levels only increase over time (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). In order to help maintain the health and well being of students, some universities have implemented policies that seem to be strict in order to reduce such risk behaviors as drug usage. This study examined the relationship between college students’ perception of university strictness and coping style. Twenty-four African American students at a university in southeast Louisiana participated by reporting their preferred style of coping with stress, perception of the strictness of their university’s policies, and demographic information. The results indicated that a weak, non-significant correlation exists between coping mechanisms and perceptions of strictness, thus the hypothesis was not supported. An implication of the results is that other factors may contribute to students’ use of particular coping styles. A future study could examine the perception of enforcement of university policies on students’ preferred stress coping styles.

Key Terms: Stress, Coping Mechanisms, University Strictness, Perceptions

In today’s society, college students face alarming levels of stress. Students who possess the drive to succeed may be hindered by several internal and external pressures. This may explain why fewer students reach their goals via a healthy path. More disturbingly, students are experiencing record levels of depressive symptoms which may trigger the use of unhealthy stress management strategies. One study found that 96 percent of the participants, all of whom were college students, reported high levels of depressive symptoms (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2006). These symptoms can stem from increasing financial, academic, social, family, and internal demands (Pritchard, Wilson, & Yarnitz, 2007).

Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, and Whalen (2005) hypothesized that college students use drugs and alcohol to manage the stress associated with college demands, but instead found that use of unhealthy coping styles (such as drinking and drug use) correlates with instances of stress. In other words, as students consume alcohol more frequently, they experience stress more frequently, implying that alcohol is ineffective in reducing stress.

Though alcohol is ineffective in reducing stress, Piacentini and Banister (2006) found that it serves another purpose. Students were asked to write narratives about the role of alcohol in
their lives, and eight participants were interviewed. The results of the study point to alcohol as a key aspect of “student culture.” According to the participants, consuming alcohol, often to a point of excess, defines what it means to be a modern-day college student. From this information, college students noted that alcohol use was mainly limited to the alleviation of social stressors, allowing them to feel more at ease with their peers in social settings. The context of alcohol consumption also depended on the way students viewed themselves. Students who felt that they were a part of the school’s “student culture” tended to drink more alcohol than those who felt that they assumed a different identity. The results also reveal that the majority of participants were constantly concerned about peer perceptions, which led them to mirror the behavior of their peers (Piacentini & Banister, 2006). Pritchard et al. (2007) also explored the relationship between college students’ self-identity and stress, finding that as students adjusted to their identities and roles over time, their stress levels stayed constant, and that students’ health declined upon entrance to college. The amount of unhealthy symptoms that students experienced continued to increase over time.

Students experience more instances of stress than they experienced before starting college and more turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms to combat rising levels of depressive symptoms (Pritchard et al., 2007). Canalez-Gonzales and Kranz (2008) found that declining health especially pertains to pharmacy students. The results of their study indicated that 88 percent of the participants felt that their level of stress increased tremendously after the first semester. However, most of them strayed away from unhealthy ways of handling the stress and instead adopted healthy coping techniques. For example, they played a sport to relieve the amount of stress that had accumulated: 10.5% more pharmacy students engaged in a physical form of recreation than pre-pharmacy students. The main forms of recreation were playing sports like basketball. The students also listed napping, using the computer, and watching television as ways of coping with the increase in stress levels.

Pierceall and Keim (2007) also found that engaging in recreational activities is a major way college students deal with stress. The participants in their study were male and female students attending a community college in Illinois. Men typically use the “problem-focused” method of coping (figuring out the steps needed to resolve stress), and women tend to use the “emotion-focused” method (seeking comfort and advice from loved ones). However, Dyson and Renk (2006) have shown that these two methods are beginning to converge such that both men and women use a combination of the two. Their study showed that talking to family and friends was the most popular coping mechanism. Out of nine coping techniques, drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs ranked fourth and seventh, respectively.

Though many studies indicate that drug use is not as widespread on campus as is portrayed in the media, some studies aim to completely eliminate drug consumption by testing the effects of making anti-drug policies stricter. Cohen and Rogers (2001) enforced fines on underage students found drinking on campus. The fine for a first offense was $50, and the individual had to submit a self-assessment. After enforcing this new policy for eight consecutive semesters, the number of fines issued dropped dramatically. Though fewer students were caught intoxicated or drinking on campus, the researchers highlight that this may be attributed to the
“underground” movement of on-campus under-age drinking.

A university in southeastern Louisiana sought another method of reducing risk behaviors. This university does not impose drug related fines, but instead implements policies that resemble parental guidance. For example, freshmen students are not allowed to have visitors of the opposite sex in their dormitories. Those students who live on campus are supervised by resident assistants and “dorm mothers,” who tend to be older, non-student employees. Also, a curfew is enforced on all students residing on campus. Individuals who infringe upon this rule are consistently “written up,” and other privileges are taken away. As well, students who are enrolled in 1000 level courses have a limited number of allowed absences before they are given an “FE,” failure due to excessive absences. The FE policy requires underclassmen to attend class regularly.

Another characteristic that may reduce risk behaviors at this university is the location. The university is located in an area devastated by Hurricane Katrina. As a result of slow rebuilding efforts, there seems to be few places within walking distance where students can go to socialize after hours, but it appears that they feel safer traveling across the city to a better neighborhood to go out. Additionally, there are no sorority or fraternity houses located on or around campus. These factors are unique to the university and seem to explain why less risk behaviors are present on this campus than at other campuses.

The fundamental theme underlying unique policies at this university is supervision. The students are supervised by dorm mothers and the Dean of Academic Affairs via the FE policy. The university’s success with reducing problem behavior can be explained by research findings. Richardson, Radziszewska, Dent, and Flay (2001) found that supervised teenagers are less likely than unsupervised teenagers to engage in problem behaviors such as risk taking, substance use, and loss of academic interest. Adalbjarnardottir and Hafsteinsson (2001) found that parenting style is associated with the extent of risk behaviors over time. Authoritative parents have expectations and make demands of their children in a nurturing and supportive environment. Children raised in authoritative households are less likely to experiment with drugs than those raised in neglectful households. Authoritative parenting has been shown to be effective in reducing risk behaviors in young adults. Children raised under this parenting style are less influenced by peer pressure and appear to be healthier than children from neglectful families (Adalbjarnardottir & Hafsteinsson, 2001).

The students attending the university in southeast Louisiana may view the authoritarian policies as strict since students at other universities are allowed more individual freedom. However, these authoritarian policies may also account for the seemingly low levels of risk behavior present on campus. Based on the above observations from this university, the present study hypothesized that the more a university is perceived as strict by its students, the more students will use healthy coping mechanisms for handling stressors.

Method

Participants

A total of 24 college students attending a university in southeastern Louisiana participated in this study. Fifty-six percent of the participants were psychology majors, and the
others represented a variety of majors. Eighteen females and six males participated, and all of the participants were African American.

**Materials**

The COPE Inventory (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) and the Institutional Procedures in Colleges and Universities (IPCU) questionnaire (Seligman, 1969) were used. The COPE Inventory is composed of 60 items that identify the strategy a respondent uses to handle stress. Respondents rate the extent to which they use a particular coping style on a scale from 1 to 4. An example of a coping style item is, “I make a joke about it.”

The participants were also given the IPCU questionnaire, which determines strictness in policy implementation. It contains 45 items to which participants describe their certainty about the likelihood of an event, where 1 means “I’m fairly certain that this statement is true” and 5 indicates “I am fairly certain that this statement is false.” An example of an item from the IPCU measure is, “Administrators here believe that the only way to control improper student behavior is through the use of punishment.” The COPE inventory and IPCU questionnaire can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively.

**Procedures**

Participants were recruited for participation in this study. Before administering the questionnaires, a researcher reviewed the informed consent forms. The participants then signed the forms, entered the lab, and were given a packet containing the COPE Inventory, IPCU questionnaire, and a demographics survey. After completion of the questionnaires, the participants were debriefed.

**Results**

A Pearson correlational analysis was performed to assess the correlation between perception of university strictness and use of healthy coping mechanisms. A weak, non-significant correlation was found ($r(22) = -.165$, $p > .05$). An analysis was also conducted to assess the correlation between the length of time participants had been enrolled as students at the university and their perception of the university’s strictness, but a weak, non-significant correlation was found as well ($r(21) = .155$, $p > .05$). A maladaptive scoring system was devised to assess perception of strictness and use of “healthy” versus “unhealthy” coping styles, but neither correlation was significant ($r(22) = -.054$, $p > .05$; $r(22) = -.138$, $p > .05$, respectively).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to discover whether students’ perceptions of their university’s procedures, rule enforcement, and reputation share a relationship with the way they handle stress. It was hypothesized that the more a university was perceived as strict, the more students will use healthy methods of dealing with stress.

The results indicated that there is only a weak, non-significant relationship between strictness perception and use of healthy or unhealthy coping styles, and thus the hypothesis was not supported. This implies that school policies aimed at improving the over-all well being of the
student body may be ineffective. For example, the southeast Louisiana university’s curfew policy, which reduces the amount of time students can go out at night, may only reduce the amount of time, not the amount of alcohol that students can drink. The results may also imply that students have found ways of getting around such rules (by spending the night at a friend’s house to avoid curfew, etc.).

These nuances should be investigated further to answer the question, “To what degree do students internalize fear of disciplinary action?” These topics should be explored experimentally, if possible, in order to determine causality, which would be an advantage over the present study. Another limitation of this study is there may be alternative explanations for the relationships. For example, the relationship between drug use and coping style may not be as assumed. Students may not consciously be drinking alcohol to reduce social stress. In fact, some may enjoy the taste and the “buzz.” This study also relied on students’ perceptions of university strictness, as opposed to the actual strictness of the university policies. Some participants may have been involved in disciplinary action, while others may have not. Other participants may have been freshmen or transfer students with limited experience at the university. A final limitation is that this study was conducted at an HBCU. The students at this university may hold different beliefs and attitudes than students attending a non-HBCU. These limitations show that there is a need for more research in this area. Increased research is needed especially because today’s college students will comprise a large portion of the workforces of future generations, so any way that their college experience can better prepare them for the stressors found in the post-graduation world would be greatly desirable.
References


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Appendix A
COPE Inventory

We are interested in how people respond when they confront difficult or stressful events in their lives. There are lots of ways to try to deal with stress. This questionnaire asks you to indicate what you generally do and feel when you experience stressful events. Obviously, different events bring out somewhat different responses, but think about what you usually do when you are under a lot of stress.

Then, respond to each of the following items by circling one number on the answer sheet using the response choices listed just below. Please try to respond to each item separately in your mind from each other item. Choose your answers thoughtfully, and make your answers as true FOR YOU as you can. Please answer every item. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, so chose the most accurate answer for YOU—not what you think “most people” would say or do. Indicate what YOU usually do when YOU experience a stressful event.

1- I usually don’t do this at all
2- I usually do this a little bit
3- I usually do this a medium amount
4- I usually do this a lot

1. I try to grow as a person as a result of the experience.
2. I turn to work or other substitute activities to take my mind off things.
3. I get upset and let my emotions out.
4. I try to get advice from someone about what to do.
5. I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it.
6. I say to myself “this isn’t real.”
7. I put my trust in God.
8. I laugh about the situation.
9. I admit to myself that I can’t deal with it, and quit trying.
10. I restrain myself from doing anything too quickly.
11. I discuss my feelings with someone.
12. I use alcohol or drugs to make myself feel better.
13. I get used to the idea that it happened.
14. I talk to someone to find out more about the situation.
15. I keep myself from getting distracted by other thoughts or activities.
16. I daydream about things other than this.
17. I get upset, and am really aware of it.
18. I seek God’s help.
19. I make a plan of action.
20. I make jokes about it.
21. I accept that this has happened and that it can’t be changed.
22. I hold off doing anything about it until the situation permits.
23. I try to get emotional support from friends or relatives.
24. I just give up trying to reach my goal.
25. I take additional action to try to get rid of the problem.
26. I try to lose myself for a while by drinking alcohol or taking drugs.
27. I refuse to believe that this has happened.
28. I let my feelings out.
29. I try to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.
30. I talk to someone who could do something concrete about the problem.
31. I sleep more than usual.
32. I try to come up with a strategy about what to do.
33. I focus on dealing with this problem, and if necessary let the other things slide a little.
34. I get sympathy and understanding from someone.
35. I drink alcohol or take drugs, in order to think about it less.
36. I kid around about it.
37. I give up the attempt to get what I want.
38. I look for something good in what is happening.
39. I think about how I might best handle the problem.
40. I pretend that it hasn’t really happened.
41. I make sure not to make matters worse by acting too soon.
42. I try hard to prevent other things from interfering with my efforts at dealing with this.
43. I go to the movies or watch TV, to think about it less.
44. I accept the reality of the fact that it happened.
45. I ask people who have had similar experiences what they did.
46. I feel a lot of emotional distress and I find myself expressing those feelings a lot.
47. I take direct action to get around my problems.
48. I try to find comfort in my religion.
49. I force myself to wait for the right time to do something.
50. I make fun of the situation.
51. I reduce the amount of effort I’m putting into solving the problem.
52. I talk to someone about how I feel.
53. I use alcohol or drugs to help me get through it.
54. I learn to live with it.
55. I put aside other activities in order to concentrate on this.
56. I think hard about what steps to take.
57. I act as though it hasn’t even happened.
58. I do what has to be done, one step at a time.
59. I learn something from the experience.
60. I pray more than usual.
Appendix B
IPCU Questionnaire

Part I. The following items describe various aspects of college life relating to institutional procedures. Consider each statement in terms of what you know about your institution. Read each statement and circle the appropriate response on the answer sheet as follows:

1- I’m fairly certain that this statement is true.
2- I don’t know for sure, but I would imagine that this statement is true.
3- I simply don’t know.
4- I don’t know for sure, but I would imagine that this statement is false.
5- I am fairly certain that this statement is false.

1. The function of those campus officials concerned with discipline is to see that students who break the rules are apprehended and punished.

2. Students who get into serious trouble with campus officials are usually suspended or expelled, as opposed to being given a second chance.

3. The purpose if student discipline procedures here are clearly related to the institution’s educational goals, i.e., development of mature and responsible behavior.

4. Administrators here believe that the only way to control improper student behavior is through the use of punishment.

5. Administrators here are genuinely interested in students’ welfare, not just in the enforcement of rules and regulations.

6. Disciplinary policies are developed and reviewed by administration and faculty, generally without consultation with students.

7. Students on this campus have a major responsibility in formulating the rules and regulations under which they are governed.

8. Certain relatively minor kinds of discipline problems are handled solely by student judicial bodies.

9. Students, as well as faculty and administration, are represented on the judicial bodies which rule on major discipline cases.

10. Serious disciplinary matters are settled by administrative edict, without the participation of faculty or other students.

11. If a student is involved in a disciplinary problem here, he can expect his case to be judged on
its own merits—his personal circumstances will be taken into account.

12. If a student is found guilty of a particular offense, the judicial body has no leeway in deciding what to do—the student must receive a predetermined penalty.

13. A student who is accused of violating campus rules and regulations has the right to present witnesses on his behalf.

14. A student accused of violating campus rules and regulations has the right to know his accusers as well as the evidence against him.

15. Once a student’s case has been heard, he has no right to appeal to a higher authority, e.g., the president of the institution or the governing board.

Part II. The following items describe various situations which might result in the disciplinary action by a college or university. Consider each statement in terms of what you know about your institution. Read each statement and circle the appropriate response as follows:

1- No disciplinary sanctions would be applied.
2- Moderate disciplinary sanctions would be applied—warning, reprimand, probation.
3- Severe disciplinary sanctions would be applied—suspension or dismissal.
4- I simply don’t know what my institution would do in such a case.

1. Students participate in on-campus demonstrations protesting policies or activities of the government.
2. A student loans his athletic ticket to a friend who is not a student.
3. A student loans his library card to a friend who is not a student.
4. Students found “necking” on campus.
5. Students found fighting on campus.
6. A student turns in a paper which has been plagiarized from a friend.
7. A student is caught trying to break into a professor’s office.
8. A student is caught cheating on an examination.
10. A student fails to pay his library fines.
11. A student is known to be using LSD.
12. A student is known to be using marijuana.
13. A student under 21 years of age is found in possession of alcoholic beverages.
A student is known to have been involved in premarital sexual relations.

A student is known to engage in homosexual practices.

A coed is known to have spent the night at her boyfriend’s apartment.

A male student is known to have spent the night with a female in his apartment.

A student is known to have been drunk in his or (her) room.

A student over 21 purchases alcoholic beverages for a student under 21.

Students are known to have engaged in civil disobedience off campus, i.e., they knowingly violated laws though to be immoral and/or unconstitutional.

A student is convicted in the local courts for writing bad checks.

A student is involved in disorderly conduct off campus.

A student is convicted in the local courts for a minor theft.

A student is convicted in the local courts for drunk driving.

A student is involved in a demonstration for social reform in the community.

A student is convicted in the courts for possession and/or use of illegal drugs.

A student is convicted in the local courts for gambling.

A student is charged by local merchants with nonpayment of bills.

A student is convicted in the courts on a “morals” charge.