

The Influence of Counselling Self-Efficacy and Coping on Stress Among Counselling Practicum Students

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Abstract

Self-efficacy is a critical factor in motivating counselling students to persevere through stressful events during their training period. Studies have also found good coping mechanisms to be vital for individuals to manage their stress. This study analysed the influence of counselling self-efficacy and coping on stress among counselling practicum students in a Malaysian public university. A total of 88 respondents participated in this study. Three instruments were used, namely the Perceived Stress Scale-10, Counselling Activity Self-Efficacy Scale and Brief Resilient Coping Scale, to measure stress, counselling self-efficacy and coping. The descriptive analysis was conducted to identify the mean score and standard deviation of each variable. The independent sample T-test revealed no significant difference between the mean stress scores according to the demographic of the students. Pearson correlation indicated significant relationships between counselling self-efficacy and coping with stress. Significantly, counselling self-efficacy had a major influence on stress, indicating that higher counselling self-efficacy contributes to lower stress among the counselling practicum students. Suggestions were provided to help counselling students tolerate stress by encouraging increased counselling self-efficacy skills and positive coping mechanisms.

Keywords: Self-Efficacy, Coping Mechanism, Stress, Counselling Practicum, Public University

Introduction

Earlier studies have highlighted stress among students at tertiary education and its consequences. Stress has a significant impact on a person's mind and body (Koutsimani et al., 2019). There are many events that may be experienced by university students that can cause the feeling of stress. If prolonged, stress could affect students' lives while studying. Previous studies have maintained that a huge origin of behavioural issues and mental health sickness among tertiary education students was stress (Keller et al., 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2018). It

affects student's mental health and bodily issues, which can cause them inability to sleep and overweight and drug misuse issues (Sakitri, 2019; Stallman, 2010). Previous report by British Association on Counselling and Psychotherapy describes stress as causing emotional disparity and is constantly a rising issue over the past decades among students (Al-Sowaygh, 2013).

Many studies have looked into stress among children and working adults and scarcely discuss stress among students at tertiary education; this is a worthwhile topic for attention by researchers, as tertiary level students who are mostly young adults are at a crucial and risky stage of their psychological growth and emotional maturity (Petra et al., 2018; Germani et al., 2020). Indeed, stressful events reflect the stress experienced by many; and this includes students within the tertiary education setting who are emerging adults. In a study among degree students, about 20% stated they are feeling stressed majority of the time while around 25% stated that they feel stressed in a daily basis (Kirsch et al., 2014). Additionally, prior to the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic, stress was already a prevalent issue to the lives of university students, with majority stating that they were very worried and face unusual stress compared to years before (Hoyt et al., 2020). Another study carried out during COVID-19 pandemic showed that prolonged indoor quarantine affects daily routine of students, contributing to stress (Germani et al., 2020; Husky et al., 2020). This could mean that the stress levels among university students are higher compared to other social groups within the community.

Studies among physiotherapy degree students described that the students face a lot of stress even prior to doing their research paper; however the response is not persistent (Ramírez-Adrados et al., 2020). This is in contrast to students in a clinical practice, where some studies have reported greater reactions to stress (Beltrán-Velasco et al., 2018; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2018; Sánchez-Conde et al., 2019). In a Malaysian study by Abubakar et al. (2021) among undergraduate pharmacy students, stress increases during their training and is in higher levels compared to the community (Garber, 2017). Stress levels also tend to grow throughout the semester (Opoku-Acheampong et al., 2017) and over the course of the pharmacy training; it is also higher in comparison to the degree of stress during students' matriculation period (Hirsh et al., 2019). Stress is also prevalent among preclinical medical students, according to another study in Malaysia by Al-Hatamleh et al., (2019).

Evidently, most of the previous studies conducted have mainly highlight the effects of stress and fails to focus more into what are causing stress among different social groups (Al-Sowaygh, 2013; Hege et al., 2019; Koutsimani et al., 2019). The efforts to reduce stress must be in line with the effort in understanding what are causing stress and how they can be minimized. According to Thye (2018), individuals who are unable to discover an appropriate outlet to express their annoyances may end up suppressing their feelings and thoughts (Thye, 2018), which can have a detrimental effect later in life. Usual signs of chronic stress comprises of a lack of a sleep, inconsistent sleeping pattern, mental and physical fatigue, saddened mood, intellectual impairment and somatization disorder (Cohen et al., 2007; Grossi et al., 2015; McEwen, 2006). It is, therefore, critical that individuals are able to be conscious and have a positive mindset to overcoming stressful events.

Individuals with positive self-efficacy beliefs are able to acknowledge existing opportunities and have high perseverance to overcome obstacles they may encounter to strive in their selected activities (Pajares, 1997). According to Gunduz (2012), humans can grow their particular self-efficacy beliefs in different areas, both related and not-related to their careers, and they are able to express themselves appropriately. In the counselling field, counselling self-efficacy is a vital part of trainees' education and supervision process (Jaafar et al, 2011).

They serve as one of the factors contributing to counselling performance (Larson et al., 1992; Larson, 1998). Counsellor self-efficacy also has a connection in psychotherapists' self-beliefs in possessing good counselling skills and in conducting a good counselling session with their client (Midgett et al., 2016; Mullen & Lambie, 2016; Schiele et al., 2014). It acts as a tool where the counsellor applies what they have learnt during their college education into to the actual counselling session (Larson, 1998). Earlier studies have also shown that counsellor self-efficacy has a connection to how far a counsellor can commit to difficulties in their work (Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Hence, positive counselling self-efficacy can be a push factor for counsellors, both professionals and trainees, to strive in the counselling field amidst challenges encountered. Self-efficacy could be a critical factor in motivating counselling students to persevere through stressful events during their study period, survive their clinical practicum course and graduate as resourceful and competent counsellors.

In a research done in the University of Brunei on the execution of the existing foundation course, the researchers discovered ways of assisting university students to cope with stress efficiently, which has become a major concern of the university (Mundia & Shahrill, 2018). Methods of coping can be described as how an individual manage their stress response (Wu & Wang, 2016). The process of managing stress comprises of many factors (Wang, 2014) that could be categorised to effective and ineffective coping methods. Coping attitudes looks at the beliefs, attitudes, and feelings associated with various strategies of managing mental health concerns. Savarese et al. (2020) stated that most university students had adopted more religious or spiritual coping methods to facing stress. Hence, this study will highlight the gap of counselling self-efficacy and coping methods with stress among counselling practicum students at higher education institution in Malaysia. The following are the research objectives of this study:

1. To identify the stress level of counselling practicum students at a Malaysian public university.
2. To determine the difference in stress according to gender and current education level of counselling practicum students at a Malaysian public university.
3. To determine the correlation between counselling self-efficiency and coping with stress among counselling practicum students at a Malaysian public university.
4. To identify the factors that influence stress among counselling practicum students at a Malaysian public university.

Relationship Between Counselling Self-Efficacy, Coping And Stress

There have been several studies conducted among counselling practicum students to look at their stress levels and the influence of counselling self-efficacy and coping on stress. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) in 2013, a number of adults describe using reimbursement strategies with coping mechanisms to mask their challenges from the society, yet they suffer from the stress and attempt to keep a socially acceptable appearance. Healthcare workers such as medical doctors, psychotherapists and nurses are faced with numerous stress in their job (Ho, 2012). The healthcare and support field could be a challenging job, where professionals in this field may be in charge on handling issues during a crisis, assisting clients to overcome difficult issues and providing support for clients' growth throughout the sessions (Neuman & Gamble, 1995). In particular, counsellors are often exposed to a diverse range of clients who face a variety of problems. Without a proper method of maintaining a good balance of mental and emotional state, counsellors may easily succumb to emotional burnout and excessive stress.

Past studies have attempted to look at the connection between coping and stress (Diehl & Hay, 2010) and it is unquestionable that coping mechanism is a factor of how people deal with stress in their daily lives (Cabib et al., 2012). Meng and D'Arcy (2016) reported that coping is a strong variable in the process of reducing and tolerating stress and people perceive stress differently using a range of coping mechanisms (Mundia et al, 2016). In general, people may at first attempt to cope with their stresses on their own prior to reaching out for help (Mundia & Shahrill, 2018); however, this is different according to unique individuals and how they perceive stress.

Students who frequently struggle and find their studies challenging generally have low self-efficacy and this can be connected to their own self-confidence to effectively complete academic-related work (Bandura, 1993; Meyer et al, 2018). Studies demonstrate self-efficacy as a basic part of desire: if individuals do not feel that they are able to complete a task, there is less motivation to continue participating in the task (Bandura, 1993). Research in counselling self-efficacy among school counsellor has been limited (Mullen & Lambie, 2016) and the existing studies have shown strong link between counselling self-efficacy and counselling performance (Lent et al. 2003; Larson & Daniels, 1998). Ruggiero et al.'s (2013) study highlighted the professional growth and positive changes on counselling self-efficacy among practicum counsellors. Positive changes in self-compassion and healthy personal growth become vital in the self-efficacy development among counsellors; this suggest that positive mental and emotional health state predicts higher counselling self-efficacy, reflecting the link between low stress and high self-efficacy.

Methodology

Research Design

This research design is conducted in the form of a quantitative survey, in which a cross sectional study was carried out. The quantitative method was chosen to study the influence of counselling self-efficacy and coping toward stress and study the relationships that is present among those variables (Fetters et al., 2013). Quantitative methods test theories by analysing numerical data (Counsell et al., 2016) collected through use of standardized instruments with a random sample of people, allowing the researcher to generalize results back to the larger population (Yilmaz, 2013). In this study, the dependent variable is stress, whilst the independent variables are counselling self-efficacy and coping.

Sample and Population

The population chosen for this survey are counselling students who are currently studying at the Faculty of Educational Studies at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Serdang campus. This population comprises of counselling students pursuing their higher education, either doing their undergraduate or postgraduate programme and were completing their practical or internship at the time of the study. The population size is 108 counselling students, in which 68 are postgraduate students in their master's programme. Within this population, students who are completing their counselling internship courses are 33 students from mainstream group and students from People's Trust Council (MARA). Thirty-five students are completing their counselling practicum course, consisting of the mainstream and the Specialty Programme in Alcohol and Drug Abuse (SPADA) group. The remaining 40 students are degree students in their final year. Information about this population and their contact information were obtained by working with the Department of Counselling Psychology and Counselling Education at the faculty.

The random sampling method was chosen for selecting the sample study. Students who fit the criteria of the study was randomly selected. The sample size was 88 students, which were determined using the Krejcie and Morgan's sample size (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Instrument

Three instruments were used in this study to measure each variables. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)-10 was used to measure stress. The scale contains 10 items that identify the participants' recent experience on any issue and frequency of feeling stress (Hendricks et al., 1994). The PSS utilises the 5-point Likert scale from 0 being "Never having those feelings" to 4 being "Having that feelings most of the time". In the PSS scoring, participants who scored between 6 and 12 are described as having normal stress. Higher scores means that they may be experiencing high stress (Cohen & Williamson, 1988).

The Counsellor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (CASES) is used for a range of counsellors' activities in their counselling practice. The different aspects of the counsellor activities included what counsellors believe they can do, such as using organised skills during session, leading the session and perform more collaborative activities with clients, and managing difficult situations (Ooi et al, 2018). The initial CASES had a total of 59 items, which was later shortened to 41 items (Lent et al., 2003); this most recent version was used in the current study to measure counselling self-efficacy among the respondents. The first part of CASES consists of 15 items to test the therapist's scale in building rapport with clients and exploring their issues; the second part has 10 items that looks at how well the counsellors carry out their task; and the last part contains 16 items that looks at how confident the counsellor is when they face an issue.

The Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS) was developed by Sinclair and Wallston (2004). This scale looks at how an individual withstands and overcomes challenges in difficult situations. The BRCS (Sinclair & Wallston, 2004) has 4 items which looks at a person's inclination to manage stress. The respondents have to respond to each items by ranking 1 (do not refer to them at all) to 5 (refer to them the most), in which the greater scores shows greater rank of withstanding adversity (Lanz, 2015). Table 1 shows the internal consistency coefficients of all three scales used, which are show strong reliability according to Davis (1971).

Table 1:

Alpha Cronbach coefficient value of reliability of PSS-10, CASES and BRCS

Instrument	Reliability	Number of Item
Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)-10	0.523	10
Counsellor Activity Self-Efficacy Scales (CASES)	0.969	41
Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS)	0.527	4

Data collection procedure

The data was collected via survey using online google form. In the first part of the survey, the respondents were asked to provide their demographics, which include their gender, age, race, mode of their study current education level and occupation. The next three parts of the survey comprise of the three instruments used in this research. Only students who fits the criteria for this research were selected and provided the survey forms. All the raw data then was transferred to excel spread sheet (Creswell, 2014), which was then put into Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) Version 24.0 to be analysed. Descriptive analysis and inference analysis were used. The frequencies, percentages, mean, mode, median and

standard deviation were identified using the descriptive analysis. The mean difference and correlations between the variables were tested using the inferential analysis. The tests conducted were: independent sample T-test, Pearson correlation test and multiple regression test.

Findings

Demography of Respondents

From the demographic analysis, the data shows that the respondents consisted of mostly female (76.1%); male respondents comprises only 23.9% of the sample. With the respect of age, this study involves various age groups that have been divided into 3 age categories namely 21 years to 30 years, 31 years to 40 years and 41 years to 50 years. The majority of respondents were in the age category of 21 years to 30 years as many as 56 people (63.6%), followed by respondents aged 31 years to 40 years as many as 24 people (27.3%), and the respondents aged 41 years to 50 years as many as 8 people (9.1%). Next, based on the ratio of the data obtained for the categories of race, it shows that Malay respondents cover the majority of the participants with as many as 74 people (84.1%). They are followed by Chinese respondents with 9 people (10.2%), the Indians with 2 people (2.3%) and racial ethnicity with only 3 people (3.4%).

In terms of their current education level, the respondents who are pursuing their bachelor's degree are 35 people (39.8%), while the remaining 53 (60.2%) are pursuing their master degree. Among these students, the majority are full-time students, which consisted of 78 people (88.6%). The rest of the students are part-time students with only 10 people (11.4%). For the occupation category, 47 (53.4%) are students, 13 (14.8%) are counsellors, 2 (2.3%) are psychological officers, 12 (13.6%) are teachers and 14 (15.95) are uncategorised, consisting of various occupations such as insurance agent, consultant and human resource. The demography of the students are showed in Table 2.

Table 2:

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Type	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	21	23.9
Female	67	76.1
Total	88	100.00
Age		
21-30 year	56	63.6
31-40 year	24	27.3
41-50 year	8	0.1
Total	88	100.00
Race		
Malay	74	84.1
Chinese	9	10.2
Indian	2	2.3
Others	3	3.4
Total	88	100.00
Current Level Of Education		
Bachelors Degree	35	39.8
Masters Degree	53	60.2
Total	88	100.00
Mode Of study		
Full Time Student	78	88.6
Part Time Student	10	11.4
Total	88	100.00
Occupation		
Student	47	53.4
Counselor	13	14.8
Psychology Officer	2	2.3
Teacher	12	13.6
Others	14	15.9
Total	88	100.0

Level of stress among counselling practicum students

Findings using descriptive analysis show that the majority of the respondents are at a low stress level (97.7%). Only 2 people (2.3%) reported moderate stress level and none reported high stress level (Table 3).

Table 3:

Stress Level of Counselling Practicum students

Level	Frequency	Percent (%)
Low	86	97.7
Moderate	2	2.3
High	0	0

Difference in stress according to the gender and current educational level of counselling practicum students

The following are the research hypotheses tested:

Ha1: There is a significant difference of stress according to the gender of the counselling practicum students at UPM.

Ha2: There is a significant difference of stress according to the level of education of the counselling practicum students at UPM.

Gender

The result using an independent sample T-test shows that there is no significant difference in mean stress score between genders (Table 4). The mean values for both male and female students were 2.09 ($F = 1.901$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 4

Result of an Independent sample T-test for the difference of stress according to the gender of counselling practicum students

Gender	n	M	SD	F	p
Male	21	2.09	0.366	1.901	0.171
Female	67	2.09	0.265		

Current education level

The result of using an independent sample T-test (Table 5) shows that there is no significant difference in the mean stress score between the respondents' current education levels ($F = 0.460$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5

Result of an Independent sample T-test for the difference of stress according to the current education level of counselling practicum students

Current level of education	n	M	SD	F	p
Bachelor's degree	35	2.09	0.300	0.460	0.499
Master's degree	53	2.08	0.287		

Correlation Between Counselling Self-Efficacy And Coping With Stress Among Counselling Practicum Students

The Pearson correlation test was applied to test the correlation between the variables using the following research hypotheses:

Ha3: There is a significant relationship between counselling self-efficacy and stress among counselling practicum students at UPM.

Ha4: There is a significant relationship between coping and stress among counselling practicum students at UPM.

The results of the correlation analysis between counselling self-efficacy and stress among respondents showed a value of $r = 0.475$ ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that there is a significant relationship between counselling self-efficacy and stress. This correlation relationship is at a weak level, and the hypothesis is accepted. This shows that the higher the level of counselling self-efficacy, the lower the stress levels of the counselling practicum students.

The results of the correlation analysis between coping and stress among the respondents showed a value of $r = 0.351$ ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that there is a significant relationship between coping and stress. This correlation relationship is also at a weak level and the hypothesis is accepted. This shows that the higher the coping levels of the counselling practicum students the lesser their stress levels. Table 6 showed the correlation analysis result.

Table 6

The correlation values between counselling self-efficacy, coping and stress among counselling practicum students

Variable	Stress
Counselling Self-Efficacy	-0.497**
Coping	-0.351**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Factors that influence stress among counselling practicum students

The multiple regression analysis test was used to test the factors influencing stress among the respondents using the following research hypothesis:

Ha5: There is a significant influence of counselling self-efficacy and coping towards stress among the counselling practicum students at UPM.

The results found that both predictor factors contribute to stress levels. Significantly, counselling self-efficacy was a major influence of stress ($\beta = 0.497$, $p < .001$). The combination of counselling self-efficacy with coping ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < .001$) increased by 6.4% (56.1% from 49.7%) to the R^2 variant = 0.314). This means that counselling self-efficacy influences the most compared to coping towards the level of stress among counselling practicum students at UPM. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted. Table 7 showed the result of this test.

Table 7

Result of multiple regression analysis using stepwise method for independent variables

Variables (X)	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Model 1	0.497 ^a	0.247	0.238	2.017
Model 2	0.561 ^b	0.314	0.298	1.935

^aStress : counselling self-efficacy

^bStress : counselling self-efficacy, coping

Discussion

The objective of this study was to study the influence of counselling self-efficacy and coping towards stress among counselling practicum students at University Putra Malaysia. The study also tested the difference in stress between gender and current education levels among the sample group. Results of inferential analysis showed that both variables contribute toward

stress among the students and there is no significant difference in stress between gender and current educational levels of the students. Most counselling practicum students also reported low stress level.

In the past studies, stress predicts how a person thinks and increases when an individual encounters difficult events that is measured to the extent of what a person could cope (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Hence, individuals will experience reduced stress when they feel they are able to control it. The experience of stress may be even higher among new trainee counsellors (Mastroleo et al., 2010); however their stress levels may reduce with more hours in practicum and internship training as they have become more familiar with the counselling process and are able to respond more appropriately to challenging situations. The low stress level reported in the current study may be due to several factors; the students may be more aware of mental health issues and are more conscious of their own mental health state. Counselling students are taught different theories to help themselves and others and are trained to look at challenges and issues from different perspectives. They are more trained and have knowledge on what resources necessary and available to handle stress.

Coping and counselling self-efficacy were also reported to link significantly and negatively with stress; this is consistent with past studies that have reported higher self-efficacy and coping mechanisms with lesser stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Meng & D'Arcy, 2016). Further finding using regression test reported that counselling self-efficacy contribute the most toward stress level compared to coping among counselling practicum students at UPM. Self-efficacy was shown in the Social Cognitive Theory to be associated with symptoms of stress (Bandura, 1997). Previous studies have also posited that positive coping mechanisms among counsellors and mental health practitioners are linked negatively with stress; these coping mechanisms include being organised, having a good support system and having the ability to resolve their issues appropriately (Briggs & Munley, 2008). Additionally, through counselling courses and training, counselling students are constantly taught skills and are provided learning experience to develop counselling competency and self-confidence; this breeds the development of positive counselling self-efficacy and positive ways of coping with difficult situations. Hence, this may contribute to lower stress levels and higher resilience against challenges compared to other university students who are not in the counselling field. This implicates counselling students to improve skills in counselling self-efficacy and build positive coping mechanisms so that they are able to respond to stressful events better and become more resilient against challenges.

Limitations and Suggestions For Future Study

There was some limitations to this study. Firstly, this study was carried out among counselling practicum students at a selected Malaysian public university; therefore, the findings are only limited and generalizable to students within this population only. This study was also conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have affected the respondents physically and emotionally and their responses to the survey in overall. Thus, it is suggested that future studies are conducted post-COVID-19 as students may experience different coping styles and self-efficacy levels due to a range of stressful events. Future studies may also conduct a similar study based on counselling students' year of study in their university programme and explore other factors affecting stress among counselling practicum students, whether related to academic or career. This may facilitate in a better understanding of the stress levels faced by the students of different year groups and social factors. The researcher

believes that these recommendations are able to shed some light towards the need for more research and benefit trainee counsellors and the counselling profession in general.

Conclusion

This study identified the level of stress among counselling practicum students at a Malaysian public university and the influence of counselling self-efficacy and coping towards stress. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 period in Malaysia. Findings showed that the students have low stress level and both counselling self-efficacy and coping contribute towards stress among the counselling practicum students. Suggestions for future studies were provided, directed for counsellors, both trainees and professionals. The researcher concluded that counselling practicum students can manage stressful events better by developing positive counselling self-efficacy and apply positive coping mechanisms.

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