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Helen W. Bland

Georgia Southern University, Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health, hwbland@georgiasouthern.edu

Bridget F. Melton

Georgia Southern University, bmelton@georgiasouthern.edu

Stephen Patrick Gonzalez

Georgia Southern University

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A Qualitative Study of Stressors, Stress Symptoms, and Coping Mechanisms Among College Students Using Nominal Group Process

Helen Graf, PhD, Bridget Melton, EdD, and Stephen Gonzalez, MS

Abstract

Background: Stress is part of the college experience; however, how students deal with stress can greatly impact their behaviors and health status. **Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to qualitatively assess sources of stress, types of stressors, and coping mechanisms employed among undergraduate students. **Methods:** Nominal group process was utilized to obtain information related to study variables and help prioritize the accounts provided by study participants ($n = 173$). **Results:** Participants gave insight into the unique stress faced by this generation (grades, GPA, multitasking, parental expectations), stress symptoms (more psychological in nature), and coping strategies (prayer, talking to mom, surfing the net, and social networking). The top stressors included: schoolwork, money, time management, parents, and friends. Moodiness/irritability, anxiety, and sleep problems were the highest-ranked symptoms of stress cited by study participants. The three most-reported coping mechanisms were: working out, prayer, and talking to mom. **Conclusions:** Although the themes of stressors, symptoms, and coping mechanisms for college students might not have changed through the years, the sources that underlie these themes have changed as compared to past generations.

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Drs. Graf and Melton are with the Department of Health and Kinesiology, College of Health and Human Sciences, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, and Mr. Gonzalez is with the Department of Exercise and Sport Science, College of Health, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

Corresponding Author: Helen M. Graf, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Health and Kinesiology, Georgia Southern University, P.O. Box 8076, Statesboro, GA 30460-8076.

E-mail: hgraf@georgiasouthern.edu.

Introduction

Transition to the college environment for most young adults is often characterized as both challenging and stressful. Students must balance the competing demands of academics, developing social contacts, and being responsible for their own daily needs (Hudd et al., 2000). Stress is part of the college experience; however, how the students deal with it can impact their behaviors and health status.

The inability to cope with stress has been shown to negatively impact the health behaviors of college students, often resulting in alcohol abuse, smoking, and eating disorders (Oliver, Reed, & Smith, 1998; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007; Economos, Hildebrandt, & Hyatt, 2008). Additionally, there are negative consequences on health status, including suppressed immune system functioning, increased susceptibility to infection, recurrences of herpes virus infections, high blood pressure, cancer, autoimmune disease, and stroke (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Largo-Wright, Peterson, & Chen, 2005). Furthermore, several studies have shown a decrease in the mental health status of college students due to stress, which can contribute to increased rates of depression (Yorgason, Linville, & Zitzman, 2008; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Benton et al., 2002). With such detrimental effects on health, questions about what stresses students, and how they might be coping with stress, have been the foci of research study.

The literature is replete with studies that have considered stress triggers, symptoms, and coping skills in assorted college populations. Marshal, Allison, Nykamp and Lanke (2008) found that medical students reported to be stressed by family, relationships, examinations, schedule issues, out-of-class assignments, and finances; they used exercise, spending time with friends, sleeping, watching TV, and drinking alcohol to cope with stress. Among nursing students, finding new friends and working with people they do not know have been identified as significant stress factors (Seyedfatemi, Tafreshi, & Hagani, 2007). As for college athletes, whites report experiencing higher stress intensity more often than African Americans, while female athletes have higher levels of stress compared to males (Anshel, Sutarso & Jubenville, 2009). In addition to looking at different populations, current research has also investigated factors effecting stress, such as self-esteem, hardiness, reliance, and participation in sports (Skirka, 2000; Hudd et al., 2000).

A challenge in researching stress is the issue of measurement. Numerous inventories and assessment tools to measure stress and stress symptoms have been developed over the years (e.g., Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Johnson, 1980; Gadzella, 1994; Bijttebier, Vertommen, & Steene, 2001; Gadzella, Pierce, & Young, 2008). The issue of stress has been assessed using the *Life Events Checklist (LEC)*, originally developed for post-traumatic stress disorder (Gray, Litz, Hsu, & Lombardo, 2004) adapted for broader use to measure stress-related events that have occurred during the past year, as well as the *Daily Hassles Questionnaire (DHQ)* (Rowlison & Feiner, 1988), which measures events that have happened in the past month). The classic stress inventory of Holmes and Rahe (1967) modeled stress quantitatively, assigning stress event points or units. Other researchers have updated and/or modified this questionnaire by adjusting for measurement issues or target audience. Johnson (1980) adopted the *LEC* for adolescents, while Ryan-Wenger, Sharrer, & Campbell (2005) used a simple frequency count to assess stress. Furthermore, Blackmore, Tucker, & Jones (2005) developed their measure to assess undergraduate stress. The Student-Life Stress Inventory, designed for students, was validated by Gardzella (1994) for reliability and validity. Other studies have utilized author-generated questionnaires based on traditional inventories and coping mechanisms (Hicks & Heastie, 2008). Nonetheless, measuring stress in college students remains a challenge, and researchers are concerned with accurately assessing stress symptoms (Schafer, 1992; Holm & Holroyd, 1992; Dyson & Renk, 2006). Although current stress measures do meet appropriate psychometric measurement standards, limitations reported include not being up-to-date and reflective of stress and coping mechanisms used by current college students (Gadzella, 1994; Blackmore, Tucker, & Jones, 2005; Dyson & Renk, 2006). Each of these studies recommends that future research includes updates of existing stress questionnaires.

As such, the purpose of this study was to qualitatively assess sources of stress, types of stressors, and coping mechanisms employed among undergraduate college students. Data gathered will be utilized to amend and ameliorate existing quantitative stress assessment instruments for college students.

Methodology

Procedures

The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative, nominal group process, selected as a means of gaining new information and prioritizing information (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). The authors of this study served as interviewers; in order to keep variability between interviewers to a minimum, each received training in how to conduct nominal group process, and a set script was developed. In addition, each interviewer was responsible for the same content area for each group (i.e., the interviewer for coping mechanisms conducted the proceedings for coping mechanisms throughout the process), and groups were limited to one focus area in each session (Delberg, Van De Ven & Gustafson, 1986).

Intact classrooms of 25-to-40 students were selected from approximately eight total classes with two per grade classification level. Upon arrival, interviewers created three equal groups of between eight and 14 students; the groups worked simultaneously, with each focusing on a distinct content area (stressors, physical signs and symptoms of stress, coping mechanisms), facilitated by one of the researchers.

Box 1: Questions used to gather data in the Nominal Group Technique.

Each group addressed only one of the following questions:

- “Please reflect upon your time as a college student. ***What are the things that cause you stress?*** Please take 5-to-10 minutes to list all the things that have personally caused you stress during your college years. These can be big events that you experienced or minor hassles. There is no right or wrong answer.”
- “Please reflect upon your time as a college student. ***When you have been under stress, what signs or symptoms do you exhibit?*** These signs/symptoms can be physical or emotional. Please take 5-to-10 minutes to list all the signs and symptoms that you feel when you are under stress. There is no right or wrong answer.”
- “Please reflect upon your time as a college student. ***When you have been under stress, what specifically do you do that helps you cope with the stress of being in college?*** What things have you found that help to reduce or lower stress for you? Please take 5-to-10 minutes to list all you do to cope with stress. There is no right or wrong answer.”

Without conversation between or among the groups, students individually wrote all that came to their minds on a note card that was provided. When that task was completed, participants then gave their input orally in a round robin fashion, and items were recorded by the facilitator on flipcharts until all items were listed. Clarification of each item, if necessary, was then made. Participants were asked to evaluate the group’s input, and then individually ranked the top-five items on the note card; using this ranking, consensus was reached on the hierarchy of items. The process took 20-to-30 minutes; all written material was gathered and retained by researchers (note cards, flipcharts, etc).

Sampling Frame

Approximately 200 undergraduate students currently enrolled at a midsize university in the Southeastern United States were targeted for this study. A non-probability, purposive sampling technique was selected, since participants were required to meet a pre-determined criteria (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999), in this case, an equal distribution of grade-level (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior). Professors that might have been willing to grant access were solicited by electronic mail. Keeping selected classes to a maximum of 25-to-40 students, with one-to-two classes per grade level, were the targets. Classes were selected from among the colleges at the university, including general studies, health, and education majors. Anonymity of participants was maintained, no inducement was offered for participation, and no minors were included in the study. Researchers conducted the Nominal Group Technique during the first 30 minutes of class; the university's Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Participant Profile

Six professors agreed to have their classes participate in the study. The number of students registered in these classes was 192, and 19 students were absent on the day of the researchers collected the data. All students in attendance elected to participate ($n = 173$). Table 1 describes a demographic breakdown of study participants. Among the gender demographic, the majority of participants (69.9%) were female. Diverse representation vis-à-vis race/ethnicity was evident; the majority of participants (65.3%) were white. The Freshman class (41.6%) was most represented in the group; not surprisingly, more than one-half of those in the sample (51.4%) fell into the 18-to-19 year-old age demographic, however, the rest of the sample was quite representative of the undergraduate experience. Finally, the vast majority of students (91.3%) indicated full-time status.

Data Analysis

Statistical tests employed in this study were descriptive in nature. As a function of the data, as well as the inductive reasoning processes inherently related to nominal group process (i.e. obtaining a hierarchical ranking of input by participants), both qualitative and quantitative data analyses were conducted. A thematic content analysis that categorized responses into specific subject areas was conducted on the written information obtained from open-ended questions.¹ Rank and scoring procedures for nominal group process as described in Elwyn et al. (2005) were followed. To compare results of various groups, rankings given to different stress descriptors were given inverse scores and totals were calculated to determine overall rankings. Demographic data were also recorded.

Results

Three types of data were collected at each nominal group process meeting: stressors: signs and symptoms of stress; and coping mechanisms. One purpose of the nominal group process was to identify and rank new points of information. After both clarifying and listing proposed stress identifiers, participants ranked the top five items. Tables 2-thru-4 list the hierarchical order of group rankings. Qualitative investigations find richness in both breadth and depth of data, so any item that made the group ranking "cut" of the top eight are included in the data tables. Ranking and scoring of qualitative data is unique to the nominal group process, giving this method attributes of both quantitative and qualitative data reporting. To keep with tradition of this distinctive type of methodology, tables are included in full detail.

¹ The thematic content analysis of coding of raw data, and constructing categories that captured relevant characteristics of the content, was followed as directed by Merriam (2009).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants (n = 173).

| Demographic Characteristic | N | % |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 121 | 69.9 |
| Male | 40 | 23.1 |
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| Non-Hispanic White | 133 | 65.3 |
| Non-Hispanic Black | 39 | 22.5 |
| Hispanic | 2 | 1.2 |
| Asian | 2 | 1.2 |
| Other | 6 | 3.5 |
| Grade Classification | | |
| Freshman | 72 | 41.6 |
| Sophomore | 35 | 20.2 |
| Junior | 18 | 10.4 |
| Senior | 37 | 21.4 |
| Age | | |
| 18 years-old | 40 | 23.1 |
| 19 years-old | 49 | 28.3 |
| 20 years-old | 22 | 12.7 |
| 21 years-old | 15 | 8.7 |
| 22 years-old and older | 34 | 21.0 |
| Student Status | | |
| Full-time | 158 | 91.3 |
| Part-time | 2 | 1.2 |

Ranking of the top college stressors as identified by the collective sum of the six groups is given (Table 2). The higher the rank, the more point value the scored earned. Group scores were totaled to identify top stressors and arranged in hierarchical order. The top three stressors, therefore, were school work, money, and time management. The atypical stressors discussed by participants included texting, inordinate parental expectations, and pointless classes.

Stress is often accompanied by both physical and psychological signs and symptoms. As such, study participants were asked to discuss and rank signs and symptoms associated with their stress. Using the same ranking and scoring method, the top three signs and symptoms identified were being moody/irritable, anxieties, and sleep problems (Table 3). In addition, overwhelmingly, the consensus of opinion arrived at by students identified the psychological manifestations of stress as among those being encountered, oftentimes, more frequently than physical symptoms.

Coping mechanisms employed by college students were delineated and ranked (Table 4). The top three coping mechanisms cited by college students were workout, prayer, and talking to mom. These findings were not anticipated by the researchers. Contemporary coping mechanisms listed by students included on-line social network, surf the net, and have sex.²

² A broader discussion of these findings is further explored by the authors in the "Results in Context" section that follows.

Table 2: Stressors proposed and ranked by students via Nominal Group Process (NGP).

| Stressors | Group 1 Rank (Score) | Group 2 Rank (Score) | Group 3 Rank (Score) | Group 4 Rank (Score) | Group 5 Rank (Score) | Group 6 Rank (Score) | Total Score |
|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Schoolwork | 2 (7) | 5 (4) | 2 (7) | | | 1 (8) | 26 |
| Money | | 2 (7) | 1 (8) | 7 (2) | | 3 (6) | 23 |
| Time Management | | 1 (8) | 2 (7) | | 3 (6) | 8 (1) | 22 |
| Parents/Family | 5 (4) | | | 1 (8) | | 4 (5) | 17 |
| Tests (Content/Time) | | 6 (3) | 4 (5) | | 2 (7) | | 15 |
| Relationships | | | | 6 (3) | 5 (4) | 4 (5) | 11 |
| Commute | 3 (6) | 4 (5) | | | | | 11 |
| GPA | | | | | 1 (8) | | 8 |
| Texting | 1 (8) | | | | | | 8 |
| Lack of Sleep | 7 (2) | 8 (1) | | 5 (4) | | | 7 |
| Finding a Job | | | | 2 (7) | | | 7 |
| Boyfriend/Girlfriend | 8 (1) | 3 (6) | | | | | 7 |
| Graduation | | | | | | 2 (7) | 7 |
| Job | | | | 3 (6) | | | 6 |
| Major | | | | 4 (5) | | | 5 |
| Balance | 4 (5) | | | | | | 5 |
| Deadlines | | | | | 4 (5) | | 5 |
| HOPE Scholarship | | | | | 5 (4) | | 4 |
| Greek Life | | 6 (3) | | | | | 3 |
| Parental Expectations | 6 (3) | | | | | | 3 |
| Living Situations | | | | | | 6 (3) | 3 |
| Keeping in Shape | | | | | | 7 (2) | 2 |
| Pointless Core Classes | | | | | 7 (2) | | 2 |
| Not Enough Time | | | | | 8 (1) | | 1 |
| Assignments | | | | 8 (1) | | | 1 |

Table 3: Signs and symptoms of stress proposed and ranked by students via NGP.

| Signs and Symptoms | Group 1 Rank (Score) | Group 2 Rank (Score) | Group 3 Rank (Score) | Group 4 Rank (Score) | Group 5 Rank (Score) | Group 6 Rank (Score) | Total Score |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Being Moody/Irritable | 1 (8) | 4 (5) | 2 (7) | 2 (7) | 2 (7) | 4 (5) | 39 |
| Anxieties | 8 (1) | 2 (7) | 3 (6) | 6 (3) | | 2 (7) | 24 |
| Sleep Problems | 5 (4) | 2 (7) | 6 (3) | 3 (6) | 6 (3) | | 23 |
| Rushed/Hurried | 3 (6) | 1 (8) | | | 4 (5) | | 19 |
| Headache | | 6 (3) | | | 4 (5) | 3 (6) | 14 |
| Nervous | | | | | 3 (6) | 1 (8) | 14 |
| Shut Down | 6 (3) | | 4 (5) | 7 (2) | | 8 (1) | 11 |
| Poor Eating Habits | | 7 (2) | 8 (1) | 1 (8) | | | 11 |
| Feel Overwhelmed | | | 1 (8) | | | 7 (2) | 10 |
| Frustration | 1 (8) | | | | | | 8 |
| Exhaustion | | 5 (4) | | | | 5 (4) | 8 |
| Depression | | | | | 1 (8) | | 8 |
| Inattentive | 7 (2) | | | | | 5 (4) | 6 |
| Restless | | | | 4 (5) | | | 5 |
| Emotional | 4 (5) | | | | | | 5 |
| Aggression | | 5 (4) | | | | | 4 |
| Illness/Sickness | | | 5 (4) | | | | 4 |
| Backaches | | | | | 7 (2) | | 2 |
| Cry | | 8 (1) | | | | | 1 |
| Short Temper | | | | | 8 (1) | | 1 |

Table 4: Coping mechanisms proposed and ranked by students via NGP.

| Coping Mechanisms | Group 1 Rank (Score) | Group 2 Rank (Score) | Group 3 Rank (Score) | Group 4 Rank (Score) | Group 5 Rank (Score) | Group 6 Rank (Score) | Total Score |
|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Workout | 3 (6) | 3 (6) | 5 (4) | 4 (5) | 2 (7) | 4 (5) | 33 |
| Prayer | 1 (8) | | | 1 (8) | | 1 (8) | 24 |
| Talk to Mom | | 1 (8) | 2 (7) | | 1 (8) | 3 (6) | 22 |
| Sleep | 8 (1) | | 1 (8) | 3 (6) | | | 16 |
| Music | 5 (4) | 8 (1) | 2 (7) | | | | 12 |
| Friends | 5 (4) | | | | 5 (4) | 7 (2) | 10 |
| Play Sports | | | | 2 (7) | 6 (3) | | 10 |
| Shop | 3 (6) | 7 (2) | | | | | 8 |
| Shower | | 1 (8) | | | | | 8 |
| Quiet Times | 2 (7) | | | | | | 7 |
| Eat | | | | | | 2 (7) | 7 |
| On-Line Social Ntwrk | | | | | 2 (7) | | 7 |
| Movie | | | 3 (6) | | | | 6 |
| Block-it-Out | | 3 (6) | | | | | 6 |
| Relax | | | | 4 (5) | | | 5 |
| Surf the Net | | 4 (5) | | | | | 5 |
| Play Guitar | | | | | 4 (5) | | 5 |
| Write | | 5 (4) | | | | | 4 |
| Treat Myself | | 5 (4) | | | | | 4 |
| Read a Book | | | | | | 5 (4) | 4 |
| Have Sex | | | 6 (3) | | | | 3 |
| Party | | | | | | 6 (3) | 3 |
| Call Family | 7 (2) | | | | | | 2 |

Discussion

This study was a qualitative assessment of sources of stress, types of stressors, and coping mechanisms employed among undergraduate college students. Many participants enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the issues related to the factors stated above. Although the method of data collection was new for most, students quickly understood the procedures and adhered to the guidelines; they especially liked the opportunity to clarify in a group discussion format, just what they each meant to them.

Although the themes of stressors, symptoms, and coping mechanisms for college students may not have changed much through the years, the sources that underlie these themes *have* changed over time. The Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are those born after 1982 (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). They comprise over 20% of today's U.S. population and number over 100-million strong, the largest generation since the Baby-Boomers (approximately 33% larger than the Baby Boomer generation). This group possesses unique characteristics as compared with its previous cohort, characteristics that might have an impact on them as they navigate through their college years, particularly in their attempts to handle college stress.

Results in Context

Traditionally, the theme of "pressure to do well" has been indicted by School/Grades/GPA; however, participants in this study considered this statement a bit vague. Students indicated the "expectations of their parents" for them to do well was the source of their stress. Howe & Strauss (2000) described this "Millennial" generation as high achievers; household income is higher, driven in large part by the fact that both parents are working. Families are smaller, with a median of one sibling and a set of parents who have waited until they were older to have children. As such, Millennial parents are well-educated (e.g., the parents who hold a college degree has increased, from 26% in 1973, to 42.5% in 1998). This generation is the first since 1945 to face a more stringent set of academic standards than the generation that came before. Students know they have to succeed in high school if they want to get into a college or university, a primary factor reinforced by parents, media, and the school system. Furthermore, millennial students report their two greatest worries to be grades and college admission, compared to AIDS and violent crime 10 years ago, or nuclear war 20 years ago (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Money is also a theme that appeared as a stressor. Traditional surveys have used "losing a job" as an indicator for monetary stress, but this group appeared to be worried about *finding* a job. College tuition is not inclusive; once a student has paid his/her tuition, the need exists to plan for all the more traditional budget items such as rent, bills, books, and entertainment. Going to college is no longer reserved for the elite, it is the norm. Today 64% of women and 60% of men go to college after graduating from high school and 85% of those in attendance are full-time students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). And with the influx of college students, there is increased competition for part-time student work.

A reoccurring theme that appeared under stress was time management. The Millennials have also been termed as "multi-taskers" and "over-programmed" (Howe & Strauss, 2000). There has been a well-established infrastructure supporting this generation: childcare, pre-school and afterschool programs have flourished. As a result, the lives of young Millennials were highly structured, with everything from soccer camp to piano lessons pre-scheduled. In addition, their parents strove to be active and involved, mentoring, teaching, and serving as ongoing advocates for the Millennial child's well-being. Once at college, the students seem to struggle with time management issues, not only the demands of academics, but also those of technology, from texting to internet surfing to online social networks. Study participants also mentioned struggling with finding time to exercise to stay in shape, which also differentiates them from previous generations. The underlying sources of stress in this generation may be different than those of previous generations, however, the symptoms seem to be consistent.

This study found the themes of Moody/Irritable, Anxiousness, and Sleep Problems, as the three highest ranking signs and symptoms of stress. These themes tended to be more psychologically rooted as compared to physical symptoms, which have traditionally been indicators for stress symptom surveys, (i.e., listing back pain, neck pain, nausea, grinding of teeth etc). Previous studies concur with an increase of the mental health/psychological manifestation of stress in college students, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Garlow et al., 2008; Zivin et al, 2009). One study looked at separation anxiety in first-year students finding that 21 percent of freshmen experience this type of anxiety (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007). This is compatible with how this generation is described, those who are more dependent on their “parental units” for a wide range of supports. In this study, sleep problems were found to be the third most common symptom of stress, which may be a cause for concern, since sleeping disorders in college students have been positively associated with their alcohol consumption (Singleton & Wolfson, 2009). While such an assertion cannot be made from the current data, further investigations into the true sources of sleep problems are needed in this population.

Coping mechanisms most often evoked by participants in this study included working out/sports, prayer, and talking to mom. Interestingly, students in the coping group had difficulty identifying coping strategies, dissimilar to the ease with which their classmates were able to name the stressors and/or symptoms affecting them. These coping mechanisms, even though general in nature, need to be further explored in future research. Traditionally, “listening to calming music” is found on coping mechanism surveys, yet this sample of students does not admit to listening to classical music to relax, even though they do listen to music as a coping tool. Escape mechanisms such as “calling or talking to mom” or “surfing the web” were also commonly mentioned; prayer was also mentioned, however, defining what prayer consisted of was difficult. Might students be praying as a last resort before entering an exam or are they engaging in deep spirituality? Additional study can explore this question more deeply. Also, this group mentioned engaging in risky health behaviors such as binge drinking, but defined that as “partying.” More research is needed to uncover how college students manage stress in this regard.

Strengths and Limitations

Among the strengths of this study was its research design. The nominal group technique is a unique qualitative process that allows for triangulation of the data with both qualitative and quantitative underpinnings. Due to a mixed-methods approach that uses both an individual’s writing and vocal group input, an equal opportunity for input is offered each participant (the person who is quiet and reserved can be heard just as easily as he/she with a more gregarious personality type). In this regard, the study went according to what Elwyn and his colleagues (2005) described as optimal for nominal group process: “...a recognised means of allowing participants to give free rein to ideas, without constraint.” (p. 4). In addition, the relatively large sample size for a qualitative study, coupled with the representativeness of both the age and class demographics, can also be considered as strong points.

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting study findings. First, since the study employed a non-probability sampling methodology, and was limited in scope (a single, mid-sized university in the southeastern United States), results may not be generalized to college students, statewide, regionally, or nationwide. Second, all responses relied on self-disclosure and, as such, were dependent upon the honesty of participants; the extent to which students were inclined to provide socially desirable responses is not fully known. Third, the authors could not control for extraneous variables that may have affected study results (e.g., students of different majors may be exposed to different stressors and manage their stress differently). Nevertheless, findings should stimulate future research in this area, with the emphasis on study designs that might identify more robust relationships in the data.

Conclusions

This study sought to gather data on stress, stress symptoms, and coping mechanisms from the Millennial generation, which comprise the current college population. Input, ideas, and themes were discussed and assembled so that traditional stress inventories might be revised, thus made to be more reflective of the challenges faced by this generation. Students provided insight to a set of not-so-unique stressors they face (e.g., grades, GPA, multitasking, parental expectations), stress symptoms (more psychological than physical), and strategies for coping (prayer, talking to mom, surfing the net, social networking). Ideas put forth by participants can be used to adapt current quantitative college stress inventories. Future studies, and the resultant validation of these amended inventories, will allow for more accurate measurement of stress.

Although the primary objective of this study was accomplished, the authors also recognize and appreciate the richness of qualitative input by the participants. The students seemed to be genuinely appreciative to be given a forum to talk about the current stress issues they are experiencing. They seemed to take genuine comfort in building a bond with others in their classes challenged by the same stressors. The authors hope this study provided the students an opening platform to continue dialogue with one another in order to cope with their stress.

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