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Author(s)	Jessica Ball, Sharifah Muzlia Syed Mustafa and Kenneth Moselle
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STRESS AMONG MALAY COLLEGE STUDENTS

**Jessica Ball
Sharifah Muzlia Bte Syed Mustafa
&
Kenneth Moselle**

**Paper presented at the Third Afro-Asian Psychological Congress,
held at Bangi, Malaysia on 23-26 Aug 1994**

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Jessica Ball
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

Sharifah Muzlia Syed Mustafa
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Bangi, Malaysia

Kenneth Moselle
Singapore American School
Singapore

The deleterious effects of stress on performance, health, and psychosocial adjustment have been well documented (e.g., Jemmot, Borysenko, McClelland, Chapman, Meyer & Benson, 1985). In response, programmatic efforts in institutions of higher learning have focused upon understanding the stress engendering aspects of college life and students' help-seeking patterns when confronted with stress-related problems (Archer & Lamnin, 1985). This understanding is a prerequisite for effectively adapting prevention, outreach, and counselling efforts to meet students' needs and thereby contribute to their adjustment in college.

There have been few studies assessing the extent and nature of variation across cultures in how stress is experienced subjectively, how it is manifested, and how it can be measured meaningfully. Also, the extent of similarity across cultures with respect to developmental tasks and transitions and their implications for stress and coping among different types of people are not known. An initial exploration of these questions was taken up in the investigation reported here, focusing on Malay students during the early stages of their transition to college and to young adulthood.

In research conducted mainly in North America, there is substantial evidence that major life transitions, such as the transition from home to college or from adolescence to young adulthood, tend to place high demands on most people's coping capacities and put certain types of people at high risk for the development of stress related problems (Holmes & Masuda, 1974; Rahe & Arthur, 1977).

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In addition to major life events, studies in North America have found that certain people are likely to report feelings of anxiety, depression, or stress-related physical symptoms when confronted with an accumulation of daily, role-related stress (Chamberlain & Zika, 1990). There are many features of daily life as a college student in any locale that might be experienced as stressful. These include constant academic performance demands, adjusting to dormitory or hostel living, separation from family, intensive peer involvements, pressure to conform, and encounters with new situations requiring independent decisions and value choices (Archer et al., 1985).

Erikson's (1963) description of stages of psychosocial development, which has been useful in characterizing the challenges faced across the life span by individuals studied in the United States, identifies the central theme of the transition to young adulthood as the need to consolidate an integrated, coherent and satisfying identity. Unresolved personal conflicts, especially when the individual is faced with situations that require choices among equally compelling but opposing values and goals, have been identified as a source of stress.

The prevalence and nature of inner conflicts among Malays have not been a focus of previous research. However, given the rapid social change and challenges to traditional cultural values and lifestyles occurring in Malay society, we might expect that Malay young adults would find resolution of personal value dilemmas especially difficult.

Further, many of the Malay young people represented by our sample of college students were undergoing transitions from rural to urban living, from a Malaysian to an American educational system, and from a sex-segregated to a co-educational student community. These changes in context increased the exposure of these young people to values and role demands that they would be likely to experience as conflicting with those found in traditional Malay culture, though perhaps equally compelling.

METHOD

Respondents. The respondents were 392 Malay college students (186 men and 206 women), ranging from 17 to 20 years old ($X = 19.24$ yrs.). As a group, they had a history of fairly good academic success, with a mean SPM (secondary school completion exam scores) aggregate of 13.6 (S.D. = 3.05), representing an above average standing overall. All were in their first or second year of an American college program and were living in a "hostel" or "semi-hostel" situation, involving a supervised, rule-regulated, sex-segregated, residential arrangement with other students.

Questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered in small groups at the college campus. Students were informed of the objectives of the survey, and they responded on a voluntary, anonymous basis.

An original set of questionnaires was developed for this study. The questionnaires were in English, with occasional use of words and phrases from the Malay language to enhance item clarity. All of the items were extensively pilot tested to ensure the relevance of variables assessed and the meaning of items to representatives of the young Malay college student population. Item content and provided response alternatives were known to be relevant to the respondents on the basis of extensive previous exploratory studies involving this population.

The titles of the three questionnaires listed below were not used when the survey was conducted.

- (1) The **Sources of Stress Questionnaire** consisted of 31 items assessing the amount of stress experienced in various domains.
- (2) The **Stress Symptoms Questionnaire** consisted of 16 rating scales and two open-ended items assessing the frequency of various cognitive, affective, somatic, behavioral and interpersonal disturbances commonly associated with stress.
- (3) The **Inner Conflicts Questionnaire** consisted of 15 items for all respondents and two items for women and two items for men. Students were asked to rate how much turmoil or indecision they experienced over various dimensions of lifestyle, values, and approaches to social interaction shown in previous research by the first author to be problematic for this population. The dimensions on the Inner Conflicts Questionnaire were derived from qualitative and participatory investigation of Malay college students' experiences of personal conflict, culture conflict, or role strain.

Descriptive analyses were conducted on all variables to provide a general picture of the prevalence of stress and coping phenomena in the population. Correlational analyses were conducted to identify patterns of significant associations among variables within and between questionnaires. Principal component factor analyses with varimax rotation were conducted to reduce the data on the Sources of Stress, Stress Symptoms and Inner Conflict Questionnaires, and to illuminate underlying dimensions that accounted for patterns of responses to these three main questionnaires. Chi-Square analyses and T- tests were used to explore gender differences in experiences of stress.

RESULTS

This report provides an overview of the nature, extent and sequelae of stress among Malay college students

Prevalence of Stress.

Among the 392 respondents, 64.3% reported that they had experienced "a lot" of stress over the six month period prior to completing the questionnaire. Chi Square analysis revealed no significant differences between men and women in the frequency of reports of high stress. Among 64.3% (n = 249) who reported that they had experienced high stress in the past six months, 53% (n = 133) reported that they had not been able to cope effectively with the stress that they had experienced.

Stress Symptoms Questionnaire.

Table 1 shows the cumulative percent of respondents who reported that they "frequently" or "often" experienced a problem on the Stress Symptoms Questionnaire. Tests revealed that men and women differed significantly in their experiences of stress (all results were significant at the .01 level or less). Women reported significantly more frequent headaches, gastric problems, depression, loneliness, homesickness, and feelings of being unable to cope. Men reported significantly more frequent insomnia, increased smoking, and absence from classes.

Factor analysis of the Stress Symptoms Questionnaire yielded a three factor solution, which accounted for a total of 49% of the variance among the 14 continuous variables. As shown on Table 2, the factors were labeled on the basis of high loading items: Overwhelmed, Depression and Marginal Adjustment. T Tests revealed significantly higher scores overall among women on all three factors of the Stress Symptoms Questionnaire.

Inner Conflicts Questionnaire

Among the 15 approach avoidance conflicts shown in previous research to be sources of stress or internal turmoil for this student population, four received low mean ratings among both men and women, where low ratings indicate sources of **more** stress. These were:

- (1) Hide versus express true feelings (X (380) = 2.91, S.D. 1.23);
- (2) Conform to peer pressure versus follow personal principles (X (379) = 3.22, S.D. 1.12);
- (3) Follow family's needs or wishes versus meet own needs or desires (X (379) = 3.24, S.D. 1.31);
- (4) Cooperate versus compete (X (374) = 3.32, S.D. 1.08).

Factor analysis of the Inner Conflicts Questionnaire yielded a three factor solution, shown in Table 3. These factors accounted for a total of 53.7% of the variance on the questionnaire. They were labeled to reflect the apparent general theme of high loading items. In order of the amount of variance they accounted for, they were:

- (1) Religion and Culture (31.5%);
- (2) Self-Expression versus Constraint and Conformity (11.9%);
- (3) Life Goals (10.2%).

Correlational analyses explored associations between these three Inner Conflict dimensions and other items on the questionnaires. By far the greatest number of concomitant problems with stress in all areas of students' experiences were associated with inner conflicts concerning Self-expression versus Constraint and Conformity. Composite ratings indicating more inner conflict over Self-expression were associated with regretting the choice of college program, low perceived social support, low optimism and clarity about the future, low satisfaction with self, strained relationships with peers, stress-related symptoms of all kinds, difficulty meeting the academic expectations of the college program, and gender-role conflict.

Sources of Stress

Factor analysis of the Sources of Stress Questionnaire yielded a nine factor solution rotated to the varimax criterion. The 9 factors accounted for a total of 63.2% of the variance among the 31 items. Labels were assigned to the factors on the basis of high loading items on each factor, as shown in Table 4. For example, high loadings on the Future factor reflected high ratings of stress about a cluster of issues concerning anticipations about the future, having clear goals, and feeling that one is on the path to a satisfying career.

Correlational analyses explored associations between these major stress-engendering areas of experience and other aspects of these young people's lives. Correlations discussed below were significant at the .01 level or less.

Significant correlations were found between the Future factor and nearly every other measure of personal and academic stress, including most items on the Stress Symptoms Questionnaire, virtually every item on the Inner Conflicts Questionnaire, except the two conflicts relevant only to men, and low grades in academic coursework.

High loadings on the Academic factor reflected high ratings of stress about being able to cope with the academic expectations of the college and of family members. Significant correlations were

found between this factor and low grades, most Stress Symptoms, and the Self-Expression items on the Inner Conflicts Questionnaire.

High loadings on the Family Conflict factor reflected conflict with family members. This factor was significantly correlated with most Stress Symptoms, and with virtually all of the Inner Conflict dimensions, including the ones for men and for women. This factor was not correlated with academic performance.

High loadings on the factor labeled Rejection appeared to reflect a kind of interpersonal difficulty resembling unrequited love or infatuation. It was correlated significantly with low grades, with the Stress Symptom items reflecting overall mild Depression, and with turmoil over Religion and Culture assessed on the Inner Conflicts Questionnaire.

Similarly, high loadings on the Social factor, reflecting difficulty with roommates and hostel life, were significantly correlated with Stress Symptoms typically associated with mild Depression, and with Self-Expression items on the Inner Conflicts Questionnaire.

Three factors assessed on the Sources of Stress Questionnaire were not significantly correlated with many individual items or derived factors on the Stress Symptoms Questionnaire or Inner Conflicts Questionnaire. These were:

- (1) Family Separation, reflecting basic homesickness;
- (2) Extracurricular Obligations, reflecting feeling pressure to participate in campus social organizations; and
- (3) Self-Care, reflecting difficulty with self-direction and taking care of practical needs.

T-Tests revealed significantly higher stress among women on the Academic factor and the Family Separation factor. Men tended to show a pattern of ratings reflecting significantly higher stress with respect to Social relationships, Self-Care, Extracurricular Obligations, and using English.

Intercorrelations among Stress Symptoms, Stressors, and Conflicts.

Correlation matrices among individual items and among factors on each of the three questionnaires are shown on Tables 5 and 6. The matrices point to certain Sources of Stress that were significantly **associated with a large number** of Inner Conflicts and Stress Symptoms. These were:

- (1) stress about the future (Future);
- (2) stress about ability to cope with academic demands (Academic);
- (3) stress in relationships with peers (Social);

- (4) stress in relationships with family members (Family Conflict).

Sources of Stress that were **associated with fewer Inner Conflicts** and Stress Symptoms were:

- (1) homesickness (Family Separation);
- (2) ability to cope with the demand to use English in the college program (English);
- (3) social obligations of campus life (Extracurricular Obligations);
- (4) the need to care for and direct oneself (Self-Care).

DISCUSSION

Overall, two-thirds of the young Malay college students who participated in this study reported subjective experiences of high stress. About one-quarter of the students reported high frequencies of problems that are generally accepted as symptoms of stress, including: depression, headaches, poor concentration due to personal problems, loneliness, and anxiety.

The pattern of findings in this study suggests that it is not the transition from family to college that figures most centrally in students' experiences of stress. Rather, the most troublesome stressors involved daily confrontations with academic task demands, uncertainty about whether the pursuit of a college degree in a particular major was likely to lead eventually to satisfaction in the future, unresolved conflict with family members, and personal dilemmas about whether to express oneself in everyday life situations. These findings are consistent with theory and research emphasizing the contributions of chronic, role-related stressors to the individual's evaluation of the amount of stress they are experiencing overall (Chamberlain et al. 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

As a group, students reported high levels of inner turmoil about religious and cultural alignments and role expectations. Among the most troublesome conflicts were: (1) whether to express themselves openly versus hiding their actual feelings and views; (2) whether to obey elders and subjugate their own preferences "in the Malay way" versus becoming "modern" and "going for real wants even if these go against the elders"; (3) whether to embrace leisure activities and modes of dress identified with Western cultures versus retaining Malay dress and Islamic restraints on leisure activities; and (4) whether to follow Malay traditions even when they go against Islam versus following only Islam. High levels of conflict on these dimensions were significantly associated with stress-related symptoms and with low levels of satisfaction and optimism about the future. These findings are not surprising given the dramatic religious, cultural and social shifts that have occurred in Malay society in the past decade.

The results of this study lend support to efforts to provide effective preventive and supportive approaches to helping Malay college students cope with ongoing academic and social challenges in college and in hostel living. Steps need to be taken to ensure that these approaches are relevant and responsive to the array of personal dilemmas that students identified as major sources of stress. For example, students may benefit from being offered more information, discussion, and choice about what life goals to pursue. Students need to perceive a close correspondence between their academic programmes, their personal life goals and their cultural role expectations. Policies and activities that foster a campus community characterized by tolerance of creative expressiveness would probably minimize one important contributor to stress among students.

At the same time, there is accumulating empirical evidence that certain kinds and amounts of stress can be beneficial to performance on some kinds of tasks, and may be needed to stimulate the elaboration of more effective coping skills (DeLongis, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Ursin, 1978). While high levels of unrelenting and uncontrollable stress are clearly associated with negative outcomes, the effects of moderate stress depend largely on characteristics of the individual, rather than the situation (Stewart & Healy, 1985). Subsequent analyses of the data obtained in the present investigation will explore relationships among personality characteristics, motives, beliefs about the situation, and indicators of coping effectiveness among students.

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Table 1: Frequency of Stress Related Symptoms

Stress related symptoms	Percentage
* Depression	30.0
* Headaches	26.7
Poor concentration due to personal problem	24.7
* Loneliness	23.1
Anxiety	22.7
* Feeling that cannot cope at all	18.4
* Gastric problems	16.2
+ Insomnia	12.4
+ Increased smoking	10.7
Relationship conflict	10.6
Poor concentration due to family problem	9.6
Wanting to quit college	9.3
* Extreme homesickness	7.0
+ Absences from classes	6.6
Suicidal ideation	3.9

Notes: * T test revealed significantly higher frequency among women than men.

+ T test revealed significantly higher frequency among men than women.

Table 2: STRESS SYMPTOMS Principal Components Analysis: Varimax Rotated

Symptoms	Overwhelmed	Depressed	Marginal
	(30.0%)	(10.5%)	Adjustment (9.0%)
Headaches	.56	.03	.17
Stomach aches	.57	.03	.20
Extreme homesickness	.55	.17	.24
Wanting to quit college	.61	.05	.21
Anxiety	.58	.25	.13
Feeling that cannot cope	.60	.39	.07
Trouble concentrating due to personal problem	.12	.76	.20
Trouble concentrating due to family problem	.12	.61	.24
Depression	.47	.64	.00
Loneliness	.34	.60	.14
Conflict in close relationship	.04	.67	.12
Insomnia	.26	.16	.67
Started or increased smoking	.01	.04	.82
Absences due to stress	.29	.26	.62

Table 3: INNER CONFLICTS Principal Components Analysis; Varimax Rotated

Conflicts	Religion and Culture (31.5%)	Self Expression (11.9%)	Life Goals (10.2%)
Islam vs Malay customs	.60	.26	.06
Religious vs Secular life	.67	.24	.12
Fun vs Refrain from social trends	.72	.12	.11
Modern vs Traditional values	.77	.04	.15
Western culture vs Islam	.73	.04	.16
Peer vs Personal principles	.15	.65	.35
Self-assertion vs Self-effacement	.08	.81	.09
Express vs Hide feelings	.12	.75	.07
Compete vs Cooperate	.25	.64	.03
Education vs Work	.08	.09	.80
Education vs Marriage	.17	.10	.74
Keep vs Change course of study	.07	.27	.49
Family vs Own wishes	.24	.32	.53

Table 4: SOURCES OF STRESS Principle Components Analysis: Varimax Rotated

Sources of Stress	Future (20.7%)	Academic (7.5%)	Family Separation (7.4%)	Rejection (5.6%)	English (5.0%)	Family Conflict (4.8%)	Extra- Curricular (4.4%)	Self Care (3.9%)	Social (3.8%)
Clear career goals	.81	.19	.03	.12	.16	.03	.02	.17	.05
Satisfied with present major	.73	.02	.12	.04	.03	.12	.05	.17	.15
Having clear plans for future	.82	.11	.02	.14	.19	.04	.03	.17	.00
Dreading future in general	.65	.24	.23	.23	.14	.10	.02	.05	.07
Getting coursework done	.09	.75	.10	.03	.09	.00	.06	.20	.04
Lecturer expectations	.12	.81	.00	.05	.03	.09	.00	.15	.04
Away from family	.04	.03	.82	.02	.06	.00	.02	.09	.13
Hate leaving family	.08	.04	.91	.07	.07	.06	.02	.06	.07
Dread being far from family	.20	.07	.89	.10	.06	.01	.04	.10	.05
Having boy/girl friend	.21	.10	.02	.63	.10	.06	.19	.23	.03
Admiring someone	.01	.05	.05	.60	.13	.05	.03	.35	.13
Feeling unwanted	.25	.28	.15	.47	.01	.04	.00	.10	.18
Having personal problem	.01	.06	.00	.64	.05	.10	.09	.07	.01
Using English	.17	.02	.13	.03	.75	.05	.10	.07	.05
Adapting to lecturers' conduct	.11	.32	.02	.15	.63	.10	.04	.02	.22
Interacting with lecturers	.08	.10	.06	.07	.73	.15	.08	.13	.09
Relationship with parents	.08	.03	.03	.08	.19	.85	.02	.05	.12
Relationship with siblings	.12	.12	.09	.02	.13	.82	.00	.03	.09
Family expectations	.18	.45	.01	.30	.11	.47	.08	.02	.11
Religious act expectations	.13	.05	.12	.01	.22	.35	.51	.13	.22
Extracurricular expectations	.06	.01	.04	.06	.08	.03	.90	.00	.07
Meeting club obligations	.06	.07	.10	.15	.17	.02	.82	.05	.01
Self motivation	.25	.26	.09	.10	.23	.04	.09	.62	.05
Taking care of self	.12	.10	.15	.08	.02	.15	.09	.80	.02
Taking care of emotional self	.26	.30	.09	.41	.04	.01	.08	.51	.16
Getting along with friends	.03	.09	.05	.14	.22	.06	.03	.09	.70
Getting along with roommates	.03	.10	.12	.10	.05	.02	.01	.06	.77
Hostel life	.12	.04	.08	.05	.06	.15	.28	.10	.60

Table 5: Intercorrelations of factors on Inner Conflicts With Stress Symptoms

Correlations	Overwhelmed	Depression	Marginal Adjustment
Religion and Culture	.12 <.05	.15 <.01	.12 <.05
Self Expression	.24 <.00	.37 <.00	.07 n.s.
Life Goals	.05 n.s.	.22 <.00	.17 <.001

Table 6: Intercorrelations of factors on Sources of Stress With Inner Conflicts and Stress Symptoms

Correlations	Religion and Culture	Self Expression	Life Goals	Overwhelmed	Depressed	Marginal Adjustment
Future	.10 <.05	.27 <.00	.16 <.001	.21 <.00	.17 <.001	.04 n.s.
Academic	.01 n.s.	.18 <.00	.01 n.s.	.22 <.00	.17 <.001	.14 <.01
Family Separation	.09 n.s.	.02 n.s.	.01 n.s.	.25 <.00	.17 n.s.	.21 <.00
Rejection	.14 <.01	.24 <.00	.12 <.05	.03 n.s.	.40 <.00	.09 n.s.
English	.08 n.s.	.20 <.00	.04 n.s.	.04 n.s.	.09 n.s.	.08 n.s.
Family Conflict	.25 <.00	.09 n.s.	.20 <.00	.09 n.s.	.28 <.00	.19 <.00
Extra curricular	.10 n.s.	.03 n.s.	.07 n.s.	.06 n.s.	.03 n.s.	.17 <.001
Self-care	.03 n.s.	.16 <.01	.02 n.s.	.01 n.s.	.12 <.05	.15 <.01
Social	.01 n.s.	.24 <.00	.06 n.s.	.07 n.s.	.19 <.00	.00 n.s.

Note: Correlation coefficient/ significant level using two-tailed tests. n.s. = not significant.