

Academic stress and coping strategies of Chinese high school students- a qualitative investigation

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Abstract. High school students worldwide, especially in China, face significant academic pressure. Research shows that Chinese students spend more time on academic activities and less on exercise and sleep compared to their American counterparts (Yang & Tao, 2013). This heightened pressure, coupled with intense emotional experiences, has been linked to negative impacts on mental health (Zhao et al., 2015; Zhang, 2018). Chinese high school students, in particular, must navigate the rigorous demands of the gaokao, the national college entrance examination, which further amplifies their stress levels. This essay investigates the academic stress experienced by Chinese high school students and the coping strategies they employ. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with 20 students from two schools, this study explores the stressors they face and evaluates the effectiveness of their coping mechanisms. Through discourse and semantic analysis, preliminary findings suggest a prevalence of problem-focused coping strategies, though school support systems remain insufficient. This paper argues for the development of more comprehensive support programs within educational institutions to better address students' stress management needs.

Keywords: Academic Stress; Coping Strategies; Gaokao; Mental Health; Educational Support Systems.

1. Introduction

High school students from many countries in the world today are facing high academic stress. Compared with American students, Chinese high school students spend more time on their homework and tutoring and less time on exercising and sleeping (Yang & Tao, 2013). Extremely stressful learning experiences and strong expressions of emotion are not uncommon among Chinese students (Zhao et al., 2015). According to the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China, a nine-year free compulsory education is provided to all school-age children and adolescents. After this nine years of study, part of the students will enter high school to continue studying for another three years. This includes the time which is spent preparing for the College Entrance Examination or gaokao (Zhang, 2018). Too much academic pressure will be harmful to their mental health, especially for high school students who are going to enter universities (Zhang, 2018). This essay explores the nature and extent of academic stress among high school students in China and examines the coping strategies they utilize to manage this stress. Utilizing semi-structured interviews as a research method, this study delves into the experiences of twenty students across two schools to offer insights into the prevalent stressors and the efficacy of coping mechanisms within this demographic. Through discourse and semantic analysis, the research aims to identify not only the coping strategies employed but also the role of school support systems in facilitating these methods. Preliminary findings indicate a strong inclination towards problem-focused coping strategies among students. Furthermore, the analysis points to a limited framework of support from educational institutions, prompting a discussion on the need for more comprehensive stress management programs within schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Coping

Coping involves conscious, purposefully directed action used when individuals perceived a situation as stressful and includes responses directed at resolving tensions between the person and the environment and/or negative emotions arising from stress. The ability to regulate emotions, planning and problem-solving skills, good interpersonal skills, and engaging in optimistic thinking promote good psychosocial health. According to Folkman and Moscovitz (2004), coping with stress is the process of trying to deal with, manage, control, lessen, or learn to endure the risks that cause stress. Additionally, they assert that although most of the time people are unaware of these coping mechanisms, they employ them routinely to deal with stress. In support of this, Feldman (2008) suggests that people who are under stress could not even be aware of the small stresses in life until they escalate into more serious ones.

Academically, stress is a state which is on the basis of academic demands. Therefore, the meaning of coping is a process which makes the goal to solve the problem of academic demands source and emotional response from behavior and thought (Aina & Wijayati, 2019). Grades the strict requirements of the schools, lack of resources to deal with daily troubles and peer relationship issues are a major concern for teenagers. Three major types of voluntary coping styles were identified: primary and secondary participatory control coping styles, and disengagement coping styles (Shokri, Kadivar & Daneshvarpour, 2007). Primary engaged coping styles included problem solving and emotion regulation expression, while secondary active coping styles included cognitive reorganization, positive thinking, acceptance, and distraction. Disengagement coping involves trying to avoid, deny, or use wishful thinking. Adolescents who scored higher on the three engagement coping styles generally had lower levels of internalizing and externalizing barriers. Adolescents' coping styles do influence their ability to deal with various forms of stress, including peer-related stressors that affect academic performance (Lee, 2006). These two types of adolescents with higher levels of involvement in coping, evaluated by parents and teachers, typically have lower levels of externalization and internalization barriers.

2.2 Basic Coping Strategies

In this essay, I will draw on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) conceptualization of coping to investigate and analyze Chinese students' coping strategies. Coping, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to manage the internal and external demands of stress-inducing situations. There are three fundamental coping strategies, which are 1) problem-focused, aimed at addressing the source of stress; 2) emotion-focused, directed at alleviating emotional distress or 3) avoidance, where one evades the stressor or the associated feelings.

2.2.1 Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping involves active efforts to change the situation that is causing stress (Carroll, 2020). This strategy is often linked to increased feelings of control and proactive attitudes, which can mitigate the effects of stress.

2.2.2 Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping is characterized by actions and thoughts that reduce the emotional impact of stress. This can involve seeking emotional support, reinterpreting the stressor in a more favorable light, or engaging in activities that distract from the stressor (Ben-Zur, 2020).

2.2.3 Avoidance Coping

Avoidance coping involves disengaging mentally or physically from the stressor. This can be a temporary relief but may also prevent individuals from addressing the root causes of their stress, potentially exacerbating long-term outcomes (Blalock & Joiner, 2000).

It should be noted that not all coping strategies are successful (Blalock & Joiner, 2000). Being aware of events and circumstances that one considers stressful is a necessary component of effective coping, and identifying stressors entails understanding how your body reacts to stress. Using a variety of strategies may be necessary for effective stress management.

2.3 Academic Stress in Chinese Middle School Students and their coping strategies

Research has shown that Chinese students often experience high levels of academic stress due to societal expectations, rigorous exam systems, and a strong emphasis on educational attainment (Stress among Chinese students, Zhang et al., 2010). The gaokao, China's national university entrance examination, is a particular source of pressure, as it holds significant influence over students' future educational and career opportunities (Zhao et al., 2015). Also, it was reported that Chinese teenagers handle stress in a different way than their counterparts in westernized nations, which might be a result of cultural differences. Because academic success is prioritized by families and education systems, Chinese teenagers may have more mental health problems and worse life satisfaction than their European counterparts. Chinese teenagers are very susceptible to depression, with grades 9 through 11 having the greatest prevalence of depression, per a nationwide survey. According to this poll, 11.6%-12.6% of senior high school students have serious depressive disorder, and 40% of students exhibit depressed symptoms. Nonetheless, this age group also has the lowest likelihood of seeking professional assistance for mental health issues.

Zhou et al. (2023) has conducted a qualitative research to investigate the coping mechanisms and stress experiences of Chinese high school pupils. Three focus groups and a qualitative design were used in this investigation. At a Chinese high school, high school students enrolled in grades 10 through 11 and their teachers were selected using a purposive sample technique. This resulted in 20 students and 9 teacher participants. Inductive theme analysis was used to analyze the data. The research results suggest that avoidant coping is the mostly used coping strategy. In addition, the researchers identified that the emotional, sleep, study, and mental health of the kids were all negatively impacted by the stress. They suggest that both students and teachers felt that further coping skills training was required and that the coping tactics were ineffective in the long term at lowering stress. Zhou's study has offered an insight into the topic concerning coping strategies among Chinese students. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the sample used in this research is rather small. Specifically, only 20 students and 9 teachers from one single school was interviewed. Thus, the results may lack representativeness. In comparison, Meng et al. (2011) conducted large scale quantitative regarding coping and mental health problems among Chinese adolescents. Thirteen hundred and fifty-two students from eight Chinese cities took part in the school-based poll. A questionnaire covering coping mechanisms, stressful life events, anxiety, and depressive symptoms was used to gather data. Regression equations were employed as a model to investigate if coping mediated the relationship between stressful life events and symptoms of sadness and anxiety. The results demonstrated that the association between stressful life events and adolescent mental health was largely mediated by coping. This research proved the positive functions of coping for Chinese adolescents.

Furthermore, studies suggest that Chinese students frequently engage in problem-focused coping strategies, such as seeking academic help and managing time effectively (Wang & Pomerantz, 2009). These strategies are encouraged by a cultural value system that prizes perseverance and effort. However, emotion-focused strategies, such as seeking social support, are also prevalent, reflecting the collectivist orientation of Chinese society.

3. Research questions and research design

3.1 Research questions

By reviewing relevant literature, it has been suggested that the research concerning stress and coping in high school students in the Chinese context is scarce. Few studies have been conducted investigating the top. To better understand how high school students in China cope with their academic pressure, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Do middle schools students in China face high academic stress?
- 2) How do they cope with academic stress? Which basic coping strategy is mostly common used?
- 3) Is there any support from the school to help them cope with academic stress?

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore the coping strategies of middle school students in China. A total of 20 students from two high schools, referred to as School A and School B, participated in the study. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences regarding academic stress. Participants were recruited in November 2023 at two boarding schools in Hangzhou city in China. Hangzhou is a second-tier Chinese city with abundant educational resource. The recruited students are (i) grade 11 students when enrolled (2) aged between 16-18 years old (3) not having serious mental health issues.

3.2.2 Sampling

A purposive sampling method was used in the study. Initially, posters which demonstrating the topic and the purpose of the research were presented in classrooms with the consent of the school administrators. 9 students from School A and 11 students from School B were agreed to participate in the research. Among School A students, 6 are females and 3 are males. For School B students, 7 are females and 4 are male students. A prior to the participation of interview, consent forms were handed out to 20 students and their parents and all students and parents signed the forms. Also, it has been made clear to the students that they can quit at any time of the interview without giving any reasons.

3.2.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect research data. The interviews were structured around open-ended questions designed to prompt discussion about experiences with academic stress and coping strategies. Questions were developed based on the literature review and aimed to explore the extent of stress, the types of coping strategies used, and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies, as well as the support provided by the schools. The author has been trained in qualitative research methods, especially how to conduct semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which is the first language for both the author and the students. The interviews were conducted in schools during self-study classes. A multifunctional room in school was used as the research site. The author reiterated the aim of the research at the beginning of each interview and requested consent to record. The open-ended, semi-structured interview questions allowed for a deeper investigation of the stress and coping mechanisms of teenagers. The following topics were covered in questions: (i) do you face high academic stress in schools? (ii) how do you cope with academic stress? (iii) do you receive support from the school to relief your academic stress? Each interview lasted for about 15-20 minutes. With consent, all of the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for

further research. The author performed the translations and the transcriptions. Each participant was given a pseudonym in order to maintain anonymity.

4. Results

Discourse analysis was used to interpret the language and communication patterns, while semantic analysis helped in understanding the meanings and connotations behind the words used by the participants. These analyses were instrumental in uncovering the underlying themes related to academic stress and coping mechanisms.

The analysis of the interview data revealed several significant findings:

(i) High Academic Stress: All student participants expressed experiencing academic stress. Specifically, for School A, 7 students mentioned that they are currently experiencing high levels of academic stress, while two students stated that they occasionally experience academic stress, especially before different kinds of assessments:

There are different tests arranged for us almost every month. Teachers and parents will pay a lot attention on these tests. If I don't do well in the tests, my teachers will contact my parents and tell them that I did a bad job in the subject, and my parents will urge me to study harder. So before each test, I feel that I have too much pressure (Zhang, School A, female).

I feel a lot of academic pressure in school every day. The competition is too high. If I want to go to a good university, I have to study harder than my peers (Wang, School A, female).

For School B, all 11 participants stated that the academic stress is high, and 5 students commented that it is the major source of stress:

My parents always say that I should study hard at school. They only care about my grades. They will punish me if I don't get good grades in tests. So I feel stressed (Cheng, School B, female).

The academic stress is my greatest stress. I am not afraid anything but I am afraid that I don't get good grades in Gaokao. I want to go to a good university (Fang, School B, male).

In addition, through thematic analysis, four factors are identified as the source of students' academic stress. They are (i) high parental expectations, (ii) the pressure of upcoming exams, particularly the gaokao, (iii) overall competitive school environment and (iv) peer pressure.

(ii) Coping Strategies: The students reported a mix of coping strategies, with problem-focused coping being the most prevalent. These strategies included seeking help with schoolwork, creating study plans, and participating in peer study groups:

Sometimes I feel stressed because I don't study well before tests. So I will make some review plans before tests. That will relieve my stress (Hu, School A, male).

I know that I have to take Gaokao exam so there is no way I can escape from the pressure. I feel my stress relieved when I know I get good grades in tests. So I study hard to ensure that I can get good grades. Then I will not feel much pressure (Ning, School B, female).

Emotion-focused coping was also commonly reported, with students seeking support from friends, family, and teachers to discuss their stress and emotions:

I always come to talk to my friends if I have too much academic pressure. She will encourage me and be there for me (Shen, School A, female).

If I have too much pressure, I will come to my mother. She will tell me that it doesn't matter if I don't get good grades. That comfort me a lot (Xue, School B, male).

Avoidance coping was the least reported strategy. Only one student from School A mentioned that he will forget about his academic learning and read novels to tackle with the stress.

(iii) School Support: Students indicated that while the schools attempted to provide support, such as counseling services and stress management workshops, these measures were often insufficient. The participants felt that the schools were more focused on academic performance than on addressing the emotional well-being of students:

There is a counseling room in my school. But I never go there. Few students will go there because we don't think the counsellor is professional (Zhang, School A, female).

Our head teacher gave lectures about academic stress and presented some ways that we can use to relief the stress. But I think the content is merely cliché. I'd rather use that time to do more exercises (Lv, School B, male).

These results suggest a need for a more holistic approach to managing academic stress in Chinese high schools, one that balances the focus on academic achievement with equal attention to students' emotional and psychological needs. Also, more professional counselors should be hired in schools to provide professional counseling for students.

5. Discussion

The manifestation of academic stress among Chinese high school students as observed in this study reinforces the narrative found in existing research; it is a widespread and pressing concern. The tendency of students to favor problem-focused coping mechanisms may be because that students aware that they can not escape the Gaokao and they have to study hard anyway. Interestingly, the use of emotion-focused strategies, albeit less common, illustrates the importance of social support networks in the lives of students. Teachers and parents can be more understanding when students face high academic stress and seek help from them.

However, the study reveals a discrepancy between the coping strategies employed by students and the support mechanisms available within schools. Despite some efforts by educational institutions to address academic stress, the measures currently in place are insufficient and often overshadowed by the predominant focus on academic performance. There's an apparent need for schools to broaden their support frameworks to address not just the academic but also the emotional needs of students, to foster a more balanced and holistic educational experience.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Acknowledging the limitations of this study is crucial for understanding its context and scope. The relatively small and localized sample presents constraints on the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the subjective nature of self-reported data could introduce biases that may skew the study's insights. Future research could expand on these preliminary findings by incorporating a larger, more varied participant pool to develop a broader, more nuanced understanding of the issue. Longitudinal studies might also illuminate the long-term efficacy of different coping strategies, and additional qualitative research could delve into the perspectives of parents and educators, thereby enriching the discourse on academic stress from multiple angles.

7. Conclusion

In summarizing the exploration of academic stress among Chinese high school students, this study underlines the critical role of coping strategies in managing such stress and the pivotal part schools could play in supporting these efforts. While problem-focused approaches are predominant, the paucity of school-based support highlights an opportunity for educational institutions to reassess and reinvigorate their role in student well-being. As this research feeds into the broader conversation on academic stress, it emphasizes the urgency for a shift in educational paradigms—one that considers academic success and emotional health not as disparate goals but as complementary facets of student development. The findings advocate for a concerted move towards a more supportive, resilient, and holistic educational environment for the young learners in China's high schools.

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