



GENDER MATTERS: STRESSING THE DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

The present era is characterized by technological modernization. But along with the blessings of a "push button" existence and the good fortune of instant gratification, comes the rather unwanted by-product, stress. Today, school performance has become the yardstick of self-worth. This has resulted in a whole generation of youth for whom stress has become a way of life. It is interesting to note that genders respond differently to stress. Adolescent girls today are struggling more than ever to live up to enormous, unprecedented expectations to excel. Trying desperately to shine academically, juggle hectic extracurricular activities, become popular, look great, and get into elite colleges, teenage girls feel compelled to hide their distress from their teachers and families and often become disconnected from their true selves in the process. The present descriptive research aimed to study gender differences in achievement stress, examination stress and social stress in students of standard X. The sample comprised of 1092 students. The study revealed a significant gender difference in all the three dimensions of stress. This research could have important implications in helping girls cope with stress effectively and thereby enhance their self-worth as well as their capabilities in terms of educational and career prospects.

Keywords: Achievement Stress (AS), Examination Stress (ES), Social Stress (SS).



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INTRODUCTION

Stress is an inescapable part of modern life and is indeed woven into the fabric of life. Matching stride with progress and subscribing to the new age mantra of "bigger is better", people have begun to have bigger dreams and chase even bigger ambitions. Stress has come to be their inevitable companion in this struggle for one-upmanship. Parents have started to yoke their dreams and desires onto the tender shoulders of their children. Stress has emerged as an ego threatening condition in all domains and more so in the academic domain. Each year, stress continues to take its toll on the students of standard X and their parents too. Students committing suicides are not uncommon. Psychiatrists say a rising number of students suffer from traumatic disorders related to the fear of examinations (D'souza, 2012).

The adolescent period is considered to be difficult and critical because of the numerous qualitative shifts that take place. It is often referred to as "an age of crisis and transition". Indeed, adolescence has frequently been described with words like "re-organization," "realignment," "redefinition," "disequilibrium," and "flux" (Hollenstein, 2007). Coping with the bodily changes of puberty, the transitions in the school context, pressures to conform

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to prevailing norms and practices, contradictory peer expectations, the newly felt desire to free oneself from family restrictions, the lure of drugs, adjusting to cognitive changes, dealing with moral dilemmas, planning for a future vocation and sexuality make the environment increasingly complex and expose these youth to a wide array of stresses and challenges. This period has been metaphorically identified as “starting the engines without a skilled driver” (Steinberg, 2009).

The present educational system in India especially the examination procedures, aggravate the stress problem in the students of Higher Secondary Schools. Public examinations in India have played and continue to play a dominant role in determining the functional content and method of instruction. The fear of failure sends panic waves through these students.

Research studies have suggested that that girls and boys experience distinctly different patterns of stress during adolescence which may leave girls more vulnerable to depression. The present research endeavoured to determine the gender differences in stress with respect to three dimensions, namely, Achievement, Examination and Social Stress. Such an attempt would serve to throw light on existing differences if any and provide adolescent girls and boys of standard X with constructive suggestions on how best to deal with stress, set achievable academic targets and realistic vocational aspirations, so that they can concentrate on doing well at school and thus make their lives rewarding and productive.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

The following terms were defined to clarify their use in the context of this study:

1. **ACHIEVEMENT STRESS:** ‘Achievement Stress’ is defined as the pressure experienced by the students of standard X to perform in keeping with the unrealistic expectations of significant others like parents, teachers and peers.
2. **EXAMINATION STRESS:** ‘Examination Stress’ indicates the tension, fear and anxiety experienced by students of standard X arising from on-going, completed or upcoming assignments, examinations and tests.
3. **SOCIAL STRESS:** ‘Social Stress’ refers to a student’s sense of insecurity arising from his/her relationships, being rejected by others or not being popular and cared for.

AIM OF THE STUDY

To study gender differences in achievement stress, examination stress and social stress in students of standard X.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objective of the study was:

- To ascertain gender differences in the following variables:
 - a. Achievement Stress
 - b. Examination Stress
 - c. Social Stress

in students of standard X.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

The following null hypothesis was formulated for the study:

- There is no significant gender difference in the following variables:
 - a. Achievement Stress
 - b. Examination Stress
 - c. Social Stress

in students of standard X.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present investigation was a descriptive research of the comparative type and aimed to study gender differences in achievement stress, examination stress and social stress in students of standard X. Twenty secondary schools of Greater Mumbai with English as the medium of instruction and affiliated to the S.S.C. Board were selected by for the purpose of study. The sample comprised of 585 male and 507 female students of standard X. The stress rating scale was used to measure the 3 dimensions of stress and had an internal consistency of 0.9242 and test-retest reliability of 0.8310.

Data Analysis:

The Student’s t-test was used to compute the gender differences in the selected variables. Table 1 shows the relevant statistics of the same.

Table 1 Relevant Statistics of the Selected Variables

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-ratio	Level of significance	ω estimate
AS	Boys	585	38.82	7.08	3.09	0.01	0.77
	Girls	507	40.17	7.33			
ES	Boys	585	43.57	8.70	6.27	0.01	3.39
	Girls	507	46.84	8.51			
SS	Boys	585	29.17	5.40	3.18	0.01	0.83
	Girls	507	30.25	5.83			

The tabulated values for ‘t’ are as follows (Garett, 1985):

for $df = 584$ and 506 , t at 0.05 level = 1.96

Similarly, for $df = 584$ and 506 , t at 0.01 level = 2.59

Interpretation of 't': The obtained t-ratios for AS, ES and SS are 3.09, 6.27 and 3.18 respectively which are greater than 2.59. Thus, 't' is significant for AS, ES and SS at 0.01 level. The null hypotheses for these mentioned variables are, therefore, rejected. Further, it must be noted that the mean scores of all the variables are higher in girls than in boys, with examination stress being the highest.

Discussion: An analysis of the results pertaining to the null hypothesis, indicate that there is significant gender difference in AS, ES and SS. This observation is in keeping with the findings of studies which have shown that majority of girls report feeling "too much" pressure to get good grades and succeed. On entering high school they experience a sharp increase in stress, because they are told "everything counts now for college." They "usually" or "always" worry about getting into the "right" college (Sandler, 2005). Research has also revealed that women are about twice as likely as men to suffer from stress. This two-to-one difference persists across racial, ethnic, and economic divides. Many factors have been implicated, including biological, psychological, and social factors ranging from parents whose style is restrictive rather than supportive and open to emotional expression, low self-esteem, difficulty in assertiveness to over concern with appearance and notions of popularity (Nolen and Girgus, 1994).

With respect to achievement stress, girls are more conscientious and hence also more concerned about pleasing adults (teachers and parents), which might make them want to achieve higher grades. In contrast, boys are less concerned about pleasing adults, but are motivated by competition. In general, girls are known to exhibit far more school-related stress than do boys. They believe that to be successful, they have to be extraordinary in every area of their lives: academic, social, extra-curricular and appearance. Compared to girls, boys feel less connected, are less likely to feel successful and have fewer worries about academic performance. Although all teens report being burdened by too much homework and tests, girls are 55% more likely than boys to say that they pressure themselves to get good grades and do well in school.

From the point of view of examination stress, girls appear to approach exams as a way of emphasising their capabilities. Consequently, they view their exam results and the related feedback as an opportunity to reflect on their performance. This attitude may lead them to

suffer more stress than boys. Females being more nervous by nature are more stressed than males as examinations represent to them physical danger, pain and academic failure (Sharma and Sud 1990).

Adolescent girls are more likely to experience stress in their relations with parents and friends, whereas adolescent boys' stress is more likely to emerge from trouble in school or other factors outside their relationships with others. This is because adolescent girls as compared to boys, attach more importance to their relationships as a source of emotional support and perhaps, personal identity. Hence interpersonal stress may be more salient and may act as a stronger threat to their well-being, thus leading to higher levels of social stress in girls. Heightened worries about appearance/body image, clothing choices, and make-up further exacerbate the daily stress of teen girls. Besides, in a country like India, with a tradition bound society, a premium is put on the male child from conception onwards and the family does everything possible at all times to give the best to a male child. Less is given and much is expected of the female to prove her worth. Females are discriminated on the basis of personal and social expectations, multiple assigned roles and responsibilities in families and communities. Roles that are considered demeaning, laborious and time consuming for males are adopted as appropriate for females. The tendency to repress and ignore a female is found to be quite high in India, which is predominantly a traditional and patriarchal society. The reason for girls having reported higher levels of stress in this study as compared to boys could also be attributed to the fact that females can overtly talk about their emotions and easily identify them without being labelled weak (Greenglass, 1995). On the other hand, boys are told to face the reality with confidence and courage and avoid indulging in emotional expressions that characterize femininity (Eisler and Blalock 1991). This suggests the active role of different socialisation practices used for males and females from young by parents, teachers and significant others in the community.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that if constructive guidance relating to stress management is provided to girls, educators could serve to reduce their anxiety, build their resiliency, and enable them to become more successful. Educational professionals need to have an honest peek into the secret struggles of teen girls today and obtain insights into what they say they most need from their teachers and administrators to alleviate their stress and perform well in school. It is cause for concern that though girls are outdoing boys on the

academic landscape, society has not given them due credit. The opportunities available to them to match their academic feats are not proportionate. School counselors can be instrumental in helping girls expand their awareness of career options and make realistic assessments about how their own abilities and interests connect to occupational requirements. In doing so it can be ensured that their potential is tapped to the fullest, leading to a bright and promising future.

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