

LIFE SATISFACTION OF SEMINARY FINAL YEAR STUDENTS IN YANGON, MYANMAR: A PATH ANALYTIC STUDY OF THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT INFLUENCES OF COPING STYLES BEING MEDIATED BY STRESS, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of coping styles on the life satisfaction of a sample of seminary final year students in Yangon, Myanmar, both directly and indirectly being mediated by their levels of reported stress, anxiety and depression. A total of 218 Yangon seminary final year students (aged between 20 to 45 years) participated in this study by filling in a self-administered questionnaire designed to measure the study's primary variables (stress, anxiety, depression, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, avoidance-focused coping, and life satisfaction). The results of the study indicated that the Myanmar seminary final year seminary students' employment of the emotion-focused coping and avoidance-focused coping styles is directly and significantly related to their reported level of life satisfaction, although in opposite directions. The results also showed that the more the seminary students employed emotion-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the higher their reported levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The more the seminary students employed avoidance-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the lower their reported level of depression. The implications of these findings in relation to the need to assist final year students identify which coping strategy is most effective in helping them cope with the daily stressors they encounter during their final year period were discussed.

Keywords: Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Coping Style, Problem-Focused Coping, Emotion-Focused Coping, Avoidance-Focused Coping, Life Satisfaction.

Introduction

Seminary education is designed to prepare students for a life of increasing spiritual depth. Seminaries provide the skills for their students to unite their own unique qualities with specific pastoral and leadership skills, including preaching, leadership in worship, counselling, teaching, administration, and promotion of individual and

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social/political qualities in accordance with the teachings of the gospel. Seminary students are those who attend the institution to learn and to prepare themselves to be efficient and effective Christian administrators for their respective ministries. To enrol in seminary education in Myanmar, both at the undergraduate and Master levels, seminary and government university graduate students have to pass a matriculation exam before they can begin their studies. A Bachelor degree (Bachelor of Theology, B.Th) takes four years of study and an additional three years to obtain a Master's degree (Master of Divinity, M.Div).

For seminary students, academic life is undeniably stressful (Melendez & Guzman, 1983). Entering into seminary marks the beginning of frequent stressful life changes such as a lack of freedom that other university students take for granted and enjoy. For these students, there are strict rules and disciplines that they must follow, not only as part of their seminary training, but also in order to act as good role models to each other and to other people. That is, they have to fulfil not only their duties as students (e.g. completing their homework, assignments, class presentations, examinations, and other school activities within the given timeframe) but also have to take responsibility for their physical, emotional and moral selves. Especially, there are enormous demands placed on the seminary final year students in Yangon, Myanmar. Demands arising from academic pressure, social issues, and financial problems (Vitaliano et al., 1984) throughout their student career, and coupled with their worries about their future ministries culminates as stressors in affecting their levels of depression and life satisfaction. Undoubtedly, these challenges are major causes of the students' stress, anxiety and depression. While some students are able to cope with their experiences of stress, anxiety, and depression, there are clearly many who fail to cope effectively. The researcher assumes that the type of coping styles employed by these students may have differential impact on their life satisfaction. The life satisfaction of seminary final year students ultimately affects the quality of their academic achievements and their future ministry because a person who is satisfied with his/her life is capable of helping others effectively. Alternatively, low life satisfaction coupled with high anxiety and high stress can have detrimental impact on their academic achievements and their professional efficacy as future ministries.

For the above reasons, the present study has been designed to investigate the direct and indirect influences of coping styles (problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance-focused coping), being mediated by stress, anxiety and depression, on the life satisfaction of seminary final year students in Yangon, Myanmar.

The present study proposed to investigate the direct and indirect influences of coping styles (problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance-focused coping), being mediated by stress, anxiety and depression on the life satisfaction of seminary final year students in Yangon, Myanmar. It was anticipated that, through valid and reliable instrumentation, the findings obtained will contribute to, as well as build on, the existing body of knowledge regarding the life satisfaction of seminary final year students in Yangon, Myanmar. The findings from this study will be beneficial not only for seminary students in Yangon, but also for other seminary students around Myanmar. Through this study, seminary final year students will have a better

understanding of the level of their life satisfaction and how the employment of different coping styles can be mediated by their levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, in affecting their life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 218 participants of whom 117 (53.7%) were males and 101 (46.3%) were females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 45 years with a mean age of 27.18 years (median=26.50 years). In terms of educational attainment, 42.2% ($n=92$) of the participants possessed a Bachelor's degree and 57.8% ($n=126$) of the participants possessed a Master's degree. In terms of their marital status, the majority of the participants were single (single: $n=197$, 90.4%; married: $n=21$, 9.6%).

Materials

The questionnaire consists of the following sections.

Part I: Personal Information

This section contains items written to tap the respondents' demographic characteristics of gender, age, marital status and education level.

Part II: Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS)

The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS; Endler & Parker, 1990) is a 48-item self-report measure of Problem-, Emotion-, and Avoidance-oriented coping. The CISS was developed from both theoretical and empirical bases, and has been used in a variety of research and applied settings. The problem-focused coping factor consists of 16 items that measure conceptually distinct aspects of problem focused coping (purposeful problem-oriented efforts aimed at solving the problem, cognitively restructuring the problem, or attempts to alter the situation; the main emphasis is on the problem or planning, and on attempts to solve the problem). The Emotion-oriented coping factor also consists of 16 items that measure aspects of what might be viewed as emotion-focused coping (reactions include emotional responses, denial, self-preoccupation, and fantasizing; the aim is to reduce stress). The Avoidance-focused coping factor also consists of 16 items that measure aspects of what might be viewed as avoidance-focused coping (reactions involve avoiding the problem rather than dealing with it directly and social diversion, interacting with others). Each of the 48 items is to be scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=not at all, 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=often, and 5=very much, with high scores indicating higher frequency of usage of that coping style.

Part III: Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS)

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) is a 21-item self-report measure of anxiety, depression and stress developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). The DASS-21 consists of three self-report sub-scales designed to provide relatively pure measures of the three related negative affective states of depression, anxiety, and stress (Lovibond, P.F & Lovibond, S. H., 1995; S. H. Lovibond & P. F. Lovibond,

1995). Each sub-scale is composed of seven items written to reflect negative affective symptoms experienced over the past week. Each item is to be scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 0= did not apply to me at all, to 3= applied to me very much or most of the time. The final score for each of the three sub-scales of anxiety, stress and depression was computed by summing across the items that make up that sub-scale and multiplying the summed score by two.

Part IV: Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin, 1985) was developed to tap the cognitive-judgmental aspects of general life satisfaction. The authors of the SWLS stated that “the scale was designed with the idea that one must ask the subject for an overall judgment of their life in order to measure the concept of life satisfaction” (pp.71-72) (Diener et al., 1985). In contrast to measures that apply some external standard, the SWLS reveals the individual’s own judgment of his or her quality of life. Each item is to be scored from 1= strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree with high scores reflecting more satisfaction with life.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using the convenience sampling method in which the survey questionnaire was distributed in paper-and-pencil (written) form. Formal permission was obtained from the Principals of the seminaries in Yangon, Myanmar to collect data from the seminary final year students. Though there are seven Baptist seminaries situated in Yangon, the data collection was conducted from four main seminaries only. The reason for choosing these four seminaries is because they are the main seminaries of the Myanmar Baptist Convention.

Results

The items that make up each of the seven factors of problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, avoidance-focused coping, depression, anxiety, stress, and life satisfaction were summed and their means calculated. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for these seven computed factors.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for the Computed Factors of Problem-Focused Coping, Emotion-Focused Coping, Avoidance-Focused Coping, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Life Satisfaction

	Mean	S.D.
Problem-focused coping	3.46	.55
Emotion-focused coping	2.98	.71
Avoidance-focused coping	3.07	.51
Depression	1.26	.66
Anxiety	1.14	.62
Stress	1.49	.61
Life satisfaction	4.59	.96

As can be seen from Table 1, the factor of ‘problem-focused coping’ was rated above the mid-point on its scale, the factor of ‘avoidance-focused coping’ was rated approximately at the mid-point on its scale, and the factor of ‘emotion-focused

coping' was rated below the mid-point on its scale. Thus, overall, the participants were more likely to employ problem-focused coping, and to a lesser degree avoidance-focused coping, and least of all emotion-focused coping when dealing with stressful situations in their work. The participants also rated the DASS-21 factors of 'depression', 'anxiety', and 'stress' below the mid-point on their respective scales. Thus, the participants reported generally low levels of depression, anxiety, and stress experienced in their work. In terms of their life satisfaction, the participants rated their well-being above the mid-point on the scale. Thus, the respondents were generally satisfied with their lives.

Path Analysis

In order to test the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships represented by the path model depicted in Figure 1, path analysis via regression analysis was conducted. The analysis involved (1) regressing the dependent variable of life satisfaction on the predictor variables of depression, anxiety, stress, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance-focused coping; and (2) regressing the mediator variables of depression, anxiety, and stress on the predictor variables of problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance-focused coping. The results of this path analysis are presented in Figure 1.

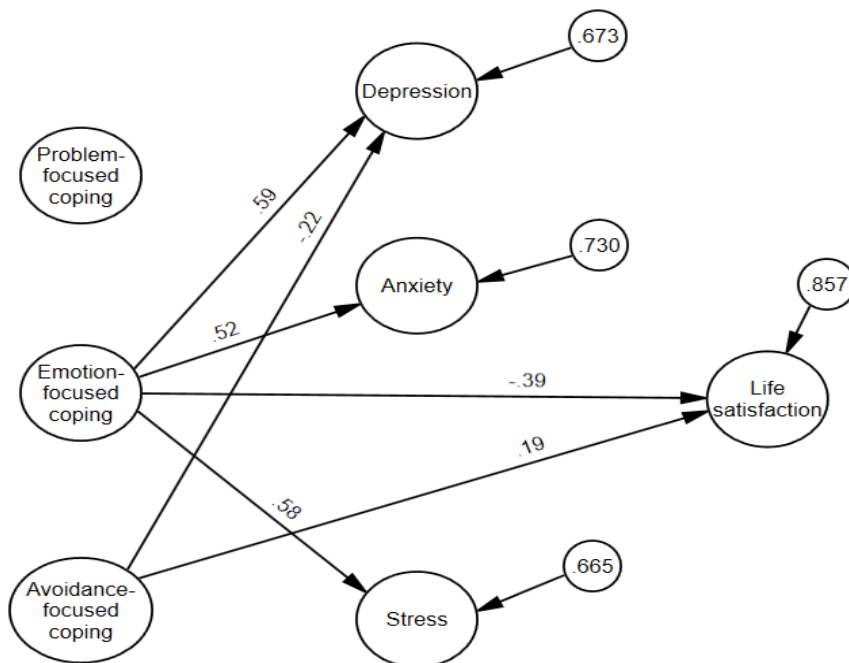


Figure 1: Path Model of Myanmar Final Year Seminary Students' Life Satisfaction as a Function of the Direct and Indirect Influences (Being Mediated by Their Levels of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress) of Their Coping Styles (Note: Only Significant Path Coefficients ($P < .05$) Have Been Presented in Order to Reduce the Complexity of the Model)

The results showed that for the Myanmar final year seminary students, their employment of the emotion-focused coping and avoidance-focused coping styles is directly and significantly related to their reported level of life satisfaction, although in opposite directions. Thus, the more the seminary students employed emotion-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the lower their reported level of life satisfaction (Beta = $-.39$); the more they employed avoidance-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the higher their reported level of life satisfaction (Beta = $.19$).

Emotion-focused coping was also found to be directly and significantly related to the three emotive variables of depression, anxiety, and stress. Thus, the more the seminary students employed emotion-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the higher their reported levels of depression (Beta = $.59$), anxiety (Beta = $.52$), and stress (Beta = $.58$). Avoidance-focused coping was found to be directly and significantly related to the emotive variable of depression. Thus, the more the seminary students employed avoidance-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the lower their reported level of depression (Beta = $-.22$).

Results from the path analysis indicated that the seminary students' employment of the problem-focused coping style was not significantly associated either directly or indirectly, being mediated by the emotive variables of depression, anxiety, and stress, with their reported level of life satisfaction. Similarly, the seminary students' reported levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were not found to be significantly related to their reported level of life satisfaction.

Figure 1 also reports the standardized residual for each dependent variable for the path model. These coefficients provide an estimate of the proportion of variance in each dependent variable not predicted by the model. Alternatively, subtracting these values from 1.00 indicates the proportion of variance predicted by the model. These coefficients indicated that the path model accounted for 32.7% of the variance in depression, 27% of the variance in anxiety, 33.5% of the variance in stress, and 14.3% of the variance in life satisfaction.

Discussion

The findings from the present study indicated that the factor of 'problem-focused coping' was rated above the mid-point on its scale, the factor of 'avoidance-focused coping' was rated approximately at the mid-point on its scale, and the factor of 'emotion-focused coping' was rated below the mid-point on its scale. Thus, overall, the participants were more likely to employ problem-focused coping, and to a lesser degree avoidance-focused coping, and least of all emotion-focused coping when dealing with stressful situations in their work.

These findings point to the preference of final year seminary students in Yangon to employ problem-focused coping rather than emotion-focused coping and avoidance-focused coping in managing their stressful life situations. These findings are in line with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) arguments that when people believe that they are capable of solving a specific problem, then there is the tendency to employ problem-focused coping, which involves the direct attempt to decrease the environmental source of stress. The purpose of problem-focused coping is to actively change something about the stress-causing situation so as to make it less stressful.

Aldwin and Revenson (1987) stated that problem-focused coping can potentially involve numerous different actions such as planning, taking direct action, looking for assistance, screening out other activities, and occasionally even forcing oneself to wait before acting. By using this method of coping, the individual attempts to short-circuit the negative emotions they are experiencing by doing something to modify, avoid or to minimize the situation that is threatening to them. These are the same strategies that Yangon seminary final year students have been observed to employ to manage their work-related stress. That is, due to the demands of their academic work as well as the realization that they need to perform well academically to be successful students and to achieve their goals, they spend a large portion of their time working on assignments as well as studying for exams. Such work experiences within their academic setting would have inculcated in them a problem-solving strategy that is more problem-focused than emotion-focused or avoidance-focused. These suggestions corroborate MacNair and Elliot's (1992) findings from their study on the relationship between self-perceived problem-solving and coping among their students. They found that those students who reported more effective problem-solving skills were also more likely to use coping strategies aimed towards problem-focused solving. These findings clearly reflect the Yangon seminary final year students' preference for problem-focused coping over emotion-focused coping and avoidance focused coping in dealing with their work stressors.

Results from the path analysis showed that for the Yangon seminary final year students, their employment of the emotion-focused coping and avoidance-focused coping styles is directly and significantly related to their reported level of life satisfaction, although in opposite directions. Specifically, the findings indicated that the participants' employment of the emotion-focused coping style is negatively associated with their reported level of life satisfaction. Thus, the more the students employed emotion-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the lower their reported level of life satisfaction. The literature on coping styles suggests that when individuals are unable to solve a problem, they adopt emotion-focused coping that includes strategies such as evasion, maintaining distance, temporary putting aside, and giving up among others. That is, the primary function of emotion-focused coping is to moderate or to eliminate the unpleasant emotions brought about by a stressor by using mechanisms such as positive re-appraisal, denial and wishful thinking. Thus, while the emotion-focused strategy may make the individual feel better by minimizing the stress reaction, not confronting the stressful condition or not trying to do something about the cause of the stress exacerbates the feeling of negative well-being. The Yangon seminary final year students often have to deal with problems/stressors stemming from time management issues, financial burdens, interactions with lecturers/advisors, personal goals, social activities on campus, expectations of family members/parents, academic workloads, attending lectures, inadequate materials, uncertainty in getting a job after graduation and worrying about the future (Wilkis, 2008; Agolla & Ongori, 2009). Thus, to vent their frustration, they may rely on emotion-focused coping as a way to cope with their stressors. While such an emotion-based strategy may be personally therapeutic in that it allows for the release of negative emotions, such a strategy nevertheless does not allow the students to manage the immediate problem with an effective action plan. The inability to solve

the problem at hand may increase negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and depression among the seminary final year students and lead to their lower level of life satisfaction.

The study's findings also indicated that the participants' employment of the avoidance-focused coping style is positively associated with their reported level of life satisfaction. Thus, the more the students employed avoidance-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the higher their reported level of life satisfaction. Endler and Parker (1990b) have noted that individuals may use avoidance-coping strategies to deal with their stressors by seeking out other people (social diversion) or by engaging in substitute tasks (distraction). The present study's Seminary final year students employment of the avoidance-focused coping to circumvent or avoid the stressful situation, either via use of person-oriented strategies (e.g., distracting oneself by socializing with others) or engaging in substitute tasks (e.g. taking time with God or participating in spiritual renewal programs) would have allowed them to avoid the problems at hand, and thus increased their overall level of life satisfaction.

Emotion-focused coping was also found to be positively and significantly related to the three emotive variables of depression, anxiety, and stress. Thus, the more the seminary students employed emotion-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the higher their reported levels of depression, anxiety and stress. These findings are in line with those obtained from past research which showed that emotion-focused coping is related with higher degrees of depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms (Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, 1988; Ebata & Moos, 1991). This is not surprising, given that the employment of emotions to deal with stressors offers no active means to eradicate the problems, but only a temporary attempt to mask the stressors at hand.

Findings from the path analysis also showed that the Seminary students' employment of the avoidance-focused coping was negatively and significantly related to the emotive variable of depression. Thus, the more the seminary students employed avoidance-focused coping to deal with stressful situations, the lower their reported level of depression. As seminary students are people who are preparing to serve the ministry of God, they are trained to be mature in spirituality. Thus, in dealing with life stressors, they may attempt to avoid stressful situations by using religious coping or spiritual activities. Avoiding stress through religion and spirituality are traditional means of coping that promote internal locus of control in stressful situations (Barbarin, 1993; Hefti, 2011). The religious and spiritual activities help to reframe stressful events in a way that motivate the individual intrinsically to deal with life stressors. Moreover, spirituality is a determinant of better mental health because it can serve as a source of hope and strength in times of crises (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Spirituality enhances resilience and optimism in stressful situations and increases personal empowerment in the face of stressors with the sense of being secured by God (Barbarin, 1993; Hefti, 2011). Thus, for the study's seminary final year students, their employment of avoidance-focused coping may be intricately linked to their reliance on religious coping or spiritual activities to deal positively with their stressors.

The present study demonstrated the role that different coping strategies play in contributing the level of life satisfaction among seminary final year students in Yangon, Myanmar. The study's findings clearly point to the need to assist these

students identify which coping strategy is most effective in helping them to cope with the daily stressors they encounter during their final year period. Folkman et al. (1991) suggested that coping training can begin by familiarizing participants with the distinction between problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance-focused coping using hypothetical and real life situations. It would be beneficial for seminary students if relevant authorities and personnel in seminaries, such as seminary administrators, lecturers, counsellors, and academic advisors, are aware of the importance of coping skills to be acquired by students. In turn, students should be made aware of the various coping strategies available when confronted with stressful situations and the adoption of effective coping strategies that can reduce stress.

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