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Academic Stress and Self-Harming Behavior among School Children: A Cross-Sectional and Correlational Study

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to examine the relationship between academic stress and self-harming behavior among school children. A sample size of 800 school children was recruited for this purpose while keeping the number of private and government students constant. Parental practices comprised of nurturance, guidance, control and permissiveness. The correlational analyses indicated a positive relationship between academic stress and self-harming behavior. Apart from this, one-way analyses and independent sample t-tests also generated comparisons of academic stress and self-harming behavior with other demographic variables. The study has implications for school administration, parents and mental health professionals for providing adequate counseling and therapeutic strategies for combating this prevalent phenomenon. This study calls for attention to the stigma surrounding deliberate self-harm and the lack of avenues available for students to turn to for help.

Keywords: Perceived Parenting, Academic Stress and Deliberate Self harm.

Introduction

Youth is considered to be a warehouse of energy since time immemorial and have an inherent desire for action and pursuit of dreams. However, the whole essence of community could be set ablaze if this same inherent energy and the fire for action isn't channelized in the proper direction (Hesketh & Ding, 2005). When the society and environment don't cater to the needs of the youth, it can greatly hinder their development and growth.

Academic pressure can pose a real challenge for children and may also drive them to self-injurious behavior (Snodgrass, 1991).

The chances for self-harming behavior are rife during adolescence as it is the age phase fraught with several interpersonal and intrapersonal difficulties (Nock, Joiner, Gordon, Lloyd-Richardson and Prinstein, 2006). Although a dearth of literature suggests the high prevalence of suicidal ideation in adolescence yet not much research focus has been attributed to children as compared to adults (O'Loughlin and Sherwood, 2005). The present study therefore undertakes this phenomenon as especially centered on school population because World Health Organisation (2014) had declared suicide as the second leading cause of death in many western countries therefore it was imperative to take a sample of school children for this study.

Several theories have been generated to propose the impact of academic stress on the self-harming behaviors. The main feature Cognitive theory is that a person's behavior leads to the creation of his/her perception of the world. Lacking parental skills can disrupt the mental development of the child and they are driven to negative and pessimistic thoughts (Corby, 2000). These pessimistic thoughts, left unchecked, translate into suicidality and the person finds harming themselves as the only plausible solution to put a stop to the thoughts of worthlessness (Hawton Saunders, 2012)

Academic Stress

Stress, in general, is that psychological arousal that results from the condition when external demands exceed the person's adaptive and coping abilities (Hashim, 2003). Academic-related stress is specifically the type of stress when students feel afraid of failing exams, finding the motivation to study and time constraints (Hashim, 2003). Since a major portion of adolescents' days is spent in school therefore much of the stress, they experience has to be due to school-related activities (Jones, 1993). Research has shown that prolonged academic stress also lead to psychosomatic illnesses, anxiety, depression, drug abuse and delinquent behavior (Jones, 1993). School and college already induce a great amount of stress and anxiety in students and this condition is exacerbated when students start fearing the inability to meet the expectations of their parents

and friends (Dyson & Renk, 2006). The stressors, such as the academic workload, do not cause anxiety on their own, rather the way the child perceives those stressors and reacts to them does (Sandler et al. 2003). Academic failure has been reported linked with depressive symptoms in children, thus, causing self-destructive behaviors (Abdo, 2003).

Self-Harm

Deliberate self-harming behavior is frequently used as an umbrella term for 'self mutilation' and 'self injurious' behavior (Klonsky, 2007). Self harming and self mutilation both comprise those adolescents who indulge in self injurious rather suicidal behaviors and are referred to emergency for the same and also those adolescents who harm themselves but without any explicit suicidal intent (Andover and Gibb, 2010). Non Suicidal Self Injury (NSSI) in particular is defined as the self-inflicted damage of the body tissues sans any explicit suicidal intention and for purposes not sanctioned by the society (Nock, 2009). Studies have also reported that more girls than boys are found prone to psychological distress and hence, at the risk of NSSI (Hilt et al. 2008).

Studies have indicated that self harm with or without the intent of suicide is an important predictor for suicide attempts in the future (Cavanagh, Carson, Sharpe and Lawrie, 2003). This is substantiated by Joiner's (2005) theory which states that young people become accustomed to self injuries because repeated attempts tend to desensitize them to the pain, hence eventually making them impervious to the fear of inflicting injuries on themselves. Moreover, those with a history of self harming behavior tend to score higher on depression and hopelessness as compared to those with no apparent history of self-harm (Brausch, & Gutierrez, 2010). Among the several factors deemed responsible for causing young people to self-harm, exam stress and educational difficulties have been cited as a significant predictor of self-harm among children (Daine, Hawton, Singaravelu, Stewart, Simkin and Montgomery, 2013).

Young people, particularly adolescents, are often bogged down by the consistent desire to excel in schools because they perceive it as a crucial factor for their personal evaluation (Nelson and Crawford, 1990). This pressure of excelling in studies tends to overburden their brains and causes anxiety and depression, hence driving them to suicidal behavior (Toero et

al, 2001). It was also established that the apotheosis of suicide cases was reported to be during the period of examination because that is when the young people experienced the most academic stress (Toero et al, 2001). The inability to meet one's own expectations and those of others often put adolescents at the risk of losing self confidence and is exacerbated by the withdrawal of parental and familial support (Yeh and Huang, 1996). Such behavior induces a sense of hypersensitivity in children and adolescents toward the judgments of others and the resultant indulgence in self-destructive behavior (Juon, Nam and Ensminger, 1994).

Impact of Academic Stress in the Pakistani & Asian Culture

The notion of self harming behavior among adolescents is backed by several researches and this seems to be a proliferated phenomenon in Asian countries (Toero et al., 2001). In East Asian countries, many more people become susceptible to suicidal ideation owing to the cultural and familial demands of high academic achievement and consequently leading to academic stress (Gloria, 2003). Moreover, self harm was reported to be more prevalent in young females aged 15-19 years in United Kingdom (Bergen, et al. 2012). People with a history of self harm are at greater risk of attempting suicides in the future owing to the emotional imbalances of the young population (Bergen, et al. 2014).

Literature Review

Pong, Hao and Gardner (2007) believed that there is a strong link between academic stress and self harming behvior. This social capital is forged through various social relationships including expectation, obligation and expectations etc which children then use to formulate their identities with their personal and social world so as to achieve certain goals for themselves. This is elicited by positive family, school and community environment. Social capital prompts the parents to set expectations for academic achievement of their children and in turn creating an environment for its successful execution. This study included a vast sample of various ethnic groups as it was believed that parenting practices vary from culture to culture. Non-Hispanic white families rated their parents to be more authoritative while Asian children rated them to be authoritarian instead of authoritative (Chao, 2001). Kao (2004) found Asian parents to

be more reluctant to interact with their children as compared to their American counterparts.

The sample Pong, Hao and Gardener (2007) used for their longitudinal study consisted of 20,000 adolescents from both Asian and Hispanic communities who completed the survey in the year 1995. The results showed that parental influence in both its forms, parenting styles and actual parental involvement, impacts child's school performance. School performance was found to be actively related to how well the child is adjusted in the familial and school environment. Parents who showed greater trust in their children and interacted with them about their daily life contributed a lot to their higher school performance and assuaged most of their school-related stressors. However, parental communication regarding social events didn't appear to have any visible impact on school performance.

Apart from a dearth of literature focusing on adolescents exclusively, it is also brought to notice that when pre-schoolers enter a formal academic environment, it is rather a very crucial phase for them as they are bombarded with stressors from every direction, such as fear of failure, meeting parental expectations and indulgence in task-irrelevant behaviors (Nurmi et al., 1995). The fact that they're to be systematically judged for their academic performance is in itself quite daunting. At this point, the academic, cognitive and behavioral strategies children employ would set the stage for their future academic achievement (Nurmi et al., 1995). Deb, Strodl and Sun (2014) reported that academic stress is prevalent among school children on a very large scale. Their findings, rooted in India, indicated that around 37 percent of adolescents reported positive on academic stress which was especially higher in under-achievers as compared to high-achievers, therefore, drawing a direct link between academic stress and student's achievement.

Research has indicated that several factors play a role in the occurrence and prevalence of academic stress, such as gender, socioeconomic status and parental expectations (Cohen & Sekino, 2004; Cherian & Malehase, 2002). Wu and Qi (2006) conducted a longitudinal study on parenting practices and their impact on the academic performance keeping into account the various demographic variables. A total of 2,247 African

American parents and children participated in the study. The findings suggested that parental expectations of their children push them to achieve more in their studies. The regression analysis also concluded that children belonging to low socio-economic classes tended to achieve lesser academically because these stressors added to their academic stress. Interestingly, the results also indicated that number of family members also affect how the child performs in school. Therefore, the accompanying academic stress is likely to have very detrimental effect on the young minds.

Butkowsky & Willows (1980) in their study, conducted on 9-12-year olds, found that those students facing reading difficulties showed symptoms of learned helplessness because they suffered from lack of persistence in the task at hand and undermined their capabilities which were exacerbated by the other class-room related factors.

Children are reported to be at the risk of suffering from several emotional issues owing to academic stress in school, e-g anxiety, psychopathology and depression (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997). This stress which is heavily imposed on children is mainly caused by school tests, fear of failure, peer and parental pressure and perceived criticism from teachers and makes the child susceptible to negative behavior as was reported by Kouzma and Kennedy (2004). They had recruited a sample of 423 (168 males, 255 females) adolescents aged 16-18 years from Australia. The results concluded that most of the stress experienced by adolescents was school-related owing to several factors including exams stress and results, burden of homework and need to do well in exams.

Thus, excessive amount of academic stress makes students teeter on the brink of developing psychiatric disorders such as depression which can, if left unchecked, lead to suicidal behaviors (Verma, Sharma and Larson, 2002). The suicidal behavior happens when the fear of school is reinforced both parents and teachers alike and the students are wedged in between (Smith, Calam and Bolton, 2009). This suicidal ideation among adolescents is believed to vary across gender as was reported by Miller (1997). Miller (1997) garnered his findings from a sample of 39 males and 45 female adolescent offenders. His study concluded that females were more likely than males to experience suicidal ideation owing to several

factors such as behavioral issues, familial conflicts and resulting hopelessness.

Aafreen, Priya and Gayathri (2018) conducted a study on a sample of 80 students who were asked to respond to an online survey. Their aim was to explore the impact of academic stress on the physical, psychological and social well being of these students. The results of the study were represented graphically, inferentially and descriptively and indicated a strong link between academic stress and depression. This anxiety and depression accompanying the academic stress ultimately led to poor academic performance. In Asian traditions, precisely in India, the individual's self worth is measured by how well they scored in their studies (Varma, 2007). Because of such restrictive environment, every day on average, around 6 students commit suicide as was reported by the Indian National Crime Records Bureau (2008).

Research has indicated that depression and hopelessness among young individuals could serve as a potential risk factor for driving them to deliberate self-harming behavior as was reported by Hawton and James (2015) that around 7-14% of adolescents attempted self-harm at some point in their lives. This self-harm, though not necessarily done with an intent to put an end one's life, is nevertheless a strong indicator for future suicide attempts (Nock et al., 2006).

Significance of the Study

The present study is useful in a way that it will help provide counselors some insight about the psychological well-being of the school children as young as 10 years because in describing stress and other mental issues, the mainstream school children are generally believed to be out of this domain. Most of the literature has focused on clinical population whenever they set out for exploring self-harming behavior but recent researches and statistics are indicating a large population of mainstream school and high-school students experiencing suicidal thoughts and also attempting it. The present study will, therefore, bring to the fore the prevalence of self-harm behavior in mainstream school population.

This study will help bring forth the importance of the counseling services for young children admitted to government and private institutes who are

often so bogged down by the excessive work load that it tends to affect their attitude toward studying.

Methodology

A cross sectional correlation study was conducted. In order to formally begin with the study, a permission letter was sought from the Clinical Psychology Unit signed by the supervisor to collect the data. After receiving the official permission, data collection was initiated from government and private institutions keeping in mind the sample size (800 school children with an age range of 10-18 years). Consent form was signed to ensure participant's willingness to participate in the study. After the data collection was completed, it was followed up by quantitative scoring and coding of the data.

Results

This chapter highlights the results of the main study. It has been divided into two sections. The first section illustrates the frequency and percentages of all demographic variables employed in the present study whereas the second section deals with the statistical analyses testing all the hypotheses formulated for the study on the basis of literature review.

The demographic variables indicated the mean age of the participants is M=14.14 (SD=1.515). The sample included 47.1% boys and 52.2% girls. The number of students from both Government and Private schools was kept constant i-e 400 (50%) from each as well as the number of students from classes 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th i-e 200 (25%) from each. Among the sample, 37.1% students belonged to Joint family system whereas 62.9% belonged to Nuclear family system.

Table 1

Independent sample t test between boys and girls for Academic Stress and Deliberate Self harm (N=800)

Variables	Boys (n=377)		Girls (n=423)	t(798)	p	95%CI		Cohen's d
						LL	UL	
	M	SD	M SD					

ASSC	73.72	22.307	75.14	21.205	-.925	.355	-4.444	1.598	.0326
DSHI	1.38	2.145	.85	1.670	3.852	.001	.259	.797	-.138

Note: p<.001, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower limit, UL=Upper limit, ASSC=Academic Stress Scale for children, DSHI=Deliberate Self-harm Inventory.

An independent sample t-test was performed comparing the mean consistency scores of boys and girls. As indicated in the table, there is no significant mean difference in Academic Stress between boys (M=73.72, SD=22.307) and girls (M=75.14, SD=21.205) t=-.925, p>.05. Therefore, boys and girls did not report any significant difference in terms of experiencing academic stress. The scores on Deliberate self-harm, however, indicate that boys reported a significantly higher indulgence in self-harming behavior (M=1.38, SD=2.145) as compared to girls (M=.85, SD=1.670) t=3.852, p<.001.

Table 2

Independent sample t test between Government and Private Students for Academic Stress and Deliberate Self harm (N=800).

Variables	Government Private (n=400) (n=400)				t(798)	p	95%CI		Cohen's d
							LL	UL	
	M	SD	M	SD					
ASSC	76.42	20.388	72.53	22.852	2.542	.011	.887	6.898	-.089
DSHI	.92	1.718	1.28	2.101	-2.653	.008	-.626	-.094	.09

Note: p<.001, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower limit, UL=Upper limit, ASSC=Academic Stress Scale for children, DSHI=Deliberate Self-harm Inventory.

An independent sample t-test was performed comparing the mean consistency scores of government and private school students. As indicated in the table, there is a significant mean difference in Academic Stress between government students (M=76.42, SD=20.388) and private students (M=72.53, SD=22.852) t(798)=2.542, p<.05. Therefore, government and private school students had significant mean differences in terms of experiencing academic stress. The scores on Deliberate self harm also indicated that private students reported a significantly higher indulgence in self harming behavior (M=1.28, SD=2.101) as compared to government students (M=.92, SD=1.718) t= -2.653, p<.05.

Furthermore, the mean differences between levels of socio-economic status on Academic stress and deliberate self harming behavior in school children are shown. The means and standard deviation indicated that academic stress and self harm among children did not differ in terms of socio-economic status.

Table 3

Frequency and Percentages of Boys (N= 377) and Girls (N=423) endorsing the DSHI items.

Self-Harm behavior	Boys		*Girls*	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*
1.Cutting	79	21	57	13.5
2.Burning with cigarette	14	3.7	2	.5
3.Burning with lighter/match	11	2.9	9	2.1
4.Carving words into skin	42	11.1	17	4
5.Carving pictures into skin	21	5.6	9	2.1
6.Severe scratching	49	13	39	9.2
7.Biting	43	11.4	35	8.3
8.Rubbing sand paper on skin	10	2.7	2	.5
9.Dripping acid on skin	9	2.4	2	.5
10.Using bleach/oven cleaver to scrub skin	22	5.8	15	3.5

11.Sticking pins, needles, staples into skin	41	10.9	50	11.8
12.Rubbing glass into skin	14	3.7	14	3.3
13.Breaking bones	12	3.2	1	.2
14.Banging head	35	9.3	17	4
15.Punching self	40	10.6	18	4.3
16.Interference with wound healing	49	13	37	8.7
17.Other forms of self harm	29	7.7	36	8.5

In terms of the frequencies of both boys and girls on each item of Deliberate self harm inventory, it was indicated that boys scored higher on some of the self harming behaviors as compared to girls such as cutting (21% & 13.5% respectively), carving words into skin (11.1% and 4% respectively), severe scratching (13% and 9.2% respectively) and punching self (10.6% and 4.3% respectively). On some items such as burning with lighter/match, using bleach/oven cleaner, rubbing glass into skin and other forms of self harming behaviors did not yield any significant difference between boys and girls. The only items where girls scored slightly higher than boys are sticking pins, needles, staples into skin (11.8% and 10.9% respectively) and other forms of self harm (8.5% and 7.7% respectively).

Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine the relationship between academic stress and self-harming behavior among school children using several approaches. Adrian et al. (2011) concluded that academic stress as a significant positive predictor of self harm and indicated that students who had shown high academic stress also had high self harming scores. These findings are corroborated by Evans & Hurrell (2016) who concluded from their systematic review that school and educational environment in general have a great impact on the mental development of students. They further concluded that stress and anxiety associated with academic performance can exacerbate negative emotional development and hence, children started indulging in deliberate self harm. They also reported that this phenomenon is very stereotypical therefore more often than not goes unreported. In schools, the concept of self harm is not structurally defined and is therefore rendered practically invisible (Simm, Roen & Daiches,

2008). Also, lack of formal sources of help i-e trained professionals in this regard, tends to further snub the problem despite its prevalence (Simm, Roen & Daiches, 2010).

Bernard & Bernard (1982) had conducted a research to examine the intensity of self harm in students as well as its associated factors. Results had indicated reported threats of or rather attempting deliberate self harming behaviors by the sample. From these findings, it was gleaned that 7% of the sample disclosed practicing self harm due to academic pressure and stress whereas 75% of the sample reported the cause to be conflicts with parents and other social problems. This, therefore, further highlights the significance of family and school environment in inculcating positive emotional and academic development among children.

The independent sample t test conducted to examine the difference between boys and girls in terms of academic stress and deliberate self harm. The results had indicated that there was a small but statiscally non-significant difference between boys and girls for academic stress where girls showed a tad higher score than boys. Literature, however, has yielded many findings suggesting a significant difference between boys and girls on this domain. Misra et al (2011) had conducted a comparative study on college students and their findings revealed that girls experienced significantly higher stress in their education as compared to boys.

Furthermore, boys were found to be more significantly indulged in deliberate self harming behavior than girls. Literature, however, presents mixed evidence in this regard as some studies (Barker et al, 2008; Ross and Heath, 2002; Hawton, Saunders & O'Connor, 2012) concluded that adolescent girls reported significantly greater indulgence in physical harming and mutilation instances as compared to boys. Another research conducted by Khokher and Khan (2005) on college students in Pakistan to examine the prevalence of suicidal and self harming behaviors indicated similar findings.

The results had yielded that around 31.4% reported experiencing suicidal ideation. Although it was a non-significant difference but still female students displayed higher scores on this domain (33%) than males (29%). Gratz & Chapman (2007), however, reported contradictory results and had explained a cultural role through their findings that males revealed higher

self harming score than their girl counterparts because they are often associated with the tougher of the two sexes, hence, are expected to inhibit their emotional expressions.

The independent samples t test was further used to examine the difference in academic stress and self harming scores for private and government school students. The results revealed that students from government institutions experienced significantly higher academic stress as compared to those from private institutions. The previous literature presents somewhat reverse findings in this regard. Malik & Shujja (2013) had conducted a study on school children in Pakistan and their results revealed that students of government schools scored higher on emotional intelligence as compared to their counterparts from private institutions. This explained their experiencing lesser academic stress and lower academic performance.

The present study, furthermore, reported that self harm was more prevalent in private school students. This can be explained from earlier researches that private school students also reported higher academic scores and since literature has provided evidence that stress is more prominent in high achievers therefore private students, because of low EQ tended to succumb to self harming practices more easily.

The present study revealed quite interesting findings in terms of the frequency of deliberate self harming behaviors among boys and girls. More boys than girls had reported harming themselves physically. Among these behaviors, skin cutting, hitting, biting and scratching were the most dominant self mutilation behaviors reported by both males and females. Ross & Heath (2002) through their findings corroborated this statistics and reported that adolescents attempt self mutilation more by hitting, pinching, cutting, scratching and biting themselves.

Conclusion

The present research was conducted to examine the relationship between Academic Stress and Self Harming behavior among school children. The statistical analyses conducted for this substantiated the presence of deliberate self harming behavior among mainstream private and government schools as around a mean = 1.38 of boys (N=377) and mean=.85 of girls (N=423) reported practicing self harm.

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