

Adjustment Problems, Coping Strategies, Protective Factors, and Academic Performance of the Vulnerable Youth

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Abstract

This mixed-method research examined the relationship of adjustment problems, coping strategies, and protective factors on the academic performance of the ESGP-PA grantees enrolled at West Visayas State University, during the Academic year 2015-2016. In the qualitative phase, 12 grantees participated in the focus group discussion while 189 served as respondents in the quantitative phase. Themes and ideas were generated from the oral narratives. The pieces of information derived from the FGD were the bases in constructing the three survey instruments; namely, the Adjustment Problems Questionnaire (APQ), Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CPQ) and Protective Factors Questionnaire (PFQ). Mean, rank and standard deviation were used for descriptive statistical analysis while the *t*-test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), Pearson's *r* and multiple linear regression were employed for inferential statistical analysis. Significance level was set at .05. The qualitative results revealed that the grantees encountered various adjustment problems in the following areas: personal/self, social/interpersonal, academic and environmental. The grantees employed coping strategies in dealing with their adjustment problems. Moreover, the grantees identified their families, the school, and community to offer moral and financial support to the grantees. The quantitative results revealed that there was a very small negative correlation between adjustment problems and coping strategies, moderately small positive correlation between coping strategies and protective factors, and small positive correlation between academic performance and coping strategies. Among the identified variables, only the coping strategies, was a significant predictor of academic performance.

Keywords: academic performance, adjustment problems, coping strategies, protective factors, vulnerable youth

Adolescence represents a crucial time in the development of an individual. Most children and adolescents adapt successfully, whereas some experience adjustment problems (Thuen & Bru, 2004). Adjustment problems are faulty or inadequate adjustments or the inability to adjust to the demands of interpersonal relationships and stresses of daily living (Jacob, 2006).

Students coming from extremely deprived environments somehow make initial adjustment, but coping with the demands of college life is quite difficult. The researcher, a designated guidance counselor and homeroom/section adviser of the Expanded Students' Grant-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA) grantees who are currently in the third year level at the College of Education of the West Visayas State University Main Campus, observed that some of these grantees made it to the list of honor students while a few incurred a number of incomplete and failing grades. Some of the grantees who graduated in the school year 2015-2016 got pregnant along the way.

The following questions serve to guide the quantitative data presentation and analysis. What other adjustment problems did these vulnerable youth encounter? How did they manage and cope with these difficulties and problems? Who and what conditions in the home, school, and community helped the grantees navigate through life amidst the stress and pressures of university life? How will these factors influence their academic performance?

For the qualitative aspect of the study, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism serves as the springboard of the study and supports the framework of the chosen research methodology, and the oral history methodology. This study was also anchored on Erik Erikson's theory on eight (8) psychosocial stages and on the process model of coping established by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. Erikson's theory on eight (8) psycho-social stages helps explain adjustment problems. It is in this period that students become vulnerable. Vulnerability exists against a framework of complex social, cultural, and economic issues. Within this framework, risk and protective factors interact to define individual cases and degrees of vulnerability. Protective factors are those influences, characteristics and conditions that buffer or mitigate a person's exposure to risk (Singh, Blanchard, Hartup, & Burn, 2011).

Hence, this study intended to examine the relationship of adjustment problems, coping strategies, and protective factors on the academic performance of the ESGP-PA grantees enrolled at West Visayas State University main campus during the academic year 2015-2016. Specifically, this research aimed to ascertain the adjustment problems encountered by the grantees during their first year of stay in the university; the coping strategies employed by the grantees in order to manage the problems they encountered; and the protective factors or conditions among the grantees' home, school, and community which enabled them to circumvent their life stressors. It also delved on the the level of adjustment, coping, and support of the grantees when taken as an entire group and classified according to sex, family structure, family size, and place of residence. Significant differences among these factors as well as the significant predictors of grantees' academic performance were also determined.

The findings of this study may be of benefit to the Department of Social Welfare and Development, West Visayas State University administration, guidance counselors, teachers, ESGP-PA grantees and their parents, and other universities and researchers.

Materials and Methods

This mixed-method research had two phases: Phase 1, the Qualitative Phase and Phase 2, the Quantitative Phase.

In the qualitative phase, 12 grantees gave narratives about their adjustment problems, coping strategies and protective factors. A focus group interview guide was developed by the researcher to gather the data needed for the study. This interview guide was submitted to the members of the research committee and a pool of experts in the field of qualitative research and psychology/guidance for review.

The recorded focus group discussion was carefully transcribed into written texts. Pseudo-names were used in order to protect the identity of the informants.

The narrative analysis was used to generate themes. Open and axial coding were conducted to develop a coding framework and generate themes. For the adjustment problems, these were grouped into the four (4) main adjustment areas, namely: personal, social/interpersonal, academics and environmental which were patterned after the Problem Checklist of Polec-eo

(2013). For the coping strategies of the grantees, these were grouped into the 13 coping styles, namely: focusing on the positive side of things, focusing on solving problems, enlisting social support, exerting effort to achieve, engaging on intrinsic motivation, thinking in a goal-oriented way, seeking spiritual support, seeking professional help, seeking to belong, worrying, ignoring the problem, keeping to self, and reducing tension. These strategies were patterned after the Adolescent Coping Scale of Frydenberg and Lewis (1993). For the protective factors of the grantees, these were grouped into the three dimensions, namely: the home, school, and community patterned after the Protective Factors Scale by Loyola, Jalandoni and Robles (2012).

The respondents for the quantitative part of the study were the 189 Batch 1 (2nd year) and Batch 2 (4th year) ESGP-PA grantees enrolled at the West Visayas State University Main Campus and the College of Agriculture and Forestry during the second semester of the academic year 2015-2016.

The data were obtained through the Adjustment Problems Questionnaire (APQ), the Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ), and the Protective Factors Questionnaire (PFQ). These three instruments were constructed based on the qualitative data of the study. Three experts were selected as members of the jurors who validated the instruments. After the validation, the three instruments were pilot-tested among the ESGP-PA grantees enrolled at West Visayas State University–Pototan Campus in Pototan, Iloilo to determine their reliability.

The Adjustment Problems Questionnaire (APQ) is composed of 66 items which are divided into four (4) main categories of adjustment problems; namely, (1) personal, (2) social/interpersonal, (3) academics, and (4) environmental. The reliability alpha coefficient of the instrument was .952.

The Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ) is comprised of 60 items categorized into the 13 conceptual areas of coping. The reliability alpha coefficient of the instrument was .970.

The Protective Factors Questionnaire (PFQ) contains items on the characteristics and conditions in the home, school and community environment that can help them cope with the adjustment problems and improve their situation as grantees. The reliability alpha coefficient of the instrument was .930.

The academic performance of the grantees was based on the computed mean of their grade point average (GPA) for two semesters during the first year of college course work.

Mean, rank and standard deviation were used for descriptive statistical analysis, while the *t*-test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), Pearson's *r* and multiple linear regression were employed for statistical analysis. Significance level was set at .05.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative results revealed that the grantees encountered various adjustment problems in the following areas: personal/self, social/interpersonal, academic and environmental. The sub-themes that emerged for the personal area were self and family. This claim is supported by the findings of Brougham, Zail, Mendoza and Miller (2009). Likewise, Redhwan, Sami, Karim, Chan and Zaleha (2009) noted that the most important causes of stress reported by students were financial and family problems.

The grantees expressed that their relationship with other people was also a source of adjustment problems. Social adjustment to a college environment is one facet of student adjustment and serves as one of the most critical activities emerging adults undertake that predicts success in college and beyond (Baker & Siryk, 1989). As defined by Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994), social adjustment is the process by which students become integrated into the campus community, build support networks, and negotiate the new freedoms afforded by college life.

Academic problem was defined as the difficulties students encountered that included reading ability, attendance, study skills, and other academic related issues the participants identified (Polec-eo, 2013).

In academics, the grantees had to deal with study skills and habits, curricular concerns, concern with teachers and other concerns were included. Similarly, the grantees had to deal with adjusting to a new environment i.e. bad roads and peace and security problems of the locality.

Ayele (2011) found out that the students are challenged by adjustment problems from four basic dimensions. One of these adjustment problem dimensions is environmental in nature. In line with this, Jye and Zawawi (2012) explored the associated factors related to causes of stress and coping strategies among post graduate studies. One of the three major sources of stress that the students identified was social/environmental related stress.

The grantees employed coping strategies/mechanisms in dealing with their adjustment problems such as seeking spiritual support, focusing on the positive side of things, thinking in a goal-oriented way, engaging on intrinsic motivation, exerting effort to achieve, reducing tension, seeking to belong, focusing on solving problems, enlisting social support, keeping to self, seeking professional help, and ignoring the problem and worrying.

Moreover, the grantees identified their families- parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents, the school- teachers, classmates, friends, administration and staff, and community-barangay captain, officials, tanod and DSWD Municipality Link, church officials, high school batchmates, friends and old people who offer moral and financial support to the grantees. Loyola et al. (2012) found out that resilient at risk youth obtain their protective factors in the home, school, and the community.

It was found out that there were no significant differences in the adjustment problems, coping strategies, protective factors and academic performance of the grantees classified according to the identified demographic variable. However, Table 1 shows that significant differences existed in the coping strategies of the ESGP-PA grantees when they were classified according to place of residence ($t=2.157, p=0.032$). This means that the place of residence contributes to the students' use of coping strategies.

Table 1

t-test Results on the Significant Difference in Adjustment Problems, Coping Strategies, Protective Factors, and Academic Performance of ESGP-PA Grantees Classified According to Place of Residence

Category	<i>M</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	sig
Adjustment problems				
Urban	2.61	0.107	187	.915
Rural	2.61			
Coping strategies	3.99	2.157*	187	.032
Urban	3.87			
Rural				
Protective factors				
Urban	3.57	-0.08	187	.936
Rural	3.58			
Academic performance				
Urban	2.10	0.655	187	.513
Rural	2.07			

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 2 shows that significant relationship, specifically very small negative correlation ($r = -0.190$, $p = .009$), existed between adjustment problems and coping strategies. This means that as more coping strategies were employed by the grantees, they experienced fewer number of adjustment problems.

Abdullah, Elias, and Uli (2010) explored the relationship between coping and university adjustment among Malaysian public university undergraduates. The results of the study showed that there was a positive significant relationship between coping and their over-all adjustment.

The computed .0361 correlation coefficient value was converted to percentage (3.61%) in order to determine the coefficient of determination. This percentage implies that the 3.61% variation of grantees' scores in coping strategies was accounted for the grantees' scores in adjustment problems. This observation notes that the contribution of the scores in adjustment problems to the variation of scores in coping strategies was very small. Furthermore, scores in adjustment problems may not be the only factor that contributed to the difference in the scores between or among the grantees' scores in coping strategies, but there were other factors as well that were not considered by this study. These could have possibly been the other factors that may have caused the variation of scores in coping strategies.

Moreover, moderately small positive correlation ($r = 0.371$, $p = .000$) existed between coping strategies and protective factors. This means that as the number of coping strategies employed by the grantees increased, the number of protective factors present in their life also increased.

The computed r^2 or correlation coefficient value of .1376 was converted to percentage (13.76%) in order to determine the coefficient of determination. This percentage implies that the 13.76% variation of grantees' scores in protective factors was accounted for their scores in coping strategies. This observation shows that the contribution of the scores in protective factors to the variation of scores in coping strategies was small. Furthermore, scores in coping strategies may not be the only factor that contributed to the difference in the scores between or among the grantees' scores in protective factors, but there were other factors as well that were not considered in this study. These could have possibly been the other factors that may have caused variation of scores in protective factors.

Furthermore, small positive correlation ($r = 0.218$, $p = .003$) also existed between academic performance and coping strategies. This means that as the number of coping strategies employed by the grantees increased, their academic performance also increased.

The computed r^2 value of .0475 was converted to percentage (4.75%) in order to determine the coefficient of determination. This percentage implies that the 4.75% variation of grantees' scores in academic performance was accounted for their scores in coping strategies. This observation notes that the contribution of the scores in academic performance to the variation of scores in coping strategies was very small. Furthermore, scores in coping strategies may not be the only factor that contributed to the difference in the scores between or among the grantees' scores in academic performance, but there were other factors as well that were not considered in this study. These could have possibly been the other factors that caused the variation of scores in academic performance.

These findings are supported by the study of Ozoji, Ugodulunwa and Bahago (2010) who found out that there were significant correlations between coping strategy and achievement of students in college.

Table 2

Pearson's r Results on the Significant Relationship in Adjustment Problems, Coping Strategies, Protective Factors, and Academic Performance of ESGP-PA Grantees

	<i>N</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Adjustment problems			
Coping strategies	189	-0.190*	.009
Protective factors	189	-0.114	.119
Academic performance	189	0.114	.118
Coping strategies			
Protective factors	189	0.371**	.000
Academic performance	189	0.218*	.003
Protective factors			
Academic performance	189	-0.025	.737

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Among the identified variables, only coping strategies was a significant predictor of academic performance. Table 3 shows that among all the variables tested, only coping strategies were found as a significant predictor ($F = -3.161$, $p = .002$) of academic performance of ESGP-PA grantees. This means that if a student has better coping strategies, he will also have a better performance in academics.

These findings are supported by the study of Abdullah, Elias, and Uli (2010) who found out that academic achievement was significantly predicted by the students' coping strategies. Likewise, Hess and Copeland (2001, in Ontario Education Research Exchange [OERE], 2012) found out that certain coping strategies can predict high school dropout.

Generally, the results revealed that coping strategies have predictive ability and value. Coping plays a significant role in assisting the grantees attain a very satisfactory academic standing. Coping is said to play an important role in the adjustment process (Rojanah Kahar *et al.*, 2001, as cited in Abdullah *et al.*, 2010), Abdullah *et al.*, 2010, Aspin and Taylor (1992), Leong, Bonz and Zachar (1997). Past studies demonstrated that students' coping efforts significantly predicted the academic achievement in terms of grade-point average (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000, as cited in Abdullah, 2010). Leong *et al.* (2007), Kuncharin and Mohamad (2014), Hampel and Petermann (2016), Brougham *et al.* (2009), Redhwan *et al.* (2009) and Kumar and Chew (2011) found out that students' differential coping styles could impact their adjustment to college.

Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression Results on the Significant Predictors for Academic Performance of ESGP-PA Grantees

	<i>T</i>	sig
Academic performance		
Sex	-0.308	.758
Family structure	0.172	.864
Family size	1.821	.070
Place of residence	-1.057	.292
Adjustment problems	1.064	.289
Coping strategies	-3.161*	.002
Protective factors	0.916	.361

Note: * $p < .05$.

Conclusions

The ESGP-PA grantees come from poor families. They were given opportunity to earn a degree in a state university through the scholarship program of the government. They experienced a natural phenomenon of being uprooted from a familiar home environment to a new setting. A number of these students have to reside temporarily in the city or a university town far from the comforts of home. They naturally have to contend with a lot of adjustment problems. These include personal, social/interpersonal, academics and environmental concerns. As expected, the issues related to self and family are predominant.

The grantees further try to cope with the identified personal and environmental demands by employing more healthy adjustment mechanisms although a few utilize maladaptive way of coping. Yet, these help them cope temporarily with the demands of a new environment/situation that they are in, such that they are able to make the necessary adjustments. Moreover, the presence of conditions and characteristics in the grantees' home, school, and community serves as their protective factor and such presence enables them to perform well academically.

Specifically, the West Visayas State University as partner institution of the Department of Social Welfare and Development in the implementation of the ESGP-PA scholarship program has done its best to cater to the needs of the student-grantees. The Office of Student Affairs (OSA) is tasked to directly oversee, monitor, and address the concerns, issues, and challenges faced by the student-grantees. The orientation program for freshmen students spearheaded by OSA was found to be a significant factor in the smooth adjustment of the student-grantees. The presence of inspiring and loving teachers, guidance counselors, school administrators, and staff proved beneficial to the student-grantees in their transition process.

The student-grantees, therefore, utilize their internal resources in the form of diverse coping strategies to deal with the adjustment problems. They too are blessed with a very supportive, caring and nurturing family, school and community environment.

Coping strategies has a predictive ability and value. The higher the level of coping, the better is the academic performance. A student who is able to make a good adjustment in terms of coping performs well academically. Thus, coping plays a substantial role in helping the grantees attain a very satisfactory academic standing.

Recommendations

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) may utilize the results of this study in designing programs and activities for the student-grantees and their families. Strengthening the bond between the grantees and their families will prove beneficial to the success of the student's educational outcomes and the program as a whole.

The partner colleges and universities of the ESGPA-PA scholarship program may utilize the findings of this study as benchmark for the development of a tailored-fit college survival program for their own set of grantees. The awareness of teachers about the academic problems faced by the student-grantees of these colleges and university may be increased so that they may become fully aware of the significant role they play in the adjustment of the students and their educational outcomes. Accordingly, there is a need to create a more conducive and nurturing environment for the grantees.

Moreover, intervention programs to assist students especially the vulnerable youth has to be geared towards the development of coping strategies. As well, the identified protective factors that helped students make the necessary adjustments like the home, school and community may be strengthened.

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