

Role of Psychological Capital Interventions in reducing Perceived Academic Stress amongst University Students

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Abstract

The study focused to examine the role, Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Interventions (PCI) play in reducing perceived academic stress amongst university students. Other objectives of the study were to check the level and prevalence of these variables and impact of different demographics on study variables in our culture. A group comprising of 8 participants, studying in different public/private universities of Islamabad/ Rawalpindi area - scoring high on perceived academic stress scale was selected. In backdrop of theoretical background and the literature review, it was hypothesized that Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Interventions (PCI) would facilitate in reducing the stress symptoms. The study was comparative, wherein; academic stress of students was assessed by applying Perceptions of Academic Stress Scale (PAS) before (pre) and after (post) the administration of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Interventions (PCI). Format of the study was 4 group therapy sessions; 75-90 minutes session per week. A positive change in the mental health of the group was witnessed regarding presenting problems and management of behavior all the way through these interventions. Post intervention results validated the hypothesis and established considerable diminution in stress symptoms after Psychological Capital Interventions (PCI) administration.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Group Therapy, Psychological Capital Interventions, Stress

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Introduction

Achieving and accomplishment of higher education is an essential landmark in individual's life. However, the transition to college life could be stressful for the students' and their beliefs and viewpoints with regards to their destiny during the course of this transition which can become a source of stress (Alipio, 2020). In Sohail's

(2013) view; study suggests that higher levels of stress are found to be associated with poor academic performance.

Nazir et al. (2018) are of the view that academic stress has been found to be one of the most frequent emotional or mental states that students come across in the process of their studies. Major focus on education has resulted in an enhanced understanding of stress, which is more common in university enrolled students – where they are more exposed to higher levels of academic stressors. Findings of research by Khan and Shamama-Tus-Sabah (2020), have also validated the notion that perceived stress has a noteworthy adverse effect on positive mental health and positive effect on academic performance.

Stress - specially, academic stress - has proved to have an adverse impact on university students' physical as well as psychological health and academic performance (Robotham, 2008). In this context; Sabri et al. (2014) have defined academic stress as state of psychological

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tension as a result of academic stressors including exams, home assignments, grades and future education. It is known to be one of the noteworthy contributory causes for a drop in academic grades and performance and also has the propensity to impact physical health (Pendergast, 2017).

Earlier studies and researches indicate that academic stress can have an impact on students' mental health which in turn, is likely to lead to a number of psychological issues including anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and even suicide (Ang & Huan, 2006; Malak et al., 2021). Whereas, those having higher psychological well-being are more likely to do better with high concentration, energy and absorption (Yildirim et al., 2018). Similarly, Martínez et al. (2021) are of the opinion, that psychological capital facilitates optimal growth in individuals for the realization of academic achievement.

In Martínez and others (2019) view, Psychological Capital (PsyCap) is the study as well as the use of an individual's strengths and psychological capabilities with positive orientation. It can be developed and handled efficiently for the enhancement of academic performance and results. It augments the overall well-being of not only students but teachers also. Previous studies also link PsyCap to superior academic engagement as well as enhanced emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of students in a number of educational settings around the globe (Gautam et al., 2019).

According to Shah et al. (2021), research has demonstrated that psychological capital can be developed with training. Rashid et al. (2021) developed a positive psychology intervention aimed at enhancing PsyCap in university students. The intervention consisted of four weekly group sessions, which resulted in significant improvements in PsyCap and mental health.

In this perspective, Alipur et al. (2013) have pointed out that the Psychological Capital Interventions (PCI) model has been tested in a number of educational and service

institutions; where it has been found to increase psychological capital and learning incentives, as well as in tandem minimizes negative attitudes toward work as well as affects organizational performance. Similarly, it has been demonstrated that people's mental health can be improved by this model.

As per researchers' best knowledge, no such researches have been conducted in Pakistan, which could investigate the effects of psychological capital interventions on stress level of university students, so this study was helpful in determining innovative outcomes in psychological research field.

Method

Research Design

The research was a comparative study in which pre and post test design was used.

Sample

The study sample comprised of 8 students ($n = 8$) of age range of 18- 25 years ($M=21.5$, $SD=2.45$), studying in different public/private universities of Islamabad/Rawalpindi districts. Since, as per experts in the field of Group Therapy the group size of 5-10 is permissible, with 7 being ideal (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Similarly, 8 is referred to as an optimal number for group members (Weis, 2003; Yalom, 1985). The participants were chosen by purposive sampling. Those scoring high on academic stress scale were administered PCI in group augmented settings to mitigate stress. Participants having any psychological disorder as reported in the Demographic Form, or who scored less on academic stress scale were excluded from the study.

Measure

A structured questionnaire 'Perceptions of Academic Stress Scale' (PAS), developed by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), consisting of 18 statements was used. Higher scores on this measure indicate elevated levels of perceived academic stress.

Procedure

In the present study, PCI model used by Liang et al. (2018) was adopted. Four group

sessions of Psychological Capital Interventions (PCI) based on the protocols proposed by Luthans et al. (2006) and Rashid et al. (2021) were administered.

The Psychological Capital Intervention (PCI) model is based on four parts. In the first part; plans are prepared to build up hope by planning goals as well as ways to achieve them. In the second part, acceptance of limitations in order to strengthen belief and accumulate experience, thereby, developing optimism. Thirdly, build up self-efficacy by inspiring participants to experience success and finally in the fourth part, benefit from effective resources and interpersonal

relations for resilience development (Liang et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Participants of the study were personally contacted and informed about the study. After obtaining informed consent, required demographic information was taken on a demographic sheet. Then scales used in the study were given to the participants; while assuring confidentiality of the information provided by them, so that they could give the required information honestly. At the end of the procedure, the participants were warmly thanked.

Results

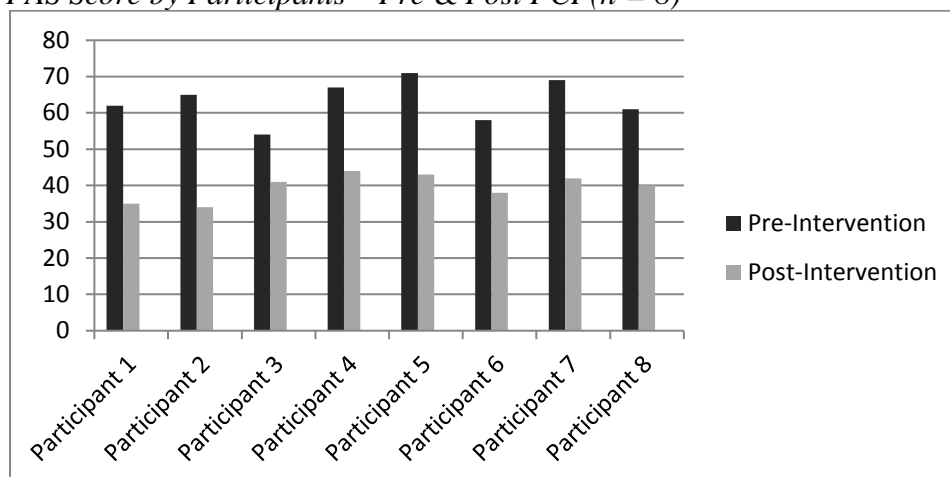
Table 1

Main Demographic Variables of Young Adults (n = 8)

Demographic Variables	Participants	Demographic Variables	Participants
Age (years)		Birth Order	
18-20	2	Only Child	1
20-22	3	First Born	1
22-24	2	Middle Born	3
24 and above	1	Last Born	3
Type of Family		Family Income	
Nuclear	3	< 50,000	1
Joint	4	50,000 – 75,000	1
Single Parent	0	75,000 – 100,000	3
Orphan	1	100,000 – 125,000	2
		125,000 – 150,000	0
		> 150,000	1

The mean age of the participants was 21.5 years with the minimum age being 18 and maximum being 25. A large number of the participants fall in the age ranges of 18 – 24 years. Likewise, participants hailing from 'Nuclear & Joint' family structure were greater ($n = 07$). Whereas, in Birth Order

category; majority ($n = 06$) of the participants fall in the 'Middle' birth order & Last Child. A large number of participants (05) were from 'Income Group' 75,000 – 100,000 and 100, 000 – 125, 000 (Middle Class) (Table 1).

Figure 1*PAS Score by Participants – Pre & Post PCI (n = 8)*

Note: The assessments were made in two settings – Pre & Post Psychological Capital Interventions.

Marked divergence in the scores of groups has been witnessed. A significant decrease in the levels of perceived academic stress was seen in the responses of the students after the application of Psychological Capital Interventions (PCI), implying that Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Interventions (PCI) proved to be effective

in alleviating perceived academic stress amongst students through Group Counseling, thus answering the Research Questions that “Would Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Interventions (PCI) be effective in alleviating academic stress amongst students through Group Counseling”? (Figure 1).

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics (n = 8)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE (M)</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE (M)</i>
Pre Test	63.37	5.73	2.02	Post_Test	39.62	3.66	1.29

Table 3*Paired Sample t test (n = 8)*

Paired Sample t Test (n = 8)									
	Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE (M)</i>	95% Confidence					
				Interval of the					
				Difference					
			Lower	Upper					
Pre Test –Post Test	23.75	5.72	2.02	18.96	28.53	11.73	7	.000	4.15

The paired samples *t*-test confirmed the hypothesis that the participants' level of perceived academic stress decreases as a result of PsyCap Interventions from pre-PsyCap interventions ($M = 63.37$, $SD =$

5.73) to post PsyCap interventions ($M = 39.62$, $SD = 3.66$; $t = 11.73$, $p < .000$, $d = 4.15$) (Table 2 and 3).

Discussion

Psychological Capital is one of the constructs with strong evidence base, which has evolved in the recent past as mediators

of stress (Luthans et al., 2015). Researches in the field of PsyCap put forth the notion that positive psychological capital adds to better and higher performance amid

improved productivity, customer service and employee retention. In this context; key components of positive psychological capital are recognized as self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience (Luthans et al., 2004). In a study by Tian et al. (2020), it was concluded that PsyCap mediated the relationship between occupational stress and fatigue amongst Chinese physicians.

Self-efficacy - one of the four components of Psychological Capital is identified as having sufficient poise to accomplish an uphill task, while facing innumerable obstacles in the way. In a number of researches and studies, it has been demonstrated that individuals possessing high self-efficacy are likely to develop less occupational stress since they consider that they possess the capacity as well as have the resources to confront these stressors. Whereas, those having low self-efficacy believe that their endeavors are futile to face difficult situations; and as a result, experience negative symptoms of stress (Shah et al., 2021).

Hope - another dimension of the Psychological Capital – has been defined by Snyder (2000) as the motivational state, as a result of dealings between an individual's goals, agency and pathways. Simmons and Nelson (2001), in their study on nurses; found a positive association linking hope and eustress. Similarly, Passmore et al. (2020), in their study on moderating aspect of hope established that it lessens the effects of traumatic stress on burnout.

In continuation with the dimensions of PsyCap, Bonanno (2004) has argued that resilience is a state-like characteristic similar to other dimensions of PsyCap, meaning it can be developed. It has been defined as a positive capacity to bounce back from failure, conflict, uncertainty, adversity or even increased responsibility, positive change, or progress. The effectiveness of resilience in overcoming stress has also been supported by Fredrickson et al. (2003), who found out in their study that individuals who are

resilient, displayed rapid emotional and psychological resurgence from the effects of stress. Zou et al. (2016), in a study on nurses found negative correlation of resilience with burnout and stress.

Optimism is the fourth constituent of PsyCap. Research has established that those who are optimistic, have a propensity to be successful than pessimists. Optimists anticipate good things to occur in everyday life, as compared to the pessimists; who expects adverse things. Optimism helps an individual to reflect in terms of improving rather agreeing to status quo. Consequently, optimism being a construct of Psychological Capital, is linked by positive events including motivation and affirmative emotions. Realistic optimism; in Peterson and Luthans (2003) view, is a state-like construct which can be changed. Likewise, Jaworski et al. (2020), in a study on nurses established that optimism helped the nurses diminish nursing care rationing.

Based on the above framework, current study endeavored to establish the role of Psychological Capital Interventions (PCI) in reducing perceived academic stress amongst university students.

Conclusion

Results of the present study afforded support for the efficacy of PCI in alleviating perceived academic stress amongst university students. The findings validated the probable significance of unequivocally targeting the lack of positive resources in stress. Future research employing more scrupulous control conditions in larger samples is needed.

Limitations & Recommendations

The application of Psychological Capital Interventions (PCI) may be generalized into other domains like it could also be used in mitigating the effects of stress or occupational stress. However, certain caveats have also been observed during the process of the current study. Firstly, the efficacy of the PCI was evaluated on a limited/small sample, which hints inadequate power to identify statistically significant effects. To overcome this

limitation, larger trials may be conducted to replicate and determine the stability of the effect. Similarly, in few of the cases, it was observed that group sessions did not cater for the individual needs of the participants and some of the participants had to be given individual sessions.

Implications

This study may be considered as few of the initial to investigate the effects of PCI on perceived academic stress amongst university students in Pakistan. The findings facilitated in concluding that the interventions improved the levels of PsyCap, which in-turn, lead to consequent decrease in stress symptoms. The present findings have number of implications for clinical and public health scholars in suggesting viable targets for the development of:

- Education campaigns and health promotion and maintaining individual health.
- Treatment plans for academic related stress.

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Contribution of Authors

Wakqas Khalid Ally: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original draft
Kiran Bashir Ahmad: Methodology, Writing- Reviewing & Editing, Supervision
Zainab Hussain Bhutto: Methodology, Writing – Reviewing & Editing

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by authors.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [W.K.A.] upon the reasonable request.

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