THE BIG FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS AS PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BAYELSA STATE

By

Dennis, Emmanuel Akpoebi
&

Prof. O. C. Nwankwo
Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling,
Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract
The study investigated big five personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness) as predictors of academic stress among university students in Bayelsa State. Two research questions were answered and two null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The design of the study is correlational. The population of the study was 9,504 first year university students (regular). The sample size for the study was 670 university students (343 males and 327 females). Simple random sampling and proportionate stratified random sampling methods were used to obtain the sample. Two instruments were used for data collection: self-designed Academic Stress Scale (ASS), and the Big Five Inventory (BFI-44) by John and Srivastava (1999) which was adapted for the study. The face and content validities were determined for the instruments. The reliability of each instrument was determined with the Cronbach alpha technique. ASS had a coefficient of .75; and BFI-44, .77, with sections namely: neuroticism, α = .80; extraversion, α =.78; openness to experience, α = .76; conscientiousness, α = .74; agreeableness, α = .79. The research questions were answered by means of multiple regression while the hypotheses were analysed with t-test and ANOVA associated with multiple regression. The findings showed the big five personality traits combined, significantly predicted academic stress among university students It was found that personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness except openness to experience independently and significantly predicted academic stress among university students. The researchers recommended that university administrators should use students' personality information as guide in providing help services for students to cope with academic stress.

Keywords: Academic stress, personality, traits, predictors.

Introduction

Stress is a component of our daily lives. Mental Health America (2017) noted that everyone experiences stress and it is a normal part of life. By implication, stress is a normal part of life of a student. A moderate level of stress is beneficial and can stimulate a student to study and learn. However, when stress levels are very high, or when stress becomes prolonged and chronic, it "significantly decreases one's ability to function normally over the course of an extended time and has significant implications for one's psychological and physical health" (Phan, 2013, p.1). The point of emphasis is that negative stress, or distress, adversely affects one health and psychological well-being.

The term 'stress' was borrowed from the field of physics and coined by Hans Selye in 1936 to describe "the non-

specific response of the body to any demand for change" (American Institute of Stress, 2017, para. 1) However, Selye's definition was not generally accepted. Gibson, John and James (as cited in Popoola and Ilugbo, 2010, p.174) defined stress as "a person's adaptive response to a stimulus that places excessive psychological and physical demands on a person". Notable in this definition is that stress is an individual's response to a stimulus, which is a stressor, i.e. something that generates stress. Thus, stress results from the excessive demand placed on the individual by a stressor which exceeds the person's adaptive power or resources.

In tertiary institutions of learning, especially universities, students are exposed to a lot of workload with a time limit, test and end-of-semester examinations. This makes them prone to experiencing stress. In fact high level of stress among university students has been reported by researchers (DaSilva, 2016). School life can be very stressful for students, coupled with new experiences and challenges they encounter. Students strive to adapt to their new educational and social environment. They face a lot of pressures at school. This could be to achieve high grades, meet parental academic targets for them, complete schoolwork, homework, graduate on time, not to drop out of school, among others. As noted above, these pressures could be family related, teacher or school-related, subject-related, examination/test-related, social-related, environment-related, and interpersonal and intrapersonal related. Specifically, academic workload at school, difficult or unclear homework assignments and project, staying up late to study, fear of failure, high expectations by classmates, teachers, and parents, personal health problems, financial challenges, sense of missing home, tragic events in family, competitive spirit among students, and perceived injustice in assessment are some in a long list of factors that may lead to significant stress in students.

Academic stress according to Wilks (2008, p.107) "is a product of a combination of academic related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual". The academic-related demands mentioned by Wilks may include those activities and situation enumerated by Sarita (2015), and others centred around teaching and learning, interpersonal relationship with teachers, class-and schoolmates, intrapersonal issues, social pressures within the school environment, pressures from parents, family members and significant others who want the student to meet certain performance expectations as well as group-related activities. Academic stress can be defined as psychological and physical tension generated by academic-related situations, events or activities.

Academic stress can adversely affect students' performance and health. Stress generally affects all the systems of the body such as musculoskeletal system, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, nervous, male and female reproductive systems. (American Psychological Association, APA, 2017). It contributes to health problems such as high blood pressure, insomnia, headache/migraine, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and memory problems (Fodor, 2012 & Mayo Clinic Staff, 2017). It has been noted that "under academic stress the performance gets hindered and students can take wrong decisions under the influence of stress" (Sarita 2015, p. 387).

The researchers presumed that personality traits may have association with academic stress. In this work, attention is centred on the Big Five personality traits, namely neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. They are discussed below.

Personality is defined in different ways by different people (Eke & Onyekuru, 2013). According to Lahey, (2004, p. 462), personality "is the sum total of all the ways of acting, thinking and feeling that are typical for that person and make that person different from other individuals". It is indeed the totality of a person's traits and behaviour that set him or her apart from others. Personality study has been hindered for some time due to lack of systematic taxonomy of constructs to represent individual differences (Cavalcanti & Pimentel, 2016). This development changed as personality researchers began to agree on some main dimensions of human personality. Gaining general acceptance among psychologists is the big five personality factors of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness and agreeableness by McCrae and Costa Jr. (2003). In this study, attention is centred on this big five personality traits, the extent they predict academic stress of university students.

Neuroticism corresponds to negative emotions such as nervousness, moodiness, anger, tenseness, fear, sadness, guilt, frustration, jealousy, and envy. It depicts low level of emotional stability. A person who scores high in neuroticism has high tendency to experience negative emotions, exhibit poor adjustment and experience negative effects such as anxiety, insecurity, and hostility (Obikoya & Ezems-Amadi, 2014). Beheshti (2015) investigated the relationship between personality trait of neuroticism and occupational stress among registered and fulltime nurses of hospitals affiliated to Gonadad University of Medical Sciences, Iran. A coefficient of 0.004 was obtained. However, the coefficient was not statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance. Schmidt, Sieverding, Scheiter and Obergfell **(**2013**)** carried out a study that explored neuroticism, its prediction of perceived stress of students at the end of the term.The finding showed that neuroticism was not a significant predictor of perceived stress at the end of the term, and accounted for only 8.7% of explained variance. In another study, Ozutku and Altindis (2011) investigated the extent of relationship between neuroticism and work stress of health professionals in state hospitals in Turkey. A low positive relationship between the two variables was established ($r = 0.162$). Further, regression analysis showed that neuroticism significantly predicted work stress ($\beta = 0.172$, $p < 0.01$).Ahadi and Narimani (2010) studied the relationship between the personality trait of neuroticism and educational stress. The relationship between the two variables was positive ($r = 0.18$). The researchers found that neuroticism significantly predicted educational stress ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.013$). Amr, El Gilany and El-Hawary (2008) investigated the extent personality trait of neuroticism predicted stress of medical students of Mansoura College of Medicine, Egypt. The result shows that neuroticism significantly predicts stress of students ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.05$).

Extraversion represents the tendency to be social, assertive, excitable, and full of energy. People who are high in extraversion are active, social, talkative, confident, and are at ease among people or large group of people. Abdullah, Omar and Panatik (2006, p.78) wrote that this personality trait "refers to the level of comfortability with relationships to others. It represents personality characteristics as active, assertive, outgoing, social, gregarious, energetic, surgency and ambitious". Extraverted people tend to possess a lot of social skills and friends owing to their active, social and outgoing nature. In his study, Beheshti (2015) found that extraversion was not statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance. In

another study by Ozutku and Altindis (2011), theresult showed that extraversion was not a significant predictor of job stress ($\beta = -0.063$, $p > 0.01$).Ahadi and Narimani (2010) also explored the relationship between personality trait of extraversion and educational stress among college students. The researchers found that extraversion was a negative significant predictor of educational stress ($\beta = -0.15$, $p= 0.009$). Amr et al. (2008) studied the extent personality trait of extraversion predicted medical students' stresst. The result shows that extraversion is a significant predictor of severe stress among students ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.05$).

Openness to experience refers to the degree an individual is curious, imaginative, unconventional, original, inventive, and artistic and open to new ideas. Teng (as cited in Iruloh and Ukaegbu, 2015) noted that the most prominent aspects of openness personality are originality and creativity. It is characterized by flexible and inclusive cognition (Antinori, Carter, & Smillie, 2017). Vujičić and Randelović's (2017) study was centred on the extent personality traits predict stress of final year secondary school students. The personality trait of openness to experience has a low but statistically significant relationship with stress ($\beta = .05$, $p < 0.05$). In a similar study by Beheshti (2015) on the relationship between openness to experience and occupational stress, a positive relationship was found. The coefficient of 0.02 was not statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance. In their study, Ozutku and Altindis (2011)finding showed that openness to experience was not a significant predictor of work stress ($\beta = 0.006$, $p > 0.01$).

Conscientiousness involves the tendency to be orderly, dutiful, efficient, self-disciplined, achievement-oriented, and reliable. Beheshti (2014, p.133) refers to it as "the tendency to be consistent, determined and thorough, and act according to plan". Individuals high in conscientiousness are "methodic, responsible, persistent and highly organized, always in the pursuit of excellence" (Chu, Ma, Li, & Han, 2015, p.11). In a study by Beheshti (2015) on the relationship between personality trait of conscientiousness and occupational stress, a negative relationship was found. A coefficient of -0.08 was obtained but it was not statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance. In Ozutku and Altindis' (2011) study of relationship between personality trait of conscientiousness and work stress of health professional in Turkey, a negative relationship between the two variables was found. The result shows that conscientiousness does not significantly predict work stress ($\beta = -0.048$, $p > 0.01$). In another related study, Ahadi and Narimani (2010) investigated the relationship between conscientiousness and educational stress among college students. The two variables had a negative relationship ($r = -0.10$). The finding of the study shows that conscientiousness is a significant predictor of educational stress ($\beta = 0.40$, $p = 0.001$).

Agreeableness, on the other hand, refers to tendency to be trusting, warm or altruistic, modest, compliant, sympathetic, considerate, and cooperative. Citing works by Barrick and Mount, and Digma, researchers Abdullah et al. (2016, p.178) wrote that the trait of agreeableness represents "personality characteristics as cooperative, softhearted, tolerant, forgiving, altruism, emotionally supportive, courteous, good nurtured, flexible, and self-sacrifice". Beheshti's (2015) studied the relationship between the personality trait of agreeableness and job stress. The result shows that agreeableness is a significant predictor of occupational stress ($\beta = -0.260$, $p < 0.05$). Ozutku and Altindis' (2011) study of

relationship between agreeableness and work stress of health professionals in Turkey showed a negative relationship. It was found that the trait of agreeableness was not a significant predictor of work stress ($\beta = 0.034$, $p > 0.01$).

Ozutku and Altindis (2011) explored whether the big five personality traits (Neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness agreeableness and openness to experience) jointly predict work stress of health professionals in Turkey. The researchers found that the big five personality traits significantly predicted work stress ($F = 3.166$, $p = 0.008$).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1 To what extent do personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness jointly predict academic stress of university students?
2 To what extent do personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness independently predict academic stress of university students?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses, which were tested at 0.05 level of significance, were formulated by the researcher to guide the study.

3. The personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness combined, do not significantly predict academic stress among university students.
4. The personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness independently, do not significantly predict academic stress among university students.

Methodology

The research design of the study was correlational. The population of the study consisted of 9,504 first year (regular) students of the 2017/2018 academic session, in different faculties of the Niger Delta University, Federal University Otuoke, and the University of Africa in Bayelsa State. The populations of first year students (male and female) of the Niger Delta University, Federal University Otuoke, and the University of Africa were 6,509, 2,610, and 385 respectively. A sample of 670 university students was used for the study. The sample size of 670 students was drawn by simple random and proportionate stratified random sampling techniques. Two instruments were used for data collection. They are the self-designed Academic Stress Scale (ASS), and the Big Five Inventory (BFI-44) by John and Srivastava (1999).The Academic Stress Scale (ASS) was a univariate, non-cognitive instrument constructed by the researchers to assess academic stress of university students. ASS contained 21 items on a 4-point Likert response format of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD). The Big Five Inventory (BFI-44), which was adapted, was used to measure the personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. It was a 44-item self-report scale on 4-point modified Likert response format of strongly agree = 4 points, agree = 3 points, disagree = 2 points, and strongly disagree = 1 point for positively keyed items. The reverse applied for negatively keyed items. Face and content validities of the instruments were determined by experts in Measurement and Evaluation. The reliability of each instrument for the study was determined with the Cronbach alpha

technique. A Cronbach Alpha value of .75 was obtained for the Academic Stress Scale (ASS).The Big Five Inventory (BFI-44) coefficient alpha value was .77, with sections namely: neuroticism, α = .80; extraversion, α =.78; openness to experience, α = .76; conscientiousness, α = .74; agreeableness, α = .79. The research questions were answered by means of multiple regression while the hypotheses were analyzed with t-test and ANOVA associated with multiple regression. Statistical decision was made at 0.05 level of significance.

Research Question One

To what extent do personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness jointly predict academic stress of university students?

Table 1a: Model summary of multiple regression on the joint prediction of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness on academic stress

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.409[a]	.168	.161	8.19879

a. Predictors: (Constant), agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness

Dependent variable: Academic stress

Table 1a reveals that the regression coefficient is .409while the R^2 and the adjusted R^2 are .168 and .161 respectively. The value of R^2 shows that personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness jointly predict academic stress of university students by 16.8%.

Hypothesis One

The personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness combined, do not significantly predict academic stress among university students.

Table 1b ANOVA associated with multiple regression on the joint prediction of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness on academic stress

Model		**Sum of squares**	**Df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**Sig.**
1	Regression	8990.455	5	1798.091	26.749	.000[b]
	Residual	44634.144	664	67.220		
	Total	53624.599	669			

b. Predictors: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness

Dependent variable: Academic stress

Table 1b shows that the calculated F value of 26.749 at 5 and 664 degrees of freedom is significant at .000. Thus, the null hypothesis one is rejected. Therefore the personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness combined, do significantly predict academic stress among university students.

Research Question Two

To what extent do personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness independently predict academic stress of university students?

Hypothesis Two

The personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness independently, do not significantly predict academic stress among university students.

Table 2: t-test associated with multiple regression on the independent prediction of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness on academic stress

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	34.273	3.028		11.320	.000	28.328	40.217
	Neuroticism	.369	.082	.167	4.497	.000	.208	.530
	Extraversion	.299-	.079	.141	3.802	.000	.145	.454
	Openness	.090	.057	.057	1.571	.117	-.022	.202
	Conscientiousness	.463	.070	.244	6.656	.000	.326	.599
	Agreeableness	-.244	.069	-.126	-3.538	.000	-.380	-.109

a. Predictors: (Constant), agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness

Dependent variable: Academic stress

Table 2 reveals that the standardized coefficient (Beta) for neuroticism and academic stresss of university students is .167. The beta value shows that neuroticism positively predicts students' academic stress by2.8%. This means that 97.2% of variations in academic stress of university students cannot be explained by reference to neurotic personality but to other factors. For the personality traits of extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness, the beta values are .141, .057, .244, and -.126 respectively. The beta values revealed thatextraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness predict university students' academic stress by 2%, 0.3%, 6%, and 1.3% respectively.

Also in table 2 above, neuroticism with t-test value of 4.497 was significant at .000 with 0.05 chosen alpha. This means that neuroticism significantly predicts academic stress among university students. For extraversion and academic stress of university students, the t-test value of 3.802 was significant at .000 with 0.05 chosen alpha. This means that extraversion significantly predict academic stress among university students. Also, the personality trait openness to experience, with t-test value of 1.571 was not significant at .117 with 0.05 chosen alpha. This implies that openness to experience does not significantly predict academic stress among university students. For conscientiousness and academic stress of university students, the t-test value of 6.656 was significant at .000 with 0.05 chosen alpha This means that conscientiousness significantly predicts academic stress among university students. For agreeableness and academic stress of university students, the t-test value of -3.538 was significant at .000 with 0.05 chosen alpha. This implies that the personality trait of agreeableness significantly predicts academic stress among university students. Since four out of five personality traits investigated significantly predicted academic stress, the null hypothesis two was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, the researchers also found that personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness jointly predicted academic stress among university students by 16.8%. This means that we can only explain or account for 16.8% of variations in academic stress scores of university students with reference to personality traits taken jointly. Also, personality traits jointly had a moderate positive relationship with academic stress (R =.409 in table 1a). This means that most students who had high scores on personality traits also earned high scores on academic stress, and vice versa. The hypothesis revealed that personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness combined, significantly predicted academic stress among university students. This agrees with that of Ozutku and Altindis (2011) who found that the big five personality traits significantly predicted work stress ($F = 3.166$, $p = 0.008$).

In this study, the researchers found that neuroticism predicted academic stress among university students by 2.8%. This shows that neuroticism makes a very low contribution to the prediction of academic, with 97.2% of variations in academic stress not accounted for by reference to neuroticism. This is however surprising to the researchers because of neuroticism's association with negative emotionality (John & Srivastava, 1999). However, neuroticism had a very low positive relationship with academic stress (Beta value =.167 in table 2). This implies that students who scored high in neuroticism also scored high in academic stress. This

finding agrees with the finding of Schmidt et al. (2013). The hypothesis showed that neuroticism significantly predicted academic stress among university students. This finding supports those of Ozutku and Altindis (2011), Ahadi and Narimani (2010), and Amr et al. (2008). However, contrary findings reported by Beheshti (2015) and Schmidt et al. (2013) show that neuroticism is not a significant predictor of stress. The larger sample size in the present study and difference in the nature of sample might have influenced the directions of the results.

In this study, it was found that extraversion predicted academic stress among university students by 2%. This shows that we can explain 2% of variations in academic stress by reference to extraversion personality while the remaining 98% cannot be explained or is attributed to other factors. Also, extraversion had a very weak positive relationship with academic stress. The related hypothesis showed that extraversion significantly predicted academic stress among university students. This was in line with all the reviewed studies (Ozutku & Altindis, 2011; Ahadi and Narimani, 2010; Amr et al., 2008) except Beheshti, 2015 who found that extraversion was not a significant predictor of job stress. This could be attributed to either difference in nature of sample or sample size.

The researchers also found that openness to experience predicted academic stress among university students by 0.3%. This shows that openness to experience has a minute and least contribution to academic stress in the model. There was no relationship found between openness to experience and academic stress. The hypothesis showed that openness to experience was not a significant predictor of academic stress among university students. This finding is in tandem with those of Beheshti, (2015) and Ozutku & Altindis (2011). However, a finding discordant with this finding has been reported by Vujičić and Randelović (2017). The dissimilar finding could possibly be attributed to difference in nature of sample in the previous study. Vujičić and Randjelović used secondary school students who could be less experience or knowledgeable than university students.

In this study, the researchers found out that the personality trait of conscientiousness predicted academic stress among university students by 6%. This means that conscientiousness contributes 6% to the prediction of academic stress of students while the remaining 94% is attributed to other factors. However, this was the highest percentage of prediction of students' academic stress in the model. This is not surprising because high conscientious students are goal-oriented, which can influence their stress experience. There was a low positive relationship between the two variables. This means that academic stress of students depends, to an extent, on personality trait of conscientiousness. The hypothesis showed that conscientiousness significantly predicted academic stress among university students. This supports finding by Ahadi and Narimani (2010). The present study's finding contradicted that of Beheshti (2015) and Ozutku and Altindis (2011) who found that conscientiousness was not a significant predictor of stress. This could be as a result difference in locale of the studies, as the previous ones are foreign.

The researchers also found that agreeableness predicted academic stress among university students by 1.3%. This shows that agreeableness makes a very low contribution to academic stress of students. Besides, there was a very low negative relationship between the two variables. This means that students who

scored high on academic stress had low scores in agreeableness, and vice versa. The related hypothesis showed that agreeableness significantly predicted academic stress among university students. This supported the finding of Beheshti (2015) who found that agreeableness significantly predicted stress. However, the finding by Ozutku and Altindis (2011) was contrary. The smaller sample size used in the previous study and difference in study instrument might have influenced the variance in results.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that academic stress among undergraduate students in Bayelsa State has been identified, among others, to be significantly predicted by personality traits of students. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that students with neurotic, extraverted, conscientious, and agreeable personality should seek help, especially from counsellors, to deal with academic stress. Besides, university administrators should use students' personality information as guide in providing help services for students to cope with academic stress.

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