

## Parents/teachers and self-expectations as sources of academic stress

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### ***Abstract***

This study investigated expectations as sources of academic stress specifically among college freshmen. A total of 597 college freshmen enrolled in a state college in the Philippines during the First Semester of School Year 2011-2012 were asked to respond to the Academic Expectations Stress Inventory (AESI). AESI is a nine-item inventory with two domains: expectations of parents/teachers and expectations of self. This study specifically dealt on the responses to expectations as sources of academic stress and whether male and female college freshmen differed with reference to perceived parents/teachers' expectations, self-expectations, and academic expectations in general. Statistical analyses revealed that the means of responses of the college freshmen to the items in the AESI ranged from 3.091 to 3.746 with 1 as the minimum and 5 as the maximum response in every item. Also, male and female college freshmen significantly differed in perceived parents/teachers' expectations, self-expectations, and academic expectations in general.

***Keywords:*** academic stress; college freshmen; expectations; gender differences; state college

## Parents/teachers and self-expectations as sources of academic stress

### 1. Introduction

Pursuing college education is the dream of everyone. This is because a college degree is often associated with success later in life. However, attending college is not easy especially when there are so many possible hindrances associated with it. Most vulnerable to such hindrances are college freshmen because the first year in college requires many transitions like adjustments that must be successfully passed. Aside from actual adjustments being experienced by college freshmen, other factors may hinder their bid to get a college degree and expectations either by others (parents/teachers) or by oneself that is academically-relevant and causes stress can be one of them.

The investigation of expectations as source of academic stress among college freshmen is a meaningful undertaking especially when stress is recognized to affect students' well-being and success in college. As a matter of fact, several studies have already documented the effects of stress on students (e.g. Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Hussain, Kumar, & Husain, 2008; Masih & Gulrez, 2006; Shaikh et al., 2004; Sulaiman, Hassan, Sopian, & Abdullah, 2009). Emotional disabilities, aggressive behavior, shyness, social phobia, and often lack interest in otherwise enjoyable activities are the most common signs of stress (Hussain et al., 2008).

Moreover, basing on empirical evidence, Ang and Huan (2006b) identified that "academic stress and in particular, academic expectations, is a factor contributing to suicidal ideation in adolescents" (p. 134) although said authors later found that adolescent depression "partially mediate the relationship between academic stress and suicidal ideation in a four-step sequential process, via the use of multiple regression" (p. 141).

In the end, as Li and Yen (1998) believed, "screening for high risk students and launching programs and activity for counseling the adolescents or parents is essential" (p. 240). Conducting a study that focuses on expectations as sources of academic stress among college freshmen can be a good start. The results generated from this study aside from contributing to the pool of knowledge regarding expectations as source of academic stress can also serve as bases for instituting interventions where they are needed the most. Instituting interventions is necessary especially when it is aimed at helping college freshmen make the most out of college education.

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1 *Defining stress*

What exactly is stress? "Stress is a lifestyle crisis" (Masih & Gulrez, 2006, p. 97) and can be "any factor, acting internally or externally, which makes adaptation to environment difficult and which induces increased effort on the part of the individual to maintain a state of equilibrium between himself and herself and the external environment" (Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000, p. 2-3). Moreover, "stress is a peculiar problem in that no one can consistently predict the amount or kind of stress that can turn an otherwise normal, positive human situation into one involving an unpredictable, irrational response" (Neil, 1994, p. 2). Specifically, "in eastern philosophies, stress is considered to be an absence of inner peace" (Seaward, 2008, p. 4). Given such descriptions, stress is indeed a critical concern.

#### 2.2 *Academic stress*

Everyone is bombarded with everyday stresses. It affects every aspect of life. Going to school is included because of the pressures associated with it. Generally speaking, "in school, adolescents often see themselves as

being evaluated in terms of their academic performance and the pressure to excel is an important measure of their success” (Ang & Huan, 2006b, p. 134). Academic stress adversely affects overall adjustment of students (Hussain et al., 2008) and one form of academic stress that merits attention is the one arising from expectations.

### *2.3 Expectations as sources of academic stress*

“In an Asian context, academic stress arising from adolescents’ self-expectations and expectations of others (e.g. parents and teachers) are particularly salient” (Ang & Huan, 2006b, p. 134). Such claim by Ang and Huan in 2006 was parallel with the findings of the study conducted by Goyette and Yu (1997) in the United States of America. The researchers found that “parental expectations play an important role in explaining the Asian-white gap for all ethnic groups and stand out as the only explanatory factor accounting for Southeast Asian students’ relatively high expectations” (p. 16). Also, Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi (1998) found in their research that “Asian American adolescents’ academic motivation and future goals were strongly affected by their special feelings toward their parent” (p. 141).

Additionally, Goyette and Yu (1998) found in another study that “Asians are indeed more likely than whites to enroll in college and to major in fields that have high financial payoffs, and these racial differences are attributable to both educational expectation and occupational expectation” (p. 29). Specifically among Filipinos, there is no concept of the other in the other person and the other is also one’s self (de Leon, 2007), therefore, the perceived expectations of others are synonymous to one’s own expectations. Indeed, expectations among Asians are important whether they are set by oneself or by significant others.

### *2.4 Synthesis of reviewed literature and difference to current study*

The reviewed literature provided the necessary information for the better understanding of the subject matter which is on academic stress with reference to expectations. This included the description of stress in general down to expectations as sources of academic stress. All of the reviewed literature have recognized the reality of stress particularly, academic stress with reference to expectations. Despite the fact that expectations as sources of academic stress were recognized by previous authors, there is no particular literature on college freshmen and possible sex difference with specific reference to expectations. Also, all literature reviewed were foreign except for de Leon (2007) which made the current investigation more relevant specifically to Filipinos. The current investigation, thus, is expected to add to available literature on the impact of expectations among Filipinos if ever there are already. This study can provide better understanding of the impact local culture which cannot be readily explained using foreign frameworks. Trying to investigate a universal phenomenon using indigenous analysis, that is from the perspective of the local culture, had already been done by other authors (e.g. Calaguas & Dizon, 2011; Putri, Prawitasari, Hakim, Yuniarti, & Kim, 2012).

## **3. Conceptual framework**

Education is considered very important in Asian cultures and this includes the Filipino culture where everyone is expected to do well in school. And as Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003) believed, “there are trade-offs that seem inherent in certain societal patterns: cultural strategies that have both costs and benefits” (p. 412). Manifestation of this trade-off is that “people are sometimes willing to sacrifice immediate happiness for the sake of achieving other goals that are valued in their culture” (Diener et al., 2003, p. 412). Relating such concept to the value of education among Filipinos mean that education is taken seriously to the extent of sacrificing immediate happiness. Sacrifices made for education’s sake can be associated with the experience of stress.

From this perspective, it can be said that Filipino students whether male or female also experiences a lot of academic stresses and one form of academic stress is one arising from expectations. This is because adolescents’ self-expectations together with the expectations of others like that of parents and teachers are particularly salient in the Asian context (Ang & Huan, 2006b). Expectations of parents impacting academic goals were already observed in earlier studies. Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi as early as 1998 found that academic motivations and

goals were affected by feelings toward parents while Goyette and Yu (1997) discovered that parental expectations can be linked to high expectations among Asians.

On the other hand, studies conducted regarding stress in general highlighting gender presents opposing views. In the study conducted by Misra and Castillo in 2004, for example, revealed “that men and women differ in their perceptions and reactions to stress” (p. 146) whereas Jogaratnam and Buchanan (2004) found differences between male and female students to be significant when it came to the time pressure dimension of stress. Relatively, Sulaiman et al. (2009) found that “female students have different stress compared to the male students. This may be because female students tend to be more emotional and sensitive toward what is happening in their surrounding” (p. 183). Conversely, Watson (2002) found no significant difference in the perceived stress levels and coping styles between male and female junior and senior students of Nursing and Social Work programs.

### *3.1 Objectives of the study*

Generally, this study aimed to investigate expectations as sources of academic stress among college freshmen. Specifically, this study was guided by the following objectives:

- to determine the responses of college freshmen to expectations as source of academic stress;
- to determine if there is a significant difference in expectations as source of academic stress with reference to perceived parents/teachers’ expectations between male and female college freshmen;
- to determine if there is a significant difference in expectations as source of academic stress with reference to self-expectations between male and female college freshmen; and
- to determine if there is a significant difference in academic expectations in general as source of stress between male and female college freshmen.

### *3.2 Hypotheses*

This study tested these hypotheses:

- There is a significant difference in expectations as source of academic stress with reference to perceived parents/teachers’ expectations between male and female college freshmen.
- There is a significant difference in expectations as source of academic stress with reference to self-expectations between male and female college freshmen.
- There is a significant difference in academic expectations in general as source of stress between male and female college freshmen.

## **4. Methodology**

### *4.1 Respondents*

There were 597 respondents in this study. These respondents were all college freshmen enrolled in a state college in the Philippines during the First Semester of School Year 2011-2012. Three hundred forty-five of the respondents were females and 252 were males. Their mean age was 16.302 with a standard deviation of 0.766. All of the respondents were Filipinos.

### *4.2 Measure*

The Academic Expectations Stress Inventory (AESI) developed and validated by Ang and Huan in 2006 was

used in this study. The AESI is a self-report scale to be completed by students. AESI attempts to measure perceived stress of students as it relates to academic work/concerns. Sources of stress could come from two main domains: expectations of parents/teachers and expectations of self. The AESI consists of nine items, and two scales (Ang & Huan, 2006a).

### 4.3 Procedure

The AESI was administered between the second and third week of the First Semester of School Year 2011-2012 among the 597 college freshmen. This undertaking was carried out because of the perceived need to have an insight on expectations as source of academic stress among college freshmen.

### 4.4 Statistical analyses

To describe the responses of the college freshmen, means and standard deviations were computed. On the other hand, to test the hypotheses of the study, independent samples t-test was used. The independent samples t-test is used when one wants to examine the mean difference between two exclusive or independent groups (Hyman & Sierra, 2010). In this study, these independent groups were the male and female college freshmen who responded to the AESI.

## 5. Results

The responses to expectations as sources of academic stress among college freshmen using means and standard deviations is presented in Table 1. On the other hand, perceived parents/teachers' expectations as source of academic stress between male and female college freshmen is presented in Table 2 while self-expectations as source of academic stress between male and female college freshmen is presented in Table 3 and academic expectations in general as source of stress between male and female college freshmen is presented in Table 4.

Table 1 presents the responses of college freshmen with reference to expectations reflected in the items of the AESI using means and standard deviations. As can be seen in the Table, the means of the responses of college freshmen ranged from 3.091 to 3.746 and the standard deviations are all above 1. The first three items with the highest means were observed in items pertaining to the feeling of stress when one was aware that parents were disappointed with exam grades, the feeling that one's parents were disappointed when one does poorly in school, and the feeling that one's teachers were disappointed when one does poorly in school. It must be noted though that all of the means were above 3 which is the mean for responses in an item considering that the minimum response is 1 while the maximum is 5.

**Table 1**

*Responses of college freshmen to expectations as source of academic stress (N=597)*

Responses to Expectations Reflected in the AESI	Min	Max	M	SD
1. I feel stressed when I do not live up to my own standards.	1	5	3.144	1.049
2. When I fail to live up to my own expectations, I feel I am not good enough.	1	5	3.097	1.099
3. I usually cannot sleep and worry when I cannot meet the goals I set for myself.	1	5	3.241	1.227
4. I blame myself when I cannot live up to my parents' expectations of me.	1	5	3.114	1.264
5. I feel I have disappointed my teacher when I do badly in school.	1	5	3.410	1.298
6. I feel I have disappointed my parents when I do poorly in school.	1	5	3.561	1.309
7. I feel stressed when I know my parents are disappointed in my exam grades.	1	5	3.745	1.146
8. When I do not do as well as I could have in an examination or test, I feel stressed.	1	5	3.487	1.052
9. I feel lousy (miserable, awful, down) when I cannot live up to my teacher's expectations.	1	5	3.091	1.114

Table 2 presents perceived parents/teachers' expectations as source of academic stress between male and female college freshmen. As seen in the Table, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the male and female college freshmen. With reference to the mean scores, female college freshmen scored higher. It must be noted that the mean scores represents the mean of the total scores of the male and female college

freshmen in the parents/teachers' expectations domain of the AESI.

**Table 2**

*Perceived parents/teachers' expectations as source of academic stress between different genders*

Items	N	M	SD	T	Df	Significance
Male	252	16.202	4.411	3.428	595	.001
Female	345	17.446	4.357			

Table 3 presents self-expectations as source of academic stress between male and female college freshmen. As seen in the Table, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the male and female college freshmen. With reference to the mean scores, female college freshmen scored higher. It must be noted that the mean scores represents the mean of the total scores of the male and female college freshmen in the self-expectations domain of the AESI.

**Table 3**

*Self-expectations as source of academic stress between male and female college freshmen*

Items	N	M	SD	T	Df	Significance
Male	252	12.492	2.971	3.282	595	.001
Female	345	13.319	3.090			

Table 4 presents the academic expectations in general as source of stress between male and female college freshmen. As seen in the Table, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the male and female college freshmen. With reference to the mean scores, female college freshmen scored higher. It must be noted that the mean scores represents the mean of the total scores of the male and female college freshmen in the AESI.

**Table 4**

*Academic expectations in general as source of stress between male and female college freshmen*

Items	N	M	SD	T	Df	Significance
Male	252	28.694	6.640	3.764	595	.001
Female	345	30.765	6.639			

## 6. Discussion

Generally, stress affect people's well-being and expectations either by others (e.g. parents/teachers) or by one's self as sources of academic stress were a reality among Asian students. Based on the literature review conducted, academic-related goals among Asians were important and their achievement was coupled with so many stresses especially when it was associated with expectations. As Ang and Huan (2006b) observed, parents/teachers' expectations and self-expectations as sources of academic stress were salient among Asian adolescents. In relation, the study of Goyette and Yu (1997) noted that "parental expectations play an important role in explaining the Asian-white gap for all ethnic groups and stand out as the only explanatory factor accounting for Southeast Asian students' relatively high expectations" (p. 16) among their study's respondents in the United States of America.

In addition, Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi (1998) found that "Asian American adolescents' academic motivation and future goals were strongly affected by their special feelings toward their parent" (p. 141). This was because "during socialization, children acquire an attitude, belief, or behavioral regulation in the socializing environment and progressively transform into a personal value, goal and or organization" (Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi, 1998, p. 122). Among Filipinos specifically, there was no concept of the other in the other person and the other was also one's self (de Leon, 2007) and the expectations of others were synonymous to one's own expectations. Expectations among Asians were perceived to be important whether they were set by oneself or by a significant other.

With reference to the results of this study, it could be assumed that expectations were indeed sources of academic stress among college freshmen and this was consistent with the reviewed literature. This was manifested by the fact that the mean of responses ranged from 3.091 to 3.746 which was above the mean of a response in an item with 1 as the minimum and 5 as the maximum. Therefore, expectations whether set by oneself or by others were sources of academic stress among college freshmen.

On the other hand, although the reviewed literature provided explanation on gender differences on stress, existing literature focused on gender differences with reference to stress in general. No reviewed literature focused on gender differences with respect to expectations of parents/teacher and self. This was the main contribution of this study. Worth-noting was the fact that significant differences were established and female college freshmen respondents consistently scored higher. The results of this study only suggest that indeed male and female college freshmen differ in academic stress arising from expectations. The significant differences found between male and female college freshmen could be explained by several assumptions about gender differences. First and foremost were assumed role differences.

A “role is a set of expected behaviors and values associated with them” (Wood, 2009) and “role differences are assumed to be responsible for the differing behavioral tendencies that women and men manifest when confronted by equivalent stimuli in typical research settings” (Eagly, 1987). As observed in most societies, “men more often than women are seen as leaders and given opportunities to lead. Further, the work that men do is more highly regarded by the society than the work assigned to women. Society teaches women to accept the role of supporting, caring for and responding to others” (Wood, 2009).

Roles are internalized and “for social specifications of behaviors to be effective, individuals must internalize them. At a very young age, girls understand that they are supposed to be nice, put others’ needs ahead of their own, and be nurturing, whereas boys understand that they are supposed to take command and assert themselves” (Wood, 2009). These claims explain why the female college freshmen of this study were more affected by expectations that served as sources of academic stress because as emphasized, they were supposed to put others’ needs ahead of their own and responding to perceived expectations of others could be one of them.

Also, a social constructionist approach view gender acquisition as a self-fulfilling prophecy. “Because people think boys and girls are supposed to be different, they treat them differently and give them different opportunities for development. This differential treatment promotes certain behaviors and self-images that recreate the preconceived cultural stereotypes about gender” (Coltrane, 1998, p. 114). Furthermore, “the process repeats itself over and over in an unending spiral across the generations, so that although gender stereotypes are being constantly re-created and modified, they seem natural and impervious to change” (Coltrane, 1998, p. 114).

The idea that boys and girls were different could explain the significant differences found in this study between the male and female college freshmen regarding expectations as sources of academic stress. Being treated differently was parallel to responding differently even when exposed to the same stimulus. Although it must be noted the male college freshmen respondents were also affected by expectations, but not as much as female college freshmen respondents.

### *6.1 Limitations and future directions*

This study focused on expectations as sources of academic stress only and it did not investigate on the correlation between academic stress and well-being or even success in getting a college degree. However, as suggested by Seaward (2008), stress refers to the absence of inner peace and peace is associated with well-being (Diener et al., 2003). Following this perspective, it can be assumed that stress can affect a person’s well-being. As Ng, Diener, Aurora, and Harter (2008) claimed, stress can decrease life satisfaction and happiness which is called subjective components of quality the of life and therefore affects the lives of college freshmen and their bid in getting a college degree.

Additionally, this study was only limited to 597 college freshmen respondents that came from a state college. And since the study was limited to those who were enrolled during the First Semester of School Year 2011-2012 in a state college in Pampanga (Philippines), the results of this study cannot be generalized to other colleges or universities either in the Philippines or abroad.

Despite of the many limitations of this study, the results of this study proved that expectations as sources of academic stress were a reality and actually being experienced by college freshmen. In line with this, it is suggested that the study be replicated in other locations, provinces and regions in the Philippines or abroad, using the same instrument (AESI) used in the study with greater number of respondents and with greater number of schools to see if results from this study will hold true. Results from other studies to be conducted can be used to compare and contrast with the results of this study. The use of other instruments that measures academic expectations stress, if ever there are, is also recommended. Relationship between expectations as source of academic stress and well-being can also be another meaningful undertaking.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of this study only proved that expectations were indeed sources of academic stress among college freshmen and due attention should be given. Also, there were significant differences in expectations as sources of academic stress with reference to perceived parents/teachers' expectations, self-expectations, and academic expectations in general between male and female college freshmen. Therefore, these findings should be recognized when organizing intervention programs aimed at combating or even just minimizing the negative effects of academic stress arising from expectations.

It must be remembered though that "stress can stem from both positive and negative conditions, and can have positive effects as well" (Ng et al., 2008, p. 14). If expectations as sources of academic stress could be considered as positive stress that encourage students to do well academically, then it could be considered as one of the stepping stones to have a college degree and be successful later in life. As presumed by Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi (1998) those "who have a strong tendency towards connectedness to significant others, would more easily internalize educational values of their parents, and as a result, they would attain academic excellence" (p. 137-138). But if expectations as sources of academic stress could be considered as negative stress which affect the well-being of students, then it could be considered as an obstacle to having a college degree and success later in life.

### 7.1 Implications to practice

In better understanding academic stress among Asians, specifically among Filipinos, parents/teachers' expectations and self-expectations should be taken into account. As proven in this study, parents/teachers' expectations and self-expectations were indeed sources of academic stress. Considering the fact that said expectations were causing stress, attention to such should be given and be investigated in order to develop proper interventions. Thorough understanding of a concern is an important requirement in the design and implementation of a sound intervention. Academic stress as this study had proven was a multidimensional concern and expectations were one of its many dimensions. Therefore, stress interventions should not only be focused and designed to combat the overt sources of academic stress but also on covert sources like that of expectations.

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