

MANIFESTATIONS AND COPING WITH EXAMINATION ANXIETY BY STUDENTS; A
CASE OF TECHNICAL TRAINING INSTITUTES, NAIROBI, KENYA

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Abstract

Examination anxiety is widespread among students with varying signs and consequences. This cross sectional study was undertaken to determine signs of examination anxiety and coping strategies of students in technical training institutes in Nairobi, Kenya. Majority of respondents (45%) were aged over 30 years; males (62.5%); married (56.2%), with a feeling that they had too much academic work (75%). Students felt that examinations were dangerous and scaring; threatening and confusing. Others got stuck and gave up; felt hopeless; lacked confidence; felt ill prepared and were worried due to high parental expectation. Majority (90%) took time to settle while 71.3% had problems to concentrate on examination. More candidates got more anxious during practical skill tests. Candidates (80%) revealed that they were nervous at the start of examination but relaxed on finding familiar questions. A number (85%) agreed that they performed well in class work but scored low marks in examination. Students' feelings were the same, about examination, irrespective of gender. Both gender got more anxious when multiple choices were set. More females than males preferred written tests. Anxiety reactions included scratching various parts of the body, restlessness, fumbling with clothes or sweating and chewing pens (males) and nails (females). Long papers and afternoon examinations elicited more stress behaviours. Students coped by proper preparation, working hard, revision and relaxation before the examination. Ill prepared students copied summarized notes to refer to secretly. Teachers should encourage, guide, assure and motivate students without harassment to reduce anxiety.

Keywords: Students, Signs, Coping, Examination, Anxiety, Kenya

Introduction

Anxiety has been defined as a painful uneasiness of mind concerning an impending or anticipated danger or illness, marked by apprehension, uneasiness and foreboding from which the individual cannot escape (Garmezy, *et al.*, 1972; Jersild and Holmes, 1935). Anxiety and Depression are common mental health problems among student population

(Kumaraswamy, 2013). At any given time if the students' wellbeing is randomly examined, one can find that 1 in every 10 students; will have emotional conflicts severe enough to merit professional help (Farnsworth, 1970). It has been noted that 25% of student population report symptoms of depression (Beck and Young 1978). Gage and Berliner (1984) reported that anxiety is both a trait (biological) and state (examination) in which students suffer from feelings of apprehension and tension that are to some extent focussed and localized. Corey (1982) discussed three types of anxiety including reality, neurotic and moral anxiety. Deffenbacher (1978) cited in Klausmeier (1985), says that examination anxiety increases as achieving high in examination becomes of greater importance. Sarason *et al.*, (1960) cited in Gage and Berliner, (1984) found out that high anxiety students do not perform as well as low anxiety students at certain tasks. Tyron (1980) cited in Klausmeier (1985) reported that other anxiety provoking factors include missing classes, delaying the taking of examinations and ill preparation for examination.

When an individual experiences fear and anxiety, stimulant hormones are released into his blood stream, causing one to be poised for action. Garmezy *et al.*, (1972) reported that milder forms of anxiety are expressed as depression, mood swings, and restlessness, lack of sleep, quick anger and extraordinary sensitivity to what others say or do. According to WebMD Medical Reference Reviewed (Goldberg, on February 27, 2016), depending on the type of anxiety disorder, the general symptoms include: feelings of panic, fear, and uneasiness, problems sleeping, cold or sweaty hands or feet, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, unable to remain still and calm, dry mouth, numbness or tingling in the hands or feet, nausea, muscle tension and dizziness. Tyron, 1980 cited in Klausmeier, (1985) reported that elimination of examination anxiety should be along teaching students more efficient study habits and being given more time to prepare for their examination. This study was undertaken to determine signs of examination anxiety and coping strategies of students in technical training institutes in Nairobi, Kenya.

Need for the Study

Anxiety and Depression are common mental health problems among student population (Kumaraswamy, 2013).

At any given time if the students' wellbeing is randomly examined, one can find that 1 in every 10 students; will have emotional conflicts severe enough to merit professional help (Farnsworth, 1970).

Student represents the society's investment for future. Their mental health and wellbeing are important not only in its own right but also as a factor contributing to the larger society's well being (Kumaraswamy, 2013).

According to Banerjee (2001), every year about 25,000 students in the age group of 18 to 20 years commit suicide during the examination month (i.e. March to June) in India.

Objectives:

- 1) To determine feelings and reactions of students to examinations
- 2) To establish signs of examination anxiety during examination
- 3) To explore coping mechanisms and possible solutions to examination anxiety

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research was a cross sectional design that was both descriptive and exploratory. The study was conducted on final year students in four technical training institutes with a total population of 303 students. Quantitative methods of data collection were employed.

Population and Sampling design

The target population consisted of final year students studying engineering, business education, institutional management and computer studies. The students were selected by stratified random sampling, considering gender and course. Twenty six percent (26%) of the students were drawn, 20 each from each institution, giving a sample size of 80 students.

Data collection methods

Quantitative data was collected using semi structured closed ended questionnaires after pre-testing. The questionnaire had four parts consisting of student background, behavior and feelings during examination and general information about examination. Observation schedule was used to record anonymous reaction of students during a real examination situation from the beginning to end. Behaviors observed included restlessness, fidgeting, looking left and right, eyes glued into space, yawning, chewing including pen, and frequent touching of different body parts among others.

Data analysis, presentation and ethics

Analysis of quantitative data was achieved by entering data in excel and analyzing using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 20.0). Data was presented by frequencies and percentages. Ethics was adhered to by acquiring interviewee consent and assurance of non disclosure of identity.

RESULTS

Student background information

Most of the respondents (62.5%) were males leaving 37.5% females. Majority (45%) were aged over 30 years while 28.8% were between 25 and 30 years. Only 8.7% aged below 20 years. Marital status indicated that 56.2% of the respondents were married while 41.2% were single with equal proportion of 1.3% each divorced or separated (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	50	62.5
Female	30	37.5
Total	80	100
Age		
Below 20	7	8.7
20-25	14	17.5
25-30	23	28.8
Over 30	36	45.0
Total	80	100
Marital status		
Married	45	56.2
Single	33	41.2
Divorced	1	1.3
Separated	1	1.3
Total	80	100

Three quarters (75%) of the respondents had too much academic work while 16.3% were moderately loaded with only 8.7% reporting adequate workload (Table 2).

Table 2: Academic workload of respondents

Work load	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Too much	60	75.0
Moderate	13	16.2
Adequate	7	8.8
Total	80	100

Feelings, thoughts and reaction of candidates during examination

Combining strongly agree and agree (Table 2) revealed that examinations were dangerous and scaring (35.3%); some candidates were threatened (42%); got confused (42%); got stuck and gave up (35%); felt hopeless (20%); lacked confidence (32.3%); felt ill prepared (52%) worried from high parent expectation (46%) and got upset by examination (40%).

Table 2: Students’ thoughts and reactions during examination

Statements about examinations	SA		A		UD		D		SD	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Tests are dangerous and scaring	1	1.3	27	34	3	4	33	41	16	20
I get confused during an examination	10	13	23	29	7	9	34	43	6	8
I get stuck during examination	2	3	14	18	8	10	28	35	28	35
I simply give up during examination	3	4	8	10	8	10	28	35	33	41
I feel hopeless during examination	7	9	9	11	3	4	31	39	30	38
Examination threatens me	5	6	29	36	11	14	20	25	15	19
I lack confidence in taking examination	1	1.3	25	31	4	5	36	45	14	18
I often feel ill prepared during examination	6	8	35	44	3	4	23	29	13	16
My parents’ high expectations worry me during examination	9	11	28	35	5	6	24	30	14	18
I get upset during examination	4	5	28	35	5	6	24	30	14	18

Examination elicited different feelings and reaction among students (Table 3). Majority 90% took time to settle while 71.3% had problems to concentrate on examination.

Furthermore 80% of the students felt uneasy and restless while 95% exhibited self confidence in their ability to do well. Examination upset 71.3% and it worried 77.5% of the candidates.

Table 3: The general feeling of students during examination

Statement about examination	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
I take time to settle for examination	72	90	8	10	80	100
I have a problem with concentration in an examination	57	72	23	29	80	100
I feel uneasy and restlessness during examination	64	80	16	20	80	100
I have no self confidence in ability to sit for examination	76	95	4	5	80	100
I get upset by examination	57	72	23	29	80	100
I get worried during examination	62	78	18	23	80	100

A number of statements soliciting feelings based on examination had a variety of responses (Table 4). Combining agree and strongly agree on responses related to anxiety, 50% of the candidates were more anxious during practical skill tests. A large number (50%) were scared because evaluation is not done frequently due to lack of time.

Table 4: General statements on examinations

Statements on examinations	SA		A		UD		D		SD	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Written tests do not reflect student's progress	29	36	35	44	3	4	7	9	6	8
I get more anxious during practical skill examinations	7	9	33	41	2	3	25	31	13	16
Evaluation is not done frequently; this makes me scared during examinations	9	11	39	49	5	6	20	25	7	9
I am nervous at the beginning of exam but relax on seeing familiar question	22	28	44	55	3	4	7	9	4	5
Learning would be	9	11	16	20	6	8	22	28	27	34

enjoyable without examinations										
When examination is approaching, I develop fear	3	4	42	53	4	5	23	29	8	10
Area of interest is unimportant so long I pass examination	3	4	20	25	11	14	25	31	21	26
It does not matter if one copies exam so long as they know they will pass	4	5	10	13	3	4	23	29	40	50
I find myself less prepared for exam more than others	20	25	37	46	5	6	16	20	2	3
I do quite well during learning periods but score low marks in exam	23	29	45	56	1	1	8	10	3	4

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; UD = Undecided; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

Candidates (80%) revealed that they were nervous at the start of examination but relaxed on finding familiar questions. A further 59% reported developing fear when the examinations were approaching; making them to focus on passing the test even if they had no interest. A large number (85%) agreed that they performed well in class work but scored low marks in examination.

Research (Table 5) showed that students' feelings were the same, about examination, irrespective of gender. The feeling of discouragement dominated among females (62%) than males (54%). Females were more confused (50%) and felt embarrassed (39%) compared to males (42%) and (28%) respectively.

Table 5: Students' reaction during examination when they get anxious

Students' reactions	Male (n=50)				Female (n=28)			
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Scared	17	34	33	66	9	32	19	68
Embarrassed	14	28	36	72	11	39	17	61
Helpless	6	12	44	88	2	7	30	91
Confused	21	42	29	58	14	50	14	50
Annoyed	9	18	41	82	4	14	24	86
Discouraged	31	62	19	38	15	54	13	46

Nature of tests that cause anxiety and preferences by candidates

Majority of respondents, both males and females, got more anxious when multiple choices were set (84.9%). More males (34%) than females (21.4%) feared essay questions (Table 6).

Table 6: Questions that elicited more anxiety in students

Question type	Male		Female	
	n	%	n	%
Filling in blank spaces	6	12	4	14
Multiple choice	21	42	12	43
Matching items	2	4	2	7
True/False items	3	6	4	14
Essays	17	34	6	22
Others	1	2	0	0
Total	50	100	28	100

Most female respondents (42.8%) than males (34%) preferred written tests. Take home assignments were popular among males (20%) compared to females (3.6%) as shown (Table 7).

Table 7: Examination preferred by candidates

Examination preferred	Male		Female	
	n	%	n	%
Written examination	17	34	12	43
Project work	10	20	4	14
Practical work	8	16	8	29
Oral examination	2	4	1	4
Take home assignment	10	20	1	4
Group work	2	4	1	4
Others	1	2	1	4
Total	50	100	28	100

Observation of student’s reaction during examinations

The candidates were observed for natural reactions during examination while they were not aware. Some respondents exhibited multiple reactions. Most students (23.6%) were scratching various parts of the body, followed by restlessness (20%), then fumbling with

clothes or sweating (10%). It was noted that while men chewed pens, females chewed their nails and these accounted for only 4.8% (Table 8).

A Table 8: Observation of students' signs of anxiety during examination

Behaviour observed	n	%
Restlessness	90	20
Fidgeting with hands and fingers	38	8.4
Staring at the ceiling or roof	34	7.6
Fumbling with clothes/Sweating	45	10
Keeping watch on the invigilator	25	5.6
Chewing the pen and/or finger nails	22	4.9
Twisting hair, ear or lips	18	4
Scratching various parts of the body	106	23.6
Serious facial expression/frowning	32	7
Others	40	8.9
Total	450	100

The longer the paper, the more were reactions including; sighing, frequent shifting on seat, clearing voice often, shaking legs constantly, wiping face, rubbing and holding chin (especially male students), and breaking knuckles. Afternoon examinations elicited more stressful behavior.

Coping of students with examination anxiety

The study sought to find out how students coped when they developed fear for examination. They reported the following; proper preparation, working hard and thorough revision in advance before the examination; positive thinking and being optimistic to build self confidence by telling oneself that I can make it since others have done so; going to the room ten minutes before examination and trying to relax to combat fear; praying for courage and confidence; coping notes for reference without being found out; adopting general talk outside the subject being examined; undertaking group discussion focused on possible questions using past examination papers; breathing in and out deeply for 2 to 3 minutes before the start of examination; answering questions one knew first; avoiding to look at other students who are busy answering questions and concentrate on yours; humming a Christian

tune before the invigilator enters examination room; setting personal goals and working hard to achieve them by proper revision before examination.

Students' suggestions on the role of teachers to inspire confidence in them

Students would like teachers to help them face examination with confidence by doing the following; being given enough time to revise and prepare for examination; they should be encouraged and guided; should be given assurance and motivated without harassment; teachers should be available in case of any difficulties in some topics; needed to be trained in time management and be given tips on how to approach examinations; be given tests and exercises regularly to get familiar; teachers should be knowledgeable enough not to read directly from textbooks but should explain and simplify facts; be given feedback from Continuous Assessment Tests (CAT) and be told signs of anxiety and how to deal with it. Students also mentioned that teachers should avoid statements like "*the examination is not as easy as you think; should you fail you will pack up and go home for good*"; lastly the invigilator should not stand near candidates during examination as it caused anxiety, especially, among ill prepared students.

DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic characteristics by examination anxiety

The study indicated that most of students taking technical courses were males. This is because the society believes that technical subjects and jobs require a lot of energy which is a preserve of males. The findings revealed that most students were mature (over 30 years), showing that they waited for long after high school to join technical training institution. Others also started their studies at a lower level (certificate) due to lack of qualification to join diploma courses. This was confirmed by the fact that most of them (56.2%) were married. Report that 75% of the students felt heavy academic work loaded proves that they did not have adequate study time, a factor that could trigger anxiety especially during exams

Gage and Berliner (1984) observed that students suffer from feelings of apprehension and tension, which are to some extent focused and localized and that this affects their level of concentration and poor performance during examination. Corey (1982) discussed neurotic anxiety, which is the fear that instincts will get out of hands and force an individual to act in a way that is punishable. In this case, a student's fear of failure in examination makes them

worry about being punished by the teacher and even parents with high expectations as earlier reported. This will affect their thinking and concentration in examination.

Coping of students to examination anxiety

According to Jim Wright (accessed on 18th May, 2017), it is not enough just to schedule lots of study time. You also need to make sure that you use effective study techniques and these include; creating a quiet, neat study area without distractions ('study haven. '); study from a legible and complete set of notes; use bits of unexpected free time to study by carrying 'pocket work' with you; make a study schedule to avoid 'time-drains' of watching television, surfing the Internet, talking with friends on the phone; create a general study schedule, with time set aside for fun activities; and taking advantage of your peak energy levels. Also, study your most difficult or challenging material first, while you are still fresh; create a study group; teach content notes as a 'learning check'; recite information aloud; pose difficult questions; review severally previously learned material and reward yourself by for example, watching a favorite videotape, going for a walk, calling a friend. Gilbert *et al.*, (accessed on 7th May, 2017) also provides coping strategies similar to the above.

Feelings, thoughts and reaction of candidates during examination

Different types of tests can make students anxious (Van Blerkomp, 2009). The students' reactions to examination concurs with a study by McDonald, (2001) and Owen-Yeates, (2005) that tests and examinations are consistently reported by children and adolescents as worrisome, anxiety-provoking and stressful events. Pupils frequently become concerned with the consequences of failure where their sense of self-worth has become bound up with external achievement, where there is the possibility of negative judgment from others, such as family members, and where educational and/ or occupational aspirations rest on achievement. Zeidner and Mathews (2005) reported that, test anxiety consists of distinct cognitive, affective-physiological and behavioural components. The cognitive component refers to worrisome thoughts and concerns about the consequences of failure, the affective-physiological component to physical sensations that accompany anxiety (trembling, headaches, etc.) and the behavioural component to actions indicating a lack of task focus during a test such as playing with a pencil, looking around the room and so forth. According to Olatoye and Afuwape (2003); Hurlock (1972), test anxiety is the psychological state of

mind of a candidate about a test as expressed by the level of worry, fear, uncertainty, concern and helplessness expressed before, during or even after a test. Examination anxiety was also reported among university students (Trifoni and Shahini, 2011).

It is normal for students to feel anxious as was reported by the study. However in order to deal with it Jim Wright (accessed on 18th May, 2017) reported the following; take care of yourself first by eating healthy foods, jog and get enough sleep before an examination; take practice exams under same examination conditions; go prepared and arrive at the test site early, with all materials, including extra pens, pencils, paper; relax periodically during examination; whenever you feel the tension building, take a brief relaxation break such as taking several deep breaths, exhaling slowly after each one; tense your muscles and hold for 5 seconds, then relax and repeat 3 times; imagine relaxing in a peaceful, quiet setting of say a beach; replace irrational negative thinking with positive self-talk and avoid talking with your examination nervous friends about it.

Teacher's role in reducing examination anxiety

Students suggested the role of teachers in reducing examination anxiety. In a study (Connors, *et al.*, 2009), pupils were portrayed by teachers as playing an independent role in their individual preparation. They appeared to possess a remarkable degree of autonomy in the preparation process along with a keen self-awareness and a high level of motivation which influenced their approach to learning and assessment. One of the suggestions students reported is that they should be given assurance and motivation without harassment. Motivation for students to engage in a task can also come from extrinsic factors such as reward or promise of rewards from school, award of prizes, praise and encouragement (Dilworth, 1991). The most stressful factors influencing students, identified in educational institutions, are evaluations and competitions between students, students' academic failures, unhealthy relations between students and course instructors (Fairbrother and Warn, 2003). According to Erickson (1978), many students respond more positively to better organized courses, led by enthusiastic instructors, who awake students' interest in the subject and succeed in influencing the students' learning process.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Students felt that they had too much academic work and that they were ill prepared, terming examination as dangerous and scaring; threatening; confusing and worrying from high parental expectations.

Majority took time to settle, some with problems of concentration and anxiety during practical skill tests.

Candidates were nervous at the start of examination but relaxed on finding familiar questions; while some reported performing well in class work but scored low marks in examination.

Students' feelings were the same about examination, irrespective of gender and both got more anxious when multiple choices were set, with females preferring written tests.

Anxiety reactions included scratching various parts of the body, restlessness, fumbling with clothes or sweating and chewing pens (males) and nails (females). Long papers and afternoon examinations elicited more stress behaviours.

Students coped by proper preparation, working hard, revision and relaxation before the examination. Ill prepared students copied summarized notes to refer to secretly.

Teachers should encourage, guide, assure and motivate students without harassment to reduce anxiety.

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