Moderating teaching practicum-related stress through religious coping strategy

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Abstract: The teaching profession is a very stressful profession. Student teachers who work in an environment laced with stress are also very vulnerable. They however, use strategies including religious coping to mediate against the stressful teaching practicum events. A quantitative self-administered Religious Coping Questionnaire (RCQ) was used to collect data from the participants. The objectives were to find out whether: student teachers used religious coping to ameliorate teaching practicum related stress; student teacher perceive religious coping as effective in reducing teaching practicum stress; religious coping strategy was gendered. The majority of the participants were religious and therefore used religious coping; the religious students perceived religious coping as an effective moderator of teaching practicum stress; statistically significant gender differences were found among student teachers in the use of religious coping strategies. In conjunction with previous research the findings indicate that religious coping is an effective moderator of perceived stress. It follows therefore that any intervention that may be rendered to student teachers to reduce teaching practicum should include religious coping.

Key words: stress, teaching practicum, student teacher, coping strategy, gender

Introduction

For many student teachers teaching is not only arduous work but is dangerously stressful as well (Moody & Barrett, 2009). Teaching practicum related stress has been attributed to inter alia, class control problems, classroom disruptions (Malik & Jamail, 2010) evaluation (Hart, 1987), over workload, pedagogical and classroom management (Morton, Vesco, Williams, and Awender, 1997).

To moderate the perceived teaching practicum-related stress, student teachers use numerous coping strategies (Denhere, 2010). Among the common strategies that student teachers use are emotional focused, religious focused, avoidant and the problem focused strategies. Religious coping strategy is seen as one of the fundamental intervention strategies used in buffering student teachers against teaching practicum stress (Cooper & Driscoll, 2001).

The benefits of religion are diverse and Schnitter (2001) claims that religious involvement is positively related to psychological well-being. This is so because it promotes lifestyles that have positive effects on health (Larson, 2002). It is claimed that religion reduces stress in the following manner:

- religious services provide the individual with social network of those with similar beliefs;
- prayer makes the individual feel valued;
- Religious salience reassures the individual of his purpose in life (Schnitter, 2001).

Individuals often look for spiritual guidance when they are seeking to understand the meaning and purpose of their life and there is increasing evidence that religious involvement is associated with better health (Koening, McCullough & Larson, 2001). Viktor Frankl, a phenomenological existential psychologist, contends that human beings have an inherent quest to find meaning in their lives. Frankl also concedes that spirituality is one medium through which human beings seek meaning in their lives. Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (2003) posit that Frankl theorised that human personality has a spiritual core around which all other attributes and actions revolve. Researchers assert that religious involvement can alleviate feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness (Pargament, 1997). Religion has a protective effect on people that frequently attend religious activities (Strawbridge, Cohen, Schemam & Kaplan, 1997).

Chai (2009) claims that weekly church attendance and religious commitment are associated with increased physical health and longevity, increased marital satisfaction, lower suicides rates, less substance abuse and other aspects of psychological well-being. Krok (2008) states that religion can be used as a coping mechanism in times of stress as people’s response to stress relate to their spiritual qualities. Chai (2009) refers to Geerts (1966) who argues that religion offers meaning to life, which is most essential function of religion. She also suggests that those who have strong religious roots often have better control over stressful events have higher level of self-esteem and higher self-efficacy and heal better and faster than those who have lesser levels of spirituality. Pargament’s (1997) view is similar as he believes that individuals with strong religiousness may have greater access to concrete forms of religious coping methods (for example prayer, meditation, religious appraisals) which makes a strong impact on their health.

In contrast, Strawbridge, Schema, Cohen, Roberts and Kaplain (1998) claim that religion may moderate the effects of stress for some individuals but not for others. Gender may play a bigger role than religion when coping with stress as Gallup’s (2002) survey attest to the fact the perception that women are more religious than men, hold their beliefs more firmly, practice their
faith more consistently and work more vigorously for the congregation. In contrast to Malik & Ajimal (2010) claim that male student teachers cope better with stress experienced during teaching practicum. Branon and Feist (2009) has revealed ‘small differences’ between women and men’s coping strategies and Wosjo, Lacdon, Moffat and Orr (2007) reported that women used religion and spirituality more to cope with stress than men (mean 2.50 against 2.25).

In agreement, Healy (2007) asserts that it has been long known that women are more religious than men but disagrees on the reasons underlying the differences. He supports the explanation given by the Risk Taking Theory that gender gaps in religiosity are a consequence of men’s greater propensity to take risks while women are risk-averse.

From these differing views on the effectiveness of religious coping in mediating stress, it is not clear whether student teachers also use religious coping to reduce stress. It is not clear whether they perceive religious coping as effective. It is also interesting to find out whether religious coping is gendered.

Van Dyke (2009) alleged that psychology has neglected religious coping in discussion of youth mental health. It is against this backdrop that the present study was designed to examine the use of religious coping strategy in mediating teaching practicum related stress.

The study focused on the following research questions:

- Do student teachers use religious stress coping strategy to ameliorate teaching practicum related stress?
- Do student teachers perceive religious coping in mitigating teaching practicum related stress as effective?
- Is the use of religious stress coping strategy by student teachers gendered?

Hypotheses:

- $H_0$: There is no statistically significant gender differentiation with regards to student teachers’ use of religious coping strategy.
- $H_1$: There is a statistically significant gender differentiation with regards to student teachers’ use of religious coping strategy.

Method

Participants consisted of 153 (81 females and 72 males) Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree student teachers on teaching practicum whose ages ranged from 21 to 36 years (mean, $\bar{x}=24.23$, SD= 3.62). The participants were selected from a total of 365 B.Ed. students on teaching practicum using a stratified random selection technique to ensure the inclusion of males and females in the sample.

Instrument

A 16-item Religious Coping Questionnaire (RCQ) was constructed based on Pargament et. al’s (1990) Brief Religious Coping Scale (B-RCS). The RCQ had category A and B. Category A solicited for the participant’s biographical data while category B measured forms of religious coping on a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from ‘not at all’ (0) through ‘sometimes’ (1) frequently (2) to ‘ always’ (3). The RCQ had a reliability coefficient (r) of .76.

Procedure

Permission to conduct research was sought from the School authorities. The researcher requested for the assistance of a Teaching Practice Team of lectures on student supervision to administer and collect the completed questionnaires. The questionnaire return rate was 100%. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the students have respect for the lecturers and felt obliged to complete the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

EpiInfo was used to analyze the data and results are displayed using Relative Risk (RR) and a Confidence Interval. Also a Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version on the chi square was used to measure data using the chi squared. The chi square was used to determine whether there was significant association between a student teacher’s gender and his/her use of religious coping strategy to mitigate teaching practicum stress.

Results

Eighty-one females and seventy-two males completed the questionnaire. The first question inquired whether student teachers used religious coping strategies to reduce teaching practicum-related stress. The Likert scale items ‘I don’t do this’ and ‘I usually do this a little’ were combined and analyzed as ‘not using religious coping strategy’ while ‘I usually do this a little amount’ and ‘I usually do this a lot’ were combined and analyzed as using religion as a coping strategy. Significantly fewer men responded that they
usually use religion a medium amount or a lot as a coping strategy of attenuating stress $\frac{31}{72}$ (43%) versus $\frac{58}{81}$ (71%) (Table 1).

Table 1 Use religion as a coping strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>I don’t do this/ I usually do this a little</th>
<th>I usually do this a medium amount/I usually do this a lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>$\frac{41}{72}$ (56.9)</td>
<td>$\frac{31}{72}$ (143.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>$\frac{23}{81}$ (28.4)</td>
<td>$\frac{58}{81}$ (71.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-value= 0.0006</td>
<td></td>
<td>RR 0.60 (0.45 - 0.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second question enquired whether the participants felt that religion as a coping strategy is effective. ‘Not effective’ and ‘don’t know’ were combined as not effective and effective and very effective were combined as effective. The majority of participants felt that religious coping strategies are effective. Significantly, fewer men $\frac{47}{72}$ (65.3%) versus $\frac{67}{81}$ (82.8%) responded that they found religious coping effective or very effective. Analysis further showed that there was an association between gender and the use of religion as a coping strategy.

Table 2 Effectivity of religion as a coping strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Not effective/I don’t know</th>
<th>Effective/very effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>$\frac{25}{72}$ (34.7)</td>
<td>$\frac{47}{72}$ (65.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>$\frac{14}{81}$ (17.2)</td>
<td>$\frac{67}{81}$ (82.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-value= 0.022</td>
<td></td>
<td>RR 0.60 (0.79 (0.65-0.96)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third question sought to determine whether there was statistically significant gender differentiation with regards to student teachers’ use of religious coping strategy.

The findings revealed that there was statistically significant gender differentiation with regards to the use of religious coping as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 shows the association between religious coping and gender

Chi-square test (test of independence)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategy</th>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>Degrees of Freedom</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious coping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sign</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at .05.

In Table 3 the calculated chi-square test for religious coping revealed that there were statistically significant association between one’s gender and the use religious coping strategy by student teachers on teaching practicum ($\chi^2$=8.099; df=3; p< .05).

Discussion

The present study investigated the use of religious coping strategies by student teachers on teaching
practicum. Slightly more than half (57.3%) of all the participants reportedly drew strengths from religion to buffer the perceived teaching practicum related stress. Previous literature also claims that religion is a rich source of strength for coping with stress (Bertram, 2011). She further argues that people who rank high on religion had lower levels of stress.

The majority (74.0%) of the participants reported that religious coping was effective in ameliorating teaching practicum stress. This study shows similar results of those reported by Strawbridge, Schema, Cohen, Roberts and Kaplan (1998) that religion may moderate the effects of stress for the majority of the student teachers. Generally, people who are very religious believe that the supernatural power controls their life and every event including stressful situation.

The results of the present study revealed statistically significant association between gender and the student teachers’ use of religious coping as a way of mediating teaching practicum stress. This finding was inconsistent with the prediction that there were no gender differentiation with regards to the use of religious coping as such that hypothesis was rejected. Some previous studies have also obtained statistically significant gender differences in the use of religious coping strategies (Ptacek, Smith & Dodge, 1994; Stein & Nyamathi, 1999). Conversely, this finding is at variance with Lengu’a’s (2000) that revealed gender neutrality with regards to the use of religious stress coping strategies. A possible explanation for the significant differences could be that women are more vulnerable to male domination. They therefore feel threatened and need protection and support from a stronger being hence these results. Also a plausible explanation for the gender gap is given by the Risk Taking Theory that claims that this is due to the fact that man has a greater propensity to take risks while women are risk-averse.

Another possible explanation could be denial by male students that they do not use religious focused strategy could be viewed as an attempt to show that they are independent and do not succumb to supernatural authority and beliefs.

Conclusion

The study pointed out that most student teachers use religious coping frequently to reduce perceived teaching practicum stress. It also emerged from the study that the female student teachers more than their male counterparts employ religious coping strategies. Most student teachers in the study view these strategies as effective. On the basis of the findings the study therefore recommends that:

- Students must be allowed to engage in religious activities as this reduces their imagined teaching practicum stress.
- The health well-being of most student teachers be promoted through their religious beliefs.
- This study used a small sample that hinders the generalizability of the results. Other more protracted studies should be conducted using a more representative sample to establish the effectiveness of religious coping as a strategy of moderating of teaching practicum related stress.

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