Chapter-V

Discussion
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It may be recalled that the objective of the present investigation was to predict psychological distress in students population. The predictor variables were parental expectations, attributional styles and coping strategies. Some demographic variables were also used as predictors. Stepwise multiple regression analysis for the total sample yielded a set of nine predictors i.e. avoidant coping, perceived parental expectations, composite positive attribution, active coping, mental disengagement, restraint coping, academic achievement, global versus specific negative, and focus on & venting of emotions. A close scrutiny of the results of the present study revealed that avoidant coping as a composite emerged as the most significant positive predictor of psychological distress experienced by senior secondary students. This finding corroborates the results of earlier studies (Billing & Moos, 1981; Endler and Parker, 1999; Steiner et al., 2002; Renland et al, 2000; Dunkley et al 2000; Suzuki, 2003). Neil (2007) also found in his study that the best predictor of psychological distress was the use of avoidant coping strategies. Renland et al., (2000), while examining the relationship between possible selves, depression and coping style among students revealed that depressed students reported more avoidant coping as compared to non depressed students. Hightagou & Peterson (1995) also found that students who had active coping style reported fewer depressive symptoms than did those who had an avoidant coping style.
Though avoidant coping as a composite was the most useful predictor, all of the three dimensions involved in avoidant coping were not equally important. Only mental disengagement emerged as significant predictor having a positive relation with psychological distress. This result is supported by previous studies which indicate that disengagement coping is positively associated with more symptoms of distress (e.g., Blalock & Joiner, 2000; Carver & Scheier, 1994; Rudnicki, Graham, Habbushe, & Ross, 2001; Terry & Hynes, 1998). Mental disengagement serves to distract the person from thinking about the behavioral dimension or goal with which the stressor is interfering. Tactics that reflect mental disengagement include multiple activities like alternative activities to take one’s mind off a problem, daydreaming, escaping through sleep or immersion in T.V. etc. This type of response often impede adaptive coping (Aaldwin & Revanson, 1987).

As was expected, perceived parental expectations also emerged as the significant predictor of psychological distress among students. This finding is supported by earlier findings on parental expectations. These studies are mostly conducted on Taiwanese students e.g., Wang and Heppner (2002) also found that parental expectations is a better predictor of Taiwanese college students psychological distress. Asian parents value high academic achievement and they put pressure on them by having high expectations from them. These high expectations seen in Asian parents may be the cause of psychological distress (Pang, 1991; Toupin and Son, 1991). Freaj, Iobin and Beesley (2004), also
found family experiences as one of the four predictors of psychological distress. Indian society which was earlier an agriculture based society is now almost transformed into an urbanized and industrialized society. Parents have high expectations from their children to achieve high in academics and professional courses. Most of them want their children to do what they could not accomplish in their own lives. The data were collected from the students of A.M.U. which is a residential university, and students from far off places are sent by their parents with lot of hopes and expectations about their children. Most of the parents decide the courses of studies and careers for them (Shakeela, 1987). Also, they desire and value certain occupations for their children. Though parental expectations are necessary for high academic achievement, as is evidenced from significant correlations between the two variables obtained in the present investigation and also supported by other researches, these expectations are sometimes unrealistic and perceived by the children as pressure. A relationship in which parents have unrealistic expectations that their children are unable to meet can lead to abusive behavior on the part of the parents which put the child at greater risk for both physical and emotional danger (Azar et al., 1984). It was earlier found that parent’s unrealistic expectations create pressure and foster performance anxiety in children (Liu, 1998; Salimi et al., 2005) and is also associated with children’s inattentiveness, aggressiveness and psychological symptoms (Cho, Seokhee & Yoon, 2005) and other problem behavior above and beyond family/ child background factors (Reynolds et al., 1994). Significant correlations were also
found between parental pressures for academic achievement and anxiety and depression (Tomiki, 2001), somatic complaints and academic anxiety (Crystal et al., 1994).

Composite attributional style for positive events also emerged as the third significant and negative predictor while its different dimensions such as internal/external, stable/unstable, global/specific could not successfully predict psychological distress. It means that those who attribute positive events to internal, stable and global causes tend to experience less distressed. These findings have support from earlier findings for example Cheng and Furnham (2001, 2003) reported that optimistic attributional style in positive situations was a strong predictor of self reported happiness and mental health and pessimistic attributional style in negative situations was a predictor of both happiness and mental health.

Mc Cauley et al., (1988) also showed that depressed children relative to non depressed children tended to have a more helpless explanatory style especially with regard to how they explained positive events. Curry and Craighead (1990) also indicated that adolescents with a diagnosis of major depression differed with regard to their explanatory style for positive events i.e. they made significantly fewer internal stable and global explanations for positive events.

On the other hand, only global versus specific dimension for negative events successfully predicted psychological distress. It had positive predictive relationship with psychological distress. This findings indicates that students experiencing psychological distress have more helpless explanatory style. It is the
tendency of the depressed persons that they perceive the impact of the negative events as pervasive, and do not see any hope/expectancies in the future (Peterson et al., 1982). This result corroborates some of the earlier findings. For example Hull and Mendolia, (1991), while studying the relations of explanatory style, expectancies and depression in college sample, found that explanatory style for negative events was indirectly related to depression by mean of expectancies. This helplessness behavior among students may be explained in terms of parental pressure as Sia et al., (1998) gave indications that parental expectations lead to helplessness behavior among children.

As for problem focused coping two of its five dimensions emerged as significant negative predictors of psychological distress. Active coping responses and restraint coping entered as the fourth and sixth predictors, respectively, in the stepwise regression analysis table. It means that those who generally take active steps- like initiating direct actions, increasing one’s efforts and executing coping attempts in stepwise fashion to remove the stressor or to ameliorate its effects- or those who wait until an appropriate opportunity to act become available and/or do not act prematurely, feel less distressed. This finding gets support from the study conducted by Higgins and his colleagues (1995), who found that task oriented coping was negatively related to distress.

From amongst emotion focused coping dimensions only one i.e. focusing on and venting of emotions emerged as a significant predictor having a positive predictive relationship with psychological distress. This is a tendency to focus on
whatever distress or upset one is experiencing and to ventilate those feelings (Scheff, 1979). Focusing on negative emotions particularly for longer periods impede adjustment (Felton et al., 1984) and phenomenological salience to distress may exacerbate distress (Scheier & Carver, 1977). These findings do not fully corroborate the earlier studies which indicate a positive relationship between emotion focused coping and symptoms of distress and depression (Hasida, 2005; Prakash and Bhogle, 1994; and Ogul et al., 2003). The use of emotion oriented coping strategies was found by Higgins and Endler, (1995) also to be a significantly positive predictor of distress in both men and women.

Academic achievement was also hypothesized by the researcher to be an important predictor of psychological distress in students. This hypothesis also proved to be true as academic achievement (in terms of the percentage of marks obtained in senior secondary exam) significantly negatively predicted psychological distress. This finding is supported by Malik and Balda (2006), they assessed academic achievement on the basis of marks obtained in last three examinations and found that academic achievement was significantly negatively correlated with all types of stress except existential stress.

Anzi (2005) examined the relationship between academic achievement and anxiety, self esteem, optimism, and pessimism among 400 male and female students and found the significant positive correlation between academic achievement and both optimism and self esteem whereas the correlations between academic achievement and both anxiety and pessimism, were negative.
Relationship between anxiety and academic achievement has also been studied by some Indian investigators. Sinha (1965) in a study to find out the relationship between anxiety and academic achievement at university level, found that low achievers were significantly more anxious than the high achievers. Pandit (1969) also concluded that an overall negative relationship existed between anxiety and achievement. Singh (1965) found that academic achievement was significantly and positively related to intelligence, concept formation ability and academic motivation, while it was negatively related to anxiety.

Results of the regression analyses for boys and girls revealed that composite attributions for negative events was the most important and significant positive predictor of psychological distress only for male students but not for females. On the basis of present findings it is apparently clear that male students who had a more pessimistic attributional style for bad events experienced more psychological distress. It was also found in the present study that internal versus external positive was the negative predictor of psychological distress only for boys i.e. students who attributed good events in terms of internal causes experienced less psychological distress. Though many studies explained with a wide range of participants including children, adolescents, and college students that examined the association between explanatory style and depression provided support for the reformulated learned helplessness model of depression (e.g., Bodiford et al., 1988; Mc Cauley, Mitchell, Burke, & Moss, 1988; Brown & Siegel, 1988; Pinto & Francis, 1993; Curry & Craighead, 1990; Hull & Mendolia, 1991;
Peterson & Vaidya, 2001), our findings showed such a relationship only for boys and not for girls.

Avoidant coping was found to be the common predictor of psychological distress for both boys and girls. It significantly positively predicted psychological distress in both the groups, but its contribution for prediction was higher for girls as compared to boys. These findings suggest that students who use more avoidant coping strategies tend to experience more distress and women particularly use more avoidant strategies. Earlier Haarr and Morash (1999) had also found in their study that women reported significantly higher use of avoidant strategies than men.

Perceived parental expectations was also one of the common predictors of psychological distress for both the groups. Though for boys its contribution was higher as compared to girls and the boys also reported significantly higher perceived parental expectations, the results make it apparently clear that parental expectations are equally important for boys and girls and can be predictive of distress in both the group.

One very important finding that emerged in this study is that for boys behavior disengagement and for girls denial entered as the negative predictors of psychological distress, though both are taken as dimensions of avoidant coping. It means that for boys behavioral disengagement helped in reducing the experience of distress while for girls denial of the existence of the problems was associated with reduced distress. Avoidant coping as a composite, which included behavioral
disengagement, mental disengagement and denial, was associated with increased level of psychological distress both for boys and girls. It means all types of responses related to avoidant coping do not predict psychological distress in the same way and also it is different for both boys and girls.

From amongst the problem focused coping strategies dimensions restraint coping emerged as the significant negative predictor of psychological distress for boys while for girls active coping was the 3rd most useful negative predictor. It means that active coping among girls and restraint coping among boys was related to reduced feeling of distress. Focus on & venting of emotions significantly positively predicted psychological distress only for girls. This finding is partially supported by Higgins & Endler's (1995) study, they found that undergraduate male students who use task oriented coping techniques report experiencing less distress while the use of emotion oriented coping strategies was a significant positive predictor of distress in both men and women.

Rao et al (2000) found that majority of students used a combination of problem focused, emotion focused and support seeking strategies to deal with stress. Albuquerque et al (1990) reported similar behaviors in the coping repertoire of college students. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) stated that in virtually every stressful encounter individuals tend to use both problem focused and emotion focused strategies.

Academic achievement was the important and significant negative predictor of psychological distress for both the groups. It may be recalled that sample of the
present study was senior secondary school students. Students at this stage are at the verge of planning and preparing for a career. In the present day scenario both boys and girls are seriously concerned about their academic achievement because it may have an impact on their selection in important courses of studies and ultimately affect the career choice.

The regression analyses for the two stream groups i.e. Science and Arts yielded different sets of predictors for the two groups.

Four predictors were identified for the Science group. These were mental disengagement, perceived parental expectations, composite negative, and focus on & venting of emotions while for Arts group six predictors were identified viz avoidant coping, perceive parental expectations, composite positive attribution, restraint coping, academic achievement and mental disengagement. For the Science group mental disengagement and for Arts group avoidant coping emerged as the most useful predictors of psychological distress. Perceived parental expectations was an important predictor in both Science and Arts students having positive predictive relationship with psychological distress. However, it accounted for the larger variance in psychological distress in Science group as compared to that in the Arts group. For the Science group composite attribution for negative events emerged as significant positive predictor while for Arts group composite attribution for positive events had negative predictive relationship with psychological distress. Avoidant coping was the largest positive predictor of psychological distress in Arts students. Restraint coping and academic
achievement also had negative predictive relationship with distress in Arts students.

If we look at the results of t-test analyses for gender group comparisons we find that female students experienced more distress as compared to male students. A comparison of Science and Arts students reveal that Arts students experienced more distress as compared to Science students, while no significant difference could be obtained between the students belonging to nuclear and joint families. Though the gender group difference is in the expected direction, stream group difference is contradictory to our expectations. A careful analysis of the results reveal that Arts students as compared to Science students used significantly more avoidant coping strategies which is negatively related to academic achievement (C.f. table-5). These results may suggest that Arts students by way of their tendency to use avoidant coping strategies remain distressed resulting in low achievement in examination. They linger on this emotional experiencing and carry this distress in later stage when they come to senior secondary school. The result of the present analysis find some support from earlier study (Mustafa, 2004), which found that academic stress affected the adjustment of Arts students more as compared to Science students but this effect was found only for girls and not for boys.