ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series
EDU2022-0245
Athens, 31 August 2022

Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing While Living in Pandemics in Albania

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ABSTRACT

This work represents a qualitative research design conducted during Fall 2021 when universities were about to open for students and continue in person the academic year. The research objectives consisted in: (i)Identification of the major stressors of students in Albania during COVID-19. (ii)Analysis of how academic issues are related with students' wellbeing and priorities; (iii)Identification of the support systems students use and would use in times of related difficulties. The research questions of the study are as the following: Which are the major stressors of Albanian students during COVID-19? How are academic issues related with students' wellbeing and other priorities? How vulnerable are students to be helped and supported in times of crises? The method of study used was the semi-structured interview administered to 25 Albanian students from different majors and universities in the Albania. Thematic analysis of the data provided results reporting that students' psychological wellbeing had been compromised during the pandemic and was associated with relevant stressful reactions such as eating and sleeping disturbances, and continuous worries and fear related to school, career, finances, social connections and the future. Students reported to have had a higher academic performance which is not always in line with the level of knowledge acquired. Referring to our data, students have developed coping strategies generally coming from experience and learning from others, however, evidence regarding the effectivity of these coping strategies is still questionable. In times of crises and difficulties, students have the tendency not to ask for support or professional help. Findings show that students have a constructive scientific approach regarding COVID-19 vaccination but they are angry about making vaccines mandatory.

Introduction

As the situation of the pandemic started in Albania in March 2020, and all universities were closed due to lockdown, the number of cases for the infected youth population was low. The Delta virus became a threat for youths, alarming them to be quite vulnerable to infections and complications as well. As universities were being opened on campus on Fall 2021, students were conditioned to have the certification of vaccination, or to undergo continuous testing in order to participate physically in the university. Although in the 21st century and with the progress of science, the "preparedness for combating the pandemic and treating people" have been different among different countries (Bäckman 2021).

To students, stress is not an unknown phenomenon and it usually increases in times of increased efforts (Boke 2019). Students of the first and second year have been considered from a body of research as more vulnerable in questioning their sense of belonging (College students affair journal 2021) in the university; they have difficulty in navigating through personal and social connections while trying to give meaning to their world around. Moreover, research (Mahdy 2020) shows that students' academic performance has been affected during the pandemic. The mechanisms interplaying between stress and coping styles among university students (Rogovska et al. 2020) represent research curiosity to the researchers as well. Little is known about the way how Albanian students living and studying in Albania have been experiencing the pandemic. An extended literature on students' psychological wellbeing during the pandemic and their support system has been in the focus.

Is it possible for psychologists to identify potential predictors for students' wellbeing during the pandemic? Research (Liu et al. 2021) found that 66.3% of students reported poor wellbeing, with 31.1% with wellbeing scores so low they may indicate risk of clinical depression and the major predictor of "poor wellbeing is perceived social isolation". Research study (Villani et al. 2021) conducted in Italy focusing on the psychological wellbeing of students in an Italian university found that "students are at risk of psychological distress in case of traumatic events, such as health emergencies". In the United States research with college students reports identified multiple stressors such as: fear and worry about health, concerns in concentration, sleeping and eating problems, etc. that caused stress and anxiety among the student population during the pandemic, which led even to depression (Son et al. 2020).

Since there are limited research initiatives about the way how Albanian students' wellbeing and mental health has been during the pandemic times, the research objectives of the study are presented as below:

1. Identification of the major stressors of students in Albania during COVID-19.
2. Analysis of how academic issues are related with students' wellbeing and priorities

3. Identification of the support systems students use and would use in times of related difficulties.

The research questions of the study are as the following:

RQ 1. Which are the major stressors of Albanian students during COVID-19?
RQ 2. How are the academic issues related with students' wellbeing and other priorities?
RQ 3. How vulnerable are students to be helped and supported in times of crises?

Methodology

Research Design of the Study

A semi-structured interview was designed for the purpose of the study aiming to gather data.The interview structure consists in four sections. The first section refers to the socio-demographic data including the age, gender major of study, academic year, the number of people living with the student and who are them.

Section A consists in explorative questions of self-reference of their overall wellbeing before the pandemic, their control in their life and their three priorities. Section B consists in a number of open-question referring to psychological wellbeing, coping with situations, support systems. Section C consists in explorative questions asking for their expectancies and vulnerability of returning on campus at the university.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the young researchers with the criterion that they need to be Albanian students living and studying in Tirana, Albania; they needed to have been enrolled in the university during the pandemic and still continue their studies at the time of the data collection process. Classes in Albania turned virtually in the midst of March 2020 until October 2021. The interviews were conducted one week before the beginning of the new academic year. Participants were Bachelor students enrolled in different universities and different majors of study were recruited by undergraduate students in psychology.

Data Gathering

The semi-structured interview was designed from the researcher referring to the current dynamics reflected in university students all over the world, then it was piloted and handed over to three undergraduate students in psychology trained in qualitative methods and on the usage of the interview. All interviews were conducted in person and after receiving the consent about volunteer participation in the study, they were audio recorded and transcribed.

Transcripts were analyzed and then themes and codes were identified and then discussed with the students who collected the data aiming to resolve any means of discrimination of information or misleading moments received in the interviews.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic Data of the Participants*

Socio-biographic criterion:	Characteristics:	Nr	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	8	32
	Female	17	68
Age	19	1	4
	20	11	44
	21	5	20
	22	4	16
	23	3	12
	28	1	4
Academic Year	Second	4	16
	Third	16	64
	Fourth	5	20
Major of study	Business Administration	2	8
	Psychology	4	16
	IT and Computer Science	6	24
	Law	2	8
	Economics	1	4
	Finance	1	4
	International Relations	2	8
	Journalism	1	4
	Marketing	1	4
	Medical	2	8
	Political Science	3	12

Results

Challenges of Students' Psychological Wellbeing during 2020-2021

Respondents reported that mental health had been compromised during the pandemic, concerns which were particularly identified from the self-report topics and the analysis of the interview are presented as below:

Sleeping and Eating Concerns

76% (19/25) of participants reported that during the pandemic they have been experiencing sleeping disturbances including: insomnia, sleeping delays and troubled sleeping due to not having had regular sleeping patterns. Sleeping problems seem to have always been present in students reflecting tendencies of

sleeping disorder: they consider it normal, however they do not relate it to the lack of focus they experienced during lessons or other phenomena in their life. Irregular sleeping patterns: sleeping late and waking up too early/late without energy and without motivation, sleep deprivation leading to anger and tension, fatigue and lack of motivation to leave the house are being reflected from the majority of the participants.

Eating concerns refer to emotional eating in 44% of the cases; from this population 81% reflect over-eating and 18% report losing appetite and losing weight. Eating and sleeping disorders are simultaneously present in 48% (12/25) of the cases.

Other Concerns and Worries

Other major stressors reflected from students include: worries about finances (29%) in cases where students were striving for financial independence from their families; other students who were being supported from their families did not report any serious financial worries. Concerns about the health of their family members that they might catch the virus was significant only for 16% of the participants, since students have been reflecting majorly personal worries and irritation coming from the pandemic. Students generally reflect a low level of self-esteem and low positive regard towards oneself in many cases including concerns about the body image, insecurities about being able to pursue a career in their major of study, fear and worry from being locked down again, and overthinking as a renomination of their troubling thoughts leading to hopelessness.

Students' Wellbeing and Mental Health Issues

Students' Expectations About the New Academic Year

Since students' life during the pandemic was projected through online learning for one year and a half, researchers were interested to analyze the patterns related to academic performance and their psychological wellbeing, then see through the way how students expected the new academic year to be. Interview data shows that in terms of academic accomplishment, 65% (16/25) of students' main focus before the pandemic was related to university and their career path. They reported they were able to manage the academic load and time for the studies in 56% (14/25) of the cases. Other participants perceived that they would better manage time and dedication to university by moving to study abroad.

Online learning resulted positive to students in terms of academic performance, however they perceived that their efficiency in learning was lower than the academic performance in grades.

"Good grades, but low performance in learning", "Surprisingly, I had better academic performance". Students report to not feel safe to join the

university in person because of not being certain about the knowledge integration of the last years when they received online learning. "It feels as if I have not studied anything" "I have learnt more new things during the first academic year in comparison with the second academic year which was all online", "I learnt only before exams" On the other side, a vast majority of students reflect a significant low concentration, low motivation and a tendency leading to procrastination in 52% (13/25) of the cases.

Fear and enthusiasm are both inclined with the beginning of the new academic year including: fear from the academic burden; organization of the new routine, difficulties in schedules; they were feeling happy, but a bit unprepared referring to knowledge; enthusiasm was present for the students of the second year wishing to be soon integrated in the students' life in campus; stressed and worried because university started physically and might end online; unprepared to go back to face-to-face environments because online classes have affected his motivation & willingness to learn.

Despite the worries related to joining the campus, 68% (17/25) of participants when asked to rank the three most important things they would control in their future, ranked university as the first or second on demand. We consider that students are relatively worried about their university engagement and graduation plans leading to having a safe career path.

Students' Approach Towards Vaccination

Participants were asked regarding their approach towards vaccines since in September they were obliged to be vaccinated in order to be in class. 52% of the students (13/25) perceive they trust vaccines and are in favor of doing the vaccines, however 92% (23/25) of them report that it is unethical to be considered as a mandatory measure to students. Students report to have a research-based consideration about vaccines reflecting trust in science and no relations with any conspiracy theories. However mandatory measures regarding vaccination were considered quite provoking from them.

Identification of the Support Systems Students Use and Would Use in Times of Related Difficulties

Reaction toward Personal Problems

Whenever students meet personal difficulties, their reaction towards their personal problems is reflected through closure in most cases associated with irritation towards people, crying, feeling anxious and the majority of the participants report they cannot manage difficult situations: "I often express the emotional load I have with people close to me in uncontrolled nerve outbursts. My eyes get blurred from the nerves and I cannot control myself", "I overdo it with words". "I always try to explain to the people around me that these reactions are not from them or for them, they are just my personal problems".

Students perceive that the risen number of sleeping hours or eating rituals has been a coping mechanism to detach themselves from the pandemic difficulties: "I close off and I push people away from myself. I am always either sleeping or eating".

Students have a tendency of self-isolation in challenging times, when they try to control and rationalize situations, they have difficulties in managing emotions leading to aggravated unintentional situations. "When dealing with personal problems, I can't remain calm and often reflects my concerns to other people which," -he admits to not control himself when worried or upset. "I express my emotions by crying a lot as it helps me relieve my bottled-up emotions".

Management of Difficulties

The coping mechanisms students use when meeting with difficulties are generally the ones used as a means of self-management in times of crises. In minor cases (12%, 3/25) they report to have talked or asked for advice from their family members or any close friend; in the majority of the cases their coping mechanisms were reflected through: an increase of navigating time in social media, listening to music, watching movies, cooking, smoking leading to addiction problems and drinking alcohol, jogging and doing workouts, learning and practicing mindfulness activities such as meditation and yoga.

"The period of the pandemic was "rocky". Initially I can say that the amount of tobacco that I smoking increased, I was consuming 2-3 packs every day, also the amount of marijuana increased. Both these substances have been constant in my life even before the pandemic but during the pandemic the amount increased significantly".

"I got involved in the world of spirituality and started meditating a few times a week".

Efficiency of the Coping Mechanisms

60% (15/25) of the participants perceive that the different coping mechanisms used have been effective in managing tension, anxiety and irritation. Others perceive these techniques to be unhelpful in a long term.

Where Did Students Learn to Use These Coping Mechanisms?

Coping is as existential and means of survival but at the same time is affected through our learning styles. Students reported that the channels teaching them what to do and how to cope with situations are originated in their experiences 32% (8/25) of the cases, role-modelling: learning from their parents coping styles "I look like my mom/just like my family members" 28% (7/25), learning from movie characters/social media 12% (3/25) of the cases, and other participants could not even identify the source of teaching them how to cope with difficult situations 28% (7/25).

Seeking for Support

Participants report that they have the tendency to ask for support to family and close friends in 44% of the cases. In this category of help seekers, they report to generally ask for help about physical problems, only when the problem is very serious and it asks for the intervention of the others. Only 27% (3/11) of the seeking-for-help population is opened to consider the professional support of the counsellors and therapists.

16% (4/25) of the participants are doubtful about asking for help to the others, considering that it might not be effective: "In 70% of cases I do not like to ask for help because I feel weak and I want to deal with my own situation". While in other cases I talk to my closest friends and rarely ask my mom for help", "Closing off helps clear out my thoughts also some things I want to keep to myself and protect them", "I go to my friends because I know they can help me. My secrets prevent me from speaking, as they are things that I cannot tell everyone."

Referring to our data 40% of the cases (4/25) are not willing to ask for help and report to do this because of " relying only to myself", stigma: "I fear the judgment", not being aware of the fact that they could be helped "even though I am having too much stress and anxiety, I am not having emotional problems to be asking for help"; Learned helplessness issues: "I do not trust that others could help with my problems", Not being well informed on professional psychologists to go to "I don't know any good psychologists which he believes might be effective".

Discussion

Principal Findings

Since the population of students have been continuously considered at risk and vulnerable to a number of psychological disorders, this research aimed to explore what is happening in the real world of thinking, emotions and behavior of students in Albania. This qualitative research design showed that students' psychological wellbeing had been compromised during the pandemic and was associated with relevant stressful reactions. These findings are in line with the research outputs conducted to college students focusing on return-to school issues (Schwartz al. 2021) citing that "in students the stress indicators were positively and significantly correlated with self-reported behavioral concerns (i.e., conduct problems, negative affect, and cognitive/inattention), and that stress arousal (e.g., sleep problems, hypervigilance)". A qualitative based research study (Son et al. 2020) conducted in the US during the pandemic reports a common ground of information regarding the presence of multiple stressors arising such as: "levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students". These consisted in fear and worry of the loved ones, lack of concentration, sleeping and eating concerns and lower social connections. The

findings of our research are comparable with the findings of the research in Venezuela and Peru suggesting that measures of students' level of depression is significantly related to the meaning that students give of life (Romero Parra 2020).

Students pay a scientific oriented approach towards vaccines, but they recall the ethical consideration of the vaccine as a mandatory instrument. This result is supported even from findings of a survey conducted in Albania during September 2021(Portalistudientor.al) reporting that "74% (nr=1678) of the students participating in the survey are against the order of the Ministry order nr.413 considering vaccines as mandatory measures for attending university.

Findings suggest that the majority of students reported "maladaptive coping behaviors" leading to depression (Changwon Son et al. 2020). Referring to our data, students have developed coping strategies generally coming from experience and learning from the others, but there is not much evidence regarding their effectivity. This research output is in line with another research in China referring to these types of coping techniques as passive and that they do not significantly associate with the improvement of their psychological well-being (Huang et al. 2021). Pending those measures of coping in people respond to the same stressful situation may be different "Individuals with better coping skills are able to see more meaning in life, which in turn leads to better outcomes in both physical and mental health status" (Cohen and Swerdlik 2013).

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations

The research findings could be used and further elaborated on recommending institutions and/or individuals/families might do on daily/ weekly basis in order to take care about their wellbeing times of collective events, such as pandemics and difficult times. Strengthening the possession and usage of the coping skills to the population of students vulnerable to stress not only in time of pandemics but as a means of supporting them in successfully dealing with their everyday concerns. Next step could be teaching to students' various techniques on how to provide self-care.

This research represents findings collected through qualitative data on an unconventional sample. However, there are several limitations identified: First, the sample size of the interview is small, however the in-depth interviews gathered significant data allowing to elaborate and clarify many dimensions of mental health in the students' population. Secondly, findings cannot be generalized to all university students referring to the sample, even though we expect to have received reasonable data coming from students of different majors from different public and non-public universities.

Future work would use a nationwide wider sample and data needs to be gathered in different timelines since students are vulnerable to stress, and not be studied only during the pandemic. This would allow us to analyze how students' psychological wellbeing and mental health would differ referring to

various socio-demographic variables such as: age, gender, location, income, etc.

In qualitative research studies, referring to a body of literature it is considered that the researcher is an integral part of the process and may even reflect personal influences (Biggerstaf and Deborah, 2012). In order to avoid any bias, the main researcher received the collected data from the in-depth interviews from the undergraduate young researchers, data was transcribed, then coded, categorized and put into themes; leading to a better understanding of the whole picture. The data retrieved from the qualitative research design is not a domain of the "hard science'' that all data can be measured systematically, however this research did not use any software for the coding to avoid the initial coding process to be considered as primarily information (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). Moreover, ethical work has been the philosophy of the research as "the method used to transform self into the form that one defines as ethical" (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

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