

Academic Adjustment and Sense of Coherence of the Muslim Students from the Three Southernmost Provinces of Thailand: Qualitative Research

Maithai Chaiyapan, Songkhla Rajabhat University, Thailand

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the experiences of academic adjustment and sense of coherence of the Muslim students from the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Participants were 12 undergraduate Muslim students from the southernmost provinces of Thailand. They were selected purposively. Instruments included the sense of coherence checklist and a interview guideline. Data were collected by the researcher through in-depth interview and analyzed through grouping of similar themes. The results reveal that three main themes. First themes, the causes of academic stress leading to adjustment problem were language, coexistence in society between men and women, and learning. Second theme, two coping strategies were used. One was a problem - focused coping strategy through positive energy creating and changing them manually to be accepted. The other was social support seeking strategy from family and friends, and faith-based practice. Third theme, sense of coherence consisted of being open-minded, regarding problems as serious matters, and learning sense of coherence from their suffering lives. The finding provided insight into Muslim students' experiences in their adjustment concerns and sense of coherence.

Keywords : Adjustment, Sense of coherence, Muslim students

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Introduction

In the past decades, substantial attention has been given toward understanding the higher incidence of psychological distress found among university students. In particular, academic stress while studying can be one important phenomenon in student's life. At this level of education many changes gradually emerge, especially the changes in status and educational institution; from school children to university students (Herzig, Roysircar, Kosyluk&Kosyluk& Corrigan, 2013). In a school year, students are closely supervised whereas in a university students are geared to study independently and make their own decisions. Being with other students in a university's multicultural society differs from staying with family (Tangnoy, 2012).

Above all, students at a tertiary education are those in their late teen stage in which they are facing with changes and a big adjustment. This is the period of learning, developing, and adjusting themselves to match their age, role and responsibility. From the said issues, this stage of life becomes a difficult period full of problems caused by themselves, surrounding people, and the society (Kotrajaras, 2002).

In leading one's life effectively and successfully, a person needs sense of coherence; the ability to perceive the world harmoniously in terms of thoughts and emotions. It is the ability to perceive the world as it is and believe that all phenomena in life are caused by himself and the environment. They can be solved and it is possible to find support from other sources (Chaiyapan, 2013). The ability to confront with any problems in life and the ability to cope with difficulties successfully consist of three factors; the ability to understand the problem, the ability to cope with the phenomena and the ability to define the problem. A person with sense of coherence can adjust himself socially, cope with problems effectively, and be successful in life (Antonovsky, 1993; Rothmann, Steyn, &Mostert, 2005; Yusuke, Shinichiro &Tadahiro, 2009).

Apart from sense of coherence, the pattern of problem experiencing of a person is another important factor in coping with academic and personal difficulties. The pattern of problem experiencing is the way of self-adjusting and stress experiencing. How much the success is depends on his ability. This attempt occurs continuously to keep balance of the mind (Rioli & Savicki, 2010). When a person faces with the phenomenon and finds that it affects his balancing state, he will use his thoughts and reactions to cope with the problem or his suffering feelings affected by stresses (Lazarus &Folkman, 1984).

The 2013 Songkhla Rajabhat University's Annual Report on student statistics showed that the majority of the students, 62.15 % , were Buddhists whereas 37.66 % were Muslim students (Office of Academic Promotion and Registration, 2014). Differences in religion and student's life in a university affect students' self-adjustment, especially the students from private religious schools. These students have their own culture in living their lives, for example, eating habit, activities, language use, and dressing style (Yosoh, 2013). Muslim students have their own cultural identity. They use the Malayu dialect in daily communication. They will dress themselves as guided by Islamic religion. They have to pray for five times a day and must eat halal food only (Suwannakho, 2010).

Cultural adjustment is an important issue of Muslim students when they move to live in another culture which is different from theirs causing problems such as stresses and worries. So, they need to learn to adjust themselves to live peacefully. Such adjustment would secure their ways of life and make them happy during the period of study positively affecting academic achievement. If they are able to cope with difficulties, they will be able to lead their lives and grow up to become competent and successful adults (Abdullah & Sulaiman, 2014).

However, there are limited numbers of in-depth study regarding self-adjustment of Muslim students from the southernmost provinces of Thailand. For this reason the researcher is interested in looking into stress dealing experiences, problem coping, and sense of coherence of Muslim students from three southernmost provinces of Thailand. The results of the study will provide guidelines for the prevention of problems and assistance for the students to perform good adjustment and have good state of mind. Moreover, they will provide guidelines for teaching and learning. They can be used as information for improving quality of education and supporting the students to be successful in their study.

Methodology

This study was conducted with a phenomenology qualitative research design, as detailed below:

Participants:

12 Muslim students (5 males, 7 females) from three southernmost provinces of Thailand (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat) were chosen purposively through the Purposive Sampling. They were reached through the gate keeper. Inclusion criteria (1) those whose hometowns were in three southernmost provinces enrolled at Songkhla Rajabhat University, (2) those who were experiencing stresses and adjustment when moving to study in a university, (3) those who passed the self-assessment checklist, and (4) those who were willing to participate in the study. Details were shown in the table below.

Participants	Age (year)	Gender	Year of study	Hometown
1	19	Male	1	Narathiwat
2	19	Male	1	Narathiwat
3	19	Male	1	Yala
4	20	Female	2	Pattani
5	21	Female	3	Narathiwat
6	20	Female	3	Yala
7	21	Female	3	Narathiwat
8	22	Male	4	Pattani
9	21	Female	3	Yala
10	21	Male	3	Yala
11	20	Female	2	Narathiwat
12	22	Female	4	Narathiwat

Instrument: The Sense of coherence checklist adapted by the researcher from Sense of coherence evaluation form based on Antonovsky's view (1993). The checklist and

interview guideline developed by the researcher were checked by an expert panel for content validity and corrected accordingly before application

Data Collection: The researcher contacted the gatekeepers to recruit the qualified participant. Then, the appointments with the participants were made to provide information about the study and their rights to participate in the study. Those who were willing to participate in the study were asked to sign the consent form and completed the checklist. After that, the students who passed all the criteria on the checklist were invited and interviewed once, each for about 1 hour.

Data Analysis: After verbatim transcription of the interview tapes, the scripts were analyzed by coding messages with similar meanings together. Then those with the same themes were grouped into subcategories and categories. Trustworthiness of the validity of analysis on the findings, interpretation, and summary from supportive data were achieved through external auditing conducted by an experts on qualitative research.

Results

Five main themes emerged from the findings as detailed below

Theme 1: Causes of stress. There were three causes of stressful situations faced by the informants; language, coexistence in society between men and women, and learning.

1.1 Language: The informants had experienced stresses caused by their use of Thai language more than the students from other provinces. This was because of the difference in language use. Muslim students used the Malayu dialect in daily communication and at schools in their hometowns. As a result, their communication in Thai language was unclear and they were unable to comprehend deeply enough. Problems caused by inability to use the Thai language included poor understanding of lectures, inability in reading critically, being not brave to share ideas, and being shy to talk and report. These problems led to stress problems in learning. Also these students did not understand local dialects of southern Thailand used by most Buddhist students creating barrier in communication and friendship building. This could be seen in the scripts below.

“When I’m with Buddhist friends, I don’t understand what they’re saying. It makes me feel uneasy and depressed. I can’t speak Thai fluently, so I don’t want to study because I’m afraid that they will make fun of me. I’m embarrassed. Whenever the lecturer asks me to report in front of the classroom, I won’t go to class. I want to stay home.” (ID 1)

“In general when I’m at home or at school, I rarely speak Thai. Sometimes I do because the teacher asks everybody to speak Thai. Everyone isn’t allowed to use Malayu. When I come to study here, I have to speak Thai only. I speak Thai with unclear pronunciation, using wrong and strange accent. When I speak Thai, my classmates don’t understand it. I beat around the bush. Most of all when the lecturer asks everyone to share ideas, I don’t know what to say. I can’t arrange words. When I do a presentation, my accent is wrong and strange. Nervousness makes me

unable to speak. It makes me feel unconfident to present. When I meet new friends who speak dialects of southern Thailand, I can't understand, especially those who speak fast.” (ID 4)

1.2 Coexistence in society between men and women: Most of the informants were from private religious schools (pondok) where male students and female students did not do activities together. Activities were separated for men and women as directed by religion no matter talking, teasing, being together out of sight, and touching. These manners are allowed after marriage only. When Muslim students moved to study in a university where male and female students were asked to do activities together, they felt stressful and were under pressures while interacting with different gender.

“I feel at first so stressful because I come from a religious school and I never learn with male students. I've never been familiar with men. I've never touched a man. The religion doesn't allow us to be friend with men. When I was a first year student and was asked to do a “BOOM” activity, I tried to go away from it or avoid touching male students but failed. Men were on both sides and it made me feel worried.” (ID 6)

“At a religious school men and women are separated to do activities. When I'm here, everybody was asked to join activities together. It is forbidden not to touch a person of different gender. There was a pressure caused by senior students and we're afraid of them. We were forced to stand near female friends and we felt considerate to them. We were stressful and we thought it was a sin.” (ID 11)

1.3 Learning: Most of the informants completed higher secondary education from pondoks where religion teaching received more attention than other subjects. This was different from public schools or universities where academic subjects were taught and learned. The difference in focus of teaching caused stress problems since they had less academic foundation affecting poor learning and inability to link knowledge with the advanced level leading to poor achievement.

“I completed my study from pondok, I have less knowledge than other students who are from public schools. I'm afraid that I don't have enough foundation and I'll be left behind. Once I was stressful because I had never received low marks or failed the exam. I cried several times and tried to forget it, but I couldn't.” (ID 3)

“We come from religious schools, so we lack academic foundation. At the pondok there were two streams of study. In the morning we studied religion and Arabic language. In the afternoon we learned academic subjects. We were assigned to do a report and a presentation but we didn't understand the contents in the same way as we were taught by teachers. In a religious school academic subject learning was not that serious.” (ID 10)

Theme 2: Stress problem coping strategies.

2.1 Problem-focused coping: In coping with stress problems, the informants tried to find information related to problems, solved the problems straightaway, or adjusted themselves such as changing their attitude, planning and setting goal in problem solving, using reasons related to religion and beliefs to explain stressful situations, being prepared to face with upcoming events. These actions were reflected in the form of being obedient to order of Allah to accept changes. The analysis revealed the following sub themes.

2.1.1 Problem coping: The informants tackled the causes of problems and planned to cope with problems by adjusting themselves first, followed by practicing different skills and describing the causes of problems to related persons in order to find solutions.

“ Every time I have problems, I’ll try to be patient and conscious. I try to discover causes of problems and cope with them. ” (ID 6)

“I’m not good at using the language. I don’t know some words. I don’t know which Thai words are used. I try to speak Thai when I talk to whoever I meet except for my family members. When I’m with my Buddhist friends, I have to speak Thai. If I don’t, my friends won’t understand. It’s a good practice and I can learn Thai language more. ” (ID 11)

2.1.2 Positive energy creating: The informants coped with stress problems by themselves to keep balance of their emotion and feelings. They motivated themselves by using good utterances, thinking and actions.

“I never give up. I try to motivate myself because I want to be a smart teacher. I work hard to improve my weaknesses, but it takes time. I try hard for my future and my family. At present I try to change the way I speak by practicing in front of the mirror, asking friends if they understand what I’m saying. Now my language problems are reduced. One day I’ll become an effective teacher.”(ID 8).

“When I do my best, I’ll encourage myself. I always say to myself that an examination is a common thing. We can do it or we can’t. Don’t get stressful. If I do my best, it’s perfect and Allah knows my attempt.” (ID 12)

2.1.3 Changing themselves to be accepted: The informants learned to change themselves to live their lives. Apart from changing themselves in learning, they changed themselves in living with new friends, friends from other cultures, and reordering their ways of life while living in a new territory.

“We have Buddhist friends because we want to know what’s going on outside our society. If we’re sent to work in schools in other provinces, we’ll know and we can answer the questions.” (I ID 3)

“I try to adjust myself and talk to Muslim students who’re not from three southernmost provinces. They can speak southern dialects. I ask them to teach me. I’ve spent long time learning Thai and now I know many

things. I can speak Thai more fluently. I sometimes speak with incorrect pronunciation, but I try to improve all the time.”(ID 12)

2.2 Social support seeking: In problem coping, the informants tried to seek any forms of assistance no matter information, emotional support, and encouragement family members, friends, and religion. All these things enable them to cope with problems and adjust themselves. They are detailed in the following parts.

2.2.1 Family and friends as key inspiration: When stress problems occurred, the informants looked for social support to lessen their stresses. Family and friends were good sources of assistance and encouragement. They served as consultants who walked hand in hand. They helped to find ways to overcome the problems.

“Friends help me. We learn together and they make me feel encouraged. All these things make me successful today.” (ID 2)

“Every time I have an exam or do a presentation, I’ll call my parents to let them know. I ask them to pray for me. When I come out of the exam room and I can’t do it well, I’ll call to tell them that I can’t do it. They will comfort me by saying “Don’t worry. If you do your best, it’s perfect really.”” (ID 9)

2.2.2 Faith-based practice: When the informants faced with stresses and pressures, the one thing that empowers them to stand up to the problems is religion. They would pray and accept the result that was regarded as a test from Allah. They lived their lives through faith-based practice which made them motivated to confront with difficulties.

“When I have problems, I’ll listen to Uztas who teaches religion on YouTube. I’m so proud that I don’t change myself to follow the trends. I get inspired by those who are at home. They encourage me and look after me very well. ” (ID 7)

“When I cope with pressures, I feel stressful. I think all the time that this is the test from Alla who wants us to be patient and I accept what Allah wants it to happen. What heal me during that period is Al Koran reading. It makes me feel released.” (ID 9)

Theme 3: Sense of coherence.

This is an ability of to understand the harmonious world, the recognition of the world in both thoughts and emotions. The world is perceived through reality, and a person must believe that all events are caused by people and the environment. Everything can be explained, predicted, and solved by ourselves. Assistance and support can be found, and everything can be done successfully by energy.

3.1 Being open-minded and regarding problems as serious matters: Being open-minded and regarding problems as serious matters are the changes from inside of the informants which is labeled as sense of coherence. This phenomenon leads to the state of open-mindedness, flexibility, and readiness in learning cultural difference. It means

a person is optimistic and able to immerse himself in the society with diverse languages and religions in order to live together in harmony.

“We have to be patient, open-minded, and prepared to solve the problems. As we interact with friends, we must learn to understand them. We come from different parts of the country and we adopt different habits. So, we have to accept one another. As soon as we understand and accept the differences, we will change ourselves.” (ID 8)

“I try to understand that each religion is different. Rituals in Buddhism are important for Buddhists. Some rituals or cultures are not in line with my religion such as touching between men and women. Our distressful condition teaches us many things. We understand that they believe in particular things and have particular reasons. When my friends ask me why we aren’t allowed to do this and that, I try to explain to make both of us understand clearly.” (ID 12)

3.2 Learning sense of coherence from suffering lives: Facing with stresses made the informants learn suffering lives. However, such misery also served as a “teacher” enabling them to discover, grow up, become patient and strong and readjust perceptions. The stresses they had experienced become a lesson guiding them to learn sense of coherence.

“All problems teach us many things; endurance and attempt, for example. Most of all, they make us think of Allah every time, and we realize the value of the religion. The religion is very important because it reminds us of being Muslim. It tells us what is right and what is wrong, and it tells us to do the right thing” (ID 3).

“All situations I’ve experienced make me proud in terms of coexistence with other people and learning achievement. Although there are a lot of difficulties, I try hard to study. Studying is very important to me. My mom told me that she and dad had no property to give to me, but they pushed me to study. This is the only thing mom and dad can do to support me. It makes me grow stronger to overcome all the problems.” (ID 9)

Discussion

This study reflects experiences in self-adjustment in learning and sense of coherence of the Muslim students from three southernmost provinces of Thailand. This group of students told about the experiences causing them to face with stresses and difficulties in adjusting themselves in language, coexistence in society between men and women, and learning. Most of them felt nervous when they talked to new friends and did the presentation as affected by the use of Malayu dialect in daily communication and disadvantageous learning background. When they continued their study in a university, they had to adjust themselves in terms of learning habits and the use of Thai language. This resulted in unclear speaking and being made fun of. Such situations caused them to avoid speaking and sharing ideas in the classroom.

Also failure to understand southern Thai dialects led to barrier in communication and friendship building with other students. Abdullah & Sulaiman (2014) and Novera (2004) revealed about Malaysian Muslim students who studied in Australia that the students from other cultures had to change themselves to cope with daily lives, their study, the use of language that was different from those of their own, relationship building and the changing ways of life. A study conducted by Zhiyuan (2012) on self-adjustment of Chinese students who had difficulties using Thai language while studying in Thailand found that language was a key factor in adjustment process. Failure to understand local dialects tended to cause a person to face with problems from the very first step when he was exposed to a new culture. It became more difficult to adjust himself if the local language was not an international one.

The informants reflected that they had to cope with their stressful mind in adjusting themselves. They began by accepting the reality and giving reasons to explain the solutions in order to accept pressures. They maintained the balance of emotion by using their beliefs to describe the phenomena and stresses to relieve conflicts and unhappiness. This made them prepared to accept the situations and adjust themselves which was reflected in the form of accepting the changes regarded as the desire of Allah.

One of the informants stated that “if we used reasons and patience to solve problems we’re facing, we could overcome all difficulties smoothly.” (*ID 2*). For positive energy creating and changing themselves to be accepted, the informant explained that “I never give up. I try to motivate myself because I want to be a smart teacher. I work hard to improve my weaknesses, but it takes time. Today I may speak Thai with unclear pronunciation, but I hope one day I can speak better. I try hard for my future and my family. At present I try to change the way I speak by practicing in front of the mirror, asking friends if they understand what I’m saying, and asking friends which words I need more practice. Now my language problems are reduced. One day I believe I’ll become an effective teacher.”(*ID 8*).

Next, the informants viewed social support seeking was a key encouragement and the faith-based practice could make them overcome stressful mind and able to adjust themselves. One of them said “Every time I have an exam or do a presentation, I’ll call my parents to let them know. I ask them to pray for me. When I come out of the exam room and I can’t do it well, I’ll call to tell them that I can’t do it. They will comfort me by saying “Don’t worry. If you do your best, it’s perfect really.” (*ID 9*) “ I look for supporters and close friends who can listen to my problems. Fortunately, I’ve got a close friend who is Buddhist. She listens to my problems all the time. She makes me relieve, not too much stressful” (*ID 4*).

These samples were relevant to the findings in the report by Radzi, Ramly, Ghazali, Sipon & Othman (2014) which explained that a person would seek social support for emotional reason. That is, he needs love, sympathy, encouragement, and soothing words, from other people. A person might also seek social support for instrumental reason. That is, he wants to know information, or guidelines in problem coping from experts or those who share same experiences. This includes turning to religion. This means a person will use religion as a mind comforter when facing with stresses by praying, reciting the Holy Book.

A study by Aflakseir (2012) also supports these research findings. It points out that religious beliefs and social support were the strategies that helped a person to cope with the crisis more effectively than other methods.

This was because these students have remained in the situation that they lacked balance of mind caused by oppressing misery. So, family support and faith-based practice turned to be strategies used to heal their own mind. One informant explained “When I have problems that make me stressful and I can’t talk to people, I’ll pray and ask Allah for blessing words that guide me to solutions and reduce all stresses and problems. I’ll read or listen to Al Koran for a peaceful mind” (ID 2)

One interesting issue found in this study is a discovery of the growth of mind of Muslim students after experiencing difficulties in self-adjustment. This shows relative condition between sadness and self-adjustment of Muslim students leading to improvement. It reflects the development of strong sense of coherence in their mind. It is a lesson obtained from the changes and self-adjustment of Muslim students. These experiences direct them to adopt patience and endurance as shown in the informants’ words. “All problems teach us many things; endurance and attempt, for example. Most of all, they make us think of Allah every time, and we realize the value of the religion. The religion is very important because it reminds us of being Muslim. It tells us what is right and what is wrong, and it tells us to do the right thing” (ID 3). “Every problem teaches us to be strong and know that we’re growing” (ID 1).

Last but not least, we can see that the key turning point in adopting sense of coherence of Muslim students starts from self-adjustment through problem coping, obedience, and acceptance of the problems. They focused on coping with problems and by doing this they acquired sense of coherence. This is relevant to a research report by Wangswat, Paktoob & Chaimongkol (2554) which investigated sense of coherence of teenagers in three southernmost provinces of Thailand. The study found that teenagers in those provinces had the mean scores of sense of coherence in terms of ability to understand, coping strategies, and regarding problems as serious matters, at a slightly high level. It could be explained that teenagers were those who loved to learn new things, paid more attention to environment, and used reasons to consider phenomena. Experiences from younger ages made them learn and find more ways in problem solving. Teenagers were able to develop sense of coherence to a higher level. As their hometowns were in dangerous areas, they knew and sometimes had experienced the violence over there. Thus, they possessed life skills and strategies to cope with continuing unrest situations. As time went by, they learned more and developed more skills in coping with such situations (Jaeasae, Suttharangsee & Leardpaiboom, 2008).

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study revealed problem coping experiences of Muslim students from three southernmost provinces and their success within the cultural context of Thai society. The results reflect difficulties faced by Muslim students in their self-adjustment and learning. These phenomena affect their ways of life and their study, and may delay their growth. The findings indicated that problem coping strategies started from awareness of reality through making attempts to solve the problems, creating positive energy, changing themselves to be accepted by friends and the society, and seeking

social support from family and friends. Another source of power that made them have mental and emotional stability was faith-based practice and Allah. Such stability enables them to change and improve themselves to become mature and mentally strong leading them to adopt sense of coherence.

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