Resilience, Transformation, and Gender: Distress within Students at a Christian Evangelical University.pdf

Andrea C Walker, Ph.D.
INTRODUCTION

Sex differences in distress variables are common, but recent research and student examination of these differences in conservative Christian environments due to prominent religious beliefs. Few studies have measured distress by relationship to deceased, and fewer still have considered both effects of relationship and whether the death was traumatic. Incorporation of coping tasks may assist in resilience and transformation following these types of losses. College students do not like to admit struggle or ask for help, so health variables may be better indicators of bereavement-related distress than self-report measures of dealing with grief. This study compares effects of sex, loss type, relationship to deceased, and coping on distress of students in a Christian Evangelical university.

Research Questions

1. How does distress and coping differ by sex?
2. How does distress differ among loss types and relationships to the deceased?
3. How does coping interact with sex, loss type, and relationship to deceased on variables of distress?

METHODS

Participants

Sex: 365 (n = 42) males; 645 (n = 75) female
Race/Ethnicity: 69% White, Non-Hispanic; 12% African American; 3% American Indian; 3% Asian American; 4% Puerto Rican-Hispanic; 9% Other
Religious Preference: 110 (94%) Protestant Christian

Instruments (see References for more information)

1. Demographic Questionnaire: (a) gender, (b) loss in the last 24 months, (c) the relationship, and (d) how the person died (traumatic/non-traumatic).
2. TAT stories coded for coping themes (yes/no)
3. Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)
4. SCL-90-R Indices of depression, anxiety, positive symptom distress, and global symptom
5. General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)
6. Impact of Event Scale (IES) – Revised

Procedures: Data collection occurred at a private, Midwestern university with a distinctly Evangelical Christian worldview and value system. Using random sampling, stratified by year in school, participants met with researchers and provided answers to several questionnaires. Participants received $22.50 gift cards to Barnes & Noble for compensation for their time.

RESULTS

Sex and Distress (Figure 1) - Females reported significantly higher event-related distress than did males, (t(14)=2.8, p = .006, and mental health stress differences were meaningful, (t(14)=1.95, p = .053).

Sex, Loss Type and Relationship to Deceased (Figure 3)

1. No difference by loss type or relationship for males
2. Females with both losses had significantly more mental health stress, F(1,71)=6.05, p<.001, and event distress, F(1,71)=3.22, p<.001, than none or family losses; event distress for friend-only losses did not differ from the others, but it did differ from no loss on mental health distress (p<.004); loss type had little effect

Coping by Relationship (Figure 2)

1. There was a significant interaction between coping and relationship on mental health distress, F(10,189)=2.87, p<.04, and on event distress, F(10,189)=3.05, p<.01. Higher event coping both measures of distress were higher when experiencing both losses than any of the other 3 conditions. When students were coping, there was no difference.
2. Those who did not include coping themes in their TAT stories had significantly higher mental and event health stress, F(1,109)=4.95, p = .043, and event stress F(2,109)=3.99, p = .03, than those who did.
3. Those with both losses had (a) higher mental health distress, F(1,109)=6.99, p<.01, than those with the other three conditions and (b) higher event distress, F(1,108)=4.48, p<.05, than those with family or no losses, but not than friend loss.

Coping by Loss Type

1. There was a significant interaction between coping and loss type on mental health distress, F(2,109)=4.12, p<.019, students not coping had higher distress when experiencing traumatic loss. When students were coping, there was no difference.
2. Non-traumatic losses and no loss did not differ on either mental health or event distress.

Sex and Coping (Figure 4) - No significant interaction, but females score much higher on distress when coping themes were not detected in their stories. Males score lower on event distress and nearly the same on mental health distress when not coping.

CONCLUSIONS

The stringent clandestine responses from men suggest that they are hesitant to engage in bereavement-related distress. It is possible that the hyper-masculinizing environments discourages acknowledgement of struggle.

Relationship appears a slight better indicator of distress than is loss type particularly for females and/or those experiencing compound losses.

Moos and Schaffer’s coping themes seem to be key to mitigating distress and promoting resilience and transformation; these themes should be addressed in counseling and incorporated into support services for bereaved students.

Implications/Limitations

1. More research on hyper-masculinity and distress in Christian environments and on friend death is needed.
2. Religious denominational preference would have allowed investigation of cultural fit on distress. Further measures of religiosity would have better informed the study.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was made possible by PSC-CUNY research education award #68043-35-36 to David E. Balk.