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

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

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INTRODUCTION

Sex differences in distress variables are common, but recent research suggests exaggeration of these differences in conservative Christian environments due to polarized gender role expectations. 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: 36% (n = 42) males; 64% (n = 75) female
Race/Ethnicity: 69% White, Non-Hispanic; 12% African American; 3% American India; 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-Rev) indices of intrusiveness, avoidance, and hyper-arousal

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.

	Male M(SD) (n-41)	Female M(SD) (n=75)	Total M(SD) (n=116)
Beck	6(5.59)	8.77(8.07)	7.79(7.39)
SCL-DEP	57.8(11.4)	56.77(10.08)	57.14(10.52)
SCL-PSDT	54.8(9.6)	55.73(10.35)	55.41(10.07)
SCL-GSI	56.9(11.58)	56.73(10.52)	56.79(10.86)
SCL-ANX	52.15(11.46)	53.04(10.27)	52.72(10.67)
GHQ	3.41(4.48)	6.12(5.59)	5.16(5.36)
IES-INT	.91(.65)	1.38(.91)	1.21(.86)
IES-AVD	.82(.63)	1.27(.97)	1.11(.89)
IES-HYP	.55(.58)	.78(.76)	.7(.71)

Table 1: Raw Distress Variable Scores by Sex

Analysis: The 9 subscales were submitted to Principal Component Analysis (PCA. Two eigenvalues made up 81% of the variance (λ_1=6.36, λ_2=.96) and were labeled Mental Health Distress and Event Distress, respectively. Further analyses involve comparing means utilizing these 2 components.
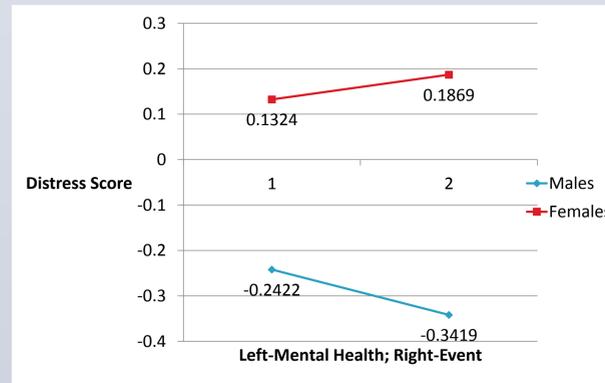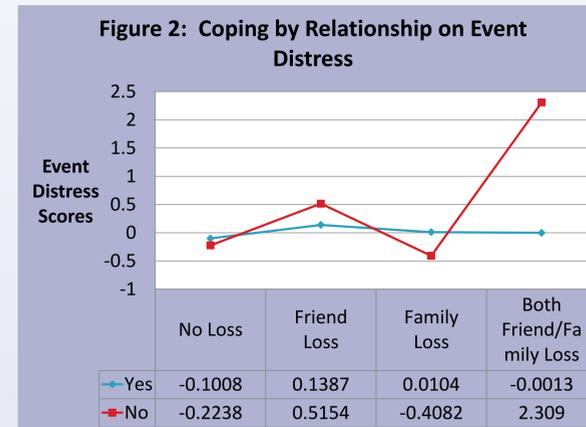

Figure 1: Distress Totals for Females and Males

RESULTS

Figure 2: Coping by Relationship on Event Distress

Event Distress Scores	No Loss	Friend Loss	Family Loss	Both Friend/Family Loss
Yes	-0.1008	0.1387	0.0104	-0.0013
No	-0.2238	0.5154	-0.4082	2.309

Sex and Distress (Figure 1) - Females reported significantly higher event distress than did males, $t(114)$=-2.8, p=.006, and mental health stress differences were meaningful, $t(114)$=-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, $F(3, 71)$=6.05, p=.001, and event distress, $F(3,71)$=3.52, p=.019, 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=.034); loss type had little effect
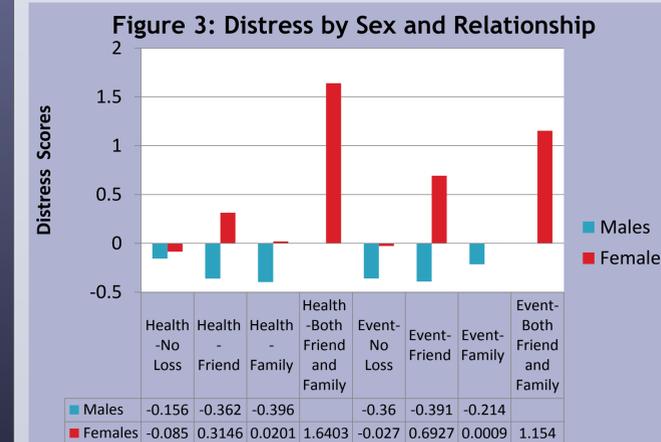

Figure 3: Distress by Sex and Relationship

	Health-No Loss	Health-Friend	Health-Family	Health-Both Friend and Family	Event-No Loss	Event-Friend	Event-Family	Event-Both Friend and Family
Males	-0.156	-0.362	-0.396	1.6403	-0.36	-0.391	-0.214	1.154
Females	-0.085	0.3146	0.0201	1.6403	-0.027	0.6927	0.0009	1.154

Coping by Relationship (Figure 2)

1. There was a significant interaction between coping and relationship on mental health distress, $F(3,108)$=2.87, p=.04, and on event distress, $F(3,108)$=3.50, p=.018; when not 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 stress on both mental health stress, $F(1,108)$=9.45, p=.003, and event stress $F(2,108)$=3.99, p=.048, than those who did.
3. Those with both losses had (a) higher mental health distress, $F(3,108)$=6.99, p<.001, than those with the other 3 conditions and (b) higher event distress, $F(3,108)$=4.48, p=.005, 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.*
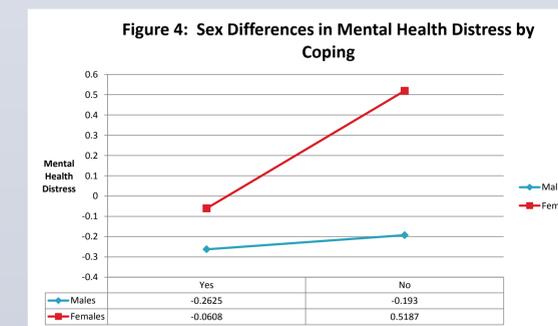

Figure 4: Sex Differences in Mental Health Distress by Coping

Mental Health Distress	Yes	No
Males	-0.2625	-0.193
Females	-0.0608	0.5187

Figure 4: Sex Differences in Distress by Coping

CONCLUSIONS

The strangely clandestine responses from men suggest that men are hesitant to express authentically regarding bereavement-related distress. It is possible that the hyper-masculine characteristic of some Christian environments discourages acknowledgement of struggle.

Relationship appears a slightly 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.
3. Small sample size, limiting analysis.

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