

Dealing with Emotional Crisis: A Phenomenological Exploration of Thai Helpers' Perception and Experiences

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to study experiences regarding emotional crisis of Thai undergraduates from the perspectives of psychological helpers. Phenomenological research method was utilized in this investigation. Twelve key informants who have provided psychological supports to undergraduate students who went through emotional crises participated in this research study. Interview data was verbatim transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Major themes regarding the experiences of crisis were identified as: situational interpretation that leads to the crisis perception, behavior responses signifying crisis distress, unhelpful thinking patterns, coping strategies, the needs for social support, environmental factors perpetuating the distress, and post-traumatic growth. Implications of these findings are offered regarding the significance of providing those undergoing the crisis with supporting systems, assisting them to create their own coping resources, and strategies in supporting those under this condition.

Introduction

Emotional crisis is a state of the mind that signifies the suffering caused by the feeling of insecurity from the environments, personal dilemmas, or psychological distress. Past literature has indicated that some of the tragedies/negative life events happening to students, especially those in a university level, cause severe distress and emotional crisis. Person in severe stress and emotional crisis may have difficulty in studying, maintaining social life, and cultivating interpersonal relationship (Abdulghani 2008; Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton 2003; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig 2006, 2007; Lucus & Berkel 2005; Ramasoott 2004). Scholars concluded that stress and emotional crisis have been related to academic problems, coping strategies, and happiness and psychological well-being. In Thailand, Sukkapan, Tungtanathanit, Sararat, and Sutusanajinda (2006) studied stress and mental health of sixty college students in a university in North Eastern of Thailand. The researchers identified stressors for these students as academic difficulties, financial problems, and personal problems. A better understanding about psychological experiences of those who were in the crisis would be beneficial to the development of both preventative and intervention measures. The objective of this research is therefore to study experiences regarding emotional crisis of Thai undergraduates from the perspectives of psychological helpers. Phenomenological research method will be utilized in this investigation.

Method

Participants

Researchers used a snowball sample technique to recruit participants for this research. They were twelve participants participating in this research study. The participants represent a reasonably homogenous, purposive sample. They were all working in higher education institutes and provided psychological supports to undergraduate students who went through an emotional crisis. At the time of the interview 10 participants are counseling psychologists, and 2 of them are academic advisors.

Procedure

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed individually by research assistants. The research assistants were graduate students in a counseling psychology program. All of them had an experience in conducting qualitative research. They have been trained by the researchers for three, each for two hours long. The training included explaining about overall research project, introducing interview and probing questions, and practicing interview questions. The interview questions were “1) Could you describe your perception on student’s emotional crisis?”, “2) What influences emotional crisis?”, “3) Could you describe what happen to student when they are in crisis?”, and “4) What factors are related to emotional crisis and how?” The interviews were 40 – 90 minutes long. The interview data was verbatim transcribed, and then rechecked to ensure that the transcripts were correctly matched with the recorded. Afterwards, the verbatim transcripts serving as the raw data for the study were coded and analyzed.

Trustworthiness

Researchers establish trustworthiness of the research via method suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as employing data triangulation, investigator triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and providing audit trial.

Analysis

Major themes regarding the experiences were identified as: *situational interpretation that leads to the crisis perception, behavior responses signifying crisis distress, unhelpful thinking patterns, coping strategies, needs for social support, environmental factors perpetuating the distress, and post-traumatic growth*. Details of each category are described as follows.

Situational interpretation that leads to the crisis perception

The participants identified circumstances in which students perceived as unmanageable. Students recognize that such events or circumstances are important and have major impact on their lives. These circumstances can be divided into 3 themes; *having academic difficulty, having interpersonal relationship difficulty, and environmental effect*. Participants shared that *having academic difficulty* impacted students significantly. As quoted from participant 5 "*the key is...when student comes here because he cannot understand what he read, and do not know what to do with it. I'm sure that I won't pass the exam, fear to fail*". Participants also shared that *having interpersonal relationship difficulty* significantly impacts students' emotions. The interpersonal relationship included relationship with significant others, family members or friends. A quote from participant 3 reflects this, "*For example is the case of the girl dumping her boyfriend. This is a crisis for the boy. He was in crisis. His academic performance went downhill. He put his life in danger, wanting to hurt himself and his girlfriend.*" The last one was *environmental change*. Participants indicated the effect from the environment to students related to students' emotional crisis. "*...the crisis situation, like, students from Southern provinces, or when the Tsunami hit, or the unrest situations in the Southern border, parents were killed and [the student] became an orphan in one day...*"

Behavior responses signifying crisis distress

Beside of the situation, participants also indicated students' behavior during the crisis. Participants observed the behavior cues from students in crisis while they were working together. *Behavior responses signifying crisis distress* consisted of three themes: *Isolation from the society, lack of interest in learning or a decline in academic performance*, and *self-injured*. For the first theme, *Isolation from society*, participants noticed that students in crisis seemed to withdraw from peer groups, family or even the helpers themselves sometimes. Indeed, at that stage, the student seemed to withdraw from everything, declining to communicate with others. Participant 1 stated that, "*If he has emotional problems, he is separated himself from friends. I can see the way he withdraws from others by not communicating...*". Participants were able to observe withdrawal behaviors in classroom and got information from friends. As for the *Lack of interest in learning or academic performance decline*, participants mentioned their identification of students in emotional crisis from their classroom behaviors. Even when these showed up in class, they appeared inattentive to class materials, just sitting still in class but failing to

focus. *"Students in emotional crisis, they rarely studied. They skip class. Even though he might show up in class but they are quite distracted. He was just burning the time."* The last theme under *behavior responses signifying crisis distress* was *self-injured*. *Self-injured* varied from the minimum level of punching the wall, cutting, and hitting his/herself. As participant 6 stated, *"When his girlfriend broke up with him, he had a suicidal thought... hurting himself with a glass bottle. Some might get drunk. This way it will be negative, he incriminates herself."*

Unhelpful thinking patterns

The participants also recognized unhelpful thinking patterns of students in emotional crisis. Students might evaluate the situation they face as things that go beyond their abilities. They tried to cope with the situations but nothing helped. Therefore they evaluated the situation as unmanageable. This was the first theme under *unhelpful thinking pattern*, *Evaluated situation as unmanageable*. According to participant 4, *"Some students could not see light at the end of the tunnel. There is nothing outside the limits of this life. They had been trying so many things. They saw only limitations. They could see things beyond the limitation. They just knew they had no choice in that time"*. The unhelpful thinking pattern also included *projection*. Students might try to get an explanation about the situation related to emotional crisis by projecting all false to others. As participant 6 stated *"She denied and rejected what she had to face. She used many methods such as blaming others, blaming professors, blaming boyfriends, blaming other things..."* Not only did the theme *Evaluating situation as unmanageable and projection* emerge, the participants also perceived the points of view of students who are in emotional crisis as *pessimistic*. Students tended to see things in the dark side and were likely to interpret everything in a negative tone. As participant 3 stated *"he interpreted everything, like his friend's reaction to himself-- when his friend says no to him or when the friend is unavailable to chat. Other people might think it's ok. But for him, he feels like the whole world reject him. Everything collapses. This is very painful. His friend is not good to him. He sees everything from the pessimistic view, nothing good at all. His mom is not good. His friends are not good."*

Coping strategies

Participants identify problem solving strategies utilized by students in emotional crisis as themes relevant to *active coping*, *avoidant coping*, and *seeking support from others*. For the first theme, *active coping* was defined as the process which with students in emotional crisis used to deal with problem encountered. For example, participant 1 mentioned about when her client was seeking for more information in order to deal with his problem better, *"This case was tried to search for a solution, in order to make himself getting over the feeling he had."* The second theme was *avoidant coping*. Participants perceived that some students tried to avoid coping with the problem. Some repressed the feelings they had. Some students tried to get distracted, ignoring the problems and trying to have fun with friends. As quoted from participant 1 *"...Some students just rush out from problems, trying to press them. Then turned to other matters, such as trying to forget about the stressors..."*. Some students just withdrawn from school because he tried to avoid coping with the problems as participant 5 stating, *"He did not choose to do so, he just tried to run away. He never came back to it."* The last coping strategy was *seeking support from others*. Students in emotional crisis sought help from others around them; namely, friends, instructors,

academic advisors, or professional helpers. As quoted from participant 5 "...when he is in crisis. He has tried so many things. He didn't know what to do next, so he asked for help..."

Needs for social support

The fifth category that explains the experiences of students in emotional crisis from helpers' perspective was the need for social support. Students appeared to wish to obtain support from others. If these needs can be fulfilled, they are likely to help them to cope with the problems better. These needs were the needs for emotional and cognitive support. Emotional support was quite important for students in emotional crisis for they need to have someone who cares, who is able to understand them, and does not judge them. As participant 4's quoted "...They want to have someone who listen to them, who can be there with them. Some students know what he supposes to do to solve the problem. But he doesn't have the courage to do so. He has no one. So he is too scared to deal with the problem." Cognitive support was also important for students in emotional crisis. When students were in crisis, they need someone who can guide them. Even they had cognitive ability, but during the crisis they might not be able to maintain their cognitive strengths they possess, "like he doesn't see the problem clearly...some students want someone to clarify the problem..."

Environmental factors perpetuating the distress

Environmental factors were significant for students in emotional crisis because they could exert both constructive and destructive influence. The environmental factors perpetuating the distress included family, friends, and instructors. For the first theme, family was the most significant factor. If student had supportive family, he/she is likely to be able to adjust to any problems. As quoted from participant 7 "...in some cases, he has a family who understands him. It is very helpful. But in some cases, he has a family who aggravates the situation. So this is the role of family. Instead of helping student, they make it worse...". The second factor was friend. Due to the developmental stage of college students, friends are important to them. Students were very close to their friends. So friends were in the position that could help them and understand them. As participant 7 mentioned, "...mostly friends are very helpful. When students have problems, friends are very supportive. But in some cases, the person doesn't have a supportive friend. That's very difficult...". The last factor was instructors. Students were in college or university. Instructors had an opportunity to see students regularly. So instructors were one of the closest supportive factors that students could access. If instructors paid attention to students in class, they could notice that a particular student might be in a crisis. Then they would be able to refer the student to professional helpers". As quoted from participant 11 "...some cases were referred from instructors. The instructor observed students in class. He/she noticed that the student seems depressed ..."

Post-traumatic growth

After students got through emotional crisis, they had a positive change. They obtain growth psychologically and cognitively. They also changed their behaviors. They learned from their experiences. Post-traumatic growth consisted of three themes that were *accepting the reality*, *learning from past experience*, and *having energy*. For *accepting the reality*, participants were able to see that students were able to be with the reality. Once students were able to accept the reality, they are less likely to fall

into a vicious loop of emotional crisis again. As participant 5 quoted, "...He has his own life. He is happy. Because he understands that, "this is it". His girlfriend is just like this. Things were bad in the past because he had tried to change it. But he can not change others ...". The second theme, *learning from past experience*, students learned the effective coping strategies when they tried to cope with emotional crisis. When they had problems again, they were able to use appropriate strategies. "...past experience is very helpful. If students had an experience to deal with problem, they would learn something ...". The last theme was having energy. Students who got through crisis, obtain changes. They had energy when they do things. Their nonverbal also changed. Even they were in the same environment, they were livelier. They were able to smile and enjoy life. For school, they had more responsibility. They also had better relationship with parent and friends. As participant 1 stated "...He/she able to be with friends. He/she laughs wholeheartedly....In the past he/she separated his/herself from friends. Now he/she has friends....."

Discussion

The experiences of students with emotional crisis from helpers' perception were identified as seven major themes which are *situational interpretation that leads to the crisis perception, behavior responses signifying crisis distress, unhelpful thinking patterns, coping strategies, the needs for social support, environmental factors perpetuating the distress, and post-traumatic growth*. Circumstances in which students perceived as unmanageable is significant relate to emotional crisis, especially, the circumstances that have major impact on their lives. They might have difference perceptions on circumstances; some might perceive failing exam as significant event, some might not. So psychological helpers should understand students' perception regarding circumstance they face. The *situational interpretation that leads to the crisis perception* can be explained by concept of secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Students evaluated the circumstance as unmanageable circumstance. Students also employed both problem focused and emotional focused coping. But they still evaluated their circumstance as unmanaged. While they were trying to cope, they also evaluated their environment. Environmental factors were significant for students in emotional crisis. They could exert both constructive and destructive influence. If students had support from others, either emotional or cognitive support, they tended to cope with the problem better.

For *post-traumatic growth*, this finding related to concept of posttraumatic growth by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006). Posttraumatic growth is a construct that occurs as the result of one's struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, and traumatic event. After students got through emotional crisis, they developed better understanding in life. They obtain growth psychologically and cognitively.

In conclusion, psychological helpers should help students establish social support network. Psychologists should also provide those undergoing the crisis by assisting them to create their own coping resources, and strategies in supporting those under this condition.

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