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**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY TRAITS AND
ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN
PAKISTAN**

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Abstract

Over the years, increased academic stress has been experienced among postgraduate students of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The struggle for achieving higher level of academic performance can produce academic stress and lead postgraduate students to low academic performance. Research indicates that the increasing amount of stress poses a serious problem for many postgraduate students at the university level. Despite other factors like academic environment, work load and peer expectations; student's personality traits also play an important role in the level of perceived stress among postgraduate students of HEIs. It has been observed that levels of academic stress among postgraduate students vary according to their personality traits. Personality traits have a significant role in student's life to handle academic related issues which may lead to decline in the academic performance. Stress brings changes in the personalities of postgraduate students' and can alter their behaviour. With regards to Pakistan, where students belong to different areas and cultural background, with below average education standards due to paucity of educated and committed teachers, therefore, Pakistani students feel increased stress due to the personality traits that they possess. The current study is mainly focusing on the relationship between personality traits and academic stress among postgraduate students of the HEIs in Pakistan.

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1. Introduction

The personality traits of postgraduate students ultimately guide them towards experiencing a high level of pressure and academic stress resulting in lowered academic performance. Usually, students' reaction to their academic environment is in accordance with the personality traits they possess and these personality traits are part of their academic life, which cannot be changed easily. When achievement criteria of a student and personality features overlap, and therefore a student cannot respond accordingly, then it will create a lot of pressure on students that can further produce academic stress.

Research indicates that the increasing amount of stress poses a serious problem for many postgraduate students at the university level (Rana & Mahmood, 2010). Studies show that postgraduate students most often require counseling as compared to students of the same age who are employed (Stallman, 2010). This suggests that postgraduate students can face more difficulty in handling with academic stress as compared to others in a different employment setting. Stress brings changes in the personalities of postgraduate students' and can alter their behavior (Wadee et al., 2001). Furthermore, if academic stress in the students is not handled properly, it can lead to low academic performance (Chapell, 2005). Akgun and Ciarrochi (2003) commented that academic stress has an adverse effect on the performance of university students in preparing their assignments effectively. As such, the purpose of this study is to identify the personality traits that act as important factors contributing to the academic stress of postgraduate students.

As mentioned earlier, research work needs hard work, commitment, time and efforts to complete. If the postgraduate students feel that they cannot cope with these requirements, they feel stressed. Nandamuri, and Gowthami (2011) have pointed out several factors that caused much stress on students such as surprise quizzes, semester/trimester system, frequent assignments, financial constraints, fear of failure and competition with the class fellows. A student's academic existence in Pakistan is exposed to different types of stressors, like the burden of academics with a compulsion of achievement, unclear future and unseen problems for integration into the structure. The postgraduate students face societal, sensitive, physical and family complications that can disturb their learning aptitude and produce academic stress (Ahmed Riaz & Ramzan, 2009; Khan Altaf & Kausar, 2013). According to Kausar (2010), postgraduate students of higher education institutions in Pakistan are under immense stress due to the high workload, coping with study material, academic burden and high expectations for higher grades. The frequency of tests, time allocation and pressure for high grades create a lot of stress (Cretsinger, 2003; Misra & McKean, 2000; Polychronopoulou & Divaris, 2005). According to Bukhsh et al. (2011) family problems at home, lack of good relations with fellows, friction with the lecturer(s), scarcity of resources to do academic work and overcrowded classrooms also add to the stress level significantly. These stressors have the capability to detract the student thus making them disoriented, disorganize and unable to cope with the situation. Prolonged stressful environment results in health issues (Desa Yusooff & Kadir, 2012; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006). Ahmed et al. (2009), found the higher level of academic stress among the postgraduate students enrolled in higher education programs in Pakistan.

Personality traits have a significant role in student's life to handle academic related issues which may lead to decline in the academic performance. A unique pattern of feeling, thinking and behaving shapes the personality of an individual (Schmitt et al., 2007). Personality traits are part of every human being, so

it can influence the performance of university students as well. Generally, students at university level respond to the academic environment subject to their personality traits that they possess. Some students have the personality to handle task very confidently and tactfully, but there are some students who cannot handle tasks confidently, feel nervous, and hesitate to interact with their classmates and especially with their course instructors and supervisors (Crockett et al., 2007). With regards to Pakistan, where students belong to different areas and cultural background, with below average education standards due to paucity of educated and committed teachers, therefore, Pakistani students feel increased stress due to the personality traits that they possess. As in Pakistan, studies at postgraduate level are a blend of both course work and research work and it is difficult to handle both the activities at the same time.

2. Problem Statement

Several studies have investigated the impact of personality traits on academic stress (Chai & Low, 2015; Allred et al., 2013; Besser & Shackelford, 2007). However, limited literature is focused on the relationship between the big five personality traits and academic stress among the students of the higher education. Furthermore, some studies have investigated on organization settings and employee job performance (Bashir et al., 2013; Shahzad et al., 2011; Abdullah, Rashid & Omar, 2013). Previous studies have revealed that no study investigated on the relationship between big five in academic stress in explaining academic performance of postgraduate students. Numerous previous studies have examined stress and its relation with the postgraduate students (Keady, 1999; Nzewi, Chiekezie & Ikon, 2016; Nelson et al., 2001; MAH, 2011; Das & Sahoo, 2012; Bukhsh, Shahzad & Nisa, 2011; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011; Cretsinger, 2003; Sharma et al., 2013). The review of literature reveals that few studies have been conducted on the relationship between stress and academic performance of postgraduate students whereas no research study could be found between the relationship of Big 5 with academic stress of postgraduate students specially in the context to Pakistan. Therefore, the current study will bridge this gap to examine the relationship of the big five personality traits and academic stress among the postgraduate students of the higher education in Pakistan.

3. Research Questions

Based on the problem statement the main objective of the current study is to study the relationship between the five dimensions of the personality traits i.e., conscientiousness, neuroticism, extraversion, openness and agreeableness. The following research question has been developed to achieve the current study objective.

Do postgraduate student's personality traits have any relationship with the academic stress?

4. Purpose of the Study

Worldwide, students at postgraduate level are facing difficulties in adjusting to a new academic environment and are experiencing lower academic performance. Academic performance of postgraduate students has attracted considerable attention from researchers (Wu & Wu, 2008; Kausar, 2010; Abbasi et al., 2011) as studies at postgraduate level are more challenging as compared to the undergraduate studies

because the postgraduate students are involved in the taught courses and research activities in order to complete their degree (Smits, Verbeek & De Buissonje, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, research work needs hard work, commitment, time and efforts to complete. If the postgraduate students feel that they cannot cope with these requirements, they feel stressed. Academic stress can further influence the academic performance of the university students. Nandamuri, and Gowthami (2011) have pointed out several factors that caused much stress on students such as surprise quizzes, semester/trimester system, frequent assignments, financial constraints, fear of failure and competition with the class fellows. A student's life in Pakistan is subjected to different kinds of stresses, such as the pressure of academics with an obligation of success, uncertain future and difficulties envisaged for integration into the system. The postgraduate students face social, emotional, physical and family problems which may affect their learning ability and academic performance (Ahmed Riaz & Ramzan, 2009; Khan Altaf & Kausar, 2013). According to Kausar (2010), postgraduate students of higher education institutions in Pakistan are under immense stress due to the high workload, coping with study material, academic burden and high expectations for higher grades.

However, in Pakistan, the culture of research is deficient at the college (undergraduate) and university (postgraduate) levels. The researchers believe that research should start at least from the college level. It is a common observation that, at the postgraduate level, students struggle with grasping the basics of research, which they should have already learnt at the college level. More than 50% of the students quit their postgraduate studies due to deficiency of appropriate skills required for research activities (Daily Times, 2014). The culture of research cannot be developed with the construction of laboratories and buying costly equipment but with a change in the student's attitude towards learning. Based on personal observations, the researcher believes that what is generally lacking in the students of undergraduate and postgraduate institutions of Pakistan is an understanding of critical analysis. Students are generally not introduced to the concepts of critical analysis and its application. Thus, they experience more stress during their postgraduate studies. Problems include low research productivity when performing different research related assignments and competition among other classmates (Kausar, 2010; Abbasi *et al.*, 2011; Mushtaq & Khan, 2012).

Personality traits have a significant role in student's life to handle academic related issues which may lead to decline in the academic performance. A unique pattern of feeling, thinking and behaving shapes the personality of an individual (Schmitt *et al.*, 2007). Personality traits are part of every human being, so it can influence the performance of university students as well. Generally, students at university level respond to the academic environment subject to their personality traits that they possess. Some students have the personality to handle task very confidently and tactfully, but there are some students who cannot handle tasks confidently, feel nervous, and hesitate to interact with their classmates and especially with their course instructors and supervisors (Crockett *et al.*, 2007). With regards to Pakistan, where students belong to different areas and cultural background, with below average education standards due to paucity of educated and committed teachers, therefore, Pakistani students feel increased stress due to the personality traits that they possess. As in Pakistan, studies at postgraduate level are a blend of both course work and research work and it is difficult to handle both the activities at the same time.

Therefore, the current study bridges this gap to investigate the relationship between the big five personality traits among academic stress among the postgraduate students of the higher education in Pakistan.

5. Research Methods

The current study aims to investigate the relationship between personality traits, academic stress and academic performance. For this purpose, the current study will propose five hypotheses. This indicates that quantitative data is required to test the relationship. For this reason, the current research will use quantitative research design to investigate the relationships. Quantitative research design is more suitable for the conditions of the current study. Moreover, findings of the quantitative research design are more generalizable as compare to the qualitative research finding. Thus, researcher opted quantitative research design for the current study.

6. Findings

The findings from this study have provided a theoretical, contextual and managerial contribution to the literature on the relationship between personality traits, and academic stress context.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

First of all, this research will add to knowledge enhancement in the area of higher education and its relationship with students of HEIs. Previous work was mostly focused on the undergraduate student's perspective rather than a postgraduate perspective (Khan *et al.*, 2013; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2002; Shi *et al.* 2015). Thus, the current study will contribute to the body of knowledge by exploring the study related problems of postgraduate students in HEIs. There are very few studies in the available literature that focused on the postgraduate students and their research related problem especially in the case of Pakistan HEIs.

6.2. Managerial Implications

This study will provide managerial implications from its empirical evidence and validation, which would make it generally applicable in the education-related industry in Pakistan in general and for higher education institutions in particular. First of all, the results of the current study will suggest those personality traits will be critical in enhancing the effectiveness of students' academic performance. Thus, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the academic performance and reduce the impact of academic stress in Pakistan requires HEIs top management commitment. Any initiative without management support in order to enhance the academic performance would be futile in the absence of management support directly or indirectly.

6.3. Policy implication

The findings of the current study will also relevant to Government level policy in accordance with the Higher Education Commission planning for future researchers. These policies will be employed

to monitor and control and make progress towards the better education systems, research environment for the students.

7. Conclusion

Individuals play a key role in the workplace (Khan et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2017; Qureshi et al., 2015; Qureshi et al., 2016; Yasir et al., 2016; Yasir et al., 2017). There has been a great disagreement among researchers about the last trait of personality. Few named it intellect or intellection (Borgatta, 1964; McCrae & Costa, 1987; Digman, 1990). Others called it as culture or openness to experience (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Norman, 1963). But Digman, (1990) has concluded this discussion by stating that openness to experience refers to all of these traits. Openness to experience explains the degree to which an individual is fascinating or imaginative. It refers to personality attributes such as, curiosity, novelty, sensitivity, creativity, aesthetics, intellect, independence of mind and artistic sense (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Karaman et al., 2010; Dagal & Bayindir, 2016). People who score low in openness to experience are usually dull, conventional and conservative and on the other hand people with a high score are innovative, novel, social, political and ethical (Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003).

The students who are highly opened are considered to have higher imagination and have will to share new ideas. Such students are in a better position in managing new learning situations that facilitates them towards higher academic achievements and less academic stress (Vermetten et al., 2001; Zeidner & Matthews, 2000). Thus, the students with 'openness to experience' trait perceive lower level of academic stress. The study will examine the relationship between academic stress and academic performance using personality trait, openness to experience, of postgraduate students in the context of Pakistan.

A review of literature on academic stress revealed that mostly literature has overlooked the personality related factors that can cause the academic stress among the postgraduate students. Impacts of academic stress vary from person to person, depending on the personality traits and personal resilience. For the students, the personality traits are important in terms of their academic stress level. Students with positive personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion and agreeableness) tend to perceive lower level of academic stress. On the other hand, students with negative personality traits like neuroticism tend to perceive higher level of academic stress. A few researchers have acknowledged the relationship of personality traits with academic stress. Few studies have been conducted to examine the relationship of big five personality traits with academic stress. However, their study was focused only on medical students. There is a scarcity of efforts by the researchers to investigate the relationship of personality traits with academic stress especially in the case of Pakistan HEIs. To fill this gap the current study is focused on this topic to investigate the relationship between personality traits and academic stress among postgraduate students in Pakistan

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