



## Predictors of Stress and Coping Strategies of US Accelerated vs. Generic Baccalaureate Nursing Students: An Embedded Mixed Methods Study



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### SUMMARY

*Background:* Stress is an inevitable part of life and is especially pervasive in the lives of nursing students. Identifying the predictors of stress as well as coping strategies used can allow for the implementation of appropriate coping interventions to assist in the management of stress in nursing students. Mixed methods research that has been undertaken to gain an understanding about student stress, especially juxtaposing generic versus accelerated nursing students could not be identified.

*Objectives:* (1) Identify predictors of stress between accelerated and generic Baccalaureate Nursing (BSN) students; and (2) Describe stressors and coping strategies used by accelerated students in comparison with generic students.

*Design:* Embedded mixed methods study.

*Setting:* Accelerated and generic BSN third- and fourth-year nursing students at two Midwestern universities.

*Participants:* 210 participants: accelerated ( $n = 75$ ) and generic ( $n = 135$ ).

*Methods:* A questionnaire packet, including demographics, history of depression, the Perceived Stress Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and open-ended questions were administered to students at the end of a class. Simultaneous multiple regression was used to examine predictors of stress. Content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data.

*Results:* Predictors of stress for both the accelerated and generic groups included history of depression, year in the program, emotional support, and self-esteem. Fear of failure and clinical incompetence, problematic relationships, and time management issues were identified as major stressors. Coping strategies used by both groups included positive thinking and social support.

*Conclusions:* Senior students with a history of depression, low self-esteem, and little social support were more likely to experience high levels of stress. This gives educators the potential to identify at risk students and establish stress reduction programs. Encouraging students to use individualized coping strategies will be beneficial.

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### Introduction

Stress is an inevitable part of life and is especially pervasive in the lives of nursing students. Baccalaureate nursing students, both generic and accelerated, experience a great deal of stress due to the intensity of the academic and clinical components of their nursing programs. Generic students are those who are working to complete their studies in a traditional 4-year BSN program, whereas accelerated students are those who have previously completed a Baccalaureate or higher degree and are completing their nursing coursework within 14 months–2 years. Educators can decrease stress by teaching stress reduction techniques, thus providing students with positive lifelong coping strategies.

Use of social support in the form of family and friends for stress management has been extensively studied with nursing students while social support from faculty and peers remains understudied (Reeve et al., 2013) although social support from faculty was found to decrease student stress (Muirhead and Locker, 2008). With the emphasis on student engagement and student success, there is a need for increased faculty awareness of student stress. Luo and Wang (2009) found that by improving students' coping skills, problem solving ability improved. This aim of this study was to identify the (1) predictors of stress; and (2) stressors and coping strategies used by accelerated and generic U.S. nursing students.

### Background/Literature

Studies of stress in nursing students began in the 1930s. Results of those studies are consistent with studies conducted today (Gibbons

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et al., 2009; Reeve et al., 2013). In 1939, nursing students identified (1) concerns regarding relationships with faculty, physicians, and patients, (2) fatigue, (3) graduating, and (4) "social, personal, and emotional problems" (Torrop, 1939, p. 177). Recent studies have shown that for today's nursing students, practice in the clinical setting is a major source of stress. Not only must students deal with interpersonal interactions with clinical instructors and nursing staff, but they also are stressed by their lack of knowledge; insecurity with clinical skills; caring for dying patients; fear of failure (Gibbons et al., 2009; Gibbons, 2010; Jimenez et al., 2010); and clinical placements (Prymachuk and Richards, 2007). While mild levels of stress can have a positive effect on students by offering alternative solutions to problems, and increasing motivation, high stress levels can lead to depression (Zebb and Beck, 1998; Ross et al., 2005).

No general consensus exists as to which year of the program is most stressful for nursing students. Some studies have reported that stress increases as a student progresses through the nursing program (Lindop, 1991; Tully, 2004; Jimenez et al., 2010), but Lo (2002) found that second year students experience the highest levels of stress. Severity of stress has been found to differ among types of nursing programs (Lindop, 1991; Tully, 2004; Jimenez et al., 2010).

Studies also revealed that use of positive coping strategies lessens student stress (Gibbons et al., 2007; Hegge and Larson, 2008). For students social support in the form of family and friends was the primary and most positive coping strategy used for stress reduction (Lindop, 1991; Lo, 2002; Ross et al., 2005; Gibbons et al., 2007). Although faculty were sought for support in matters pertaining clinical experiences and performance (Mahat, 1998), many students preferred to work out their difficulties alone (Gibbons et al., 2009). Hsiao et al. (2010) in a study of students in Taiwan found that nursing students possessing strong spirituality experienced less clinical stress.

Students engage in negative as well as positive coping skills. Studies have found that a small number turn to drugs and alcohol (Timmins et al., 2011, p. 764) indicating a need for promotion of alcohol and drug reduction.

Cognitive appraisal of events or circumstances as stressful or threatening by the individual is the underlying framework for this research (Folkman et al., 1986). The unique individual interpretation of situations means that any shared situation or condition may be perceived differently within the group, so that an individual may be more or less affected than others in the group. Allowing for this variation, there are events or circumstances that may be commonly seen as stressful. Identification of those common worries would be significant in understanding the accumulation of stress or allostatic load of the student.

Specific predictors comparing stress of US generic and accelerated BSN students has not been found, nor has a comparison of coping strategies used by US accelerated and generic BSN students. Accelerated BSN students may have higher levels of stress than generic students due in part to the rapid pace and intensity of the program. No mixed methods research has been found to gain an understanding about students' stress, especially juxtaposing generic versus accelerated nursing students based on quantitative and qualitative results. Results from this study can be used to help students use coping strategies tailored to their circumstances, thereby facilitating learning and increasing student success. The objectives of this study were (1) to identify the predictors of stress between generic and accelerated BSN students; (2) to describe stressors and coping strategies used by accelerated BSN students in comparison with generic students.

## Methods

### Design

This embedded mixed methods study is part of a larger study which examined predictors of depression among BSN students in four countries

(Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and the USA). It primarily focused on the cross-sectional, correlational quantitative arm (postpositivist philosophy) to examine predictors of stress, with qualitative data (constructivist philosophy) embedded to provide supportive information on stress and coping strategies among accelerated and generic nursing students at two Midwest universities (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011) (Fig. 1). A questionnaire packet consisting of demographics, history of depression, the Perceived Stress Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (to collect quantitative data), and open-ended questions (to collect qualitative data) was administered to participants.

### Participants

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals were obtained from six universities in the four countries. Participants were a convenience sample of 210 junior and senior generic and accelerated undergraduate nursing students in two nursing programs in the Midwest. There were 135 generic junior and senior students and 75 accelerated junior and senior students. Students were approached after class and were invited to participate in the study. The purpose, risks, and benefits of the study were explained; students were informed that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained; and that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point. Students agreeing to participate were given consent forms and questionnaires. Demographic data collected consisted of age, gender, year in the nursing program, and previous degree(s). Students who completed the questionnaire received a \$5.00 gift certificate to a restaurant.

### Instruments

Three reliable, validated, widely-used instruments were utilized in paper and pencil format to identify predictors of stress: The Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ; Levenstein et al., 1993), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (R-SE; Rosenberg, 1989), and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). Five open-ended-questions asked participants about their concerns in their personal life as well as the nursing program; how they were handling these concerns; and to include thoughts on any other issues of concern.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe the sample and simultaneous multiple regression to examine

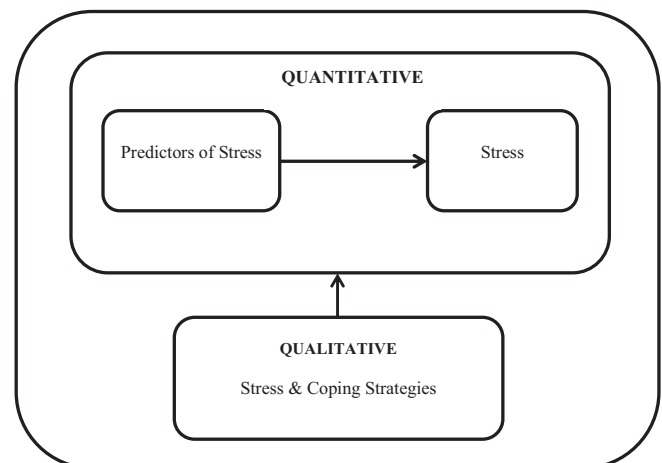


Fig. 1. Embedded Correlational Model of Predictors of Stress and Coping Strategies in Accelerated vs. Generic BSN Students.

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