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Management of Gifted Education Programme in Nigeria Dr [Mrs] Binta I. Zaifada & Apagu Kambayari...	82
Management of Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria and Quality Assurance Chika Josephine Ifedili (PhD) / Machie, Nkechi...	87
Effect of Theory/Methodology on Practical Skill Achievement in Typewriting among Business Education Students of College of Education (Technical) Gombe Hannatu Garba Joseph...	94
Repositioning Nigerian Youths for Economic Empowerment through Entrepreneurship ¹ Sani Hussaini Gimi ² Gambo Sambo ³ Babangida Aminu...	98
Study of Factors Leading to the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry A. Danladi* & O.A. Noah...	103
Influence of Biographical and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Poultry Farmers on the Extent of Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS) in Poultry Production in Sabon-Gari and Giwa Local Government Areas of Kaduna State Nigeria Mshelizah R. J ¹ (M.Sc.), M.O. Akinola ² (PhD) and D.F. Omokore ² (PhD)...	110
Sustainable Agricultural Development in Nigeria: Effect of Poor Investment and the Challenges of an Agricultural Information Repository * ¹ Kasa, M. Gabriel and ² B.D. Bannah...	118
The Role of Sponsorship in the Development of Sports in Nigeria Muktar, Sani Bichi...	123
The Challenges of Educational Planning In Nigeria and the Way Forward Dr. Akindele Ige...	130
Education for Social Integration: A Glimse at Social Studies Curriculum for Pastoral Nomads in Nigeria Dr. I.D. Abubakar...	135
Exploring Human Resources and Capacity-Building Assets Intrinsic In the Social Studies Curriculum in Achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) In Nigeria: Some Challenges of the Teacher Professor C. C. Okam and Dr. Mani Ahmed...	139
Vocational Aspirations of Secondary School Students in Ekiti State: Counselling for Appropriate Career Development D.O. Arowolo PhD...	150
British Colonial Education and the Emergence of Elite 1900 – 1955: A Panacea for Social Movements in Nigeria Danmaraya, Ibrahim...	155

STRESS COPING STRATEGIES OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY ATHLETES DURING COMPETITION

By

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the stress coping strategies of Nigerian university athletes during competition. Apart from facing the problems prevailing in the university community, he or she has to cope with the added stress of competition, such as inter-faculties, NUGA, WAUG, Classics and the like. This research therefore studied the strategies such athletes adopt to cope with stress during competition. An ex-post facto research design was used for the study. The population consist of 587 (336 male and 251 female) athletes who attended the 19th NUGA held at University of Ibadan. The results of the study revealed that social support was the most appreciated strategy of coping with stress by university athletes. This support comes from athlete's peers, lecturers, coaches, teammates, family members, friends and most importantly sport psychologists. Furthermore, the study revealed insignificant difference between gender groups, sport groups and NUGA experience in the strategies university athletes used to cope with stress during competition. However, there were differences between athletes with different age groups and years of experiences in sports competition in their stress coping strategies. Athletes of 21-25 years expressed different coping strategies with athletes of other age groupings, and those with three years of sports experiences significantly differ than athletes of one, two, and four and above years of competition experiences. It is therefore suggested that coaches, families, friends, colleagues, lecturers and sport psychologists should continue to educate and support athletes to cope with stress effectively and appropriately.

Introduction

Stress, the body's physical, mental and chemical reaction to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, endanger or irritate it is part of life from childhood. For most people, life is a succession of stressful experiences (McQuade and Aikman, 1974; Umeasiegbu, 1988). Individuals today live in stressful conditions brought about by the changing circumstances of life due to technological innovations, socio-cultural, economic and political conditions and fulfilment of desires and needs. In fact many life difficulties in life can be considered as stress (Venkateswarlu and Gwani, 2004, Venkateswarlu, 2008; Umeasiegbu, 1988). However, in all human endeavours, there must be a certain degree of activation or arousal which stimulates an individual to action. This activation or arousal varies in magnitude, intensity and duration. At the same time, people differ in the ways of coping with it. While some enjoy these experiences others are reluctant to experience anything new (Adeyanju, 1986; Ikulayo, 1990; Back, Bogdonoff, and Baron, 1990).

As life is a succession of stressful experiences, it is appropriate to state that the university community is not free from such life challenges where time demands/constraints, social

problems, scarcity of amenities and the like are encountered (Chado, 1990). The university athlete therefore is in the position to experience higher level of stress due to the fact that apart from the general problems prevailing in the university community, an athlete has to face and cope with the added stress of sports competition. For example, inter-faculties, Nigeria University Games, West Africa University Games, Classics etcetera may come up during the course of athlete's studies (Silva, 1990; Adeyanju, 2008; Venkateswarlu, 2008). University sports in this country are now a dynamic and pragmatic competition with high standards and tremendous challenges. Such standards include breaking and setting of national records in events, selection of talents for national teams and professional engagements. This is why university sports are not free from competition stress (Madaki, 2005; Venkateswarlu, 2008).

Madaki (2005) reported that the main sources of stress among Nigerian university athletes during completion are expectations and pressure to perform. Expectations from athlete's family, colleagues, lecturers, as well as internal pressure for oneself to excel makes these athletes to worry about not performing well, fear of failure and live up to expectations make such athletes to compete under

stress. This study therefore examined the stress coping strategies of Nigerian university athletes during competitions. Furthermore, as university athletes varied in their demographic variables, this study also examined whether such variables like gender, age groups, athletic groups, general competition experience in and outside the university environment as well as specific (N.U.G.A.) competition experience affects the strategies such athletes use to cope with stress during competition.

Methodology

The population of this study consisted of the male and female university athletes who participated in the nineteenth (19th) Nigeria University Games (NUGA) held at University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 2003. The sample size selected for the study was seven hundred athletes (380 male and 320 female athletes) from five athletic groups, namely Ball games (Basketball, Handball, Football and Volleyball), Combat sports (Judo and Taekwondo), Aquatics (swimming), Racket games (Badminton and Tennis)

and Athletics (Track and Field events). Out of this, five hundred and eighty seven (587) that is (336 male and 251 female athletes) representing 83.86%, responded.

Instrumentation

A self-developed and validated questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection for this study. Section A of the questionnaire was on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Section B contained statement on strategies used for coping with stress during competition. The statements were developed from Lazarus (1971) and Gould et al (1993), and were categorized into general stress coping strategies outlined by Adeyanju (1986), that is, cognitive, behavioural and social support strategies of coping with stress.

The questionnaire was administered on the respondents personally by the researcher with the help of team captains, Coaches, Officials and research assistants during the 19th NUGA at the University of Ibadan.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristic of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	336	57.2
Female	251	42.8
Total	587	100

Age	Frequency	Percentage
16 - 20 years	78	13.3
21 - 25 years	274	46.7
26 - 30 years	192	32.7
31 – 35 years	33	5.6
36 and above years	7	1.2
No response	3	0.5
Total	587	100

Athletic Groups	Frequency	Percentage
Ball Games	269	45.8
Racket Games	74	12.6
Athletics	60	10.2
Combat Sports	101	17.2
Aquatics	83	14.1
Total	587	100

Competition Experience	Frequency	Percentage
One year	25	4.3
Two years	39	6.6
Three years	72	12.3
Four years	118	20.1
Five years and above	314	53.5
No response	19	3.2
Total	587	100

NUGA Experience	Frequency	Percentage
First time	252	42.9
Second time	247	42.1
Third time	66	11.3
No response	22	3.7
Total	587	100

Out of the five hundred and eighty seven respondents used for the study, three hundred and thirty six (336) were males and two hundred and fifty one were females (Table 1). This indicates that 57.2% of the respondents were males, while 42.8% were females and thus most of the respondents were males. Most of them were

between 21 and 30 years of age, and also most of the respondents (432, 73.6%) had experience of four and more years of competition. However, their experience in NUGA was mostly two and three times (313, 53%). Most of them (269, 45.8%) were from ball games, and other sport groups were almost equally represented.

Stress Coping Strategies

Table II: Stress Coping Strategies of Nigerian University Athletes During Competition

S/N	Stress Coping Strategies	Mean	SD
1	Social support	3.91	0.78
2	Cognitive coping strategies	3.75	0.85
3	Behavioural coping strategies	3.16	0.89
Total		3.16	0.84

All the subjects mostly used social support as well as cognitive strategies to cope with stress during competition. However, behavioural strategies were not found to be significant ways of coping with stress by university athletes during competition because their obtained mean was less than 3.5.

The social support university athletes used is the assistance which comes from peers, lecturers, coaches, teammates, family members, friends and

sport psychologists. The cognitive coping strategies are thought control strategies of positive and rational thinking, positive focus and orientation. The athletes talked to themselves to maintain self confidence, accept reality and maintain positive focus through national thinking. Behavioural coping strategies however, include training hard and smart to keep in shape, relaxation exercises, perfect rest and adequate sleep.

Table III: t-ratio for differences between male and female university athletes in the strategies they adopt to cope with stress during competition

Variable	N	Mean	SD	t-
(a) Male	336	3.5224	0.260	0.22
(b) Female	251	3.5175	0.279	
Total	587			

$t(585) \approx 1.96 < 0.05$

The results of this study showed an insignificant difference between male and female university athletes in the strategies they used to cope with stress during competition. This is because the obtained t-ratio of 0.22 is much less than the tabled t-ratio of 1.96 to be significant at 0.05 alpha level.

Table IV: One-way analysis of variance for differences between demographic variables of respondents in their stress coping strategies during competition

Variables	Source of Variation	DF	SS	MS	f-ratio
a. Age groups	Between Groups	4	0.7031	0.1758	2.4566
	Within Groups	579	41.4291	0.0716	
	Total	583	42.1322		
b. Sports Groups	Between Groups	4	0.6556	0.1639	2.2993
	Within Groups	582	41.4894	0.7130	
	Total	586	42.1450		
c. NUGA Experience	Between Groups	2	0.01295	0.0147	0.211
	Within Groups	562	39.1361	0.6960	
	Total	564	39.1656		
d. Experience in sport competition	Between Groups	4	0.8295	0.2074	2.9224
	Within Groups	563	39.9509	0.0710	
	Total	567	40.7804		

The study revealed that university athletes of different groups and with different NUGA experience did not significantly differ in their stress coping strategies. However, university athletes with different age groups and different years of competition experiences significantly differed in the stress coping strategies they adopted during competition. Athletes with 21-25 years perceived stress coping strategies lesser than athletes with 16-20 years, 26-31 years and 30-35 years of age. Furthermore, athletes with three years of experience in sports competition perceived lesser behavioural stress coping strategies compared to those with one, two and four, and above years of experience in sports competition.

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that university athletes in mostly used social support to cope with stress during competition. This support came from peers, lecturers, coaches, teammates, family members, friends and sport psychologists. This finding is in support of Gould et al (1993) who discovered that the most consistently used form of coping with stress was social support and that majority of his subjects (71%) appreciated support from others and mostly from a sport psychologist. This study also showed that university athletes in Nigeria adopt a similar stress coping strategies irrespective of gender difference during competition. This however is not in line with Perloe (2002) according to which there is no single level of stress or coping strategy that is optimal for all people. We are all individual creatures with unique requirements; as such what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. Venkateswarlu (2004) also reported that even if we agree that a particular even is distressing, we are likely to differ in our behavioural, physiological and psychological response to it.

The study showed significant difference between age groups of university athletes in their stress coping strategies. This is in line with Perloe (2002) and also supported Markides and Cooper (1991) who showed significant difference between age groups in stress coping strategies. This study also revealed that university athletes adopted a similar strategy of coping with stress during competition irrespective of their sport groups. This finding is in line with Pflasterer (2002) who reported that most of the collegiate athletes used cognitive and behavioural strategies of coping with stress during competition. Gould et al (1983) also reported that majority of his subjects (80%) used similar strategies of coping with stress, and the most consistent form of stress coping strategies by these athletes was social support. The study further revealed significant difference between university athletes of

different years of experience in sports competition in the stress coping strategies they used during competition. This is supported by Randolfi (2002) and Venkateswarlu (2004) that a person's stress coping resources are usually not constant over time, they are likely to expand or contract as a result of experience, degree of stress, time of life and periods of life, therefore, the presence of a given strategy at a given time does not imply that it will be available for the same person to the same extent at another time.

Conclusion

The study showed that the most consistently used strategy of coping with stress by university athletes during competition was social support. University athletes used the same stress coping strategies irrespective of their gender, sport groups and NUGA experience, however, university athletes with different age groups and different years of experience in sports competition differ in the strategies they use to cope with stress during competition. This is due to the fact that athletes with 21-25 years of age expressed different stress coping strategies with the other age groups; and athletes with three years of competition experiences expressed different coping strategies with athletes of one, two and four and above years of competition experience. It is therefore suggested that coaches, families, friends, colleagues, lecturers, and athletes themselves should be educated on how to support and encourage athletes to cope with stress positively and objectively. From the results of the study, it was evident that roles of sport psychologist are imperative in competitions involving university athletes. Such specialist should be employed and encouraged to help athletes in identifying possible stressors as well as advising/guiding the athletes on how to deal and adjust to the various stressors appropriately during competitions. University athletes should be encouraged to give their best with ease during competitions not necessarily emphasizing on winning.

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