

HOW IS STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF THEIR PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS AFFECTED THEIR RESILIENCY: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Social scientists have gone through several stages in their approach to understanding vulnerability and resiliency, and resiliency research has shifted its focus from the emphasis on negative development outcomes to an emphasis on successful adaptation in spite of childhood adversity. This study investigated student's perception of their problem solving skills, and how it affects their resiliency in handling stressors during studying at Faculty of Psychology Muhammadiyah University of Gresik. We are also trying to see the psychodynamics aspect of the three students participating in this research and make a brief conclusion about what make those three students different from one another in facing their problems and how they build a resiliency after the storms.

Keywords: Student's perception, problem solving skills, resiliency

1. Introduction

One main problem experienced by student of Faculty of Psychology Muhammadiyah University of Gresik is how to finish their final project (thesis). Thesis has long been considered the most difficult student experience in their study. Some students can successfully finish their study on time, but still most of them admit that working on thesis is a highly stressful situations. Besides, they were also facing other problems while doing their thesis. Resiliency can be detected through an individual response to adversity, whether it is a stressful life event or a situation of continuous stress (e.g. war, abuse; Masten & Coastworth, 1998 in Perkins, 2003).

Several individual characteristics have been found to be related to school failure. Individuals who value school less or who have a negative attitude about school are more likely to fail or drop out than individuals who value school and possess a positive attitude about school (e.g., Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Powell-Cope & Eggert, 1994; Rumberger, 2001; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Individuals who have low educational aspirations are more likely to fail at school or to drop out of school (e.g., Goldsmith & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 2001; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Moreover, a lack of basic skills and problem-solving abilities has been linked with school failure and dropout; individuals who are deficient in basic skills and problem-solving skills have an increased probability of failing or dropping

out of school (e.g., Dryfoos, 1990; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 2001).

An association has been found between self-esteem and school failure and dropout (e.g., Powell-Cope & Eggert, 1994; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Individuals who have low self-esteem are more likely to do poorly in school and to drop out.

1.1. Resiliency

Current definitions of resilience are varied and problematic (see Kaplan, 2005). Some have construed resilience as a personal trait or attribute, while others have seen it as an ongoing developmental process that reflects positive adjustment in adverse circumstances (see Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). For example, Brooks (2005) apparently defined resilience both as "the capacity of a child to deal effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to rebound from disappointments, mistakes, trauma, and adversity, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to interact comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect and dignity" and as the "ability to meet life's challenges with thoughtfulness, confidence, purpose, responsibility, empathy, and hope". Masten, Best, and Garmezny (cited in Alvord & Grados, 2005), on the other hand, defined it as "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances".

Resilient individuals are well adapted despite serious stressors in their lives (Luthar et. al., 2000; Masten, 2001, in Perkins, 2003). Indeed, resilience individuals are those who cope effectively with stresses arising as consequences of their vulnerability, and a balance, congruence, or fit, among risk, stressful life events, and protective characteristic of the individual and the individual's accounts for the diversity of developmental outcomes (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Kumpfer, 1999, in Perkins, 2003). Therefore, studying resiliency involves an examination of the link between the person and the demand of the context in variables factors, and processes that will either promote or subvert adaptation. Resiliency is also defined as a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development (Masten, 2001, in Perkins, 2003). We then conclude resiliency as the human's ability to adapt well to his changing environment that includes stressors.

Resiliency research has shifted its focus from the emphasis on negative development outcomes to an emphasis on successful adaptation in spite of childhood adversity (Luthar, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992 in Perkins, 2003). Indeed, in the last 25 years developmental psychopathologists and other social scientists have increasingly explored the concept of invulnerability rather than focusing predominantly on vulnerability and maladjustment (Luthar et. al., 2000 in Perkins, 2003). However, Rutter (1985) noted that resistance to stress in an individual is relative, not absolute. Thus, an individual's ability to overcome stress is dependent on the level of stress not exceeding the level of the individual's resiliency characteristics. In addition, the bases of resistance to stress are both environmental and constitutional, and the degree of resistance varies over time according to life circumstances (Luthar et. al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1985 in Perkins, 2003). Invulnerability may imply an unbreakable individual, one able to conquer any level of stress. Therefore, concept of resilience or stress resistance, rather than invulnerability, is preferred by many researcher, because it acknowledge a history of success while also implying the possibility of succumbing to future stressors.

People adapt, develop strengths to meet needs, grow and change, have varying strength levels, sometimes grow by struggling with adversity, and so on—underlie or are incorporated in many, more testable theories (e.g., Epstein, 1994; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 in Lightsey, 2006). Many research provide evidence that specific variables and factors are involved in safeguarding and promoting successful development. Protective factors can be defined as variables that are linked with an individual

experiencing positive developmental outcomes as compared to negative developmental outcomes (Lerner, et. al., 2003). The idea that protective factors can buffer stress and that positive thinking can have salutary effects on depression, have often been tested and at times been confirmed (e.g., Lightsey, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 1999).

1.2. Student's Perception of Their Problem Solving Skills

Problem solving skills is defined as the specific behavioral, cognitive, and emotional strategies that someone use to address the stressful situation. Problem solving refers to the plans that a person make to alleviate or ameliorate the stressor itself. For example, what a person does to organize the stressful situation into smaller more manageable parts. Problem solving refers to the concrete steps that families take to either remove the threatening situation or maintain and strengthen the families' emotional state and ongoing well-being (Yee, et. al., 2007).

Individuals behave in a given manner based not on the way their external environment actually is but, rather, on what they see or believe it to be. This is what we called perception. So, the student's perception of their problem solving skills include what they thinks and what they believes about their problem solving skills.

2. Methods

A case study is a research approach in which one or a few instances of a phenomenon are studied in depth (Given, 2008). This research is a case study that try to investigated student's perception of their problem solving skills, and how it affects their resiliency in handling stressors during studying at Faculty of Psychology Muhammadiyah University of Gresik. This research also trying to see the psychodynamics aspect of the three students participating in this research and make a brief conclusion about what make those three students different from one another in facing their problems and how they build a resiliency after it.

2.1. Participants

The participants in this research were three students in The Faculty of Psychology Muhammadiyah University of Gresik. Their ages are 26, 29, and 36 years old; two of the participants were female and one were male. Each participants were in their last semester and now they have already finished their study in Psychology.

Information about this research's participants were obtained from many sources through assessment process. Several methods used in this research are

psychological test (TAT, BAUM, DAP, HTP), in depth interview, and observation.

3. Results and Discussion

The participants's responses to assessments held by researchers:

3.1. Subject 1 (male, 29 years old)

Stressors/Challenges. Subject 1 has through a hard life since he was very young. His father had passed away when he was 15 years old and then he also lost his brother 2 years after that. Subject 1 has 2 little sisters and 1 little brother. After that great lost, he's working much harder than before to earn money for his family. He must delay his dream to go to college for couple years before he finally got his mother's blessings to continuing his study in Faculty of Psychology. Both of his parents didn't get a high education, therefore his father told him to continue his study until college. This message gave him strong motivation to finish his study, no matter what barriers he found while studying at Faculty of Psychology.

Environmental condition of subject 3 include: risk factors that his family conditions made subject 1 forced to find a way to fulfil his family's needs, especially financial needs.

According to subject 1, finishing his study (thesis) is a big opportunity for him to raising his social-economic status. She has a supporting friends from highschool and also classmates. For him, financial support from his friends (giving him allowance) was function as a protective factor. Attention and support from his lecturers also becoming protective factor for him.

In his resiliency process, subject 1 was trying to make selective perception. During consultation process, when he heard a criticism from her lecturer (promotor) he trying to take the positive side from those critics and being motivated. He has the ability to reframe problems as a challenges and he trying hard to accomplished it, especially to prove to others that he is able to reach success.

Subject 1 also facing problems while trying to accomplished his thesis, most of them related to his financial condition, but that obstacles couldn't make him demotivated. He tend to use active coping (problem focused coping) and never runaway from problems. When he's facing his lack of money, and he must be resigned from his job one day, he felt sad but he won't let that disappointment went for a long time. To fulfilling his family needs, he's becoming an entrepreneur by founding LBB (academic course). When he found difficulties in doing his

thesis related to the content, he was struggling hard to follow the directions from lecturer and accomplished all tasks.

Internal resiliency factors: (1) cognitive factor: He has a good academic skills. Subject 1 has shown that he has the ability to reach a very good result in his study (GPA: 3,85 scale 1-4). During finishing his study, subject 1 facing some difficulties i.e. searching theoretical background of his research variables. Subject 1 was trying hard to solving his problems. He was trying to look for literatures, journals not only in local libraries but also looking for them in anywhere else possible i.e. library in Jogja. (2) emotional factor: Subject 1 could manage his emotions quite well. Basically subject 1 was a high temper person, but he was trying to not showing his negative emotions to other people. His parents always told him to respond other's aggressive behavior not by doing the same thing. His parents also told him to study hard and trying to reach a better life. Life had been treat him hard, since he lost his father who had passed away when he's stil teenagers and then he also lost his brother 2 years after that. After that great lost, he's working much harder than before to earn money for his family. He must delay his dream to go to college for couple years before he finally got his mother's blessings to continuing his study in Faculty of Psychology. (3) spiritual factor: Religion has been one main factor that underlying almost all of his behavior and decision. As a moslem, he's always been told to respect and obey his parents rules. When he disobeyed his parents's rules he felt so guilty and suffered. His parent's blessings is a very important thing in his life that give him a peace of mind; He has already give her best effort and struggling hard in finishing his thesis (4) behavioral/social competency: He has a good interpersonal skills at campus; he has a good ability to solve his problems. (5) physical factor: in general he's in a good physical condition. By all of those processes, subject 1 is being stronger and reaching a higher state of resiliency.

3.2. Subject 2 (female, 26 years old)

Stressors/Challenges. Subject 2's main target was her thesis must be done as soon as possible. She must be well adapted to her condition as a student transferred from other university in Surabaya, and as a married woman. Besides, her parents have a big hope for her to finish her study as soon as possible. Knowing many of her friends has finished their study made her anxious.

Environmental condition of subject 2 include: risk factors that she's possibly failed to finish her thesis on time, and when she failed to graduate soon it means she will stay with her husband's family

longer and it makes her felt depressed. Other condition she faced is the distance from her house to campus that takes about 2 hours trip and she must use 4 different transportation to get there. Limited availability of literatures in her campus's library make her should go outside Gresik.

Subject 2 live with her husband, mother in law, and 6 sisters in law. This family environment is not welcome and it make difficult adaptation for her. But she has a supporting husband that help her finishing her thesis.

According to subject 2, thesis is the biggest problem she faced along her study. She imagine how difficult it would be to arrange an appointment with her lecturer, facing her promotor, searching for literatures, making a questionnaire, collecting data, until the examination. She often feel anxious and panics.

In her resiliency process, subject 2 was trying to make selective perception. She got through stage by stage and start to realize that she can do it and her perception began to change. At the beginning she's experiencing a negative halo effect, she generalized her impressions that finishing thesis is a very difficult thing to do.

Subject 2 also experiencing contrast effect. She's totally influenced by other person that had a negative experience while doing their thesis. Stereotyping that subject 2 experienced was based on judgement from her friends who having difficulties in finishing their thesis.

After getting through one stage, she began to realize the problem she actually have. Finally she was able to see the bias of analysis and conclusion she made before, and she's slowly reframing her view to her problem. Subject 2 was trying to make environmental change by informing what had really happened to her significant others i.e. her husband, her sister in law. Subject 2 also explained to her lecturers some expressions and body language that made her felt uncomfortable during thesis consultation.

Subject 2 often felt sad, helpless, anxious, and tense while trying to accomplished her thesis. Subject 2 in using active coping tend to use emotional focused coping than problem focused coping. She's seeking social support and symphaty from her friends, her husband, and her lecturers. She's also raising her praying quantity and quality.

Internal resiliency factors: (1) cognitive factor: She has a good academic skills; when subject 2 experiencing problems, she tends to contemplate;

she had planned work schedule to finish her thesis and trying to fit it. (2) emotional factor: she can recognize her emotional state, she has a sense of humor. (3) spiritual factor: she want to make her parents happy and build a happy household with her husband, she has a strong beliefs in her religion, she has already give her best effort in finishing her thesis (4) behavioral/social competency: she can communicate quite well with friends and lecturers. (5) physical factor: in general she's in a good physical condition. By all of those processes, subject 2 is being stronger and reaching a higher state of resiliency.

3.3. Subject 3 (female, 36 years old)

Stressors/Challenges. Subject 3 is an energetic and enthusiastic woman. She's dreaming of having bachelor degree and share that dream with her husband. Subject 3 is a working woman. She's a mother of 3 children. One of her child is still a baby during working at her thesis. She's working fulltime from 8 a.m til 5 p.m. and had a lot of activities beside her job. The company where whe's working had went through financial crisis and postponed the salary of the company's employees until a couple months. This conditions made subject 3 forced to find other financial resources to fulfil her family's needs. Subject 3 had a personal target was her thesis must be done as soon as possible and reach cumlaude GPA.

Environmental condition of subject 3 include: risk factors that she's possibly failed to finish her thesis on time, and when she failed to graduate soon it means she would burdening her family's budget. Other condition she faced is she had a limited time to have a consultation with her lecturer.

According to subject 3, thesis is a big challenge. She has a supporting husband, eventhough he can't support their family's financial needs. For her husband's support was function as a protective factor.

In her resiliency process, subject 3 was trying to make selective perception. During consultation process, she's often heard a criticism from her lecturer (promotor) but she can take the positive side from those critics and being motivated. She has the ability to reframe problems as a challenges and she's trying hard to accomplished it.

Subject 3 also facing a lot of obstacles while trying to accomplished her thesis, but she tend to use active coping (problem focused coping). When she's facing lack of fascilitation i.e. have no PC, she try to solve it by negotiating it to her manager. As a result her manager allowed her to use PC at the office after office hour. To fulfilling her family needs, she's not

only rely on her salary form the company where she's working but also becoming an entrepreneur.

Internal resiliency factors: (1) cognitive factor. She has a good academic skills; Subject 3 has reach a very satisfying result in her study (GPA: 3,45 scale 1-4). While trying to finished her thesis, subject 3 felt difficulties in written expression; she had planned work schedule to finish her thesis and trying to fit it, but unfortunately at the time she's collecting data, her company had to raise the production targets so almost all of her respondents must delay filling the questionnaire. (2) emotional factor. she

has a good ability to manage her emotion i.e. she can keep her motivation high to finish her thesis, she has a good sense of humor; she has a good self esteem; she's a happy person. (3) spiritual factor. she has a strong beliefs in her religion; she has already give her best effort and struggeling hard in finishing her thesis (4) behavioral/social competency. she has a good interpersonal skills at campuss, at work, and at home; she has a good ability to solve her problems. (5) physical factor. in general she's in a good physical condition. By all of those processes, subject 3 is being stronger and reaching a higher state of resiliency. For detail, see table 1.

Table 1. The pattern of the three participants

Aspects	Subject 1	Subject 2	Subject 3
Environmental contexts			
- Risk factors	Finance	Distance, emotional state, family environment	Finance
- Protective factors	Friends's support	Friend's support, husband's support	Husband's support
Person-Environment transactional process			
- Perception	Positive	Negative	Positive
- Reframing	Problem as a challenge	Realizing bias of analysis and conclusion	Problem as a challenge
- Changing environment	Becoming entrepreneur	Looking for support and symphaty	Becoming entrepreneur
- Active coping	Struggling hard to follow directions and accomplishing tasks	Struggling hard to follow directions and accomplishing tasks	Struggling hard to follow directions and accomplishing tasks
Internal resiliency factors			
- Cognitive	Good	Good	Good
- Emotional	Stable	Unstable	Stable
- Spiritual	Good	Good	Good
- Behavioral/social competency	Good	Fair	Good
- Physical	Good	Good	Good
Outcome	Stronger and reaching a higher state of resiliency	Stronger and reaching a higher state of resiliency	Stronger and reaching a higher state of resiliency

4. Conclusions

This study shows that the student's perception of their problem solving skills can affect their resiliency in handling stressors during studying at Faculty of Psychology Muhammadiyah University of Gresik. The aspect of reframing and active coping play a central roles to change subject's perception to stressors becoming more positive, so they were struggling hard to meet the challenges (solve the problems) and the more they can solve their problems the stronger they become. These three participants had also showed us the psychodynamics aspects in building resiliency. They were individuals who cope effectively with stresses and become a stronger person.

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