

An Investigation into the Factors Associated with Learned Helplessness among Undergraduates of University of Kelaniya

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Abstract

The research aimed at investigating the factors associated with learned helplessness among the undergraduates of the University of Kelaniya. The sample was selected by using the random sampling method and included two hundred undergraduates representing the four faculties namely Faculty of Science, Faculty of Commerce & Management Studies, Faculty of Social Science and Faculty of Humanities of the University of Kelaniya. A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather data and the collected data was analyzed quantitatively by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Twenty five factors for learned helplessness of undergraduates were considered in the research. In the categorization of the causal factors, speaking in English is the highest and maintaining the rapports with friends is the lowest among the causal factors for learned helplessness. The study made possible suggestions to minimize the learned helplessness among undergraduates.

Key Words: Learned Helplessness, Undergraduates, University Life, Causal Factors, Controllability, Stress

Introduction

Learned Helplessness (LH) is regarded as the belief of a person or an animal that outcomes are independent of their actions.

Learned Helplessness was introduced by Martin E. P. Seligman and it is linked with his theory of learned helplessness (LHT). This is a psychological state that occurs when events appear to be uncontrollable (Seligman, 1989). This also is an acquired inability to overcome obstacles and avoid aversive stimuli and afflicts humans. Moreover LH is thought as a common reaction to repeated failure and to unpredictable or unavoidable punishment. Seligman discovered helplessness by accident whilst studying the effects of inescapable shock on active avoidance learning in dogs. In his experiment, Seligman restrained dogs in a Pavlovian harness and administered several shocks (Unconditional Stimulus) paired with a conditioned stimulus (CS). This is the conventional CU-USC pairing procedure used to study classical conditioning. Then those dogs were placed in a shuttle – box where they could avoid that shock by jumping over a barrier. The shuttle –box was used to study the role of operant conditioning in learning. Many dogs failed to learn avoiding shock.

For the experiment Seligman studied the behavior of one hundred and fifty (150) dogs. About hundred dogs (100) or 2/3rds of dogs were helpless after the administration of unavoidable electric shock in the Pavlovian harness. The remaining fifty dogs (50) or 1/3rds of dogs were completely normal and learned to avoid the shock in the avoidance learning test. The central idea in the learned helplessness is the notion that all animals including humans are able to learn that reinforcers are uncontrollable. This marks change in the direction of learning studies which had focused on learning in controllable situations.

Learned helplessness is attracted by many researchers in different contexts. Many researches on learned helplessness among patients, workers and athletics have been carried out for

years. This has many implications in university context as undergraduates encounter hopelessness and helplessness in their university life due to their inability to control the environment surrounding them. Accordingly, this research was conducted to identify the causal factors for learned helplessness in undergraduates in University of Kelaniya.

Research Problems The researcher has formed three research problems for the research to solve by collecting the relevant data. They are given below.

1. What are the factors associated with Learned Helplessness among undergraduate students of University of Kelaniya?
2. What is the gender differences in the factors associated with learned helplessness among undergraduate of University of Kelaniya?
3. What are the possible categorizations of factors associated with learned helplessness among undergraduates of University of Kelaniya?

Objectives of the Research

The research includes three objectives and they are mentioned below.

1. To identify the factors associated with Learned Helplessness among undergraduate students of University of Kelaniya
2. To identify gender differences in the factors associated with Learned Helplessness among undergraduate students of University of Kelaniya.
3. To categorize the factors based on the level of Learned Helplessness among undergraduate students of University of Kelaniya.

Methodology

The researcher used 200 undergraduates from the University of Kelaniya as the sample to collect data to solve the research problems. The sample was randomly selected. The undergraduates were used only from the above university because they represent the actual participants of the data to answer the research questions. A questionnaire was administered to identify the causal factors of learned helplessness in undergraduates. The researcher encompassed all the factors which students have no control over and to understand the helpless behaviors regarding those factors. Accordingly, this questionnaire also consists of twenty five factors and the participants have to select anyone of the four choices which are mentioned below.

1. Controlled
2. Failed
3. Unconcerned
4. Not faced

The factors affecting learned helplessness were determined depending on the previous researches and theories of learned helplessness. The data collected was analyzed by using descriptive statistical presentation and reached for the conclusions.

Results & Discussion

One of the objectives of this research is to categorize the factors associated with learned helplessness among undergraduates of University of Kelaniya. The factors for learned helplessness are determined on the choice, 'Failed' which is given to be selected by participants. 'Failed' means that the participants can't control the factors. Those factors cause them to be helpless. Based on the level of the choice, "Failed", factors for learned

helplessness were found. As much as they are unable to control those factors, they become helpless. Accordingly, the causal factors for learned helplessness are listed down as follows and suggestions for minimizing learned helplessness are also given below the every category.

1. Speaking English (30%)
2. Facing examinations when lectures were not sufficient (26.5%)
3. Accommodation in university (19.5%), knowledge of offices, and personnel (19.5%)
4. Students' campaign (19%) and Selection for special degree (19%)
5. Usage of technical equipments (18%)
6. Examinations in closure days (17.5%)
7. Students' struggles (15.5%)
8. Expected marks for classes (14.5%) and seniors' threats (14.5%)
9. Money collections (13.5%) and removing subjects (13.5%)
10. Knowledge of courses, credits and related factors of programs (13%)
11. Assignment completion on due dates (12.5%)
12. Presentations (11%) and changing subjects (11%)
13. Meeting lecturers (10.5%)
14. Lovers' threats (10%)
15. Adjust to teaching styles (8%)
16. Expected marks in examinations (7.5%)
17. Compulsoriness of going field trips (06%), lecture attendance (06%) and lecturers' threats (06%)
18. Rapports with friends (04%)

When taking the above factors into consideration, speaking English is the highest among the other factors. Majority of the

students follow their degree courses in Sinhala and when they want to use English they are unable to control using that language according to the data. Therefore, the University has to take actions to improve the English knowledge of students and to make them fearless. Accordingly, some lectures in English, English course from basic to advanced level and suchlike can be implemented. Further students should be motivated to read English books.

The second highest factor is the facing examinations when lectures were not sufficient. Lecturers are unable to complete all the topics in the syllabuses and in a situation of that nature; students can't control the examinations well. As a result, they become helpless. Students should be given the syllabuses and thereby they can get ready for the examinations. They should be informed what to expect from them in the examinations although lectures are not completed.

Accommodation in university and knowledge of offices and personnel concerned are the third highest factors which are out of the students' control. They face difficulties when taking accommodations in the university though they want to stay at the university. Rules and regulations on giving students the accommodation facilities are the behind factors on this regard. Both students and the university can't escape from following those rules. The limited facilities have to be shared by limited number of students. The students have not enough knowledge of offices, officers and other related personnel in the university. This causes them to be helpless. In many times, they have to go to offices, centers and meet the people to get their tasks done. When they are not aware of them, they become helpless. As the suggestions for the above factors, the university should take actions to improve the facilities for accommodations. The knowledge (information) of the personnel, offices and suchlike

is provided at the beginning. But they forget them. Psychologically they should be assertively trained.

Students' campaign and Selection for special degree are the fourth highest factors which cause students to be helpless. Students organize campaigns in many occasions and they have to participate in them. When students can't participate, they become helpless as they can't control the surrounding of campaigns. This happens when they do not like to participate in the campaigns. Students expect to follow major degrees in the subjects they like. Due to the limitation of students' selection, the needed marks for selection can't be controlled by students, they become helpless. But this is objective only to those who want to follow major degrees. That students have the right to participate or not to participate in students' campaign, should be informed to the students. They can get the decision whether to get the membership of the students' unions or not. The number of students who are selected for special degrees has to be increased or level of marks concerned should be lowered.

Fifthly, it is usage of technical equipments which can't be controlled by students and caused them to be helpless. Students have to use technology in their studies especially in making presentations and in other moments like internet and computer usage, but if they do not have enough knowledge, it causes them to become helpless. Therefore based on the subjects, students should be given the knowledge of using the technology. Technological facilities have to be improved so that students can frequently use.

The Sixth causal factor is the students having to sit for the examinations in closure days. When they have to sit day by day or each day, they have to work hard and keep many subject

matters in mind. They can't manage and use to the environment of this nature. Psychologically students become stressed in the examinations of this nature. Therefore examination schedules should be allocated within few break days.

The students' struggles are the Seventh factor that is not within their control. Students fight faculty by faculty or student movement by student movement. Hundreds of thousands of students subjected to be victims of those struggles. As they can't control the struggles, they try to flee from the environment in which such incidences take place. Students' struggles should be controlled by taking such actions as service of student counselors, giving the students the knowledge of conflict management skills. The rules and regulations for the actions against discipline should be implemented.

Expected marks for classes and seniors' threats are the eighth highest factors for that can't be controlled by the students. In students' point of view, the marks needed for classes are somewhat harder to be achieved. They become helpless when they can achieve expected marks in the examinations and thereby achieve the classes. The level of marks for classes can't change. Therefore students have to be qualified with high marks. Otherwise they should be cognitively prepared to accept their classes. To minimize the threats by seniors can be implemented through security service, counseling service and implementation of rules and regulations.

Money collections and removing subjects are in nine which cause students to be helpless. Students organize movements to collect money for their needs. Some students do not like to participate in them. But they can't escape from such movements. The other factor, removing subjects is faced by students in almost every semester. There is an allocated time

period for registering the subjects of the courses. But in other times, they are not allowed to remove any subject if not needed. Participating in money collections is up to students. The university is not responsible for it. But to remove subjects is allowed in reserved time period. The students should be informed of the time to change their subjects. On special reasons, they have to be given the opportunity to change their subjects if possible.

Knowledge of courses, credits and related factors of programs is the tenth factor that causes for learned helplessness in undergraduates. Students must have this knowledge otherwise; they occasionally face problems with regard to their courses. Without this knowledge, they hesitate what to do in their studies. Anyway, this causes students not trying or going forward. They have to go asking for information. It makes them distress. This knowledge is also provided at the university entrance. Anyway they should be informed the information when needed. The notice boards and handouts can be used on this regard.

Assignment completion on due dates is the eleventh factor in number of the order. Students have to write assignments in almost all the courses they follow. They have given the time period for completion and submission. When they have to submit several assignments, they feel stress and thereby helpless. The topics to write assignments should be given earlier or the time period for submitting should be expanded.

The twelfth factor is presentations and changing subjects. Similar to assignments, students have to make presentations. Students report that they failed in making presentations and could not succeed in them. Fear, shy and similar other kinds affect them to be in front of the audience. As a result, they

hesitate to make presentations. The other factor is to change the subjects. Except the removing, this is also needed for students. Based on their willingness and number of credits, they register for subjects and change them. When they fail in changing the subjects, they feel helpless. Students should be trained in soft skills. The university has already the career guidance unit and it implements many programs on this regard. Timely, such programs have to be created and implemented. The time for changing subjects should be informed and on special reasons, students should be given the opportunity to change their subjects. Students should motivate to go for changing with the time concerned.

Meeting the lecturers is the thirteenth factor for students' helplessness. Students have to meet lecturers on varied purposes. But they face difficulties in making appointments and become helpless. It is up to the relevant lecturer that allocates time for appointments. But lecturers should be empathetic to give students time to meet them. Their time tables can be made based on this need of the students as well.

Love affairs are freely available in university life and it is the fourteenth factor that makes students helpless. Lovers' threats mean scolding, hitting or any psychologically affected actions any lover makes the other. The victim of them becomes helpless when he or she can't manage the surrounding of the affair or problem they face. The counseling center can provide the service on this regard console the victim's mind. On the other hand, university has to take actions against the threats.

Adjusting to the teaching style of the lecturers also causes students become helpless and this is the fifteenth factor of the order. This means that lecturers use their own styles. Those ways of lecturing may not suit to some students. When they

can't adjust to teaching style, they face difficulties and become helpless. The lecturers have to consider the personality, needs, feelings and knowledge, abilities and special needs of the students. Their teaching style should suit to all of the students.

Expected marks in the examinations are the sixteenth factor for helplessness in undergraduates. Everything students try to get marks in the examinations. All the marks play a central role in their lives. When they can't get expected marks for any reason, they become helpless.

Compulsoriness of undergoing field trips, lecture attendance and lecturers' threats are the seventeenth factor for helplessness in undergraduates. Almost all the departments organize the field trips and students should participate in them. But students may not be able to go on those trips due to many reasons such as time, dates, illnesses or personal reasons. Attendance to lectures is a must for some lectures. If they are unable to attend, they face difficulties. Lecturers' threats mean scolding or demands to do or not to do their studies. When going on field trips, students and the departments altogether should decide all about the trips. On special reasons, they should give the chance not to participate in the trips. If one can't attend lectures, he or she can inform the relevant lecturer. Students can get the support from student counselors and counseling center when they face threats by lecturers. The university can get actions against so-called lecturers.

The friendships are the last or eighteenth factor for helplessness in undergraduates. Students find friends after or before university entrance. When they can't maintain their friendships and if their friendships break up, they face difficulties. When they can't manage the friendships, they become helpless. Students have to train their skills to maintain good rapports.

Such programs can be implemented by counseling center or career guidance unit.

Gender difference in the factors was identified by using mean cross tabulation and the relevant statistics are presented in the following table.

Gender * mean Cross tabulation

		mean		
		Controlled	Failed	Unconcerned
Female	Count	1	82	16
	% within Gender	1.0%	82.8%	16.2%
	% within mean	50.0%	49.1%	51.6%
Male	Count	1	85	15

	% within Gender	1.0%	84.2%	14.9%
	% within mean	50.0%	50.9%	48.4%
Total	Count	2	167	31
	% within Gender	1.0%	83.5%	15.5%
	% within mean	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Sources: Survey Data (2013)

According to the statistics in the above table, males and females similarly control the causal factors for learned helplessness and it is 1% in number. Female percentage for "fail" is 82.8% and male percentage for it is 84.2%. It could be found that 16.2% of the females and 14.9% of the males reported that they are 'unconcern' the factors for learned helplessness. Accordingly, the differences can be found in the causal factors for learned helplessness. Males are more failures than females in the factors for learned helplessness. The factors for learned helplessness are more unconcerned by Females than males.

Conclusion

Twenty five factors were found as the causal factors for learned helplessness among undergraduates in the University of Kelaniya. According to the categorization, speaking in English is the highest factor and maintaining the rapports with friends is the lowest factor among the factors for learned helplessness among undergraduates in this university. For every factor, the possible suggestions could be provided to manage those factors and to succeed the studies of university students.

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