

Displaced Aggression among University Students in Anambra State: Predictive Roles of Academic Stress and Childhood Traumatic Experience

Emeka A. Nwankwo¹, Moses D. Tingir¹, Uche V. Okpaleke¹, Chidozie E. Mabilia¹, Edwin C. Enunekwu¹, Edoaka, Anthony. C¹, Favour E. Nwankwo¹ and Ifeanyichukwu I. Okpaleke¹

¹Department of Psychology, Chuwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's Email: nea.en@gmail.com

Abstract

The study investigated the predictive roles of academic stress and childhood traumatic experience on displaced aggression among university students in Anambra State. A total number of Three hundred and twenty-one served as participants in the study. They consisted of 172 (53.6%) females and 149 (46.4%) males. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 35 years with a mean age of 26.27 and a standard deviation of 3.78. Simple random sampling and accidental sampling techniques were used to select the participants and schools. Four instruments were used: Displaced Aggression Questionnaire, Educational Stress Scale, and Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. The study was cross-sectional research, and correlational design was adopted, and Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regressions statistic was used to test the hypotheses and data collected. The findings showed that the study pressure of stress and childhood traumatic experiences like physical abuse, and emotional abuse predicted displaced aggression. Similarly, self-expectation of stress, physical neglect and sexual abuse of childhood traumatic experience predicted displaced aggression negatively. Conversely, perceived burden and worrying about grades, despondency of stress and emotional neglect of childhood traumatic experiences did not predict displaced aggression. The study recommended that government and school management should provide well-equipped counseling centres that will take care of the student's stressful and traumatic experiences that usually push them into displaced aggression.

Keywords: stress, trauma, displaced aggression, students

Introduction

In Nigerian universities, students are confronted with gigantic challenges that perhaps threatens their studies and affect their personal life. Occasionally, the challenges might stimulate cognitive distortion, frustrations, depression, anxiety, poor academic performance, dropout of school, inferiority complex, and suicidal thoughts. Consequently, some of these students result in aggression displacement for the sake of calming anxiety, depressive tendencies and experience temporal pressure at the detriment of their academic pursuits and goals or others. The displaced aggression can lead to a toxic environment, affecting both

the aggressor and those on the receiving end. It may manifest as bullying, verbal outbursts, or passive-aggressive behavior, which can hinder learning and emotional well-being.

Addressing displaced aggression in students typically involves identifying its root causes and providing appropriate interventions. These might include counseling to help students process their emotions, teaching conflict resolution and stress management techniques, fostering supportive relationships, and creating a positive school environment that reduces triggers for frustration and aggression. Early intervention can play a crucial role in preventing long-term negative outcomes associated with displaced aggression.

According to Dollard et al. (1919) displaced aggression occurs when a person is provoked, is unwilling or unable to retaliate against the original provocateur, and subsequently aggresses against a seemingly innocent target. Similarly, displaced aggression is also an aggressive behaviour that is directed at a person or other target (e.g., a pet) that is not the source of the aggression arousing provocation or frustration. Displaced aggression occurs when it is impossible or unwise to respond aggressively toward the source of the provocation or frustration. Prototypically, displaced aggression occurs when a person cannot aggress or is constrained from aggressing against the source of provocation. Direct retaliatory aggression might not be possible because the source of the initial provocation is unavailable (e.g., the provocateur has left the situation). Fear of retaliation or punishment from the provocateur may also constrain direct aggression (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000).

For example, if the provocateur is strong, people may be reluctant to aggress directly against the provocateur and may instead displace their aggression toward innocent targets, sometimes called scapegoats. Practically, a student insults his peers for no apparent reason after having been berated previously by his lecturer. Often, the target provides no justification or instigation to warrant a retaliatory response from the aggressor. Likewise, the “innocent” target may provide a trivial and ambiguous instigation (“a trigger”) to aggress. Such disjunctive escalated aggression refers to a level of aggression exceeding norms of reciprocity and tit-for-tat matching rules (Axelrod, 1984). One possible explanation for this is that those who engage in displaced aggression want someone to “pay” for their maltreatment regardless of the attributes of the target. Consistent with this

view, it appears that most school shooters targeted innocent bystanders “at random” regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity.

However, there are also good reasons to believe that displaced aggression may be disproportionately directed against individuals whom the aggressor perceives as dissimilar (i.e., out-group members). Impression formation studies have shown that targets that differ in important ways from the self are typically liked less (Smeaton, et al., 1989). Because out-group status is associated with negativity, out-group members are more likely to prime a network of aggression-related thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in semantic memory (Miller et al., 2003). Consequently, the stronger the dissimilarity between the aggressor and the potential targets of displaced aggression (particularly on salient attributes), the higher the level of displaced aggression may be. These include the tendency to engage in verbal and physical aggression; the frequent experience of hostility and anger; the chronic accessibility of aggressive constructs, often resulting from exposure to violent media; gender; anger expression; narcissism and self-esteem; and frontal electroencephalogram asymmetry and approach withdrawal tendencies that are likely to cause academic stress among students (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).

According to Gobena (2024) academic stress occurs when academic demands exceed a student’s perceived ability to cope with them. Consequently, Sun et al. (2013) defined academic stress as subjective psychological distress from multiple aspects of academic learning, rather than a sum of stressors. The sources of academic stress can originate from the heavy burden of homework, and negative attitudes toward learning, such as loss of interest and difficulties in learning due to the burden of academic material varies within a semester (Wunsch et al., 2017). This stress can lead to various negative consequences, such as unpleasant emotional states, smoking behavior, mental health issues, poor sleep quality, depression, impatience, nervousness, strain, elevated blood pressure, insomnia, fearfulness, substance addiction, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Chua, et al, 2018; Lotz & Sparfeldt, 2017; Soares & Woods, 2020; Xiang et al., 2019).

Thus, the factors which cause a significant stress in students are such as difficult and many classes, poor time management, repeated homework overload, poor study skills, travelling

to school, revision of syllabus and examinations, difficulties in meeting up with the expectations of family members, dissatisfaction with syllabus thought, poor relationship with teachers, significant people's expectations, fear of failure, financial difficulties at home, feelings of inadequacy, fear of unknown assessments, unsatisfactory accommodation, friends, roommates, poor communication skills, adverse body image, lack of diet and nutrition, lack of exercise, serious illness, death or tragedy in family, etc. (Balamurugan & Kumaran cited by Ghatol & Bharucha, 2024). Other contributing factors include self-inflicted stress, academic queries, low parental education levels, poor exam grades, family pressures, scholarship demands, financial burdens, classroom competition, time management challenges, and course-related stress (Córdova-Olivera et al., 2023; Nogueira, 2023; Slimmen et al., 2022).

Hence, students with a high level of course related stress tend to experience poor academic achievement, low self-efficacy, and low classroom participation (Park et al., 2020). Conversely, students who view academic stress as opportunities tend to exert effort to meet the challenges associated with academic stress to achieve positive result (Sang et al., 2018). This could be the reason scholars said that academic stress may not necessarily result in negative outcomes (Sang et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019). In affirmation, scholars reiterated that academic stress may positively or negatively affect the academic performance of students depend on individual childhood traumatic experiences (Bisson, 2017; Pascoe et al., 2020; Schimelpfening, 2020).

Childhood traumatic experience is defined as an exposure to deeply distressing or life-threatening experiences in early life (American Psychiatry Association, 2013; McCormack & Thomson, 2017). This traumatic experience can arise from various adverse experiences including physical abuse (inflicting physical harm on a child), emotional or psychological abuse (verbal assaults or constant criticism) sexual abuse (any sexual activity with a child, including molestation, rape, or exploitation), verbal abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, bullying, accidents, experiencing parental divorce, living with someone who is mentally ill or abuse drugs and medical trauma (Burke, 2024; Duke et al., 2010; Monnat & Chandler, 2016). The experience can impair normal development, cognitive functions

(memory, attention, and executive functioning), behavioral patterns, and emotional regulation which can affect academic performance and social relationships (Majer, 2010). Traumatized students may develop insecure attachment styles, leading to difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships in adulthood (Erozkan, 2016).

This implies that childhood traumatic experiences have a wide range of detrimental repercussions. According to scholarly research, childhood traumatic experience is linked to a rise in mental health issues and chronic discomfort that interferes with regular physiological and psychological functions. For instance, studies confirmed that childhood abuse is positively associated with students' depression, aggression, rage, wrath, fear, anxiety-related disorders, and personality problems (Ernst et al., & McCauley et al., cited by Fadl et al., 2025). In addition, research shows that childhood traumatic experience has a lasting effect on the development of early psychopathology in some students (McCauley et al., cited by Fadl et al., 2025). This increases onset of behavioral issues; because the victim's neurological structure changes in accordance with the adversities experienced or witnessed resulting in the risk of psychopathology development (Connell et al., 2018; Dye, 2018; Galletly et al., 2011).

Hence, Cognitive neo-association theory, proposed by Berkowitz (1989), offers a framework for understanding how negative emotions and experiences can influence behavior. This theory suggests that unpleasant events or stimuli can trigger a network of associated thoughts, emotions, and memories, leading to aggressive responses. When applied to concepts like displaced aggression, academic stress, and childhood traumatic experiences, the theory provides insight into how these factors might interact. Since, displaced aggression occurs when an individual cannot direct their frustration or anger at the original source and instead redirects it toward a safer or more accessible target.

According to Berkowitz's theory, the activation of negative emotional networks may make individuals more prone to aggression, even in unrelated situations. For instance, stress from academic challenges could activate these networks, heightening vulnerability to displaced aggression. Similarly, childhood traumatic experiences can shape the emotional associations stored in memory. Such experiences may create heightened sensitivity to stressors later in

life, as they reinforce negative emotional networks. Academic stress, in this context, might act as a trigger, reactivating these associations and intensifying emotional responses. Sequel upon that, Berkowitz's cognitive neo associationistic theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying displaced aggression and the long-term impact of stress and trauma. Therefore, this study seeks to establish if academic stress and childhood traumatic experiences would predict displaced aggression among university students in Anambra State.

Method

Participants

A total number of Three hundred and twenty-one (321) university students served as participants for the study. They consist of 172 (53.6%) females and 149 (46.4%) males. The age of the participants will range from 19 to 35 years with a mean age of 26.27 and a standard deviation of 3.78. Faculty data revealed that 173 (53.9%) were selected from Social Sciences, 85 (26.5%) were selected from Management Sciences, 42 (13.1%) were selected from Education, and 21 (6.5%) were selected from Engineering. Departmental data showed that 71(22.1%) were from Psychology, 89 (27.7%) were from Criminology. 55 (17.1%) were from Public Administration, 18 (5.6%) were from Sociology, 17 (5.3%) were from Mass Communication, 17 (5.3%) were from Educational Foundation, 32 (10.0%) were from Accountancy, and 22 (6.9%) were from Electrical Engineering.

Instruments

Three instruments were used: Displaced Aggression Questionnaire, Educational Stress Scale, and Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ).

Displaced Aggression Questionnaire

The instrument is developed by Heishman et al., (2009), it contains 31-items design assess aggression directed toward a human target other than the source of initial provocation. The scale has three dimensions: Angry rumination, revenge planning, and displaced anger. All items were rated on bipolar 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic of me*) to 7 (*extremely characteristic of me*). Internal consistency reliability was high for the total scale (Cronbach's alpha 0.95, for the subscales: Angry Rumination

(.80, .84), Revenge Planning (.85, .78), and Displaced Anger (.60, .71). The researcher reported Cronbach alpha reliability of 0.88 for the overall scale, while subscales 0.93 for Angry Rumination, 0.84 for Revenge Planning and 0.79 for Displaced Anger.

Educational Stress Scale

The scale is developed by Sun, Dunne, Hou and Xu (2011), it contains 16 items derived from extensive review of both the English and Chinese literature and discussions with professionals in both public health and education in China. The scale has five domains of stress which consisting of study pressure, perceived burden, worry about grades, self-expectation and despondency. The response format used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) with a higher score indicating greater stress. The overall scale internal consistency was 0.81, while subscales have Cronbach alphas' of 0.74 for study pressure, 0.75 for perceived burden, 0.71 for worry about grades, 0.66 for self-expectation and 0.66 for despondency. In this study, Cronbach alpha reliability of 0.78 for the overall scale, while subscales have Cronbach alphas of 0.64 for study pressure, 0.77 for perceived burden, 0.82 for worry about grades, 0.69 for self-expectation and 0.76 for despondency.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)

The CTQ is a 28-item retrospective self-report questionnaire developed by Bernstein and Fink (1998) designed to assess five types of negative childhood experiences: (1) emotional neglect (e.g., "I felt loved"), (2) emotional abuse (eg. "People in my family said hurtful or insulting things to me"), (3) physical neglect (e.g., "I didn't have enough to eat"), (4) physical abuse (e.g., "I was punished with a belt, a board, a cord, or some other hard object"), and (5) sexual abuse (e.g. "Someone tried to make me do sexual things or watch sexual things"). These five types of experiences are each assessed by five items; three additional items assess tendencies of respondents to minimize or deny abuse experiences. Respondents rate the truth of each statement on a 1-5 scale, from Never true when they were growing up to Very often true when they were growing up. Thus, scores range from 5 to 25 for each of the abuse types. The CTQ has demonstrated reliability and validity, including test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.86 over an average of 4 months, internal consistency reliability coefficients ranging from a median of 0.66 to a median of 0.92 across a range of 847 samples (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). The researcher in this study reported

Cronbach alpha of 0.90, the subscales revealed internal consistencies of 0.72 for physical abuse, 0.81 for physical neglect, 0.76 for emotional abuse, 0.89 for emotional neglect, and 0.78 for sexual abuse.

Procedure

The participants for the study were recruited through assistants of the class representative who enabled him to distribute the questionnaires. These class representatives were debriefed on how to administer and guide the participants to respond to the questionnaires. After the debriefing, the researcher and the assistants approach the students, and explain the purpose of the study, before administering the copies of the questionnaire. On the whole, 330 copies of the questionnaire were administered, but 321 were properly answered. Ethically, the participants were appropriately debriefed about the study and the right they have to withdraw from the study. Participants were allowed to participate in the study after they have signed an informed consent form indicating their approval to participate in the study. And those who signed the form were allowed to be part of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their names, ages, and information they provided during the study.

Design and Statistics

The study adopted a cross-sectional and correlational design: It has childhood traumatic experience and academic stress as its independent variables and displaced aggression as the dependent variable. Hierarchical Linear Regressions statistic was used to test the hypotheses and data collected. That is because the relationship among study variables is the main aim of the study.

Result

Table: Hierarchical Linear Regressions Analysis of Academic Stress, and Childhood Traumatic Experience on Displaced Aggression

Variables	R	R2	Adj.R2	Std.E.E.	F	df	β	t	Sig.
Model 1	.622 ^a	.387	.377	23.86	39.73	5			
SP							.19	3.73	.000
PB							.01	.09	.930
WG							-.11	-1.60	.110

Academic Stress dimensions: Study pressure predicted displaced aggression at ($F_{5, 315}$), $\beta = .19$, $t = 3.73$, $p < .01$; perceived burden did not predict displaced aggression at ($F_{5, 315}$), $\beta = .01$, $t = .09$, $p > .01$; worrying about grade did not predict displaced aggression at ($F_{5, 315}$), $\beta = -.11$, $t = -1.60$, $p > .01$; self-expectation negatively predicted displaced aggression at ($F_{5, 315}$), $\beta = -.57$, $t = -9.07$, $p < .01$; and despondency did not predict displaced aggression at ($F_{5, 315}$), $\beta = .10$, $t = 1.40$, $p > .01$.

In Model 2, that academic stress dimensions (study pressure, perceived burden, worry about grade, self-expectation and despondency) and childhood traumatic experience (physical abuse, physical neglect, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse) accounted for 81.7% of the displaced aggression, with $R = .904$, $R^2 = .817$, adjusted $R^2 = .811$, $(F_{5, 310}) = 145.83$, $p < .01$. That shows that the overall model 2 has significant contribution to displaced aggression among university students in Anambra State.

On academic stress, study pressure predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = .39$, $t = 12.87$, $p < .01$; perceived burden negatively predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = -.12$, $t = -2.63$, $p < .01$; worrying grade predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = .54$, $t = 10.27$, $p < .01$; self-expectation negatively predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = -.43$, $t = -5.44$, $p < .01$; and despondency also predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = -.79$, $t = -13.24$, $p < .01$.

On Childhood traumatic experience, physical abuse predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = 2.09$, $t = 17.42$, $p < .01$; physical neglect predict displaced aggression negatively at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = -1.46$, $t = -17.03$, $p < .01$; emotional abuse predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = 1.39$, $t = 22.92$, $p < .01$; emotional neglect did not predict displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = -.07$, $t = -1.73$, $p > .01$; and sexual abuse negatively predicted displaced aggression at $(F_{5, 310})$, $\beta = -.87$, $t = -15.33$, $p < .01$.

Summary of the Findings

1. Study pressure of stress predicted displaced aggression.
2. Self-expectation of stress negatively predicted displaced aggression
3. Perceived burden and worrying about grade, and despondency of stress did not predict displaced aggression.
4. Childhood traumatic experience like physical abuse, and emotional abuse predicted displaced aggression.
5. Physical neglect and sexual abuse of childhood traumatic experience predict displaced aggression negatively.
6. Emotional neglect of childhood traumatic experience did not predict displaced aggression.

Discussion

This proves academic stress predicted displaced aggression among university students in Anambra State. This is because the study pressure of stress predicted displaced aggression positively, while self-expectation of stress negatively predicted displaced aggression. However, perceived burden, worrying about grades, and despondency of stress did not predict displaced aggression. This shows that an increase in study pressure means an increase in displaced aggression, whereas a decrease in self-expectation of stress means an increase in displaced aggression. This is in line with the Vranjes et al., (2020) observation that students' daily stressors spilled over to life and school context in the form of anger after school. This indicated that the odds of aggression were negatively influenced by chronic long-term stressors related to interpersonal problems, health adaptation difficulties, and other troubles, even after adjustment for parental neglect, emotional management, social support, and other relevant factors (Huanga et al., 2020). Hence, Winiarski et al., (2018) suggested that stress was related to persistent aggression, and that callousness had a mediating role in this process.

To this, cognitive neo associationistic theory by Berkowitz (1993) proposed that aversive events produce a negative affect that in turn activates various thoughts, memories, physiological responses, and motor reactions contained within an associative network. The properties of the network are such that once a construct is processed or stimulated, activation spreads out along the network links and primes (activates) associated or related constructs. Since a wide variety of events like stress may serve to activate or prime components of an aggression network. The ones that are especially relevant to our theorizing are those that already have a strong association with anger and aggression (Berkowitz, 1993). For example, an initial provocation will prime aggression-related constructs that make future aggressive responses more likely. In addition, negative stressful experiences of greater intensity are more likely to result in more widely spread activation, and consequently, stronger aggressive inclinations.

Similarly, childhood traumatic experience predicted displaced aggression among university students in Anambra State partially. Since, childhood traumatic experiences like physical abuse, and emotional abuse predicted displaced aggression, while physical neglect and sexual abuse of childhood traumatic experiences predict displaced aggression negatively.

Emotional neglect of childhood traumatic experiences did not predict displaced aggression. Hence, an increase in childhood traumatic experiences like physical abuse, and emotional abuse means an increase in displaced aggression, while a decrease in physical neglect and sexual abuse of childhood traumatic experience means an increase in displaced aggression. This is in tandem with the assertion of Odacı, and Çelik, (2020) that traumatic experiences (physical, sexual, emotional maltreatment, and emotional neglect) influence risk-taking and aggression. Moreover, physical and sexual abuses are significant predictors of risk-taking and aggression (Odacı, & Çelik, 2020). This concludes that exposure to traumatic experiences in childhood prepares the foundation for negative behaviours in students: Which translates to exposure to traumatic events and PTSD symptom severity, acute aggression, the number of committed offenses and violence. Childhood traumatic experience tends to impact the propensity toward aggression (Sommer et al., 2017).

Theoretically, it supports the assertion that childhood traumatic experience highlights the fact that although traumatic experience is an intensely personal feeling, childhood traumatic experience is generated from social interactions and relationship dynamics such as displaced aggression (Klein, 1991). Thus, childhood traumatic experience involves putting down and holding down and has such intense power that it is considered the nuclear bomb of the emotions” (Lindner, 2001, 2006). For childhood, traumatic experience exacerbates displaced aggression (Fitness, 2000) and results in strong, negative emotions. For example, students who reported they had been traumatized by their parents also reported feeling hatred towards their parents and tended to withdraw (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993). These, in turn, elaborate, intensify, or suppress the initial rudimentary emotional reactions. This is the process by which the relatively basic emotions of anger or fear are differentiated into more subtle variations such as annoyance, anxiety, guilt, irritation, and trauma.

This study denotes that displaced aggression among university students often stems from underlying factors such as academic stress and unresolved childhood traumatic experiences. Theoretical implications suggest that these behaviors may be linked to coping mechanisms where individuals redirect their frustration onto less threatening targets. This can provide insight into stress management and emotional regulation strategies within educational settings.

Practically, understanding displaced aggression can help universities implement support systems like counseling services, peer support groups, and workshops focused on managing academic pressures and addressing past traumas. By fostering a supportive environment, institutions can mitigate the negative effects of displaced aggression, promoting healthier interpersonal relationships and improve academic performance among students.

The study also connotes that displaced aggression among university students may arise as a coping mechanism when individuals face academic stress and unresolved childhood traumatic experiences. Academic stress, characterized by pressure to perform, deadlines, and competitive environments, can lead to feelings of frustration and helplessness. When these emotions are combined with the lingering effects of childhood trauma—such as emotional neglect, abuse, or instability—students may struggle to manage their emotions effectively. In such cases, displaced aggression often manifests as directing anger or frustration toward individuals or situations unrelated to the original source of stress. For example, a student experiencing high levels of academic pressure might lash out at friends, family members, or peers instead of addressing the root cause of their distress.

More so, the interplay between academic stress, childhood trauma, and displaced aggression is crucial for developing effective interventions. Counseling services, stress management programs, and trauma-informed approaches can help students process their emotions constructively and reduce the likelihood of displaced aggression. Building awareness among educators and mental health professionals about these dynamics can further support students in navigating their challenges in a healthier and more productive manner.

Based on the implications, the following recommendations are made:

1. It is essential to implement targeted interventions that focus on both emotional regulation and stress management.
2. Universities should consider providing access to mental health resources, such as counseling services and workshops on coping mechanisms.
3. Fostering a supportive campus environment where students feel encouraged to share their struggles can help mitigate feelings of isolation.

4. Students with a history of childhood trauma, trauma-informed therapy can be particularly effective in addressing underlying issues that contribute to displaced aggression.
5. Peer support groups may also serve as a valuable platform for sharing experiences and learning healthy ways to manage stress and emotional responses.
6. Incorporating mindfulness practices, such as meditation or yoga, into daily routines can help students develop greater self-awareness and resilience in the face of academic stress.

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