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**Exploring Coping Styles & Present Mental Health Status of Final Year Undergraduate
Students in Relation to their Psychological Capital amidst uncertainties of COVID**

Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown declared due to this, has brought a robust stagnation in different sectors of human life. When the world is facing delayed development and crisis in economic sectors, job markets, work culture, etc., educational realm has also undergone a massive change within just few months. In this era of new normal, not only the teaching-learning system is forced to be shifted to online platform; but also the students who were supposed to complete their college/ university degrees this year are still in a stagnated state. Along with the present pandemic environment stress, the uncertainties relating to their future aspirations have become an added burden for these students' mental health. This study has focused on the present mental health status of these final year students of undergraduate (UG) level (groups separated as higher education and job aspirants) and the coping styles adopted by them to combat environmental uncertainties in relation to their psychological capital. The study, thus, investigated difference in psychological capital, present mental status and adopted coping style between final year UG students aspiring for higher studies and job. The data was collected through online platform and after proper screening, and analysed with the help of descriptive and multivariate statistical techniques. Final results observed no particular difference in psychological capital between the two groups of final year UG students. However, difference was observed in their adopted coping strategies and present mental health status. As the psychological capital shows no difference, the difference observed in mental health condition and coping, hence, could be attributed to the stress and insecurities culminating from pandemic crisis.

KEYWORDS: Psychological capital, Coping, Mental health, Pandemic

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COVID 19 had been declared by the World Health Organisation as a public health emergency of worldwide concern in January 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020a) which had its origin in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and which has affected all the countries of the world and is one of the largest as recoded in history, even worse than the aftermath of the World War II. A Pandemic is the outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population. Pandemics not only impact the mortality and morbidity but also stagger the economic growth and delays national development. There is social disruption, political tension and individual behavioral changes, such as fear-induced aversion to workplaces and other public gathering places (Madhav et al, 2017). Pandemic affects the mental health of individual as a total result. Economic loss, insecurity, school/work closure, inadequate medical response, and deficient distribution of necessities are only a few factors that causes emotional disturbances like stresses, insomnia, frustrations and often lead to psychiatric disorders like depression, anxiety, substance abuse just to name a few (Pfefferbaum, 2020). The psychological issue can worsen with social distancing and the lockdown measures taken by administrations as observed in many countries worldwide.

Mental ill-health is a huge impediment to student's academic success. It affects student's motivation, concentration levels, social interactions and perseverance to name a few (Unger, 2007). Lee J in an article published in Lancet (Apr 2020) explains the effects of COVID 19 pandemic on students. In a survey, which included 2111 participants up to age 25 years with a mental illness history in the UK, 83% said the pandemic had made their conditions worse, 26% said they were unable to access mental health support; peer support groups and face-to-face services have been cancelled, and support by phone or online can be challenging for some

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young people. The 2019 Annual Report of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health reported that anxiety continues to be the most common problem (62.7% of 82,685 respondents) among students who completed the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms, with clinicians also reporting that anxiety continues to be the most common diagnosis of the students that seek services at university counseling centers (2019 annual report. Center for Collegiate Mental Health. University Park, PA: Penn State University; 2020)

In response to the Covid-19 scare, many schools and colleges have moved online and parents seem to have assumed the role of teachers. The crisis has also affected the Indian education system with most schools and higher educational institutions moving to virtual/online platforms for lecture delivery. Also, institutions are prompted to establish management approaches regarding pandemics to encourage positive health behavior among students (Akan et al., 2010).

There is sparse evidence of the psychological or mental health effects of the current pandemic on college students, who are known to be a vulnerable population (Bruffaerts et al, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the coping styles & present mental health status of final year undergraduate students in relation to their psychological capital.

Methodology

Hypotheses- The study was conducted with those students, from UG final year course (segregated as per their future aspirations), whose final examinations and result declarations were pending, in context to present pandemic scenario. Amidst this environmental stress and future uncertainties, how these students functioning in terms of their psychological capital/resources, their present mental health status and adapted coping styles were the major focus of understanding, for this study. In this respect, the objectives of the present study could be hypothesized as:

1. There exists significant difference in terms of psychological capital between the groups of students under study (Hypothesis 1).
2. There exists significant difference in coping styles between the student groups (Hypothesis 2).
3. There exists significant difference in present mental health status between the student groups (Hypothesis 3).

Participant Selection- A sample of 104 UG final year students, having different future aspirations in terms of continuing with higher studies (n=60) and entering in to job field (n=44), whose final examination and result declarations pending were selected as participants for this study. These participants were recruited through rigorous screening process, to ensure otherwise inclusion of mentally healthy individuals for this study. This screening was necessary as the study purported to observe overall psychological strength and mental health status of the participants in context to present pandemic/ environmental situation. The data, thus, collected

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was through online mode, and using non-probability sampling method (Snowball technique). Non-probability technique was used, majorly, due to the time and present environmental constraints. Further, the participants selected were from middle class socio-economic background, and were residents of Kolkata.

Instruments Used- The tools used for the present study were all self-report measures. At initial stage, all participants were required to complete the Preliminary Information Schedule, prepared for participant screening process. After screening, the finally selected participants were provided with main measures, which were:

- Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Questionnaire- 24 (Luthans et al., 2007)- To measure overall psychological resources of individuals, in terms of their Hope, Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism;
- COPE Inventory (Carver, 2013)- To understand the adapted coping strategies/ styles of the student groups under study; and
- General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)- 12 (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979)- To evaluate their present mental health condition/ status, amidst all these environmental stress and uncertainties of COVID pandemic situation.

Data Analysis- After data collection, descriptive (Mean, SD) and multivariate (MANOVA) statistical techniques were used for final interpretation.

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Results & Discussion

Multivariate analysis was performed to find out the effect of group interaction as categorised as Higher study aspiration & Job aspiration among the final year undergraduate students amidst uncertainty of pandemic situation. The results revealed:

Group (Higher study & Job aspirant), Pillai's Trace = .125, F (3,100) = 4.767, p= .004, partial²= .125

This indicates existence of significant difference in two groups of UG final year students, under study. Subsequently univariate F tests were conducted with the group as independent variable, and psychological capital, coping strategy and present mental health condition as dependent variables. The following table demonstrates the means, standard deviations and results of univariate ANOVA for each category of dependent variable selected for study.

TABLE 1: Results of statistical analysis to find difference in Psychological Capital, Coping strategy & Mental health of Final year UG students aspiring for Higher studies & Job

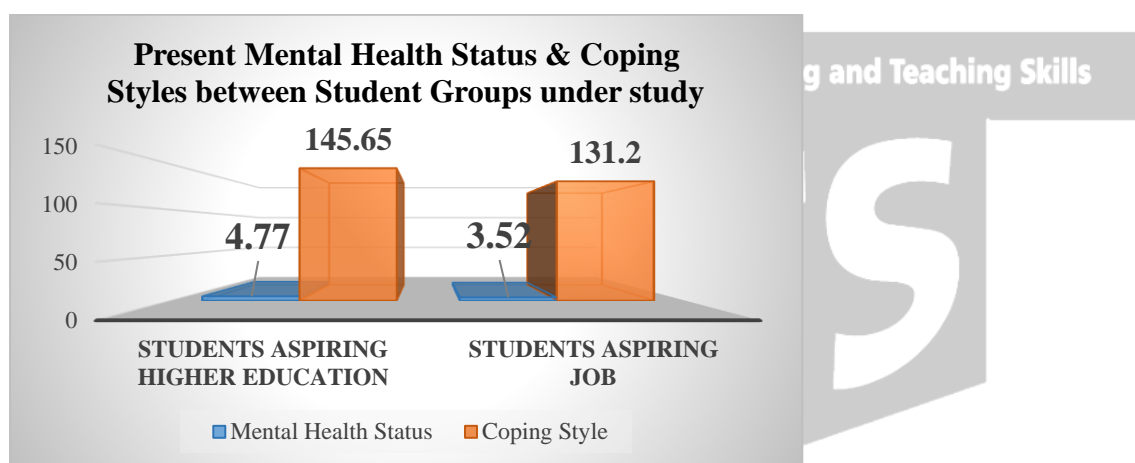
Measures	Aspiring HighEdu (n=60)		Aspiring Job (n=44)		F (1, 102)	Sig.	Partial Eta Square
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>			
<i>PsyCap</i>	101.4500	16.14387	101.0682	21.78585	0.011	0.918	0.000
<i>Cope</i>	145.6500	21.87160	131.2045	24.40128	10.038	0.002	0.090
<i>GHQ</i>	4.7667	2.94795	3.5227	2.44463	5.205	0.025	0.049

As can be observed from the above table, students aspiring for higher education differs significantly in their present mental health status and coping strategy (taken all together) in

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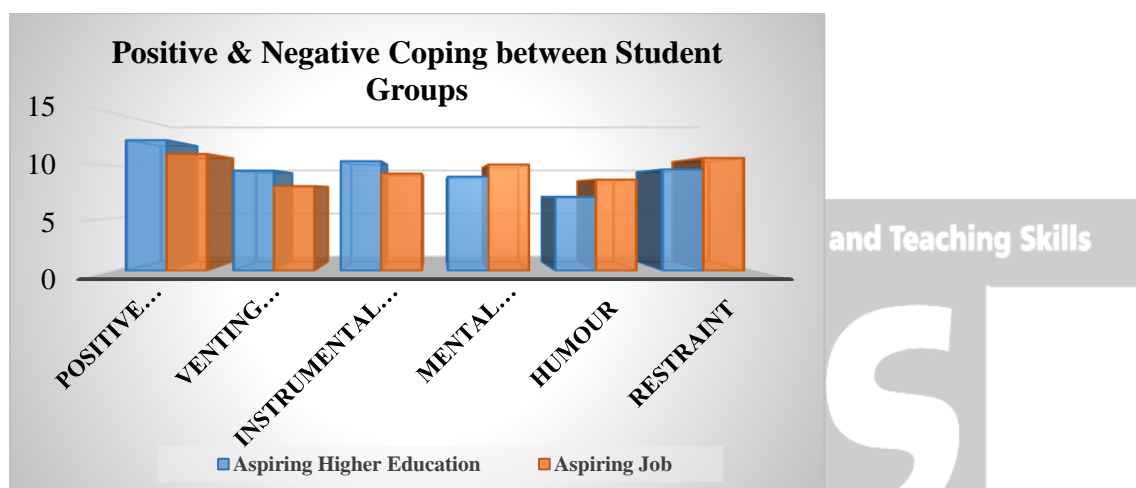
comparison to students aspiring for jobs (FIGURE 1). However, no such difference observed in case of psychological capital (taken all together) between the two groups.

FIGURE 1: Difference in Present Mental Health Status & Coping Styles of Final year UG students aspiring for Higher Studies & Job



Maximum and strongest difference observed in coping mechanisms of these two categories of students (FIGURE 2). Hence, further exploration done in respect to different coping strategies, to understand the nature of coping (positive or negative) adapted by the student groups.

FIGURE 2: Difference in Specific Coping Styles (Positive & Negative) of Final year UG students aspiring for Higher Studies & Job



The following table provides means, standard deviations and univariate ANOVA results of each coping style as adapted by the student groups under study.

TABLE 2: Results of statistical analysis to find difference in internal Coping strategies of Final year UG students aspiring for Higher studies & Job

Measures	Aspiring HighEdu (n=60)		Aspiring Job (n=44)		F (1, 102)	Sig.	Partial Eta Square
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>			
<i>Positive Reinterpretation & Growth</i>	12.42	2.64	11.11	3.26	5.071	0.026	0.047
<i>Mental Disengagement</i>	8.95	2.59	10.10	2.43	5.314	0.023	0.050

<i>Venting Emotions</i>	9.53	3.04	8.06	2.55	6.715	0.011	0.062
<i>Instrumental Social Support</i>	10.42	2.92	9.25	2.72	4.273	0.041	0.040
<i>Active Coping</i>	10.83	2.55	10.32	3.27	0.812	0.370	0.008
<i>Denial</i>	7.45	2.50	8.26	3.03	2.107	0.150	0.020
<i>Religious Coping</i>	9.25	3.54	8.18	2.55	2.891	0.092	0.028
<i>Humour</i>	7.00	2.72	8.67	3.37	7.255	0.008	0.066
<i>Behavioural Disengagement</i>	7.51	2.58	7.13	2.96	0.486	0.487	0.005
<i>Restraint</i>	9.64	2.77	10.72	2.42	4.481	0.037	0.042
<i>Emotional Social Support</i>	8.63	2.89	8.09	2.60	0.970	0.327	0.009
<i>Substance Use</i>	5.36	2.30	5.68	2.66	0.409	0.524	0.004
<i>Acceptance</i>	10.92	2.43	9.72	2.64	5.624	0.20	0.052
<i>Suppressing Competing Activities</i>	9.68	2.40	10.88	2.40	6.317	0.14	0.058
<i>Planning</i>	11.82	2.77	11.22	2.49	0.921	0.340	0.009

Table 2 reveals significant difference between higher education and job aspirant group of students in relation to various coping mechanisms. The group differed significantly in a number of coping strategies adapted, viz., Positive reinterpretation & growth, Mental disengagement, Venting emotions, Instrumental social support, Humour and Restraint; where, the students with higher study aspiration mostly scored better in positive coping strategies like Positive

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reinterpretation & growth, Venting emotions, seeking Instrumental social support, etc. The students, with job aspiration after completion of UG course, scored higher in negative coping styles like Mental disengagement, Humour, Restraint, etc.

Hence, from the observations of data analysis and result tables above, Hypothesis 1, which states existence of difference in psychological capital between two student groups, was rejected. However, the data analysis further revealed difference in adapted coping strategies and present mental health status between the two groups of students; thus, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 were accepted for this study.

Psychological capitals are those inner properties, resources or qualities of human mind that makes a person mentally healthy and strong (Luthans et al., 2004; Roddenberry & Renk, 2010; Baron et al., 2013; Avey et al., 2010; Newman et al., 2014). Earlier studies in this domain have revealed that there exist a direct and positive relation between psychological capital, coping style and mental health of individuals (Avey et al., 2009; Boscarino, 1995; Brewin et al., 2000; Frydenberg, 1997; Yan & Zhang, 2016; Fink, 2014). These studies suggested, when psychological capital reveal no such difference between groups or individuals, coping styles and mental health status also to be considered similar, pertaining to the direct and progressive relative between these three variables. However, the present study revealed different results, where psychological capital score inspite of having no difference and yielding positive results between the student groups, differences were observed for coping styles and mental health status. The reason could be attributed to the present uncertain conditions prevailing due to pandemic situation. Data collection was done after proper screening through use of Preliminary Information Schedule, to ensure only mentally healthy individuals participating in this study,

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who have no history of psychiatric illness/ psychological treatment. This screening totally justified observation of no major difference in psychological capital scores between the two groups of students (Sweetman & Luthans, 2010; Hansen et al., 2015; Keyes et al., 2002). But pertaining to the job market and economic status of present global pandemic situation, the group of students aspiring to enter into job field after completion of UG courses seems to be feeling more insecure in comparison to those students aspiring for continuing with higher studies (Baluku et al., 2020; Sethi, 2018).

Earlier studies advocated that certain amount of mental restlessness is evident while experiencing a global change in living, or while going through some uncertain stressful conditions (DeVries, 2003; Xiong et al., 2020). In this sense, present pandemic situation, with advent of 'new normal' pattern of life and uncertainties in every other aspect, be it job, or education, or business, etc. have impacted lives globally. Many ventures are facing a great deal of stagnation. Final year UG course students are no exception here. Students are struggling with uncertainties related to their examination process and result publication. However, those students who wishes to continue with higher studies, are still having some more years with them to enter job market, and many institutes with rendering provisional admission to these students whose final mark sheets are yet to be published, somehow are providing at least some sense of security to the students amidst all other insecurities. But in case of students, aiming to enter job field, are experiencing more stress due to this uncertain condition of job market, businesses and financial sectors. This pandemic and environmental stress of 'new normal' along with uncertain future prospect, could be considered here as one of the leading reasons for these students to feel insecure; which further is getting associated with their present poor

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mental health status and use of negative coping strategies (Frydenberg, 1997; Sheroun, et al., 2020; Reser & Swim, 2011; Aldwin & Stokols, 1988).

Conclusion

From the statistical analysis of the data and the discussions, the conclusion inferred suggest that significant difference exist between two groups of students, viz., aspiring higher education and aspiring for jobs, in terms of coping strategies and present mental health status. Students with higher study aspiration scored better in coping and mental health status in comparison to students with job aspiration after UG course completion; where higher education aspiring students seem to be practicing positive coping mechanisms, even amidst this uncertain pandemic lockdown and crisis period. Hypothesis 2 and 3 are accepted, in this regard.

However, the data analysis further reveals existence of no significant difference in terms of psychological capital between the student groups, under study. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is rejected here. This indicates, existence of no other mental health related concerns for both the student group. The difference is coping style and mental health status where job aspiring students scored low, thus, could be attributed to the present environmental stress and uncertain pandemic conditions.

Limitations and Applicability

The study was limited to a relatively small sample size (n=104), from middle class socio-economic background. Data collected was specifically from Kolkata. Sampling technique used was non-probability method, owing to the time and other related constraints of present scenario. Further, the mode of data collection was limited to online platform, and the tools used for study purpose were all self-report measures that tends to leave possibility of response biases.

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In spite of all these mentioned limitations, the study highlighted some interesting concepts in relation to mental health and coping attitude while experiencing robust environmental stress and insecurity like pandemic or other such calamities. The major implication of this study lies in unfolding the notion that in spite of being otherwise mentally healthy and well equipped in psychological capital strength, people might have compromised coping skill or often adapt to negative coping styles for a definite period of time. Furthermore, even after possessing adequate psychological capital, individual might demonstrate poor mental status due to sudden change or persisting uncertain conditions.

Henceforth, this study finding can be useful in understanding student's perspectives and planning mental health care for them. The study further is noteworthy in understanding the impact of social and environmental change among final year students, having different aspiration levels for future. Therefore, this study can effectively be used as a reference work that paves way to further researches on educational, environmental, student mental health and social change management domains, in future.

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