
The Most Negative Life Experiences of College Students

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Abstract

In a 1972 American study college students were asked to describe in writing their two most negative life experiences. These were defined as, "experiences that made your life worse or were a negative force in your development." Incidents involving teachers were reported by subjects more often than any other persons or events. More than ten years later, the author replicated the above mentioned study at a Canadian urban university and found very similar results. The purpose of this investigation was to replicate these studies, but with the major difference of using in-depth telephone interviews. Subjects were also asked some health-related questions.

The 208 volunteer college students reported that their negative experiences most frequently involved illness/injury, parents, and death (in that order). Interactions with teachers were at the bottom of the list. It is recommended that because of major research design deviations, the present investigation be viewed with caution as a replication study. Further research is needed before minimizing or dismissing the serious implications of the two previous studies.

Résumé

En 1972, une étude américaine demandait, à des étudiants de niveau collégiale, de d'écrire leurs deux plus mauvaises expériences de leur vie. Elles étaient définies comme suit: "des expériences qui ont rendu votre vie plus difficile ou étaient une force négative dans votre développement." Des incidents impliquant des enseignants étaient reportés par les sujets plus souvent que tout autre personne ou événement. Plus de dix années plus tard, l'auteur réappliqua l'étude mentionnée ci-haut dans une université urbaine canadienne et trouva des résultats tout aussi semblables. Le but de cette investigation était de reprendre ces études, mais avec la différence importante d'utiliser des interviews téléphoniques en profondeur, et les sujets devaient aussi répondre à des questions d'ordre médical.

Les 208 étudiants volontaires de niveau collégial ont rapportés que leurs expériences négatives impliquaient plus fréquemment la maladie/blessure, les parents, et la mort (dans cet ordre). Les interactions avec les enseignants étaient au bas de la liste. Il est recommandé suite aux changements importants apportés au modèle de recherche que la présente investigation soit vue avec précaution comme étant une réplique exacte de l'étude première. Par conséquent, de plus amples recherches sont nécessaires avant de minimiser ou de rejeter les implications sérieuses des deux études précédentes.

The identification and measurement of common social stressors has received much attention over the last few decades and the use of life events schedules has become accepted practice in well-being research. The best known measurement of life events is perhaps Holmes and Rahe's (1967) formulation of the "Social Readjustment Rating Scale." In this scale subjects were asked to rate common life events in terms of the intensity and the amount of time required to adapt. Two of the 43 life events on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale relate to the stress effect of school, but not specifically to the influence of teachers. One criticism of the life events approach is that

little attention has been devoted to the meaning of different types of events for the individual. Another criticism is that the subjects rating the stress effect of an event may not have experienced it (Pennebaker, 1985; Stones and Kozma, 1983).

In using life events schedules, the common practice has been to combine both positive and negative life changes in determining a total stress effect. There is growing evidence, however, that negative stressors exert the greatest impact on disease and well-being (Chiriboga, 1977; Pearlin, Lieberman, 1979; Zautra & Reich, 1983; Cernovsky, 1985). With regard to the development of illness and health problems Pennebaker (1985) asserts that the “failure to confide may be the critical mediating variable” (p. 88).

More germane to student learning and development and the focal point of this investigation is an American study by Branam (1972), “Negative Human Interaction.” (The approach used by Branam addresses the two criticisms of the life events schedules mentioned previously.) Branam asked his subjects what they perceived as the two most negative experiences in their lives. A negative experience was defined as “an experience which they felt made their life worse or was a negative force in their development” (p. 81). The subjects, 150 rural college students, produced 300 written responses. Of these, 44 were categorized as “non-personal” — responses that related to religion, injury and illness. The vast majority of negative experiences (85%), however, were experiences involving other people. According to these first and second-year psychology students, the most negative life experiences involved interaction with teachers (33% of human interactions). Parents (23%) were involved considerably less often in these reported negative experiences, and then followed friends or acquaintances (14%), boy or girlfriends (12%), strangers (11%), and siblings (7%).

Believing very different results would be obtained in a more conservative traditional educational system (Ontario), the author (Warner, 1983) undertook a slightly modified replication of Branam’s American study. The author surveyed 111 students at a large urban university including 31 older part-time evening students. The students were asked to describe in detail what they considered the single most negative experience in their lives (A negative experience was defined as it was in the Branam study.) Of the 111 written responses obtained from several classes at the university level, 11 were judged to be too general to be classified, and 14 were categorized as non-personal (i.e., accident or illness). This indicated that 86 percent of the sources of students’ most negative life experiences involved interactions with other people — a figure that is very close to Branam’s finding of 85%.

The most frequently reported negative experience (30% of the human interactions) involved interactions with teachers, next were negative experiences with parents (24%), followed by the other target persons in the same rank order and comparable percentage points to the Branan study. Of the four levels of teachers involved in these negative experiences, the high school teacher was selected most frequently by the students. Following this were college, elementary, and junior high teachers. Students described instances which involved humiliation in front of the class, unfairness in evaluation, embarrassment, destruction of self confidence, and personality conflicts.

Even though this replication study was conducted with an urban sample more than ten years later, the findings are markedly similar; thus offering added weight to Branan's comments:

The results are particularly interesting in terms of the negative effects of teachers on human development. — In terms of the goals of education this is not complimentary. Those who are concerned as much with the psychological development of students as human beings as with their cognitive development are likely to find such findings disquieting (p. 81).

As to why these students reported their most negative experiences frequently involved teachers, poor teacher interpersonal communication skills appear to be one plausible explanation. This view is clearly illustrated in the work of Sadker and Sadker (1985) who, after spending more than a year in systematic observations of over 100 classrooms in 5 states, concluded that;

... classroom interactions between teachers and students are short on both quality and equality... that teachers simply have very little insight into their own patterns of responding to students... Most teachers remain not only untrained in the skills of interaction, but unaware of the importance of precise reactions, equitably delivered. They need appropriate inservice and preservice training (p. 361).

Certainly the need for and relevance of interpersonal communications skills to learning and student development has been well documented (e.g., Aspey, 1969; Carkhuff, 1981; Gazda, Asbury, Balzer, Childers, Desselle & Walters, 1977; Halamandaris & Loughton, 1972; Higgins, Moracco, & Danford, 1981; Karvas, 1977; Long, Paradise & Coleman, 1978). As Branan pointed out more than one and a half decades ago, the need for human relations training would appear to be more widely accepted for police officers than for teachers.

A recent study was undertaken to address the question of whether individuals who had long ago finished school, would similarly report that teachers were involved in their most negative life experiences. The study (Warner, 1989) involved 102 volunteer senior citizens (with

a mean age of 68) who were asked to describe in a telephone interview their two most negative life experiences. The most frequently reported negative life experiences were death of a close family member and personal illness/injury.

The majority (61%) of negative life experiences reported by these seniors fell into the “non-personal” category of illness/injury and death in contrast to the studies involving students (Warner, 1983; Branam, 1972) where the majority (86% and 85% respectively) of the subjects reported incidences involving human interaction (particularly teachers). The results of this study involving seniors (Warner, 1989), were similar to the responses of an earlier preliminary study involving seniors (Warner, 1987).

The major purpose of the present study was to determine whether a larger sample of students when interviewed in-depth over the telephone, would report interactions involving teachers as their most negative life experiences as two previous studies have found. This change in research design to individual interviews outside the classroom, would of course, result in a major deviation from the previous two studies which had the subjects describe their experiences on paper in a university classroom setting. A minor purpose (for exploratory reasons) was to determine if there were any correlations between sources of negative experiences, health related issues, and self disclosure as Pennebaker (1985) has suggested.

METHOD

The 208 volunteer subjects with a mean age of 23.8 (ranged from 18 to 50 years of age) consisted of 144 females and 64 males, who had completed a mean of 3.3 years of post-secondary education. They were recruited at a large urban university directly from classes as well as by placing posters in several prominent places on the campus over a two year period. The subjects were asked to volunteer for a “life experience” interview by giving their first name and telephone number after being given brief general explanation.

Six senior level undergraduate students, who were funded by the Ontario Student Work Project, conducted the interviews of the subjects over the telephone during the two-year data collection period. The interviewers received training in how to ask the questions and handle the responses of the subjects.

The subjects were asked the following questions: how would you rate your overall health (on a four point scale)? how many times this year have you visited the health centre or a medical doctor? the number of close friends you have? and when you are worried, how fully do you express your feelings to a close friend (on a four point scale)?

The subjects were also asked whether they had experienced any of the 14 items (on a four point scale from never to frequently) of a health symptoms index employed in a study by Rubenstein (1982).

The critical question of negative life experiences was introduced differently than in the previously mentioned two studies with students. In order to encourage students to consider their whole life span the following was read to all subjects:

Considering your whole life, again, from your earliest memories of childhood through the school years, adolescence, and adulthood, what do you consider to be the two most negative experiences in your life? A negative experience is defined as one that made your life worse or was a negative force in your development.

After describing these experiences the subjects were asked if they talked to anyone immediately after, how fully they disclosed their feelings, and how long they were affected by such experiences.

TABLE 1

The Sources of the Most Negative Life Experiences of Students

<i>Source</i>	<i>Frequency</i>		<i>Mean Age</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>(%)</i>	<i>of Experience</i>	<i>Still Affected</i>
Illness/injury	74	(19)	16.2	46
Parents	58	(14.9)	14.1	46
Death	53	(13.6)	15.9	42
Boy/girlfriend	52	(13.4)	19	42
Friends	44	(11.3)	15.8	44
School Related	42	(10.7)	16.6	43
Parental Divorce	19	(4.8)	15.8	54
Other	47			

N = 389

RESULTS

The negative experiences reported by the students were not a result of recency of experience. Most of these events occurred in their younger years — the mean age of all the negative experiences was 16.4. No relationships were discovered between the sources of negative experiences and the scores (or numbers) on the overall health self-rating, health symptoms index, visits to doctor, number of close friends, or whether and how fully the subjects disclosed.

When the subjects were divided into either those who told no one after the negative experiences (n = 87), and those who disclosed their feelings (n = 121), the only difference found was that the latter group

(disclosers) had more close friends ($M = 4.38$ vs 3.96 ; $t = 1.88$ at .05 level of confidence).

Table 1 indicates the frequency of each of the sources of the most common negative experiences including the mean age at occurrence, and the percentage of subjects still being affected by these experiences. The students reported that the most frequent negative experiences involved illness/injury, parents, and death (in that order) which together accounted for almost 50% of the sources. The category illness/injury, in contrast to the Holmes and Rahe scale, was not limited to incidents affecting subjects personally, but included illness/injury of family members as well. Also, the category of "school related" sources in Table 1 was not limited to teachers but included all school related experiences (e.g., "school failure"). In table 2, however, the sources of teacher and school related experiences are separated.

TABLE 2
*Comparisons on the Sources of the Most Negative Life Experiences
with Previous Studies*

Source	Present Study		Students*		Elderly**	
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)
Illness/injury	74	(19)	54	(14)	54	(19)
Parents	58	(15)	80	(20)	23	(8)
Death	53	(14)	0		96	(34)
Boy/girlfriend or Spouse	52	(13)	47	(12)	24	(8)
Friends	44	(11)	55	(14)	1	(.4)
School/work related	28	(7)	na		23	(8)
Divorce	19	(5)	na		4	(1)
Teachers	14	(3)	110	(28)	8	(3)
Other	47		51		53	
	N = 389		N = 397		N = 286	

* figures combined from the Branan (1972) and Warner (1983) studies

** figures combined from the Warner (1987) and Warner (1988) studies

COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS STUDIES

With the student subjects in the Branan and Warner studies, the vast majority of reported negative experiences (85% and 86% respectively) involved people (particularly teachers). In contrast, when the 389 negative life experiences of the present investigation were divided up into the categories of "interpersonal" and "non-

personal," (the approach first used by Branam) the latter, which consisted of illness, injury and death, accounted for 49.35% of the experiences. Those involving interactions with other people accounted for 50.65%. This ratio of non-personal to experiences involving people is similar to the two earlier studies involving senior citizens (59% and 61% respectively).

Table 2, which compares the responses of the subjects of this investigation with those of the previous studies, indicates that the rank order of the sources of negative experiences is similar to that of the seniors in the past studies with illness/injury and death being most frequent and teachers at the bottom of the list. In fact, the major difference among these studies is that the negative experience involving teachers is most frequent for the two previous student studies and least frequent for the other investigations as indicated in Table 2. With this major exception, (and the lack of death experiences reported by the two previous student investigations), Table 2 shows relatively consistent results for all studies.

On the Holmes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale, the four most negative life events have to do with loss of spouse (death, divorce, and separation) and liberty (jail term); events or experiences that do not appear relevant to this unmarried (87%) and well educated sample of college students. However, the most frequent source of negative life experience for the students, illness/injury, as well as the third most common experience, death, however, appear to be consistent with the ranking of the events on the Holmes and Rahe scale. (On the latter scale, death of close family member and personal illness/injury rank fifth and sixth places respectively.)

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of the present study was to determine whether a larger sample of students when interviewed in-depth over the telephone, would report interactions involving teachers as their most negative life experiences as the two previous independent studies have found. A minor purpose was to determine if there were any relationships between the sources of negative experiences, health-related issues, and self disclosure as Pennebaker (1985) suggested. No significant relationships were found.

The most frequent sources of negative experiences reported by the students involved illness/injury and death. Interactions involving parents was the second most common source of negative experience in both this study and the previous studies with students. With the two studies involving seniors, parents occupied third place and was tied with "work related" sources.

The major finding was that the students' most frequent negative experiences did not involve interactions with teachers. In fact, interactions with teachers ranked at the bottom of the list, accounting for only three percent of the negative experiences. The explanation of why interactions involving teachers was the least frequent source of negative experiences in the present study, but the most frequent source in the two previous studies is, of course, open to interpretation. One important difference was that the subjects in the previous studies were asked to describe their most negative experiences in a classroom setting and thus the context may have served as a "demand characteristic" influencing students to have an educational perspective.

In the present study the subjects were interviewed by telephone in their homes or residences which would appear free from this educational influence. This raises the question whether the setting in which research of this kind is conducted influences the nature of the negative experiences reported. For example, if a study were conducted in a work setting, would respondents tend to report more work related experiences?

A second difference in the present study was that in asking about their most negative experiences, the subjects were given additional instructions to ensure that they considered their whole life (i.e., "from your earliest memories of childhood through the school years, adolescence, and adulthood . . ."). These instructions would appear to favour non-school related experiences and thus introduce a bias against recalling teacher interactions.

The results of this study, nevertheless, clearly indicate that the subjects perceived teachers as very infrequently being involved in their most negative life experiences. It is advised, however, that because of the two research design deviations mentioned above, that the present investigation should be viewed as a replication study with caution. In the author's view, further research is needed before minimizing or dismissing the serious implications of the two previous independent investigations (Branan, 1972; Warner, 1983) undertaken in classrooms.

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