

## **SOCIAL STRESSORS AT UNIVERSITY**

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### **Abstract**

The paper describes partial results from the research implemented by the support of the SGS-2016-063 project – Studying at the Faculty of Education as a place for forming future teacher's professional identity. The survey was carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen during the academic year 2016/2017. Research focuses on emotionally negative situations emerging from interaction between students and their teachers, from the students' point of view. It deals with the question which stressful situations are subjectively perceived by students as being most stressful and how often they are encountered during their studies. From a methodological point of view, this is a mixed research.

**Keywords:** Social Stressor, Microtrauma, Student, University teacher, Frequency of occurrence, Intensity of experience.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

A lot has been written about stress to this day. Nowadays, stress is most often connected to work, study, and interpersonal relationships. This article focuses on stress that is experienced during studies at a university. To successfully cope with studies, it is necessary for a student to be able to adapt to requirements that are demanded. Student life carries a disadvantage of long-term stress, especially during the exam period. This excessive load is negatively experienced by students and subsequently manifests in deficit of energy, sleep disorders, various psychosomatic complications, and in relation to the process of learning, especially by lower ability of concentration.

A student exposed to excessive load long-term or repeatedly may be internally unbalanced and integrates alternative mechanisms with a goal to escape from the problem or to attack. The withdrawal can lead to a failure in studies, health problems, and even result in a number of illnesses (Provazníková, Schneiderová, 2005). The presented survey focuses on the issue of social stressors in the process of interaction between a university professor and student. It inquires to what extent might a university teacher negatively influence students by their behavior and whether misguided interaction between them can lead to subsequent traumatization of the student.

### **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Atkinson (2003) considers stress a situation when people encounter events and perceive it as dangerous for their physical or mental well-being. These events are usually called stressors; a person's reaction is called stress reaction (Melgosa, 1997). The term stressor can be, in general, comprehended as a negative force on a person. According to type they can be divided into biological, physical, psychological, and social stressors (Křivohlavý, 1994). Janke (1995) includes primarily social isolation and conflict in interpersonal relationships among social stressors which are the subject matter of our target group. From a quantitative point of view two groups of stressors may be distinguished: micro-stressors which are mild to very mild and macro-stressors that go beyond the limit of manageability.

Several world-class researches deal with the stress of university students. They are oriented at stress connected with adapting at a university (Abdullah et al., 2009; Baker and Siryk, 1999), different sources of stress (Gadzella et al., 1994), methods of coping with stress (Chang et al., 2007), the influence of stress on learning styles of students (Gadzella et al., 1998), and other relations. In the Czech Republic R. Kohoutek, a pedagogical psychologist and a university teacher, has been focusing on the topic of university stress for a lengthy period. He speaks about "micro-traumatism" (Kohoutek, 2008). A micro-trauma is considered "a minor damage"; in psychology it is most commonly a minor brain haemorrhage accompanied by psychological disorders (Hartl, 2004). A clinical psychologist from California, P. Lambrou (Lambrou, 2014) suggests that micro-traumatism might affect a wide range of children, adolescents, but also young adults. With most people it appears below the level of awareness and therefore the influence is surfaces after a longer period of time. Regardless of what an individual has actually achieved, it [micro-trauma] numbs the ability to succeed, love completely, feel loved, and enjoy life. It disguises itself in the form of constant criticism, harsh (even cruel) rules, afflicting guilt for small perhaps even petty mistakes, illnesses and accidents that resulted in lasting psychological problems, and so forth.

In his survey realized three years ago, Kohoutek investigated 78 respondents, students in the 4th year of teaching-major studies, what stressors and stressful situations they met during their studies and what are the possibilities to prevent those stresses. Using a questionnaire survey and subsequent evaluation by both approaches, quantitative and qualitative, the examples of situations that are experienced by students as traumatic are most often: experience of failure; underestimation; mockery; offense; humiliation; public scandalisations and depreciation, most often associated with choleric and coldly-distant teachers. These moments are then reflected in the atmosphere of social climate of individual schools, as well as into each student's personality.

Impacts influence development and progress of a personality in all fundamental levels which are: psychological, social, and somatic. Participants of the above-mentioned survey described the following consequences, in particular: reduction of self-confidence and self-assurance in situations when their intelligence was ridiculed; physical appearance; students' weight or clothing; aversion towards the teacher and their subject; chronic fear of "the choleric teacher" and their behaviour; fear even phobia from examinations and unfair grading; headaches; elevated perspiration; sleep disorders; abdominal pains; bowel problems and vomiting; complete nausea up to faintness; generally raised neuroticism.

Individual students from the research differ in terms of resilience (resistance towards negative phenomena and ability to adapt to difficult life situations and vulnerability (susceptibility) of each student. Being exposed to so-called "academic or university stressors" does not usually cause students' macro-trauma that would directly threaten their health or even life but they [micro-trauma] might greatly reduce the level of their [students'] well-being. Micro-traumatism influence human desire to achieve something, are connected to the feelings of happiness and joy, and cause self-sabotaging behaviours of a person. All these aspects then lead to an enormous decrease in a possibility to live a successful life (Kohoutek, 2008 and 2014; Lambrou, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to detect whether a university professor can directly be a source of micro-trauma for students of Faculty of Education.

### 3. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The research focuses on the social interaction between students and their teachers. The assumption is that during the studies at faculties of education, students should encounter their teacher models in their professors. We were interested if students of the Faculty of Education are not exposed to negative social interactions because of the teachers which could then possibly lead to micro-traumatism. In the process of the survey stressful social situations were analysed in terms of frequency of occurrence and level of subjective experience strain. Types of these stressful situations had not been defined in advance but were designed by students themselves. Therefore, from a methodological point of view this is a complex research including both, first, a qualitative part and then a quantitative part.

The principal objective of the qualitative part was to generate social situations or interactions of teachers, which were by recognized students as stressful. As the method of data collection, a semi-structured interview was applied, focusing on social micro-trauma at university. It was realized with five students in the final year of graduate teaching programs. The extension of the sample would not bring any new data. Individual interviews were recorded and then analyzed by content.

During the interviews, students presented situations in which they have appeared and have experienced them negatively, for example: *fear of speaking, because the teacher humiliates; frustration because they are perceived as incompetent; give up because of intransigence and reluctance of a teacher; feelings of futility*

and apathy; feelings of wanting to quit the studies... Students also spoke of specifics of the teacher in terms of their approach towards the profession and towards the students, for example: *teacher's dislike of job; lack of interest in their field; incapability to connect theory with practice; a teacher with low professional knowledge and skills... a teacher with exaggerated, inadequate requirements; a teacher orientated strictly at the field; a teacher who does not communicate with the students at all...*

The objective of the quantitative part was to detect the frequency with which respondents meet with the proposed situation during their studies; identification of extent of each situation burdening the respondents and which social interactions between the two parties are perceived most negatively by the respondents (students). Data collection was realised by a questionnaire constructed on basis of the qualitative part. The questionnaire consisted of 20 authentic statements of students, formulated as case scenarios. All of them [questions] were provided with a five-point frequency scale and five-point intensity of experience scale. To fulfil a wide range in terms of age and also in terms of diversity of study fields, students of all study programs were asked to participate in the research. The target group was represented by 130 students of Faculty of Education – 67 studies a two-year graduate program for secondary education; 63 study a five-year graduate program for pre-primary or primary education.

#### 4. RESULTS

The following tables display the values of arithmetic averages and standard deviation for individual statements used in the questionnaire. The first table (Table 1) shows the aggregate values of all 130 respondents. The second (Table 2) and the third table (Table 3) divide results according to the respondents' field of study. The first group represents students of a two-year graduate program for secondary education; the second group represents students of a five-year graduate program for pre-primary or primary education.

**Table 1. Values of arithmetic averages and standard deviation for individual statements used in the questionnaire – aggregate values of all 130 respondents**

ALL RESPONDENTS				
ABBREVIATIONS OF STATEMENTS USED IN QUESTIONNAIRE	FREQUENCY OF OCCURENC E		INTENSITY OF EXPERIENC E	
	A	SD	A	SD
1. misunderstanding of requirements + correcting of st.'s mistakes	2.89	0.90	2.92	0.96
2. fear to speak because of humiliation by a teacher	2.32	1.00	3.10	1.41
3. teacher as a negative model	3.08	1.07	3.26	1.17
4. negative behaviour of a teacher towards students	2.35	1.00	3.08	1.43
5. intransigence and reluctance of a teacher	2.15	0.86	2.96	1.37
6. teacher disgusted by their work, with no interest in the subject	1.95	0.86	2.28	1.27
7. a teacher orientated strictly at their study field	2.53	0.91	2.68	1.07
8. no use of the subject	2.96	1.02	3.11	1.17
9. excessive, inadequate requirements	2.75	0.95	3.70	1.21
10. a teacher who decreases students' self-confidence	2.08	0.93	2.76	1.46

11. low professional knowledge and skills of a teacher	1.73	0.85	1.98	1.22
12. resigned, almost burned-out teacher	2.00	0.89	2.38	1.18
13. unconcerned, indifferent, passive teacher	1.90	0.85	2.22	1.20
14. arrogant, ironic teacher	2.34	0.94	3.12	1.32
15. a teacher who does not communicate with the students at all	1.73	0.76	2.30	1.30
16. boring, uninteresting lecturing	2.86	1.00	2.89	1.22
17. feelings of futility, apathy, resignation	2.56	1.12	3.22	1.35
18. feelings of despair, hopelessness, frustration	2.54	1.13	3.38	1.45
19. the experience of being humiliate by a teacher	1.78	0.88	2.82	1.70
20. thinking about ending the studies	2.24	1.32	2.80	1.63

Students often encounter situation in which they perceive their professor negatively. The only value that corresponds with the expression "I meet with this situation more than 'sometimes'" in its average occurred in: *"I found myself in a situation, when students, looking at the teacher, thought to themselves, I definitely do not want to teach in the same way."*

The value of intensity here is also higher than the medium which means that at least some respondents encounter these moments more than often and they feel to be influenced by them more than "medium".

With all other situations students encounter in lower frequency than "sometimes"; the least frequent possibilities are: *"I have met with a teacher who did not communicate with their students at all, and through it put students through stressful situations."* *"I have met a professor who had such low professional knowledge and skills that students felt their lessons being completely useless."*

In both statements mentioned above students were almost identical in their opinions; in the first situation the standard deviation acquired the lowest value of all. In the second situation the lowest value of the intensity acquired as well; that means students almost never meet with a professor who is not an appropriate professional and if they meet with them, they do not feel very affected by it.

A situation perceived by students as most stressful: *"I have experienced a professor who put exaggerated, inadequate requirements on the students which led to feelings of despair and hopelessness."* Only this moment was perceived as "almost very" affective by students.

Based on the standard deviations it can be stated that students differ the most in the evaluation of intensity of experience rather than in frequency. This result has its own logical justification. Students come across similar situations, however, their response to these moment vary according to personal traits of every individual, primarily on the frustration tolerance level. Two statements students completely disagreed on were: *"I, personally have experienced a moment, when I wanted to end my studies."* *"I, personally, have experienced that my teacher humiliated me."*

**Table 2. Results according to the respondents' field of study –students of a two-year graduate programs for secondary education**

<b>1<sup>ST</sup> GROUP (secondary education)</b>				
<b>ABBREVIATIONS OF STATEMENTS USED IN QUESTIONNAIRE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY OF OCCURENC E</b>		<b>INTENSITY OF EXPERIENC E</b>	
	<b>A</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SD</b>
<i>1. misunderstanding of requirements + correcting of st.'s mistakes</i>	2.93	0.83	2.95	0.84
<i>2. fear to speak because of humiliation by a teacher</i>	2.42	1.07	3.36	1.47
<i>3. teacher as a negative model</i>	3.43	0.96	3.55	1.03
<i>4. negative behaviour of a teacher towards students</i>	2.31	1.00	3.18	1.47
<i>5. intransigence and reluctance of a teacher</i>	2.27	0.82	3.15	1.33
<i>6. teacher disgusted by their work, with no interest in the subject</i>	1.97	0.88	2.37	1.36
<i>7. a teacher orientated strictly at their study field</i>	2.54	0.92	2.67	1.01
<i>8. no use of the subject</i>	3.18	0.97	3.25	1.16
<i>9. excessive, inadequate requirements</i>	2.67	0.85	3.73	1.25
<i>10. a teacher who decreases students' self-confidence</i>	1.96	0.97	2.62	1.52
<i>11. low professional knowledge and skills of a teacher</i>	1.69	0.81	2.03	1.28
<i>12. resigned, almost burned-out teacher</i>	2.06	0.90	2.55	1.20
<i>13. unconcerned, indifferent, passive teacher</i>	1.88	0.80	2.24	1.20
<i>14. arrogant, ironic teacher</i>	2.34	0.99	3.18	1.36
<i>15. a teacher who does not communicate with the students at all</i>	1.72	0.79	2.31	1.30
<i>16. boring, uninteresting lecturing</i>	3.14	0.88	3.13	1.17
<i>17. feelings of futility, apathy, resignation</i>	2.75	1.12	3.57	1.20
<i>18. feelings of despair, hopelessness, frustration</i>	2.60	1.20	3.64	1.44
<i>19. the experience of being humiliate by a teacher</i>	1.67	0.74	2.93	1.77
<i>20. thinking about ending the studies</i>	2.40	1.40	2.82	1.72

**Table 3. Results according to the respondents' field of study – students of a five-year graduate program for pre-primary or primary education**

<b>2<sup>ND</sup> GROUP</b> (pre-primary and primary education)				
<b>ABBREVIATIONS OF STATEMENTS USED IN QUESTIONNAIRE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE</b>		<b>INTENSITY OF EXPERIENCE</b>	
	<b>A</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SD</b>
<i>1. misunderstanding of requirements + correcting of st.'s mistakes</i>	2.86	0.96	2.90	1.06
<i>2. fear to speak because of humiliation by a teacher</i>	2.22	0.92	2.83	1.29
<i>3. teacher as a negative model</i>	2.81	1.11	2.95	1.24
<i>4. negative behaviour of a teacher towards students</i>	2.38	1.00	2.97	1.39
<i>5. intransigence and reluctance of a teacher</i>	2.03	0.89	2.76	1.39
<i>6. teacher disgusted by their work, with no interest in the subject</i>	1.92	0.84	2.17	1.15
<i>7. a teacher orientated strictly at their study field</i>	2.52	0.91	2.68	1.04
<i>8. no use of the subject</i>	2.84	1.06	2.95	1.16
<i>9. excessive, inadequate requirements</i>	2.84	1.03	3.65	1.16
<i>10. a teacher who decreases students' self-confidence</i>	2.22	0.86	2.86	1.39
<i>11. low professional knowledge and skills of a teacher</i>	1.78	0.88	1.94	1.14
<i>12. resigned, almost burned-out teacher</i>	1.94	0.87	2.19	1.14
<i>13. unconcerned, indifferent, passive teacher</i>	1.92	0.90	2.19	1.21
<i>14. arrogant, ironic teacher</i>	2.33	0.89	3.06	1.27
<i>15. a teacher who does not communicate with the students at all</i>	1.75	0.73	2.29	1.30
<i>16. boring, uninteresting lecturing</i>	2.60	1.05	2.63	1.21
<i>17. feelings of futility, apathy, resignation</i>	2.37	1.09	2.84	1.41
<i>18. feelings of despair, hopelessness, frustration</i>	2.48	1.05	3.10	1.41
<i>19. the experience of being humiliate by a teacher</i>	1.90	0.99	2.70	1.62
<i>20. thinking about ending the studies</i>	2.24	1.23	2.75	1.52

Students specialising in higher levels of education are more exposed to stressful situations during their studies than students from the second group, as well as being more burdened by them.

Students from the first group appeared to be in three situations “more than sometimes”, and they perceived even ten situations as “more than medium” stressful. On the contrary, students from the second group evaluated only two statements with a higher final number than medium from the intensity point of view.

While the highest average of frequency of occurrence of 3.34 resulted in the master program students’ statement: “I found myself in a situation, when students, looking at the teacher, thought to themselves, I definitely do not want to teach in the same way.” No statement achieved a higher average than 3 in the second group. This can be interpreted if respondents encounter such situations it is “less than often”.

In the first group, i.e. students of secondary education, we noticed the highest number of frequency with three statements overall:

- *“I found myself in a situation, when students, looking at the teacher, thought, I definitely do not want to teach in the same way.”*
- *“I have met a professor who led boring and uninteresting lectures and was completely uninterested in the lack of student attention.”*
- *“I have experienced a professor who was unable to connect theory with practice, so students did not find any applicability of the subject.”*

However, the most stressful situations were:

- *“I, personally, have experienced feelings of futility, apathy, resignation caused by a teacher.*
- *“I, personally, have experienced feelings of despair, hopelessness, frustration caused by a teacher.*
- *“I have experienced a professor who put exaggerated, inadequate requirements on the students which led to feelings of despair and hopelessness.”*

The second group, i.e. students preparing for teaching at pre-primary or primary schools, met most often these situations:

- *“I found myself in a situation when students did not understand what they are asked to do or do not know how to correct their mistake.”*
- *“I have experienced a professor who was unable to connect theory with practice, so students did not find any applicability of the subject.”*
- *“I have experienced a professor who put exaggerated, inadequate requirements on the students which led to feelings of despair and hopelessness.”* This moment is considered the most stressful for students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the results that it is mainly professors who are responsible for making future primary and secondary teacher’s lives difficult due to their inability of being seasoned educators. Most demanding are those situations when professors reach for inadequate requirements. Due to negative experiences feelings of apathy and frustration follow. Considering this fact and also having the research results in mind, it is possible to take a look at the last statement of the questionnaire: “I have personally experienced an instance when I wanted to quit my studies.” The arithmetic mean is 2.24, which means in spite of a high degree of pressure in these conditions, overall students rarely think about ending their studies. This train of thought burdens them only slightly more, the numbers in this case are 2.80, again this approaches a medium stress.

Students preparing for a career of pre-primary and primary schools are also most concerned with teachers that lack didactic skills as well as professors with inadequate requirements. It is interesting, although numbers are significantly lower with this particular group, both figures are almost identical in the last statement item with the first group. Students “rarely” thought about ending their studies (equality of statements) and are slightly more pressured by it (“medium stress”).

Respondents consider instances when lecturers demanded inadequately high requirements as most stressful. The statement from Kohoutka’s case study: “Micro-traumas are caused primarily in moments when students are humiliated by teachers” which was a characteristic theoretical presupposition, proved to show heightened figures, nonetheless, not as high as the previous statement. The occurrence is attributed foremost to the fact that respondents are, luckily, not being humiliated too often for these instances to be truly traumatic.

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