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# AN ARTICLE

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# ACADEMIC STRESS AND STRESS-COPING STRATEGY OF A HIGHER BATCH STUDENT WHO IS CONDUCTING THESIS

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#### Abstract

Everybody experiences stress at one point or another in their lives, just at different levels and for different reasons. It is inevitable. And, writing a thesis is one of the most stressful moments in a student life, especially when the student is in the last semester before being dropped out. As XY's case in this present study. This study aimed to investigate what were the stressors that she encountered that made her late in finishing her thesis and how she coped with the situation. The researcher used case study as the method and observation, semi-structured interview, Gadzella's SII Questionnaire, and Lazarus and Folkman's Ways of Coping Questionnaire to gather the data. The result shows that the stressors that caused XY were family and personal problems, academic-related problem, and other minor problems such as the lack of material sources and finance. She coped with her stress in the ways of distancing, detaching, distracting herself from the stress sources, confining her problems to her close-ones and keeping her motivation high.

**Keywords: Academic Stress, Academic Stressors, Higher Batch Student, Stress-Coping Strategy** 

# INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, every university student is obligated to write a thesis and conduct a research before they can graduate from the university. Writing Thesis or *Skripsi* is one of the most stressful phases of students' academic life (Gunawati et al., 2006). What the students encountered during and to their thesis wring is susceptibly make them stress and hinder them to finish the thesis smoothly and/or fast. One of the students who had to encounter such situation is XY.

XY was a higher batch student of English Education Study Program of FKIP Untan who took considerably long time to finish her thesis. She was a female student of 2008 batch, she started the process of thesis writing by the end of 2012 and had her thesis examination in September 2016. It means that she needed almost four years to finish her thesis and eight years to graduate from the university. This

number of year can be considered long because generally for undergraduate (S1) degree, the students usually finish their study in approximately four and half a year to five years. Moreover, XY and those who are considered higher batch students had actually been gathered by the study program chairperson. The chairperson gave them an ultimatum to finish their study within a certain semester or to be dropped out of the university. This sentence fuelled her to work harder to finish her thesis since she wanted to graduate.

As Gunawati et al. (2006) believe, thesis writing itself is a stressful period in university student live, adds up unpleasant life-events and the compulsory to write a thesis in English, which is not her mother tongue nor first language, XY seemed to have every reason to be stress. Regarding the unpleasant life-events, during the pre-research interview, XY mentioned that there were a lot of family

matters and personal problems that she had to face along the process of thesis writing. These problems took place in a short time and made her lost interest in her thesis.

This state and situation that XY was in, put her in a condition that got her to have academic stress. This is confirmed by a psychologist and consoler at a psychology institution in Pontianak, Mrs. Mega Marpaung, M. Psi. She conveyed, "Even without the further test, and just seeing her situation, it is pretty clear that XY is stress." Stress that caused decreasing in academic performance and hindering to get good academic achievement can be referred to academic stress.

Gadzella (1994) mentioned that academic stress does not only happen and cause in school settings but it can also happen on and off school setting. She argues that academic stress can also take place off school setting; as long as it affects students' academic perception, performance, and/or achievement. Moreover, she also argued that interpersonal relationship can also make students have academic stress, in a way that it gives pressures to students.

Additionally, Gmelch (1993) mentioned that academic stress, especially faculty stress, has some characteristics as; a) somewhat predictable, depending on age, gender, and marital status; b) influenced by tenure and rank; c) influenced by time constraints impeding the way to productivity, d) influenced by the perception of one's own expectations, and e) it is universal across all academic disciplines.

To deal with a stressful situation or even a stress condition, one needs a coping mechanism. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "Cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person." Moreover, they (1991 in Goh et al., 2010) conceptualized coping as a complex, organized sequence of behaviors that include cognitive appraisal, action impulses, patterned somatic reactions and reflect physiological aspects of a particular emotion.

Problem-focused coping involves thoughts, actions, and strategies geared toward removing

or diminishing a stressful event or its impact and tends to operate when people believe that something can be done to alter their situation (Struthers et al., 2000). Problem-focus coping is aimed at problem-solving or doing something to alter the source of the stress and coping represents any attempts to reduce stress by attempting to change the event or situation producing the stress (Carver et al. 1989).

Emotion-focused coping involves thoughts, actions, and strategies directed toward the management and reduction of distressing emotions associated with a threatening event and is invoked when one perceives that a stressor must be endured (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984 in Struthers et al., 2000). This coping strategy is aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with/or cued by the situation (Carver et al., 1989).

Positive reappraisal is considered to be a conscious evaluation of whether a situation is benign, threatening, involves a harm or a loss, or constitutes a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 in Aldwin 2007). This coping strategy can be defined as the process of reevaluating that takes place after or during a stressful situation that one has. Positive reappraisal emphasizes the efforts to find positive meaning and personal growth from the encounter (Bippus and Young, 2012).

Thesis or skripsi itself, in Buku Pedoman Penulisan Karya Ilmiah FKIP Untan (2013), is defined as "Scientific writing made by an undergraduate (S1) student...as a final task report to acquire an academic degree". While Wirartha (2006 in Tatan, 2011) also stated that Skripsi is an evidence of student academic ability in doing a research related to the taken. Thus, undergraduate thesis or skripsi is a requirement of Indonesian college students to graduate from a university or college they registered in. It is a written report based on a research that the students have done according to the major they take. The research must be based on the standard of research methodology and the result of the research must be presented in a formal-scientific book-like form.

Referring to XY's case, this sort of longtime thesis finishing for a student to take cannot be a coincidence nor happens for no reason. There must be a background for this kind of situation. Especially for a student with good academic records and positive personality, like XY (supported by the researcher's pre-research interview, interview, and observation).

During the appointment with XY, she stated that her thesis wring process was really a stressful moment for her. She graduated with a relatively high GPA which was 3.5. and she was unreserved and open-up about her situation, moreover, she was not reticent at all. As Bao (2012 in Irwanti, Ikhsanudin, & Rosnija, 2017) considered reticence as the learners' inadequate ability in self-expression, a problem in verbal response to the learning situation, or lack of initiative in negotiating of a meaning. And XY was a total opposite of this state. Due to the positiveness that she owned, the researcher was triggered to investigate what stressors that she had during the process of writing her thesis that made her late in finishing it and how she finally coped with the situation.

Based on the background and the case of the study, the researcher formulated the research questions as; 1) what academic stressors does XY has as a higher batch student that made her late in finishing her thesis? and 2) how does XY cope with her academic stressors. By conducting this study, the researcher hoped that the result of this study can give contribution: 1) for students, this research is expected to be a reference for further research about academic stress and stress coping and probably to help students to cope with their academic stress, and 2) For readers in general, it is hoped that this study can build awareness of how students' mental condition can affect their academic and can also be acknowledgement of academic stress and coping with academic stress.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research is intended to find out deep understanding about the academic stressors and stress coping strategies that XY, a higher batch (2008 batch) had, thus the researcher used case study as the methodology. Case study can depict what it is like to be in a particular situation through an intense description of the participants' life experiences, feelings, thoughts or situations (Geertz, 1973 in Cohen et al., 2005).

To choose the participant, the researcher applied some criteria that the higher batch student had to fit. The criteria are: 1) the student is English Education Study Program student of FKIP Untan of 2009 batch year students or above, 2) the student is in one of the processes of writing the thesis, and 3) the student has one or more life-situation that make him/her unable to finish his/her study on time. After applying the criteria to the higher batch students, the researcher finds a student who meets the criteria set. She was XY. She was the student of English Education Study Program of 2008 batch and was in the process of revising her thesis after thesis examination. She started the process of thesis writing (proposing research title to Academic Advisor) at the end of 2012, but due to some life-events she just had, her thesis examination in September 2016.

There are three premier data for this research. The first two data were about her stressors which divided into two parts, one is the data about the participant's non-academic difficult situations that hindered her to finish her study on time. The data consists of XY's facility to study (internet access, book), her financial situation such, access to get to campus; social support, family condition (including her relationship with her family members), and the series of the life-events she had during the process of completing her thesis. While, the second was data about participant's difficult situations related to her academic, that consist of; her relationship with her academic supervisor, her relationship with her thesis supervisors, her academic score (GPA), and data about her finishing her study. The last is about how she coped with her stressors.

To get the data about her non-academic stressors the researcher took the data from XY herself, her best friend, her life-surrounding, and Student-life Stress Inventory (SSI) Questionnaire by Gadzella. For the data of the academic-related stressors, the data is taken from XY and her best friend. For the data about

how XY coped with her stress, the researcher used Ways of Coping Questionnaire by Folkman and Lazarus, XY, and her best friend as the sources. Therefore, the researcher used observations, questionnaires, and interviews to gather the data. There were five observations, two questionnaires, and two interviews in total.

To analyze the data, the researcher used two analyzes, the first was for the questionnaires and the second was for the observation field-notes and interview transcripts. Since there were two questionnaires used, thus the researcher used each questionnaire scoring guideline to analyze them. For the observation, the researcher summarized every field-note from every observation and took the essence of each of them. The results of the summarization were used directly in the triangulation. While for interviews, the used the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006 in Clarke & Braun, 2013).

# RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Research Findings**

This present study focused on XY's case of late finishing her study. She was a higher batch student of English Education Study Program of Teacher Training and Education Faculty of Tanjungpura University Pontianak. She was a 2008 batch student who took almost four years to finish her thesis. Based on the pre-research interview, she told the researcher that she encountered some difficult life events that made thesis writing even more stressful situation for her. Thus, this study investigated what the difficulties were, why it happened, and how she finally coped with it.

The researcher found that the main stressors that contributed to XY's overdue were personal and family related ones. She told, "The main problem is family related ones, as my father got ill ...and my mother passed away two weeks after my father admitted into hospital". This is in line with her friend's statement, she said that the problem was started when XY parents argued with each other, and shortly after that, her mother passed away, then her father's health started decreasing. These problems occurred when she just started conducting her

thesis. Moreover, shortly after that, XY was forced to face her elder brother's affairs. He made the situation worse and become more unconducive for her to finish her study. Her brother got her and their father into some scandals, such as crime-related, his miragelife-related and finally his decision to leave home. XY's best friend explained the occurrence as, "After her mother's death, her big brother left home because of his own fault, he got divorced, and from that moment on she lives with her father". To put in sequence, the occurrences were, her parents' separation, her father admitted to a hospital, her mother passed away, and her brother got her and her father into a scandalous situation, then he got divorced, and finally he left home. His decision caused XY to take full responsibility for the household, including the family's financial management. All these problems happened relatively in a short time and made her lost her enthusiasm and broke her focus on her study since they occurred when she was in the process of writing her thesis. Consequently, made her late in finishing her thesis.

Beside personal/family-related stressors, another source of stress that caused XY took so long in finishing her thesis was researchrelated ones. Things that were related to her thesis writing, such as material, writing, analysis, or supervisor were also so susceptible to become obstacles during her way to finishing her thesis. XY admitted that she had difficulties that hindered her were the limited learning sources and English wring format. Another thing that she considered difficulties were the APA and MLA writing system. She explained, "Aside of proper sources or material that made me miserable in conducting my thesis in English, the rules and format on writing in English sometimes got me so confused and fed up, especially when I've been sitting in front of my laptop for hours end my eyes and back hurt so much, the little things like punctuation could trigger me so much". Moreover, her friend confirmed that XY faced difficulties dealing with her thesis writing, she told it was statistical details about her thesis.

Regarding XY's thesis supervisors, her friend said that XY never complained anything

about her first supervisor, yet she did confide to her friend about her second supervisor, though it was not significant. This is in line with her statement during the pre-research interview, she stated that she found her second supervisor somehow made her situation a little bit more difficult and that the second supervisor was less understanding, but she did not consider this issue to contribute to her overdue thesis finishing.

Asides of personal and family and researchrelated stressors, there were other sources of stress that cannot be neglected from XY's case, they were material-related other stressors. The material here is including finance and internet connection since both are quite foundational to support study and can be a source of frustration if they do not meet the needs. XY only lives with her father, she is unemployed, and the only financial source that they have is from the father's retirement money. She commented, "Since I've been jobless ever since, and only living off my father's pension money, you can say that money isn't really that friendly to me." Moreover, she is the one who manages her family finance, from money for food to the electricity bill. This so susceptibly puts her in a more stressful state and made her focus to finish her thesis divided.

Internet connection, on the other hand, is definitely a need that also costs money. As a student who was writing a thesis, XY surely needed sufficient internet connection to help her with her thesis, especially to find research materials, but considering her financial condition, she could not have adequate internet data connection to support her study. Another condition that was stressful for XY was the fact that she cannot ride a motorcycle. She had to ask her friend or someone else to drop her to campus. This was not an easy task, for she had to match her schedule with the person and not to mention the probability that the person might change their appointment due to certain things. She admitted her inability to ride motorcycle contributed to her stress and her thesis. She said, "And the fact that I cannot ride a motorcycle by myself also played a big part since I cannot frequently consult with my advisor as frequent as I want to".

XY's delayed in finishing her thesis and the stressors that she encountered obviously affected her, both psychologically and physically. Psychologically, the stressors made her anxious and worry. One of the thing that caused her worried was her supervisor. Neither because her supervisor was not supportive nor he made things more difficult for her, but purely because her self-esteem decreased a bit during her tough situation. She once worried that her supervisor might get tired of her and her excuses of why it took her so long to finish her thesis, but in contrary, by time, she found that her supervisor was very understanding.

Regarding her thesis conducting, the problems themselves did not take motivation to finish it, but they did make her become more agitable and irritable towards random things, and it can make her ignore her responsibility. She stated, "It did not really take my motivation per se, it's just... when I'm upset, I tend not to care about what I should do and what I should not (II-3-A: Appendix IV, Table 4)." Equally to the thesis writing and onfield thesis conducting, she did not worry as well, because she thought she put her best effort into it, she mentioned, "I wasn't that worried about conducting or writing my research, and that's not because I was too full of myself, but simply I because I thought I've done the best thing I could".

On the other hand, the stressors also affected XY physically, she turned herself off the thesis on purpose. XY intentionally distracted herself, put herself away, and just simply tried to forget about her thesis, moreover, the stress had also made her detach herself from others and feel more irritable towards other. She admitted, "Hence, once I was forced to face unexpected problems over the past three years while I was supposed to finish my thesis, I just went, M.I.A? missing in action, you know? It even made my friends and supervisor questioning my whereabouts and wellbeing".

To deal with stressful situations one uses coping strategies to help him/her cope with the situation. As XY, her stressful situation was related to a lot of problems that happened in her life during her process of finishing the thesis.

The researcher found that when XY has to face problems, her first defense was to avoid, distract, and detach the stress sources, and also procrastinate the works until the last minutes, and purposely put herself away from the stress sources. The reason she detached herself from the works was that of the frustration she might feel if she forced herself to deal with it. She considers these ways are effective for her to help her deal with the situation and prevents her from being even more frustrated.

Another coping strategy that she used was confiding her problems. There are a few people she usually vented her problems to; her sisterlike neighbor, her used-to-be sister-in-law, and her friend. Her friend mentioned that XY was quite unreserved about her situation. The friend said, "She did share her problem with me and she was quite open about her problems. If I could describe how open she was in percentage, then it was 85%." XY was quite unreserved about her situation, and according to her, confiding her problems to her closed-ones helped her calm her mind to some extent.

Other than Distancing, Distracting, and Procrastinating and confiding her problems, keeping her motivation high was also XY ways of coping with her situation. During the almostfour-years of finishing her thesis, XY did not lose her motivation to graduate, despite the problems she encountered and responsibility at that moment and also the long time she took to finish it. She knew deep down no matter happened she still want to finish her study. She said, "I think no matter what the circumstances, I would still have the desire to finish my study, because, even though it wasn't for me, I just wanted to make my father proud." As mentioned before, she lives only with her father. They only have each other and her father is the most important person for her, thus she really wanted to make her father proud. She stated, "He kept saying that he's been waiting to see me graduate for so long".

Based on the researcher's observation, the researcher found out that XY's English skill is great and that she uses English very often both in social media and face-to-face interaction with the researcher. She seems so comfortable using English. Moreover, XY GPA is

considerably high, it is 3.50 and she is satisfied with it. Additionally, her friend confirmed this and thinks that XY is smart and her English skill is good. Though, is not really diligent. Thus, when XY was writing her thesis, she kept motivated her to finish her study so that her skill will not be wasted. Regardless of the fact, XY thought that for higher batch students, like her, who fight against the time to finish their study, English skill would not affect anything. For their only goal is to graduate no matter what, moreover, they have to fight against time of their drop-out date.

Her perspective towards writing a thesis in English was so positive. she didn't find writing a thesis in English as difficulty and she totally understood it is part of enrolling herself into English Education Study Program. She stated, "Frankly, I've never really had an extravagant thought about it. I mean, we're in English department, what's new about it?" and "Besides, it comes as a package deal, right? You enroll in the English department, so of course, you deal with stuff in English, right?". She didn't even consider it as a burden. In contrary, she can find the silver lining of it. She thought, writing a thesis in English is advantageous. The advantages that she felt were "It subtly helps us to re-learn and discover things on our own and it rose my awareness of English".

Delay in finishing a thesis is probably not a rare issue and XY's case is obviously not the only one. This might differ in the cause and the solution that the students might have, some students probably would decide to discontinue their study, while others are willing to fight the urge and try to defeat the obstacles to finish their study. One of the students who decided to take the second choice is XY. She tried to cope with her stressful situation and finish her study. She finally managed to graduate, even if took her approximately eight years.

### **Discussion**

The aims of this research are to investigate what academic stressors that made XY took long in finishing her thesis and how did she cope with the stressors. XY was a higher batch student who spent almost four years to finish

her thesis. She was a student of English Education Study Program of FKIP Untan. She was a 2008 batch student and she graduated in 2016 – it took her almost eight years being a college student. This sort of case may not but uncommon, yet this topic seems to left neglected. Furthermore, what makes XY's case unique is she is a smart student with good English skill. Thus, the researcher decided to do a case study research about this case.

After doing a pre-research interview, observation, interviews, and distributed questionnaires to XY, the researcher found that main academic stressors that made her took almost four years to accomplish her thesis were personal/family-related problems. As Gadzella (1994, p.396) and Wilks (2008 in Busari, 2012, p.139) believed, academic stress is a stress that a student has during his/her academic years that can be caused by both in and off academic settings that hindered him/her to accomplish her/her academic-related goals. This also supported by the result of Khan and his colleagues' (2013) finding where that found that academic stress significantly affects students' academic performance achievement - the higher the stress level the lower the achievement and performance.

In XY's case, her off-academic condition, which was personal/family related and material/finance-related problems, contributed the most to her stress that slowed her down to graduate. Even though there was also an inacademic condition, such as her worry about and a little problem with her supervisors, they did not contribute as significant. This is in line with Kadapatti and Vijaylaxmi's (2012) findings in their study of Stressors of Academic Stress – A Study on Pre-University Students where that found that family conflicts, financial issues, self-expectation can lead to academic stress.

Furthermore, the researcher found that XY mostly coped with her stress using emotion-focused coping. It is a coping strategy that is invoked where the person has a tendency to distract or distancing her/self from the stressors (Lazarus and Folkman 1984 in Struthers et al., 2000). Baqutayan's (2015) and Struthers, et al.'s (2000) findings are in line with this, they

found that one tends to employ emotionfocused coping when he/she perceives the stressors uncontrollable and that there is nothing he/she can do to improve the situation. In XY's case, the stressors were her parents' conflict, her mother's death, and her brother's issues.

To be precise, the emotion-focused coping that XY most likely to use was distancing and escape-avoidance coping strategy. detached, distanced, distracted herself on purpose from the stressors and everything that could remind her of it without really facing the real deal, or as for XY, it took her considerably long time to get over her difficult situation. Shah and Thingujam's (2008) findings support this. They found that avoidant coping strategies lead people into activities (such as alcohol use) or mental states (such as withdrawal) that keep them from directly addressing stressful events and that coping strategy appears to be a psychological risk factor or marker for adverse responses to stressful life events.

Other than those coping strategies, XY also used seeking social support strategy, as she confided her problems to her best friend and her sister-like neighbor. Moreover, another way that made her survived the situation was her motivation to make her father happy and proud of her. Motivation, as Mubarok, Regina, & Ikhsanudin (2015) mentioned in their research findings, plays a fundamental role in influencing the success of a learner and acts as a driving force that gives purposes or direction in order to complete a certain task.

This research took about more than eight months to finish, from the observation to interview. During that times, the researcher has become close with the participant which is XY and her friend, the researcher has even met with which those are important to the participant, such her father, nephew, uncle, sister-like neighbor, and nephew-like neighbor. Thus, the researcher can convince that what is in this research are honest, true, and authentic, considering her relationship with them and XY's openness and cooperativeness.

On the other hand, the researcher also had other difficulties in conducting this research. The first one is the time spent which is

considered quite long. As mentioned before, it took about eight months only to finish; six months to do the observation and interviews, and the two months to analyze data. Moreover, the probability that XY might not want to participate in this research or share her story did make the researcher anxious and hesitate to ask her participating. Since this is a single-participant research and the topic is very sensitive; not everyone is willing to share their hard times. Yet, it turned out that XY was very welcome and the long-time spends resulting the researcher and XY become close.

The other difficulty was the sources of the information. It took some time to decide whom and how many people to interview until the researcher choose her best friend. XY is very friendly and she seems to befriend everyone, but all of her friends are the researcher's seniors which means the researcher does not know them and there's a quite big gap, especially to talk about other people's problems. The researcher actually also considered to interview XY's father or her sister-like neighbor, but this option also seemed impossible for some ethical reason such the researcher did not want to disturb him to ask about his past and his family matter. As the result, the researcher only observed him when she comes to XY's home.

Lastly, the theming process also got the researcher puzzled at times. Some data seems to be overlapping one another, especially in the part of stress reactions and stress coping, both of them are similar to one another. Moreover, the terminologies used also potentially mix with psychologies. Thus, the researcher has to select them carefully. And also, how deep the result and data elaboration, needed to restrict since the theme of this research is so potentially mix with psychology.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion that the researcher conveyed, it can be concluded that the main stressors that made XY took almost four years in finishing her thesis were mostly personal/family-related, such her parents' conflicts, her mother's death, her brother's cases, his decision to leave her

and her father, resulting her to be responsible to all of the household. The other stressors, even though not really significant, were thesis/academic related, and materials/financial.

Moreover, coping strategies that XY used significantly were distancing and escape-avoidance, which were shown in the action of distracting, distancing, and procrastinating herself intentionally. Other coping strategies that she used were confiding her problem to her close ones and maintaining her motivation high.

XY reacted psychologically, physically, and behaviorally. Her psychology reactions were the worry and anxiety that she felt during the stressful situation. Her physical reaction was shown the weight she gained and the headaches she had at the time, while the behavioral reactions she felt were the feeling of being more irritable towards and she separated herself from other people. Additionally, XY's perspectives towards writing a thesis in English was very positive, but it cannot be proved that her positivity or good English skill contributed to help her in finishing her thesis.

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