

## *Coping Stress among Students during Undergraduate Research Project*

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**Abstract.** *To Finish undergraduate degree, college students have to complete their final task, undergraduate thesis. Working on Undergraduate thesis could be a stressor since this is unstructured activity in college unlike regular class. They are demanded to finish their study on time, maintain relationship with supervisor, thesis content and writing, are such conditions that come along during thesis project. Based on those phenomena, research of this study is aimed to understand and describe coping stress on College Students to reduce their stressor during thesis project. This research is using Coping Stress theory based on Lazarus & Folkman (1984) that consists of Problem Focused-Coping and Emotion-Focused Coping. This research using quantitative method with descriptive statistics to describe Coping Stress's dimension: Problem-Focused Coping and Emotion Focused Coping to College Students who finishing undergraduate thesis. Sample in this study is 63 college students with convenient sampling technique. Coping Stress was measured by Coping Stress Questionnaire modified by Muchlisin & Putri (2018) based on Coping Stress Questionnaire by Lazarus & Folkman (1984). This questionnaire was made for college students and thesis project context. Findings of this study is most of college students show low level of Coping Stress. And Coping strategy most used is Problem-focused coping.*

**Keywords:** *Adolescence; Undergraduate Students; Undergraduate Thesis; Coping Stress*

**Abstrak.** Untuk mendapatkan gelar sarjana, mahasiswa memiliki tuntutan untuk menyelesaikan skripsi. Selama proses pengerjaan skripsi kerap kali memunculkan stresor karena skripsi adalah kegiatan yang strukturnya disusun oleh mahasiswa sendiri, tidak seperti kuliah biasa. Selain itu ada tuntutan lain seperti keharusan lulus tepat waktu, relasi dengan dosen pembimbing, materi skripsi dan lainnya. Berdasarkan fenomena tersebut, peneliti bermaksud memahami dan menggambarkan coping stress yang dilakukan oleh mahasiswa untuk menurunkan stressor selama menempuh skripsi. *Coping stress* yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini berdasarkan pada Lazarus & Folkman terdiri dari *Problem Focused-Coping* dan *Emotion-Focused Coping*. Penelitian menggambarkan dimensi pada *coping stress* yaitu *problem-focused coping* dan *emotion focused-coping* pada mahasiswa yang sedang mengambil skripsi. Sample dalam penelitian ini adalah 63 mahasiswa dengan teknik sampling convenient sampling. Alat ukur yang digunakan adalah Kuesioner Coping Stress untuk konteks skripsi yang telah dimodifikasi oleh Muchlisin & Putri berdasarkan kuesioner Coping Stress Lazarus & Folkman. Hasil menunjukkan mahasiswa paling banyak memiliki level coping stress yang rendah. Rata-rata paling sering mengatasi situasi stress pengerjaan skripsi dengan pendekatan *problem-focused coping*.

**Kata kunci:** *Remaja; Mahasiswa; Skripsi; Coping Stress*

### **Introduction**

Thesis is a final project that must be taken by all students to get a bachelor's degree. Usually, these activities do not have a clear schedule structure and guidelines so that students have to be more independent in managing them. Unlike from the previous semester where students received more instruction, making students tend to have difficulty making decisions. In addition, during final project there are several academic demands, for example students have to communicate intensively with supervisor, thesis material that is unsure and some of materials are difficult to reach, and set a schedule systematically. The average thesis writing period is 11.1 months, of course this is not a short period (Fathonah, et al, 2011). In other words, it takes consistency and commitment in completing the thesis.

The researcher also conducted initial interviews with five students who were taking their thesis, all of them admitted that they had difficulties related to writing the thesis, including (1) understanding the concept of the thesis content, (2) understanding the main references in foreign languages, (3) processing words to write scientific writing, (4) There is no "standard" or "benchmark" (5) difficulty in time managing for thesis work and other activities, (6) Procrastination and less optimistic when encountering obstacles in the middle of project. (7) Supervisor schedule is relatively uncertain. This is supported by Mukhayaroh (in Solih, et al, 2018) that students experience anxiety when there are demands from parents, lack self-confidence, and lack of support from lecturers and friends. Meanwhile, students really need elaboration for learning strategies (Yanti & Wardani, 2014) that sometimes do not meet this ideal condition during thesis project. This condition may lead to stress among students. Stress that is not handled properly will trigger other mental health, such as anxiety, or even depression. Stress is all demands from the environment, social or internal that require a person to readjust behavior patterns, where in facing the pressure, a person will do coping stress (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). While coping is a cognitive and behavioral effort made to tolerate, master, or reduce external demands (Folkman & Lazarus).

Previous study by Devonport & Lane (2006) showed, before dissertation submission students especially male, in regard to coping, used more active coping, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance of the stressor. It means their coping strategies related with problem-focused coping. Similar results shown by Al-Dubai et al (2011) mentioned that medical students in Malaysia mainly adopt active coping strategies rather than avoidance. But, different result in previous study by Ryan (2013) showed that emotion-focused coping among college students have greater mean than problem-focused coping.

### **Coping Stress**

Coping is a learned behavior that has been successful in reducing urges by neutralizing dangerous conditions. This is also done by animals by lowering the driving tension with positive reinforcement. It could be argued that the definition of coping usually involves trying to manage stressful demands, as well as thinking about outcomes. This means that no one person's strategy can be applied exactly to another person. In conclusion, coping is:

“Constant change in cognitive and behavioral effort to manage internal or external demands shown by respecting requests or increasing one's own resources.”  
(Lazarus, Folkman, 1984)

Another definition of Lazarus (Lazarus, Lanuier, 1978 in Seiffge-Krenke, 2013) Coping is an effort to manage (for example: mastering, reducing, minimizing) internal demands and conflicts by using one's own resources. This emphasizes that coping is a complex construct to be classified into person-specific or situation-specific aspects. The interrelation of " person " and "situation" is very influential on the formation of coping.

The function of coping refers to the goal of a strategy, the results relate to the strategy that will be prepared by the individual. Strategy has a predefined function, such as avoidance, but does not result in avoidance. In general, there are two functions of coping with stress, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

The problem-focused coping strategy is similar to the strategy used for problem solving. For example, problem focus efforts are often associated with defining the

problem, developing alternative solutions, considering which alternative is more beneficial, choosing between these alternatives and then acting. However, problem-focused coping emphasizes the broader meaning of problem-oriented strategies rather than problem solving. While problem solving refers to a purposeful process and analysis focused on the environment, problem-focused coping involves inward-directed strategies. That means, coping that appears focused on individual problems, which will overcome stress by learning new skills. Individuals tend to use this strategy, when they believe that the demands of the situation can be changed (Lazarus & Folkman 1984).

Aspects in problem-focused coping include (1) Seeking Information Support, trying to get information from other people who are experts in the field; (2) Planful Problem Solving (PPS), efforts to change the situation, and use efforts to solve problems. Individuals think and consider carefully for several alternatives in solving problems that will be carried out, ask for opinions from other people's points of view on the problems at hand, be careful before deciding on something and evaluate the strategies that have been carried out (3) Confrontive Coping, using aggressive efforts to change the situation, look for causes and experience risks.

If it is associated with students who are taking their thesis, problem focused coping can be described in the form of constructive behavior that makes the thesis work process run faster and easier, such as proactively contacting guidance lecturer, asking for consideration from people around, and so on. In emotion-focused coping, individuals focus on aspects of cognition that aim to 'change the way they deal with problems, not change the purpose of the situation' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This strategy is similar to reappraisal. Therefore, this strategy aims to manage emotional responses to stressful situations. In addition to cognitive, individuals can also use a behavioral approach. Examples are alcohol use, seeking emotional support from friends, and engaging in other activities.

Aspects in emotion focused coping include (1) Distancing, using efforts to be able to detach from oneself, and paying more attention to things that can create a positive outlook; (2) Escape-avoidance, behavior to escape or avoid; (3) Self Control, individuals

use their efforts to control their own actions and feelings; (4) Accepting Responsibility, acknowledging the existence of one's own role in the problem; (5) Positive Reappraisal, where the individual sees the positive side of the problems experienced in his life by looking for meaning or benefits from the experience.

Based on Mitchell (2004) Emotion focused coping and problem focused coping are significantly correlated, which means that humans use both types of coping in their daily functions.

### **Method**

The method used in this study is a quantitative method using descriptive statistical tests to see coping stress on students who take theses. To measure *coping stress*, the researcher used the *coping stress* questionnaire which refers to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) which was developed by Muchlisin and Putri (2018) which has been modified for the context of the thesis. The questionnaire is packaged in the form of a Google Form. The questionnaire is in the form of a Likert scale and has a range of 5 scale which are strongly disagree, disagree, less agree, agree and strongly agree. Cronbach's Alpha of this measuring instrument is .814.

The sample of this study was final year students with a total of 63 participants. The sampling method used in this study was *Convenient Sampling* considering the conditions for data collection were in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The criteria for the subjects in this study are (1) Students; (2) Currently taking a thesis.

The analysis technique used in this research is descriptive statistics to see the average, as well as high and low categorization

### **Result**

Table 1. Semester Take

| <b>Semester</b>       | <b>N</b> |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Semester 6 – 7        | 9        |
| More than 7 semesters | 54       |

From the overall demographics of the participants, the most semesters done are from semester 7 or more.

Table 2. Average Dimension Score

| <b>Dimension</b>              | <b>Mean</b> |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Problem Focused Coping</i> | 62          |
| <i>Emotion Focused Coping</i> | 58          |

In table 2, emotion focused coping shows a lower score than problem focused coping. In other words, many students deal with stress in a way that focuses on cognitive, namely *problem focused coping*.

**Table 3.** Distribution of *Coping Stress Frequency* in Thesis Students

|                 | <i>Problem Focused Coping</i> | N  | %  | <i>Emotion Focused Coping</i> | N  | %  | <i>Coping Stress</i> | N  | %  |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|----|----|-------------------------------|----|----|----------------------|----|----|
| Low             | <58                           | 18 | 29 | <56                           | 23 | 37 | <115                 | 18 | 29 |
| Moderately Low  | 59-61                         | 13 | 21 | 57-58                         | 10 | 16 | 116-119              | 15 | 24 |
| Moderately High | 62-66                         | 17 | 27 | 59-60                         | 17 | 27 | 120-124              | 16 | 25 |
| High            | 66<                           | 15 | 24 | 61<                           | 13 | 21 | 125<                 | 14 | 22 |

Researchers divide the level of *stress coping* along with the dimensions of *problem focused coping* and *emotion focused coping* on students who are taking theses which are divided into four categorizations based on frequency. Categorization consists of low, moderately low, moderately high, and high.

### **Dimension Analysis**

The researcher tries to compare the mean between each aspect to dig deeper into which area is the highest. From Image 1, it is found that most students cope with their stress by *planful problem solving*, which is 248. Then, *confrontive coping* is 228, while the lowest is *seeking information support* of only 212.

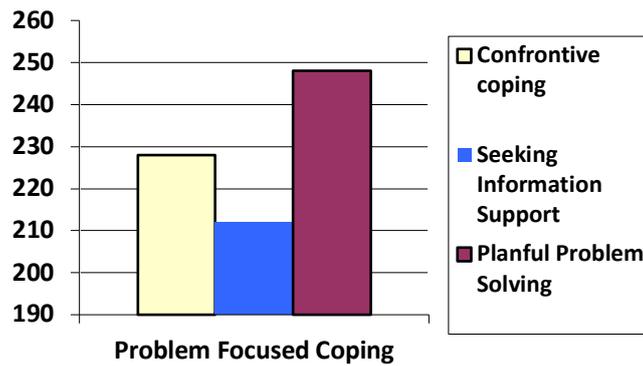


Image 1. Dimension of *Problem Focused Coping*

In *emotion focused coping*, it can be seen that the order of scores from highest to lowest is *Positive reappraisal* (256), *Distancing* (229), *Accepting Responsibility* (207), *Escape avoidance* (201) and the last is *self-control* (153).

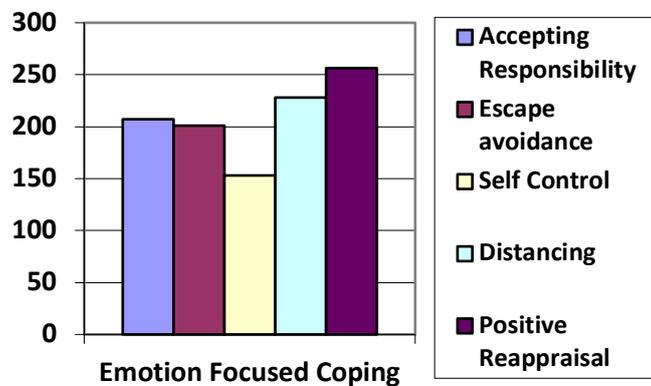


Image 2. Dimension of *Emotion Focused Coping*

Table 4. Table of Overall Mean

| Dimensi                       | Aspek                              | Mean |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------|
| <i>Problem Focused Coping</i> | <i>Planful Problem Solving</i>     | 248* |
|                               | <i>Confrontive Coping</i>          | 228  |
|                               | <i>Seeking Information Support</i> | 212  |
| <i>Emotion Focused Coping</i> | <i>Positive reappraisal</i>        | 256* |
|                               | <i>Distancing</i>                  | 229  |
|                               | <i>Accepting Responsibility</i>    | 207  |
|                               | <i>Escape avoidance</i>            | 201  |
|                               | <i>Self-Control</i>                | 153  |

From the table above, it can be seen that the distribution of *Problem Focused-Coping* is quite even, while *Emotion Focused Coping* has a wide range of scores from the highest to the lowest.

### **Discussion**

The subjects of this study were 63 students who were actively taking theses. The results of this study showed that on average, students who were taking theses did more coping with the *problem-focused coping* approach than the *emotion-focused coping*. This finding can be explained by the results of research conducted by Mitchell (2004) which states that individuals who more often use *problem-focused coping* methods usually have high *self-efficacy* and also have support from others. On the other hand, the average *emotion-focused coping* is associated with low educational background. In this study, all participants were undergraduate students so that their reasoning abilities were able to overcome problems better cognitively.

Then the division is carried out based on the categorization of 4 clusters, namely low, moderately low, moderately high and high. Researchers tried to see Coping Stress based on these categorizations along with *Problem-focused coping* and *emotion-focused coping*. The results obtained that most of the *coping stress* on students who took theses were low (N=18), moderately low (N=15), moderately high (N=16) and high (N=14).

Meanwhile, when viewed from the *problem-focused coping* dimension, subjects who are in the low category (N=18), quite low (N=13), quite high (N=17), and high (N=15), based on these data, then most of the subjects are in the low category. In the dimension of *emotion-focused coping*, the results showed that the subjects were in low category (N=23), quite low category (N=10), quite high category (N=17), and high category (N=13), so that most of the subjects had low *emotion focused coping*.

After that, the researcher compared all aspects in each dimension to see which one was most often done by students. The results show that the subjects mostly do coping in the form of *positive reappraisal*, where individuals try to see from the positive side of the thesis problems they are experiencing. Positive reappraisal is a critical component of meaning-based coping that enables individuals to adapt to stressful

situations (Garland, 2005). In addition, research on the final project of female students who are taking a thesis conducted by Rositoh et al (2017) shows that there are 4 subjects who take positive-minded coping actions.

The next moderately high *coping stress* is that *planful problem solving* is seen as a strategy used to solve problems. In other words, students have drawn up steps to try to solve the problem. In the previous study by Wardani and Depati (2021) shown that people with problem focused coping tend to relate with core self-evaluation. Meanwhile the lowest is *self-control*, a low number means that students are able to manage their actions and feelings so that they do not have an impact on stress related to the completion of their thesis.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded from the results of this study that *coping stress* on students who are taking theses is relatively low. In other words, students who take thesis are quite susceptible to stress. In addition, students who are taking the thesis do more *stress coping* in the form of *problem-focused coping* than in the form of *emotion-focused coping*. Meanwhile, if viewed based on its aspects, *Positive Reappraisal* is a *coping strategy* that is most often used by students, for example by giving positive affirmations to the situation. Furthermore, *Planful Problem Solving* is also the second type of coping that is often done by students who are taking their thesis, meaning that students design strategies for completing their thesis through more concrete steps when experiencing stress during thesis work. *Self-Control* is a coping strategy that has the lowest score. This means that students still often lack self-regulation or actions to restrain themselves, be unhurried, and thorough when experiencing stressful conditions

### *Suggestion*

From the whole research process, of course, the researchers found shortcomings that could be improved so that this research continues to grow. Among other things: (1) It is better if this research is related to the COVID-19 issue and also associated with the online thesis process (2) Adding additional variables will be an additional point in this study (3) It will be more in-depth if this descriptive research is accompanied by interview. In

addition, author hoped that this research can be developed as a basis for conducting interventions such as psychoeducation on students who are experiencing stress during thesis work.

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