

# **A LOOK AT THE GENDER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COLLEGE STUDENTS IN A PUBLIC VERSUS A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY AND THEIR COPING SKILLS RELATED TO DEATH, DYING, AND BEREAVEMENT**

Dan Festa, D.Min., Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology,  
Angie Bell, B.A. in Psychology, and Krystal Harris, senior Psychology major

## **Abstract**

*This study was conducted to identify the grieving differences between male and female college students. It focused on the differences found between Henderson State University, a publicly funded university and Ouachita Baptist University, a private Baptist University comparably sized and in close physical proximity. The instrument used was designed by Dr. Dan Festa, Angie Bell, and Krystal Harris and it approached many issues related to attitudes and fears about death including, but not limited to the differences found in coping skills between male and female college students. The results of these data focused on gender issues as well as the response of students in a public university versus those in a private university. It was these researchers' expectation that the coping abilities between genders would be different with female students being much more open to supports and having better defined coping mechanisms. It was also these researchers' expectations that those students from the private university would have had greater coping mechanisms and resources available to them. Lastly the findings of this study and the need for subsequent follow-up studies will be addressed. It was the intention of these presenters that from this study, other similar universities might draw corollary information for use with students who have suffered the devastating death of someone close to them.*

## **Introduction**

**T**he relationship between coping mechanisms and the grief experienced by college students is one which has received a minimal amount of exposure over the last decade. Upon exploring PsycInfo these authors found relatively few articles which specifically addressed coping mechanisms, following a death, in College Students. In doing the literature review prior to developing our hypothesis, and to broaden the field of exploration, these authors decided to search in both Medline and CINHALL for additional references. The articles which these authors found to be most closely related to their scope of research are included herewith. Oltjenbruns studied ethnicity and gender in grieving college students. The conclusions drawn from her study support that there are ethnic characteristics which do affect the grieving process (Oltjenbruns 1998). Balk and Vesta completed a longitudinal study examining the experience of grief for a college student throughout the course of the student's college career (Balk and Vesta, 1998). In a study conducted by Marshall which analyzed results from 354 traditional undergraduate college age students findings indicate that there is no significant interaction between gender and death experience. (Marshall, 1999). Balk and Lampe in a study of 141 college students reported finding themes of affiliation, death, grief, and coping (Balk and Lampe, 1998). In a study reported by Robak and Griffin, they found there to be no gender differences in the purpose of

life, however, they did note gender differences in death depression (Robak and Griffin, 2000). Trammell reported a need for well planned grief programs for intervention and support in unexpected deaths (Trammell, 1999). Edmonds and Hooker found that College students who experienced change both positive and negative and had a change in belief in God had higher levels of grief than those who reported no change. However, the results suggested that there were positive changes associated with bereavement and that grief itself may serve as an impetus for personal growth. Another article which we found which pertained to the development of our instrument was an article which investigated positive aspects of bereavement among college students (Edmonds and Hooker, 1993). A study by Vickio, Cavanaugh, and Attig surveyed 123 undergraduate students to explore their perceptions of various aspects of grief (Vickio, Cavanaugh, Attig, 1990). An internet source that we referenced during development of our instrument was Reflections on Death: A Guest Book /Questionnaire (Sapienza, 2001).

The instrument designed by these authors, approaches many issues related to attitudes and fears about death including, but not limited to the differences found in coping skills between male and female college students. This research took place at Henderson State University, a publicly funded university and Ouachita Baptist University a private religiously affiliated university comparably sized and in close physical proximity to one another. It was the researchers' expectation that the coping abilities between the genders would be different, with female students being much more open to support and having better self-reported coping mechanisms. It was also the researchers' expectation that those students from the private university would have greater coping mechanisms and resources available to them which would positively affect their self reported experience of grieving. Lastly the findings of this study and the need for subsequent follow-up study will be addressed. It was the intent of these authors that from this study, other universities might draw corollary information for use with their students who have suffered the devastating death of someone close to them.

## **Method**

The research instrument was designed to identify grief and help researchers and clinicians better understand loss experiences of college students. The results were then going to be used to possibly set a grief counseling that would be offered by the school. Grief support would be offered to those students on campus in the event of any type of loss. The instrument looked at two schools in the area. The schools studied added the element of a publicly funded university versus a privately funded school. Henderson State University is a publicly funded university with an average student enrollment of 3600. OBU is a privately funded university with an average student enrollment of 1700. Both schools are located in Arkadelphia, Arkansas that had a population of 10,014 in the year 2000. 214 students completed the survey. 107 students from each school completed the survey. Out of the 107 students at HSU, 74 were female and 33 were male. Of the 107 at OBU, 59 were female and 48 were male. The most common age of the respondents was in the 17 to 20 years age bracket, although HSU had a higher number of non-traditional students. A variety of faith groups responded: Apostolic, Assembly of God, Baptist, Catholic, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, Pentecostal, Presbyterian.

When designing the instrument, researchers looked at the various elements. First the instrument

had to be easy to understand. Each question was followed by a series of responses in which the respondent had to check the answer that best fit their desired response. 18 of the questions had a free response section where answers that did not fit their desired response could be filled in. Second, the instrument had to be easy to fill out in a timely fashion. In that the researchers took into consideration the environment in which the instrument would be filled out. Since it would mainly be a classroom setting, the instrument was designed to take less than five minutes to fill out. Once the surveys were all completed, the instrument had to be easy to derive answers from. So consideration for the respondents and the researchers were taken into account.

Once the surveys were completed, the responses were the put into a spreadsheet. Each response was coded so that the information could easily be calculated. Once on the spreadsheet, the researchers then began calculating the responses used for the research. Our main focus was on the male or female response, the school in which they attended, and their self-reported rating on 100mm scale on how they believed they were coping. For both males and females at each school, the mean was determined in the coping response.

## **Results**

The overall coping level of the students at Henderson State University was 78.1963 while the overall coping level of Ouachita Baptist Students was 84.6449 (see figure 1). These results supported the hypothesis of these researchers. Results of these data also showed that the males at Henderson State University had a higher coping score than the females, which went against the hypothesis of the these researchers and represented a significant trend (see figure 2). Other results found in the study were presented and analyzed and no significance was found. Much of the information obtained from participants in this study lends itself to further research.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that there was grief being experienced by students on both campuses and the results describe a difference in the grief experience between the two universities. Because of the difference in the coping mechanisms between male and female students at each school, these researchers believed that a corollary study is indicated.

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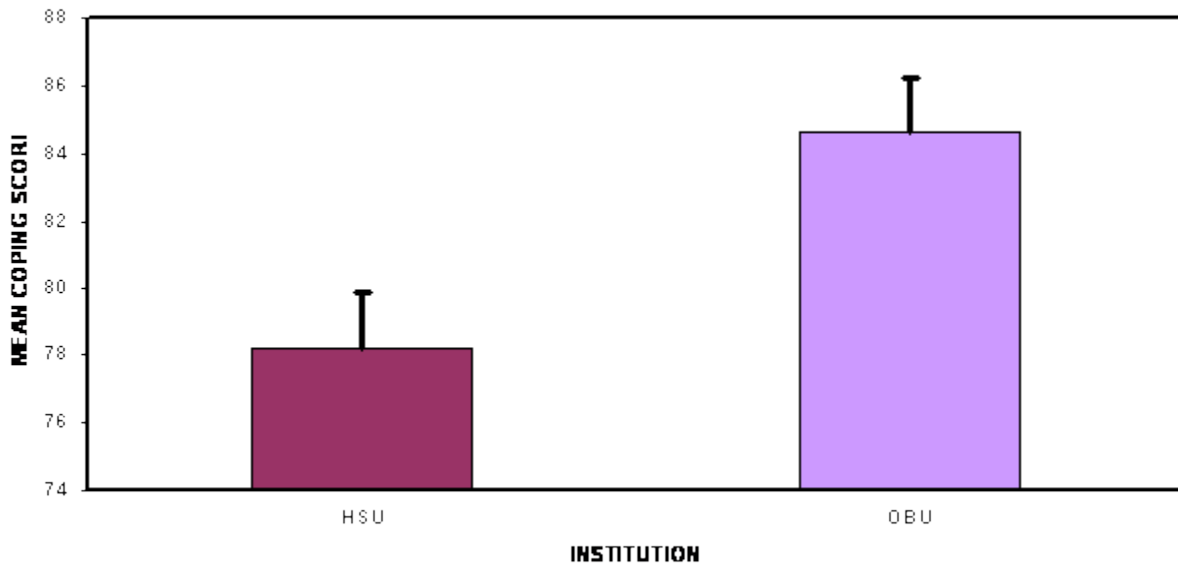
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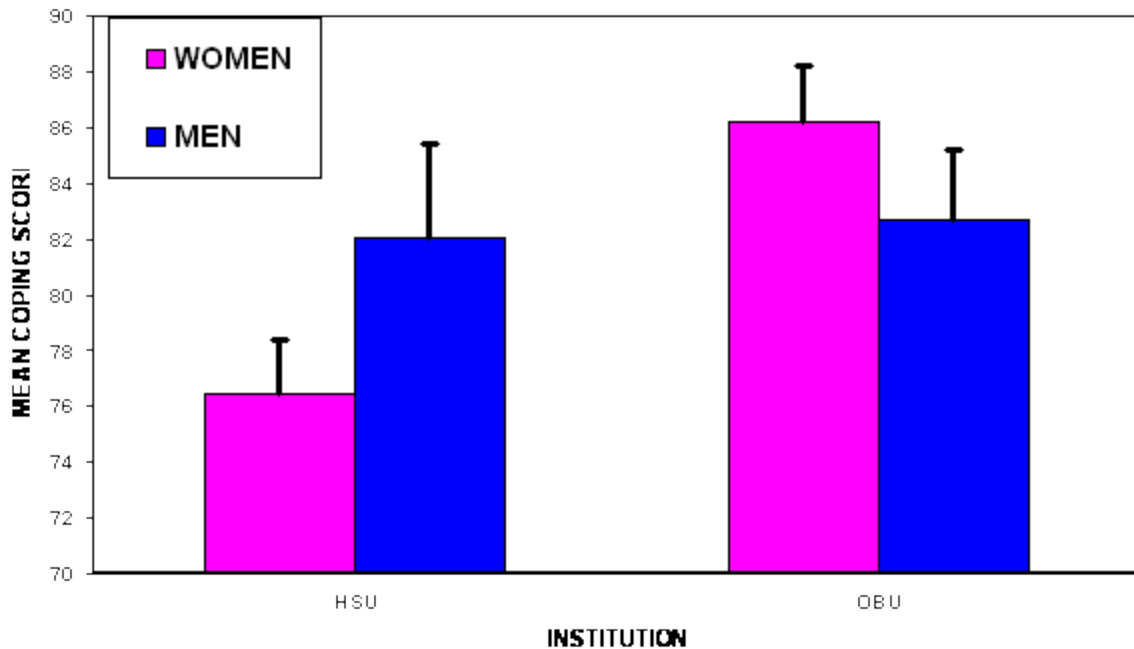
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**Figure #1**



**Figure #2**



### Biographical Sketch

Dr. Dan Festa has been a Visiting Assistant Professor in Psychology at Henderson State University since Fall of 2000. For the decade prior to coming to Henderson, Dan was an Assistant Professor in the School of Allied Health at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dan has an undergraduate degree from the College of Charleston, a masters from the University of South Carolina, and a Doctorate from Union Theological Seminary. Dan has done post graduate work at Virginia Commonwealth University and at the Kennedy Center for Bioethics located at Georgetown University.

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