CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PERSONALITY AND COPING IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract
Adolescence is a transitional period, which is punctuated with a number of age-specific stressors. This paper reviews literature regarding the relationships between personality and coping efforts, adolescents and the stressors which they face, as well as definitions of personality and coping, theoretical relations and models that highlighted the association between personality and coping , and finally age and gender differences in personality and coping response.
Key words*: Personality, Coping, Adolescents, age and gender differences*

Introduction

Many studies have confirmed the importance of personality traits in stress and coping processes (Bolger, 1990; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Ferguson, 2001; Leandro & Castillo, 2010). Personality traits and coping strategies have been found as two significant factors, which affect subjective well-being (Malkoc, 2011). Subjective well-being longitudinal studies have shown that some individuals regularly perceive their lives in a more positive light and that this phenomenon's can be explained by dispositional traits (Leandro & Castillo 2010).

However, there have been many explanations offered as to why some people are better at adapting to potentially stressful situations. Simply put, certain personality traits can affect the way by which an individual experiences stressors (Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009).

Personality, in certain cases, can either limit or facilitate the utilization of particular strategies and therefore it could directly influence the type of coping strategy chosen. Personality can also indirectly affect the nature and undesirability of stressors encountered, as well as how efficiently these coping strategies are used (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007).

The connection between the personality of adolescents and their coping mechanism may be related to health-risk behaviors, involving major risks especially when there are inadequate or inefficient coping abilities, like psychological anxiety and suicidal thoughts, smoking and substance abuse, and high-risk sexual behaviors (Rew, 2005).The foremost purpose of this study is to unravel several conceptual issues related to adolescent personality and their stress coping mechanisms. This review is oriented to focus on personality and coping in adolescents, and recent advances in the literature.

Adolescents and Stressors

Adolescence has been known to be a difficult time for most individuals as it is punctuated by various stress factors. This phase of growth often involves both physical and cognitive developments (Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2000) and has been linked to heightened stress and applying inefficient coping responses (Rowely, Roesch, Jurica, & Vaugghn, 2005).

Most certainly, many adolescents will encounter a number of social experiences, which are new and somewhat threatening or challenging. These experiences can potentially become more serious towards the later part of adolescence, which happens when an individual turns 21 or 22 and important social transitions take place, such as leaving home, finding satisfactory education or occupation, and starting close partner relationships. These difficult life experiences and a number of frequent adolescence's

stressors have been linked with mental health and behavioral problems experienced by adolescents. These problems include depression and anxiety, in addition to negative external behaviors like aggression and antisocial manners (Compas et al., 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008). Some literature suggested that during this phase, significant changes happen in the brain structures, which make adolescents vulnerable to depression (Horwitz, Hill, & King, 2010).

Therefore, the impact of daily stressors in the lives of adolescents cannot be denied. Aysan, Thompson& Hamarat (2001) stated that the effects of stress from daily life and other stressors could accumulate throughout the adolescent phase to such an extent that they will need to desensitize themselves to such stress and other related emotional arousal or else risk suffering significant psychological and emotional problems. Thus, adolescents who manage to cope through cognitive and behavioral means to reduce stress may then be able to decrease the negative consequences of stress. In this case, as aforementioned, individual differences may affect the choice and the effectiveness of these coping responses making some strategies effective for some individuals but less effective or damaging for others.

Hence, the increased attention focused on how adolescents cope with stress in part is the result of the heightened awareness of the risk and protective factors involved in the intervention to enhance the well-being of adolescents (Garcia, 2010). As research has suggested that, the patterns of coping used by children and adolescents are more important to mental health than stress itself (Compas et al., 2001; Liu, Tein, and Zhao, 2004).

Definitions of Personality

The meaning of personality differs among Psychologists. There is most agreement that the word "personality" originated from the Latin "persona", which referred to a theatrical mask worn by roman actors in Greek dramas. However, psychologists are referring to something more than the role people play, when they use the term "personality" (Feist & Feist, 2009). So far, psychologists are of opinion that there is no single definition of personality that is acceptable to all personality theorists (Cervon & Pervin, 2008). For instance, Allport (1961; Cervon & Pervin, 2008) believed that "personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychological and physical systems that establishes his patterns of actions, thoughts, and feelings". But contemporary psychologists may be agree with this definition that personality is a pattern of relatively unique and permanent traits and characteristics that provide both consistency and individuality to a person's behavior.

Definitions of Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral effort to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the recourses of the person". Aldwin (1994) portrayed coping as the transactional processes in which individuals engage on tangible problems in their daily lives. Currently, Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) suggested that coping conceptualizations have underlined two significant processes: reactions to stress that are mostly unconsciously and may include impulsive emotions and behaviors; and action regulations as the second processes, which purposefully serve to change or improve reactivity to stressors.

Models, Which Present the Link between Personality and Coping

In the transactional model of stress and its coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1991), stress is the transaction between the person and his environment so both the individual and the environmental factors are taken into account in the perception of stress. In this model, stress is defined as a combination of environmental demands and individual resources, with cognitive processes being a central concept. According to Lazarus, the extent of the environmental demand and the amount of resources that an individual has available to cope with that demand affects the perception of stress, or its appraisal (Aldwin, 2007).

Another model was presented by Bolger & Zuckerman (1995) in which a script to help systematize the study of the relationships between the stress processes and the coping strategies with personality dimensions is suggested. These authors state that personality may influence the stress process in three ways: first, in the exposure to the stressor, second, in the reactivity to the stressor, and finally, in both. Similarly, an individual's personality may influence the reactivity to the stressor, thus the resulting in the choice of the coping method, the degree of effectiveness of the chosen coping strategy, or both (Leandro & Castillo, 2010). Therefore, the influence of personality can be noted on the selection and/or modeling of stress producing situations and the kind of coping or interpretation of situation chosen (Vollrath, 2001).

In this case, both models function as an attempt or adequate recourse to manage stressful events in order for it to become less stressful or threatening.

Age and Gender Trends in Personality

The contemporary model for describing personality is "The Big Five", so named because it consists of five global factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) (McCrae &Costa, 1992).

Generally, teenagers seem to be more anxious and concerned with acceptance and self-esteem (Higher Neuroticism), more welcome to almost all types of experience and experimentation (Higher Openness), spend more time on the phone with friends and participate more in social activities (higher Extraversion).They are also less conscientious and responsible than authority figures (parents, teachers, police) expect them to be less Conscientious, and are more critical and demanding of others and society in general (lower Agreeableness) (Pervin & John, 2001).

The teenage years and early twenties are known to be filled with great turbulence, discontent, and revolt. However, even though it is often mentioned that adolescence is a time of storm and stress, results of cross-sectional studies have found that the average levels of Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness among adolescents are similarly close to the respective scores of the adult population (Allik, Laidra, Realo, & Pullmann 2004). Only the scores of Openness seem to be lower in adolescents compared to adults, in spite of the fact that the Openness' levels seem to show some increase among the younger high-school students and college students (Costa & McCrae, 2002; Allik et al., 2004).

Studying personality differences between the genders can help in determining whether men and women differ on the Big Five personality traits. A study on gender differences in the Big Five personality traits has recently been done among 23,000 people from 26 cultures by Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae (2001). Findings showed that women consistently scored higher than men did on many facets of Neuroticism and Agreeableness. Men, on the other hand, scored higher on the need for excitement and assertiveness (Extraversion's components), competence (Conscientiousness' component), and openness to ideas and fantasy (facets of Openness). Costa and his colleagues found that gender differences in personality have a tendency to be stronger in economically developed countries with liberal gender ideologies, like Europe and the United States, compared to less economically developed countries with more traditional gender roles like African, Asian, and Latin America (Delega, Winstead, and Jones 2005).

However, all these aforementioned information from cross-cultural studies were only carried out on groups of college students and adults and there is therefore a lack of studies using adolescent based data. However, it has recently been found that these results can also be replicated among adolescent

samples (Klimstra, Crocetti, Hale, Fermani, & Meeus, 2011). Klimstra et al. (2011) mentioned that in addition to third-person judgment based data, self-reported adolescent personality data is required so that more insight into cross-cultural gender differences in adolescent personality traits can be obtained.

Age and Gender Trends in Coping Behaviors

Strategies employed by teenagers often correspond to their maturity level and to the type of problems, they experience. Teenagers therefore approach stress in generally a different manner as compared to older people. Recent research on children and adolescents focused mainly on individual differences, and investigating the relationships between a variety of strategies and different outcomes in order to identify adaptive and maladaptive patterns (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck 2007).

Age and gender are thought to be the most significant factors, which affect the relationship between coping strategies and health while number of variables, such as demographic, culture, personal and situational factors can influence an individual's coping responses to lesser degrees (Piko, 2001; Wilson, Pritchard, & Revalee, 2005).

A study by Seiffke-Krenke (1990 1993; Wrzesniewski & Chylinska, 2007) discovered that adolescents aged between 15-19 years consistently used various coping strategies. However, this consistency is only present within a certain range, which means that youths responding differently to different problems when their problems linked to school and their parents.

Irion and Blanchard-Fields (1987; Amirkhan and Auyeung 2007) found that many adolescents and young adults utilized more escape-avoidance and self-blame strategies to cope with stress as compared to middle-aged and older adults.

Blanchard-Fields and Irion (1991; Amirkhan and Auyeung 2007) concurred with these findings, stating that a similar trend was present where less Emotion-Focused strategies were used by individuals during their teenage years, although the data was considered insignificant. There was an age-related increase in using Problem-Focused strategies, with peak use during the young Adults phase. These two trends were corroborated in a larger study that showed a considerable increase in Problem- Focused strategies and a reduction in Emotion-Focused coping strategies as individuals increase in age.

While discussing the influence of gender on coping strategies, we should consider that there is a potential for either gender to use coping strategies, including Emotion-focused during the adolescence period. However, differences between how the different genders handle stress begins to emerge throughout this transitional period (Piko, 2001; Wilson, Pritchard, & Revalee 2005).

Some studies have pointed to strong evidence that shows girls prefer to use social support when faced with stressors (Hampel, 2007; Hampel & Petermann 2006; Rose and Rudolph, 2006; de Anda et al., 2000). Lengua & Stormshak (2000) declared that girls employed more Emotion-focused coping strategies such as relaxation, as well as more dysfunctional strategies such as emotional ventilation, rumination, avoidance, and resignation. On the other hand, boys prefer stress release thought activities such as drugs and alcohol use than girls. Therefore, the gender differences may demonstrate that boys and girls response differently to various problems.

Conclusion

The review on literature has shown that adolescents face a transitional period with many physical and cognitive alterations. Research has proven that personality may have direct and indirect effects on the choices and efficiency of coping strategies. In addition to these findings, the transactional model of stress and coping strategies, and the coping choice and coping effectiveness model also provides a general basis to support the link. Finally, a growing body of research indicates that age and gender differences are both significant factors in personality and coping responses. To conclude, the adolescent's appraisal regarding stressful events affects the way that they cope or behave with these stressors. Therefore, to gain an insight about coping responses, both psychologists and school

counselors will be able to form structured interventions, which encourage healthy coping behaviors with the aim of promoting the mental health and well-being of adolescents.

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