Adolescents' Coping: Understanding the Role of Gender and Academic Competence

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Abstract

An attempt was made to examine the effect of gender and academic competence on coping processes of adolescents. The study adopted a 2 (academically competent adolescents versus academically less-competent adolescents) × 2 (boys versus girls) factorial design. In the present study, two hundred forty adolescents (120 academically competent adolescents securing 80% or more marks and 120 academically less-competent adolescents securing 50% or less mark) are randomly sampled from different urban colleges of Odisha. All the subjects were first year graduate students. The participants of all the four groups were compared with respect to their coping processes. The result indicated that academically competent adolescents adopted more problem- focused coping strategies and academically less-competent adolescents adopted more emotion-focused coping strategies. Again, boys used more problem-focused while girls used more emotion-focused coping strategies.

Keywords: The Effect of gender and academic competence on coping process of adolescents

Introduction

Adolescence is the developmental period of transition between childhood and adulthood; it involves biological, cognitive and socio-emotional changes. It starts with the physical beginning of sexual maturity and ends with the social achievement of independent adult status. While there is extensive debate in the literature as to whether adolescence is a period of storm and stress or a period of relatively smooth transition into adulthood, there is general agreement that adolescence is the most stressful time (Clarke, Perlmutter and Freidman, 1988; Harper and Marshall, 1991). Adolescents are confronted by a multitude of problems arising from physical and cognitive development to social and emotional changes. During this period they are required to develop personal values and a sense of identity, fulfill social roles with peers and members of the opposite sex, meet the requirements of education and make decisions regarding their career. Adequate coping skills and adaptive cognitive and behavioural styles are vital for effective transition and adjustment to adulthood (Frydenberg and Lewis, 1993). Adolescents use different coping strategies to prevent the psychological harm, when they are faced with stressful life experiences. In this study, the concept of coping is based on the process model established by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who defined coping,"as the process constantly changing cognitive, behavioural and emotional efforts to manage specific demands (external or internal) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". According to this approach, coping refers only to adaptational activities that involve effort, and not all the things that a person does in relating to the environment. The coping process is complex and variable according to the situation. Coping as a process has three main features (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). First, observations are concerned with what the person actually thinks of, in contrast to what the person usually does. Second, coping thoughts and actions are examined within a specific context and third, a coping process involves change in coping thoughts and actions as a stressful encounter unfolds which means that coping is a shifting process in which a person uses different strategies according to the situation. The theory of coping emphasises two major functions of

coping, problem-focused and emotion- focused (Lazarus, 1993).   Problem-focused coping effort involves taking direct action to change the stressful situation. Emotion-focused coping effort attempts to regulate or reduce the emotional consequences of the stressful event. When a person perceives an event as unchangeable or irreversible, he may use emotion-focused coping. The same person may employ problem-focused coping where he/she finds the stressful situation manageable.

Academic competency is among the most demanding cognitive and motivational challenge that growing adolescent's face in their life. The importance of academic competence lies in the fact that academic records in the school/college life predominate social reactions and adolescents' future occupational picture. The growing sense of personal control and self- esteem in adolescents as a result of academic achievement serve as a major personal force in their ultimate level of accomplishment.

Academic competence will influence the coping pattern of adolescents. Past studies demonstrated that students' coping efforts significantly predicted their academic achievement in terms of grade point average (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson, & Strauss, 2003).The ability to cope with challenges and setbacks has been found to be a crucial factor in students' achievement (Dweck & Sorich, 1999). The relationship between coping and academic achievement was also evidenced in a study by DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka (2004) who reported that academic achievement of university freshmen was explained by their acceptance-focused coping. Escape-avoidance coping was found to correlate negatively with their academic achievement. All the findings mentioned have pointed out the role of academic standing of the students in their coping efforts and also the role of coping in academic achievement. A study conducted by Hackett, Betz, Casas & Rocha-Singh (1992) reported positive and significant relationship between coping and students' academic achievement.

Gender differences might also affect coping strategies. Although genderdifferences in coping strategies have been observed in many studies (e.g. Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Sahin et.al. 1998), coping research reveals conflicting findings with regard to coping strategies of females and males. The greatest consistency in research concerning coping among adolescents is that girls engage in more emotion-focused coping strategies, while boys engage in more problem-focused strategies (e.g., Folkman and Lazarus 1980; Karanc1 et.al. 1999). Similarly, in a cross-cultural study of Indian, Italian, Hungarian, Swedish and Yemenite students, Olah (1995) found that in all cultures females reported more emotion-focused coping strategies than males, where as males reported more problem-focused strategies compared to females.

In the literature there are few studies conducted to find out the role of academic achievement in the coping strategies of the adolescents. It is expected that adolescents with high academic achievement will use more problem-focused coping (e.g. accepting responsibility, planful problem solving, confronting, and seeking social support). Gender differences are considered one of the most important predictors of coping strategies. In the current research, it is hypothesized that gender would be related to coping strategies. Males are expected to get higher scores on problem-focused coping (e.g. accepting responsibility, confronting coping etc.) than females. In contrast, females are expected to get higher scores on emotion- focused coping (e.g. escape-avoidance, positive reappraisal, self-control and distancing). In this study, an attempt was made to find out the role of academic competence (high and low) and gender in the coping strategies of the adolescents.

Method

In this investigation, a series of activities were carried out to test the effect of gender and academic competence on the coping strategies of adolescents.

3.1 Subject

In the present study, two hundred forty adolescents (120 academically competent adolescents securing 80% or more marks) and (120 academically less competent adolescents securing 50% or less marks) are randomly sampled from different urban colleges of Odisha. Since all the subjects were +3 first year students, they belonged to the same age group. On the basis of their marks 120 academically competent students was selected. Out of 120 students 60 are boys and 60 are girls. Again out of 120 academically less competent students, 60 boys and 60 girls are taken. Care was taken to sample groups equated with respect to their socio-economic status

3.2 Measure

In the present study, measure of ways of coping (revised) is applied.

Ways of Coping (Revised). The ways of coping questionnaire was developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1988) consisting of a series of predicates, each of which portrays a coping thought or action that people engage in while under stress. Respondents indicate whether they used each of these responses in a given stressful transaction. Embedded in this way of coping scale is the important distinction between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Research, however, typically finds that responses to the ways of coping scale from several factors other than these two (e.g. Aldwin, Folkman, Schaefer, Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Aldwin Revension, 1987). Researchers generally view that factors other than problem- focused coping are variations on emotion-focused coping. These factors often diverse quite sharply in character to the extent of being inversely correlated. Because some emotion-focused responses involve denial, others involve positive interpretation of events and still others involve seeking out of social support. These responses are different from each other having very different implications for successful coping in a person. Problem-focused coping also potentially involves distinct activities like planning, taking direct action; seeking assistance, screening out other activities and so on.

   The ways of coping (revised) is a 66 item questionnaire containing a wide range of thoughts and actions that people use to deal with the internal and external demands of specific stressful encounters. In the revised ways of coping scale, the subject has to respond in a four point scale. While keeping the stressful situation in their mind, respondents were asked to respond to each statement by circling only one response that best described the action taken by them such as, 0 (not used), 1 (used somewhat), 2 (used quite a bit) and 3 (used a great deal). Raw scores describe the coping effort of the eight types of coping and high raw scores indicate that the respondent often used the coping behaviours described by the scale in coping with the stressful event (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). The measure examines the coping processes like confronting, distancing, self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape avoidance, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal.

3.3 Procedure

The study involved a 2 (academically competent adolescents versus academically less-competent adolescents) $\times$ 2 (boys versus girls) factorial design. The participants of these four groups were compared with respect to the coping processes used. The coping processes involved are

confronting coping, distancing, and self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal.

The summary of the analysis of variances of academically competent adolescents versus academically less-competent adolescents and boys versus girls on different coping strategies are presented in Table – 1 below.

The summary of the mean ratings of the participants on different coping strategies are presented in Table – 2 below.

The Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) performed on different coping strategies indicate significant main effect for status in confronting coping, seeking social support, accepting responsibility and planful problem solving, $F(1,236) = 9.49$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 14.72$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 8.86$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 13.67$, $P < .01$ respectively (see table -1). As shown by Table-2, academically competent adolescents scored higher in confronting coping, seeking social support, accepting responsibility and planful problem solving compared to academically less-competent adolescents (M = 10.06 & 9.08, M = 11.70 & 10.34, M =8.56 & 7.73, M = 11.80 & 10.32 respectively). Again the analysis of variance computed for distancing, self-control, escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal shows significant main effect for status, $F(1,236) = 21.66$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 10.41$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 11.26$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 21.51$, $P < .01$ respectively (see Table-1). As shown by Table-2, academically less competent adolescents used distancing, self-control, escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal more compared to academically competent adolescents (M = 10.88 & 9.43, M=13.59 & 10.62, M = 12.14 & 10.64, M = 14.63 & 12.59 respectively).

The analysis of variance performed on different coping strategies like.Confronting coping, seeking social support, accepting responsibility and planful problem solving indicates significant main effect for sex, $F(1,236) = 141.82$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 10.40$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 25.62$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 24.44$, $P < .01$ respectively (see Table-1) As shown by Table-2, males scored more in confronting coping, seeking social support, accepting responsibility and planful problem solving than females (M = 11.47 & 7.67, M = 11.59 & 10.45, M = 8.85 & 7.43, M = 12.05 & 10.07 respectively). The analysis of variance performed on emotion-focused coping strategies like distancing, escape-avoidance and positivereappraisal indicates significant effect for sex, $F(1,236) = 16.09$, $P < .01$, $F = (1,236) = 37.38$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 14.47$, $P < .01$ respectively (see Table-1). As shown by Table-2, females scored more in distancing, escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal than males (M = 10.78 & 9.53, M = 12.76 & 10.02, M = 14.45 & 12.78 respectively). The analysis of variance performed on self-control shows nonsignificant effect for sex, $F(1,236) = .58$, n.s. (see Table-1). As shown by Table-2, males and females do not differ in case of self-control coping strategy, (M = 12.46 & 11.76 respectively).

Discussion

The present study provides evidence regarding the influence of the academic competence (high and low) and gender on the selection of coping strategies of adolescents in a multidimensional measure of coping.

As expected, the findings clearly showed that academically competentadolescents make more use of problem-focused coping (e.g. confronting coping, planful problem solving, accepting responsibility and seeking social support) compared toacademically less competent adolescents. Academically less-competent adolescents used more emotion-focused coping (e.g. distancing, self-control, escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal) compared to academically competent adolescents. Problem-focused coping Includes strategies that involve actively trying to solve the problem which is typically adaptive where as emotion-focused coping involves avoiding the problem, a strategy that is typically maladaptive. In problem-focused coping, the individual makes an aggressive effort to alter the stressful situation (confronting coping) or makes a deliberate effort using analytical approach to problem solving (planful problem solving) or acknowledges his/her own role in the problem with an effort to put things right (accepting responsibility) and makes effort to seek more information, knowledge or professional help to solve the problem (seeking social support).

Academically competent students outperform others in order to demonstrate their competence while academically less competent students attempt to avoid situations in which they might fail because they fear being labeled as stupid or incompetent. Academic confidence is positively associated with grades (Nounopoulos et al, 2006). High achievers tend to have perceptions of competence and control over the situation and they believe that it is possible to achieve success. The sense of competence or confidence is a coping resource. They are more likely to see stressful situation as a challenge rather than a threat. So they use more problem-focused coping. When confronting obstacles, underachievers exhibit decreased problem solving behaviour and readily disengage from goal. Underachievement leads to poor self-esteem, helplessness and a poor sense of control over the stressful situation. So they used more emotion-focused coping. They make more cognitive effort to detach themselves and minimize the significance of the situation (distancing) or make behavioural efforts to escape or avoid the problem (escape-avoidance) or make effort to regulate their feelings and actions (self-control) or make efforts to create positive meaning by focusing on personal growth (positive reappraisal).

It has also been found that females are inclined to use more emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g. distancing, escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal) compared to males. Males used more problem-focused coping strategies (e.g. confronting, seeking social support, accepting responsibility and planful problem solving). The result is consistent with the result of previous research. Renk and Creasey (2003) found from their study that females endorsed greater use of emotion-focused coping strategies than males and males endorsed higher levels of problem-focused coping strategies than females. According to Ptacek and his associates (1994), with regard to gender differences in the selection of coping strategies, males adopt more problem-focused strategies and females adopt more emotion-focused strategies. Male's dominance still remains strong in collectivistic culture like India. Patriarchle values and gender differences are strongly endorsed in Indian culture. Men are the head of the family and they are expected to have control over the members of the household, where as women are expected to be dependent on their husbands and take care of the family members. Females adopt gender roles that are characterised by being more dependent and less problem-focused where as males adopt more problem-focused roles. Most cultural and social anthropologists believe that sex differences are socially and culturally induced products of different socialization. In India, gender differences are clear-cut by social norms. Males are expected to became independent, ambitious, competitive, Self-reliant and achievement oriented. Females are expected to be mild, tender anddependent. The sex difference in socialization has made males to use

more problem-focused coping and females to use more emotion-focused coping. This finding is consistent with the findings of Folkman & Lazarus (1980) that men use direct forms of coping and women use indirect forms of coping.

5. Conclusion

Another interesting feature of this investigation is that in coping strategy like self-control, there is no gender difference. Although self-control is an emotion-focused coping strategy, no difference is found between boys and girls. Boys and girls are socialized differently. Boys are socialized to control their emotion. They never breakdown and weep in the public. They exercise restraint and try to bring their emotion under quick control. The result is very much in line with the cultural expectation.

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Table-1: Summary of the Analysis of Variance Performed on Coping

Strategies of Participants.

Coping Strategies	Sources	df	MS	F
Confronting	Status	1	58.01	9.49*
Coping	Sex	1	866.40	141.82*
(P-fC)	Status X Sex	1	36.81	6.02
Distancing	Status	1	126.15	21.66*
(E-fC)	Sex	1	93.75	16.09*
	Status X Sex	1	33.75	5.79
Self-control	Status	1	528.06	10.41*
(E-fC)	Sex	1	29.40	.58
	Status X Sex	1	109.35	2.15
Seeking Social	Status	1	110.70	14.72*
Support	Sex	1	78.20	10.40*
(P-fC)	Status X Sex	1	3.50	.46
Accepting Responsibility (P-fC)	Status	1	41.66	8.86*
	Sex	1	120.41	25.62*
	Status X Sex	1	32.26	6.86
Escape-Avoidance	Status	1	135.00	11.26*
(E-fC)	Sex	1	448.26	37.38*
	Status X Sex	1	10.41	.86
Planful Problem	Status	1	132.01	13.67*
Solving	Sex	1	236.01	24.44*
(P-fC)	Status X Sex	1	8.81	.91
Positive Reappraisal	Status	1	250.10	21.51*
(E-fC)	Sex	1	168.33	14.47*
	Status X Sex	1	.70	.06

Note: P-fC = Problem-focused Coping; E-fC = Emotion-focused Coping * P< 0.01

Table-2: Summary of the Mean Ratings on Different Coping Strategies of participants.

Coping Strategies	Groups	Males		Females		Combined
		M	S D	M	S D	M
Confronting Coping (P-fC)	Academically competent	11.57	3.12	8.55	2.72	10.06
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Distancing (E-fC)	Academically competent	8.43	1.72	10.43	2.60	9.43
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Self-control (E-fC)	Academically competent	10.30	2.11	10.95	2.70	10.62
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Seeking Social Support	Academically competent	12.15	2.83	11.25	2.93	11.70
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Accepting Responsibility	Academically competent	8.90	2.26	8.22	2.38	8.56
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Escape Avoidance (E-fC)	Academically competent	9.06	2.95	12.22	3.31	10.64
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Planful Problem Solving	Academically competent	12.60	3.34	11.00	2.83	11.80
	Less-competent					
	Combined					
Positive Reappraisal	Academically competent	11.70	3.27	13.48	3.67	12.59
	Less-competent					
	Combined					