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Cognitive Appraisal and/or Personality Traits: Enhancing Active Coping in Two Types of Stressful Situations

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College students frequently experience stressful situations (Dungan, 2002; Li, 2006). Some college students actively cope with stressful situations while others become victims of the situations. The researcher has been interested in exploring factors that lead college students to actively cope with stressful situations. Enhancing these factors may facilitate college students to employ active coping. The term active coping in the study refers to people's coping responses that are characterized by solving problems, seeking social support, and non-avoidance. The purpose of this study was to explore effective predictors of active coping in two major types of stressful situations among college students: relation and work. Results of this study may provide information for counselors to help students adapt better to college life by enhancing specific factors in different stressful situations.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers have not reached an agreement on the nature of coping. For example, process-oriented researchers (e.g., Albinson & Petrie, 2003; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Olff, Langeland & Gersons, 2005) proposed that cognitive appraisal determines the responses individuals adopt to cope with stressful situations. In contrast, diathesis-oriented researchers (e.g., Abela & Skitch, 2007; Li & Yuan, 2003; Wagner, Chaney, Hommel, Andrews, & Jarvis, 2007) suggested that a match between personality traits and stress types decides coping responses. The present study explored the extent to which a combination of these two theoretical approaches can determine college students' employment of active coping.

Process-oriented researchers (e.g., Albinson & Petrie, 2003; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Olff, Langeland & Gersons, 2005) proposed that coping is a process (instead of a mere trait) in which personal factors, such as beliefs, and environmental factors, such as novelty, work together to affect coping responses through cognitive appraisal. These researchers argued that personality traits and environment are insufficient to determine coping responses. Cognitive appraisal, they believe, is what determines individuals' coping responses. From their perspective, coping responses can be decided only after

individuals have cognitively considered (a) how their lives are influenced by the situation and (a) what they can do to deal with the situation.

In contrast, diathesis-oriented researchers (e.g., Abela & Skitch, 2007; Li & Yuan, 2003; Wagner, Chaney, Hommel, Andrews, & Jarvis, 2007) advocate that individuals' personality traits influence coping responses in specific contexts. They argued that personality traits influence coping responses most in stressful situations that are closely related to those traits. For example, individuals' self-efficacy (a task-related trait) has great influence on their coping responses to task-related stressful situations, such as looking for a part-time job. In contrast, individuals' secure attachment (a relation-related trait) is powerful in influencing coping responses to relation-related stressful situations, such as getting along with new roommates.

Both approaches have been supported by previous studies. However, little attention has been drawn to the possibility of combining the two approaches. The present study addressed this possibility. The study was aimed to explore the extent to which a combination of these two theoretical approaches influences people to actively cope with stressful situations.

Cognitive appraisal and three traits (self-efficacy, secure attachment, and resilience) were included in the combined model. According to the process-oriented approach, cognitive appraisal was expected to predict active coping across the two stressful situations. Based on the diathesis-oriented approach, self-efficacy was expected to predict active coping in work-related stressful situations such as looking for a part-time job; and secure attachment was expected to predict active coping in relation-related situations such as getting along with new roommates. In addition, the researcher hypothesized that resilience can predict active coping in both relation-related and work-related stressful situations because this trait reflects individuals' general ability to moderate the negative effects of stress (Benetti & Kambouropoulos, 2006).

Cognitive appraisal, self-efficacy, secure attachment, and resilience were applied to predict active coping in two types of stressful situations (relation, work), in order to detect the effectiveness of the combined model. The two hypotheses tested in the study were:

Hypothesis 1: In relation-related situations, secure attachment, cognitive appraisal, and resilience can effectively predict active coping.

Hypothesis 2: In work-related situations, self-efficacy, cognitive appraisal, and resilience can effectively predict active coping.

Methods

Participants were 126 students recruited from a college in Taiwan. Their age ranged from 18 to 23 years old. The mean age of this sample was 19.6. Participants were categorized into two groups—a relation group and a work group, based on their self-reported stressful situations. The numbers of participants in groups of relation and work were 76 and 50, respectively. The researcher administered a questionnaire to participants

when they were waiting for a class. Participants signed informed consent forms before they responded to the questionnaire.

Data was collected using a questionnaire containing the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996), the Coping Strategy Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990), the Chinese Adaptation of General Self-Efficacy Scale (Zhang & Schwarzer, 1995), and category I (cognitive appraisal) of the Student-Life Stress Inventory (Gadzella, 1991). All of the instruments have been used to study college students and have demonstrated adequate validity (construct or concurrent validity) and reliability (Cronbach's coefficient alpha range from .76 to .93).

All of the instruments except the Chinese adaptation of General Self-Efficacy Scale were translated by the researcher from English into Chinese. Two bilingual Psychology professors and four bilingual doctoral students examined the translated instruments. A bilingual undergraduate student, who was blind to the original English instruments, back-translated the Chinese versions into English. The original instruments and the back-translated instruments were very close in meaning, indicating correct language transference.

Internal consistency estimates of reliability (Cronbach's coefficient alpha) were computed for each of the instruments used in this study. The values for coefficient alpha were .89, .90, .75, .87, and .81 for the Student-Life Stress Inventory (SSI), the Resilience Scale (RS), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (AAS-Revised), the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSS), and the Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI), respectively. The alpha values for the three sub-scales of the Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI) were .86 (problem-solving), .88 (seeking social-support), and .68 (avoidance). In addition, the alpha value for the category I (cognitive appraisal) of the Student-Life Stress Inventory (Gadzella, 1991) was .84.

The research design of this study was a correlational design with four independent (predictor) variables and one dependent variable. The four independent variables were cognitive appraisal, resilience, secure attachment, and self-efficacy. The dependent variable was active coping. This research design consisted of two separate multiple regression procedures that were used to test the proposed model in two types of stressful situations.

Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed by using SPSS 14.0. Two procedures of multiple regression were applied to test the two hypotheses. The step-wise method was used because the available literature does not provide direction as to how the variables in this study should be entered into a multiple regression equation. By using the step-wise method, the researcher allowed the computer to select the model with the best statistical "fit." Correlations among predictor variables and between predictor variables and the dependent variable were examined in order to meet the requirements of multiple regression. The outlier was removed so it did not impact the accuracy of data analysis. The criterion used to screen outliers were (a) a Cook's distance greater than 1, and (b) a standardized residual greater than 3. Hypothesis 1 was supported while Hypothesis 2 was

not supported. Results showed that (a) cognitive appraisal and resilience can predict active coping in stressful situations associated with relation, and (b) secure attachment can predict active coping in work-related stressful situations. Tables I and II showed the results.

Table I. Summary of Regression Analyses of Resilience, Secure Attachment, and Self-Efficacy Predicting Active Coping in Relation-Related Stressful Situations

Variable	B	β	R^2 Change	p
Resilience	.13	.29	.09	.00
Cognition	- 2.56	- 4.2	.18	.001

Table II. Summary of Regression Analyses of Resilience, Secure Attachment, and Self-Efficacy Predicting Active Coping in Work-Related Stressful Situations

Variable	B	β	R^2 Change	p
Secure Attachment	.50	.41	.17	.003

Discussion

The study was aimed to test the effectiveness of the model combining two approaches to coping. Results indicated that this model is effective in stressful situations associated with relation.

In stressful situations associated with relation, individuals who less engage in cognitive appraisal (i.e., lower levels of cognitive appraisal) and are able to moderate the negative effects of stress (i.e., higher levels of trait resilience) tend to actively cope with the situations. This finding is consistent with Kulenovic and Buško's (2006) finding that cognitive appraisal and personality trait simultaneously influence individuals' coping responses to stressful situations. It seems that when people are in the initial stage of coping with a relation-related stressful situation, the less they evaluate the situation and the stronger their trait resilience becomes, the more likely they can cope with the situation actively. A possible explanation of the finding that cognitive appraisal and trait resilience simultaneously influence individual's coping response to relational stressful situations is that cognitive appraisal leads people to respond to situational factors such as how the romantic relationship ended and who wanted to end the relationship (Bouchard, Guillemette, & Landry-Leger, 2004) while trait resilience directs people to respond to any situation that causes stress such as breaking-up with a boy/girl friend and losing a job (Li, 2008).

In work-related situations, those who hold a positive attitude toward social interactions (i.e., high levels of secure attachment) tend to actively cope with work-related situations. It seems that when individuals are in the initial stage of coping with a work-related stressful situation, the more they believe they can get along well with people in the workplace, the more they become willing to take action to deal with the situation.

Conclusion

While researchers have proposed different theoretical approaches to explain coping, no adequate efforts have been made to test the possibility of combining different approaches. This study addresses this issue by combining two existing approaches into one model and tests the effectiveness of the model.

Results of the study not only expand our knowledge about coping but also provide useful information for counselors to help clients deal with stressful situations. When clients are in the initial stages of coping with relation-related stressful situations, counselors can help the clients by engaging them in reflection of their previous positive coping experiences rather than urging them to cognitively appraise the situations. When clients are in the initial stage of coping with work-related stressful situations, counselors can help the clients by enhancing their person skills.

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