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Article 39

Actively Cope With Stressful Situations: Is Active Coping a Trait or a Match Between Traits and Stressful Situations?

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College students may experience relation-related and performance-related stressful situations (Shiraishi, 2000). Active coping is a vital factor that leads individuals to successfully cope with stressful situations (Kumpfer, 1999). Although coping has been studied extensively, researchers have not reached a consensus on the nature of coping. This study aimed to explore the nature of active coping. The term *active coping* in this study refers to coping style that is characterized by solving problems, seeking information, seeking social support, seeking professional help, changing environments, planning activities, and reframing the meanings of problems.

Trait-oriented researchers propose that coping is a personality trait (Costa, Somerfield, & McCrae, 1996). Diathesis-oriented researchers (Lazarus, 1999; Morrison & O'Connor, 2005) regard coping as a response caused by a match between personality traits and specific stressful situations. The purpose of this study was to explore whether active coping is a stable trait across different types of stressful situations or is a stress-activated response caused by a match between personality traits and specific types of stressful situations. Findings of this study may provide mental health counselors with useful information that helps college students to actively cope with stressful situations. If active coping is a trait, counselors can help college students adapt to stressful situations by enhancing this trait. If active coping is a response caused by a match between traits and stressful situations, counselors can help students by enhancing some of their traits (e.g., performance-related traits) in specific stressful situations (e.g., performance-related stressful situations).

One view of coping emphasizes it as a personality trait. Researchers of personality such as Bolger (1990) have argued that "coping is personality in action under stress" (p. 525). Costa et al. (1996) connected the five-factor personality model with coping responses. They argued that any one of these five factors is associated with specific coping responses. For example, individuals high in conscientiousness tend to use plans for actions in dealing with stressful situations; however, individuals low in conscientiousness are likely to handle stressful situations by making jokes or excuses.

An alternative view of coping is that individuals' personality traits may influence coping responses in specific contexts. Cox and Ferguson (1991) suggested, "…individuals have a repertoire of coping options available to them from which they can build what they believe to be the most effective strategy, depending on the nature of the situations" (p. 20). Similarly, Lazarus (1999) proposed that a certain personality trait may affect coping thoughts and behaviors in situations which are salient and relevant to the trait. For example, individuals' high achievement orientation (trait) may greatly influence their coping responses to a performance-related stressful situation such as failing a midterm exam.

In the present study, the exploration of whether active coping is a stable trait or is a response caused by a match between traits and stress types was threefold. It started with an examination of active coping as a stable trait across four stress types: academia, work, high-stress relation, and low-stress relation. Next, the researcher examined the difference of active coping between high and low stress levels. Then, effective predictors of active coping in each of the four types of stressful situations were examined.

Subjects were 244 students currently enrolled in a university in Taiwan. Data were collected using a questionnaire that consists of six sections: demographic information, the Student-Life Stress Inventory (Gadzella,1991), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996), the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992), the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993), and the Coping Strategy Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990). All of the instruments were used in previous studies and have demonstrated adequate validity and reliability. The researcher

translated these instruments into Chinese. A back-translate procedure was done by a bilingual college student who was blind to the original version of instruments. A comparison of the original English version and the back-translated version (English) showed no difference in meaning between these two versions, indicating an accuracy of translation.

Participants were asked to identify a stressful situation that occurred to them within the previous 6 months. These situations were categorized into four different stress types: academia, work, low-stress relation, and high-stress relation. The first two stress types were considered performance related while the latter two types were regarded relation related. Participants were asked to respond to the Coping Strategy Indicator based on their experiences of coping with their identified problems within 2 days after the problems occurred.

Data were analyzed by two different procedures of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and by four separate procedures of multiple regression. The first one-way ANOVA procedure was used to detect active coping as a stable trait across four stress types. The second one-way ANOVA procedure was used to examine whether active coping is stable across high and low stress levels. Multiple regression procedures were used to test the hypothesis that performance-related and relation-related traits are effective predictors of active coping in performance-related and relation-related stressful situations, respectively. In each of these four multiple regression procedures, the predictor variables were the traits of secure attachment, self-efficacy, and resilience. The dependent variable was active coping. Secure attachment, self-efficacy, and resilience have been regarded a relation-related trait, a performance-related trait, and a comprehensive trait, respectively.

Findings of the study are divided into the following sections: (1) Is Active Coping a Stable Trait Across Different Stressful Situations? (2) Is Active Coping Activated by Stress? (3) Is Active Coping an Outcome of a Match Between Traits and Stress Types? and (4) Conclusion.

Is Active Coping a Stable Trait Across Different Stressful Situations?

In order to investigate the hypothesis that active coping is a stable trait across different stressful situations, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted. The independent variable was the type of stressful situation and the dependent variable was active coping. If active coping is a stable trait, there should be no difference in active coping among the four stressful types. The ANOVA was not significant, F (3, 240) = 1.88, p = .13, indicating that there was no significant difference in active coping (dependent variable) among the four types of stressful situations, suggesting that active coping may be a stable trait. The summary of the results of one-way ANOVA is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Effects of Problems (Stress Types) on Active Coping

Source	df	*F*	*p*
Problem	3	1.88	.13
Error	240	(88.53)	

Note: Value enclosed in parentheses represents mean square error.

*$p < .05$

Is Active Coping Activated by Stress?

In order to investigate the hypothesis that active coping is a stress-activated response caused by a match between personality traits and specific stressful situations, a procedure of one-way ANOVA and four procedures of multiple regression were conducted. The one-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the relationship between stress levels and the change in active coping. The independent variable was level of stress, which included high and low stress levels. The dependent variable was active coping. If active coping can be activated by stress, there should be no difference in active coping between high stress and low stress situations. The ANOVA was not significant, F (1, 242) = .10, p = .75, showing that there was no significant difference in active coping between high and low stress levels, indicating that active coping is stable across stress levels and that it is not activated by stress. The summary of the results of one-way ANOVA is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Effects of Stress Levels on Active Coping

Source	df	*F*	*p*
Stress Level	1	.10	.75
Error		242	(89.82)

Note: Value enclosed in parentheses represents mean square error.

*$p < .05$

Is Active Coping an Outcome of a Match Between Traits and Stress Types?

The purpose of the multiple regression procedures was to examine predictors of active coping in relation-related versus performance-related stressful situations, based on the assumption that a performance-related trait such as self-efficacy should be a better predictor of active coping than a relation-related trait such as secure attachment in performance-related stressful situations. On the contrary, a relation-related trait such as secure attachment should be a better predictor of active coping than a performance-related trait such as self-efficacy in relation-related stressful situations. The predictor variables in each of the four multiple regression procedures were secure attachment, self-efficacy, and the trait of resilience. The dependent variable was active coping.

The summary of the results of multiple regression procedures is presented in Table 3. The results show that (a) in stressful situations associated with academia, none of the predictors in this model proved to be an effective predictor of active coping; (b) in work-related stressful situations, secure attachment was the only effective predictor of active coping; (c) in low stress situations associated with relation, the trait of resilience was the only effective predictor of active coping; and (d) in high stress situations associated with relation, the trait of resilience was the sole effective predictor of active coping. These findings show that a performance-related trait does not predict active coping in performance-related stressful situations and that a relation-related trait does not predict active coping in relation-related stressful situations.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis in Different Stressful Situations

Variable	B	≤	R^2 Change	*p*
Relation (Low Stress) Resilience	.20	.35	.12	.01
Relation (High Stress) Resilience	.13	.24	.06	.04
Work Secure Attachment	.50	.41	.17	.00

*$p < .05$

Conclusion

There was no significant difference in active coping among the four types of stressful situations. In addition, no significant difference in active coping was found between high and low stress levels. These findings seem to indicate that active coping is a stable trait and that it is not activated by stress. A performance-related trait did not predict active coping better than a relation-related trait in performance-related situations. Similarly, a relation-related trait did not predict active coping better than a performance-related trait in relation-related stressful situations. The overall conclusion based on the findings is that active coping in this sample is a stable trait instead of a response caused by a match between traits and specific stressful situations. Perhaps college students' personalities are more stabilized than younger individuals' personalities. The conclusion is consistent with those of the trait-oriented researchers (Bolger, 1990; Costa et al.,1996). However, the conclusion is not definitive. Future studies that replicate this present study with students enrolled in different colleges and in different cultures can provide additional information for counselors and researchers to understand the nature of active coping.

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