THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
PERSON. COLOR. NATURE. MUSIC.
May 5-10, 2009, DAUGAVPILS, LATVIA

THE PECULIARITIES OF COPING STRATEGIES OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE FROM CHILDREN'S HOME, BOARDING SCHOOL AND FAMILY

Aivis Dombrovskis
Daugavpils University, Latvia

Abstract

There are still a lot of children's homes and boarding schools in Latvia where about 5000 children are living and acquiring education. These institutions train the young people for the social active and independent life. The period of youth is one of the most sensitive stages of the personality development. The links of the youth coping strategies with the situative and personal anxiety in different social environments – the family, the children's home and the boarding school have been studied. The research questions were stated about 1) the coherence between the strategies of coping and the situational/personal anxiety at the age of the youth and 2) similarities or differences between the coping strategies and the anxiety in the children's home, boarding school and family at the age of 16 to 18 years. Ninety young people from the children's home (n=30), the boarding school (n=30) and the family (n=30) have been studied using Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS) developed by Hobfoll and his colleagues and State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) developed by Hanin and Spielberger. This study can be used by teachers, psychologists and social workers in their work with young people, namely to identify their anxiety and to forecast their behavior.

Key words: coping strategies, the strategies of overcoming stress, stress, young people, situative anxiety, personal anxiety, deprivation, family, boarding school, children's home.

Introduction

The social and economic situation in Latvia and in the world becomes more and more inconsistent and as a result of these changes the values of the society have changed. Though, many researchers and practitioners suggest that family should be preserved as one of the most important values of our age. But today a lot of parents in Latvia leave their children in the friends' families or at their parents' and go to the work abroad to earn their living (LR CSB, 2009). With the advance of the economic crisis in Latvia and globally many parents loose their jobs and their subsistence sources (LR CSB, 2009). These social processes in the families directly or indirectly influence the growing children.

All these processes influence not only families and families with children, but also the children from children homes and the children who study and spend their weeks at the boarding schools. The young people who are living in the families usually feel the support of their parents who can help in complicated situations, the children in the children's homes can ask the support from the employees of the children home or the public officials, while the children from the boarding schools communicate with their parents at the weekends and holidays when they are free from school.

Therefore it would be necessary to compare all these three groups of young people living in these different environments. Also, the age from 16 to 18 that will be described in this study, is a very sensitive time for them as they have to make important choices in their lives and to make decisions which would determine their future lives. All that makes their psychological and physical load heavier and these circumstances raise a question how to cope with this stressful situation.

The Ministry of Children's Family and Society Integration Affairs of Latvia has summarised the researches and the scientific works about the youth in the following spheres – social and political participation, civil society and integration, health, education, human rights and social isolation, social behavior (The Ministry of Children's, Family and Society Social Integration Affairs of LR, 2008).

However, there are the evident shortage of research on the strategies used to overcome stress – coping strategies at the young age and the question arises – is there any link between the coping with stress and the environment the young person is surrounded. The psychological traits of the children from children's homes are insufficiently investigated. This issue is extremely urgent because in Latvia there are 60 children's homes (total number of population 2 million) inhabited by 3000 children.

Theoretical background is important to investigate the concept of anxiety and surmounting of stress during the period of youth and to classify the existing links between the three social environments where the children are growing – the family, the children's home and the boarding school.

In their daily life people face different events having quite diverse reactions to them. Every person reacts individually to a specific event that is why psychology investigates the person's reactions to the events, the ability to adapt to the psychological influence on the organism. The factor that influences the individual and causes his/her response is called a stressor, but the effect of this response on the organism is called stress. The stressors come from the external environment as well as from the person's internal environment, therefore the stress is an natural component of human life. Stress differs in its length, depth and power of influence. According to Selye (1977), stress is an unspecific reaction of the organism to the influence of harmful agents that displays itself as a general adaptation syndrome.

Psychology investigates the person's ability to adapt and to surmount with stress situations. The methods the person uses in stress situations are called 'coping strategies'.

Coping strategies help the individual to adapt to the new situation caused by various external social factors. As it is recognized by many researchers of the coping strategies, many theories of the coping strategies have been worked out, but up to this time there is no any unified classification of coping strategies worked out (Водопъянова, 2009). The largest part of the coping strategies is described according to the cognitive processes. As a basis for the classification the models by Lazarus and Folkman (Folkman & Lasarus, 1988) are used. These models are oriented to the solution of the problem and to the changes of attitude and viewpoint on the existing situation.

Coping strategies include all person's activities that can help to deal with internal and external stressors to make the influence softer, to lessen it or to solve it, to control it or to escape from this situation.

Freud suggested that there are the adaptive and the non-adaptive mechanisms of protection. Vaillant has created the hierarchy of coping models starting from "immature" to "mature" models of defence drawing on the psycho-pathological principles. Mature defences are characterized by the activities similar to sublimation, humour or depression – hiding. Immature defences are activities similar to projection, hypochondria and passive aggression. Vailant characterized the inter-stage defence as neurotic defence which includes intellectualization, banishing, the formation of the responding reaction (Абабков & Перре, 2004). Presently the integrative and situational model focusing on the links between the person and his/her environment is important. The totality of the person's qualities expressed in a definite context of the social environment is inspected and analyzed here.

Coplic has divided the cognitive coping strategies into groups that were named after the personality traits: those who are seeking the information and introvert people (Нартова-Бочавер, 1997). Billing and Moos (1984) offer the dichotomic classification distinguishing between active and passive activities to overcome the problem focusing either to the emotional reactions or problems. This dichotomic classification corresponds to the instrumental and palliative surmounting model suggested by Folkman and Lazarus and also to those models that are more problem-orientated.

Hollan, Moos and Shefer distinguish between two groups of coping strategies – the strategies approaching the stressors and the escaping strategies (Абабков & Перре, 2004). Matheny with the co-authors suggest looking at the stress surmounting strategies from the operative and preventive influence on the stress situation and the person's reaction to this situation. The operative influence envisages to surmount stress trying to abolish or decrease the reactions caused by the stressors, the preventive influence envisages the change of the negative influence through the cognitive appreciation, the analyses of the situation or the improvement of the supporting abilities and the resistance against the stressor (Matheny, Aycock, Hugh, Cutlette & Silva-Can-Nella, 1986).

Makbere has come to the conclusion that the coping strategies do not change much during the lifetime and are passing over from one period of age to the next one. The individuals who are competent in surmounting stress till the age of 30 can retain the appropriate surmounting strategy in the old age and vice versa. The dynamics of the people who demonstrate the lack of coping strategies in early youth will preserve inappropriate reactions in the old age if there won't be any outer interference (Водопъянова, 2009).

Suicide is the final choice selected by the young people to solve their problems. This is a destructive solution, because it doesn't solve anything, but the young person escapes from the problems refusing from his/her life. Some other youth groups choose the drugs or alcohol that help them change the reality by deforming and distorting it (Walker, 2005).

As a result of conducting a longitudinal research about the youth coping strategies Frydenberg and Lewis came to the conclusion that after the teenagers period is over and the period of youth begins any specific coping strategy changes are not observed. Nevertheless, two years later boys point out that they can cope with stress situations on the same level as before, but girls inform that it is more difficult for them to cope with the stress situations as it has been before. At the age of 12 – 14 the most stable are the following coping strategies: seeking the social support, solution of problems, self-reproach, maintaining the stability, decreasing of tension, but two years later, at the age of 16, the usage of these strategies has grown. Frydenberg and Lewis points out that youngsters use the functional and the dysfunctional combination of coping strategies (Frydenberg, Lewis, 2000)

Studying the strategy of social support seeking the researchers noticed that young people use it less when growing older, but the usage of such strategy has dramatically increased among the girls. The strategies like social activity, mental support, physical activities are used with the same frequency.

The young people use the help of professionals in solving their problems more when they grow older and no differences between the young girls and boys are observed here (Kristiansens, Kopelands & Staperte, 2008).

The young people who have permanently and repeatedly suffered from the harmful influence of stress and haven't got any appropriate assistance in the formation of the coping strategies can develop the dissociative symptoms which includes de-realization, de-personalization, self-punishment reaction of the activities and periodical attacks of evil (Foa,

Kin & Frudman, 2005). The choice of coping strategy for the young people is a very important thing considering the consequences which are heavier for them comparing with adults because of the sensitivity of youngsters. The choice of the coping strategies is determined by the specific psychological and physiological state as well as the experience gained and the knowledge about the methods how to cope with stress.

The anxiety usually is connected with anticipation of failure in social interaction and it is determined by the sources of unconscious fears.

Functionally the anxiety is not only a warning sign anticipating danger or trouble but also encouragement for person to find out and specify the dangerous factor.

There are the situational anxiety which characterizes the individual in the specific situation and anxiety as a personality feature – the heightened disposition to feel anxiety toward real or imagined troubles. The anxiety weakens the defence mechanisms such as repression, rationalization, projection, etc. (Корсини & Ауэрбаха, 2006).

The most frequently mentioned cause of the anxiety of the young people is the inner conflict when the dispositions are contradictory and one need is in opposition to other. The disharmony between the different external social demands, the needs of youngster and his/her wishes is the cause of this conflict. When the demands of the adults exceed the abilities of the young person or the demands to him/her are opposite to the performance of the aim, it creates the feelings of humiliation or put the young person in the dependent situation. All these situations can be characterized as the feeling of loosing the ground, loosing the stable orientations in life, distrusting the surrounding world (Петровский, 1979).

Horney (1993) speaks about the basal anxiety that can be obtained already in the childhood and displayed throughout the life. The cause of this basal or basic anxiety is the hate, which has accumulated gradually in the childhood and has become chronic and oppressed.

The environment of the children's home, that of a boarding school and the family influences the level of the anxiety of a young person differently. That how he/she feels is determined by the totality of the personal and situational anxiety.

Considering the presented theoretical analysis and the research approach of this paper, the following research questions were set:

1. Is there any coherence between the strategies of coping and the situational/personal anxiety at the age of 16-18 years?

2. Are there any similarities or differences between the coping strategies and the anxiety in the children's home, boarding school and family at the age of 16-18 years?

Methodology

Sample

To answer the research questions, three sample groups with 30 young people from 16-18 years of age in each group were assembled. The groups represented three different social environments: the children's home, the boarding school, and the families. The respondents lived in Vidzeme region of Latvia. Gender of respondents was not considered important for this study.

Instruments

Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS)

In the presented research the instrument called the Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS) developed by Hobfoll and his colleagues (Dunahoo et al., 1998) drawing from their model of coping was used. The general version of the scale was administered to measure the forms of coping that were usually used by the subjects when facing stress. This scale consists of 52 items derived from common proverbs, idioms, and strategies that are believed to be broadly culturally applicable. The authors presented a dispositional, as well as a situational version. Hobfoll and his colleagues created the following subscales based on factor analysis: Assertive action (9 items), social joining (5 items), seeking social support (7 items), cautious action (5 items), instinctive action (6 items), avoidance (6 items), indirect action (4 items), antisocial action (5 items), and aggressive action (5 items).

State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)

The STAI Form Y is the definitive instrument for measuring anxiety in adults. It clearly differentiates between the temporary condition of "state anxiety" and the more general and long-standing quality of "trait anxiety". It helps professionals distinguish between a client's feelings of anxiety and depression. The inventory's simplicity makes it ideal for evaluating individuals with lower educational backgrounds. Adapted in more than forty languages, the STAI is the leading measure of personal anxiety worldwide. The STAI has forty questions with a range of four possible responses to each. Translation from the Russian version of this instrument was used in the given study (Hanin & Spielberger, 1983).

Procedure

The research was carried out in three children homes, in one boarding school and in one elementary school. The procedure took three days, each day it was conducted in different environment. The answers on the questions did not take a long time and did not cause the fatigue of the sample. The instruments were administered in a way where researcher was standing in front of group and explaining the unclear issues. The main questions were discussed before the filling the blanks – how to match answers and what does it mean to feel in this moment and to feel generally. All respondents filled the blanks individually and in time. The participation in this research was voluntary, anonymity and confidentiality were granted.

Results

The investigation of the youth coping strategies in children's home, boarding school and family lead to the following results.

There are several differences in the coping strategies of the young people from these institutions regarding the *assertive action, antisocial action, seeking the social support, impulsive action* and *aggressive action:*

1. The youngsters from the children's home differ from those coming from the boarding school in following coping strategies: *assertive action* (p=0.005), *impulsive action* (p=0.003), and *aggressive action* (p=0.037). The youngsters from children's home and boarding school used these coping strategies more than the youngsters from family.

2. The youngsters from the children's home differ from those coming from family in following coping strategies: *assertive action* (p=0.013), *social joining* (p=0.014), seeking the *social support* (p=0.012), and *impulsive action* (p=0.001). The youngsters from family used these coping strategies more than the youngsters from children's home and boarding school.

3. Differences in coping strategies *social joining* (p=0.020) and *aggressive action* (p=0.006) can be observed between the youth from the children's homes and boarding school. The youngsters from children's home and boarding school used these coping strategies more than the youngsters from family.

Research on the personal and the situational anxiety of the youth in the environment of the children's home, the boarding school and the family showed that:

1. The youth from the families have a lower level of the situational anxiety in comparison with the youth from the children's homes and the boarding schools. 50% of the young people from families, 25.8% from the children's homes and 24.1% from the boarding schools have a low level of the situational anxiety;

2. The young people from the family have a lower level of the personal anxiety in comparison with the youngsters from the environment of the children's homes and the boarding schools. 42.7% youth from families, 27.9% from the children's homes, 29.4% from the boarding schools have a low level of the personal anxiety. A high level of the personal anxiety is demonstrated by 47.5% youngsters from boarding schools and 52.3% youngsters from the children's home.

The theory by Hobfoll and his colleagues applied in the construction of the scales of SACS suggests that in addition to the two behaviour related axis – pro-social-antisocial and active-passive behaviour the axis determining direct and indirect behaviour is necessary.

The results of presented research shows that the youth from the children's home (43.5%) and the boarding school (43.5%) can be characterized by the more antisocial behaviour than the youth from the family environment (13.0%). The youth from the families (40.3%) are characterized by more pro-social behaviour.

The young people from the family environment are larger trend toward the direct behaviour (47.4%), but the youth from the boarding schools (32.7%) and the children's home (44.2%) – toward the indirect behaviour.

Clarifying the similarities and differences between the coping strategies and the direct/indirect model of behaviour it was discovered that 63% of the young people living in the children's home choose the pro-social – indirect model of behaviour and the same is with the youth living in the boarding school. The youth from the family environment use direct – pro-social behaviour, but only the youngsters from the boarding school present the direct – antisocial behaviour.

Analysing the connection between the youth coping strategies and the situational/personal anxiety the following negative correlations were found: between the coping strategy *impulsive action* and the situational anxiety (r=-0.236, p<0.05); between the coping strategy *impulsive action* and personal anxiety (r=-0.259, p<0.05); between the coping strategy *social joining* and medium level of personal anxiety at the medium level (r=-0.288, p<0.05), between the coping strategy *impulsive action* and the medium level of personal anxiety (r=-0.275, p<0.05); between the coping strategy *assertive action* and the medium level of personal anxiety (r=-0.243, p<0.05).

Analysing the connection between the youth coping strategies and anxiety for the youngsters coming from the boarding school, children's home and family the following results were obtained: the positive correlation between the coping strategy *social joining* and the situational anxiety (r=0.369, p<0.05) can be observed for the youth from the children's home, the negative correlation between the coping strategy *social joining* and the situational anxiety (r=-0.544, p<0.001) can be observed for the youth from the family, the negative

correlation between the coping strategy *prudent activity* and the situational anxiety (r=-0.397, p< 0.05) can be observed for the youth from the family.

Conclusions

Young people from the orphanage, boarding school and family environment have differences in such coping strategies as "assertive activity", "social contacting", "searching for social support", "impulsive activity" and "aggressive activity".

After studying similarities and differences of coping strategies and behaviour models of direct or indirect behaviour the obtained results allowed making the conclusion that there are quite many similarities: 63% of young people residing in orphanages choose "prosocial – indirect" behaviour model, the same model is chosen by 36.7% of young people living in boarding schools. The indirect model of prosocial behaviour is chosen by approximately the same number of young people in all three selected groups. Young people from family environment more often use "direct - prosocial" behaviour model and only young people residing in boarding schools demonstrate the use of "direct – asocial" behaviour model.

Adolescents have similar level of situational anxiety and such coping strategy as "impulsive activity". Personal anxiety and such coping strategies as "social contacting", "impulsive activity" and "assertive activity" also have certain similarities.

After studying young people's personal and situational anxiety in the orphanage environment, boarding school and family environment we can make the conclusion that:

Young people from families have lower level of situational anxiety as compared to young people from orphanages and boarding schools. 50% of young people from family environment, 25.86% of young people from orphanage environment and 24.14% of young people from boarding schools have low level of situational anxiety.

Young people from family environment have lower level of personal anxiety as compared to young people from orphanages and boarding schools. 42.65% of young people from family environment, 27.94% of young people from orphanage environment and 29.41% of young people from boarding schools have low level of situational anxiety. High level of personal anxiety is characteristic only to young people from boarding schools (47.62%) and young people from orphanages (52.38%).

This research has not studied peculiarities of choosing coping strategies as well as peculiarities of anxiety caused by sex differences.

We can give the following practical recommendations for the staff working in these institutions:

- In the course of developing upbringing guidelines it is recommended to take into account peculiarities of young people's behaviour in this educational environment.

- It is advised to develop educational courses for young people on self-perception and understanding of their conduct in collaboration with psychologists and psychotherapists of these educational institutions.

Further research of coping strategies and problems of anxiety in adolescence in relation to family environment should be aimed at studying the differences in coping strategies and anxiety caused by sex differences. After assessing the findings of this research it would be necessary to continue the research and develop anxiety reduction models and possibilities of changing asocial coping strategies for prosocial coping strategies.

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Aivis Dombrovskis

PhD student,
Daugavpils University, Latvia,
aivis_dombrovskis@inbox.lv