

PROACTIVE COPING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AGE, GENDER AND EDUCATION

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Abstract: The article presents the results of a study of proactive coping in its relationships with age, gender and education. The concept of proactive coping contains the aspect of time in the sense of involving steps that are to precede the situations to be coped with. In the sample of 172 subjects differences were studied between groups defined by the above factors. The results show age-related differences in proactive coping where older people compared with younger ones prefer proactive coping more often, and women compared with men seek instrumental support coping strategy more often. Comparison of groups of adults who study and who do not study does not show significant differences among strategies of coping used.

Key words: proactive coping, age, gender, education

Coping involves a number of ways of coping with varieties of one's interactions with the environment. It is usually characterized by concepts of strategies, tactics, responses, cognitions or behavior. Lazarus (1991) defines coping as a cognitive and behavioral effort to deal with specific external and internal demands that are perceived as challenging or those that exceed a person's own resources.

People, however, are often able to identify and recognize problems and take steps by which they prevent problems before they arise.

In their review of studies dealing with the relationship of coping and age, Strack and Feifel (1996) show that coping strategies used among different age groups differ. They emphasize that the strength and direction of relationships between coping and age are not clear and are related to differences in the research samples, methods and stressful situations used and studied. Ficková and Halama (2004) found

that older women in comparison with young women prefer goal-oriented strategies, hence in our study we expect a higher preference for goal-oriented strategies in the group of older people. They also found that young women prefer coping strategies related to emotional experience and avoidance strategies. We hypothesize that the group of younger people will prefer social support seeking strategies (instrumental - oriented on asking for advice in their own social network, as well as emotional - regulating emotional discomfort by sharing their own emotions with others). We also expected that younger people in our sample will prefer avoidance strategies when compared with older people.

Several studies (in studying gender differences in proactive coping, i.e., Šolcová et al., 2006; Greenglass et al., 1999) document significant differences between men and women. Findings on Canadian, Polish and Czech samples agree that women prefer strategies oriented to social support

seeking (both instrumental and emotional support). Šolcová et al. (2006) also found higher preference for reflective coping in men. We hypothesize that we shall find significant differences in social support seeking strategies according to gender.

Proactive coping especially stresses the aspect of future orientation in solving everyday situations, and we were accordingly interested in studying factors that relate to decisions having impact on the future life of people. As an example of such a decision we used a decision of an adult to study at university. Thus we formulate a research question whether the decision to study at university can predict proactive coping.

METHODS

Sample

The sample consisted of 73 high school students (2nd to 4th grade), 61 university students (29 full-time students and 32 part-time students) and 38 adults not currently studying at university. The age of subjects ($n = 172$) ranged from 15 to 59 ($M = 23.94$ years with $SD = 10.69$).

The Proactive Coping Inventory

The Slovak version of the Proactive Coping Inventory (Greenglass et al., 1999) was administered. The inventory consists of 7 scales: the Proactive Coping Scale (14 items), the Reflective Coping Scale (11 items), Strategic Planning (4 items), Preventive Coping (10 items), Instrumental Support Seeking (8 items), Emotional Support Seeking (5 items), Avoidance Coping (3 items). Items are worded in the singular and are rated on a 4-point scale. Individuals scoring high on the Proactive Coping subscale are seen as having beliefs

that are rich in potential for change, particularly in ways that would result in improvement of oneself and one's environment.

RESULTS

The Aspect of Age

In studying the aspect of age we divided the sample into three groups: below the age of 18, 18-34 year olds and over 35 years. Similar groups were used in studying coping in relation to age in the research of Cornelius and Caspi (1987). Table 1 shows the results.

Statistically significant differences were found in four dimensions of proactive coping (proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping). A statistically higher preference in these four strategies was found in the oldest group (over 35). Of the two aspects of social support seeking statistically significant results were found in emotional seeking. A lower preference for using this strategy was found in the group of older adults. The three groups studied did not significantly differ in the dimension of avoidance coping.

The Aspect of Gender

The aspect of gender was studied for the sample as a whole. Table 2 shows the results.

Statistically significant differences were found in the Instrumental Support Seeking scale. In all other scales the difference was not statistically significant. Significant differences previously found (Šolcová et al., 2006; Greenglass et al., 1999) are supported for instrumental support seeking coping, not for emotional support seeking coping.

Table 1. Differences in proactive coping in the three age groups

Age	Below 18 (n = 73)		18-34 (n = 70)		Over 35 (n = 29)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Proactive coping	41.47	5.42	40.83	6.35	46.03	5.98	8.43	<.001
Reflective coping	30.55	5.40	30.04	6.10	35.14	5.61	8.73	<.001
Strategic planning	9.70	2.78	10.04	2.24	13.00	3.09	17.39	<.001
Preventive coping	26.68	5.61	25.86	5.34	31.40	4.81	11.33	<.001
Instrumental seeking	25.10	4.49	23.20	4.94	24.10	4.47	2.94	.056
Emotional seeking	16.45	2.79	15.31	3.38	14.09	2.70	6.81	.001
Avoidance coping	7.34	2.49	6.77	2.34	7.48	1.72	1.48	.230

Table 2. Differences in proactive coping according to gender

	Men (n = 49)		Women (n = 123)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Proactive coping	41.27	5.69	42.26	6.34	0.91	.341
Reflective coping	30.55	5.99	31.34	5.99	0.61	.436
Strategic planning	10.37	2.62	10.41	2.98	0.01	.936
Preventive coping	27.78	6.06	26.89	5.54	0.84	.361
Instrumental seeking	22.43	4.53	24.85	4.65	9.60	.002
Emotional seeking	15.20	2.92	15.74	3.21	1.04	.309
Avoidance coping	7.37	2.21	7.04	2.37	0.69	.407

Table 3. Differences in proactive coping between adults studying and not studying

	Studying adults (n = 29)		Non-studying adults (n = 38)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Proactive coping	40.41	6.79	41.53	7.18	0.41	.522
Reflective coping	30.69	5.99	30.58	7.41	0.00	.948
Strategic planning	9.62	1.86	11.03	3.50	3.84	.054
Preventive coping	25.07	4.09	26.11	5.97	0.64	.426
Instrumental seeking	22.79	5.64	23.13	4.53	0.07	.786
Emotional seeking	15.66	3.98	14.55	2.84	1.75	.191
Avoidance coping	6.76	2.29	7.03	2.51	0.20	.655

The Aspect of Education

Possible differences in proactive coping between adults who study and who do not study at university were examined. Table 3 shows the results.

No statistically significant result in proactive coping was found. The difference in the scale Strategic Planning is close to the level of significance ($p = .054$), the group of non-studying adults has much higher standard deviation. Possible limits of the research are discussed further.

DISCUSSION

Cornelius and Caspi (1987) studied the level of solving everyday problems of a well-educated New York community sample between the ages of 20 to 78 years old who answered the list of hypothetical problem situations. Results showed that the use of effective problem-solving strategies increased with age. Young adults (20 to 34) were significantly less effective than older (55 to 78) ones, while middle-aged subjects (35-54) were placed between young and old. In an 18-65 year old sample Pearlin and Schooler (1978) found a lower tendency to emotional support seeking in the situation of marital problems in older adults than in younger adults. Based on longitudinal results, Vaillant (1986) claims that the use of healthy and mature coping strategies increases from the age of 20 to middle adulthood; he relates this to progress in cognitive maturing processes. Our findings support these research findings. In four proactive coping scales a higher tendency to act proactively was found in the older group when compared with younger groups. There were also significant differences found in emotional support seek-

ing, with its higher preference by younger groups.

The results of studying gender differences support previous findings (Green-glass et al., 1999; Šolcová et al., 2006) in instrumental support seeking (younger people use more support seeking strategies more often). This result may have been influenced by the sample structure with its higher proportion of women.

Exploring relationships of proactive coping and education in adults shows no significant differences. According to these findings it seems that, more than by education or the decision to study at university, proactive coping is influenced by age. As possible research limits we consider the fact that the sample consisted of groups of people currently studying and not studying at university. The relationship of proactive coping with the decision to study at university can be manifested in younger individuals, which was not controlled in the research.

Proactive people are focused on creating potentials that may facilitate reaching one's goals and personal growth. The motivation of proactive persons is positive. They look at everyday situations as challenges. From the perspective of studied factors (age, gender, education) age represents the strongest predictor: older individuals are more actively oriented toward improvement of themselves and their environments rather than (only) reacting to situations that occur.

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PROAKTÍVNE ZVLÁDANIE Z PERSPEKTÍVY VEKU, POHLAVIA A VZDELÁVANIA

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Súhrn: Príspevok predstavuje skúmanie proaktívneho zvládania z pohľadu vzťahov s vekom, pohlavím a vzdelávaním. Proaktívne zvládanie predstavuje definíciu zvládania vzhľadom na časový aspekt - podnikanie krokov pri predchádzaní situáciám, ktoré je nutné zvládať. Na vzorke 172 respondentov sme skúmali rozdiely medzi skupinami definovanými uvedenými faktormi. Výsledky naznačujú rozdiely v proaktívnom zvládaní vzhľadom na vek v smere väčšej preferencie proaktívnych stratégií u starších, rozdiely vzhľadom k pohlaviu v častejšom vyhľadávaní inštrumentálnej opory u žien, a nenaznačujú významné rozdiely v stratégiách zvládania medzi študujúcimi a neštudujúcimi dospelými.

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