Research on coping with stress in the Research Institute for Child Psychology and Pathopsychology in Bratislava

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Summary

The study presents an overview of the results of the „coping with stress" team coming from the Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology. The variety of results does not allow a brief summary, but the conclusions, research examples and references are to understand the strategies and results of the scientific work of the research team, which are discussed in the text.

Key words: Coping with stress, coping strategies, personality, Big Five

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The onsets of researches on coping processes following the conception of R. S. Lazarus' (1960) transaction theory were in 1984-85, when this issue started to be dealt with by a small group of our Institute's workers (J. Senka, M. Zvalová, Ľ. Medveďová). The tendency to contribute to the knowledge of this important issue and to find means to utilize findings on information finally gave birth to gradual formation of three projects accepted for solution by the Scientific Grant Agency of Ministry of Education of SR and Slovak Academy of Sciences. The first of them, *Mental and Social Sources of Coping Processes at School* (Senka, 1993) was worked at between 1994-1996; the second, *Coping Strategies of Children and Youth in School Achievement Context* (Senka, 1996; Medveďová, 2000a) between 1997-1999; and the third, *Stress Sources and Coping Sources of Children and Adolescents* (Medveďová, 1999a) is planned for 2000-2002.

The first research stage of this issue at our Institute (1984-1993) can be understood, in a certain sense, as a certain pre-preparation. The research focused on exploration of conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues of coping (which, obviously, persists until now); however, the emphasis on adjustment mechanisms and effectiveness of coping was more highlighted and we (conceptually as well) alternatively used the term *mental resistance.* After 1994, the research follow-up of coping took on both extensive and intensive expansion. A new team was created of which the key members continued to be E. Koubeková, T. Kováč, Ľ. Páleník and Ľ. Medveďová until now. It was lead by J. Senka, the author, coordinator and initiator of the first steps to the solution of this issue in our Institute, but he died in 1998 after a grim disease (a lot of attendents of Danubian Psychologists Meetings surely do remember our jolly collegue).

In the contribution, we try to present briefly at least basic results that we obtained in the solution of the issue within the scope of grant projects – that is, since 1994. It is not possible to mention every important finding here; colleagues should forgive subjectivity in the selection, possible inaccuracies, or overlook further certainly not very relevant findings.

The study of foreign literature shows continuous non-agreement in the research of this issue and application of more conceptual models. So far, no theory for explanation of stress-coping processes in children and adolescents has been developed, hence many researches are based upon empirical base, or upon concepts developed for adults. We, too, have raised our expectations in relation to R. S. Lazarus' and S. Folkman's (1984) concept; however, we took account of considering a developmental level, too, and bigger dependence of children and adolescents on adults.

Measuring variables of coping mirrors this condition, so it is based upon methodologies for adults; it reflects on a pertinent theory, it is based upon empirical information, or it is a combination of more models (Senka, 1995a). We translated, adjusted and used several measures that showed the existence of mostly four basic categories of coping: active strategies (problem-solving), support-seeking strategies, distraction strategies, and avoidance strategies (Medveďová, 1998b).

In researching on preferences of concrete coping strategies and in finding out their effectiveness, we obtained results (Medveďová, 1995a, 1996a, 1997b, 1998b, 2000b) that show very high variability not only in dependence on the used conceptual coping model and to its relevant measures, but also in dependence on age, gender, type of stress situation and its subjective experiencing. We observed the age span from 4 years up to the adolescence period

(several research samples were involved), however, our concentration mostly focused on the adolescence period. One of our first findings was that the level of coping does not increase with age (Medveďová, 1992), because demands and requirements imposed on individual increase too; these are so called developmental tasks. However, in age categories we found a higher level of efforts focused on coping with the environment (on problem) rather than on coping with negative emotions (Medveďová, 1992; 1995a). With reference to the preference of coping strategies in relation to gender, boys – contrary to girls – more often use strategies of problem-solving and of physical relaxation in the time of adolescence; girls more often use strategies of social support (Medveďová, 1997a, 1997b). The effectiveness of concrete strategies is changing according to the type of stressor and is related to perception of the level of its controllability. With an increase of the perception level (of the subjective one) of controllability of the stressor the level of active, problem-focused strategies, and social-support seeking increases, too; the level of emotional (avoidance) strategies does not decrease as expected (Medveďová, 1998b).

A lot of attention was paid to relationships of variables of coping with characteristics of personality as personal coping sources (Kováč, 1996a, b, 1997a, b, 1998, 1999, 2000a, b; Kováč, Senka, 1995b, 1997; Medveďová, 1995a, c, 1996a, b, 1998a, 1999a; Páleník, 1995a, 1997a, b, 1998, 1999, 2000; Senka, 1995b, 1997.) We concretely followed relationships of coping with self-conception, anxiety, anxiety-trait, intellect, creativity, locus of control, sense for humor, dimensions typical for prosocial (altruism, empathy, etc.) and individualistic orientation (assertiveness, performance motivation, etc.), with personality factors (Big Five) and dimensions of quality of life. Here, too, we found very big variability in dependence on variables that entered into these relationships; however, generalization can be made that personality characteristics can be both moderators and predictors of coping and that the individual more effectively copes with distress when he or she subjectively believes in stressor's controllability, has high self-esteem, and is emotionally stable and balanced. A high level of creativity, altruism, assertiveness and sense for humor contributes positive to effectiveness of coping, too. High anxiety and anxiety-trait, depressive mood, low self-esteem and aggressiveness unfavorably influence coping. Analysis of relationships between coping and personality factors (Big Five) allow assumption that mostly a conscientious individual copes with stress more effectively – than any individual that is open to experiences, has a low level of neuroticism, is agreeable and extrovert. Conscientiousness and neuroticism are more related to coping with negative emotional states (distress), while openness, agreeableness and extraversion are related to coping with external circumstances of a stressful situation.

For example Table 1 illustrates the correlation relationships of adaptive coping with personality factors. Regarding the statistically significant differences in several variables, we made the correlation analysis separately for each gender. The **research sample** consisted of 207 pupils of a secondary school – aged 10,5-14,5 years – of which 105 were boys and 102 girls.

Adaptive coping is more related to some factors, less related to others, and the correlation between neuroticism and effective coping is, as expected, negative. The highest level is achieved by correlations between conscienciousness with both categories of coping, but they are, in the group of girls, closer to coping with self. Conscienciousness, systemization and self-discipline probably secure better preparedness of individuals to threat and environmental demands and, simultaneously, their better regulation and solving. The second factor in order – mostly related to effectiveness of coping – is openness to experience that is represented by activity, creativity and fantasy. This factor correlates – in addition to conscienciousness – higher to coping with environment in both groups. Other two factors, too – extraversion and

agreeableness – correlate higher to coping with environment, which is obvious, as these are the dimensions focused on human beings. Neuroticism is significantly negatively related to effective coping with negative emotional states (self) and it is much closer for girls, which is probably also because the level of neuroticism is higher for them than for boys.

We used the following measures in our research:
1) The **CCSC** (Children's Coping Strategies Checklist – Ayers et al., 1996), which identifies **active coping strategies**, **support seeking strategies, distraction strategies, avoidant strategies.**
2) The **CCQ-BFS** (The California Child Q-set Big Five Scale – from John et al., 1994). This scale, in the same way as for adults, covers 5 bipolar personality factors: **extraversion** versus social inhibition, **agreeableness** versus antagonism, **conscienciousness** versus lack of direction, **neuroticism** versus emotional stability, and **openness to experience**.
3) **Coping Inventory** (S. Zeitlin, 1978, 1980) to measure adaptive coping with stress. The scale identifies **coping focused on self** (efforts to influence a negative emotional state) **and on the environment** (efforts to change threatening conditions of environment). Three bipolar dimensions are used to describe the coping style: nonproductive-productive, passive-active, and rigid-flexible.

Table 1: Correlations of the personality factors with the adaptive coping

ADAPTIVE COPING	PERSONALITY FACTORS					
	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscien-tiousness	Neuroticism	Openness	
Coping - Self:						
1. Productive	,35**	,26*	,61***	-,32*	,33**	**B**
2. Active	,12	,14	,28*	-,26*	,17	**O**
3. Flexible	,19	,19	,34,**	-,09	,28*	**Y**
SELF - TOTAL	**,25**	**,25**	**,48***	**-,29***	**,29***	**S**
Coping - Environment						
1. Productive	,25	,43***	,42***	-,17	,35**	**n**
2. Active	,37**	,26*	,34**	-,22	,27*	**55**
3. Flexible	,23	,27*	,40**	-,14	,33**	
ENVIRONMENT - TOTAL	**,32***	**,36***	**,44***	**-,20**	**,37***	
Coping - Self:						
1. Productive	,45***	,38**	,54***	-,63***	,37**	**G**
2. Active	,26	,18	,56***	-,46***	,11	**I**
3. Flexible	,00	,20	,36**	-,28	,41**	**R**
SELF - TOTAL	**,30***	**,33***	**,60***	**-,57***	**,36***	**L**
Coping - Environment						**S**
1. Productive	,47***	,27	,46***	-,45**	,38**	
2. Active	,38**	,39**	,45**	-,22	,51***	**n**
3. Flexible	,32*	,29*	,19	-,20	,22	**46**
ENVIRONMENT - TOTAL	**,44***	**,37***	**,43***	**-,32***	**,45***	

* < 0,05, ** < 0,01, ***< 0,001

We administered the Coping Inventory from S. Zeitlin, regarding its complexity, only to older pupils – aged 12,5-14,5 years (55 boys, 46 girls).

Table 2 shows correlations between personality factors and particular coping strategies. We find, in both groups, the closest relationships between the conscienciousness factor and active coping strategies. In other correlation relationships, differences between boys and girls typical for this development period are more significantly mirrored. In short, we can say that positive poles of personality factors, including emotional stability as the antipole of neuroticism, are positively related to active coping strategies and support seeking (in girls), while neuroticism to avoidant strategies. We did not find any relationships with distraction strategies, neither support-seeking strategies in boys, and we consider this to be a consequence of a higher increase of demand for freedom and independence than in girls.

Table 2: Correlations of the personality factors with coping strategies

COPING STRATEGIES	PERSONALITY FACTORS					
	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscien-tiousness	Neuroticism	Openness	
Active coping strategies						
1. Cognitive decision-making	,12	,31***	,51***	,03	,34***	**B**
2. Direct problem-solving	,36***	,21*	,41***	-,21*	,26**	**O**
3. Seeking understanding	,00	,26**	,38***	,25**	,22*	**Y**
4. Positive cognitive restructuring	,06	,29**	,14	,11	,11	**S**
Support-seeking strategies						
1. Problem-focused support	,12	,06	,08	,16	,04	**n**
2. Emotion-focused support	,11	,16	,03	,07	,05	**105**
Distraction strategies						
1. Physical release of emotion	,17	,06	-,04	,01	-,07	
2. Distracting actions	,03	-,13	-,06	,04	,00	
Avoidance strategies						
1. Avoidant actions	-,07	,15	,03	,24**	,07	
2. Cognitive avoidance	-,05	,08	,08	,20*	,18	
Active coping strategies						
1. Cognitive decision-making	,00	,09	,37***	-,08	,15	**G**
2. Direct problem-solving	,26**	,21*	,48***	-,32***	,20*	**I**
3. Seeking understanding	,15	,14	,12	,01	,12	**R**
4. Positive cognitive restructuring	,18	,06	,02	,01	,12	**L**
Support-seeking strategies						**S**
1. Problem-focused support	,31**	,11	,15	,05	,16	
2. Emotion-focused support	,42***	,02	,12	,06	,21*	**n**
Distraction strategies						**102**
1. Physical release of emotion	,14	,01	,13	-,06	,15	
2. Distracting actions	,05	,06	-,08	,13	,06	
Avoidance strategies						
1. Avoidant actions	-,07	,18	-,11	,29**	,15	
2. Cognitive avoidance	-,09,	-,05	-,10	,26**	,00	

*p< 0,05, ** p< 0,01, *** p< 0,001

The research also focused on the social network that can be a source of social support which individuals seek or accepted in stress. Here, we put attention to the influence of the family climate, to educational approaches of parents and their activity as an example both in forming variables of coping and in developing personality characteristics (Medveďová, 2000b) relevant for effective coping. The results speak of higher correlations between the quality of educational activity and family climate and the development of personality characteristics as coping moderators. The parent's impact as an example is important in formation of concrete strategies (Medveďová, 1995b). The research of relationships of emotional and instrumental support with coping not only shows different preference of strategies in pubescents in dependence on sex, but also different effects of these types of social support on coping mostly in the context of specific developmental periods (Koubeková, 1998a, b, 2000b). In both sexes, social support provided by friends starts to be continuously dominating, however. Social support for girls provided by parents is accepted less contrary to boys. Independence and disengagement by the family is more accepted by boys.

We put attention to issues of coping in families that foster children with different handicaps and we found out (Póňová, Senka, 1995; Senka, 1995b,c, 1997, 1998; Senka, Kováč, 1997; Senka, Páleník, 1995) that the most powerful and finest support (order based on level) is provided by families to children with chronic disease; with physical handicap; to children from regular families; in an alternative family education; the lowest and least quality support to children with behavior disorders. In families with children with mental retardation (Senka, 1998) we found a high level of family coping sources and effective strategies, however, it was simultaneously demonstrated that these families seek only little social support in the environment.

In researching coping in children in the Children's City (Zlatovce) we found out (Koubeková, 1996; Páleník, 1995b) that even though this modus of alternative education is near to conditions in natural families in the most and that it significantly decreases consequences of previous mental deprivation, it can not eliminate them completely. These children can use this alternative family as a reliable and powerful source in coping with distress, but they more often opt for negative means of coping with life situations, as well as for unacceptable and noncreative coping strategies than children from regular families.

In individuals with a physical handicap it was found out (Koubeková, 1998, 1999, 2000a) that, at the pubescence period, girls perceive their handicap more negatively than boys do. Negative experiencing of handicap for girls has consequences in an unfavorable level of personal sources (reduced self-esteem, increased anxiety-trait), which means that they perceive stressful situations more threatening than boys do, or their healthy peers. This simultaneously means preference of less quality strategies, mostly avoidance strategies, and seeking of social support to a certain degree, while for boys, these are also strategies of problem-solving and distraction strategies. Boys basically do not differ on the level of adjustment from their healthy peers, and they perceive school as relevantly less stressful than healthy individuals.

Other results point out the fact that school success (Baliga, 1997; Medveďová, 1999b; Senka, 1994) is not a guarantee for effective coping with stress. A higher level of adaptive coping with stress and more frequent use of effective coping strategies were not found in well-achieving pupils and pupils of selective schools, but in their average schoolmates. However, it is possible to say definitely that enormous school demands only a little contribute to this fact; specific conditions in the family and the structure of pupil personality are involved more here. Nevertheless, school does not sufficiently make use of creative thinking of individuals (Kováč, 2000a, b), and it often uses a negative motivation for learning that evokes distress for those individuals that want to be successful.

In relation to this, it is apparent that a good moderator of coping with stress can be sport (Kováč, 1997a; Páleník, 1997b,1998) because some partial findings say that children and youth who attend sports schools show a higher level of adaptive coping and have a tendency to use coping strategies more effectively and are socially more acceptable.

All these researches brought a large scale of information that we tried to utilize not only for presentation to professional and lay public; they also resulted in attempts to develop programs for strengthening of competence to cope with distress. The training program that we developed for preschool children (Medveďová, Zvalová, 1997) appeared successful after three months when feelings of personal value, self-confidence and emotional stability significantly increased in children.

Recently, we have focused our research effort more on analysis of sources of stress and on coping sources that are different in adults. In the identification of stressors, we try to recognize their structure and intensity specifically with respect to age minimally in three anticipated areas (school, family, peers). By the same token, we try to make a deeper analysis of personal coping sources, particularly to find out more about the task and functioning of motivational personality components in relation to stress and coping. With reference to social sources, we are interested in the development of abilities to regulate relationships among them.

We would like to contribute to strengthen mental health and to develop those forms of mental functioning and behavior that have a positive relevance from the aspect of health.

In references, we mention only the journal studies which:
- *were published in English language*
- *were published in Slovak language, but the journal contains an English abstract of the article*
- *were published as abstracts of contributions presented at international happenings in a composite book*

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