YOUNG MALE AND FEMALE COPING STYLE IN NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS

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Bachelor of Science with Honours (Cognitive Science) 2015
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This declaration is made on the 24 day of JUNE year 2015.

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YOUNG MALE AND FEMALE COPING STYLE IN NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS

KOMALAVANI A/P SUBRAMANIAM

This project is submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
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The project entitled ‘YOUNG MALE AND FEMALE COPING STYLE IN NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS’ was prepared by Komalavani A/P Subramaniam and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Science with Honours (Cognitive Science)

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study is to explore on the types of negative life events and the various coping styles used among young adults at Kota Samarahan. Besides that, aspect of differences among gender in dealing with a particular negative life event is also taken into consideration in this study. The research was qualitative study and semi-structured interview questions were used. The number of informants involved in this study were ten, 5 male and 5 female respectively. All respondents were interviewed based on the research questions formed earlier of this study. The age of respondents basically revolves around 21-25 as only young adults were selectively chosen. The data collected from the interview was analysed based on the thematic analysis. Analysis shows that females were prone towards friendship problems and they tended to deal it using emotional-focussed coping such as crying, whereas male were reported to experience cases much related to relationship problems and tended to cope with action based coping style like confronting and play games. The findings from this research would be useful for future research to further enhance the study on impact of negative life events in much varied demographic profile and larger sample size.

Key Findings: Negative Life Events, Coping Styles, Gender, Young Adults
ABSTRAK


Kata Kunci: Peristiwa Hidup Negatif, Strategi, Jantina, Remaja
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter discusses the background of the study, problem statement, research questions, and research objectives, significance of study, definition of key terms and limitation of study.

Background of study

A large number of recent studies have found that negative life events are associated with the onset of psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia (Brown & Birley, 1968), depression (Billings & Moos, 1983), and attempted suicide (Paykel, 1978). The theoretical assumption behind these studies is that negative life events create a temporary state of disequilibrium, which must be read-adjusted to establish new balance. The expenditure of effort during the adjustment process is believed to drain peoples' emotional, cognitive and even behavioural resources and thereby contribute to the deterioration of their physical and psychological health (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1978; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Rabkin & Struening, 1976).

Coping responses are defined as the cognitions and behaviours that a person uses to assess and reduce stress and to moderate the inner tension that accompanies it (Billings et al., 1983; Folkman, 1984). They fulfil two functions: (a) a problem-focused function of channelling resources to solve the stress creating problem; (b) an emotion-focused function of easing the inner tension by intra psychic activity, such as denial of the stress or changing one's attitude towards it (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Mitchell et al. (1983) suggested that even if
emotion-focused coping aids in maintaining emotional balance, the non-use of problem-solving strategies has negative implications for mental health. Problem-focused Coping, on the other hand, was related to fewer physical and depressive symptoms (Billings & Moos, 1981; Billings et al., 1983).

The impact of negative life events might be either buffered or exacerbated by one's habitual coping strategies (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Individuals who possess an effective repertoire of coping responses would be able to endure severe and tragic negative events with minimal consequences for their mental health, whereas individuals who rely on inadequate coping strategies would develop psychological symptoms in consequence of even normal negative events like not getting good grade in exam. According to Lazarus, when people faces less tragic life events, individuals use problem-focused strategies to eliminate the cause of the stress. As the negativity of a certain event become intense and poses a greater threat to emotional balance, individuals use more primitive and inadequate coping processes which are maladaptive and at the same time detrimental to mental health.

Young adults are best described as a transitional period in which individuals experience major physical, cognitive, and socio-affective changes. Several other life events like family issues, crime, bully, also can be the predominant experiences that young adults face before. Hereby, some youngsters could adapt successfully and could learn a lot from the negative events and move on whereas others might face difficulties in overcoming the situation alone. Moreover, male and female both do handle their life events differently. Therefore, the study of these individual differences could help in providing enriched experiences and lesson that could help those who might face similar negative events in future.
Fewer studies have been examined on the association between types of negative life events and the respective coping style. Even fewer studies have moved beyond an examination of overall types of negative life events that is commonly faced by young adults. Young adulthood is a period of lifespan development characterized by dramatic physical, physiological, and social changes. While these transitions provide opportunities for growth, exposure to negative life experiences in a variety of domains (e.g., family, university, friends/social activities) can place a young adult at a risk in coping wisely (Garber, 2002).

Thus, an enriched case study on young male and female undergraduates at Kota Samarahan, was conducted to explore the types of negative life events, such as the death of loved ones, failure in relationship and poor academic achievement. Moreover, minor studies have revealed the differences among gender in coping up after encountering a negative life event that left a scar in researcher’s life. Consequently, the respective coping style in prior with the negative life event experienced would also be studied.
Problem Statement

Negative Life Events are among the leading causes on the onset of many emotional afflicts worldwide besides being one of main reason in causing people being vulnerable towards depression, stress, social anxiety, schizophrenia and all other mental illness (Jabor & Juboori, 2012). Negative, stressful, and traumatic life events are reported to be one of the major role in one's life changing moments (Jabor & Juboori, 2012). Numerous research have been done to determine the causal relationship between negative life events causing depression, stress among patients and late adulthoods. However, fewer research had been done in underlying the different coping styles used due to the impact of negative life events specifically focussing on young adults. Young Adults are at the critical phase of life at where they face different types of acute negative life events like death of loved ones, relationship failures and also poor academic performance. Therefore, a research was conducted on exploring the types of negative life events among young adults at Kota Samarahan. The differences based on the aspect of gender in coping negative life events would also be studied in detail.

Research Questions

This study attempts to provide answers for this following questions:

i) What are the types of negative life events prevalent among Young Adults by gender?

ii) What are the coping styles used among young adults experiencing negative life events by gender?

Research Objective

The main focus of this study is to explore how young adults overcome negative events in their life. Specifically, the objectives of the studies are:

i) To explore types of negative life events among young adults by gender.
ii) To study various coping styles used by young adults encountering respective negative life events.

Significance of study

Several studies done previously, have focused on the association between an individual’s negative life events and the coping strategies used by them (Klein, 2012). The main contribution of this research is to discover the prior and common types of negative life events experienced by young adults and the various ways they use to cope with that particular event. One of the most consistent findings in emotion and psychology literatures is that women are addressed to face negative events more emotionally compared to men whom tend to handle and solve it without much emotional concerns (Nolen, 1991). Therefore, this research would mainly outline the comparison among gender in overcoming a negative life event with each individual’s own and unique coping style. Thus this study would create an awareness on adaptive and maladaptive coping styles handling negative life events among young adults and eventually help them to learn what to follow and what to avoid. There has been many studies or research conducted to measure people’s coping styles solely (Lazarus, 1992). Thus, this research would provide a deeper understanding on the coping measures that one could practise in order in facing severe negative life events. The research is believed to reduce severe maladaptive coping styles such as the act of suicide attempts among students.

Definition of key terms

In this section of the study, some important key terms are defined in order to get a better understanding on the research being made.

Negative Life Events

Negative life events is defined as any known major change in a person’s environment or circumstances creating an unpleasant feeling like sad. The example of negative life events
is the death of spouse, loss of job and more that eventually affects interpersonal relationship, mood, feelings, behaviour and thought of a person (Segen, 2012).

**Young adulthood**

Person in the range of 20-40 (Erikson, 1999)

**Coping style**

The cognitive and behavioural efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them (Lazarus, 1993).

**Emotional-focussed coping**

It acts on one’s belief to discharge negative emotions or reinforce positive emotions. It’s a combination of cognitive and behavioural coping (Lazarus, 1991).

**Cognitive coping**

It enacts thinking process such as avoidance, denial, positive thinking or rational thinking (Hart & Hittntert, 1995).

**Behavioural coping**

Individual takes action or strategies about potential action in response to a stressor (Ben-Zur, 1999).

**Gender**

Gender is known as the division of people into two categories which is male and female based on biological and phenotypical differences (Borgatta, 2007).

**Limitation of study**

The number of respondents is small which is just about ten. Thus, the results taken from this research could not be generalized on a whole as to a certain degree, everybody’s perception and experience could varies. Data taken only involves qualitative manner and empirical part of the study is not taken into account.
Conclusion

In this chapter, all important elements such as background of study, problem statement, research questions, research objectives, significance of study, definition of key terms and limitation of study are stated clearly which will be later on discussed in other chapters.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Concepts and definitions on the theories behind life, depression, coping style related and to the study were clearly examined in this particular chapter.

Theories & Model

Negative Life Events

Negative Life events are defined as any known major change in a person’s environment or circumstances creating an unpleasant feeling like sadness (Segen, 2012). Negative life events experienced by adolescents increase their vulnerability towards failure in adapting and coping the situation well plus worsening psychological health leading to critical depression, social anxiety and even stress (Hunter, 2011). As a result, it is significant to identify different types of coping style that are adaptive enough when young adults are confronted with negative life events.

Negative life events are negatively associated with life satisfaction (McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002), a variable that has been theorized to mediate the impact of a negative life event on psychopathological behaviour. Using satisfaction with life as a mediator, however, has resulted in inconsistent findings (e.g., McKnight et al., 2002; Suldo & Huebner, 2004). In addition, coping mechanisms undertaken by the adolescent may influence the impact of negative life events on distress and psychological health. Adolescents’ ability to use behavioural and cognitive methods to cope with stressful situations has been studied extensively (Compas, & Wadsworth, 2001), and it is clear that coping has the potential either to reduce or augment the effects of a negative life event. Murberg and Bru (2005) found that
aggressive coping was related to depressive symptomatology and that anger coping sustained depression, perceived stress, and use of illicit substances. "Acting out" or anger coping has been implicated in many studies as a risk factor for depressive symptomatology (Galaif, Sussman, & Wills, 2003), as has coping through rumination (Skitch & Abela, 2008). Based on a longitudinal study, Seiffge-Krenke and Klessinger (2000) reported that avoidant coping was consistently associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms while approach oriented coping was not. Optimistic explanatory coping (e.g., external attribution style when explaining a negative life event) has been shown to reduce the effects of negative life events on suicide ideation (Parker, 2009). These combined findings indicate that maladaptive coping such as acting out and rumination may adversely influence adolescents' depressive symptomatology, while adaptive and approach coping, such as the use of optimism, seems to have the opposite effect. Maladaptive coping could come in the form of conversion mechanism at where one tend to direct their emotion towards something else, however, if it is a bad habit like substance use (drugs, smoking, drinking) and more could only result in harming one's own body. For example, smoking, as a way of coping augments the effects of negative life event on distress (Rosario et al., 2011).

The examination of the effects of different ways of coping among adolescents has been extensive but has mainly been focused on 'western' countries. This does not provide data from adolescents in non-western cultures. In non-Western countries, different negative life events are encountered where, for instance, adolescents face increased rates of poverty (Good, 1999) and HIV (Dyer, Roby & Day, 2011), as well as barriers to receiving high quality education (Tella & Akande, 2007). Cultural context must be considered (Gelhaar et al., 2007). Findings and theoretical frameworks from the West need to be tested and examined in non-western cultures. Western research consistently shows that how adolescents cope with life events has an impact on their psychological well-being (Carleton, 2008). However, few if any studies have
been conducted to examine the effects of different coping strategies on the relationship between the impact of negative life events and psychological distress in adolescents outside western countries. Furthermore, there is a lack of quality cross-culturally valid measures for adolescent coping strategies (Sveinbjornsdottir & Thorsteinsson, 2008).

In light of the current lack of knowledge about negative life events commonly experienced by adolescents in non-western countries, coping mechanisms used to deal with negative life events and their outcomes in non-western countries, and whether measures designed for western cultures are suited for use in non-western cultures, there is a need for research that examines these factors. A result might be the development of high quality interventions to assist adolescents in managing negative life events.

Overall, some studies have been conducted on the role of negative life events and coping style. Based on all cognitive vulnerability theories, it is confirmed that emotional negative life events have a huge impact on the development of negative emotions that could lead to serious mental illness like depression. The presence of negative life events has been found to be a reliable risk factor for the development of emotional symptoms in both females and males (Lorenz, Conger, & Simon, 1994). Females are known to be more vulnerable to emotional symptoms compared to male because they tend to experience and influenced more by negative life events (particularly in interpersonal domains) and easily get anxious even by very small issues or minor negative life events such as misunderstandings with their best friends (Hankin & Abramson, 1999).

There are several theories that explains how negative life events could affect someone until he or she lose control in coping. For an instance, learned helplessness theory (Beck, 1987) proposed that those who experienced negative life events that was beyond their self-control and eventually failed to move on with ease, would definitely leave a scar that could not be
erased from their mind easily. As a result, whenever they face similar situation in the future, they would think and set on their mind that they could never go through the events just like last time (Beck, 1987). Similarly, the hopelessness theory (Benner, 1996) postulates that emotional symptoms and negative feelings are caused by internal and external factors due to negative life events as in this case. Beck’s cognitive theory on the other hand, explains that individuals living by having negative schema on themselves, thinking all the bad traits about them that is not even true at times, could easily be fragile and hard to accept negative life events occurred in their life and hardly cope well (Broderick, 1998).

**Contingency-Competence-Control model**

The contingency-competence-control (C-C-C) model integrates three types of cognitions into one model (Burwell & Shirk, 2007). This Perceived Control model hypothesizes that one is capable of producing favoured outcomes but this solely relies on two important principle which is contingency and competence. Contingency is basically the chance, accident, or possibility conditional on something uncertain that could happen in future, whereas, competence is the perception of one’s ability to produce the desired outcome (Burwell & Shirk, 2007). Perceived control and competence are thoughts about one self, while perceived contingency involves about the environment on the most. According to the Contingency-Competence-Control model, perceived contingency and competence are expected to significantly predict, but not fully account for, perceived control, control (Burwell & Shirk, 2007).

Studies have been conducted based on C-C-C model and mixed results have been produced on the role of perceived contingency and control towards the onset of unclear coping styles. In a cross-sectional study of ethnically diverse adolescents aged 8 to 17, (Burwell & Shirk, 2007) it was found that perceived contingency and perceived competence were
significantly associated with perceived control. Then, further studies were conducted on adolescents aged 10-14, (Clark & Beck, 1999) and it was found that perceived contingency and perceived competence plays an important role in predicting perceived control. Han et al. have noted that it is important to examine the specific relations of different types of control-related beliefs with internalizing symptoms towards negative emotions (Carter, 2006).

Fewer studies were conducted by examining the applicability of cognitive theories to low-Social Economic Status (SES), ethnically diverse youth suggest that control cognitions do affect coping style used by young adults. Locus of control basically refers to individuals whom believe they can control themselves against any emotional events (Rotter, 1954). There are two types of locus of control which is internal locus of control and external locus of control. Internal locus of control describes self-determination and believes every outcome of a situation is based on what we do. While, external locus of control explains the belief as any emotion based events is outside one’s personal control. Thus, Reinemann and Teeter Ellison found that when a youth experienced less negative life events, those with a more internal locus of control reported lower levels of anhedonia (scientific term to describe inability to enjoy any kind of pleasures) than those with an external locus of control (Costello, 2003). However, for youth who experienced high levels of negative life events could not possess good internal of locus thus they tend to blame everything on their environment. Thus, under conditions of high emotional fluctuation, an internal locus of control may be less able to buffer against negative emotional symptoms. In contrast, Cowen et al. (Cole, 2006) found that urban youth who displayed resilience in the face of highly emotional conditions reported significantly more use of internal locus of control than non-resilient youth. These studies suggest that an internal locus of control may be an important resource for youth exposed to negative life events, but these protective effects may be limited for urban, minority youth living under highly emotional conditions.
In addition to mixed findings regarding the role of cognitions in the development of minority youth, methodological problems limit our understanding of how control cognitions affect psychological adjustment in these youth. Because studies have used different terminology for conceptually similar cognitions (e.g., internal and external locus of control; contingency, competence, and control beliefs), it is difficult to determine which types of control cognitions predict the development of youth’s coping style. For example, youth from minority ethnic, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods may perceive that others similar to themselves have little control over their environment given their knowledge of many uncontrollable events experienced by similar others (e.g., victimization by violence). If so, contingency beliefs may be particularly relevant for these youth. Finally, studies examining the role of control-related beliefs in coping style development primarily have used cross-sectional designs, limiting our knowledge about whether these cognitions lead to changes in coping.

It is recognized that negative life events can lead to low perceptions of control and contingency. This might be specifically true for youth from low social background, and live in poor neighbourhoods, who often experience negative life events beyond their control (e.g., neighbourhood violence) would eventually have a thought and belief that their own act is never the only reason for some negative life events to occur as environment is reason of all and they tend to lose heart and put less hope in self-control; these lowered control beliefs may cause the development of maladaptive coping styles. Prior research has found that young adults are more prone to develop maladaptive coping styles due to non-violent life like failure in relationship events compared to violent life events (Barratt, 2006). Recent research has shown that gender differences in cognitive styles, such as increased use of rumination in girls, could help to explain the gender difference in adolescent coping styles (Cole, 1996). Similarly, gender differences in control-related beliefs could explain the differences in gender in expressing negative life events as these beliefs are more strongly linked with girls than boys. Therefore,