

Exploring situated accounts with stressful life events in students' life stories

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Abstract

Coping comprehends all the behaviours a person endorses when faced with stressful events during their life. Studies have shown that university is considered one of the most stressful times in someone's life. Previous research also showed that students experience many stressors and events related to many factors, such as family, friends, work and more. People deal with these types of events by adopting either a problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategy. This study focuses on how students with a generic propensity to use an emotion-focused or problem-focused coping mechanism account for the use of these coping styles in actual situations. The stressful life events of 6 students of the University of Twente were examined to understand how they coped with the situations they have experienced and through the COPE inventory, the students' generic coping tendencies were assessed. Results found out that independently from the generic tendency of the students, they use an emotion-focused approach more often than a problem-focused one; however, the students, who have a generic tendency towards problem-focused coping, tend to adapt their coping style according on the stressor. The results of this study can be used to better understand the approaches employed by students when faced with stressful events, and can be used to improve these strategies to employ a more efficient stress coping strategy.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the amount of stressful events and general stress an individual is exposed to on a daily basis has highly risen among college and university (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). University is considered one of the most stressful periods in someone's life because a transition to a more independent life is experienced, where individuals need to take care of their own financial situation, academic standards, and need to find a new social network (Broughman & Mendoza, 2009). Studies have examined stressful life events and how people, specifically university students cope in order to overcome such an adjustment. Coping can be defined as the behaviours that people adopt when faced with stressful experiences (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003). The overall outcome of all these studies is that each individual has his/her unique story and the way past events are interpreted and coped with differs among people. When taking a closer look at how men and women deal with stressful events, there seems to be a gender-specific pattern, as women have shown to be more inclined to use an emotional focused strategy; while men are more inclined to use a problem focused one (Matud, 2004; Kelly, Tyrka, Prince, & Carpenter, 2008; Ptacek, Smith, & Dodge, 1994). However, no extensive research has been done on the possibility for coping to also be situation-specific, meaning that there is a possibility for coping strategies to change according to the situation at hand.

Coping has been found to be useful for three main aspects of a person's life. First, it helps a person by eliminating or changing the conditions in which a person found themselves when the stressful event arose. Second, it helps the person size what is happening by controlling the meaning of the situation which eventually eliminates the problematic factor of the situation. Finally, coping helps the person regulate the emotional reactions and consequences caused by the

situation (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). There are different coping styles, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. *Problem-focused* coping strategies are behaviours adopted by a person with the intention of modifying or removing the stressful situation (Matud, 2004). This specific type of coping is usually used when the person, experiencing the aggravating event, believes that something can be done to reduce the problem (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). Moreover, it has been found that problem-focused coping is used among people who expect to experience positive changes when approaching the situation (Carver & Scheier, 1985). *Emotion-focused* coping refers to the effort a person puts in a situation to try to regulate his or her emotional responses caused by that event (Matud, 2004). This emotion-based coping strategy is usually applied when a person believes the situation is unchangeable and something he or she has to suffer through (McCrea, 1984). This type of coping strategy can be linked to a pessimistic view on events and expectations (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). In their research, Sigmon, Stanton, and Snyder (1995) found that the problem-focused approach was more effective in reducing psychological distress than the emotion-focused approach.

When taking a look at the tendency of individuals to use a specific coping strategy rather than another, the conclusions of the studies conducted on these topics are varied. For example, Eton and Bradley (2008) showed that university women have a higher tendency to use emotion-focused coping styles compared to men. Moreover, university women reported using their social network, denial and positive reframing, which are all strategies related to emotion-focused coping, more than men (Ptacek, Smith, & Dodge, 1994; Dyson and Renk, 2006). Contrary, according to the research carried out by Brougham and Mendoza (2009), individuals in university have a tendency to predominantly use an emotion-focused coping style.

Furthermore, no clear information has been found on the frequency of use of problem-focused coping mechanisms among university students (Pritchard and Wilson, 2006). However, according to a different study, university students used planning, active coping and suppression of extra activities, all part of a problem-focused approach more often (Lin, Wenbo, & Bing, 2005). Additionally, the study conducted by Rosario, Shinn, Morch, and Huckabee (1988) showed specifically that individuals do not differ in the way they cope with stressors. Rather, it appears that they adapt their coping mechanisms to the situation at hand, meaning that one time they could be using the emotion-focused approach, and another time they could be using the problem-focused one (Rosario, Shinn, Morch, & Huckabee, 1988). In conclusion, it seems that university students change in the way they deal with stress, as they change their coping style depending on what the stressful situation is; however, there seems to be a difference in opinions about the tendency in which students use either emotion-focused or problem-focused coping.

To understand coping styles, the types of events considered stressful among people need to be explored. An overview of what university students consider a stressful event is presented. Generally, women have reported more stress than men, especially during their university years (Brougham & Mendoza, 2009; Matud, 2008; Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Among university students, it was found that the main sources of stress are health related matters and academic difficulties (Bailey & Miller, 1998; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). Growth and change, such as becoming an independent person, change in goals, challenges towards personal values and ideals, were mentioned as stressful situation among students (Roisman, Masten, Coastsworth, & Tellegran, 2004; Romano, 1992). Furthermore, earlier studies have found that stressors among

university students also include social relationships and events related to family matters (Crespi & Becker, 1999; Larson, 2006).

The present study tries to explore how students with a generic tendency to employ emotion-focused or problem-focused coping styles account for the use of these coping styles to actual stressful situations.

Methods

Design

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design has been employed in this study. This type of design implies that one qualitative as well as one quantitative instrument has been used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview, while the quantitative data was gathered through an online questionnaire. The qualitative data was collected before the quantitative one. It has been done this way in order to give the chance for the participants to remember stressful past events and to elaborate on how they previously coped with such events. Thereafter, when doing the questionnaire they have a clear frame of reference about how they usually cope with problems in general. The researcher has obtained ethical approval by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of BMS at the University of Twente (registration number: 190262).

Participants

This study used a convenience sample of 6 students of the University of Twente, who have been personally approached by the researcher to take part in this study. The only requirement to be included in the study was for the individual to speak English sufficiently and to be at least 20 years old. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 24. The characteristics of the participants are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1.

Characteristics of the participants.

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male
Nationality	Irish	Greek	Caribbean	Dutch	German	Egyptian
Coping style	Problem- focused coping	Problem- focused coping	Emotion focused coping	Problem- focused coping	Problem- focused coping	Emotion focused coping

*Materials**Qualitative method*

The researcher interviewed the selected participants by using the “Life Story Interview” (McAdams, 2008). The interview can be found in Appendix A. This interview is about the participant’s life story. This interview has been chosen because its questions are related to the crucial aspects of someone’s life, the stressor they have experiences and are experiencing, and it questions the way the participant is coping/coped with current/previous challenges, stressors, and aggravating events. The different sections of the interview include: Life Chapter (which requires the participant to divide his or her life in chapters and to explain what each chapter is about and how you go from one chapter to another), Key Scenes in the Life Story (which includes an explanation of the high point, the low point, the turning point, a positive childhood memory, a negative childhood memory, a vivid memory of his or her adult life, and a religious memory), Future Script (which requires the participant to jump one chapter in the future and to explain

what his or her expectations for the future are), Challenges (which includes questions about the greatest challenge he or she has experienced, a health challenge, a loss of an important person in his or her life, and the greatest failure/regret of the participant), Personal Ideology (which includes the political and social view of the participant, how did they develop, and the main value in life according to his or her view), Life Theme (which includes the recognition of a main theme in the participant's life so far), and Reflection (which includes talking about how the participant felt during the interview and to see if he or she has further questions and/or concerns).

Quantitative method

Afterwards, the participants were asked to fill in online the COPE inventory questionnaire (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). This questionnaire is aimed to understand the way people cope with and respond to stressors in their life. The questionnaire comprises 10 subscales which measure two coping strategies: problem-focused (i.e., active coping, and planning); and emotional-focused (i.e., seeking of emotional social support, and turning to religion) (Scheier, Weintraub & Carver, 1989). Each of the items is scored on a likert-scale from 1 to 4, with 1 being the minimum score and 4 being the maximum. The maximum score for problem-focused coping as well as for emotion-focused coping is 40. Concerning the interpretation of the scores, the participants are categorized as problem-focused coping user or emotion-focused coping user depending on their score. According to Bacanlı, Surucu, and Ilhan (2013), the Cronbach's alpha for the subscales ranged from 0.39 to 0.92; the highest being the subscales of Turning to Religion (0.92), Humor (0.92) and Alcohol/drug use (0.95), and the lowest being the subscale of Restraint Coping (0.39). Additionally, the subscales of Using Instrumental Social Support, Humor, Focus

on and Venting of Emotions, Substance use, Turning to Religion, Positive Reinterpretation, Using Emotional Social Support and Planning have a Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.70 (Bacanli, Surucu, and Ilhan, 2013). This alpha is used to measure internal consistency; which indicates to which extent all the subscales in the test measure the concepts they are supposed to measure (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1 and there are some rules of thumb that have been developed in order to understand what each value means (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). When the value is higher than 0.9, the reliability is considered excellent; when the value is between 0.9 and 0.7, the reliability is considered acceptable; and when the value is less than 0.7, the reliability is considered insufficient (George & Mallery, 2003).

Procedure

All the semi-interviews were conducted in the time period from the 1st of April 2019 to the 11th of April 2019. Each participant was interviewed individually and face-to-face. All the interviews were conducted at the University of Twente. The interviews were administered in English. Before participating in the interview and survey, all participants were asked to sign a printed version of the informed consent, which can be found in Appendix B. The interviews were semi-structured. The interviews were audio recorded. After closing the interview, the researcher sent a link to the COPE inventory through Whatsapp which they had to fill in immediately after the interview. After completing the questionnaire, the participant was thanked for the participation, the goal of the study was repeated, and they were reassured that all the information will remain confidential and anonymized. The average duration of the interviews was 60 minutes, ranging from 50 minutes to 70 minutes.

Data analysis

Contrary to the data collection, the quantitative data was analysed before the qualitative data. In this way, the participants were first clustered in those with a problem-focused coping style and those with an emotion-focused coping style. Afterwards, the interview has been analysed to see how each participant accounted for the use of either a problem-focused or emotion-focused approach, assessed from the outcome of the quantitative data analysis, in the stressful events he or she mentioned. The frequency of the codes for the problem-focused participants have been added up, same as for the emotion-focused participants.

The responses of the questionnaire have been analysed through the program IBM SPSS Statistics 24 (1964). To analyse the frequency of the use of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies by men and women, the variables of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping were created on SPSS. Each participant's response on the subscales for these two coping mechanisms has been analysed. When the participant scored more on the subscales for problem-focused coping than on the subscales for emotion-focused coping, the participant is categorised as more prone to use a problem-focused approach; in the same way, when the participant scored more on the subscales for emotion-focused coping than on the subscales for problem-focused coping, the participant is categorised as more prone to use an emotion-focused approach.

Afterwards, the interviews have been transcribed verbatim, and all information that could be used to identify the participants was removed. The transcripts were coded using the program ATLAS.ti. In order to analyse the content of the interviews, a code scheme was created. A mix

between a bottom-up approach and top-down approach was used. The main codes of family, social network, academic institutions, finances, health, growth & change, and coping were derived from the literature mentioned above together with the subcodes of emotion-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Meanwhile, the main code of work have been created while reading the transcriptions together with the subcodes of parents, siblings, relatives, friends, partner, colleagues, school, and university. These sub codes have been created in order to make the coding scheme more detailed and to be sure that all the aspects of the main codes derived from the literature were accounted for. All the main codes have been created because in the literature and by analysing the transcriptions of the interviews they have been mentioned as different sources of stress for university students. To be able to code coping, the two subcodes are emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. The emotion-focused coping subcode includes the following strategies: positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion and emotional social support; while the problem-focused coping subcode comprehens active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, and instrumental social support. All the strategies to make sure that the distinction between emotion and problem-focused coping was clearly understandable while coding were drawn from the COPE inventory. To check the validity of the code, the interview was analysed again independently by another researcher. The second researcher received one of transcript and the already developed coding scheme and then the researcher proceeded to code the interview according to the coding scheme provided. Afterward, the two coded interviews were compared and analysed to understand if each code corresponded to the same themes and sentences of the participant. The inter-rater reliability was .74. To calculate this, the amount of times the two researchers have

agreed on a code needs to be divided by the total amount of codes found in the interview. Afterwards, the percentage is transformed in decimal in order to be interpreted on a scale from -1 to +1. If the Cohen's kappa, inter-rater reliability, is between the values of .61 and .80, it is considered moderate (McHugh, 2012). Accordingly, the remaining interviews have been analyzed using the code scheme developed. The overview of the coding scheme is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2.

Coding scheme.

Main code	Subcodes	Definition
Family	Parents	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned which are related to their parents.
	Siblings	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned which are related to their siblings.
	Relatives	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned which are related to their relatives.
Social network	Friends	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned which are related to their friends.
	Partner	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned which are related to their girlfriend/boyfriend.
	Colleagues	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned which are related to their colleagues.
Academic Institutions	School	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned in which primary/high school was the source of stress.
	University	Every stressful event that the participants mentioned in which university was the source of stress.
Work		Every stressful event mentioned by the participants in which work was the source of stress.

Finances		Every stressful event in which the participant mentioned money as a factor of stress.
Health		Every stressful event in which the health of the participant or the health of someone related to the participant or the health of a friend of the participant caused stress to the participant in any way.
Growth & change		Every stressful event/situation in which the participant was stressed out because of their own personal thoughts, values and ideals.
Coping	Emotion-focused coping	Every instance in which the participant used a problem-focused strategy to cope with a stressful situation.
	Problem-focused coping	Every instance in which the participant used an emotion-focused strategy to cope with a stressful situation.

Before coding the interviews, some rules were formulated in order to make sure that each interview was coded in the same way. The unit of analysis was sentence-based and units could be coded multiple times to ensure that all relevant aspects of every event mentioned by the participants were reflected in the codes, for example, one scenario was about one of the participant's parent's health and therefore was coded both as "health" and "parent" and there was no hierarchy between the codes. After coding the transcriptions of the interviews, each code was assessed on whether it was coped through problem-focused or emotion-focused approaches, and

this was done by coding the strategy used by each participant every time they mentioned a stressful situation.

Results

In Table 3, the results of the data analysis can be found. All participants, independently of whether they were categorized as problem-focused or emotion-focused, show a tendency to use emotion-focused strategies, as they were mentioned being used 93 times over the 79 times problem-focused was mentioned. The participants, categorized as problem-focused user (4 out of 6), have mentioned using an emotion-focused coping mechanism 70 times; while 69 times, they mentioned adopting a problem-focused approach. The emotion-focused participants (2 out of 6) mentioned using an emotion-focused coping 43 times and a problem-focused coping 18 times. In Table 3 below, the terms emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping are abbreviated as EFC and as PFC respectively.

Table 3.

Coping differences per stressor according to participants' own coping tendencies.

	Problem-focused participants		Emotion-focused participants		Total	
	EFC	PFC	EFC	PFC	EFC	PFC
Family	13	13	16	4	29	17
<i>Parents</i>	9	10	7	2	16	10
<i>Siblings</i>	1	1	2	1	3	2
<i>Relatives</i>	3	2	7	1	10	3
Social network	12	9	8	3	20	12
<i>Friends</i>	6	5	8	3	14	8
<i>Partner</i>	6	3	0	0	6	3
<i>Colleagues</i>	0	1	0	0	0	1
Academic institution	13	12	7	4	20	16
<i>School</i>	2	1	2	0	4	1
<i>University</i>	11	11	5	4	16	15
Work	6	8	0	0	6	8
Finances	1	1	1	0	2	1
Health	7	8	5	2	12	10
Growth & change	18	18	6	4	24	22
Total	70	69	43	17	93	79

Within the family code, emotion-focused coping (29) was used more often than problem-focused coping (17). Participants labeled as problem-focused used both coping strategies the same

amount of times (13); while the emotion-focused participants opted more often for an emotion-focused coping style (16). When taking a closer look to the subcodes, to cope with stressful events related to parents, the problem-focused participants used a problem-focused method (10) more than an emotion-focused one (9). An example of a problem-focused strategy used in this category is the following: *“I also wanted to be there for my father, and I was in the same exact situation and this was really weird because you also have to be strong for your dad [...] I concluded for myself okay just do something that you like and you are going to be fine.”*; while an emotion-focused strategy can be seen in this quote: *“I didn’t always tell my parents straight away what grades I got sometimes because I wanted to stay there [...] I was sitting in my living room with my parents and then my mum found out and I tried to deny it”*. As for subcode of friends, the problem-focused participants mentioned using both coming styles while the emotion-focused ones used a more emotion-focused strategy. When it comes to relatives, all participants used emotion-focused strategies more often than problem-focused ones.

Similarly, social network matters have been dealt with an emotion-focused strategies (20) more often than with a problem-focused one (12). For the subcodes of friends, all participants mentioned using an emotion-focused coping style. None of the emotion-focused participants mentioned stressful event with partners and colleagues. However, problem-focused participants used a more emotion-focused style when dealing with partner related matters, and a more problem-focused one when dealing with colleagues. Examples of a problem-focused coping mechanism for this code is *“It was really shitty because I was really badly bullied by some friends of mine and then after that moved to Paris because of that”*, likewise an emotion-focused strategies used can be explained by the following quote: *“It’s been hard having to adjust to many*

paces and with all the other changes it is been hard to keep like certain people in life and you rely on them but when you move all the time you have to adjust all the time to someone new and then you need to describe your life to your previous friends but they don't get it [...] and it's always like I would lose so many friends because of this".

When the source of stress was academic institutions, once again, all participants mentioned emotion-focused strategies (20) more than problem-focused ones (16). Within this code, the subcode of school was dealt with emotion-focused mechanisms. Emotion-focused participants dealt with university matters emotionally, while problem-focused participants used both coping styles equally. Regards such events, an emotion-focused strategy used by one of the participants can be explained by this quote: *"I was able to get to university and now that I'm in University I wasn't good enough and I was getting really low grades and it made me feel really bad about myself I would like to say that I recovered from that failure but I still have to deal with that"*, while a problem-focused strategy is the following: *"I got all my grades and I got all my points but I didn't like it so [...] I said to my parents I am not going to do this study anymore I am going to study Psychology we had little bit of a discussion my parents were not so pleased about it but in the end they couldn't do anything about it"*.

Work related situation were only mentioned by the participants categorised as problem-focused copers and they have been dealt more often with problem-focused mechanisms (8). An example of a problem-focused strategy used in such a situation is *"There is a big big stress issue [...] I was applying for an internship so I was like okay I'm just going to do the tasks here and I'm going to learn what is actually asked from me in the field of marketing in practice"*, while an emotion-focused strategy is *"I was focused on work all the time [...] you know when you*

are just there with a huge pile of work and you are like okay is this actually correct is and what is this that I'm doing here [...] it was really a time of a lot of tears and a lot of fights”.

Financial matters have been dealt with both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles by problem-focused participants; while emotion-focused ones used an emotion-focused one. A problem-focused approach used for this sort of event is the following *“I can say like it's a big challenge right now and also finding a way to get all the money together and I made a plan on how to get it so I hope to get them in time”* while an emotion-focused approach *“I hope that I won't have to think about money again I hope that I won't have to open my bank account almost everyday to be like almost everyday to be like okay I need to save money and it is quite overwhelming so I have to ask my partner to help me out”.*

In general, health related matters have been handled by using emotion-focused coping style (12) more often than problem-focused (10). Problem-focused participants used a more problem-focused style (8) while emotion-focused participants coped with a more emotion-focused style. An example of a problem-focused strategy is *“My mum [...] is being allergic for a certain enzyme [...] she had bread by accident and she didn't realize and I think I was 16 or something and she couldn't drive the car she would just fall asleep and I had to steer the wheel of the car.”*. An emotion-focused mechanism used is *“I felt so bad even though it wasn't my fault because we used to take him to the vet and the vet him a wrong shot and he was just like four or five months old and we were super excited”.*

Similarly, the growth & change code has been coped with a more emotional-focused strategy (24). However, the problem-focused participants used both coping styles equally and emotional-focused participants used a more emotional-focused coping style. An example of such

strategies are “*Sort of giving up is not an option for me you know when you start something then you usually also have to bring it to an end*” for problem-focused and “*I think the importance is there that I learned at that point that I can tell my parents everything [...] I became more open and straight forwards*”.

In conclusion, university students appear to use a more emotional-focused coping style when having to cope with different situations. However, some situations gave grounds for the problem-focused participants to adapt their coping styles, meaning that university students appear to also adapt their coping style to the stressful situation at hand.

Discussion and Conclusion

Main findings

The focus of this study was to understand how university students with a generic tendency towards using either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping account for these coping style when dealing with actual stressful events. The main findings of this research is that (1) university students rely more on emotion-focused strategies; and that (2) university students with a generic tendency to use problem-focused coping styles do adapt their coping style depending on the situation they are experiencing.

These findings are in line with the results reported by Broughman and Mendoza (2009). In their study, they showed that students predominantly use an emotion-focused approach when dealing with stressful events (Broughman & Mendoza, 2009). Similarly, these findings are in accordance to what was found by Rosario, Shinn, Morch, and Huckabee (1988), who showed that individuals usually adapt their coping style to the situation at hand.

As seen in the results section, problem-focused participants adopted a more problem-focused coping style when dealing with problems related to their parents, yet they relied more on an emotion-focused coping style when dealing with relatives. They also used problem-focused mechanisms when dealing with family, finances and growth & health problems just as often as they use emotion-focused coping. The same participants used a more problem-focused coping style when dealing with stressful events related to work and health matters. While emotion-focused participants showed a reliance towards emotion-focused strategies independently from the situation at hand.

However, the finding about the reliance on emotion-focused coping by students contradicts the findings of Zin, Wenbo and Bing (2005). In their study, they found out that university students have a tendency towards using strategies such as active coping and planning which are considered problem-focused coping' strategies (Zin, Wenbo, & Bing, 2005). There are a few reasons why these results contradict. Although 4 out of the 6 participants who took part in this study scored higher on problem-focused subscales in the COPE inventory, the results of the interviews are different, showing that all the participants relied more on emotion-focused coping strategies on all the situations identified except for the category of work. Therefore, the two results are controversial, at least partially, to each other and there are a few reasons as to why this might have happened. First, no participant who was categorised as emotion-focused mentioned any stressful situation about work; therefore, whether stressful situations related to working matter are coped by emotion-focused or problem-focused strategies cannot be concluded. It could also be that either one of the materials used or both of them were not the right fit for the purpose of the study. For example, one of the categories of the interview was about health and how the participants coped with the health problem he or she was personally experiencing or an acquaintance of the participant was experiencing, which made it easy to code as reflecting health matters and the coping strategies used. However, this was the only case, because for example there was nothing specific about work related matters and it could be that for this reason the participants did not mention a lot about this topic. The questionnaire in itself is adequately valid and reliable, however, there is doubt when it comes to the interpretation as no scientifically-proven rules to fully understand it were found.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference in terms of the nationality of the participants. As mentioned before, the participants were asked out of convenience to take part in this study and it was accidental that all the participants came from different countries. This might have affected the results as well because on one side, it could have enhanced the study by giving the opportunity for the results to be generalized among different cultures, and to show that students have a tendency toward emotion-focused coping no matter where they are from. On the other hand, however, the cultural ideologies, values, and costumes might have had an impact on how the participants cope with stressors or how participants presented themselves in the interview. For example, the participants who scored more on emotion-focused coping on the COPE inventory are respectively from the Caribbean and from Egypt, which are both non-western countries and are considered collectivistic countries.

In conclusion, it can be stated that university students appear to have a propensity towards using an emotion-focused coping style when dealing with actual stressful situation; and that university students with a generic tendency towards using problem-focused coping tend to adapt their coping strategies to better cope with the situation at hand.

Strengths and limitations

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the results reported in this study. One main limitation of this study is the target group. As stated before the participants were asked out of convenience by the researcher and all of them were students in their young adult years. The participants were all known by the researcher in advance which could have caused the participant to either disclose more or less than they would in such an interview. It should be

noted that one of the participants was less acquainted with the researcher and this same participant was the one who talked and disclosed the most. As mentioned before, the cultural background of the target group could have had an impact on the found results. For example, all the participants who scored higher on problem-focused scales on the COPE inventory are from an European individualistic country, while all the participants who scored more on the emotion-focused strategies are from a non-European collectivistic world. This could have caused either for cultural bias or social desirability to take place and alter the findings of this study.

Furthermore, the interview permitted the participant to skip a question if the participant did not feel comfortable or capable about talking about something too intense or too personal, therefore, it could have happened that some of the participants did not mention particular stressful events because of this reason or simply because they did not want the researcher to know about these specific events. Furthermore, the interview had quite specific categories of events the participant had to mention, and this could have limited the amount of freedom of the participant to mention some different situations.

Another limitation is in the difference in how long the interviews lasted. As already mentioned, the interview ranged from 50 to 70 minutes, therefore they were not consistent in how much the participants actually shared. There was a difference in participants' willingness to share about certain topics and therefore two of the interviews only lasted 50 minutes while only one interview lasted 70 minutes.

Moreover, there is an inconsistency when it comes to the amount of participants categorized as problem-focused (4 out of 6) and emotion-focused (2 out of 6); which could limit the validity of the results found in this study as it would be better to have the same amount of

participants per coping style in order to make a more reliable comparison. The results of the questionnaire and the interview could also be different because a questionnaire is always susceptible to bias and social desirability (van de Mortel, 2008); and also interviews have their own set of limitations, such as research bias, selective memory and attribution (Chenail, 2011).

One strength of the study was the use of the COPE inventory as the subcategories presented in the questionnaire were either considered a problem-focused strategy or an emotion-focused strategy, which was of great help when having to categorised the participant in either of the two coping styles.

Direction for further research

The aim of this study was to understand how students with a generic tendency to either use emotion-focused or problem-focused coping account for these tendencies in actual stressful situations.

One interesting direction for further research would be to look further into this topic by either doing this study on a bigger scale or by focusing on adults. Another interesting direction would be to see which specific strategies of problem-focused and emotion-focused are used more often, and if there is a gender difference in the frequency they are used. In their study, Nezu and Nezu (1987) found out that women use the strategy of seeking emotional social support more than other strategies such as turning to religion or positive reinterpretation when adopting an emotion-focused coping style; while man when using a problem-focused approach, they tend to use active coping more than planning for example.

Lastly, it would be interesting to see if there are internal and/or factors such as

personality which affects which kind of coping style is used by a person. For example, it has been shown that women with a higher sense of social support opt for a more active strategy when faced with a stressful event (Lin, 2016). Moreover, it was found that men who scored higher on masculinity are less prone to use avoidance as a coping mechanism but usually opt for a more active strategies to cope with a stressful event (Nezu & Nezu, 1987).

Conclusion

This study focused on university students and on how they cope with stressful events. The result of this study is that university students have a tendency to use emotion-focused strategies more than problem-focused ones and that university students, who have a generic tendency towards using problem-focused coping, adapt their coping approach to the situation at hand. The results, nevertheless, need to be interpreted and understood with caution because there are some limitations in this study which could have altered the final results. The previous literature on the subject of coping is rather outdated as most of the researches found are from the '90, and most of it focuses on the gender-specific pattern of coping instead of a situation-specific pattern. It is important to mention that university is one of the most stressful periods of time in someone's life and understanding which situations stress students out and how they face such a situation could help understanding how to improve coping mechanism, as for example, it was found that employing a problem-focused approach is more effective and helps reduce psychological stress. Finally, given that university is a period of intense change, discovery, independence and stress, it is necessary to understand how to improve the coping responses to stress and to help university students to better cope with everyday distress.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The Life Story Interview

Introduction

This is an interview about the story of your life. As a social scientist, I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life – a few key scenes, characters, and ideas. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Instead, your task is simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened in your life and how you imagine your life developing in the future. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about two hours or less.

Please know that my purpose in doing this interview is not to figure out what is wrong with you or to do some kind of deep clinical analysis! Nor should you think of this interview as a “therapy session” of some kind. The interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story. As social scientists, my colleagues and I collect people’s life stories in order to understand the different ways in which people in our society and in others live their lives and the different ways in which they understand who they are. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

I think you will enjoy the interview. Do you have any questions?

A. Life Chapters

Please begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book or novel. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the main chapters in the story. To begin here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be. Please give each chapter a title, tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about, and say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next. As a storyteller here, what you want to do is to give me an overall plot summary of your story, going chapter by chapter. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about two and seven of them. We will want to spend no more than about 20 minutes on this first section of the interview, so please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief.

[Note to interviewer: The interviewer should feel free to ask questions of clarification and elaboration throughout the interview, but especially in this first part. This first section of the interview should run between 15 and 30 minutes.]

B. Key Scenes in the Life Story

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for your life, I would like you to focus in on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. A key scene would be an event or specific incident that took place at a particular time and place. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for a particular reason – perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the eight key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you tell me why you think this particular scene is important or significant in your life. What does the scene say about you as a person? Please be specific.

1. High Point

Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be the high point scene of your entire life, or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Please describe this high point scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good and what the scene may say about who you are as a person.

2. Low Point

The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not the low point in your life story. Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. What happened in the event, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about you or your life.

[Interviewer note: If the participants balks at doing this, tell him or her that the event does not really have to be *the* lowest point in the story but merely a very bad experience of some kind.]

3. Turning Point

In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points -- episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story. Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point in

your life. If you cannot identify a key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe some event in your life wherein you went through an important change of some kind. Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, please say a word or two about what you think this event says about you as a person or about your life.

4. Positive Childhood Memory

The fourth scene is an early memory – from childhood or your teen-aged years – that stands out as especially *positive* in some way. This would be a very positive, happy memory from your early years. Please describe this good memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or about your life?

5. Negative Childhood Memory

The fifth scene is an early memory – from childhood or your teen-aged years – that stands out as especially *negative* in some way. This would be a very negative, unhappy memory from your early years, perhaps entailing sadness, fear, or some other very negative emotional experience. Please describe this bad memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or your life?

6. Vivid Adult Memory

Moving ahead to your adult years, please identify one scene that you have not already described in this section (in other words, do not repeat your high point, low point, or turning point scene) that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful. This would be an especially memorable, vivid, or important scene, positive or negative, from your adult years. Please describe this scene in detail, tell what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, what does this memory say about you or your life?

7. Wisdom Event

Please describe an event in your life in which you displayed wisdom. The episode might be one in which you acted or interacted in an especially wise way or provided wise counsel or advice, made a wise decision, or otherwise behaved in a particularly wise manner. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and your life?

8. Religious, Spiritual, or Mystical Experience

Whether they are religious or not, many people report that they have had experiences in their lives where they felt a sense of the transcendent or sacred, a sense of God or some almighty or ultimate force, or a feeling of oneness with nature, the world, or the universe. Thinking back on your entire life, please identify an episode or moment in which you felt something like this. This might be an experience that occurred within the context of your own religious tradition, if you have one, or it may be a spiritual or mystical experience of any kind. Please describe this transcendent experience in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or your life?

Now, we're going to talk about the future.

C. Future Script

1. The Next Chapter

Your life story includes key chapters and scenes from your past, as you have described them, and it also includes how you see or imagine your future. Please describe what you see to be the next chapter in your life. What is going to come next in your life story?

2. Dreams, Hopes, and Plans for the Future

Please describe your plans, dreams, or hopes for the future. What do you hope to accomplish in the future in your life story?

3. Life Project

Do you have a project in life? A life project is something that you have been working on and plan to work on in the future chapters of your life story. The project might involve your family or your work life, or it might be a hobby, avocation, or pastime. Please describe any project that you are currently working on or plan to work on in the future. Tell me what the project is, how you got involved in the project or will get involved in the project, how the project might develop, and why you think this project is important for you and/or for other people.

D. Challenges

This next section considers the various challenges, struggles, and problems you have encountered in your life. I will begin with a general challenge, and then I will focus in on three particular areas or issues where many people experience challenges, problems, or crises.

1. Life Challenge

Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story?

2. Health

Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe a scene or period in your life, including the present time, wherein you or a close family member confronted a major *health* problem, challenge, or crisis. Please describe in detail what the health problem is or was and how it developed. If relevant, please discuss any experience you had with the health-care system regarding this crisis or problem. In addition, please talk about how you coped with the problem and what impact this health crisis, problem, or challenge has had on you and your overall life story.

3. Loss

As people get older, they invariably suffer losses of one kind or another. By loss I am referring here to the loss of important people in your life, perhaps through death or separation. These are *interpersonal* losses – the loss of a person. Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe the greatest interpersonal loss you have experienced. This could be a loss you experienced at any time in your life, going back to childhood and up to the present day. Please describe this loss and the process of the loss. How have you coped with the loss? What effect has this loss had on you and your life story?

4. Failure, Regret

Everybody experiences failure and regrets in life, even for the happiest and luckiest lives. Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe the greatest failure or regret you have experienced. The failure or regret can occur in any area of your life – work, family, friendships, or any other area. Please describe the failure or regret and the way in which the failure or regret came to be. How have you coped with this failure or regret? What effect has this failure or regret had on you and your life story?

E. Personal Ideology

Now, I would like to ask a few questions about your fundamental beliefs and values and about questions of meaning and morality in your life. Please give some thought to each of these questions.

1. Religious/Ethical Values

Consider for a moment the religious or spiritual aspects of your life. Please describe in a nutshell your religious beliefs and values, if indeed these are important to you. Whether you are religious or not, please describe your overall ethical or moral approach to life.

2. Political/Social Values

How do you approach political or social issues? Do you have a particular political point of view? Are there particular social issues or causes about which you feel strongly? Please explain.

3. Change, Development of Religious and Political Views

Please tell the story of how your religious, moral, and/or political views and values have developed over time. Have they changed in any important ways? Please explain.

4. Single Value

What is the most important value in human living? Please explain.

5. Other

What else can you tell me that would help me understand your most fundamental beliefs and values about life and the world? What else can you tell me that would help me understand your overall philosophy of life?

F. Life Theme

Looking back over your entire life story with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story? Please explain.

G. Reflection

Thank you for this interview. I have just one more question for you. Many of the stories you have told me are about experiences that stand out from the day-to-day. For example, we talked about a high point, a turning point, a scene about your health, etc. Given that most people don't share their life stories in this way on a regular basis, I'm wondering if you might reflect for one last moment about what this interview, here today, has been like for you. What were your thoughts and feelings during the interview? How do you think this interview has affected you? Do you have any other comments about the interview process?

Appendix B: Informed consent

Thank you for taking part in this study.

This study examines people's life events, the way that people have coped with previous stressors and the way they cope with daily life stressful events. You are going to be interviewed using the McAdams' Life Story Interview. Next you will be asked to complete the COPE inventory. There is no right or wrong in this study, therefore please answer in a truthful way. The interview and the questionnaire is going to take up to 120 minutes to complete. By agreeing to this informed consent, you are agreeing to the following terms:

- Your participation is confidential;
- The interview will be recorded, and later transcribed;
- The data will be anonymized and only shared with the supervisors of this study;
- You agreed to participate in a voluntary manner;
- You are free to terminate the interview at any time, without having to give an explanation.