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The relationship of gender, gender identity, and coping strategies in late adolescents

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Abstract

The relationships among gender, gender identity, and coping in late adolescents were examined. One hundred sixty-nine late adolescents completed measures assessing their masculinity and femininity, as well as their use of coping strategies. Females endorsed greater use of emotion-focused coping strategies than males. Late adolescents who were high in masculinity endorsed higher levels of problem-focused coping strategies than those who were low in masculinity. In contrast, late adolescents who were high in femininity endorsed higher levels of emotion-focused coping strategies than those who were low in femininity. Neither the gender nor the masculinity and femininity of late adolescents were predictive of the use of avoidant coping strategies. Overall, gender identity made an important and independent contribution to the endorsement of coping strategy use. These results emphasize the importance of assessing both gender and gender identity with regard to coping in late adolescents.

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1. Introduction

In Western cultures, adolescence is considered to be a transitional period from childhood to adulthood (Matter, 1984). This transition is complex and generally involves a variety of developmental tasks, such as identity achievement (Erikson, 1959), the development of intimacy in social relationships (Verduyn, Lord, & Forrest, 1990), and preparing for some type of career (Steel, 1991). Each of these developmental tasks help to prepare adolescents for different types of stressors that they may experience throughout their lifetime. The characteristics of adolescents, such as their gender and gender identity, may be related to the manner in which they cope with such stressors. As a result, this study examined the manner in which late adolescents tend to cope,

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in general, with stress. In particular, the relationships of the gender and gender identity of late adolescents, as well as the coping strategies they utilize, were examined.

2. Coping strategies

The coping process is complex and generally unfolds over time. Before a coping strategy is selected, a stressor must be appraised. This cognitive process of appraisal consists of a continuous, evaluative process of categorizing the encounter (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Two types of appraisal have been described. First, primary appraisal is an evaluation of what is at stake. In contrast, secondary appraisal is an evaluation of the stressful situation with respect to what coping resources and options are available (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Further, secondary appraisal includes an evaluation of the likelihood that a given coping option will result in the conclusion that is desired, as well as the likelihood that the individual can apply effectively the chosen strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

After the stressful encounter has been evaluated, coping attempts are made in response to these stress appraisals. Coping consists of the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized coping behavior with two different types of strategies. Strategies may include problem-focused coping, which is employed when the individual determines that a harmful, threatening, or challenging situation is amenable to change, or emotion-focused coping, which occurs when it is judged that nothing can be done to modify a harmful, threatening or challenging situation. Many researchers have examined the coping process using adolescent populations (e.g. Compas, 1987; Phelps & Jarvis, 1994). So that the characteristics of late adolescents could be examined in relation to the coping process, the current study was designed to assess the relationship of gender, gender identity and adolescent coping strategies.

3. Gender and gender identity: variables of interest

Both gender and gender identity have a role in adolescent development. Gender identity describes how relatively masculine or feminine individuals view themselves to be with regard to their characteristics, capabilities, and behaviors (Berk, 1991). Masculine-typed traits are often expressed as instrumental in nature to reflect competence and rationality, whereas feminine-typed traits are treated as expressive in nature to reflect warmth and caring (Bem, 1974; Spence, 1993). Although initial research treated the concepts of masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive, it has since been accepted that individuals can display varying degrees of both masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1974). These types of traits are related to gender stereotyping, which often increases in adolescence, and influence the types of behaviors that adolescents deem acceptable.

The stress and coping literature provides numerous examples of differences in coping strategies related to gender and gender identity. Traditionally, it has been reported that males tend to endorse more active, problem-focused coping strategies (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) and, as a result, are often viewed as more effective copers than females (Hovanitz & Kozora, 1989).

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