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Associations of coping and appraisal styles with emotion regulation during preadolescence

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the associations of appraisal and coping styles with emotion regulation in a community sample of preadolescents ($N = 196$, 9–12 years of age), with appraisal, coping styles, and emotion regulation measured at a single time point. In a previous study, we identified five frustration and four anxiety emotion regulation profiles based on children's physiological, behavioral, and self-reported reactions to emotion-eliciting tasks. In this study, preadolescents' self-reported appraisal and coping styles were associated with those emotion regulation profiles. Overall, findings revealed that children who were more effective at regulating their emotions during the emotion-eliciting tasks had higher levels of positive appraisal and active coping when dealing with their own problems. Conversely, children who regulated their emotions less effectively had higher levels of threat appraisal and avoidant coping.

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Introduction

A critical task for child researchers is to identify factors that predict the development of emotion regulation during preadolescence (Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006) in part because emotion regulation is an important basis for the emergence of affective and behavioral disorders

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during adolescence (Cole & Hall, 2008). Two factors that may shape how children regulate their emotions are the manners in which children generally appraise and cope with their problems. Children who are able to view stressful situations or life problems as something they can learn from or overcome and who are able to actively deal with these situations should be able to apply these approaches during an emotionally provoking situation and, therefore, be better able to regulate their emotions effectively. Despite the theoretical soundness of this statement, there is a surprising lack of research testing the relations among appraisal, coping, and emotion regulation. Furthermore, there is essentially no research examining these associations during the preadolescent period. Therefore, our research sought to uncover associations of appraisal and coping strategies with children's regulation of emotions in frustrating and anxiety-evoking contexts.

Stressful events are determined in part by the individual's appraisal of the event as "taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed two appraisal processes. Primary appraisal involves the evaluation of consequences of the event, that is, either the harm or benefit of the event. It includes evaluations of risk to one's self-esteem, values, or goals or to the well-being of a loved one (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986b). A determining factor of response to a stressor is the appraisal of the situation as a threat or a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Threat refers to the anticipation of harm in the future. In contrast, challenge is the appraisal that, although stressful, the event can result in some positive outcome, that is, the potential for gain or growth. In secondary appraisal, the individual evaluates whether anything can be done to overcome or prevent harm or to improve the prospects for benefit. Secondary appraisal involves the appraisal of coping options, the potential effectiveness of coping options, and the individual's sense of efficacy in coping with the stressor (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986a; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, when an individual believes that he or she lacks the resources or skills to cope with an event, the event may be perceived as stressful.

Coping is another important aspect of an individual's stress response and has been defined as the "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Appraisal and coping overlap in that both contain cognitive processes, yet coping is distinct from the appraisal process in other ways. Although coping efforts have been categorized in a variety of ways, within the current study we categorize coping strategies to include those efforts that are active attempts to deal with the stressor, such as positive reappraisal and problem solving, or avoidance of the stressor, including escape and cognitive repression (e.g., Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roosa, 1996; Compas, 1998; Ebata & Moos, 1991; Rudolph, Dennig, & Weisz, 1995).

Before moving onto discuss emotion regulation, we first must acknowledge that the conceptual distinction between coping and emotion regulation is not always clear (Watson & Sinha, 2008). The challenge with distinguishing these constructs arises when examining emotion regulation strategies as opposed to the question of whether an emotion response was regulated or not. In the latter case, physiological responses, emotional behaviors, or reports of having an emotional response can be assessed independently of the efforts employed to manage these responses. However, overlap between emotion regulation and coping is greatest when emotion regulation strategies are being measured. For instance, there are a host of studies that assess emotion regulation strategies that are nearly identical to coping strategies such as positive reappraisal (Garber, Braafladt, & Weiss, 1995; Shipman & Zeman, 2001; Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). In fact, some studies measuring emotion regulation strategies have made use of questionnaires originally devised for measuring coping, with modifications to the timing of children's reporting and to what children were asked to report about (i.e., how they respond to a particular emotion after it occurs rather than reporting what they do when they have problems) (Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003). Although by altering the timing and target (problem vs. negative emotion) about which participants responded, these authors shifted the measurement from coping to emotion regulation strategies. Use of the same questionnaire to assess coping and emotion regulation hints at how similar the constructs are.

Perhaps the greatest conceptual overlap lies in the constructs of *emotion-focused coping* and strategies of *emotion regulation* because each is defined as efforts to manage or modulate negative emotions (Losoya, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998). In fact, both often include efforts to appraise a situation in

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