Full Length Research Paper

Ways of coping and personality traits among Kurdish adolescents

Azad Ali Ismail
Koya University, Erbil/Iraq.

Received 16 April, 2015; Accepted 7 May, 2015

This study was designed to explore the relationship between coping methods and personality among a group of Kurdish adolescents. A sample of 235 secondary students completed surveys measuring methods of coping and personality types. Pearson’s r correlations indicated that positive attitude, as a method of coping, was correlated to all personality traits, except for neuroticism. Passivity and mixed efforts were the only coping methods that correlated with neuroticism. All methods of coping, except for passivity, correlated with openness. Except for avoidance and spiritual connection, all other methods of coping correlated with agreeableness. Differences were found between boys and girls in spiritual connection and passivity as well as in neuroticism trait.

Key words: Methods of coping, personality, traits, adolescence, Kurds.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest in research on coping with stressful situations (Frydenberg, 1997; Taylor and Stanton, 2007). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as tasking or exceeding the resources of the person” p.141. Recently, Lazarus and Lazarus (2006) simplified their definition of coping and they defined it as a flexible effort to manage stress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping serves two main functions: either managing the problem with the environment (problem-focused coping), or managing the emotional response to the problem (emotion-focused coping). The way of coping is partly determined by person’s resources, including health and energy; beliefs, commitments and other factors. These factors are directly related to the type of personality.

Though some studies suggested that there is a relationship between personality traits and methods of coping (Scott and Scott, 1998; Geisler et al., 2009; Hambrick and McCord, 2010), other studies (Murberg, 2009) argued that findings of the relations between personality and coping are inconsistent.

Personality has been defined as a “set of psychological traits and mechanisms within the individual that are organized and relatively enduring and that influence his or her interactions with, and adaptations to, the intrapsychic, physical, and social environments” (Larsen and Buss, 2005, p.4). McCrae and Costa (2003) define traits as “dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions” (p.25). Five-Factor Theory (FFT) is
a description of the personality system based on traits. FFT is supported by various studies from cross-cultural, comparative, and behavior genetic perspectives. These factors include: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Each of these factors encompasses six traits (McCrae and Costa, 2003). Studies (Lee-Bagley et al., 2005) reported that Five-Factor Model is particularly useful in understanding coping. Researchers (Garcia, 2011) found that certain traits such as Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness were strongly related to adolescents’ well-being. Neuroticism is associated with high vulnerability to stress and poor coping (Vollrath and Torgersen, 2000), withdrawal/passivity (Geisler et al., 2009) and avoidance (Bosworth et al., 2001) Conscientiousness factor was found to be positively related to more problem-focused coping (Geisler et al., 2009; Bartley and Roesch, 2011), less vulnerability to stress and good coping (Vollrath and Torgersen, 2000) and high religiosity (Larsen and Buss, 2010; Yonker et al., 2012). Extraversion and Agreeableness factors were found to be positively related to proactive coping (Hambrick and McCord, 2010), problem-focused coping and cognitive restructuring (Geisler et al., 2009) and negatively related to avoidance coping (Bosworth et al., 2001). Agreeableness and Openness were found to be positively related to religiosity (Larsen and Buss, 2010; Yonker et al., 2012). Geisler et al. (2009) summarize the relationship between personality types, measured by Five Factors, and coping by indicating that Extraversion, Openness to experience, Conscientiousness and to a smaller extent Agreeableness were positively associated with coping strategies such as problem-solving and cognitive restructuring, while Neuroticism was positively related to disengagement coping behaviors such as withdrawal.

Coping and adolescents

Studies show that adolescents’ using of ineffective methods for coping linked to many psychological problems (Frydenberg, 1997) such as depression (Li et al., 2006), eating disorders (Garcia-Grau et al., 2004) delinquency (Ruchkin et al., 1999), neurotic tendencies (Mustafa and Jermis, 2006), suicide (Portzky et al., 2005; Kim and Kim, 2008) and mental health in general (Eslami et al., 2014).

Some studies indicated that gender plays a role in the method of coping used by adolescents. Researchers (Lengua and Stormshak, 2000; Gil, 2005) confirm that females prefer using social support, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies relative to males. Males, on the other hand, seem to prefer using other activities to cope. However, with regards to problem-focused or active coping strategies, it seems there are inconsistent findings regarding gender differences.

Studies addressing the relationship between coping methods and personality traits in Muslim context are dearth. A recent study conducted on Iranian youth found that individuals with higher neuroticism scores used the emotion-focused coping style more frequently (Sharif et al., 2014).

Kurds are distinct ethnic group distributed among many countries including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Except in Turkey, Kurds live in unstable countries. The area has been exposed to military conflicts for decades. So, it is expected that this situation affects how Kurdish people, from all age groups, cope with their daily stressors. A report by World Health Organization (WHO) shows that Kurdistan region of Iraq shows higher prevalence for: social phobia, any anxiety disorder and any disorder compared to other parts of the country (World Health Organization, 2009).

Kurdish adolescents were not subject to scientific scrutiny to find out how they cope with life’s stressful situations. So, we do not know how Kurdish adolescents cope. One study (Ismail, 2015) has dealt with ways of coping used by Kurdish adolescents with relation to their religious commitment. Furthermore, there is also an obvious lack of knowledge on the relationship between the ways of coping and types of personality of Kurdish adolescents. This study aims to find out the relationship between ways of coping used by Kurdish adolescents and their types of personality.

METHOD

Sample

The sample of this study constituted of 235 secondary students (123 male and 112 female) from four secondary schools in Koya and Ranya districts in Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Two of these secondary schools were for boys; the other two were for girls. Their age ranged from 15 to 24 years. The mean age was 17.32 years with the standard deviation of 1.46.

INSTRUMENT

For measuring ways of coping, the study used a scale developed by Ismail (2009). It consists of 44 items covering six ways of coping namely, spiritual connection (5 items), passivity (5 items), positive attitude (5 items), avoidance (5 items), seeking social support (3 items) and mixed efforts (3 items). Spiritual connection method includes items such as: I depend on God, I say this problem is a test from God. Examples of items under Passivity method are: I cry, I feel paralyzed. Examples for Positive attitude method include items such as: I will try not to let my morale down, I look at the problem as an opportunity to grow. For Avoidance method, example items were: I distant myself from the problem, I neglect the problem. Seeking social support method was represented by items such as: I ask help from others, I discuss with my friends to find solution. Finally, Mixed efforts method was assessed by items such as: I will be alone for a while, I compensate the other party. Every item has five options: Always (4), often (3), sometimes (2), few times (1) and never (0). This scale was used in previous studies on both Kurdish young adults and adolescents. It has been found to have good psychometric properties including validity and reliability, alpha=.74 (Ismail, 2009), alpha = .68 (Karim, 2013).
Table 1. Means and standard deviations of methods of coping.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods of Coping</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual connection</td>
<td>16.8616</td>
<td>2.73160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>14.5157</td>
<td>3.34536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed efforts</td>
<td>7.7152</td>
<td>3.13827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>6.9586</td>
<td>2.46390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passivity</td>
<td>5.5249</td>
<td>3.42135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>5.5134</td>
<td>2.93830</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Mean scores and Standard deviations of five personality factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five factors</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>35.0030</td>
<td>6.36927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>33.1523</td>
<td>5.26135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>31.5383</td>
<td>5.71476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>29.6844</td>
<td>5.47087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>23.0667</td>
<td>8.10170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subscales ranged from .74 to .36. Spiritual connection subscale had the highest alpha (.74), followed by Passivity subscale (.63), Positive attitude subscale (.61), Avoidance subscale (.55), Seeking social support subscale (.49) and the Mixed efforts had the lowest alpha (.36). The alpha of three of the subscales, namely; Avoidance, Seeking social support and Mixed efforts, are low. This might be due to the few item numbers of these subscales, each had three items. In addition, Mixed efforts subscale, which had the lowest alpha, does not constitute one single coping method.

For measuring personality types, the study uses Five Factor model measured by Neo-Five Factor- Personality Inventory (McCrae and Costa 1992). This scale consists of 80 items and has been translated and used in a previous study in Kurdish society (Mustafa and Batu 2006). For measuring the Kurdish version of NEO-FF et al. (2006) used test-retest technique and found the correlation of sub-scales (Neuroticism= .79, Extraversion= .81, Openness= .82, Agreeableness= .79 and Conscientiousness = .80). Using Cronbach’s alpha for measuring reliability of each subscale, this study found that they were as follows: .71 for Neuroticism, .63 for Extraversion, .47 for Openness, .41 for Agreeableness and .47 for Conscientiousness. The low alpha of Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness might be due to the sample size of this study (235) compared to the sample size in Mustafa and Batu (2006), which was (400).

Results

Table 1 shows that adolescents use spiritual connection as a method of coping more than other methods, followed by having a positive attitude. Passivity and avoidance were the least methods of coping used by the sample of this study.

Extraversion was found to be the dominant personality factor among the sample of the study followed by conscientiousness and openness respectively. Neuroticism was found to be the least dominant personality factor (Table 2).

Using spiritual connection as a method of coping was found to be significantly related to two personality factors; Openness to experience and Conscientiousness. Passivity method of coping was significantly related to Neuroticism as well as Agreeableness. Positive attitude has significant correlations with all personality factors except Neuroticism. Avoidance was found to be significantly correlated to Openness to experience. Seeking social support as a method of coping was also significantly correlated with Openness to experience as well as Agreeableness. Finally, except Extraversion, Mixed method of coping was significantly correlated to all other personality factors (Table 3).

In the current sample no significance differences were found between boys and girls with regard to avoidance and escape subscale. The difference was found between boys and girls on two methods of coping namely, spiritual connection and passivity. On both subscales, girls scored significantly higher than boys (Table 4).

With regards to the correlation between various personality factors and sex, the results of the study show that Neuroticism was significantly higher in girls compare to boys (Table 5). With regard to other personality factors, no differences were found between boys and girls.

Table 6 shows that many methods of coping namely, passivity, avoidance, seeking social support and mixed efforts, change according to the age variable. Only two methods, spiritual connection and positive attitude, showed stability over time during adolescence.

As for the relationship between personality factor and age, Table 7 shows that except for agreeableness, all other factors were stable over time during adolescence.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that the sample has used seeking spiritual connection more than any other methods while the least used method was avoidance. This result is similar to what was found in a previous study on a Muslim sample (Bhui et al., 2008; Johnstone et al., 2012). Johnstone et al. (2012) found that Muslims scored highest on spiritual/religious coping compared to other religious groups. This result indicates to the important role Islam plays in many Muslim adolescents’ lives.
Extraversion was found to be the most frequently trait of the sample. McCrae and Costa (2003) provide an evolutionary explanation for adolescents being high in Extraversion. They believe that perhaps it is good at the beginning of life to be open and extraverted to meet partners and to learn more about life. However, they maintain that there are age-related declines in some aspects of Extraversion. This decline of Extraversion by age might explain the difference between the finding of this study (i.e. adolescents scored highest on Extraversion) and the study of Yusuf and Batu (2006) who found that Extraversion came second among the most frequent factors among university students (young adults). However, this result does not support Kotelnikova and Tackett’s (2009) hypothesis that children from collectivistic cultures would score lower on Extraversion.
Table 5. Personality factors and sex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Factors</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22.0660</td>
<td>7.9013</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24.1656</td>
<td>8.2113</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35.2071</td>
<td>6.3074</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34.7789</td>
<td>6.4574</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31.8665</td>
<td>5.9862</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31.1779</td>
<td>5.4047</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30.2969</td>
<td>5.0156</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29.0118</td>
<td>5.8801</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32.9587</td>
<td>5.1959</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Methods of coping and age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods of Coping</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual connection</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passivity</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.025*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>.440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance and escape</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.029*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking social support</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>.038*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed efforts</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>.037*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Personality factors and age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Factors</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extroversion</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>.033*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.503</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though this study did not compare between cultures, but being from a collectivistic culture, Kurdish adolescents scored highest on Extraversion.

Neuroticism was the least frequent trait in the sample. This result is consistent with the findings of Yusuf and Batu (2006). Neuroticism was found to be significantly correlated to both passivity and mixed efforts methods.

With regard to the correlation between Neuroticism and passivity method of coping, this result is consistent with the findings of Bosworth et al. (2001), McCrae and Costa (2003), Geisler et al. (2009) and Sharif et al. (2014). Using mixed efforts, as a method of coping, indicates that the person might not be certain about the effectiveness of a certain method, that may lead to using mixed efforts. This possibly explains the correlation found between Neuroticism and using this method of coping.

All traits, except Neuroticism, were significantly correlated to positive attitude method of coping. Having a positive attitude while facing problems and coping with stress is shared by all personality factors, except Neuroticism. Openness to experience was significantly related to all other methods of coping except for passivity. Since passivity is not a problem-focused method of coping, it could be said that this result is somehow consistent with study of Geisler et al. (2009) who found that Openness is positively related to problem-focused coping. Those who are open to experience are also open to use various methods of coping while facing problems. Agreeableness was significantly related to passivity, positive attitude, seeking social support and mixed efforts. The correlation between Agreeableness and both positive attitudes and seeking social support could be indirectly supported by those studies which found correlation between this trait and proactive coping methods (Bambrick and McCord, 2001) and problem-focused coping (Geisler et al., 2009). Using mixed efforts might partially be considered a type of problem-focused coping. However the correlation between Agreeableness and passivity has not been found in previous studies. McCrae and Costa (2003) have indicated that agreeable person avoids conflict with others. This might mean for some people, in some situation, to be passive. Conscientiousness had significant correlation with spiritual connection, positive attitude and mixed efforts. The correlation between Conscientiousness and both positive attitudes and seeking social support could be indirectly supported by previous studies which found correlation between this trait and problem-focused coping (Geisler et al., 2009; Bartley and Roesch, 2011).

Girls scored higher than boys in using spiritual
connection and passivity methods of coping. Most of the studies conducted on Muslim samples (Khan et al., 2011) found that Muslim women use religious coping more frequently than men. Though Erickson and Feldstein (2007) cited several studies which found that girls use significantly more approach coping strategies, and boys use more avoidance coping techniques, in the current study no significance differences were found between boys and girls with regard to avoidance and escape subscale.

Girls also scored higher on Neuroticism trait. This result supports the findings of some previous research (Alansari and Soliman, 2014; Jaradat and Ghazal, 2014) which found similar results related to gender. McCrae and Costa (2003) confirm that although the size of gender differences varies, the direction shows that women were higher in Neuroticism than men. This means this result is in accord with general direction of research in this area. Age was found to be related to Agreeableness only. This could be the result of decreased egocentricity of adolescents. Except for spiritual connection and positive attitude as two methods of coping, age was related to other four methods of coping. The more their age increases, the more they frequently use these methods of coping (i.e. passivity, seeking social support, mixed efforts, avoidance and escape). Two of these methods, namely, passivity and avoidance and escape, are not efficient methods of coping. Generally, these findings support Lerner and Steinberg (2004) comment about the relationship between adolescent’s age and the method of coping they use being less clear.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that some coping methods are strongly related to personality traits, thus, supporting other studies in the field. The differences were also found between boys and girls with regard to personality traits as well as their coping methods. Some methods of coping were found to change with age, others did not. Certainly more researches are needed on how personality traits and methods of coping are related during adolescence particularly in Kurdish society.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

Li CE, DiGiuseppe R, Froh J (2006). The roles of sex, gender, and