



Misconceptions of group norms concerning coping are a risk for negative social interaction: A cross-sectional study using the vignette method



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ABSTRACT

Greater use of a norm-violating coping strategy relates to higher risk of negative social interactions and to higher distress. We examined the factors that are linked to the use of a norm-violating coping strategy and those that moderate the relationship between the coping strategy used and social interaction. Results of a cross-sectional survey for 74 Japanese undergraduate students and 68 Japanese workers indicated that, in a group with frequent contact, misconceptions about group norms concerning coping strategy relate to more negative social interactions. To draw causal inferences, a replication study with a large sample from heterogeneous cultural backgrounds is necessary.

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1. Introduction

Coping, which refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts or strategies used to adapt to a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), is an important intra-individual factor in alleviation of distress evoked by a stressor (Penley, Tomaka, & Wiebe, 2002). In the stress coping literature, it has been well documented that the effect of a coping strategy on distress is subject to an interaction with the particular stressors experienced (e.g., goodness-of-fit hypothesis, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park, Folkman, & Bostrom, 2001). Effectiveness of a coping strategy is also subject to interaction with the sociocultural context of one's environment, which refers to circumstances related to both social and cultural matters that frame the stressors (Aldwin, 1994; Slavin, Rainer, McCreary, & Gowda, 1991).

To use a simple example, an office worker who is feeling

distressed from heavy responsibilities on the job (i.e., job as a stressor) may seek comfort by using alcohol as a coping strategy. This strategy would likely receive approval from the worker's peers at the local pub, but probably would not be seen as appropriate if used among colleagues at the office. Previous studies have found that there are two phases for the influence process of sociocultural context on coping effectiveness. First, one's coping efforts influence not only the stressors, but also relationships with others in one's sociocultural group, as a sociocultural context (e.g., Lane & Hobfoll, 1992; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997). Accordingly, as a second phase, subsequent social interaction within the group also affects one's distress (e.g., Hwang, 1979; Kato, 2002). In the drinking example, the worker's use of alcohol on the job may cause him or her to be snubbed by the group, which could increase the worker's distress further.

This kind of indirect effect of coping on distress through subsequent social interaction appears in various levels of sociocultural context, including the macro-level of society (e.g., Aldwin, 1994; Hwang, 1979), the meso-level of the workplace (Spector & Fox, 2002), and the micro-level of marital or familiar relationships (e.g., Marin, Holtzman, DeLongis, & Robinson, 2007; O'Brien & DeLongis,

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1997). At any of these levels, greater use of a coping strategy that is appraised negatively by others in the sociocultural group is associated with increased risk of experiencing negative social interactions (Aldwin, 1994; Kato, 2002; Slavin et al., 1991; Spector & Fox, 2002). Negative social interactions, such as meddling behavior or withdrawal from supportive relationships, can themselves become secondary stressors (Hashimoto, 2000), thereby heightening the level of distress. This kind of indirect effect of coping also moderates the effectiveness of the selective use of a coping strategy for a given stressor (i.e., goodness-of-fit hypothesis, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), (Morimoto, Shimada, & Ozaki, 2014).

Meanwhile, in the recent stress coping literature, Morimoto, Shimada, and Ozaki (2013) have asserted that in the process of selecting a coping strategy, individuals perform not only a stressor evaluation (i.e., threat, challenge, and controllability; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), but also an assessment of the appropriateness of different coping strategies in light of the sociocultural context, namely appraisal of coping acceptability (ACA). The ACA refers to an estimation of others' approval or disapproval of a particular coping strategy based on perceptions of the sociocultural group's shared beliefs concerning coping (Aldwin, 1994). Morimoto et al. (2013) also suggest that when individuals estimate that a given coping strategy will not be accepted by others (i.e., lower ACA), they are less likely to choose it. Morimoto et al. (2013) ask why, particularly in Asian countries, where cultures are characterized by interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), some people choose a coping strategy that is thought to be frowned upon by others in their sociocultural group. They also ask why some people make decisions that put them at risk of experiencing negative social interactions, but others do not make such choices. Furthermore, although previous studies on stress coping have found that there are individual differences in the degree of sociocultural influence on the effectiveness of a coping strategy (Aldwin, 1994), there is limited evidence about the moderator in that process (i.e., moderation in the relationship between use of a coping strategy and social interaction experienced within the group, and between the social interaction experienced and distress).

1.1. Misconceptions about sociocultural beliefs concerning coping

As to our first question, findings from organizational psychology provide useful suggestions. Several scholars in this area (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Rousseau, 1990; Schein, 1990) have argued that a given sociocultural group (e.g., work group) develops a norm about appropriate behavior in the group (i.e., values in Hofstede's and Schein's model, and behavioral norms in Rousseau's model); in turn, the organizational norm shapes the behavior of individuals in the group. When a given behavior goes against the organizational norm, negative social interactions will follow (Schein, 1990). These assertions in organizational psychology coincide with those in the stress coping literature regarding sociocultural influences on the effectiveness of a coping strategy (e.g., Aldwin, 1994). We therefore use the term *sociocultural beliefs* as equivalent to *organizational norm* (Morimoto & Shimada, 2015).

Schein (1990) also argued that the appropriateness of different behaviors in a workplace (i.e., the sociocultural beliefs) is not always a matter of consensus among its members because the issue involves not only visible, but also many invisible facets. Therefore, it is often the case that individuals who do not know the *actual* sociocultural beliefs in their group will learn them only through social interaction within the group after one or more episodes of unaccepted behavior (Schein, 1990). With regard to Schein's suggestion, there is a possibility that one's ACA will not always coincide with the *actual* sociocultural beliefs in one's group. In these cases, individuals who incorrectly estimate that a given coping

strategy will be met with approval in their group would be expected to experience negative social interaction. We have defined such misconception as a *discrepancy* in the ACA.

Although previous studies on the influence of coping strategy on subsequent social interaction have mainly focused on negative transactions (e.g., Kato, 2002), social interaction contains both negative and positive experiences, where positive experiences elicit support (Hashimoto, 2000) and play an important role in alleviating distress (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Given the documented positive relationship between social skill and social support (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986), we expect that appropriate evaluation of sociocultural beliefs (i.e., smaller discrepancy in the ACA), along with application of a norm-appropriate coping strategy, is associated with a more positive experience of social interaction.

Hypothesis 1. Greater discrepancy in the ACA is associated with less perceived positive social interaction and more perceived negative social interaction.

1.2. Moderators in the influence process of sociocultural context on coping effectiveness

Even if an individual misguidedly chooses the norm-violating coping strategy, or correctly chooses the norm-appropriate coping strategy, there would be individual differences in the degree of perception of the negative or positive character of social interactions within the group, and therefore differences in the levels of distress (Aldwin, 1994). In this regard, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlighted the importance of reappraisal as a factor in a coping strategy's effect on distress. Reappraisal is a type of cognitive process in which an appraisal changes on the basis of new information received from the environment or as a result of an individual's coping effort (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman further suggest that the meaning of a given social interaction that occurs after use of a coping strategy differs across individuals, and that one's reappraisal of the events resulting from a coping effort – less than the events themselves – determines whether the social interaction experienced is positive or negative. However, because the reappraisal is supposed to a state variable, it will be difficult to measure the individual differences in the level of ease in the perception of social interaction.

Gray (1981, 1982) argued in his reinforcement sensitivity theory that people's behavior is regulated by two independent motivational systems: the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and the behavioral activation system (BAS). BIS, the system of sensitivity to signals of punishment, activates through signals of punishment, and operates to inhibit one's goal-oriented behavior as well as to evoke negative emotions such as anxiety. Alternatively, BAS is the system of sensitivity to signals of reward and is activated by such signals, and operates to stimulate one's goal-oriented behavior as well as to evoke positive emotions (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). BIS and BAS are claimed to be based on independent nervous systems, and characteristic BIS/BAS sensitivity has been argued to be more stable than other personality traits such as the Big Five (Gray, 1982, 1987). An individual with greater BIS versus BAS sensitivity will react more easily to negative versus positive environmental stimuli and vice versa (Carver & White, 1994). Considering that BIS/BAS sensitivity and cognitive appraisals are closely related (Williams, Hundt, & Nelson-Gray, 2014), BIS/BAS sensitivity can serve as a measure of one's level of ease in the perception of social interaction, and may moderate the relationship between the discrepancy in the ACA and perceptions of social interaction experienced.

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 1 is supported in individuals with

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