



A model for assessing coping and its relation to resilience in adolescence from the perspective of “person–situation interaction”



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ABSTRACT

The person–situation interaction model suggests that the nature of stressful situations moderates the activation of coping strategies and styles, and that this interaction affects resilience. To support these hypotheses, this study pursued two objectives, to develop and validate the *Person–Situation Coping Questionnaire for Adolescents* (PSCQA), designed for assessing the “person–situation” interaction when using coping strategies, and to analyse the relationships between coping styles (CS) and resilience (Rs). 1083 Spanish Secondary-Education students filled in the coping questionnaire, and a resilience one. Data fit analysis using confirmatory techniques (CFA & PALV) supported hypotheses concerning the be-factor structural model including the moderator effect of the kinds of stressing situation on the use of coping strategies, and hypotheses concerning the relationship between the two coping styles identified – emotion-centred and problem-solving centred CS – and resilience. Results imply that CS predicts Rs, but also that the differential sensibility to each kind of adverse situation contributes to activate coping strategies in different degrees.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence constitutes a complex moment in the life cycle, in which the young face numerous challenges derived, for example, from conflicts in the interpersonal relationships, from problems with parental attitudes, or from academic situations affecting their self-concept and sense of efficacy (Trivedi, 2015). Within this developmental stage, there are key situations in which personal resilience will mark his/her way of overcoming such challenges (Alonso-Tapia, Nieto, & Ruiz, 2013). However, *resilience*, a concept that refers to positive adaptation or recovery despite experiences of significant adversity (Luthar, 2006), is a phenomenon (Leipold & Greeve, 2009) that may depend on dynamic psychological processes such as the use of coping strategies, and/or of personality factors (Masten, 2007). Therefore, in order to favour the development of resilience, it would be useful to know whether and how coping strategies and styles affect resilience. To contribute to this objective, the assumptions from which our study was designed are described next.

1.1. Coping

The increasing interest in studying coping strategies is the result of recognising them as a particular way of responding to the different situations causing stress, as well as the result of understanding their

positive role in mitigating the harmful effects of such situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). But what are we referring to exactly with the term “coping”?

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “those constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts that are developed in order to manage the external and/or internal specific demands that are appraised as exceeding the individual’s resources” (p. 141). Therefore, while coping styles are the usual way in which people deal with stress, a style relatively stable, it follows from Lazarus and Folkman’s statement that strategies are situationally dependent, constantly changeable, though the tendency to use some of them with preference configures the style that a person uses to face daily-life problems.

It is a fact recognised by the scientific community that no strategy itself is better or worse than any other, and that the adaptability depends on the specific context or situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Coping constitutes a purposeful process in which the person and the context constantly interact: individuals vary their coping patterns depending on the type of the problem to be solved and the circumstances thereof. According to Lazarus (2006), the activation of traits depends on environmental circumstances that are made functionally equivalent by the disposition or trait. In effect, the trait generates the expected reaction only in circumstances that are relevant to the trait. Due to this dependence, the coping process should not be divorced from the person who confronts the stressful situation, and from the situation itself, a perspective that any efficient measurement of coping strategies (CS) must take into account. Nevertheless, though there are many scales and questionnaires for assessing coping – Kato (2013) includes 47 examples – they have

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not been built from such perspective. Therefore, the first goal of our study is to develop a *person–situation coping questionnaire (PSCQ)*.

First, as coping strategies are multiple, it is necessary to decide which strategies are the best candidates to be included in a PSCQ. The meta-analysis by Kato (2013) has shown that some of the strategies included in coping scales have good predictive power for outcomes coherent with the nature of the CS. These strategies are shown in Table 1.

Therefore, it was decided to include these strategies in the questionnaire. However, to validate it, it is also necessary to hypothesise how such strategies can be grouped to define coping styles. Different dimensions have been proposed (Skinner et al., 2003). A distinction widely accepted is that of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) between *problem-solving focused* and *emotion-focused* coping (*PSFC* and *EFC*). The use of one or another would initially depend on the control over the situation. Coping focused on the problem aims to handle or alter it, whereas coping focused on emotions implies methods for regulating the emotional response to the problem. After examining the content of the kinds of strategy selected for this study on the base of Kato's (2013) analysis, it can be hypothesised that the strategies that correlate positively with *well-being* can be considered as *problem-focused*, and that the strategies that correlate positively with negative affect are *emotion-focused*, as shown in Fig. 1, right half.

Second, as coping strategies may change depending on the situation, a measurement instrument that allows assessing the power of the situation for activating or inhibiting coping strategies is necessary. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) pointed out that some strategies are more stable through various stressful situations, whereas others are more related to particular contexts. So, it has been decided to study the effect of five different kinds of situations that can cause stress to adolescents (Trivedi, 2015): problems “with peers due to my own fault”, “with parents”, “with teachers”, “with peers because of their fault”, and “problems of study and achievement”.

The model is shown in Fig. 1. Two of the strategies are supposed to load on the two coping styles because items in the questionnaire could have two interpretations. *Rumination* could imply lack of decision for action (Kuhl, 1994), which is negative, or required reflexion for solving a problem, which is positive. In the same way, *thinking avoidance* could imply that the person does not deal with the problem at all, which is negative, or that he/she avoids it only after trying to solve the problem repeatedly without achieving any success.

1.2. Resilience

A second goal of this study is to analyse the relationship between resilience and coping. To achieve this goal it is necessary to consider, first, the kind of instrument to be used and the assumptions supporting it, and second, the kind of relation between resilience and copying that can be expected in adolescents.

Table 1

Strategies in coping scales with best predictive power for outcomes coherent with the nature of coping.

Main strategies that correlate positively with <i>well-being</i>	Correlation
Active coping and planning (focus on problem solution – PS)	$r = .25$
Positive reinterpretation and growth (positive thinking – PT)	$r = .32$
Seeking social support, instrumental or emotional (help seeking – HS)	$r = .24$
Acceptance (avoiding to think on the problem when unsolvable – TA)	$r = .18$
Main strategies that correlate positively with <i>negative affect or general distress</i>	Correlation
Self-distraction (rumination and coping avoidance – RM) with negative affect	$r = .38$
Behavioural disengagement (isolation and coping avoidance – IS) with neg. affect	$r = .40$
Focus on and venting of emotions (emotional expression – EE) with neg. affect	$r = .28$
Self-blame (SB) with general distress	$r = .43$

First, though there are several instruments designed for assessing resilience (Windle, Bennet, & Noyes, 2011), most of them do not have adequate psychometric properties; others do not assess resilience conceived as positive adaptation or recovery despite experiences of significant adversity (Luthar, 2006), but rather personal characteristics related to it, and others are valid, but for adult subjects. Fortunately, Alonso-Tapia et al. (2013) have shown the conceptual and empirical validity of the Subjective Resilience Questionnaire (SRQ) for adolescents. Therefore, it was used for this study.

Second, Davey, Eaker, and Walters (2003) highlighted that most coping research on adolescents does not support the assertion made by many researchers stating that resilient teenagers will demonstrate better coping skills as compared to those less resilient. This conclusion may be due to the fact that studies on coping do not always seem to be well integrated with other research that examines children's reactions to adversity and stress (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997). Perhaps the relationship coping/resilience is not an all or none question, but an issue that depends on the kinds of situation and of strategies used for studying it, a problem that this study deals with.

Summarizing, from the ideas discussed, two are the main hypotheses to be tested. The first one has to do with the structural validity of the PSCQA: it was expected that the fit of the structural model would be good enough to be accepted. If it were the case, it would show the possibility of studying the systematic effects of the different kinds of stressful situation in the activation of coping strategies. The second hypothesis relates to concurrent/predictive validity. It was expected that, though moderated by the kind of stressful situation, the higher the scores in problem-solving centred coping, and the lower the scores in emotion centred coping, the higher would be resilience.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

A total of 1078 Spanish students, 585 boys and 493 girls, from three public and one Charter High Schools took part in the study. Two of the schools were settled in rural areas, whereas the other two pertained to urban areas. Ages were comprised between 12 and 18 years (Mean: 14.10; SD: 1.69). By educational stages, 412 belonged to the First Cycle of Secondary school (ages 13–14), 452 to the Second Cycle (ages 15–16) and 214 were High School students (ages 17–18).

2.2. Materials

In order to test our hypotheses, the following instruments were used.

2.2.1. Person–Situation Coping Questionnaire for Adolescents (PSCQA)

This questionnaire, designed for this study, allows assessing to what extent the coping strategies used by adolescents generalize to different situations or vary depending on the kind of adverse situation. It is composed by 40 items, which make reference to eight different kinds of coping strategies (Rumination, Thinking avoidance, Self-isolation, Help seeking, Look for problem solution, Emotional expression, Self-blaming, Positive thinking), and to one of five adverse situations (“problems with peers due to my own fault”, “problems with parents”, “problems with teachers”, “problems with peers because of their fault”, and “problems of study and achievement”). A sample of items measuring one of the situations is shown in Table 2. It is expected that these strategies can be grouped into the two general categories or coping styles described by Lazarus (2006). Items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale, in which the students determined the degree of agreement with the content.

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