Adolescent Coping Styles in a Sample of Singaporean Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents data on the ways Singaporean adolescents choose to cope with problems. A sample of 467 secondary school students completed the Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS: Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) which yields data on eighteen potential coping scales, namely, (1) Seek Social Support, (2) Focus on Solving the Problem, (3) Work Hard and Achieve, (4) Worry, (5) Invest in Close Friends, (6) Seek to Belong, (7) Wishful Thinking, (8) Not Coping, (9) Tension Reduction, (10) Social Action, (11) Ignore the Problem, (12) Self-Blame, (13) Keep to Self, (14) Seek Spiritual Support, (15) Focus on the Positive, (16) Seek Professional Help, (17) Seek Relaxing Diversions, and (18) Physical Recreation. The association between coping style and gender, school and stream will be presented.

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Introduction

Background and Statement of the Problem

In 1986, Singapore's Minister for Education and twelve school
principals visited reputedly good schools in the United Kingdom and the
United States of America. The Towards Excellence in Schools (1987)
report that summarised their observations from the visit noted that the
schools they visited ensured not only students' academic development
but also a total development of the pupil in the personal, social, and
vocational aspects of their maturation.

In particular, it identified the absence of close coordination between
teachers involved in discipline, and personal counselling; lack of
professionally trained personnel to act as counsellors and proper rooms
for personal counselling; plus a lack of information on careers for
pupils. It was therefore recommended that a planned comprehensive
Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) programme be implemented in
each school to cater to the total development of the pupil.

To date, PCCG has been implemented in all secondary schools in
Singapore and is being introduced into primary schools. Key findings
from a 1991 evaluation of the programme showed that the programme was
proving effective in schools. While the PCCG programme focuses on the
overall environment of the school and the development of students
within that caring and orderly school environment, little has been said
about how these students cope with problems of a specific or general
nature. Still little is understood about their broader help-seeking
repertoire and preferred source or mode of coping with concerns. The
PCCG programme emphasises prevention and development. The programme
also educates students on ways to cope as well as seek help when
necessary. However, notwithstanding the apparent success of the PCCG
programme, we still do not know what students do to cope with concerns
and if they are indeed coping. Recent reports both academic and by
local media suggest that there is an increase in the energy spent by
schools to deal with disciplinary problems and other concerns presented
by students. There is also an apparent increase in the number of young
children being seen by the Health Ministry psychiatrists.
Consequently, school administrators have increasingly recognised the
need for helping professionals such as counsellors to have a more
significant and permanent presence on school campuses.

The investigators of this study believe that measuring and
understanding the coping styles of Singaporean adolescents can only
increase the effectiveness of helping programmes that currently exist
in the schools by informing these programmes of the coping styles
Singaporean adolescents exhibit and the interplay of several variables.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study is therefore to administer the

Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS: Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993), to a sample of Singaporean adolescents in secondary schools. The authors of the scale define coping from the work of Lazarus and Launier (1978) who state that: "coping consists of efforts, both action oriented and intra psychic, to manage (i.e., master, tolerate, reduce, minimize) environmental and internal demands and conflicts" (p. 311). In other words, coping involves the adaptive processes that individuals utilize to deal with diverse problems, situations, and contexts.

The study aims to identify the coping styles of Singaporean adolescents, investigate the association between style, gender, school, and stream in order to inform educators about the coping profile of students and hence improve the delivery of help services in schools.

The information obtained is useful because the ACS assesses the degree of usage of a broad range of coping strategies that focus on what our adolescents do rather than what they feel they should be doing. While the ACS has been used extensively in the Australian context, the coping strategies and items do not appear significantly different from that of Singaporean students. It would be interesting to discover how responses from Singaporean adolescents compare with samples from the ACS research literature.

The ACS also provides insights into coping behaviours which might not come to mind in a less structured approach to investigating adolescent

coping behaviour. The instrument further provides a stimulus for thinking about coping behaviour and clues to the psychological well-being and adaptive strategies of our adolescent students.

The ACS was developed over a 6-year period across Australian and international settings with several thousand adolescents. It is used extensively with regular school students, gifted students, students with psychosomatic disorders, students coping with final examinations, and students in clinical settings. While the instrument is still relatively new, studies in the past with similar instruments, and more recently with the ACS have noted possible differences in the ways adolescents cope as well as age, gender, and ethnicity differences (Frydenberg and Lewis, 1991a, 1991b, 1993, 1994; Frydenberg, 1993). Thus, this study looked into how coping style may vary with gender, school and stream.

Research Questions

Four research questions were examined. These are:

What are the preferred coping styles used by adolescents in the sample?
Do coping styles adolescents use differ with regard to gender?
Do coping styles adolescents use differ with regard to schools?

Do coping styles adolescents use differ with regard to streams?

Method

Sample

The sample comprised 467 secondary students from three government
 schools in Singapore. Approximately similar numbers of students
 participated from each of the three shcools: School 1 (n = 142),
 School 2 (n = 176) and School 3 (n = 149). The gender ratio was also
 comparable across the three schools: 222 female students and 245 male
 students. All students were from one level--Secondary Three which is
 equivalent to the ninth grade in the U.S. schools' context. Students
 came from two tracks--the Express stream and the Normal Stream. In the
 Singapore schools' context, students of higher academic ability are
 tracked into the Express stream which is a four-year programme leading
 to the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level examinations; while the Normal
 stream caters to students with an average academic ability. Students
 in the Normal stream will take a local national exam called the 'N'
 Level Exam at the end of their fourth year in secondary school, and if
 they qualify, will spend another year of study to prepare for the 'O'
 Levels at the end of their fifth year in secondary school. The sample
 in this study comprised 221 students from the Express stream and 246
 stduents from the Normal stream. Students from each of the major
 ethnic groups were represented in the sample: Chinese (n = 370),
 Indians (n = 3), Malays (n = 81), Eurasians and other ethnic groups (n
 = 8). The ethnic composition of the sample did not approximate the
 national ethnic composition, as the classes used for the study were low
 in the numbers of Indians represented.

Dependent and Independent Measures

The dependent measure used in this study was the Adolescent Coping
 Scale (ACS: Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). The independent measures which
 will be discussed in this paper are gender, school, and stream.

The Adolescent Coping Scale. The ACS is a self-report inventory
 comprising 80 items (70 structured and one open-ended) which assess 18
 distinct coping strategies.   The coping strategies were obtained from
 600 students' responses and grouped into 18 key areas based on
 similarity of idea.   Factor analyses confirmed the identification of
 these 18 areas. Test-retest correlations indicate that item responses
 tend to be highly stable. The 79 structured items are rated by the
 respondent using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = doesn't apply or
 don't use it;
2 = used very little; 3 = used sometimes; 4 = used often; 5 = used a

great deal. The respondents in this study answered the 'General Form'
of the ACS which addresses how an individual copes with concerns in
general. The 18 conceptual and empirically distinct coping strategies
are described in Table 1.

Procedure

With the help of the principals of each of the three schools, two to
 three whole classes of Express students and Normal students were
 randomly selected to participate in the study. The researchers
 administered the ACS (General Form) at the participating schools.
 Students took about 30 - 40 minutes to complete the survey.

Table 1: Description of the ACS (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993)

Scale

Description
Example of item

Seek to Belong
Indicates a caring and concern for one's relationships with others in
general and more specifically, with what others think
Improve my relationship with others

Focus on the Positive
Positive outlook on current situation
Look on the bright side of things and think of all that is good

Invest in Close Friends
Engage in a particular intimate relationship
Spend more time with boy-girl friend

Ignore the Problem
Consciously block out problem
I ignore the problem

Keep to Self
Withdraw from others and keep others from knowing problem
Keep my feelings to myself

Not Coping
Inability to deal with problem and development of psychosomatic
symptoms
I have no way of dealing with the situation

Physical Recreation

Play sport and keep fit
Keep fit and healthy

Seek Professional Help
Use a professional adviser, like teacher or counsellor
Discuss the problem with qualified people

Seek Relaxing Diversions
General relaxation, leisure activities
Find ways to relax, for example, listen to music, read a book, play a
musical instrument, watch television

Self-Blame
See themselves as responsible for the concern
Accept that I am responsible for the problem

Social Action
Letting others know what is of concern and enlisting support by wirting
petitions or organising an activity like a meeting or rally
Join with people who have the same concern

Seek Social Support
Inclined to share the problem with others and enlist support
Talk to other people to help me sort it out

Focus on Solving the Problem
Problem-focused strategy which tackles the problem systematically
Work at solving the problem to the best of my ability

Seek Spiritual Support
Belief in the assistance of a spiritual leader or God
Pray for help and guidance so that everything will be all right

Tension Reduction
Make oneself feel better by releasing tension
Make myself feel better by taking alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs

Wishful Thinking
Hope and anticipation of a positive outcome
Hope for the best

Work Hard and Achieve
Commitment, ambition and industry
Work hard

Worry
Concern about the future
Worry about what is happening

Statistical Analyses and Findings

Four research questions were investigated. The first sought to
 identify preferred coping styles among adolescents. The second
 questioned if there are significant gender differences in coping
 styles, while the third and fourth questions explore if significant
 differences occur between participating schools and between streams.

The means and standard deviations of each of the scales for the entire
 population were computed and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of the Eighteen Scales of the
ACS for Entire Population

ACS Scales	Entire Population(N = 467)	
	Mean	SD
Seek to Belong	62.36	13.22
Focus on the Positive	66.02	13.19
Invest in Close Friends	58.25	17.41
Ignore the Problem	49.16	12.18
Keep to Self	53.84	14.98
Not Coping	43.39	12.15
Physical Recreation	65.62	17.39
Seek Professional Help	41.13	17.01
Seek Relaxing Diversions	81.41	14.39
Self-Blame	53.50	15.84
Social Action	42.47	14.20
Seek Social Support	61.08	12.16
Focus on Solv Problem	71.17	12.41

Seek Spiritual Support	47.23	19.03
Tension Reduction	41.63	13.50
Wishful Thinking	59.40	16.52
Work Hard and Achieve	75.11	11.49
Worry	63.50	16.62

As can be seen from the table, adolescents in this study tended to
 prefer coping with their problems by seeking relaxing diversions (M =
 81.41, SD = 14.39); working hard and achieving, described as being
 committed, ambitious and industrious (M = 75.11, SD = 11.49); and by
 using problem-focused strategies which would tackle the problem
 systematically (M = 71.17, SD = 12.41). Focusing on the positive (M =
 66.02, SD = 13.19); physical recreation
(M = 65.62, SD = 17.39); seeking out what others thinkas well as being
concerned with how one's choice of coping style may affect one's
relationships with others (M = 62.36, SD = 13.22); and seeking social
support (M = 61.08, SD = 12.16) were other preferred coping styles.
The results also indicated that students worry about what is happening
now and in the future (M = 63.50, SD = 16.62). Coping strategies which
were relatively less chosen were seeking professional help (M = 41.13,
SD = 14.39); 'Tension Reduction' (M = 41.63, SD = 13.50) and 'Social

Action' (M = 42.47, SD = 14.20).

A comparison of means was analysed to establish if there were
 significant gender, school and stream differences. The means and
 standard deviations of the eighteen scales of the ACS by gender, school
 and stream are presented in Tables 3, 4 and 5 respectively.

Table 3 : Means and Standard Deviations of the Eighteen Scales of the
ACS by Gender

ACS Scales	Female(N = 222)		Male(N = 245)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Seek to Belong	62.43	12.98	62.30	13.45
Focus on Positive	65.09	13.36	66.86	13.01
Invest in Cl Friends	56.25	17.12	60.07	17.50

Ignore the Problem	48.69	12.33	49.59	12.06
Keep to Self	52.70	14.81	54.88	15.08
Not Coping	45.05	11.79	41.89	12.29
Physical Recreation	59.94	15.65	70.77	17.31
Seek Prof Help	39.32	16.96	42.78	16.92
Seek Relax Diver	81.79	13.80	81.06	14.91
Self-Blame	53.15	15.90	53.82	15.81
Social Action	40.32	14.31	44.43	13.83
Seek Social Support	62.68	12.17	59.62	12.00
Focus on Sol Problem	69.28	12.14	72.88	12.42
Seek Spirit Support	48.20	19.33	46.35	18.75
Tension Reduction	45.08	13.84	38.50	12.41
Wishful Thinking	58.77	17.03	59.97	16.06
Work Hard and Ach	73.87	10.91	76.23	11.90
Worry	62.09	16.40	64.78	16.75

Table 4: Means and Standard Deviations of the Eighteen Scales of the ACS by School

Schools

ACS Scales	School 1(N = 142)		School 2(N = 176)		School 3(N = 149)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Seek to Belong	62.45	12.35	62.98	13.35	61.56	13.88
Focus Positive	67.61	12.52	66.31	12.95	64.16	13.94
Inves Friends	58.68	16.18	59.23	18.42	56.70	17.32
Ignore Problem	50.07	12.42	48.81	11.92	48.72	12.30

	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Keep to Self	54.54	15.17	52.67	13.74	54.56	16.16
Not Coping	43.72	11.55	43.93	11.75	42.44	13.14
Physical Rec	66.06	16.56	66.46	17.88	64.22	17.60
Seek Prof Help	38.20	15.31	43.75	17.65	40.83	17.39
Seek Relax Div	82.42	15.65	79.70	13.49	82.45	14.07
Self-Blame	54.54	16.23	53.92	15.24	52.01	16.16
Social Action	41.06	13.22	43.89	15.11	42.15	13.92
Seek Soc Sup	61.66	12.50	61.27	11.98	60.30	12.10
Focus on Sol	70.87	12.67	70.14	12.51	72.67	11.96
Seek Spirit	45.00	17.73	49.94	19.99	46.14	18.80
Tension Red	42.06	13.79	41.91	13.44	40.89	13.35
Wishful Think	60.99	16.60	59.68	16.84	57.56	16.00
Work Hard Ach	75.18	11.15	74.98	12.10	75.19	11.15
Worry	64.51	15.90	64.61	16.61	61.23	17.18

Table 5: Means and Standard Deviations of the Eighteen Scales of the ACS by Stream

ACS Scales	Express(N = 221)		Normal(N = 246)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Seek to Belong	62.37	13.08	62.36	13.37
Focus Positive	64.66	14.31	67.24	12.00
Invest Friends	53.38	16.30	62.63	17.24
Ignore problem	48.91	12.37	49.39	12.03
Keep to Self	55.50	15.08	52.36	14.75
Not Coping	43.48	12.61	43.32	11.74

Physical Rec	64.33	16.61	66.78	18.02
Seek Prof Help	38.35	16.84	43.64	16.80
Seek Relax Div	81.47	14.20	81.35	14.59
Self-Blame	55.91	15.89	51.34	15.51
Social Action	41.38	13.47	43.46	14.78
Seek Soc supp	61.60	11.44	61.51	12.79
Solving the Prob	72.38	12.83	70.08	11.94
Spiritual Support	46.29	19.09	48.07	18.97
Tension Reduction	42.28	13.70	41.04	13.32
Wishful Thinking	59.44	17.51	59.37	15.62
Work Hard achieve	75.28	11.68	74.96	11.35
Worry	64.49	16.91	62.62	16.34

Next, 2 (gender) x 3 (school) x 2 (stream) multivariate analyses of
 variance (MANOVA) were conducted with the eighteen scales of the ACS as
 dependent variables. The results of these anaylses are presented in
 Table 6.

Table 6 : Multivariate Analysis of Variance of the Eighteen ACS Scales
by Gender, School and Stream

Table 6 (contd) : Univariate Analysis of Variance of the Eighteen ACS
Scales by Gender, School and Stream
Univariate Fs

As is evident in Table 6, there are significant gender effects
 (Hotelling's T2 = 0.00, p < 0.001); school effects (Hotelling's T2 =

0.03, p < 0.05); and stream main effects (Hotelling's T2 = 0.000, p < 0.001) in students' choice of coping styles. Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each of the eighteen ACS scales were conducted to assess the extent to which these individual variables contributed to the significant multivariate effects.

The results showed that adolescent boys tended to use the following coping styles more than girls: investing in close friends [M = 60.07, SD = 17.50 vs M = 56.25, SD = 17.12, F(18, 438) = 4.627, p < 0.05], physical recreation [M = 70.77, SD = 17.31 vs M = 59.94, SD = 15.65, F(18, 438) = 47.57, p < 0.001], seeking professional help [M = 42.78, SD = 16.92 vs M = 39.32, SD = 16.96, F(18, 438) = 7.33, p < 0.01], social action [M = 44.43, SD = 13.83 vs M = 40.32, SD = 14.31, F(18, 438) = 10.58, p < 0.01], focus on solving the problem [M = 72.88, SD = 12.42 vs M = 69.28, SD = 12.14, F(18, 438) = 5.16, p < 0.001], and working hard and achieving [M = 76.23, SD = 11.90 vs M = 73.87, SD = 10.91, F(18, 438) = 6.18, p < 0.05].

Girls, on the other hand, significantly preferred seeking social support [M = 62.68, SD = 12.17 vs M = 59.62, SD = 12.00, F(18, 438) = 6.693, p < 0.05], tension reduction [M = 45.08, SD = 13.84 vs M = 38.50, SD = 12.41, F(18, 438) = 33.45, p < 0.001], and 'not coping' [M = 45.05, SD = 11.79 vs M = 41.89, SD = 12.29, F(18, 438) = 10.88, p < 0.01].

School differences in coping style were observed with respect to students' use of professional help (e.g., teacher, counsellor, etc.) when they could not cope with problems. The results showed that adolescents from School 2 [M = 43.75, SD = 17.65, F(36,874) = 4.25, p < 0.01] tended to choose seeking help from a helping professional more than did students from School 3 [M = 40.83, SD = 17.39] and 1 [M = 38.20, SD = 15.31] respectively.

Significant stream differences were also evident from the results. Normal students tended to cope by investing in close friends [M = 62.63, SD = 17.24 vs M = 53.38, SD = 16.30, F(18, 438) =32.97, p < 0.001] and would choose to seek professional help more than Express students [M = 43.64, SD = 16.80 vs M = 38.35, SD = 16.84, F(18, 438) = 11.00, p < 0.001]. On the other hand, Express students tended to prefer to cope by keeping the problem to themselves [M = 55.50, SD = 15.08 vs M = 52.36, SD = 14.75, F(18, 438) = 5.25, p < 0.05] and to blame themselves for their problems [M = 55.91, SD = 15.89 vs M = 51.34, SD = 15.51, F(18, 438) = 12.07, p < 0.001].

The results also yielded significant two-way interaction effects in student coping styles by school and stream. On further investigation of the means (illustrated in Figures 1-4), it was observed that for School 2, the style of coping behaviour used by the Normal and Express

students varied significantly when compared to those of the Normal and Express streams from the other two schools.

Figure 1 shows the two-way interaction effect between school and stream in the 'Invest in Close Friends' scale. The figure shows that, although all students in the Normal stream tended to invest in close friends more than Express stream students, it is obvious that students from the Normal stream in School 2 invested much more in close friends than did their fellow schoolmates in the Express stream.

Figure 2 illustrates the two-way interaction effect between school and stream in the 'Physical Recreation' scale'. It can be observed that both School 1 and 3 Express stream students tend to use sports and physical leisure activities more than their Normal stream counterparts. On the contrary, it is the Normal stream students from School 2 who use this style of coping more than their Express stream schoolmates.

Figure 3 illustrates the significant two-way interaction effect between school and stream in the 'Seek Relaxing Diversions' scale. Normal students in School 1 seem to be using this style of coping less than their Express stream counterparts, unlike the students in the other two schools where it is the Normal students who seem to be using this method of coping more than the Express students.

Figure 4 illustrates the significant two-way interaction effect

between school and stream in the 'Seek Spiritual Support' scale. From this figure, it can be seen that again, School 2 seems to be significantly different form the other two schools. The findings show that the Normal students from School 2 tend to use this coping style much more than the Express students. On the contrary, for the other two schools, the Express students tend to be using this coping style more.

Discussion

When faced with problems, adolescents in this study tended to choose positive coping strategies like seeking relaxing diversions; working hard and achieving; and using problem-focused strategies to tackle

problems systemmatically. Other positive copers used were focusing on
the positive; using physical recreation; seeking ways of coping which
did not contradict others' thinking or relationships; and seeking
social support. It is important to note that a number of students also
indicated that they worried about their current problems and about the
future.

Coping strategies which were relatively less chosen were seeking
professional help; releasing tension by crying, screaming, using
alcohol, cigarettes, etc.; as well as getting involved in social action
activities is order to solve a collective problem. It seems reasonable
that the latter coping styles were less frequently chosen. Seeking
professional help still carries with it the stigma that one is a
'failure' because one cannot cope with daily and life events--students
may prefer to 'save face' and more likely approach a friend rather than
approach a teacher or counsellor for help. Substance abuse is illegal
in Singapore and students are aware of the harsh penalties associated
with violating this law. The majority of students heed the warning,
and do not choose alcohol or drugs as a coper. Also, if they were
abusing alcohol or drugs, they would be unlikely to reveal this, even
in a confidential survey.

The findings seem to point to the fact that boys may be using more
positive coping strategies than girls. Boys chose strategies like
investing in close friends, exercise and physical recreation, focus on
solving the problem, working hard and achieving, seeking professional
help, and social action. Girls, on the other hand, expressed that they
were 'not coping'. Traditionally, females have used social support
networks more than males, and this was evident in the sample of
adolescesnts studied this time, too. A possible reason why girls
seemed to be using less of the more positive coping strategies could be
a question of low self-efficacy. This 'hunch' warrants further
investigation. There is also the question of whether boys were
responding to the items in a more socially desirable manner than girls.

School differences were puzzling and it is difficult to explain why
students from School 2 tended to choose using professional help more
than students in the other two schools as it does not seem likely that
School 2 has any added advantage over the other two schools in terms of
having school counsellors, or trained helping professionals in the
school.

The findings also indicated that students from the Normal stream tended
to choose more healthy coping strategies than their counterparts in the
Express stream. Normal students tended to invest more in close
relationships and would choose to seek professional help more than
Express students. On the other hand, Express students tended to prefer
keeping their problem to themselves. They also indicated that they

tended to blame themselves for having problems. Perhaps this could be explained by the observation that Express students tend to often 'be hard' on themselves.

The two-way interaction effects between school and stream for the 'Invest in Close Friends', 'Physical Recreation', 'Seek Relaxing Diversions', and 'Seek Spiritual Support' scales seem to indicate that large differences between streams were evident mainly in School 2 rather than in School 1 and 3. The question arises as to whether this difference could be due to elements of school climate? Could it be due to personal and/or collective school expectations? Could it be due to students' personal motivation and attribution factors?

Future Research Directions

This exploratory study has raised many questions regarding the association between coping style, gender, school and stream.   It is apparent, therefore, that further investigation of the present data as well as the collection of a larger and more comprehensive data set is warranted.   Factor analyses of the ACS needs to be carried out to ascertain the factorial validity of the instrument in the Singapore context.

Results from the future use of the ACS with Singaporean adolescent students will certainly have far reaching benefits for the theory and practice of guidance and counselling in schools. From a broader perspective, it will further illuminate a yet vague conceptualisation of the psychological anatomy of the Singaporean adolescent with implications for understanding the psychology of our cultures. It is from this initial study that many other useful studies, some of a cross-cultural and cross-national nature may be pursued.

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