The Differential Salience of Coping Mechanisms in Variable Risk Contexts

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Background

• While the literature on coping recognizes that the effectiveness of specific coping strategies may vary across settings and times (e.g., home vs. school), it has not yet identified individuals for whom the same coping behaviors, in the same settings, might be more or less adaptive.

• Research on the salience of the early caregiving environment suggests that deficits during this vulnerable period may influence the ways in which the developing child learns to relate to the world and navigate challenging situations.

• Therefore, this investigation examined the influence of different forms of risk exposure on the relation between laboratory –observed coping strategies and positive adjustment.

Method

• Data were collected from a sample of 250 children and their primary caregivers at age 4 (M_{age}=49.05 months, SD=2.91; 50% Female).

• Risk exposure groups were identified based on semi-structured interviews with caregivers who provided information about environmental risk factors (e.g., low income, high residential mobility) and relational/interpersonal risk factors (e.g., child maltreatment, excessive discipline). Children with any relational risk were categorized in the relational risk group (N=116, $N_{with\ teacher\ data}$=72), and the remaining children were divided between high (N=79, $N_{with\ teacher\ data}$=56) and low (N=55, $N_{with\ teacher\ data}$=44) environmental risk groups based on the number of risk factors endorsed.

• Coping mechanisms (Eisenberg, 1993) were coded observationally during an inhibitory control task in which the child had to wait her/his turn for two minutes while the examiner played with an attractive remote control car in front of them (Bennett et al., 2005). Coping strategies were rated as present/absent in each 10 second interval of the task, with scores reflecting the proportion each strategy was used out of all intervals in which coping occurred. Brief descriptions of each strategy follow:
  • Instrumental Coping: taking some constructive action to solve the problem
  • Avoidance Coping: changing activities or attention focus
  • Aggressive Coping: physical or verbal aggression, such as yelling or pushing
  • Venting Coping: expressing feelings by crying or whining
  • Support Seeking Coping: asking for help or support from a parent or teacher

• Outcome measures included ratings of behavior problems (rated by examiners, parents, and teachers) (TOF, CBCL, TRF, Achenbach, 2001), and teacher rated anger (CBQ, Rothbart, 2001), aggression (Dodge & Coie, 1987), discipline problems, peer acceptance , and academic problems (HBQ, Armstrong et al., 2003).

Results

• One-way ANOVAs verified that there were no significant differences in the mean levels of each type of coping behavior by risk group.
• Tables 1-5 display correlations between each type of coping and the adjustment outcomes [teacher report, unless otherwise noted], split by risk group. Footnotes denote statistically significant differences between correlation coefficients (1: different from low risk; 2: different from environmental risk; 3: different from relational risk)

Table 1. Instrumental Coping (Correlations with Outcomes by Risk Group)

Outcome	Low Risk	Environmental Risk	Relational Risk
Behavior Problems (Examiner Report)	-.175	.025	-.262 **
Behavior Problems (Parent Report)	-.001	-.080	-.031
Behavior Problems	.120	-.144	-.097
Anger	.039	-.002	-.031
Aggression	.064	.220	-.058
Discipline Problems	.236	.087	-.009
Peer Acceptance	.034	-.046	.024
Academic Problems	-.110	-.165	.056

**p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

• **Instrumental Coping** was not associated with maladaptive behavior for any group, and was associated with fewer examiner rated behavior problems specifically in the relational risk group

Table 2. Avoidance Coping (Correlations with Outcomes by Risk Group)

Outcome	Low Risk	Environmental Risk	Relational Risk
Behavior Problems (Examiner Report)	.142	-.029	.191 *
Behavior Problems (Parent Report)	.033	.091	.038
Behavior Problems	-.135	-.144	.131
Anger	.056	[3]-.250 #	[2].250 *
Aggression	[3]-.053	[3]-.186	[1,2].318 **
Discipline Problems	-.046	-.087	-.030
Peer Acceptance	-.068	[3].245 #	[2]-.135
Academic Problems	-.011	.297 *	.009

**p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

• **Avoidance Coping** was related to adjustment problems in several domains for the relational risk group only, and conversely was associated with positive adjustment in the environmental risk group

Table 3. Aggressive Coping (Correlations with Outcomes by Risk Group)

Outcome	Low Risk	Environmental Risk	Relational Risk
Behavior Problems (Examiner Report)	[2,3].476 ***	[1]-.128	[1].042
Behavior Problems (Parent Report)	[2,3].429 **	[1].084	[1].029
Behavior Problems	.010	-.120	.148
Anger	.057	-.181	.072
Aggression	.059	-.151	.050
Discipline Problems	-.134	-.086	.119
Peer Acceptance	.079	.094	-.032
Academic Problems	.125	-.080	-.135

**p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

• **Aggressive Coping** was associated with behavior problems (examiner and parent reported) in the low risk group, but not with teacher reported outcomes for any group

Table 4. Venting Coping (Correlations with Outcomes by Risk Group)

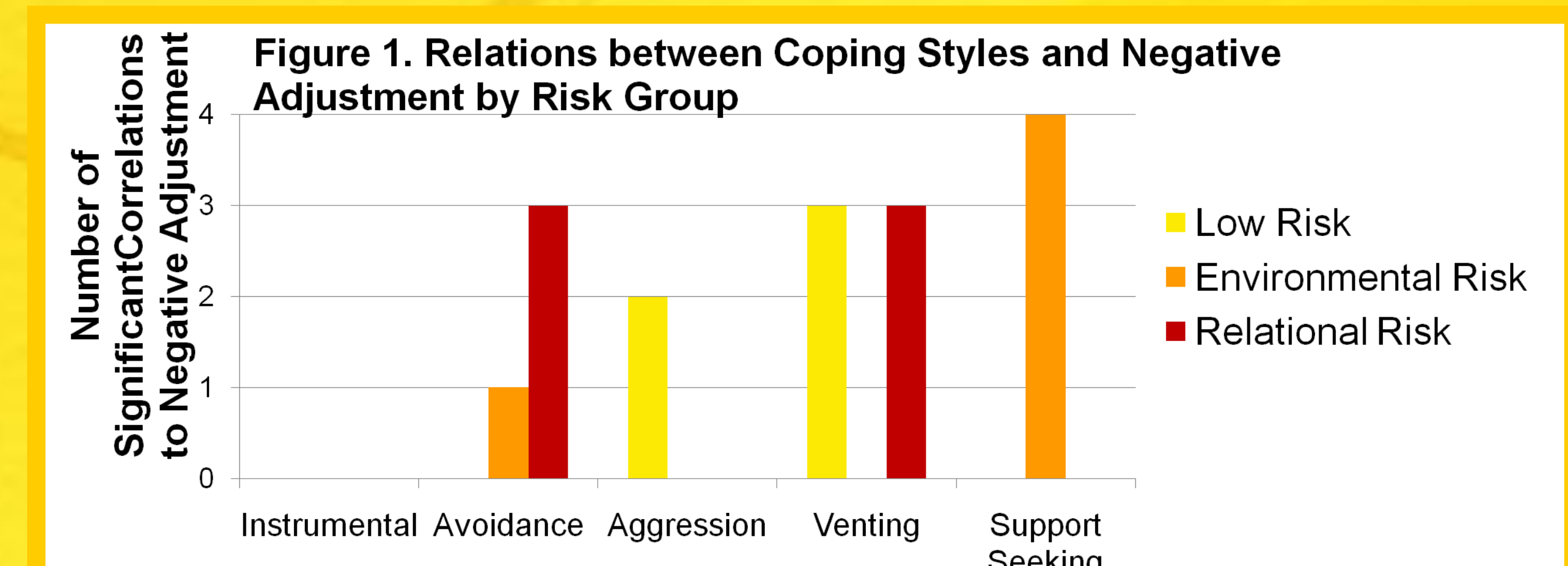| Outcome	Low Risk	Environmental Risk	Relational Risk
Behavior Problems (Examiner Report)	[3].327 *	.085	[1]-.008
Behavior Problems (Parent Report)	.191	-.024	.056
Behavior Problems	.071	-.055	.180
Anger	.376 *	.083	.225 #
Aggression	.059	-.073	.198 #
Discipline Problems	.045	[3]-.137	[2].258 *
Peer Acceptance	-.119	.078	-.040
Academic Problems	[2].288 #	[1,3]-.168	[2].146

**p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

• **Venting Coping** was related to maladaptation in both the low risk and relational risk groups, although the specific outcomes varied by group

Table 5. Support Seeking Coping (Correlations with Outcomes by Risk Group)

Outcome	Low Risk	Environmental Risk	Relational Risk
Behavior Problems (Examiner Report)	-.051	.048	.011
Behavior Problems (Parent Report)	-.146	.095	.062
Behavior Problems	.015	.261 #	.074
Anger	.101	.152	.012
Aggression	.142	.198	.021
Discipline Problems	.050	.280 *	.134
Peer Acceptance	[2].121	[1]-.284 *	-.010
Academic Problems	[2]-.191	[1].294 *	.047

**p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

• **Support Seeking Coping** was related to numerous adjustment problems, but only for the environmental risk group

• In examining the predominant associations within each risk group, a clear pattern emerged. The low risk group displayed associations between negative adjustment and aggressive and venting coping behaviors. The environmental risk group had relations primarily between maladjustment and support seeking coping, while the relational risk group on the other hand associated negative adjustment with avoidance and venting coping (Figure 1 displays the number of significant or marginal correlations with adjustment difficulties in each category).

Figure 1. Relations between Coping Styles and Negative Adjustment by Risk Group

Number of Significant Correlations to Negative Adjustment / Instrumental, Avoidance, Aggression, Venting, Support Seeking / Low Risk, Environmental Risk, Relational Risk

Discussion

• These findings support the contention that coping behaviors may vary in their effectiveness as a function of risk exposure. A pattern of associations suggests that different coping styles are more or less adaptive for each risk group.
• One possible explanation is that certain strategies are developed or used in a more maladaptive way in some groups than in others. For example, the type of avoidance used by the relational risk group may look qualitatively different than the avoidance used by the environmental risk group, based on the context in which it was developed, and the effectiveness with which it is applied in the school setting.
• Alternatively, although there were no group mean differences in the amount of each coping style used, it may be that the children in each group who do display maladaptation have differences in their preferred coping style. While environmental risk children in general do not use more support seeking, perhaps the more adjustment difficulties children in this group have, the more likely they are to use support seeking coping. This stands in contrast to the relational risk group, where maladjustment is not associated with support seeking, but rather avoidance. These associations support the idea that the particular quality of adverse experiences to which these children were exposed may influence the coping strategy toward which they gravitate when struggling with behavior and other difficulties in the school setting (i.e., maltreated children may not be as likely to seek support from an adult).