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SIMPOSIO por invitación

"Coping with stress: different approaches"

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INTRODUCTION

According to Lazarus and Folkman, psychological stress is a peculiar relationship between the individual and his environment which the former deems as menacing or overflowing his own resources and endangering his well being. When faced with a stimulus, the person analyses its menacing potential. If he feels it is dangerous, he will assess the resources he can tap on in order to cope with it and will face the situation either successfully (adaptively) or not (non-adaptively). Should coping not be successful, the menacing situation will still be there and the person will remain under stress.

This theoretical model poses several questions which have been studied by Lazarus and other researchers. Mostly, they refer to considering which situations are seen by different people as beyond their resources, whether they vary according to sex, age and culture, at what point in each person's developmental history the resources for coping with such situations are established and how and what turns such resources sufficient or insufficient, whether there are coping styles, whether they change with development, etc.

This symposium will go through these different issues from a theoretical point of view, summarising several years of research on the subject.

Participant's Abstract

Interpersonal trust in coping with stress

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The harmful effects of stress do not depend exclusively on the characteristics of stressing events; the resources used to cope with those events also contribute to such deleterious results. Coping includes behaviour and thoughts employed by the individual to manage the stressing situation. Folkman and Lazarus' theory defines two coping principles: the first kind or category, **problem focused coping**, refers to strategies

employed to alter or manage sources of stress. The second category, **emotion-focused coping**, has to do with the strategies used to manage emotions.

Interpersonal aspects are important predictors of individual ability to face the situation; they offer three types of functions to achieve it: firstly, interpersonal relationships contribute to well being because they are a source of acceptance and intimacy, and therefore of emotional support. In the second place, there is general agreement over the fact that social support provides information, elucidation and guidance; consequently, they offer informational support. Lastly, they ensure assistance, service, etc.; namely, instrumental support. Our work is focused on the emotional and social support offered by interpersonal relationships. Social support serves to minimise a perceived menace exclusively when it is seen as such: when it is directly related to the satisfaction provided by such support. When others do not offer help, the world is deemed menacing and this feeling becomes stronger when one cannot trust others. In other words, "we" provides security and control, but it also causes disturbances. When there is no secure and firm "base" from which the world can be explored, the result is inhibiting behaviour, ignoring warm feelings towards others as well as conflicts, aggressiveness and emotional distancing.

On the other hand, when other people's behaviour can be predicted, the individual can expect protection or non-protection (menace). Hopes of positive social relationships favour socialisation and co-operative and sympathising behaviour.

In order to study feelings of trust in interpersonal relationships we have worked out Likert-type tables with items ranging from large agreement (1) to total disagreement (5). Items are chosen by three psychologists from a given set, half of which express trust and the other half, lack of trust. The discriminating potential of items was examined, as well as their reliability following Cronbach's method and their validity, through factorial analysis. Scales have been drawn up for adults (32 items), small children (16 items), children aged 9-12 (32 items) and teenagers (32 items). We will show the results of the use of these scales within each sample.

Development of coping resources in childhood and adolescence

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The relationship with parents and peers during childhood is seen one of the most important aspects determining the development of personality and behaviour. Since the relationship with parents and peers provides support throughout life, people who have trouble with interpersonal relationships will probably run the risk of not developing adequate resources for coping with stress. These persons tend to perceive the world as extremely menacing and hostile and they feel it must be approached aggressively or ignored through evasion or generalized inhibition.

A study on the evaluation of menacing situations and children's perception of their relationship with their parents showed that the main source of stress in childhood is the child's feeling that his relationship with his parents is inadequate. Other studies have also examined the influence of peer relationships and how particular interaction patterns developed within the family come into action and establish a dynamics of interaction which will later influence devious behaviour.

As regards adolescents, when facing menaces typical of this stage of life (life crisis), coping styles developed during childhood come up. Such styles can be altered according to the coping resources available at that particular moment. The latter are basically related to the kind of interaction with parents and peers established at that stage. When the teenager widens the scope of his social relationships (entering secondary school, group activities, etc.) he gradually and progressively leaves the family circle and this leads him to develop new relationships with other people. Nevertheless, such relationships will reflect bonding patterns learnt within the family. On the other hand, apparently the age and sex of the adolescent determine each particular coping style.

This paper will examine such aspects and will show experimental results to back up our hypothesis.

Vocational choice as a source of stress

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Among the menaces or challenges faced by the teenager, his vocational choice upon finishing his secondary school seems to be a source of stress since it implies a decision which affects his life project for the future and which he will approach with varying degrees of success according to the psychological resources available.

In this work two different instruments are used: the CP test constructed for conflicts of personality (based in the Rotter Incomplete Sentences Test), and a specific test for measuring stress. Comparisons between youngsters stressed by vocational choice and those who are not will be established.

Gender and coping style in old age

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The study of stress in the field of Social Psychology must examine whether situations perceived as potentially menacing vary throughout life and, consequently, if coping styles change.

Richaud de Minzi y Sacchi have found some empirical evidence on the subject in research carried out in Argentina at the Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Mathematical and Experimental Psychology (CIIPME). These authors come to the conclusion, just as other researchers did before, that sources of stress and coping styles probably vary with age. They also infer, and here they coincide with Gutmann's findings, that when people age they shift from an active coping style to a more passive one.

On the other hand, the study of the stress phenomenon within the senior population has been very relevant in gerontology research during the last decades. Following the approach suggested by Lazarus and Folkman, it is interesting to examine those situations which elderly adults perceive as potentially menacing, the physical, psycho-

social and material resources available to face daily demands and the coping strategies used to diminish the menace perceived.

Lowenthal et al. have carried on some research on the effect of gender on coping strategies. They come to the conclusion that social roles corresponding to masculine and feminine sex probably change and become more similar when people reach middle age; men become more dependent and women more aggressive.

A set of empirical results will be presented in this symposium which were gathered in the course of research aimed at examining a group of Argentine elderly people in order to find out whether gender influences 1) the kind of situation which is perceived as potentially menacing and 2) the kind of coping strategy used in order to lower the menace perceived. The Spanish version of Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WOC), adapted to this age group, was administered to 150 subjects, aged 65 or over, of both sexes, of an average medium socio-economic standing and living in the city of Buenos Aires.

We will show the patterns of the groups of men and women for 1) the kinds of situations which are seen as potentially menacing and 2) the types of strategies used. A qualitative and quantitative comparative analysis is carried out in 1) and 2) according to gender.



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