

## **THE COPING STRATEGIES MEN AND WOMEN EMPLOY WHILE ENCOUNTERING UNPLEASANT STIMULI\***

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*The study is an effort towards understanding the differences in the use of coping mechanisms by men and women. 120 adults (60 men and 60 women) of Indian nationality, in their early adulthood years participated in the study. A semi projective instrument namely Coping Operations Reference Enquiry (Schutz, 1978) was administered. The comparison reveals that the men and women differ on only two mechanisms predominantly, 'Denial' being used more by men and 'Projection' being used more by women. Coping preferences of both the groups are also discussed.*

'Coping' is an important aspect of human adaptation defined as a process of managing demands both external and internal that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the persons (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The extent to which people experience stress and its potentially damaging effects depends on both the kind of events they encounter and the way in which they appraise them.

At each life stage, society within which one lives makes certain psychological demands upon individuals. The nature of coping within these situations varies as individuals and their environments change across the life span. It is significant to note that the quality of coping changes from adolescence to adulthood because of the different transitions taking place in their lives. An adult is an individual who has completed his growth and is ready for his status in society with other adults facing more complex roles and responsibilities requiring a new perspective on life activities.

Researchers have reported that adults experience the greatest number of life changes and strains in early adulthood years

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(McLanahan & Sorensen, 1985; Pearlin, 1980), and life strain decreases from early adulthood to middle adulthood perhaps because of adults settling into more stable life styles. McCrae (1982) reported that young adults were more likely to use immature and usually ineffective coping techniques, such as expressing hostility and escapism. Vingerhoets and Van Hick (1990) are of the view that men sought physical outlets and used rationalization strategies and women preferred emotion-focussed coping, they seek social support and resort to self blame. Kumar and Ramamurti (1990) pointed out that older men used cognitive redefinition and logical analysis most frequently in dealing with socials relationship stresses. Fry (1990) and Gallanghen (1990) are of the view that internal self-control, social support, prayer, and preoccupation with objects of attachment are skills used by older people. Martin, Lee, Poon, Fulk, and Steven (1992) reported active behavioral coping in older people.

Yet, another issue which should be kept in mind pertains to gender differences in coping behaviour. Two theoretical explanations have been offered, the socialization theory and the role constraint theory. The socialization theory proposes that women are socialized to use lesser effective coping strategies (Brems & Johnson, 1989; Long, 1990; Low, 1989). On the other hand, the role constraint theory suggests that no apparent sex differences exist in coping strategies of men and women when they occupy the same roles (Billings & Moos, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Though there has been some amount of research conducted with the adults but comprehensive comparative studies are not found in the early adulthood years. Keeping this idea in mind the present study is designed to assess differences in the use of coping strategies by men and women adults.

## METHOD

### Sample

The present study was carried out on a sample of 120 adults (60 men and 60 women) of Indian nationality, in their early adulthood years, belonging to the middle income group. The age of the sample ranged from 20 to 34 years with a mean age of 26.97 years for men and 26.51 years for women.

## Instrument

### *Coping Operations Preference Enquiry (COPE)*

Coping Operations Preference Enquiry (Schutz, 1978) is a semi-projective instrument used to identify the coping mechanisms, people employ when they encounter unpleasant stimuli. Earlier it has been used profitably by investigators like Brems and Johnson (1989), and Garar (1970). COPE has two parallel forms, the men form and the women form. It presents a number of stories each depicting an unpleasant situation in which the central character finds himself/herself. Respondents are asked to read each story and indicates the degree of each mechanism, the central character is likely to adopt in each situation. The preference ratings of respondents are projections of their own coping patterns. Rating is summed across the stories to indicate overall adoption of mechanism. Lowest rank represents the dominantly used coping mechanism.

A brief description of the coping styles as proposed by Schutz (1978) are: Denial (denying of the stress); Isolation (to intellectually solve the problems); Projection (blaming other individuals); Regression (seeking help from others); and Turning Against Self (blaming one's own-self).

## Procedure

The subjects were contacted either at their workplaces or at their homes. A final rapport was established with them and the confidentiality of their responses were ensured. A verbal explanation was given pertaining to the test and cooperation was sought from them. The test was administered individually. The significance of difference between means was checked by the *t*-test.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Reliability

Test-retest reliability coefficients were found for each of the variables in COPE. The retesting was done after three weeks of the previous testing with a sub-sample of 30 subjects. The reliabilities (Table 1) are quite high and range from .73 to .87.

Table 1

*Reliability coefficients of the variables in COPE*

Variables	Test-retest Reliability Coefficients
Denial	.81
Isolation	.87
Projection	.85
Regression	.79
Turning Against Self	.73

### Comparison of Means

The *t*-values computed, along with the mean scores and standard deviations of all the five coping dimensions for both the groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Means, standard deviations and t-values for the different coping variables*

Variable	Men		Women		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Denial	19.41	2.04	21.33	2.25	4.90*
Isolation	17.91	2.04	18.56	2.04	1.75
Projection	18.02	1.68	16.41	2.09	4.88*
Regression	16.66	2.05	16.75	2.07	0.27
Turning Against Self	17.41	2.05	16.75	2.07	1.78

\**p* < .01

The table shows significant difference among men and women on two coping dimensions Denial and Projection only. The means indicate a trend in the direction of higher denial among men than women and higher projection among women than men.

The higher use of denial by men while facing a situation is supported by several researchers (Brems & Johnson, 1989; Garar, 1970). Another important dimension of coping i.e., Isolation, though not suggesting a significant difference but approaching the significance

level, suggests that men compared to women have a tendency to use more cognitive skills. This has been reported by several researchers.

A tentative explanation about higher denial in men, but which needs further verification, could be that denial in men may be their tendency to alleviate the emotional stress for some time and try to reappraise the situation once again, and find a solution for the situation. The reappraisal helps them to preserve their capability as men which otherwise would have been jeopardized.

The results pertaining to women adults show their predominant use of Projection (blaming others). It has been seen that women do not feel confident of handling any stress situation on her own because of early socialization practices which teach her more dependency and hence they may easily try to evade situation by making others responsible for it and make attempts to de-link herself from the situation. This is seemingly true in Indian context.

### Coping Preferences

Comparing the means of different coping styles did not reveal much significant difference between the two groups, however the grouping of preferred coping mechanisms for each group presents an interesting picture (Table 3).

Table 3

*Coping preferences of men and women adults*

Men		Women	
Coping Mechanisms	<i>M</i>	Coping Mechanisms	<i>M</i>
Regression	16.66	Projection	16.41
Turning Against Self	17.41	Regression	16.75
Isolation	17.91	Turning Against Self	16.75
Projection	18.02	Isolation	18.56
Denial	19.41	Denial	21.33

The coping mechanisms in order of preference for the men are Regression (16.66), Turning Against Self (17.41), Isolation (17.91), Projection (18.02), and Denial (19.41), which is the least important mechanism for them. For women, the coping styles of Projection

(15.41), Regression (16.75), and Turning Against Self (16.75) are almost used to the same extent. Isolation (18.56) comes next in preference, and Denial (21.33) finds the least preference. Though preference for Denial is the least in both men and women, but men adopt this mechanism more as compared to women.

A simple ranking of the means suggest that in both the groups denial is the least preferred coping mechanism suggesting that both men and women may attempt to resolve the crises situation not by simply denying it but by using some other mechanisms. They may use denial but it is their last preference. Further, looking at other preferences, the results are indicative of the fact that the men prefer social support the most over other mechanisms. Women more or less prefer putting blame on either others or themselves and also seek social support. The preferences are a reflection of the doubts in their minds regarding their capacities. Quite possible the doubts pertaining to their capacities are a result of the complex roles and new responsibilities which the early adulthood years bring with them. The new complex roles demand from them a different perspective on life situations.

The present study provides some basic information about the coping mechanisms of men and women adults. It reveals that men and women use more or less the same kind of coping mechanisms, supporting the role constraints theory. It is, however, pertinent to point out that the interpretations should be considered tentative rather than conclusive. Further, research in this specific area would help us in drawing further conclusions.

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