

Schemes “Me and the world” and styles of coping with stress in youth practising sports

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Summary

The aim of the paper was to determine the relationship between self-image and the image of the surrounding world, and coping with stress in youth practising sports. The research was conducted on 222 students of both sexes in high schools with a sports profile in southern Poland. The following research methods were used: Endler's and Parker's CISS (Polish adaptation by Szczepaniak, Strelau, Wrześniewski), and Wysocka's Attitudes to Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and to the World Questionnaire. Therefore, there is a link between the dominant cognitive schemata “Me – the world” and the styles of coping with stress.

Keywords: cognitive schemata, coping with stress, youth, sport

Introduction

An athlete is widely regarded as a mentally strong person who can effectively cope with stress, and think positively. Athletes are considered to be more optimistic than non-athletes [Mohan Singh, Dureja 2013]. However, continuous exposure to stress, failure or criticism from fans and coaches may contribute to the consolidation of negative self-perception and one's efficiency, and lead to problems in coping with difficult situations. This seems to be particularly evident among young athletes.

Based on Richard Lazarus' transactional model [Lazarus, R., Folkman S. 1984], an emphasis needs to be placed on the role of cognitive appraisal, that is, the process of “categorization of the event and its various aspects, because of its importance to welfare” [Łosiak 2008, p. 66]. It concerns the choice of the way stress is coped with. According to Lazarus, coping with stress is “a constantly changing cognitive and behavioural effort to face external and/or internal requirements which are regarded as endangering or beyond the capacity of an individual” [Łosiak 2008, p. 85].

Having analysed the activities which perform the functions of coping, Lazarus singled out activities aimed at solving the problem that causes stress, and aimed at regulating the emotions associated with it [Łosiak 2008, p. 86]. Coping with stress may be considered in the categories of style (that is, a lasting personality disposition towards dealing with stressful situations), strategy (cognitive and behavioural efforts that an individual makes in a particular stressful situation) and process (under-

stood as a series of strategies that change over time due to situational changes and changes in the psycho-physical state of an individual) [Gracz, Sankowski 2001, pp. 142–143]. According to Wrześniewski [2000, p. 61] “the style together with the strategy are complementary to the process”. Norman Endler and James Parker – relying on Lazarus' model and discriminated problem- or emotion-focused coping – suggested three basic coping styles. These are: task-oriented style (taking the tasks); emotion-oriented style (involves focusing on one's emotional experiences) and avoidance-oriented style (avoiding the experiencing of stressful situations) [Strelau 2002, 2006, p. 302].

There is a clear association between the style of thinking, cognitive appraisal and coping with stress. In the relational model of Richard Lazarus the concept of coping refers to both the thoughts and the behaviour of an individual in a given situation. They change together with the situation [Klonowicz, Cieślak 2004, p. 282]. The ways of coping also correlate with the types of stressors [Anshel 1996] which may be even more important than the individual factors [Anshel, Kaissidis 1997; Anshel, Williams, Williams 2000]. The fact that the appraisal of stress requires taking the situation's characteristics into account is also emphasized by Łuszczynska [2011]. The strategies of coping depend to some extent on how the individual assesses the stressful situation, which was shown by Anshel, Jamieson, and Raviv [2001] in their studies on athletes. The strategies are also associated with personality traits, and the way of perceiving oneself and the world. Numerous studies

have shown the relationship between personality and the coping strategies preferred by an individual [as cited in: Klonowicz, Cieślak 2004].

Psychology finds many definitions of personality. In this paper, personality is defined as the views and beliefs about reality and the ways of processing information and interpreting events [Pervin 2002, cited in: Wysocka 2011]. Cognitive elements of personality are schemata (categories organizing the knowledge about the world and self), attributions (causes assigned to events) and beliefs (convictions that something is true or false). They may concern the physical world, other people, or ourselves [Wysocka 2011]. Cognitive schemata about ourselves and the surrounding world play an important role in dealing with stress, including that connected with sports competitions. Accordingly, a positive way of thinking and optimism are considered to be predictors of effective coping [Peterson 2000; Scheier, Carver 1985 & 1987; Haskell 2008; Ben-Zur, Debi 2005; Ceran 2013]. Conversely, a state of learned helplessness, described by Seligman, may be considered to be a negative consequence of stress [Łosiak 2008, p. 64], which is connected with the negative perception of self. The research by Hatchett and Park [2004] shows that optimism (resulting from positive thinking) is positively correlated with task-oriented strategies and social support, but negatively – with emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented strategies. The latter association was also confirmed by Taylor et al. [1992]. A positive way of thinking is also a predictor of effective adaptation to stressful events; optimism correlates positively with task-oriented strategies of coping with problems, searching for social support and emphasizing the positive aspects of a stressful situation. Moreover, pessimism and a negative style of interpretation of stressful events correlated with denial and distancing oneself, and with other maladaptive strategies [Scheier, Weintraub, Carver 1986; Mahmouds 2011, p. 8].

In athletes, the associations between strategies of coping with stress and positive representations were observed by Mohd. Sofian Omar-Fauzee et al. [2009], and between optimism and problem-oriented coping – by Grove & Heard [1997]. Schinke & Peterson [2002] also wrote about the role of positive thinking and optimism in sports activities. A relationship between self-esteem and the styles of coping was also observed. According to Nwankwo & Onyishi [2012] high self-esteem corresponds with more effective strategies of coping in sports situations. High self-esteem works also in favour of perceiving difficult situations as tasks to be solved. Furthermore, it facilitates choosing more effective strategies of coping in sports situations. In addition, a player with high self-esteem will try to control what happens to him or her; they will try to think optimistically about the tasks they decide to face.

The aim of the study

The aim of the study was to determine the relationship between self-image and the image of the surrounding world, and coping with stress in youth practising sports.

Research questions:

1. What is the relationship between cognitive schemata about self and the styles of coping with stress in the athletes surveyed?
2. What is the relationship between cognitive patterns concerning "others and the world" and the styles of coping with stress in the athletes surveyed?

Participants

The research was conducted on 222 participants – 114 boys and 108 girls – pupils of secondary sports schools from southern Poland. They were students from seven Schools of Sports Championship (in Zakopane, Żywiec, Szczyrk, Sosnowiec, Zabrze and 2 schools in Kraków), as well as from sports classes in the 12th Secondary School in Kraków.

Participants represented both summer and winter disciplines; individual (126 participants) and team sport players (96 participants).

Research method

Two research methods were used:

The Coping Inventory of Stressful Situations (CISS) by Endler and Parker in the Polish adaptation by Szczepaniak, Strelau, Wrześniewski [Strelau, Jaworowska, Wrześniewski, Szczepaniak 2005]. The questionnaire consists of 48 statements determining behavioural style in stressful situations on three scales:

- SSZ – task-oriented style (determines the tendency for making an effort to solve a problem in a stressful situation by attempting to change the situation or by cognitive transformation) [Wrześniewski 2000, p. 58];
- SEZ – emotion-oriented style (determines the tendency for focusing on oneself in a stressful situation) [Wrześniewski 2000, p. 58];
- SSU – avoidance-oriented style (determines the tendency to avoid thinking and going through the situation in the face of stress), which takes two forms: ACZ – (Distraction) engaging in substitute activities (for example, thinking about something pleasant, not related to the problem) and the PKT – (Social Diversion) the search for social contacts [Wrześniewski 2000, p. 58; Strelau, 2002 & 2006, p. 302].

Attitudes to Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and To the World Questionnaire (Kwestionariusz Nastawień In-

trapersonalnych, Interpersonalnych i Nastawień wobec Świata – KNIIS) – Wysocka [2011]. The questionnaire examines the following attitudes:

- Intrapersonal (recognised as self-image, global self-esteem), that is the system of beliefs about one's "self", within which there can be distinguished: general self-esteem (non-specific), partial self-esteem (specific – cognitive-intellectual sphere, physical sphere, socio-moral sphere, and the characterological sphere, which depicts the image of global, specific self-esteem) [Wysocka 2011, p. 4];
- Interpersonal (reflecting the image of other people and relations with them, as well as beliefs about the functioning of interpersonal relations: "others towards me" – appreciation and support from others versus indifference and underestimation; the threat posed by others versus the sense of security in a relationship – and "Me towards others" – taking actions on behalf of others, pro-social behaviour, altruism, sociability versus egocentrism, isolating oneself; aggressiveness versus the lack of aggression) [Wysocka 2011, p. 4];
- Attitudes towards the world (image of the world, beliefs about its meaningfulness and being sympathetic to people) [Wysocka 2011, p. 4];
- Attitudes towards one's own life (image /vision/ of one's life and, consequently, the beliefs about self-efficacy and control versus learned helplessness) [Wysocka 2011, p. 4].

The paper discusses the following beliefs concerning: the level of global self-esteem, the sense of social approval, feelings of helplessness, the sense of meaningfulness and goodwill of the world, the sense of self-efficacy, the sense of support from the others, the sense of danger, aggressive attitudes, pro-social attitudes, the characterological sphere of self-esteem, the physical sphere of self-esteem, the cognitive-intellectual sphere of self-esteem and socio-moral self-esteem [Wysocka 2011].

The analyses were conducted with the use of the following data statistical packages: IBM SPSS Statistics 21 and Statistica 10. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was also calculated.

Results

Pearson's correlation analysis showed that with increasing levels of global self-esteem (meaning beliefs about one's value) as well as the physical sphere (which relates

to beliefs about the qualities of appearance and physical fitness) the level of task-oriented style of coping increased among the athletes surveyed. Together with increasing levels of global self-esteem and physical sphere, the usage of emotion-oriented style of coping and engaging in substitute activities decreased.

Similarly, together with increasing levels of socio-moral sphere (moral beliefs revealed during actions focused on ourselves and others) and characterological self-esteem (which consists of a set of mental characteristics that appear in the actions of the individual, in the behaviour towards others, in the way of being, and in dispositions), the usage of emotion-oriented style of coping and engaging in substitute activities decreased in the group surveyed. At the same time the levels of task-oriented style and the search for social contacts increased.

Similarly, the growth of the level of task-oriented style with a simultaneous decrease in the emotion-oriented style of coping were observed in the case of increased scores on the cognitive-intellectual sphere of self-esteem (beliefs about one's talents and intellectual abilities).

A high sense of support from other people (related to the expectation of the fulfilment of desires or help in their fulfilment from someone else) was positively correlated with task-oriented and avoidance-oriented styles of coping (especially that connected with the search for social contact). The sense of danger (i.e. beliefs about perceived or received/experienced danger), however, resulted in a more frequent use of emotion-oriented style of coping focused on the search for social contacts, and task-oriented coping.

With the rise in pro-social attitude (which means the individual's readiness to act on behalf of another person) the simultaneous growth of task-oriented and avoidance-oriented style of coping (especially that focused on searching for social contacts) was observed. An aggressive attitude towards others (i.e. a tendency to overcome the resistance with force, fight, attack, etc.; to diminish and ridicule, depreciate other people) increased

the intensity of emotion- and avoidance-oriented coping (especially that involving engaging in substitute activities). It was also observed that with the increase in the sense of efficacy (i.e. a subjective belief in the ability to act in a given situation, to cope with the task), the use of emotion-oriented style and engaging in substitute activities decreased, whereas the level of task-oriented style of coping and the search for social contacts increased.

It was also observed that in the case of feelings of helplessness (i.e. belief in the inability to control events) these relationships were reversed. This means that the increase in feelings of helplessness was related to the decrease in the use of emotion-oriented style and engaging in substitute activities. Interestingly, the level of task-oriented style of coping decreased, as well as the search for social contacts.

It was also shown that with the increase in the sense of social approval (the tendency to assign socially desirable statements to ourselves and to reject the socially undesirable ones) the use of emotion-oriented style of coping decreased, whereas the level of task-oriented style of coping increased.

The final analyses concern the relationship between the sense of meaningfulness and goodwill of the world (in the case of positive beliefs about the world – the so-called basic hope), and coping with stress. It was found that the sense of meaningfulness contributed to the increase in the levels of task-oriented style of coping. Moreover, the increase in the sense of meaningfulness of the world caused a decrease in the use of emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping, especially that related to engaging in substitute actions. However, with an increasing sense of the goodwill of the world the use of emotion-oriented coping decreased, while the levels of task-oriented coping and the search for social contact increased.

These associations were presented as the results of Pearson's correlation analysis in chart 1. below.

Discussion

The results obtained enabled the research questions that concerned the association between the style of thinking and ways of coping with stress in youth practising sports to be answered. According to the cognitive theory paradigm, the main components of human psychological functioning are cognitive schemata. These are the structures that are responsible for the subjective interpretation of the situational context and the relation individual – situation [Alford, Beck 2005]. The beliefs about oneself, the others and one's own worlds [Beck J.S. 2005] stand behind the thought patterns. These patterns will

also prove important in the case of preferred style of coping with stress. As is clear from the studies presented, positive thinking patterns that are related to self-image, beliefs about oneself, and self-efficacy work in favour of the task-oriented style of coping. This is consistent with the reports by Hatchett and Park [2004]. People who accept themselves can face difficulties directly. A positive self-image and an optimistic way of thinking are factors that help people to cope in stressful situations. These are also the factors that shield from the negative consequences of stress [Taylor, Stanton 2007].

Positive general self-esteem may also come from earlier experiences. According to Alford and Beck [2005, p. 11] "Cognition' is defined as that function that involves inferences about one's experiences and about the occurrence and control of future events". Prior positive experiences with oneself, as well as the effective coping with stress, build up one's self-efficacy. It results in a belief in one's ability to act in a particular – also difficult – situation; it lays the foundation for a positive appraisal of one's ability to deal with the task at hand. Hence, the task-oriented style of coping develops.

General self-esteem, beside the knowledge of previous experiences, consists of beliefs about one's intellectual and physical capabilities. Positive beliefs about one's talents and intellectual abilities in the case of the athletes surveyed enable them to cope with stress better. Positive thinking and belief system, social skills (communication skills, undertaking behaviours consistent with social norms and principles of cooperation) and social support

Chart 1. Analyses of the Paerson's correlation of I – others and the styles of coping with stress.

Schemes: I – OTHERS	Task-oriented coping	Emotion-oriented coping	Avoidance-oriented coping
General self-esteem	.33***	-.52***	-.10
The sphere of cognitive-intellectual self-esteem	.45***	-.38***	-.05
The sphere of the physical self-esteem	.30***	-.29***	-.08
The sphere of socio-moral self-esteem	.35***	-.24***	-.07
The sphere of characterological self-esteem	.51***	-.36***	-.05
"Others towards me" – Support	.23**	-.19**	.16 *
"Others towards me" – Danger	-.17*	.24***	-.05
"I towards the others" – Pro-social	.16*	-.11	.20**
"I towards the others" – Aggressiveness	-.04	.17*	.19**
The meaningfulness, orderliness of the world	.29***	-.31***	-.21**
Image of the world – Goodwill of the world	.31***	-.14*	-.01
The image of life – sense of efficacy	.57***	-.28***	-.07
The image of life – sense of helplessness	-.42***	.53***	.10
The scale of social approval	.30***	-.41***	-.04

are not the only fundamental resources which enable individuals to effectively cope with stress. They are on a par with the intellectual, problem-solving skills, like the ability to search for data, analyse the situation, identify the problem, generate alternative solutions and select the most appropriate one [Lazarus, Folkman 1984].

Similarly, a positive perception of one's own physical condition – which in the case of athletes is particularly important – helps in the task-oriented approach to stress. The surveyed group consisted of young people, teenagers. Adolescence is a time of concerns over such issues as physiognomy or adequacy in terms of physical prowess. These types of concerns are not unfamiliar to young athletes who compete every day in the realm of physicality, compare themselves with others and submit to evaluation from the environment. Their physical fitness and general beliefs about the physical sphere to a large extent determine their overall self-image. Perhaps this is why the results of global and physical self-esteems converged.

Moreover, the individuals who are characterized by high values in terms of socio-moral sphere in the face of difficulties are trying to focus directly on the task at hand. Perhaps the values they follow help to some extent in meeting the need for security and facilitate the struggle with difficulties. A positive attitude towards the environment and good relations with others can also contribute to the search for support in difficult moments of life. This type of relationship was also observed in the students surveyed. It is possible that these individuals are characterized by higher levels of socialization and high interpersonal skills, as well as a high level of sense of social approval, which is also associated with socialization. Similar associations were observed in students with a strong pro-social attitude. It is possible that they are able to show social support to others when needed. However, they expect the same behaviour from the environment. This confirms the correlation between a high sense of support among individuals and their tendency to choose a task-oriented style of coping and searching for social contacts.

As in the case of a positive image of oneself and others, a generally favourable picture of the world will affect how an individual will behave in the face of a difficult situation. Both the sense of meaningfulness and goodwill of the world – perception of the world as predictable, accepting – made it possible for the participants to attempt active coping with stress by applying a task-oriented style. In a safe, predictable world, it is easier for an individual to believe in the success of their activities and their own efficacy.

Among the young athletes surveyed, a group characterized by a negative, pessimistic way of thinking was also distinguished. Particularly among athletes this attitude is not beneficial. The topic of negative thinking in sport has already been addressed by Hatzigeorgiadis [1999], Hat-

zigeorgiadis & Biddle [1999, 2000], Lane, Harwood and Nevill [2005], as well as Wilson and Smith [2007]. It was observed (based upon the research results discussed) that young players who had developed a belief in their inability to control events, and a high sense of helplessness in the face of difficulties, tried to ignore the problem by engaging in the least effective substitute activities. Therefore, the dominant style of coping with stress among them is the avoidance-oriented style. These individuals are characterized by a lack of self-efficacy and negative beliefs about themselves and the world around them. The world is perceived as threatening, unsympathetic. Other people are perceived in a similar way, which evokes an aggressive attitude towards them. Such a view of oneself, others, and the world contributes to the rejection of the resource of social support. This may be associated with lower social competence. According to Heller [Silver R.L., Wortman C.B. 1984 p. 64], “deficits in social competence may ‘produce the poorer levels of adjustment reported for unsupported individuals, as well as accounting for the lower levels of support they receive.’”

Summing up the considerations on the basis of this study it is possible to distinguish the variables fostering the task-oriented style of coping with stress. These are: global, physical, cognitive-intellectual, socio-moral and characterological self-esteems, high self-efficacy, with a simultaneous sense of the meaningfulness and goodwill of the world, a sense of support from others, a pro-social attitude, and the need for social approval. In turn, the least efficient avoidance-oriented styles of coping correlate with an aggressive attitude towards others, insecurity and helplessness.

Conclusion: There is an association between the dominant cognitive schemas “Me – the world” and styles of coping with stress – a positive image of self and of others increase the frequency of the task-oriented coping style being used.

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