PERCEIVED COPING STRATEGIES OF SRI LANKAN ADOLESCENCE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence - The word *adolescence* derives from the Latin verb *"adolescence",* which means *"to grow up"* or *"to grow to maturity"* (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Hence, adolescence is conceptualized as a transitional period, with a variable and imprecise duration. It is believed to begin in parallel with the onset of puberty/ fertility and ends with the acceptance of adult roles and responsibilities. Of all life-stages, except childhood, adolescence is the one most marked by rapid and potentially tumultuous transition (Williams, Holmbeck & Greenly, 2002).

Psychosocial Profile of Sri Lankan Adolescence - Due to traditional values and strong roots in the family system, Sri Lanka may not have witnessed radical changes within the adolescence which the Western world experienced as a result of the world wars, flower powers and drugs or may have experienced such changes comparatively slower and differently than the western world. However, the above described forces may also have changed the traditional values about marriage and family, in the Sri Lanka context.

Adolescent stress and coping - Although S. Hall and others overdramatized the extent of "storm and stress" in adolescence, many adolescents today experience numerous potential stressors throughout the process of growth and development (Compas & Reeslund, 2009). Stressors of both an acute and chronic nature are important in the course of normal as well as disrupted development during adolescence.

Hence, the ability to adapt to stress and adversity seems to be central facet of adolescence. Further, learning to cope with stressors seems to be an important aspect for adolescence considering the intense and unique stressors adolescence experience in comparison to other developmental milestones. As a result, research on coping in adolescence seemed to be highly significant as findings from such research studies would provide valuable information on the nature and development of coping from a more applied perspective such as how adolescence address psychosocial stress. Since, psychosocial stress is a significant and pervasive risk factor for psychopathology (Perera, 2004) in adolescence; coping strategies of adolescence as potentially important mediators and moderators of the impact of stress on current and future adjustment and psychopathology looms large. Further, the research on coping strategies of adolescence would widely contribute to the research on psychosocial interventions as they may place adolescence on more versus less adaptive developmental trajectories and may be a precursor of patterns of coping throughout adulthood.

Stress, coping and Sri Lankan Adolescence - After several decades of political unrest which was mainly due to the unmet needs of the youth and adolescence the country cannot ignore the psycho social-wellbeing of the said group. Also there are 3.7 million adolescents in Sri Lanka which roughly equals to the one fifth of the population (UNICEF, 2004), hence exploring their coping strategies pertaining to met/ unmet psychosocial needs seem to be logical and rational venture.

Even though adolescent coping strategies seemed to be widely studied aspect in the globe there seemed to a vacuum when it comes to coping strategies in Sri Lankan adolescence. Therefore, the aim of the present research was to identify coping strategies of Sri Lankan adolescence and whether they are serving as mediators or precursors of stress.

METHOD
Participants
When recruiting participants, diversity in their socio-economic back grounds (plantation sector, rural and urban areas)and experiences (e.g. experiencing abuse/neglect…) was considered. Maximum variation was utilized during participant selection. Before the participant selection, experts in the areas of psychology, educational psychology and research methodology were consulted in order to compile a diverse list of participants. Redundancy was reached with 10 (Girls = 06; Boys = 04) participants. .

Instrument - The primary data source of the study was an open ended, semi–structured interview schedule comprising of 19 open-ended questions, addressing three main areas: the participants' relationships with their parents (e.g. tell me about the relationship between you and your parents, when you are unhappy what do your parents do?), siblings (e.g. tell me about your brothers and sisters) and peers (Tell me about your friends, Are you in a romantic relationship). This interview schedule was developed based on experts in the field of psychology and sociology whose expertise lies in working with Sri Lankan adolescents reviewed the questionnaire. Based on their feedback the revisions were made. Subsequently, the interview schedule was pilot-tested with a girl and a boy (15-18 years) representing the sample.

Phase II- The aim of this phase was to explore perceived coping strategies of Sri Lankan Adolescence
During the present study the data were collected using focus group activities.
*Participants -*The participants for the focus groups were adolescents between 13 to 16 (M = 14.4; S.D = .893) years. Each focus group comprised of six to eight same gendered and same age adolescents, as smaller groups show greater potential (Krueger & Casey, 2000). All together 11 focus groups were conducted with a total number of 73 adolescents with 32 (43.8%) girls and 42(56.2%) boys.

Each focus group activity session lasted 30 to 45 minutes and contained three activities. Through these activities the participants were requested to discuss three topic; 1. Factors which threaten their psychosocial wellbeing, 2.Perceived coping strategies employed by them when confronted with factors which threaten their psychosocial wellbeing and 3.adolescence perception of their support groups. This poster depicts data collected on adolescence perceived coping strategies.

In order to explore the perceived coping strategies, the participants were given an activity listed as 'coping mango tree'. Each group was given a large paper containing a picture of a mango tree and color papers cut in the shape of mangoes. They were requested to write the coping strategies they use when confronted with problems.

RESULTS

Phase I - Adolescence has been conceptualized as an inevitable period of transition. Hence, the speed and magnitude of these changes may overtax the capacity ofmany young people to cope. Although adolescents explore and contemplate being in the adult roles, in the Sri Lankan milieu; to an abnormal degree they seem to be under the influence and protection of authoritative figures such as parents and teachers. Therefore, parental restrictions and disciplinary strategies seem to affect the adolescents' wellbeing.

My parents told me that they would not send me to 'Angampora' (traditional fighting sports – Sri Lanka), and I said 'No, I will go but I will get good marks for my studies as well...I am fed up with the scolding of my parents...and are immune to it (8/F/18)

Recently in Katugasthota my three wheeler almost collided with a bus, I felt afraid but did not show it to my father or the older brother who was with me, I smiles and said 'oh!, it is not so important' (2/M/16)

From my childhood I am used to being harassed...but smallest things make me cry...it is something which belongs to me (meaning that sadness and sorrow is inherent)...now I am used to anything (meaning that she is immune to it)...sometimes I look at the sky...in front of our house there a plot of land...from there the sky looks very beautiful...therefore, I go out and gaze at the sky...when my mind comes to state which enables me to study I go inside and study (6/F/17)

Though I have free cards for some of my tuition classes a revision class costs 800 rupees...it cost a lot, my grandmother gives me money for it out of her pension...otherwise I do not have much expenses, if I have expenses I do something 'part time' like making cakes, decorating sarees and earn it (6/F/17).

Table 01: Perceived coping strategies of the Sri Lankan adolescence

	Coping	
Positive (n = 26)		
	Physical (n = 18)	*Dance, indulge in hobbies with friends, go to a quiet place alone, take a walk, play with siblings, do art and craft, indulge in a hobby, draw, run, play games, climb trees, play computer games, play cards, going to temple, watch television, listen to music, Read books/ novels, write songs/ poems*
	Verbal (n =04)	*Get advice from teachers/siblings/ parents, Tell parents/ teacher/ friends/ best friend/siblings when there is problem or 'tell my sorrow to Lord Buddha', Sing songs, laugh,*
	Emotional (n = 03)	*Tolerate with patience, face problems without wavering, Meditate*
	Other (n = 01)	*Being happy with friends*
Negative (n = 25)		
	Physical (n = 15)	*Throwing things/ books, breaking things, harassing others/ parents, throwing stones at tree/ roof, hit siblings, walk away from home, staying somewhere in the school when certain subjects are being taught ('cut classes'),Being absent from*

	school, fighting with siblings, pretending to be ill, walk aimlessly, hide, refusing to eat, Sleeping, Refusing to come out of the room
Verbal (n = 07)	*Arguing with parents,avoiding or refusing to speak with parents/ others, cry, shout, scold others/ friends, howl, crunch teeth*
Emotional (n = 03)	*'Being angry'with self and others (e.g. mother), think of the problem/s constantly, think of sad things and be unhappy*

Table 1 depicts the perceived coping strategies listed in the focus group activity session were coded into positive and negative based on the feedback of the participants. They were further coded into physical, verbal, emotional and other. Table 01 conveys that adolescents seem to use more physical (n = 33) strategies in comparison to verbal (n = 11), emotional (n = 06) and other (n = 01). The perceived positive and negative coping strategies listed by the participants were almost similar in number, with positive physical strategies (n = 18) conveying a slight increase in comparison to the negative physical strategies (n = 15). Further, participants have listed culturally inherent passive aggressive practices such as 'crunching teeth to refrain from speaking back to elders (parents, teachers and other…) when being scolded or criticized as coping strategies. Moreover, results conveyed that adolescent boys have listed more negative/ physical coping strategies such as throwing/ breaking things, in comparison to adolescent girls who listed more positive coping strategies.

DISCUSSION

The present study fills a vacuum which exist in research pertaining to Sri Lankan adolescence' perceived strategies of coping. The results of this study convey several important findings. First, participants possess limited awareness pertaining to systematic coping strategies to alleviate stressors and daily hassles they encounter. Second, their perceived coping strategies are more focused on behavioral aspects.

Based on these findings the present study makes several recommendations. The most important recommendation it makes is the awareness pertaining to coping strategies within the adolescence which address cognitive, verbal and behavioral aspects of coping in a child-friendly manner preferably through activities and games.

Since, the absence of measures and tools available to assess adolescence coping within the Sri Lankan milieu, the present study also recommends in standardizing or developing measures to suit the cultural contexts of Sri Lankan adolescence.

Finally, coping strategies listed by the participants do not confirm to the western definition of coping as a sub-set of broader category of self regulation. Therefore, the present study also conveys the importance of conducting research on coping strategies employed by Sri Lankan adolescence.

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