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Refining the conceptualization of a future-oriented self-regulatory behavior: Proactive copingStephanie Jean Sohl , , Anne Moyer[Show more](#)  Share  Cite<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.j.paid.2009.02.013> [Get rights and content](#) 

Abstract

Proactive coping, directed at an upcoming as opposed to an ongoing stressor, is a new focus in positive psychology research. However, two differing conceptualizations of this construct create confusion. This study compared how each operationalization of proactive coping relates to well-being. Participants ($N=281$) facing an upcoming college examination completed the Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI; consisting of two subscales that each assess one of the conceptualizations), the Proactive Competence Scale (PCS; that assesses the proactive coping process), and measures of well-being. The results demonstrated that conceptualizing proactive coping as a positively-focused striving for goals was predictive of well-being (the shared variance from affect, subjective well-being and physical symptoms), whereas conceptualizing proactive coping as focused on preventing a negative future was not. The first conceptualization of proactive coping's unique association with well-being was explained by two of the proactive competencies, use of resources and realistic goal setting, and the remaining variance in well-being was explained by the first factor of optimism. These results demonstrated that aspiring for a positive future is distinctly predictive of well-being and suggests that research should focus on accumulating resources and goal setting in designing interventions to promote proactive coping.

Introduction

Proactive coping has emerged as a new focus of positive psychology research. It predicts outcomes such as functional independence, life satisfaction, and engagement (Gan et al., 2007, Greenglass et al., 2005, Uskul and Greenglass, 2005). However, the construct's conceptualization has been guided by two similar, yet distinct, theoretical frameworks that use the same term, proactive coping (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997, Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002). Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) posit that proactive coping is a method of assessing future goals and setting the stage to achieve them successfully. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) assert that proactive coping is a process through which one prepares for potential future stressors, possibly

averting them altogether. Reconciling the inconsistent definitions of this important self-regulatory behavior would help to avoid confusion in its operationalization and would foster more fruitful future research.

One measure of proactive coping, the Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI; Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum, & Taubert, 1999), includes both a subscale that captures proactive coping as defined by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002), labeled the *proactive coping subscale*, and a subscale that captures proactive coping as defined by Aspinwall and Taylor (1997), labeled the *preventive coping subscale*. Thus, the confusion surrounding the definition of *proactive coping* begins with the names of the subscales in this measure. Because this measure was developed by the same group of researchers that proposed the first conceptualization of proactive coping (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002), the proactive coping subscale is consistent with their definition. Both the proactive coping subscale and the preventive coping subscale have been included in several studies (e.g., Gan et al., 2007, Greenglass, 2002, Greenglass et al., 2006, Greenglass et al., 2005, Ouwehand et al., 2006, Uskul and Greenglass, 2005).

A recent study included both the proactive coping subscale and the preventive coping subscale of the PCI (Gan et al., 2007). This large cross-sectional study of Chinese college students ($N=1254$) found that each translated subscale formed a distinct factor and the best fitting model included both subscales as related factors. A second study in another sample of Chinese college students ($N=171$) examined the roles of both subscales in explaining the relationship between self-reported stress and student engagement; however, it evaluated each subscale separately. The results indicated that only the proactive coping subscale fully mediated the relationship between stress and student engagement (Gan et al., 2007).

The two conceptualizations agree on the mechanisms through which proactive coping acts and the behaviors it manifests (Greenglass, 2002). The five stages of proactive coping as defined by Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) are: (1) resource accumulation; (2) recognition of potential stressors; (3) initial appraisal; (4) preliminary coping efforts; and (5) elicitation and use of feedback concerning initial efforts. A study based on this process model of proactive coping found that proactive coping (using the second conceptualization measured with the preventive coping subscale) correlated with three of four assessed *proactive competencies* at baseline (Bode, de Ridder, Kuijer, & Bensing, 2007). However, the study did not assess whether the proactive coping subscale was associated with the proactive competencies, as well.

Optimism, defined as an overall expectancy that the future will work out favorably (Scheier & Carver, 1992), is considered influential in facilitating proactive coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997) and was found to be related to both the proactive coping and preventive coping subscales (Gan et al., 2007). In studies suggesting that proactive coping is associated with affect, satisfaction with life, and physical symptoms, optimism has also been related to these positive outcomes (Chang and Sanna, 2001, Uskul and Greenglass, 2005). Thus, it is important to establish if proactive coping uniquely predicts salutary outcomes above that which is predicted by the shared variance of optimism and proactive coping. Prior work found that proactive coping assessed with the proactive coping subscale remained significant in predicting lower depression and marginally significant in predicting life satisfaction after controlling for demographic variables and optimism (Uskul & Greenglass, 2005). Therefore, it would be useful to investigate this association with the preventive coping subscale, as well.

The current study aimed to clarify the conceptualization of the construct proactive coping and determine the process through which proactive coping results in positive outcomes. Therefore, the two definitions of proactive coping were examined simultaneously during the anticipatory stage of confronting an upcoming stressor, an exam in a psychology course. Studying this specific stressor is useful because it occurs in the future, participants have some degree of control over it, and it is the same for all participants (Bolger, 1990, Ouwehand et al., 2006). Also, exam scores represent an objective outcome measure.

As supported by the finding that proactive coping measured with the preventive coping subscale correlated with three of four proactive competencies, we hypothesized (1) that both the first and second conceptualizations of proactive coping would predict all four of the proposed proactive competencies. Additionally, given prior work showing that the proactive coping subscale remained a significant predictor of salutary outcomes after controlling for optimism, we further hypothesized (2) that the paths between both conceptualizations of proactive coping and the outcomes, well-being and exam grade, would remain significant and be explained by the proactive competencies when controlling for optimism.

Section snippets

Participants and procedure

Three hundred undergraduates 18 years of age and over and fluent in English participated in return for course credit. They provided informed consent and completed all questionnaires at a single point in the week before their second exam in a college course. Completing the questionnaire online through a secure survey program, PsychData, took less than one hour. A total of 281 participants completed all required measurements (age, $M=19.2$, $SD=2.6$; 59% female; 9.3% Hispanic vs. non Hispanic; 49.1%...

Data preparation

To prepare the data for the planned analyses, list wise deletion was used for 19 participants because of screening failures ($n=3$), too many missing items ($n=2$), and to reduce skewness and kurtosis ($n=14$). This resulted in an N of 281. Values were imputed with linear interpolation in SPSS for participants missing fewer than 10% of their data....

Measurement model

The measurement model that included the latent variables Proactive Coping 1 and 2, Optimism, Low Pessimism and Well-being was not a good fit to the data, χ^2 ...

Discussion

In summary, the action of the self-regulatory strategy proactive coping is most accurately described by the first conceptualization by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002), whereby Proactive Coping 1 was significantly associated with all of the mechanisms proposed in the theoretical framework (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Additionally, this conceptualization of proactive coping's unique variance associated with Well-being was completely explained by use of resources and realistic goal setting, whereas...

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...Consequently, it is expected to reduce maladjustment and promote wellbeing because the person is prepared to deal with the stressful event. The research data indicate that future-oriented coping is negatively related to depression and anxiety (Altan-Atalay & Zeytun, 2020; Gan et al., 2007; Greenglass et al., 2006; Li & Miller, 2017; Vaculíková, 2016), and perception of stress and burnout (Gan et al., 2007; Gan et al., 2010) and positively associated with and subjective wellbeing (Vaculíková, 2016), positive affect (Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009; Sohl & Moyer, 2009), and life satisfaction (Bakracheva, 2019; Sohl & Moyer, 2009), with associations for proactive coping being more consistent and significant than those for preventive coping. The study of coping in adolescents is the most appropriate since adolescence is a period of transition and development characterized by multiple changes and demands whose ineffective management could impact the individual's mental adjustment and affect their wellbeing (Cunsolo, 2017)...

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