DOI:10.6129/CJP.202103_63(1).0003
中華心理學刊 民 110，63 卷，1 期，41-72
Chinese Journal of Psychology 2021, Vol.63, No.1, 41-72

One Moment of Patience, One Hundred Years of Peace? Strategies of Interpersonal Stress Coping in Chinese Organizations

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Previous research has identified context-specific interpersonal stressors in Chinese organizations that are negatively related to employee health. However, the issue regarding how Chinese workers cope with these interpersonal stressors is still unclear and requires further clarification. Thus, we conducted three studies to clarify this issue. Study 1 adopted an inductive approach (N = 184) to explore the strategies of interpersonal stress coping in Chinese organizations. Study 2 developed a new Chinese interpersonal stress coping survey and used confirmatory factor analysis (N = 237) to examine its construct validity. Study 3 drew on the transactional process model to explore the relationships between the strategies of Chinese interpersonal stress coping and their antecedents and outcomes with a multilevel model (N = 170). The results revealed that Chinese workers used specific strategies to cope with interpersonal stress, including proactive resolution, patience, passive escape, and cognitive adaptation. Moreover, the results also demonstrated that relative power appraisal and relationship quality appraisal at event-level and harmony motives at the individual-level were related to different strategies of coping with interpersonal stress and that different coping strategies affect emotional exhaustion differently. Based on the research findings, we proposed a two-dimensional model (i.e., approach/avoidance, high/low energy investment) to explain the mechanisms underlying Chinese individuals' coping with interpersonal stress. Overall, this study explored the strategies of interpersonal stress coping in Chinese organizations. We discuss the research findings, managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research in the last section of this paper.

Keywords: *stress coping, interpersonal stress coping, transactional process model, harmony motives*

Extended Abstract

Past research has explored the relationship between Chinese interpersonal stressors and their consequences. However, the strategies that Chinese workers use to cope with these interpersonal stressors and the consequences of the strategies using remain unclear. This issue is worthy of further investigation for two reasons. First, coping with interpersonal stress is context-specific and differs across cultures. Therefore, when facing interpersonal stressors, it is expected that Chinese workers will employ culturally appropriate coping behaviors, which are seldom investigated. Second, prior research only examined Chinese workers' coping behaviors toward general work stress. No research has explored Chinese workers' coping with interpersonal stress. Accordingly, research tools to measure the strategies used to cope with interpersonal stress in this population have not been developed. Hence, this study will conduct three series of studies to address these two gaps. Study 1 followed an inductive approach to explore the strategies of Chinese interpersonal stress coping. The study collected incidents related to interpersonal stress in organizations to clarify how Chinese workers respond to interpersonal stressors.

Study 2 aimed to develop a scale to measure the strategies of Chinese interpersonal stress coping. Finally, Study 3 explored the causes and consequences of the strategies of Chinese interpersonal stress coping with an event-based survey to establish a nomological network.

Study 1

Methods

The purpose of Study 1 was to understand the strategies of interpersonal stress coping in Chinese organizations. Using the critical incident technique, we collected 271 valid incidents from 184 workers (Sample 1). We then conducted a content analysis to classify these incidents of interpersonal stress coping into different dimensions. Among all workers, 38% were male, the average age was 39 years, the average tenure was 8.91 years, 58% were university graduates. The industries represented were medical care (15.2%), hi-tech (11.9%), and traditional manufacturing (17.5%).

Results

This study classified 271 incidents into four dimensions. The first dimension, *proactive resolution*, refers to taking the initiative to solve the problem through communication, coordination, and seeking assistance from others. This dimension accounts for 40.59% of the incidents and includes two sub-categories, communication and seeking assistance. The second dimension, *patience*, refers to suppressing the behaviors and emotions involuntarily and passively and deliberately maintaining good interaction with the others to avoid harmony disruption. This dimension accounts for 24.72% of the incidents and includes two sub-categories, suppression and politeness. The third dimension, *passive escape*, refers to not responding or not acting proactively, refraining from the occasions that cause interpersonal stress, or being oblivious to others and creating psychological distance. This dimension accounts for 19.56% of the incidents and includes three sub-categories, compliance, escape, and obliviousness. The fourth dimension, *cognitive adaptation*, refers to adjusting or changing one's perception or cognition toward the incident of interpersonal stress. This dimension accounts for 15.13% of the incidents and includes two sub-categories, empathy and cognitive regulation.

These four dimensions of Chinese interpersonal stress coping reflect many Chinese-style characteristics, which can reflect the social orientation and harmony value in Chinese cultural tradition and may differ from the West. For example, regarding proactive resolution, Chinese workers may adopt third-party intervention and coordination to solve the problem. This coping behavior is a form of relationship management that highlights the relationship-oriented value in social orientation. Regarding patience, Chinese workers will hold back and strategically suppress their opinions and ideas to maintain interpersonal harmony and avoid conflict, which echoes Chinese conflict resolution strategies (Huang, 1999; Hwang, 1997-1998). Regarding passive escape, Chinese workers will show Taoist inaction and detachment, engaging in emotional refinement (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007). Chinese workers will also show negative resistance (e.g., silence, indifference, neglect, and noncooperation) in response to others' requests. Finally, regarding cognitive adaptation, Chinese workers will reinterpret the interpersonal stress in such a way as to produce a feeling of gain, which is consistent with Laozi's perspective that "constructive words seem to be the opposite."

Study 2

Based on Study 1, we preliminarily generated a 25-item Chinese interpersonal stress coping scale, and each item belongs to one of the four dimensions. To test the validity and reliability, we first conducted forced classification to investigate the content validity of the scale (i.e., whether the written items can be classified into the corresponding dimensions). Second, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and calculated internal consistency to test the construct validity (i.e., whether the proposed four-dimension model is the best model) and reliability of the scale.

Forced Classification

Fifty-five graduate and undergraduate students (Sample 2) were enrolled for the classification of the preliminary items. These students had some work experience, mainly part-time or internship experience. Among them, 30.9% were male, the average age was 22.9 years, the average tenure was 17.6 months, and the industry represented was mainly service.

The results of forced classification showed that among 25 items, three items failed to be classified into their corresponding dimensions. Hence, the remaining 22 items were retained. For the 4 dimensions, each dimension comprised 3 to 7 items. Sample items were, "communicate with others to achieve consensus" (proactive resolution), "suppress negative emotions, not expressing" (patience), "take no actions and just let time solve the problem" (passive escape), and "take the perspective of others" (cognitive adaptation).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Overall, 237 valid samples (Sample 3) were recruited for the CFA. Among them, 45.1% were male, the average age was 30.5 years, the average tenure was 49.9 months, the education level was mainly university (69.6%). The industries represented included service (24.9%), general manufacturing industry (16.9%), high-tech (11.4%), information (7.6%), and finance and insurance industry (7.6%).

The results of CFA showed that the proposed four-factor model generally fit the data well (χ^2 = 445.49, df = 203, p < .01; CFI = .89, NNFI = .87, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .09) (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and all factor loadings reached a significant level (β = .41~.86, p <.01), providing evidence of convergent validity. Furthermore, following the suggestions of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we set the correlation coefficient of any pair of four factors to 1 to produce six nested models and performed difference test between hypothesized four-factor model and six nested models respectively. The results showed significant differences between the proposed four-factor model and all six nested models (χ^2 (1, N = 237) from 151.71 to 392.26), providing evidence of discriminant validity. The Cronbach's α of the four dimensions were .84 for proactive resolution, .86 for cognitive adaptation, .83 for patience, and .78 for passive escape.

Study 3

Study 3 drew on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping model to explore the nomological networking of the four dimensions of Chinese interpersonal stress coping. This model emphasizes people's coping with stressful events affected mainly by the cognitive appraisal of stressful events (situational factors) and the general tendency to handle or cope with stressful events (personal factors). Therefore, Study 3 explored the effect of situational factors (event level, level 1) and personal factors (personal level, level 2) on the strategies of interpersonal stress coping and subsequent consequences (event level, level 1) for Chinese people.

Regarding situational factors, we selected relationship quality appraisal and relative power appraisal as appraisal-related factors that reflect two critical Chinese social orientations (i.e., guanxi and authority). We proposed that relative power appraisal would be positively correlated with passive escape (H1a) and patience (H1b). We also proposed that relationship quality appraisal would be positively correlated with proactive resolution (H2a), negatively correlated with passive escape (H2b), and positively correlated with cognitive adaptation (H2c).

Regarding personal factors, we selected two motives of harmony, disintegration avoidance, and harmony enhancement to represent personal factors because these two motives are associated with Chinese people's tendency to maintain harmony. We proposed that harmony enhancement would be positively correlated with proactive resolution (H3a) and cognitive adaptation (H3b) and that disintegration avoidance would be positively correlated with passive escape (H4a) and patience (H4b).

Finally, regarding consequences, we selected emotional exhaustion because it is one of the most widely used well-being variables in workplace stress research.

We proposed that passive escape (H5a) and patience (H5b) would be positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, whereas proactive resolution (H5c) and cognitive adaptation (H5c) would be negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion.

Method

Study 3 used the 2-wave survey to collect data. Specifically, the interpersonal stress event questionnaire was used to collect data on event-level research variables (Time 1). One week later, the personal attitude questionnaire was used to collect the data on personal-level research variables (Time 2). A total of 170 valid samples (Sample 4) were obtained in Study 3. Among all participants, 47.6% were male, the average age was 37.2 years, the average tenure was 8.46 years, the education level was mainly university (67.6%), and most participants were employees (67.1%). In addition, in Study 3, we collected three interpersonal stress events from each research participant. After screening out invalid events, 487 valid interpersonal stress events were obtained.

A self-reported survey was used to collect the data in this study. Except for demographic variables and interpersonal stress coping, scales were measured on 5-point Likert scales, with response options ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree."

Measures

Research Variables

Relative power appraisal. We developed a 1-item measure to assess this variable based on previous power distance studies (Tsai et al., 2009).

Relationship quality appraisal. We adopted 1 item to measure this variable based on Tsai (2006) and Liden and Maslyn (1998).

Interpersonal stress coping. We used the scale developed in Study 2, which comprises 22 items measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1="not used" to 4="used a lot." The Cronbach's αs of the four dimensions were .85 for passive escape, .87 for patience, .88 for proactive resolution, and .95 for cognitive adaptation.

Emotional exhaustion. We used a 2-item scale adapted from Tepper (2000) and Maslach and Jackson (1986) to measure this variable. Cronbach's α was .87.

Harmony motivation. The harmony motivation scale developed by Leung et al. (2011) measures two distinct harmony motives, harmony enhancement (3 items) and disintegration avoidance (3 items). Cronbach's αs were .70 for harmony enhancement and .54 for disintegration avoidance.

Control variables

We controlled for *demographic variables (*gender, age, tenure, and rank) (Gao & Cheng, 2014), *Chinese interpersonal stressors* (8 items adopted from Gao & Cheng, 2019), *interpersonal conflicts* (2-item scale from Spector & Jex, 1998), *primary appraisal* (8-item scale from Dewe, 1991), and *secondary appraisal* (3-item scale from Peacock & Wong, 1990).

Results

The results of the CFA showed that the proposed eleven-factor model generally fits the data well (χ^2 = 2180.11, df = 647, p <.01; CFI = .88; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .07) (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and the factor loadings for each item were significant (β = .41~.96, p <.01).

The results of two-level SEM reveal that, for antecedents at the event level, the relative power appraisal had a significant positive effect on passive escape (γ_{50} = .07, p <.05) and a significant positive effect on patience (γ_{50} = .12, p <.01). Therefore, H1a and H1b are supported. The relationship quality appraisal had a significant positive effect on proactive resolution (γ_{60} = .16, p <.01), a significant negative effect on passive escape (γ_{60} = -.19, p <.01), and a significant positive effect on cognitive adaptation (γ_{60} = .28, p <.01). Therefore, H2a, H2b, and H2c were supported. For the antecedents at the personal level, the harmony enhancement motivation had a significant positive effect on proactive resolution (γ_{05} = .18, p <.05) and a significant positive effect on cognitive adaptation (γ_{05} = .30, p <.01). Therefore, H3a and H3b

were supported. However, the disintegration avoidance motivation did not have a significant effect on passive escape and patience (γ_{06} = .08, p > .10; γ_{06} = .10, p < .10). Therefore, H4a and H4b were not supported. For the consequence of interpersonal stress coping, passive escape had a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion (γ_{11} = .22, p < .05), patience had a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion (γ_{21} = .39, p < .01), proactive resolution had no significant effect on emotional exhaustion (γ_{31} = -.01, p > .10), and cognitive adaptation had significant negative effect on emotional exhaustion (γ_{41} = -.19, p < .05). Therefore, H5a, H5b, and H5d were supported but H5c was not supported.

Conclusion

In the study, we evaluated the four dimensions of Chinese interpersonal stress coping (i.e., proactive resolution, patience, passive escape, and cognitive adaptation) and developed a scale to measure them. Drawing on the transactional theory of stress and coping model, and using the cross-level research approach, we explored the relationship of Chinese interpersonal stress coping with its antecedents and consequences. The findings support a two-dimension model of Chinese interpersonal stress coping and explain the mechanisms of Chinese interpersonal stress coping (i.e., proactive resolution, patience, passive escape, and cognitive adaptation) in terms of approach/avoidance and high/low energy investment, as shown in Figure 1.

In the past, researchers often thought that patience is the focus of Chinese coping behaviors. However, this study found that in addition to being patient or holding back, Chinese people will also take the initiative to solve problems or change the cognition when facing interpersonal stressors. Such findings not only enrich our knowledge of Chinese people's interpersonal stress coping but also demonstrate the vital role of culture in the management of work stress.

Figure 1

Two-dimensional model of Chinese Interpersonal Stress Coping