Self-leadership and Coping with Stress: The Mediating Effects of Emotional Intelligence

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【Abstract】 Objective: This study examines the effects of self-leadership strategies on Chinese students' ability to cope with stress, and the mediating roles of emotional intelligence in this process. Methods: 491 college students completed The Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire, The Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire and The Emotional Intelligence Scale. Results: All the three general self-leadership strategies—behavior focused, constructive thought pattern, and natural reward—had a significant effect on the behaviors of Chinese students in terms of how they actively cope with stress. Further, emotional intelligence fully mediated the constructive thought pattern strategies and active stress coping, and partially mediated the relationship between behavior focused and natural reward strategies and active stress coping. Conclusion: Self-leadership strategies not only directly affect active stress coping, but also indirectly affect active stress coping through emotional intelligence.

【Key words】 Self-leadership; Stress coping; Emotional intelligence

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自我领导与压力应对的关系：情绪智力的中介作用

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【摘要】 **目的：**探讨情绪智力在自我领导策略与大学生应对方式间的中介作用。**方法：**491名在校大学生完成自我领导策略量表、简易应对方式量表与情绪智力量表的测量。**结果：**自我领导的三大策略——行为聚焦策略、建设性思维策略与自然奖赏策略都对大学生积极应对具有显著预测作用；情绪智力在建设性思维策略与积极应对之间起完全中介作用；情绪智力在行为聚焦策略、自然奖赏策略与积极应对之间起部分中介作用。**结论：**自我领导策略既可以直接影响积极应对，也可以通过情绪智力间接影响积极应对方式的使用。

【关键词】 自我领导；压力应对；情绪智力

Introduction

Self-leadership has stimulated many research endeavors in the organizational setting (Konradt et al. 2009). Most of the studies concentrated on the influence of self-leadership on positive outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, and innovative behavior (Neck & Manz 2013; Politis 2006). A few studies, however, have demonstrated that self-leadership may facilitate the process of stress management (Dolbier, Soderstrom, & Steinhardt 2001; Houghton et al. 2012). In particular, recent intervention studies indicate that self-leadership training reduces stress and anxiety, and enhances positive emotions in both occupational and academic contexts (Sampl & Furtner 2017; Unsworth & Mason, 2012). However, the processes underlying such adaptive effects are unclear. One possibility under these processes is that people high in self-leadership may cope with stress more effectively (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Interestingly, a few studies have investigated the direct relationship between self-leadership and coping strategies, namely the specific behavior that people resort to in order to deal with stressful events. Therefore, one objective of the present study has been to examine whether self-leadership is associated with adaptive rather than maladaptive coping tactics.

The study of stress is usually correlated with emotions (Lazarus, 2000). The concept of emotional intelligence captures individual differences in emotional expressions, and regulation in self and others. People with high emotional intelligence tend to feel less dis-

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tressed in response to various adverse events (Mikolajczak, Luminet, & Menil, 2006). In addition, coping strategies may mediate the effect of emotional intelligence on the propensity to experience negative emotions or positive ones in a given situation (Mikolajczak et al. 2008). There is also evidence to prove that emotional intelligence is associated with coping efficacy (Han et al. 2009). As both involve a similar process of self-regulation, emotional intelligence (emotions) and self-leadership (behaviors and thought) are generally regarded as distinct and reciprocally correlated (Boss & Sims, 2008). The practice of general self-leadership behaviors may enhance the recognition and regulation of emotions, subsequently affecting stress coping. This study examines this relationship and evaluates the extent to which emotional intelligence mediates the influence of self-leadership on the act of grappling with stress.

Self-leadership involves self-influence, a process in which individuals use a set of strategies toward higher levels of performance in their tasks (Manz, 1986; Neck & Manz ,2004). It is widely based on the theories of social cognition, self-regulation, and self-management (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Self-leadership constitutes specific behavior, and cognitive and natural reward strategies that are intended to improve individual effectiveness (Manz & Neck, 2004; Prussia et al., 1998). Behavior-focused self-leadership helps individuals improve their self-awareness, and generate effective behavior while simultaneously restraining undesirable conduct (Manz & Neck, 2004). Behavior-focused strategies include self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-cueing, and self-punishment. Cognitive-focused strategies entail evaluating beliefs and assumptions, engaging in positive self-talk, and practicing mental imagery to align cognitions with desired behavior (Neck & Manz, 1996). Natural reward strategies mainly relate to self-motivation through finding intrinsic reward in the task. The practice of self-leadership may help people deal with their stress more effectively. For example, people engaged in self-observation helps them to determine which behavior is effective or ineffective, and which demeanor contributes to effective stress management. Through evaluation of beliefs and assumptions, individuals can use constructive thoughts to replace dysfunctional irrational cognition, which usually leads to passive stress coping (e.g., avoidance) (Folkman, 2013). Unsworth and Mason (2012) suggested that the practice of self-leadership strategies allows individuals to address potential problems before they become threatening (meaning of coping), and their research demonstrates that self-leadership training decreases work related stress through enhancement of self-efficacy and positive affect. In fact, self-leadership training has been proven to be an effective and preventive stress management intervention at the individual level (Lucke & Furtner, 2015). Thus, we can argue that self-leadership could facilitate the process of coping with stress.

Emotional intelligence involves a set of abilities to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In this study, we adopted the four-branch model of emotional intelligence developed by Davies, Stankov, and Roberts (1998), which includes self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, regulation of emotion, and use of emotion. People high in emotional intelligence are better prepared to cope with stressful situations (MacCann et al. 2011). Por et al. (2011) suggested that emotional intelligence can help individuals solve problems in stressful situations and increase wellbeing. Preliminary evidence has revealed that trait emotional intelligence not only affects the appraisal of both stressful situations and one´s resources to grapple with them, but also influences the choice of coping behaviors (Mikolajczak, Luminet, & Menil, 2006). Numerous studies have found that emotional intelligence is positively associated with the use of active coping strategies (e.g., problem-focused coping) (Austin, Saklofske, & Mastoras, 2010; Jung & Yoon, 2016).

Self-leadership and emotional intelligence are both involved in a similar process of self-regulation. emotional intelligence primarily focuses on emotion regulation, whereas self-leadership essentially relates to cognition and behavior regulation. As cognition processes and behaviors have a powerful potential to impact emotions, people who can lead themselves more effectively are thought to be higher in emotional intelligence. D'Intino et al. (2007) suggested that "self-leadership skills such as self-observation, cueing, self-

goal setting, and self-rewards maybe useful in helping people to become more emotionally intelligent". Empirical studies also demonstrate that self-leadership and emotional intelligence are closely correlated (Deppe et al., 2006; Furtner, Rauthmann, & Sachse, 2010). Further evidence has demonstrated that total self-leadership scores can be attributed to self-regulation of emotions -- one dimension of emotional intelligence (Zyl, Mokuoane, & Nel, 2017). Self-leadership can lead to many constructive and positive outcomes, including emotional intelligence (Shahin & Salehzadeh, 2013). Therefore, the present study aims to examine the mediation effect of emotional intelligence between self-leadership and coping with stress among Chinese college students.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 491 students (219 males, 272 females) were invited to an introductory psychology course at a university in Changsha, Hunan Province, China. The average age of the participants was 19.56 years (SD= 1.61). Questionnaires were completed during class, and were then collected on the spot. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, and that their responses would remain anonymous.

Measures

Stress coping. The 20-item self-report Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire (Xie, 1998) was used to measure active stress coping (problem-focus coping) and passive coping styles (emotional-focus coping), which was designed for use with the Chinese general population. Responses are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (did not use at all) to 3 (used a lot) in a specific stress coping behavior. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for active and passive coping style subscales were 0.71 and 0.66 respectively.

Self-leadership was measured using the Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ), which was developed by Ho and Nesbit (2009) within the Chinese setting of Hong Kong. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all accurate) to 5 (completely accurate). We used item parceling procedures to create composite indicators representing the 11 distinct self-leadership subscales, and confirmatory factor analysis provided acceptable evidence for the second-order model of self-leadership in the present study: comparative fit index (CFI)=0.92; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)=0.89; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=0.07; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)=0.05. From there, the 11 subscales were categorized into the following second-order self-leadership strategies: (1)behavior-focused strategies, (2)constructive-thought-pattern strategies, and (3)natural-reward strategies.

Emotional intelligence. Using the 16-item Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002). Evidence showed that the WLEIS has better predictive power and is more suitable for Chinese respondents (Wong & Law 2007). The WLEIS measures the four emotional intelligence dimensions proposed by Davies et al. (1998), and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the four dimensions were self-emotion appraisal(0.82), others' emotion appraisal(0.84), regulation of emotion(0.74) and use of emotion(0.79), respectively, in the present study. Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Data Analysis

The descriptive, pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses was conducted using SPSS version 19.0.

Findings

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between the study variables. Most of these were statistically significant at $P<0.01$. The correlations between passive coping style and emotional intelligence, and self-leadership strategies were not significant. Therefore, passive coping was not included in the next analysis.

Mediation effect analyses

Multiple hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to prove the mediation effect of emotional intelligence between self-leadership and active coping. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the following conditions must be fulfilled for the mediation effect:

First, the independent variable must significantly influence the dependent variable. Second, the independent variable must influence the mediator significantly. Third, the mediator and independent variables enter the regression equation at the same time, and the effect of the independent variable decreases. If the independent variable becomes insignificant, there is a full mediating effect; conversely, it is partial mediation.

The results shown in Table 2 indicate that all the three dimensions of self-leadership were found to be positively associated with emotional intelligence(behavior-focused strategies $\beta=0.17$, $P<0.001$; constructive-thought-pattern strategies $\beta=0.25$, $P<0.001$; natural-reward strategies $\beta=0.22$, $P<0.001$). Behavior-focused strategies, constructive-thought-pattern strategies, and natural reward strategies were also found to be positively related to active coping ($\beta=0.24$, $P<0.001$; $\beta=0.15$, $P<0.01$; $\beta=0.20$, $P<0.001$, respectively,). When the three dimensions of self-leadership and emotional intelligence were included in the analysis in the last step, emotional intelligence ($\beta=0.18$, $P<0.001$) was found to be positively associated with active coping. The effect of behavior-focused strategies ($\beta=0.21$, $P<0.001$) and natural-reward strategies ($\beta=0.16$, $P<0.001$) decreased but were still significant. Constructive-thought-pattern strategies became insignificant ($\beta=0.10$, $P=0.07$) . The results of multiple hierarchical regression analysis indicated that emotional intelligence partially mediated the relationship between behavior-focused strategies, natural-reward strategies, and active coping, and fully mediated the relationship between constructive-thought-pattern strategies and active coping.

Table 1　Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 EI	3.91	0.99	1					
2 BFS	2.83	0.47	0.46**	1				
3 NCT	3.19	0.57	0.48**	0.64**	1			
4 NRS	3.52	0.61	0.45**	0.58**	0.54**	1		
5 Active coping	1.92	0.38	0.40**	0.45**	0.41**	0.42**	1	
6 Passive coping	1.22	0.45	−0.07	0.07	−0.05	−0.01	0.16*	1

Note: *$P<0.05$, **$P<0.01$; EI=emotional intelligence; BFS=behavior-focused strategies; CTP=constructive-thought-pattern strategies; NRS=natural-reward strategies.

Table 2　Results of hierarchical regression analyses for active coping

	Emotional intelligence	Active coping	
		Step 1	Step2
Independent variables			
BFS	0.17***	0.24***	0.21***
CTP	0.25***	0.15**	0.10
NRS	0.22***	0.20***	0.16**
Mediator			
Emotional intelligence	—	—	0.18***
F	68.60***	65.76***	46.07***
R^2	0.30	0.25	0.28
ΔR^2	0.29	0.25	0.27

Note: **$P<0.01$, ***$P<0.001$; BFS=behavior-focused strategies; CTP=constructive-thought-pattern strategies; NRS=natural-reward strategies. Standardized(β) regression coefficients wad reported.

Discussion

This study examines the mediating effects of emotional intelligence on the relationship between self-leadership and stress coping in Chinese college students. Self-leadership has been proven to be a multidimensional construct, and it is usually considered to include three general strategies—behavior, cognitive, and natural-reward strategies (Houghton, Carnes, & Ellison, 2013). Our findings support this multidimensionality of the proposed model, as the three strategies of self-leadership are distinct and not complementary. We examined the mediation effect of emotional intelligence between the three dimensions of self-leadership and stress coping.

First, the predicted positive relationship between self-leadership and stress management was supported. All three strategies -- behavior-focused, constructive-thought-pattern, and natural-reward -- were significantly related to active coping mechanisms (e.g., prob-

lem-focus coping), and had no correlation with passive coping strategies (e.g., emotional-focus coping), which is consistent with previous studies on the positive effects of self-leadership (Dolbier, Soderstrom, & Steinhardt 2001). Boss and Sims (2008) suggested that self-leadership, together with emotional regulation, can help people recover from failure and stressful situations. Our results also demonstrated that an effective self- leader seems to cope with stress more actively. Self-leadership has been proven to be not only a goal pursuit intervention but also a means of anticipatory stress coping resource (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013).

Second, our main finding from this research was the mediation effect of emotional intelligence between the three general strategies and stress coping tactics. Our results suggest that emotional intelligence partially mediates both the effect of behavior and natural- reward strategies on active coping, and fully mediates the relationship between cognitive strategy and active coping. This means that the practice of specific self-leadership strategies will help people improve their emotion regulation, and ultimately present more effective stress coping behaviors. Although the positive correlation between emotional intelligence and adaptive stress coping style has been well established, there are a few studies that have examined the mechanism of self-leadership in the process of struggling with stress. Our findings provide insight into the processes that can explain previous self-leadership interventions for stress reduction. Our findings also make practical suggestions for the stress management of Chinese students. Relative curricula, including emotion regulation and self-leadership strategies, has been advised.

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