



EVALUATION OF DOCTORAL THESIS

THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY TRAITS AND COPING STRATEGIES IN THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT OF CHRONICALLY ILL ADOLESCENTS: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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The doctoral thesis presented by Andreea Mihalca is an exemplary work which integrates five separate studies, conducted during her doctoral term at the Department of Health Psychology at Jagiellonian University. The main aim of Andreea Mihalca's PhD research was to identify the relations between personality traits and coping strategies used by adolescents in the context of a chronic condition, as well as their main and interactive effect on adjustment outcomes. Five chronic diseases were selected by the PhD candidate: asthma, diabetes type I, chronic renal failure, and cystic fibrosis. The research topic of her dissertation is of critical importance in regards to improve adolescents' adjustment to a chronic disease, quality of life and well being, and ultimately their health status. Importantly, the dissertation not only steps on existing international work to conduct the five studies in Poland and Romania, but extracts research questions from the existing literature to fill gaps, to test hypothesis and come to insights which are contributions to the international literature. The research is having a high theoretical and practical relevance for different type of readers:



clinical psychologists, developmental psychologists, health psychologists, pediatricians and family doctors, nurses, social workers.

Components of the dissertation

The dissertation explores the answers to the research questions throughout the 10 chapters of the thesis.

The *theoretical background* is organized in five chapters; each of them clearly sets the stage for the empirical research and places the topic of adolescents' coping with a chronic disease within the context of contemporary scholarship. It defines relevant terms and delineates the specific theoretical framework which will be the base for the research. *Chapter 1* defines the concept of childhood chronic disease and presents the medical characteristics and prevalence of the selected chronic conditions. *Chapter 2* operationalizes the concept of adjustment in its social and emotional dimensions. Different theoretical models of illness adjustment are described, from classical one (e.g. Lipowski, 1970) to those more comprehensive (e.g. Wallander et al., 2003), emphasizing the key role of personality traits and coping strategies. It is worth to mention the important information brought by literature review of each included disease. *Chapter 3* discusses the role of demographic, disease and individual factors in adjustment of adolescents. After analyzing the strengths and limits of different personality theories, the author made a choice for a theory which fits better to the current research (trait theory). *Chapter 4* brings a transactional perspective on the relations among personality, coping and chronic diseases in adolescents. The complexity of the dynamic interaction and inter-dependence between these factors needs more research and empirical findings as the PhD candidate identified. The theoretical background of research is enriched in *Chapter 5* with a multilevel approach of young people with chronic conditions, specifically from micro (individual's characteristics) and meso (family characteristics) levels to macro level (culture characteristics). This approach is a major step to bring and discuss cross-cultural data and comparison (Poland-Romania). Additionally, the chapter charts the similarities and differences in cultural values, psychological characteristics, economics and health statistics between Poland and Romania. These data bring specificity and local meanings to the empirical data collected by Andreea Mihalca.



A strength point of the first part of the thesis is the fact that the theoretical background is not a compilation of more than 600 references cited in the bibliography, but each page proves that the author was actively involved in a critical reading, analysis, selection, reflection, synthesis, arguments. Thus, it ultimately makes a convincing rationale for the relevance of the presented research and formulates the purpose of this research.

The second part of the thesis consists by 5 chapters (chapter 6-10). *Chapter 6* presents the aim, research questions, hypothesis, the methods used for data collection and data analysis. The aim of the research is derived from an insufficient knowledge in the field of pediatric psychology but also from an ecological need of improving adjustment of children and adolescents to chronic disease. Two groups of participants were recruited from chronically ill adolescents (173 Polish and 220 Romanian), and healthy adolescents as control groups (361 Polish and 418 Romanian). The psychometric properties of the four instruments were explored in each country; internal reliability, factorial structure, stability and construct validity proved that the instruments are reliable and allow cross-cultural comparisons. The instruments measure: personality traits, cognitive and emotional regulation/coping strategies, emotional distress, social difficulties and social distress, and subjective severity of illness.

The PhD candidate developed and conducted **five studies**. Each of the five studies is situated appropriately in the existing scholarship, each of them is clear in the definition of its specific purpose, theoretical framework, research questions and hypotheses, and each accurately presents discussion and conclusions. All the ethic requirements have been addressed and followed. The first three studies are connected by a common theoretical model which underlines the relations between variables proposed to be examined.

Study 1 is designed to evaluate the role of health status, demographic characteristics, disease parameters and cultural group on the social–emotional adjustment of Polish and Romanian adolescents. Based on a complex statistical analysis of the results (including descriptive statistic, such as means and standard deviations, correlations, but mainly inferential statistic strategies, such as regression, moderation and mediation analysis, ANCOVA and MANCOVA), the author concludes that the differences in socio-emotional adjustment between healthy and chronically ill adolescents are not specific to the diagnosis



label but rather to generic disease characteristics. Subjective severity and prognosis are the dimensions which explain not only the differences between the two groups of adolescents (healthy vs. ill), but also cross-cultural differences between pediatric patients. Even more, these two dimensions are the best predictors of social and emotional adjustment of adolescents. This study makes the rationale for the importance of evaluating further, the role of personality traits and coping strategies in regards to socio-emotional adjustment.

Study 2 addresses another source of information about healthy and non-healthy adolescents: on which way the following variables (health status, demographic characteristics, disease parameters, and cultural group) have impact on personality traits (measured with Five Factor Personality Inventory). The hypotheses are formulated in the direction of testing the effect of gender, disease parameters and culture on personality traits. Based on an adequate selected and performed statistical data analysis, the author concludes that the above mentioned factors had a small effect on personality traits in adolescents. Still, the data brought a nuance on interpretation of the impact of severity indicators on personality traits by cultural group; Polish adolescents are stronger influenced by these factors than Romanian adolescents.

Study 3 addresses the role of the same factors of the model presented on the page 147 on the coping strategies. The hypothesis of this study were based on the results of the Study 1 and Study 2 and tested on the same sample of 762 participants as in the previous studies. The instrument used to assess adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies was Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for kids. Based on regression analysis the results show that overall demographic characteristics and disease parameters explained a small, but non-significant amount of variance in coping strategies, contrary to health status which plays a small but significant role in both Polish and Romanian adolescents. The study adds important insight on how cultural factors impact the coping strategies used by adolescents. Another significant result of this study shows that an irreversible stressor, like a chronic disease can have a beneficial effect in adolescents through the stimulation of higher use of adaptive coping and a decrease in the use of maladaptive strategies.



Study 4 – In this component of the dissertation, Andreea Mihalca presents the results aimed to identify the relations between personality traits and coping strategies and weather the relation varied with health status and cultural group. The data analysis is very well designed and illustrated by figures 8.1- 8.4 which help the reader to understand the models which will be tested. The moderation analysis models are conducted rigorously. The results suggest the importance of personality traits in the frequency of adolescents' using emotion-focused strategies. This result have important practical implications by suggesting that preventive mechanism should be implemented to decrease the use of maladaptive coping strategies and increase the level of adaptive strategies when dealing with chronic stressors related to the characteristics of the cultural group.

Study 5 – aims to identify the direct and interactive effects of personality traits and coping strategies on chronically ill adolescents' adjustment. Also this study employs a rigorous design developed to test 3 main hypotheses, each of them with 2 sub-ordinate hypotheses (presented on the page 246). Regression, mediation, moderation and moderated mediation analysis are used to test the hypotheses. Overall, the main findings of this study show that both personality traits and coping strategies are important factors that influence adolescents' adjustment; among these, emotional regulation and maladaptive coping strategies are the most relevant individual characteristics for adolescents' socio-emotional adjustment regardless of their health status or cultural background.

The *General Discussion* part is developed around the main three research questions and guided by the results of the five studies. The interpretations of the results are accurate and complex in line also with the exiting literature. The conclusions drawn by the PhD candidate are realistic but relevant, adding knowledge to the existing evidence of pediatric psychology and bringing important clinical implications. The fact that Andreea Mihalca identified the limits of her research but also the strengths proves she has a high level of reflexivity, an important characteristic of a mature researcher.

I would suggest to the author to conduct in the future also a qualitative study, based on a narrative or phenomenological approach which allows getting a deeper and nuanced understanding of adolescents' experience of coping with a chronic illness.



In Summary, this dissertation exemplifies that Andreea Mihalca has a comprehensive perspective on the topic of adolescents' socio-emotional adjustment to a chronic disease moderated by personality traits, coping strategies, illness characteristics, demographic and cultural factors. She has illustrated mastery of the international literature, and has processed and critically reviewed all relevant current scholarship on the topic. The author demonstrates strong skills for complex research designs and data analysis. The studies included in the thesis are well integrated and build upon each other, so that the dissertation leads to comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and empirical issues surrounding adolescents' coping with a chronic disease. Importantly, the implications of the findings for improving prevention efforts in the cases of maladjustment to the chronic condition are clearly outlined. The cross-cultural comparisons between Polish and Romanian adolescents bring a unique and valuable dimension to the research.

Finally, I highly evaluate the current Doctoral Thesis with all its parts: theoretical, methodological and empirical. Additionally, I acknowledge that the Thesis complies with the requirements for a Doctoral Thesis, which allows me to formulate a request to admit Andreea Mihalca, M.A., to the next steps in receiving the PhD title.

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