PERSONALITY AND COPING STRATEGIES IN AGE DYNAMICS

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Abstract

Any attempt to describe the human personality always implies looking at the roles and stages of life. In the various stages of life, the coping mechanisms that must be developed are the ones that prove to be the most efficient and valuable in the shaping of a personal destiny. In their great diversity, coping mechanisms express the level of individual maturity. Irregardless of age, they are conditioned by the personality dimensions and the quality of interpersonal relationships. They sustain the subjective wellbeing, and thus the self-esteem of the human person. From the dimensional perspective of the Big-Five model, agreeability and openness, along with self-determination underlie the most important coping mechanisms and give value to the human person.

Key words: personality, coping mechanism, Big Five dimensional model

Any attempt to describe personality necessarily implies looking at life roles and the temporal dimension of human existence. The latter is the foundation of personal destiny, and influences self-awareness and the ways in which one connectes with others. A person's subjective wellbeing, in both its cognitive and affective components, is dependent upon the quality of human relationships, and favors coping capacities in the diversity of life roles throughout all its stages.

Considered to be a major existential aim, being “yourself” means self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Likewise, it implies a harmony between self-image and self-esteem, and gives a person the natural feeling of belonging to humanity. Human nature includes the individual dimension of personality as well as an important part of the personal and collective archetypes, confirming in a special way the concept of “unity in diversity”. Thus, being yourself favors and at the same time transcends inter-human differences. Genetics, society and culture simultaneously determine these differences and confirm the diversity of the human condition.

Throughout the various stages and in the diverse roles one plays in life, the personal attributes that should be developed are the ones that favor the most efficient coping mechanisms, while also taking into account the fact that age can enhance or diminish them.

Man is not born an adult, and all childhood experiences - among which the relationship with family and people close to you play a major role - form the foundations of a person's emotional life, cognitive strategies, and major existential motivations for the following stages of life. Man also has one body – biological maturation precedes the psychological one, and decisively influences it. Together they shape one's self-image. But man is also a social being, one's internal world being a projection of the external one. The binoms activism/passivity, dominant/submissive, interpersonal closeness/detachment dominate the individual's life and shape the maturation process.

Mind theory says that human beings have the capacity to intuit and anticipate the psychic content of the people around them, which constitutes a major coping attribute. There is a complex inter-conditioning between the dimensions of the individual personality and the psyche. Thus, the psychic functions and the dominant personality structures mature and manifest themselves simultaneously, and sustain a person's coping abilities (1).

The relationship between the emotional life of the individual and the diversity and hierarchy of personal motivations plays a special role. Precocious affective experiences decisively influence ulterior biological and socio-cultural motivations, as well as the ways a person responds or reacts to external stimuli. The ability to cope and resonate emotionally, their depth and persistence are particularly involved in the representation of the self and of the outside world – inner working model. They determine self-knowledge and self-esteem as well as the coping ability and the ways in which one influences one's surroundings.

The process of individual maturation is also determined by the ability for self-determination – a personological character dimension whose value rises progressively – in normal people – throughout the various stages of maturation (2). This is confirmed also by the fact that self-determination is optimized by cognitive-behavioral therapies and the administration of antidepressants.

Whether we look at it as reality or myth, adulthood/maturity implies the passage/progression from an immature and dependent human condition/state, to an independent and socially inter-dependent one, in which an individual is free to make decisions and select interpersonal relationships and existential values and beliefs.

Individual self-determination – whose major aim is self-fulfillment – constitutes thus a tiered process that is partially conscious and partially unconscious. Such is the passage of human beings from one age to another.
Personhood is thus a temporary structure whose dimensions are conditioned both genetically and socio-culturally. Genetically they are stable throughout life, while environmental and interpersonal relationship factors shape the dimensional facets which are dominantly thrown into the dynamics of existence (2).

In the contemporary social and cultural context dominated by post-modern attributes, man is a duplicitous being who simultaneously cultivates narcissistic tendencies and pro-social abilities. It grabs selfishly what is “good” and tackles “evil” subjectively as being the exclusive attribute of others. In relating to others, morality is conjunctural/relative, egocentric or altruistic. Virtues are displayed—often ostensive—only to enhance one's value.

The destiny of an individual is in great measure influenced by one's coping abilities, which in turn are undergirded by the personality dimensions, the quality and complexity of interpersonal relationships, the quality of one's motivations, and last but not least, by the specific stages of life.

The coping mechanisms of the individual allow the anticipation and control of the negative and positive events of life. They consist of stable personality traits as well as the ability to consciously mobilize one's affective, cognitive, volitional and motivational resources (3).

Coping mechanisms are individual psychological attributes that play a major role manifested throughout a person's life, and which produce a great variety of strategies and behaviors. They are aimed at more or less specific aspects of one's life such as personal safety, interpersonal relationships, reproduction, parental attributes, professional options and involvement, social status (4).

In the constant search for self-fulfillment—happiness—as a support for one's subjective wellbeing, the contemporary human being feels the need to surpass oneself. That is why, in the spirit of competitiveness which has been promoted since the first stages of life, the need to be “someone” in other people's eyes is born and becomes dominant. The attachments people form with others are thus based only on common interest.

The most intense and complex implication of a person in life's roles takes place in adulthood, while relating in the most meaningful way to life's experiences and events happens in youth and with the elderly. The quality of the involvement in existential roles depends thus on the quality of the coping mechanisms which differs from person to person and from age to age, especially in the presence of stress factors.

In youth, the processes of biological and psychological maturation harmonize, emotional life is intense, and self-knowledge is in its beginning stages. Special aptitudes and talents often become evident and professional options are being formulated. While self-searching, young people are curious, non-conformist, thirst for novelty, give importance to appearance, are pragmatic and idealistic, and often abuse drugs. Self-esteem is fragile and inter-personal relationships are many and mostly short-lived and shallow (5).

Adulthood is the age of maturity, in which self-knowledge and self-acceptance are reached. It is the age of stable, adaptable emotions, of introspection and reflection, and of elaborate cognitive strategies. The adult is intensely involved in a multitude of roles—the professional one being dominant—nowadays for females as well—and has complicated relationships with others. An enhanced sense of responsibility for one's opinions and actions is present, and self-esteem goes hand-in-hand with self-image.

The 3rd age is characterized usually by a certain devolution of the somatic state and of the ability to function in the various life roles. They are diminished, as are social contacts and relationships. The fear of dependency, of poverty, and of death can appear at this stage along with the various ways of dealing with it. The tendency to undervalue oneself, lower self-esteem and social isolation are often evident at this stage. But this stage of life also means psychological maturity and spiritual growth, the acceptance of one's personal biography, the capacity to select what is valuable in life, and the promotion of its true sense. The wisdom which inspires and guides those who are younger can protect against age discrimination which is so present nowadays. The elderly can also pursue a symbolic “eternal life” through their children's accomplishments or through religion (6).

The life coping abilities of the human person integrate the levels and ways of self-expression, their dominant existential motivations, and their age-specific traits. From the personological dimensional perspective of the Big Five model—neuroticism and extraversion are the most studied dimensions at any age. Together with conscientiousness, they condition and differentiate the states of subjective wellbeing (7). This subjective wellbeing is enhanced but fragile in youth, less strong in adults, and once again higher in the elderly, mostly in its affective/emotional component. The subjective wellbeing grows in time, provided that adulthood is lived at higher level of conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience (8).

The level of extraversion diminishes with age leading to a less active social life, except for people with high levels of openness. The heightened level of introversion can become an important coping mechanism when the environment is uncertain or dangerous. Enhanced extraversion spells success in finding a partner or a friend, but is also risky. When the environment is harmonious and safe, the heightened levels of extraversion are coping factors and favor exploring the environment, especially in youth. Together with agreeableness, extraversion influences interpersonal relationships no matter the age.

Neuroticism grows with age—especially in females—and it means affective instability, pessimism, low sense of wellbeing and self-esteem. Extreme neuroticism is expressed by hypervigilance toward danger in adults and the elderly, but at the same time it favors episodes of anxiety and depression. The depression and anxiety are aggravated when associated with low levels of conscientiousness. Dysfunctional relationships between youth and adults—especially parents—appear frequently when, in this context, the level of extraversion is also low. On the other side, high levels of both neuroticism and agreeableness favor work efficiency in adults and enhance the cognitive component of their subjective wellbeing (9).

Besides, low neuroticism associated with high levels of conscientiousness and extraversion enhance the diversity and quality of interpersonal relationships in youth and adults. Low neuroticism and low extraversion
favor the ability to climb in the social and professional hierarchy in adults, while high levels of extraversion are a supportive factor in the commercial and artistic professions, as is openness to experience.

Neuroticism ad extraversion are believed to be shaped at any age by material gain. In adults they are shaped also by the quality of personal relationships, and in the elderly, especially males, by their marital status. At these stages, if the levels of neuroticism and extraversion are also joined by an enhanced level of openness, an efficient coping mechanism appears which protects a person's state of subjective wellbeing and emotional balance (8).

The dimensions of agreeability, conscientiousness and openness to experience are less the subject of study as they relate to age, but their levels must constantly be related to those of neuroticism and extraversion with which they correlate in complex ways. For example, high agreeability associated with high extraversion positively influence subjective wellbeing. The low values of agreeability and conscientiousness favor disinhibited behavior and delinquency.

High levels of conscientiousness have a multitude of adaptive effects. For example, they influence the professional orientation in youth, and ensure heightened efficiency in conventional activities. They also ensure stability in professional roles and the quality of marital status with the elderly. High quality academic performance is associated with high levels of openness to experience, especially in young people, while low levels of conscientiousness explain in great measure the behavioral disorders in youth and ADHD in adults (8).

The openness to experience is a special dimension which evens out the differences between individuals and often compensate for the maladaptive values of the other dimensions of personality. It implies originality, curiosity, artistic and aesthetic sense, as well as magical thinking, faith, a capacity for self-transcendence, and is, at any age, a major adaptive factor. Its heightened levels sustain artistic abilities, the ability for self-transcendence, and a heightened state of subjective wellbeing in both its affective and cognitive forms. These heightened levels can also explain the high intensity of certain depressive episodes, especially in women. Still, the correlation between age and openness to experience remains strictly individual, thus underlining the specificity of the other.

The human person's coping mechanisms are shaped by structural dimensions of personality and psychological peculiarities of age. In this context, self-determination together with agreeability and openness to experience constitute the most relevant elements of adaptive support.

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