

FROM RESILIENCE TO COPING STRATEGIES: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SICILIAN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to examine self-efficacy in life skills, psychological well-being, coping strategies, and dispositional resilience in a sample of 566 Sicilian adolescents between 14 and 19 years old (338 boys and 228 girls). Measures: 1) Self-Efficacy in Life Skills Scales (Sagone & Indiana, 2017) to analyze problem-solving ability, interpersonal and social communication ability, and managing of positive and negative emotions; 2) Psychological Well-Being Scale (Zani & Cicognani, 1999); 3) the Coping Orientation to the Problems Experienced-NVI (Foà et al., 2015); 4) Dispositional Resilience Scale (Prati, 2010; Sagone & De Caroli, 2014) with the dimensions of rigidity, alienation, and positive attitudes. Results pointed out that boys obtain higher scores both in self-efficacy in life skills than girls, perceiving themselves as highly efficient in managing negative emotions and in psychological well-being, expressing high environmental mastery, high self-acceptance, and positive relations with others. With reference to coping strategies, boys tend to use mainly coping toward orientation to the problem. Lastly, for dispositional resilience, boys show more positive attitudes and rigidity than girls, while girls express higher alienation than boys. Future research will be focused on the promotion of educational actions useful to improve the psychological profiles of adolescents, with particular attention to the empowerment of deficient psychological dimensions that mainly emerged in the group of female adolescents.

Keywords: resilience; well-being; coping; self-efficacy

RESUMEN

De la resiliencia a las estrategias de afrontamiento: diferencias de género en los adolescentes sicilianos. El objetivo de esta investigación es examinar la autoeficacia en habilidades para la vida, el bie-

nestar psicológico, las estrategias de afrontamiento y la resiliencia en una muestra de 566 adolescentes sicilianos entre 14 y 19 años (338 niños y 228 niñas). Instrumentos: 1) Autoeficacia en Escalas de Habilidades para la Vida (Sagone y Indiana, 2017) para analizar la capacidad de resolución de problemas, capacidad de comunicación interpersonal y social, y manejo de emociones positivas y negativas; 2) Escala de bienestar psicológico (Zani y Cicognani, 1999); 3) Coping Orientation to the Problems Experienced-NVI (Foà et al., 2015); 4) Escala de Dispositional Resiliencia (Prati, 2010; Sagone y De Caroli, 2014) con las dimensiones de rigidez, alienación y actitudes positivas. Los resultados indicaron que los niños obtienen puntuaciones más altas en autoeficacia en habilidades para la vida que las niñas, percibiéndose a sí mismos como altamente eficientes en el manejo de emociones negativas y en el bienestar psicológico, expresando un alto dominio ambiental, alta auto-aceptación, y relaciones positivas con los demás. Con referencia a las estrategias de afrontamiento, los niños tienden a utilizar principalmente la orientación hacia el problema. Por último, en lo que respecta a la resiliencia, los niños muestran actitudes más positivas y más rigidez que las niñas, mientras que las niñas expresan una mayor alienación que los niños. Las futuras investigaciones se centrarán en la promoción de acciones educativas útiles para mejorar los perfiles psicológicos de los adolescentes, con especial atención al empoderamiento de las dimensiones psicológicas deficientes que surgieron principalmente en el grupo de las adolescentes.

Palabras clave: resiliencia; bienestar psicológico; afrontamiento; autoeficacia

INTRODUCTION

The principal aim of this paper is focused on the analysis of the relationships between different topics linked to the approach of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002) and, mainly, on the differences for gender reported in each of the topics examined in the present study, that is, coping strategies, self-efficacy in life skills, psychological well-being, and resilience. Scientific literature offers several empirical evidence in relation to the gender differences in these psychological constructs, even if the reported results are not always in the same direction. For this reason, the present study emphasizes the importance of studying gender differences also in the Sicilian school context.

1.1. Coping and gender differences

Coping has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as "a constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (1984, p. 141). Scientific literature underlines the existence of different types of strategies. Problem-focused coping strategies are intended to change stressful situations, while emotion-focused strategies are oriented to altering emotional responses to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As well as approach strategies involve direct efforts to alter the stressful situation, while avoidance strategies are characterized by the absence of attempts to modify the situation (e.g., deny its existence, lose hope) (Moos, 1984). For example, according to Folkman and Lazarus's approach, there are eight different ways of dealing with stressful events: confrontative coping, distancing coping, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal. Gender differences for coping strategies indicated that, in adults (Meléndez et al., 2012), women use coping strategies directed at changing their emotional responses to stressful situations, while men utilize more problem-focused or instrumental coping to manage stressful experiences (Enderl & Parker, 1990; Ptacek et al., 1994; Matud, 2004). In children and adolescents, girls score higher in seeking social support and problem-solving coping than boys, whereas boys score higher in avoidant coping than girls (Eschenbeck et al., 2007). Phelps and Jarvis (1994) observed that American females adopt the seeking social support for instrumental and emotional reasons, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, turning to religion, and venting of emotions as coping strategies significantly more than males; in addition, males use alcohol-drug disengagement and humor as coping strategies more than females. Other researchers found that adolescent girls are more likely than boys to seek social support and engage in wishful thinking, preferring the avoidance because they believe that the situation is not under their control; on the contrary, boys are more likely to actively deal with the problem in an attempt to solve it and more willing to take risks (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991). In addition, it

emerged that German female early adolescents cope maladaptively with common stressors, showing a decreased employment of distraction and positive self-instruction (adaptive coping) and enhanced use of rumination and aggression (maladaptive coping strategies) (Hampel & Petermann, 2005). Significant gender differences are discovered also by De Boo and Wicherts (2009) for the coping strategies of support for feelings, distracting actions, and wishful thinking, demonstrating the superiority of Dutch girls rather than boys. Further, using the Coping Styles Questionnaire (Roger et al., 1993), English male students exhibit a greater ability to keep away themselves from the emotions of a situation, are more prone to demonstrate emotional inhibition, and report higher levels of self-esteem than female ones (Lawrence et al., 2006). More recently, Graves and colleagues (2021) found that American female university students utilize the emotion-focused coping and demonstrate the use of four individual coping strategies more often than male ones (self-distraction, emotional support, instrumental support, and venting). At last, Eisenbarth (2019) pointed out that male college students are more engaged in the use of humor, while female college students utilized the emotional and instrumental support to cope with stress more than male ones.

1.2. Self-efficacy in life skills and gender differences

According to the Social-Cognitive Theory, developed by Bandura (1986, 1997), the dimension of self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Among these different types of ability, *self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions* is considered to be one of the most important life skills, along with *self-efficacy in the management of negative emotions*. The first type has been defined by Caprara et al. (2008) as the perceived ability “to experience and to allow oneself to express positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, and pride in response to success or pleasant events” (2008, p. 228). The second type has been considered as the perceived ability “to ameliorate negative emotional states once they are aroused in response to adversity or frustrating events and to avoid being overcome by emotions such as anger, irritation, despondency, and discouragement” (idem, p.228). Considering the gender differences, it is emerged that women engage in emotion regulation more frequently than men and utilize a greater variety of emotion-regulation strategies (see Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011); additionally, girls are more efficient in *interpersonal communication* than boys (Zach et al., 2016; Sagone, De Caroli, & Indiana, 2018), while boys express higher levels of self-efficacy in problem-solving (that is, the *ability to solve and cope with difficulties in a creative and innovative way*) and academic success than girls (Wismath & Zhong, 2014). Individuals who perceive themselves as highly capable tend to attempt and successfully execute tasks or activities in various types of situations reporting significant differences for gender (Capanna & Steca, 2006; Di Giunta et al., 2010).

1.3. Well-being and gender differences

The psychological well-being has been studied according to the “eudaimonic perspective” (Ryan & Deci, 2001), analyzing the six criteria that ensure the positive and optimal human functioning (Ryff & Singer, 1996). These criteria are represented by the sense of “self-acceptance” (in terms of self-actualization, optimal functioning, and maturity), the positive “relations with other individuals” (in terms of feelings of empathy and affection for all human beings), the “autonomy” (as self-determination, independence, and internal locus of control), the “environmental” (in terms of the ability to manage surrounding environments), the “purpose in life” (in terms of a sense of directedness and intentionality in changing purposes or goals in life), and the “personal growth” (in terms of an optimal development as a person, underlining the importance of new challenges or tasks at different periods of life). Considering the gender differences for each of these dimensions of well-being at psychological level, it emerged that boys express a greater well-being than girls and, specifically, in environmental mastery and self-acceptance (Sagone & De Caroli, 2014). Italian girls report lower scores in self-acceptance than boys (Visani et al., 2011). Further, except for autonomy and self-acceptance, Chinese girls report higher scores on the other dimensions of psychological well-being than boys (Sun et al., 2016). Lastly, with outcomes not entirely in line with the previous results, American females score higher than males in personal growth, positive relations with

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others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ludban, 2015). More recently, Spanish men report higher scores than women in self-acceptance and autonomy, while women score higher than men in personal growth and positive relations with others (Matud et al., 2019). These findings indicate that gender differences may be influenced by the cross-cultural characteristics of research samples.

1.4. Resilience and gender differences

The last topic examined in this study is represented by resilience as dispositional trait of personality (Sagone & De Caroli, 2014). It is considered as the ability to restore or maintain psychological equilibrium under significant threat by means of human activities including thoughts and actions (Smith & Carlson, 1997) in the face of adversity (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). Also it has been recognized as the ability to bounce back or recover from stressful conditions to reach an optimal adjustment to surrounding environment (Richardson, 2002). Resilience is a multi-dimensional trait characterized by the factors of engagement, adaptability, control, competence, and sense of humor to cope with stressful circumstances (Hurtes & Allen, 2001; De Caroli & Sagone, 2014). Gender differences in resilience are evident: Italian girls score higher than boys in control and engagement (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014); Italian boys score higher than girls in sense of humor, competence, and adaptability, while girls score higher than boys in engagement (Sagone & De Caroli, 2016); Pakistan boys obtain higher scores than girls in resilience (Sarwar et al., 2010; Naseem & Munaf, 2020); Spanish boys score higher than girls in confidence and negative cognition in the Self-Domain using the Adolescent Resilience Questionnaire (Guilera et al., 2015); in addition, Italian males reach higher scores in positive attitudes than females, whereas females obtain higher scores in alienation than males using the Dispositional Resilience Scale (Prati, 2010).

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The objective of this investigation is to examine the gender differences in self-efficacy in life skills, psychological well-being, coping strategies, and dispositional resilience in a sample of Sicilian adolescents. We hypothesized that:

H₁ - *for self-efficacy in life skills*, boys perceive themselves as more efficient than girls in problem-solving and manage negative emotions, while girls perceive themselves as more efficient than boys in interpersonal and social communication and expression of positive emotions;

H₂ - *for psychological well-being*, boys score higher in autonomy, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance, while girls score higher in the other dimensions.

H₃ - *for coping strategies*, boys use coping focused on orientation to the problem and positive reinterpretation, while girls adopt strategies of turning to religion, avoidance, and searching for social support;

H₄ - *for resilience*, boys obtain higher scores in positive attitudes, while girls score higher in alienation.

Linear correlational analyses are carried out to give further confirmation of the positive relationships among the examined topics during this age in the life span.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample of this study consists of 566 Sicilian adolescents between 14 and 19 years old (M=16.6, sd=1.3) and divided in 338 boys and 228 girls, randomly recruited from two Public High Schools of Catania, Sicily (Italy).

METHODOLOGY

We used four measures to analyze the chosen topics, after receiving the formal consent given by parents of teenagers. Data collection was carried out through Google Platform during the pandemic (March 2021-May 2021). The study was approved by IERB (Internal Ethic Review Board of Psychology Research), Department of Educational Sciences, University of Catania.

1) The Self-Efficacy in Life Skills Scales (Sagone & Indiana, 2017; Sagone et al., 2020) are four independent but highly correlated scales for measuring the self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) in four types of areas and composed by 50 items each valuable on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *not at all efficient* to 5 intervals = *completely*

efficient); in detail, we used these scales to analyze the ability to efficiently regulate and manage the expression of positive emotions (Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale for Positive Emotions: 7 items) and negative emotions (Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale for Negative Emotions: 13 items); the ability to efficiently communicate in interpersonal and social relations (Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale for Interpersonal/Social Communication: 19 items); and the ability to solve critical situations in an efficient way (Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale for Problem-Solving: 11 items).

2) The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Zani & Cicognani, 1999) is a self-report inventory and consists of 18 items valuable on a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating *strong disagreement* and 6 indicating *strong agreement*. We used the Italian short form version of the PWB with 18 items grouped in six subscales: (a) autonomy, (b) environmental mastery, (c) purpose in life, (d) relations with others, (e) personal growth, and (f) self-acceptance.

3) The Coping Orientation to the Problems Experienced-NVI (Foà et al., 2015) is an inventory, articulated in 25 items valuable on a 6-point Likert scale, and analyzes the following coping strategies: (a) orientation to problem, (b) positive reinterpretation, (c) turning to religion, (d) searching for social support, and (e) avoidance coping. We applied this short version rather than the complete version of Sica et al. (2008) with 60 original items.

4) The Dispositional Resilience Scale (Prati, 2010; Sagone & De Caroli, 2014) is a measure of resilience as dispositional personality trait, with 17 items valuable on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strong disagreement*) to 5 intervals (*strong agreement*). It analyzes the dimensions of rigidity (3 items), alienation (6 items), and positive attitudes (8 items).

RESULTS

We examined the gender differences in the chosen topics. Results pointed out that boys obtain higher scores in self-efficacy in life skills than girls, perceiving themselves highly efficient in the managing negative emotions (Mboys=46,12, sd=8,31; Mgirls=41,38, sd=8,82)($t=6.495, p<.001$). Further, boys reach higher scores than girls in psychological well-being, expressing high environmental mastery, high self-acceptance, and relationships with others (Tab.1).

Tab.1 – Differences for gender in dimensions of psychological well-being

Tab.1 – Differences for gender in dimensions of psychological well-being	Gender	N	Mean	sd	T-Test
Autonomy	Boys	338	13,35	2,64	n.s.
	Girls	228	13,08	3,01	
Environmental mastery	Boys	338	13,14	2,51	$t=6.202, p<.001$
	Girls	228	11,71	2,91	
Personal growth	Boys	338	14,31	2,37	n.s.
	Girls	228	14,11	2,65	
Relations with others	Boys	338	12,94	2,85	$t=2.097, p=.036$
	Girls	228	12,42	2,91	
Purpose in life	Boys	338	11,39	2,86	n.s.
	Girls	228	11,49	2,69	
Self-acceptance	Boys	338	12,65	2,76	$t=5.048, p<.001$
	Girls	228	11,42	2,97	

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With reference to coping strategies, boys tend to use mainly coping of orientation to problem (Mboys=21,72, sd=4,25; Mgirls=20,90, sd=4,70) rather than girls ($t=2.161, p=.031$). Lastly, for dispositional resilience, boys show more positive attitudes and rigidity than girls, while girls express higher sense of alienation than boys (Tab.2).

Tab.2 – Differences for gender in dimensions of resilience

Tab.2 – Differences for gender in dimensions of resilience	Gender	N	Mean	sd	T-Test
Alienation	Boys	338	2,83	,90	$t=-3.915, p<.001$
	Girls	228	3,14	,88	
Rigidity	Boys	338	3,20	,89	$t=3,927, p<.001$
	Girls	228	2,90	,90	
Positive attitudes	Boys	338	3,78	,62	$t=3.610, p<.001$
	Girls	228	3,58	,69	

To analyze the associations among the chosen topics (with $r > 0.30$), we carried out the Pearson's correlations for total sample. Self-efficacy in problem-solving is correlated with autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance; self-efficacy in interpersonal and social communication is correlated with environmental mastery and personal growth; self-efficacy in managing negative emotions is positively correlated with environmental mastery and self-acceptance; at last, self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions is correlated with environmental mastery, personal growth, relations with others, and self-acceptance (Tab.3).

Tab. 3 – Correlations between self-efficacy and psychological well-being

Tab. 3 – Correlations between self-efficacy and psychological well-being		Autonomy	Envir. Mastery	Personal Growth	Relations with others	Purpose in life	Self-acceptance
Self-efficacy in problem-solving	<i>r</i>	,354**	,506**	,353**	,241**	,172**	,359**
	Sig.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
Self-efficacy in interpersonal and social communication	<i>r</i>	,260**	,325**	,373**	,256**	,122**	,255**
	Sig.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,004	,000
Self-efficacy in managing negative emotions	<i>r</i>	,251**	,517**	,275**	,267**	,007	,429**
	Sig.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,873	,000
Self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions	<i>r</i>	,222**	,336**	,382**	,311**	,104*	,389**
	Sig.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,013	,000

Self-efficacy in problem-solving, self-efficacy in interpersonal and social communication, and self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions are positively correlated with positive attitudes in dispositional resilience; further, self-efficacy in managing negative emotions is correlated negatively with alienation and positively with positive attitudes in dispositional resilience (Tab.4).

Tab. 4 – Correlations between self-efficacy and dispositional resilience

Tab. 4 – Correlations between self-efficacy and dispositional resilience		Alienation	Rigidity	Positive attitudes
Self-efficacy in problem-solving	<i>r</i>	-,203**	,156**	,669**
	Sig.	,000	,000	,000
Self-efficacy in interpersonal and social communication	<i>r</i>	-,131**	,117**	,547**
	Sig.	,002	,005	,000
Self-efficacy in managing negative emotions	<i>r</i>	-,304**	,080	,537**
	Sig.	,000	,058	,000
Self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions	<i>r</i>	-,257**	,079	,586**
	Sig.	,000	,062	,000

Self-efficacy in problem-solving, self-efficacy in interpersonal and social communication, and self-efficacy in managing negative emotions are positively correlated with the strategies of positive reiteration and orientation to problem. Self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions is positively correlated with the strategies of positive reiteration, searching for social support, and orientation to problem (Tab.5).

Tab. 5 – Correlations between self-efficacy and coping strategies

Tab. 5 – Correlations between self-efficacy and coping strategies		Avoidance	Positive reiteration	Searching for social support	Orientation to problem
Self-efficacy in problem-solving	<i>r</i>	-,095*	,506**	,134**	,582**
	Sig.	,023	,000	,001	,000
Self-efficacy in interpersonal and social communication	<i>r</i>	-,161**	,471**	,295**	,524**
	Sig.	,000	,000	,000	,000
Self-efficacy in managing negative emotions	<i>r</i>	-,123**	,351**	,052	,364**
	Sig.	,003	,000	,215	,000
Self-efficacy in the expression of positive emotions	<i>r</i>	-,120**	,387**	,330**	,446**
	Sig.	,004	,000	,000	,000

Environmental mastery is positively correlated with positive reiteration ($r=.337, p<.001$) and orientation to problem ($r=.342, p<.001$). In addition, avoidance coping is positively correlated with alienation ($r=.454, p<.001$). Positive reiteration ($r=.521, p<.001$) and orientation to problem ($r=.585, p<.001$) are positively correlated with positive attitudes in dispositional resilience.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this investigation is to examine the gender differences for each topic chosen by the authors in the Positive Psychology Approach. For self-efficacy in life skills, results indicated that boys perceive themselves as more efficient than girls in the managing negative emotions; no differences were found in self-efficacy in problem-solving, interpersonal and social communication, and the expression of positive emotions, as initially hypothesized (H_1). For psychological well-being, results showed that boys reach higher scores than girls in envi-

ronmental mastery, self-acceptance, and positive relationships with others; these data are a partial confirmation of H₂. For coping strategies, boys use the orientation to problem more than girls do, as partially hypothesized (H₃). No differences for girls in the use of coping strategies. Lastly, for resilience, results indicated that boys express more positive attitudes and rigidity than girls, while girls exhibit higher alienation than boys; these data confirm the direction of H₄. In summary, the situation emerging from this group of Sicilian adolescents demonstrates that boys are highly efficient in the managing of their negative emotions, highly able to handle the surrounding context, perceiving themselves as growing individuals, and able to establish positive relationships with others. Additionally, unlike girls, the group of boys tends to utilize the adaptive coping focused on the problem-solving, expressing highly resilient attitudes, even if these positive attitudes are characterized by higher rigidity than girls. Some of these findings are in line with the previous results of Frydenberg and Lewis (1991), Capanna and Steca (2006), Sagone and De Caroli (2014), Sagone and De Caroli (2016), and other scholars cited in the section of Introduction. In the opposite direction, the group of girls is signed by low self-efficacy in managing of negative emotions, reduced psychological well-being, and high sense of alienation, as indicated by Prati's research (2010).

CONCLUSION

This study has been carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as in previous comments provided by reviewers for other published papers, the authors know that this latent variable could have affected the direction of the results of this investigation. The incidence of this variable (COVID-19) is not included in this analysis because the purpose is different. Another interesting element to consider in the next investigation focused on these relationships could be the comparison with other levels of age (preadolescence and youth) to verify the possible differences in the examined topics of the Positive Psychology Approach. The results of the present study underline the necessity of and potential for helping female adolescents develop active coping strategies, dispositional resilience, and positive attitudes toward their life and critical situations. Adequate training courses in life skills, designed to improve and enhance problem-solving skills in adolescence, could decrease the gap between the genders.

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