

Coping styles of music teachers

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ABSTRACT

The previous findings have shown that musicians as well as music teachers differ in personality characteristics from the general population. There are strong indications that musicians are exposed to numerous stressful situations during their education and professional life. We aimed to: identify preferred coping styles of music teachers and their possible difference in comparison to non-music teachers' coping styles, as well as to depict their relationship taking into consideration certain socio-demographic variables. The sample consists of music teachers (N=67) who teach instruments and music theory and teachers who teach general subjects (N=72). All the teachers filled in the Plutchik's Coping Styles Questionnaire. We included gender, educational level, working experience and urban/non-urban environment as socio-demographical variables. Findings show that music teachers have preferred coping styles such as: minimizing the problem, avoiding the problem, asking others for help, doing unrelated pleasurable activities, but also improving shortcomings. On the other hand, no differences were found regarding the coping styles profile between music and non-music teachers. There are indications that female teachers are more prone to use avoiding, help seeking and substitution behavioral strategies, but they are also prone to use improving personal limitations or limitations imposed by the situation. Results show that there are differences, to a certain extent, between: older and younger music teachers and music teachers from urban and non-urban environments. We may conclude that mainly passive and avoiding styles and dysfunctional strategies in tension reduction are used by both groups of teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Do our profession and the context surrounding it make us different from our innate personality? Would we be different personalities if we did something else? The findings in the field of music psychology have shown that musicians differ in personality characteristics from the general population (Kemp, 1996). This could be explained partially as an adaptation to certain demands and practice routines during a long period of time when some special attributes are developed. In a group of musicians, there are also some specific attributes that are related with subgroups. It was confirmed that music teachers are more conservative (Kemp, 1996) and that the successful ones are noticeable for their personality traits – they are Agreeable, Conscientious and Extraverted (measured by NEO PI-R, Costa & McCrae, 1995) (Bogunović, 2008). Bearing in mind that coping styles are closely related to a personality structure (Watson et al., 1999), we assumed that there are some specific characteristics regarding the manners music teachers use in order to cope with stress in different life and working situations they are faced with.

Music teachers and stress

Perhaps one could ask: "Why are we considering the mastering stress and coping behavior within a group of people

who do such a 'nice job' – working with the art of music and musically gifted children?" Well, there are strong indications that musicians are exposed to numerous stressful situations during their education and professional life. In the course of music education young musicians are exposed to numerous hours of instrumental practice, demands for perfection and demands to give their best at public performances and competitions. Music education, especially on conservatories, aims to develop the 'performer' musical identity of young students sometimes causing difficulties in the next life and professional phase when they have to work as teachers, given the fact that there are not so many job opportunities for soloists (Davidson, 2002). The most challenging issue is how to transfer the "performer" musical identity into the "teacher" musical identity (MacDonald et al., 2002). They have to adapt to a new role, to the demands of almost new profession. They are challenged to manage a classroom or individual students, because teaching is primarily oriented towards others and communication is their main agency (Altwegg, 1990). Other source of professional stress lies in the fact that certain number of teachers tries to continue to actively perform and therefore they have divergent professional orientations at the same time. They try to reconcile two streams – the need to play and the need to have a stable job. This solution has its consequences – their students, at least on the elementary music level in specialized music schools, are less successful. This fact emphasizes the divided attention of these teachers (Bogunović, 2008). Another source of possible stress deals with the issue of career development when in the middle phase teachers experience professional climax but also crisis or plateau since there are not so many possibilities for vertical promotion and horizontal perspective in the educational settings. The teacher's career can be at stake and this phase culminates either with transformation of self-identity or not, depending on the perspective that the teacher has for him/herself (Baker, 2005) or, we could add, depending on their coping strategies and styles. Some researchers even speak about clearly negative traits of personality of music teachers, such as anxiety, hysteria and paranoia. In their opinion these are provoked by high standards teachers set for themselves. They are more vulnerable to the high rate of stress and are susceptible to a "burn out" syndrome (reviewed by Hallam, 2006). Based on the theory of occupational role stress, one collective case study (Scheib, 2003) had the aim to examine six roles of stress in the professional life of the music teachers: role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, underutilization of skills, resource inadequacy and nonparticipation. It was discovered that there were substantial issues related to role conflict, role overload, underutilization of skills and resource inadequacy. This study shows that music teachers often experience tension when they have to fulfill unwanted, unimportant administrative responsibilities, due to the constant need for music education advocacy, conflicts between personal and professional roles as well as tension created by scheduling conflicts due to the increasingly busy schedules of students and lack of teaching materials.

Coping with stress

Coping strategies, developed through long term mastering stress situations are differentially effective. Style in which they are applied is determined by individual characteristics and social and personal experiences. Several theoretical approaches exist regarding understanding, researching and explaining coping with stress. It is perceived as a process-oriented concept that comprises cognitive and emotional appraisals, as a conscious part of ego defense mechanisms and as stable traits of personality.

The comprehension of the coping as a process that happens in continuous transactions within closer and wider environment represents complex concept of stress and coping. Authors are of the opinion that coping strategies are cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific stressors that are assessed as taxing or exceeding the resources of an individual, and are perceived as potentially leading to negative consequences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals generally adopt a coping style based on the determination whether they believe the situation may be changed or not. A cognitive style is often used when the situation is perceived as changeable, while an emotional or escape based style is used when the situation is perceived as chronic. However, not all sources of stress are amenable to mastery. Therefore, efficient coping should not be equated with mastery over the environment, but it could be the one allowing the person to tolerate, minimize, accept or ignore what cannot be mastered (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping is directed at taking action to alter the stressor in such a way as to manage the situation, while emotion-focused coping is directed at regulating and reducing emotional distress through, for example, avoidance or fantasy (Latack and Havlovic, 1992). According to the meditational model of stress coping mediates the relationship among organizational stressors and personal characteristics, and job-related strains and organizational outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Findings from another study support the influence of emotion-focused coping on the psychological outcomes of emotional exhaustion and job-induced anxiety; which in turn are found to influence job satisfaction and intention to withdraw (Boyd et al., 2009). While problem-focused coping had no effect on job-induced anxiety, problem-focused coping did affect emotional exhaustion, which in turn influences job satisfaction and intention to withdraw.

In the theoretical frame of ego psychology, coping styles are closely related to defense mechanisms. The defense refers to an unconscious process designed to hide, avoid or modify some threat, conflict or danger. The coping styles refer to methods of problem solving; they are conscious strategies and all of them can be applied to a wide variety of problems, although conceptually related to the defenses. Authors allege eight coping styles that are related to defense mechanisms: avoidance (repression), minimization (denial), substitution (displacement), help seeking (regression), replacement (compensation, identification, fantasy), mapping (intellectualization), blaming others (projection), reversal (reaction formation) (Conte & Plutchik, 1995). This approach has a good tradition of coping styles measurement and this was one of the reasons why we used one of these instruments in our research.

Supporters of the personalistic approach which is opposed to the situational approach reached the conclusion that coping styles have characteristics of personality trait and that their dispositional nature is warranted (Watson et al, 1999). Authors report that several studies have shown that there are correlations between personality traits (NEO PI-R) and general emotional

status. Extraversion/positive emotionality is positively related to active problem-focused forms of coping. Extraverted persons are likely to use less emotion-focused coping strategies, problem solving, support seeking and instrumental help seeking. On the other hand, neuroticism/negative emotionality is related to passive, emotion-focused orientation. It is also confirmed that coping behavior shows broad consistence and temporal stability in different situations and contexts. We believe that coping with stress is viewed structurally as a style that usually refers to the broad, pervasive and encompassing ways of dealing with people and situations and we tried to transpose these ideas into a context of music education, namely music teachers' coping styles.

Recently new concepts have been developed that have a bit different approach in viewing coping with stress and personal and life circumstances. While the traditional concept of resilience tended to focus on acute and chronic life difficulties as poverty or violence and one's ability and strategies to overcome them (Howard & Johnson, 2000), a newer concept has been developed to consider more 'everyday resilience' that is typical of the ordinary course of life. This 'everyday resilience' has been related to the concept of buoyancy which consider individuals' self-perception of their ability to successfully deal with setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of life (Martin & Marsh, 2006, 2008). According to this concept, the model which proposes relation among coping, buoyancy, work-related engagement and well-being, has been developed (Parker & Martin, 2009). According to Kyriacou (2001), the ways in which individual teachers attempt to cope with stress fall into two main categories: palliative and direct action. Palliative techniques do not deal with the source of the stress but are rather aimed at reducing the impact of the stressor. Direct action techniques for coping with the stresses of teaching involve attempts to eliminate the sources of stress. Some researchers (Martin & Marsh, 2008) tend to suggest that the use of 'direct' coping strategies contributes to greater level of resilience and buoyancy, which lead to greater levels of engagement and well-being. 'Palliative' strategies, on the other hand, can ease pressures in the short run but do not directly deal with the sources of these pressures in the medium or longer run. Thus they can appear useful at first, but are linked to reduced well-being in the medium to longer period (Kyriacou, 2001).

AIMS

We aimed to:

- find out if there were significant differences between music and non-music teachers' coping styles
- identify preferred coping styles of music and non-music teachers,
- confirm possible differences considering socio-demographical variables

METHOD

Research presented here is a part of a wider study which dealt with socio-economic position of teachers and the ways they manage to overcome difficulties that arose during the time of transition in South-Eastern European countries. We were especially interested in music teachers' stress coping styles given that they represent a specific group which differs in many

other aspects from teachers in general education schools. Research was conducted in four specialized music schools for gifted children and four general education schools, on elementary and secondary levels. The sample consists of music teachers (N=67) who teach instruments and music theory and teachers who teach general subjects (N=72). Variables that were taken into account were coping styles and socio-demographical attributes of the teachers. Coping styles: avoidance, minimization, substitution, help seeking, improving shortcomings, mapping, blaming others and reversal. As socio-demographical variables we included gender, education level, working experience and urban/non-urban environment. All the teachers filled in the Plutchik's Coping Styles Questionnaire describing 8 coping styles.

RESULTS

We have found out that there were no significant differences between music and non-music teachers' coping styles in our two samples (Figure 1). This result points out that specific music education environment is not a setting that makes music teacher problem solving behavior different in comparison to other, non-music teachers. It seems that teachers in different educational settings are having the similar coping styles, and this would mean that educational context per se, no matter how specific, does not affect the coping behavior. Specific sources of stress that we pointed out earlier seem to be more related with the nature of music profession itself, the profession that perhaps induces more structural changes that are confirmed by specific personality profiles. Perhaps differences are more striking between music performers and music teachers, who, on the other hand, possess the characteristics of the group of teachers in general. Having taken coping behavior into consideration, it seems that the wider context is more important in this case. In our further results analysis we shall treat our two samples as one and interpret the results of coping styles for the group of teachers.

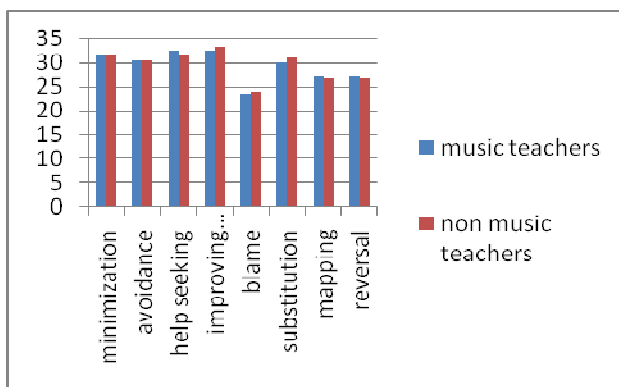


Figure 1 Coping styles of music and non-music teachers

Findings show that teachers coping styles are relatively equable regarding the degree teachers use them, therefore there are not striking differences among them. However, there are some that we could identify as salient and these are:

- Improving shortcomings – solving the problem by improving weaknesses or limitations that exist either in themselves or in the situation they are faced with in order

to develop strength in one area to offset real or imagined deficiency in another.

- Seeking for help in stressful situations, when teachers tend to ask other people for help in order to solve a problem, which places them into a slightly dependent position.
- Minimizing the problem which represents an attempt to solve the problem by assuming that it is not as important as other people think it is, which would mean that some events, experiences or feelings would be too painful to acknowledge.
- Avoiding the problem represents an attempt to solve a problem by avoiding a person or situation believed to create a problem or by “thought-stopping” or turning attention away from the problem.
- Substitution behavior, which keeps teachers busy with unrelated pleasurable activities that they apply in order to solve the problem. For example, reducing tension by using meditation, drugs or alcohol.

The ones slightly less striking are mapping (getting as much information as possible about the problem before acting or taking decision) and reversal behavior (solving a problem by doing the opposite from what you feel) and somewhat less distinct in comparison to other coping styles is blaming others for their own faults.

Our teachers deal with stressful situations by thinking, though focusing mainly on immediate actions in order to improve the obvious and seeking help, emotionally (withdrawal, substitutive activities) and on behavioral level (avoiding situations). They do not use primarily mapping of the problems and planning strategies and there is no strikingly long term cognitive elaboration. We notice that teachers express a bit bigger number of passive styles and avoiding and dysfunctional strategies in managing stressful situations. Avoidance, denial and substitution based strategies fail to resolve the underlying problems that are generating stress and they can be expected to lead to a greater longer term distress than more active problem focused approaches (Watson et al., 1999). Styles that they use are mainly emotion-focused, coping to maintain hope and optimism, to deny both fact and implication, to act as if what had happened did not matter. These strategies are palliative and efficient in a short term period and are contrary to the direct ones that could bring some concrete and perhaps structural changes. Coping styles that teachers in our sample use are more of negative emotions type, which contradicts the fact about the generally confirmed extraversion of the teachers (Ryans, 1970), which is strongly and broadly related to positive emotions and experience (Watson et al., 1999). On the other hand, people who are more extraverted tend to turn to others for support in times of stress, as teachers in our sample do. However, extraverted people also tend to have problem-oriented coping behavior and not primarily emotion-directed. Ergo, our findings show slight discrepancy. We assume that mainly palliative and emotionally-based coping styles of teachers could be in the function of dealing with prolonged difficulties connected to the socio-economic context. In the results of the research that is related to this one, we find arguments for this kind of interpretation implying that teachers are in a great extent burdened by temporary socio-economic situation in the period of transition. In order to raise their socio-economic status and improve life quality teachers use financial and psychological strategies to overcome stress and these strategies can be

determined as: moralist, compensatory, evasive, inappropriate, emotional and relying on family and friendly supportive systems and activist (Bogunović & Stanković, 2008).

Regarding the differences considering socio-demographical variables, results indicate that female teachers are significantly more apt to use avoiding ($r=0.36$; $p<0.01$), help seeking ($r=0.31$; $p<0.01$) and substitution ($r=0.23$; $p<0.01$) emotional-behavioral strategies, but also to improve limitations in themselves or in the situation ($r=0.21$; $p<0.05$). We believe that these differences are very much influenced by socio-cultural gender role identification, which define women as more passive and relying on others and family network. Correlations between other socio-demographical variables and coping styles are single, but they shed light on some attributes of the teacher sample. Namely, when education level is in question, we found out that teacher with higher education (B.A. and M.A.) use minimization of the problems as a coping mechanism significantly less ($r=0.22$; $p<0.05$), which implies that they are aware more than others about severity of the problem, but, still they do not take direct actions. Teachers who work longer, ask for help less ($r=-0.22$; $p<0.01$) which is also logical, they rely on their long life and professional experience. People from bigger cities tend to use substitution ($r=0.19$; $p<0.05$) as a coping style significantly more often, probably because they have more opportunities to find sources for pleasurable activities.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude that no significant differences in coping styles were found between music and non-music teachers; therefore we may say that music teachers are more similar to teachers in general, than to music performers. We confirmed that several coping styles are more distinct in a group of teachers, but that there is a certain ambiguity in coping strategies that they use. On the one side, problem-solving styles are present, though they are reduced in a mainly, passive, avoiding and dysfunctional strategies in managing stress situations, which are emotional-focused. Long term cognitive elaboration in stressful situations is not strikingly present. There are indications of the socio-cultural gender roles differences. To resume, we could say that theoretical concept of coping styles that arises from ego psychoanalytic theory is somehow narrow when the “when and where and how” have to be taken into account, because it does not include environment and adaptability to the context changes. It could also be understood that some patterns can be more common than others due to shared cultural ways of responding (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) or perhaps they can be influenced by common circumstances. We could also say that prolonged and ‘undercover’ stress, that has been provoked by general economic uncertainty of the transition times could have long term effect also on coping behavior strategies and styles of teachers in Serbia. We think that concept that regards coping as a process and taking into account wider context – professional, social and cultural, apart from ‘personal reality’, provides more insights and profound answers.

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