
ASPECTS CONTRIBUTING TO THE LIMITED USE OF PROBLEM-FOCUSED
COPING MECHANISM STRATEGY OF THE SECOND LEAD CHARACTER IN THE
NOVEL HEAVEN

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Abstrak Strategi mekanisme koping merupakan salah satu aspek penting yang menentukan hasil bagi korban trauma; namun, terdapat kesenjangan literatur dalam aspek yang membatasi penggunaan strategi mekanisme koping berfokus pada masalah dalam situasi perundungan yang dialami oleh remaja. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis unsur-unsur yang berkontribusi pada keterbatasan penggunaan strategi mekanisme koping berfokus pada masalah pada karakter utama kedua dari novel Heaven karya Mieko Kawakami, menggunakan kerangka teoritis Stress, Appraisal, dan Coping yang diusulkan oleh Lazarus dan Folkman (1984). Metode penelitian yang digunakan dalam studi ini adalah metode kualitatif dalam menganalisis data dan penelitian perpustakaan dalam mengumpulkan data dari novel. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa dari 20 mekanisme koping yang diidentifikasi pada karakter utama kedua, mekanisme koping berfokus pada masalah hanya 30%, sementara mekanisme koping berfokus pada emosi mendominasi 70%. Penggunaan yang terbatas ini disebabkan oleh tiga aspek utama: keterbatasan sumber daya sosial dan kognitif remaja, ketidakmampuan mengendalikan situasi, dan konteks budaya Jepang. Temuan penelitian ini membantu mengembangkan intervensi yang mempertimbangkan batasan kontekstual untuk meningkatkan kapasitas mekanisme koping berfokus pada masalah, serta memahami aspek yang membatasi penggunaan mekanisme koping aktif di kalangan korban bullying.

Kata Kunci: Heaven, Mekanisme Koping, Mekanisme Kajian Karakter, Mieko Kawakami, Sastra.

Abstract: Coping mechanism strategies are one of the important determining aspects of the outcomes for the victims of trauma; however, there is a literature gaps in the aspects that limits the usage of a problem-focused coping mechanism strategy in bullying situations experienced by adolescents. This study aims to analyze the elements that contribute to the limited use of the problem-focused coping mechanism strategy of the second lead character from the novel Heaven by Mieko Kawakami, using the Stress, Appraisal, and Coping theoretical framework proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The research methods employed in this study included qualitative analysis of the data and library research to collect data from the novel. The results of this study indicate that out of the 20 identified coping mechanisms of the second lead character, the identified problem-focused coping is only 30%, meanwhile the identified emotion-focused coping is dominating in 70%. These limited uses were caused by three primary aspects: adolescent social and cognitive resource constraints, uncontrollability of a situation, and the Japanese cultural context. The findings of this study help to develop interventions that consider the contextual limitations to enhance the capacity of problem-focused coping, as well

as gaining an understanding of the aspect that limits the active coping usage among victims of bullying.

Keywords: *Character Analysis, Coping Mechanism, Heaven, Literature, Mieko Kawakami.*

INTRODUCTION

In the fields of psychology, bullying has always been a complicated phenomenon that raises concerns due to the impact on the victim's psychological well-being. Bullying definitions include three main aspects: repetitive behavior for a long period, power imbalance, and aggressive behavior that was intentional (Olweus, 1993). This thing could not only affect the victims' academics but also their psychological development, social skills, and emotions in the long run.

In case of bullying, the individuals tend to use various coping mechanisms in dealing with it; to manage the pressure their situations give them. The concept of coping was introduced and developed by Lazarus and Folkman, who define coping as a cognitive and behavioral effort that tends to be ongoing, meaning it involves managing internal and external requirements that are perceived as exceeding one's resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The coping mechanism strategy was categorized into two significant types: problem-focused coping, used when the situation is controllable, and emotion-focused coping, used when the situation is out of the individual's control. (Lazarus and Folkman, 1980).

A problem-focused coping, like its name, was defined as a type of coping that requires the person to make an effort through concrete actions to change or control the source of the stressor. This type of coping involves a confrontation, problem-solving, and seeking instrumental support. Contrary to problem-focused, emotion-focused coping was defined as a type of coping that requires the person to manage the responses and behavior emotionally through emotional regulation, avoidance, cognitive reappraisal, or changing the way they view the situation, and seeking emotional support. The effectiveness of both strategies of coping will depend on the strategy type and the stressful situation. In practice, however, the coping strategy selection isn't always following this theoretical pattern.

The bullying context has a particular characteristic that makes the coping theory a lot more complicated. It involves a power dynamic that is considered unequal, which often happens in an institutional environment that has a significant structure of authority. This thing forms a paradoxical situation where other contextual factors may limit or risk the theoretical situation from being controlled.

This study will analyze the second lead character from the novel *Heaven* by Mieko

Kawakami (2021), who portrays a unique and distinct coping mechanism strategy and is a static character that tends to stick with the same personality and behavior until the end, which is more intriguing compared to the main character, who is a dynamic character that constantly changes throughout the story.

The second lead character, namely Kojima, in dealing with the bullying, shows an interesting experience that challenges the application of the coping theory itself. There are only a few aspects of Kojima's situation that can be controlled by using a problem-focused coping strategy, and for the rest, she deals with them by using an emotion-focused coping strategy. Analysis of her behaviour has revealed 20 main strategies, of which the ones classified as problem-focused coping are only 6 of 20.

Previous research shows that the victims of bullying often face difficulty in choosing suitable coping strategies. Gender, social, and cultural context play a big role in influencing the coping strategy consistency used in the case of bullying (Smith et al., 2019). Effects of bullying on adolescents' mental health are treated by a perceived social support and aggressive behaviour, which indicates how coping strategies are influenced by contextual aspects (Liu et al., 2022). A defensive coping strategy towards bullying is more effective than the confrontational strategies for the victims to reduce the psychological impacts in the long run. This shows that a victim of bullying tends to develop coping strategies that are adaptive and do not align with any coping theory predictions (Wachs, 2019).

There is a gap in the literature on the influencing aspects in coping strategies selection among bullying victims, especially on why the victims rarely use a problem-focused coping strategy, which should be more effective. Most of the previous studies had focused on classifying and identifying the types of strategies used, but have not explored the reasons behind their choices of these strategies.

This study aims to analyze the aspects that limit the second lead character, namely Kojima, from using the problem-focused coping strategy in dealing with her bullying situation. This analysis is important for the readers to gain an understanding of the coping dynamics and gives a new point of view on how victims of bullying deal with their situations. In understanding the reasons for the selected coping strategies, this study is expected to theoretically contribute to more effective interventions of both practical and contextual coping types.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, which is an approach that aims to gain an

understanding of humanitarian problems that a specific group or individuals face (Cresswell, 2014). The data will be collected through library research, which is a data collection that includes gathering information from written sources (Zed, 2008). This study focuses on the second lead character, Kojima, who will be analyzed in terms of her behavior throughout the story and the coping mechanism strategy she adopts in dealing with bullying. The data in this study were collected through observing the narratives of the behavior and responses Kojima shows in various situations inside the novel.

The data collection techniques involve an analysis of the textual evidence found in the narratives, which indicates Kojima's coping mechanism strategies, focusing on six problem-focused coping mechanisms out of twenty coping mechanisms that have been identified, and why the use of problem-focused coping mechanisms is limited. The data analysis is conducted using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress, Appraisal, and Coping theory to classify and identify the aspects that influence the second lead character's strategy selection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the second lead character, namely Kojima, shows six forms of coping mechanism strategies that are classified as problem-focused coping based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory; however, the implementation of it are limited and defensive. The analysis will give an understanding of the problem-focused coping complexity within a bullying context.

In the novel, the second lead character, namely Kojima, displays twenty coping mechanism strategies, whereas six out of twenty are problem-focused ones that differ from the traditional theory proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The first problem-focused coping strategy is reaching out and building a friendship with the main character, viewing him as an ally who suffers through the same struggle, reflecting her active attempts in establishing a social support that is considered instrumental. This shows in the passage:

“One day, towards the end of April, between classes, I unzipped my pencil case and found a folded triangle of paper between the pencils. I unfolded it to see what was inside. **“We should be friends.”** That’s all it said. (Kawakami, 2021, p. 1)

A perceived social support deals as a mediator in the relationship between mental health and bullying, where it is showing how that victims with a higher support system are less affected by the negative impact of bullying (Liu et al., 2022). The strategy Kojima used in building friendship shows the importance of social support in a bullying situation as one of the coping

resources.

The second coping strategy used by Kojima is observing the behavior of her bullies to anticipate possible threats, which reflects seeking information to manage the stress from her trauma (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This is shown in the passage:

“They aren’t even thinking. Not at all. They’re just doing what they’ve seen other people do, following blindly. They don’t know what it means, or why they’re doing it. You and me, **we’re just an outlet for them**” (Kawakami, 2021, p. 63)

Anticipatory development by the victim of bullying displays a lower anxiety level than those without a predictive strategy (Kowalski and Limber, 2021). This strategy gives Kojima predictive control that allows her to prepare better and proper responses towards her situation. Although the strategy does not solve her problem directly, it still helps to not intensify the psychological impact of the bullying.

The third and fourth strategy used by Kojima is maintaining her physical boundaries to people around her, as well as limiting her interactions to the main character, and identifying a location to interact secretly with him, which shows boundary management. These strategies display a problem-focused coping in a spatial and environmental manipulation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This shows in the passage:

“Kojima sat rigid in her seat. No matter how long I watched that head of hair, it never moved. **No one spoke to Kojima, and Kojima spoke to no one.**” (Kawakami, 2021, p. 68)

“The first week of June came and went, and soon it was the second Wednesday of the month. **I met Kojima, as promised, at the top of the fire stairwell.** When she saw me, she gave a little wave. I waved back in the same way.” (Kawakami, 2021, p. 18)

A planned spatial control is a problem-focused coping that is effective in reducing the bullying exposure from the victim (Garnet et al., 2014). The boundary management Kojima adapt portrays her mature comprehension of a power dynamic in bullying situations, whereas creating a safe zone and limiting physical contact gave her a sense of security and maintained her ability to access her needed social support from the main character.

One of the effective strategies that helps reduce the psychological impact on the victims is the coping strategies focusing on managing their surrounding environment (Xie et al., 2020). This indicates that in the context of bullying, a problem-focused coping needs to be adopted covertly to prevent an escalation of the situation, unlike the other contexts of stressors, which allow multiple confrontational approaches.

The fifth strategy used by Kojima is thinking of the consequences of actions the bullies

will get in the future, which shows a cognitive reframing where it involves Kojima actively attempts to change her situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This shows in the passage:

“Same way that I learned from what they’ve done to me, I think they need to learn, but not from me. **It has to be the consequences of their actions. Otherwise, they’ll never understand.** They need to learn about themselves from what they’ve done to me. That would be enough to justify my life” (Kawakami, 2021, p. 70)

A positive cognitive reframing, including creating perspective and positive reappraisal, could help the victim of bullying in lowering their depression and anxiety level that they get from the situation itself (Garnefski and Kraaij, 2014). This strategy helps Kojima to gain a sense of justice and control that are important for long-term mental health, even when the strategy does not involve a confrontation.

The sixth strategy used by Kojima is not reacting to the bullying she received with explosive emotions and instead maintaining a blank and silent reaction, which shows a strategic emotional regulation where a conscious action is done to control the victim's situation by refusing to give any reinforcement towards the bullies (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This shows in the passage:

“I saw one of the girls kick the back of Kojima’s chair on her way out. Kojima winced and shot up in her seat. **For a moment, she froze,** but once the usual girls were gone, **she gathered up her bags and slowly left the room,** hands full and shoulders heavy.” (Kawakami, 2021, p. 28)

Strategic emotional control is our important predictor of bullying victims' high self-esteem. This strategy counts as an active coping strategy that requires understanding of the bullying dynamic and self-control, even when it appears passive.

Although Kojima's portrayal of the various problem-focused coping strategies defined by the coping theory is effective for dealing with her situation, Kojima's implementation of problem-focused coping is limited by the contextual aspects of her bullying situation. The unequal power structure that is unequal may trigger a high-risk confrontation strategy, making it almost impossible for Kojima. A chronic victim of bullying experienced a complicated process of receiving attacks to exiting bullying, which explains their need for a more sustainable coping strategy (Glumetti and Kowalski, 2022). Unlike the other situations that give flexible choices, the imbalance of power in bullying situations forces the bullying victim to use more defensive and subtle strategies.

Kojima developed a covert and self-reliant strategy due to a lack of institutional support.

Bullying victims that has no access to a formal support develop complex coping strategies that are more diverse than conventional ones, even if they are less effective (Nixon et al., 2020). The anti-bullying interventions are dependent on systemic support from institutions, and the absence of this support leads the victims of bullying to rely more on an individual strategy that limits them from completely solving their problems.

The findings of this study suggest that, in the context of bullying, problem-focused coping that was proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) has always been modified into a defensive form of coping. There will be a unique collection of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping combined, developed by bullying victims, that doesn't follow the traditional theory itself (Calvete et al., 2015). Kojima's strategy is a defensive problem-focused coping, which is shown by how she constantly puts an effort into managing her problems, but with minimized risk and confrontation.

A defensive coping mechanism strategy was more suitable among victims of bullying than a confrontational one because it helps to reduce psychological impacts in the long run, affirming that a coping adaptation in a certain context is a coping intelligence rather than a sign of deficiency (Wachs, 2019). Kojima does not use problem-focused coping rarely, but rather applies it in an adapted form to the reality she faced.

This research contributes to the coping theory proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) by proving that the effectiveness of the strategies chosen wasn't only determined by what it identified as, but also by how appropriate the application was towards the context of the stressors' characteristics. In the bullying context, the effectiveness of a problem-focused coping needs a strategic, subtle, and long-term oriented manner rather than an impulsive problem resolution (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). These findings will enhance the comprehension of coping strategies' adaptability in addressing a complex and structured source of stressors

CONCLUSION

This study shows how the second lead character, namely Kojima, uses a variety of problem-focused coping forms, but the implementation was limited due to the bullying context complexity. The six problem-focused coping strategies chosen by Kojima demonstrate how the contextual factors of her situation limit her high adaptive capacity. The aspects that limit the problem-focused coping in Kojima's case include the uncontrollable bullying context, survival orientation, situational control limitations, lack of support system, the risk of an escalated conflict, and consideration of long-term consequences.

This research gives a significant insight into which, in the context of bullying, a problem-focused coping strategy has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other sources of stress contexts. Strategies that were categorized as problem-focused coping should be fitted in a more hidden and minimized risk-oriented manner than an open and direct problem-solving.

The implications in theory of this study are the need for the development of a contextual coping model that acknowledges the characteristics of each type of existing stressor. Traditional coping theories that divide the types of coping into problem-focused and emotion-focused may be deficient in explaining the complexity of bullying victims' coping strategies.

This study recommends the intervention development that not only focuses on changing structures and systems but also on strengthening the person's coping abilities, which will allow the problem-focused coping strategies to be used effectively and safely. It should also give an extensive support system so the victims of bullying do not have to rely on high-risk and limited coping mechanisms.

Further research could explore the effectiveness of the various problem-focused coping forms in the bullying context, analysing factors that complement the support system in facilitating the victim of bullying to an optimal use of problem-focused coping, and more accurate measurement tools of coping strategy application.

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