

The Process of Coping Among Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Freshmen: A Narrative Approach

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ABSTRACT. Using a narrative approach, the authors explored the process of coping among ethnic minority college students. Participants were 30 freshmen, predominantly the 1st members of their families to attend college, who wrote journals once a week for 3 weeks on their ways of coping with stress. They also completed a survey of background information. Those who were more successful in coping, compared to those who were less successful, expressed a greater sense of self-efficacy and did not feel that they lacked needed social support. However, those who were more successful in coping did not differ on demographic variables, including ethnicity, gender, country of birth, and parental education. The narratives provide evidence of the complex and interactive process of coping among ethnic minority college students.

Key words: college students, coping, ethnic minorities, stress

THE ABILITY OF INDIVIDUALS TO FUNCTION effectively in dealing with life challenges is a topic of interest that is central to psychologists. Much of the research on this topic has been carried out within a framework of stress and coping, largely on the basis of the seminal work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The research on this topic is now voluminous. However, investigators have noted

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substantial problems in the study of coping. Somerfield and McCrae (2000) noted that much of the research has used between-persons, cross-sectional research designs that can not capture the complexity of the coping process. They suggest that, as a result, research on the topic has led to conclusions of limited theoretical or clinical value.

In response to critiques of coping research, recent investigators have emphasized the importance of utilizing designs that can capture the dynamic, interactional nature of coping (Lazarus, 2000). Qualitative methods may be of particular value in this respect. Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) suggested that valuable insights can be obtained through personal narratives in which individuals report what happened and what they did in response to stress. According to Lazarus, "full and accurate descriptions of phenomenal wholes" (p. 668) are as important as the search for causal variables.

Furthermore, some scholars stress the value of examining coping within particular contexts, rather than at an abstract, theoretical level (Coyne & Racioppo, 2000). Coping is a response to specific situations that the individual experiences as posing challenges that cause stress or anxiety. Coping with incurable cancer poses issues that are very different from those of coping with chronic poverty, divorce, or academic pressures, although coping with each of them can lead to high levels of stress. It may ultimately be more informative to study the process of coping within particular contexts, rather than attempting to derive general principles of coping across widely varying situations.

The goal of the present study was to gain understanding of the coping process in a particular context through the use of personal narratives in combination with background survey data. The focus of the study was on the stress faced by ethnic minority college freshmen who are predominantly the first generation in their family to attend college. Students in the first generation to attend college often face greater stress than typical middle class college students. For example, they generally must deal with greater financial pressures and more family responsibilities (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Yet many of them do well in college, showing resilience in the face of substantial difficulties (Masten et al., 1999).

In the present study, we addressed the issue of how situational factors, social support, and personal characteristics contribute to successful coping by these students. The primary data for the study are in narratives written by the students once a week for three weeks, describing (a) their then-current stress from academic, family, or personal problems, (b) the way in which they dealt with the stress, and (c) the resources that they needed in dealing with the situation. In addition, we used survey data to provide background information on the students.

Although coping is an interactive process, it is necessary for analytic purposes to consider the parts that make it up. We review the stressful situations that minority first-generation college students face, the strategies they use in coping, the supports available to them, and the personal characteristics that influence the coping process.

Ethnic minority college freshmen who represent the first generation in their family to attend college face a number of stressors over and above those identified for college students generally (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). With parents whose level of education is often only high school completion or less, these students are likely to come from low-income households and to have greater financial needs than middle class students (Archer & Lamnin, 1985; Pliner & Brown, 1985; Terenzini et al., 1996). As a result, most hold part-time or full-time jobs and must balance the competing demands of a job and schoolwork. Archer and Lamnin found that ethnic minority students were likely to mention financial stressors more often than were White students.

Other possible stressors for ethnic minority students may result from their minority status. Researchers have examined ethnic and cultural stressors such as perceived discrimination (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Saldaña, 1994; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001) and perceived cultural differences between their own culture and that of a largely White middle class American university (Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997). In contrast to such research, the current study was conducted in a predominantly ethnic minority, commuter university where the cultural climate is very diverse and less threatening for minority students. In a separate study conducted with the same population as the current study, perceived discrimination was rated very low, with a mean between *never* and *rarely* on a 5-point scale (Phinney & Tomiki, 2002).

Students who are the first in their family to attend college may also face a lack of support from family members who have not experienced and so do not understand the problems that the students experience. Parents who have not attended college also may not understand that the time pressures of college may interfere with the performance of family obligations (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000). Many ethnic minority students are from immigrant backgrounds and from cultures that place a central value on the family and family obligations. Such students, especially those living at home, feel obligations to the family and are expected to carry out family duties, such as housework and child care (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Family relationships can thus become a major source of stress and concern, especially in conjunction with academic pressures. Constantine and Chen (1997) found that family issues were especially stressful among minority college students. Thus financial stress and family obligations add to the academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal problems that college students experience generally (Ross et al., 1999; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). The present investigators expected that situational factors, including holding a job and having family responsibilities, would detract from the ability of first-generation college students to cope successfully with college stress.

However, the extent to which one perceives situations as stressful depends in part on one's ability to handle them, that is, one's coping strategies. Previous researchers have found differences in the types of coping that are used by members of different ethnic groups, but only a few of these studies have focused on

ethnic minority college students. Chang (1996) found that there were no ethnic differences in coping strategies such as problem solving and seeking support; nevertheless, Asian American college students were more likely to use avoidance and social withdrawal strategies than were their European American counterparts. Jung (1995) also found that there were ethnic group differences in coping. Latino and Asian American students were more likely to score higher on avoidance coping than European American students. Both Chang and Jung examined ethnic differences in general coping strategies, rather than examining coping in relation to specific college stressors, as the present investigators did in this study.

Efforts to identify individual strategies as more or less effective are difficult or impossible, because the success of any coping effort depends on the particular issue and context. Coping proactively is likely to be effective in dealing with events that are perceived as controllable, whereas alternative approaches may be more appropriate in response to events beyond the individual's control (Compas, 1998). Moreover, differing approaches can be equally successful in reducing stress. Facing academic pressures, one student may choose to study harder, whereas another may do something relaxing and then return to studying; both approaches may be successful. Nevertheless, some approaches are likely to be less successful than others. In particular, simply avoiding or ignoring a stressful situation may neither reduce stress nor alleviate the problem. We expected that a variety of strategies could be effective, if they are appropriate to the situation.

One consistent finding in the literature is the positive role of social support in helping an individual to cope with a stressful situation (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996). Social support can be viewed as a resource or as a coping response. As a resource, social support would include the availability of tangible help, guidance, and emotional support. A coping response would include seeking and receiving support from others (Pierce et al.). In the college context, support may consist of either academic assistance from instructors or the institution or emotional support from family and friends who provide understanding and encouragement. Research suggests that social support promotes academic success among college students. Students who have perceived lack of support are more likely to report greater stress and lower academic performance (Newby-Fraser & Schlebusch, 1997). Research has shown that social support is related to various components of college success, such as achievement as measured by grade point average (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994), college adjustment (Solberg, Valdez, & Villarreal, 1994; Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995), and college satisfaction (Weir & Okun, 1989). The present investigators expected that students would cope more successfully in situations in which they feel that they have adequate support.

Psychological characteristics of individuals are also important factors in effective coping. Costa, Somerfield, and McCrae (1996) and Freitas and Downey

(1998) have conceptualized characteristics such as expectancies, goals, and competencies as mediators of coping effectiveness. In particular, self-efficacy has been identified as an important component of successful coping. According to Bandura (1997), *self-efficacy* is the belief in one's ability to execute behavior that is necessary to achieve a specific outcome. *General self-efficacy* refers to a broad set of expectations that are based on past experiences that affect one's expectations of success in new situations (Scherer et al., 1982). Much of the research in this area has focused on task-specific or situation-specific beliefs about perceived capabilities. The predictive value of self-efficacy is greatest when self-efficacy and performance are assessed with measures specific to a particular situation, rather than globally assessed (Bandura; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares, 1997). Research in academic settings suggests that self-efficacy is an important factor in both academic performance and persistence (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). A study of the adjustment of 1st-year college students found that self-efficacy was strongly related to academic performance and adjustment (Chemers, Li-tze, & Garcia, 2001). Solberg and Villarreal (1997) found that among Hispanic college students, higher levels of self-efficacy were related to better personal adjustment to college. The present investigators expected that students who indicated greater self-efficacy would be more successful in handling stress.

A continuing problem in the study of coping is the issue of defining and measuring effective coping (Lazarus, 2000). Particularly when stressors are complex and continuing, it is not clear what is effective coping; responses that achieve one objective may interfere with another (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). For example, a student may relieve stress by exercising or socializing but in so doing may not complete an academic assignment. College students are likely to have a number of goals that they wish to accomplish. Although academic success is usually an important goal, some students, particularly those from minority backgrounds, have other competing goals, such as meeting family responsibilities. Such students may be successful in dealing with family issues but in so doing may compromise their schoolwork. In the present study, we used the students' own ratings of their success as an indicator of effective coping. These ratings have the limitation that they may be confounded with the students' perceptions of the difficulty of the stress and of their own ability to deal with it. Nevertheless, self-ratings provide an appropriate measure of success, because perceptions of stress, coping, and success are difficult to untangle in research. As a first step in understanding the process of academic coping of these students, we examined a student's subjective evaluation of successful coping as it related to aspects of the situation and the person.

In summary, coping with stress in college is a complex process whose outcome depends on the interaction of many factors related to the stressor, the context, and the individual. One approach to understanding the process is through narratives of specific instances of coping. This approach limits the size of samples that can practically be used and thus does not lend itself to multivariate analyses of a

large number of variables. However, it has the advantage of providing insight into the on-going process, as students attempt to cope with specific issues. The students whom we studied were those who, for demographic reasons, are particularly subject to academic stress. We expected that those who report dealing more successfully with stress, compared with those who report dealing less successfully, would use coping strategies more appropriate to the problem, would have greater feelings of self-efficacy, and would be more likely to feel that they had adequate support from family, friends, and others. To address these issues, we analyzed the narratives qualitatively, coded responses from coping narratives, and carried out quantitative analyses of survey data.

Method

Participants

The participants were 30 ethnic minority freshmen (21 females, 9 males; age range = 18–19 years; $M = 18.4$, $SD = .50$) from an urban commuter university in southern California, with a student body that was 80% non-White. Of these, 19 participants were Latino, 8 were Asian American, 2 were African American, and 1 was of mixed heritage. Among the participants, 22 were born in the United States, and 8 were born elsewhere. For 25 of the participants, neither parent had education beyond high school. Participants were mainly residing at home with parents or family (23); the rest (7) were living in a dorm or apartment. All but 2 were carrying full academic loads of 12 or more units. Two thirds of the participants (21) worked part or full time (from 8 to 45 hr per week). Table 1 shows information regarding participants' parental education and students' academic units, work time, and household chores.

Survey

About 1 month prior to writing the journal narratives that are the focus of this research, the participants completed a survey of college attitudes as part of a larger study. In the present research, we used the following variables from the survey.

Grade goal. One item assessed the academic grades that the participant hoped to attain in the current year. Responses options were 5 = *A average*, 4 = *B average*, 3 = *C average*, 2 = *passing all courses*, 1 = *avoiding academic probation*.

Confidence. One item assessed the participant's confidence in achieving the above goal. Responses were on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *not at all confident* to 5 = *very confident*.

TABLE 1. Parents' Education and Students' Academic and Time Commitments

Variable	Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Mother's education</i>		
Elementary school or less	12	40.0
Attended or completed high school	12	40.0
Some college	4	13.3
BA or beyond	2	6.7
<i>Father's education</i>		
Elementary school or less	11	36.7
Attended or completed high school	12	43.3
Some college	3	10.0
BA or beyond	3	10.0
<i>Student's academic units</i>		
8-11	2	6.7
12-15	17	56.7
16-18	11	36.7
<i>Student's work hours per week</i>		
0	11	36.7
8-26	11	36.7
30-45	8	26.7
<i>Student's household chore hours</i>		
0-2 hr/week	11	36.7
30 min/ to 2 hr/day	9	30.0
3 or more hr/day	10	33.3

College self-efficacy. Two items assessed the extent to which the participant relied on a belief in him or herself to deal with problems at college. The items were "I believe that in spite of the setbacks, I have the ability to succeed" and "I believe that I have what it takes to succeed in college." These two items were highly correlated, $r = .65$. Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The mean of the two items was used in analyses. A high score indicated a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Demographic background information. We asked participants demographic questions regarding their age, gender, ethnicity, academic level, birthplace, parental education, and occupation.

Journal

We recruited participants from a larger sample of students who had completed the survey of college attitudes. Participants were offered \$35 for completing three journal entries. Of the 48 freshmen invited to participate, 38 agreed to take part in the present study. Of them, 8 freshmen completed only one or two of the assignments and were dropped from the study; 30 completed all three journal assignments. We paid \$35 to those who completed all three journal entries.

We gave participants instructions for accessing a Web site that provided instructions for the journal. In the instructions, we asked participants to write a journal once a week for 3 consecutive weeks. A template was provided, and participants were prompted to describe in a paragraph or less (a) the most stressful situation that they had experienced during the previous week that had interfered with their academic work, (b) the way in which they had coped with the situation, and (c) the resources or types of support that they had lacked or needed to deal with the stressful situation.

Participants also reported how difficult the stressful event was, on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *not at all difficult* to 5 = *very difficult*. They also indicated how successful they thought they were in dealing with the stressful situation, using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *completely successful*.

In addition, participants completed items as part of the first journal assignment that assessed the number of academic units that they were taking; the number of hours, if any, that they worked per week; the amount of time that they spent on household chores; and their current place of residence.

We had developed a preliminary coding scheme for stressors, ways of coping, and needed resources on the basis of a pilot study. In the present study, we carried out trial coding using journal entries from the eight students who had not completed all three assignments and had been dropped from the study. We modified definitions of coding categories as necessary on the basis of the trial coding. The stressor categories were as follows: *financial stress*; *academic stress*; *time management (conflicts between schoolwork and jobs, family, and social activities)*; *family problems*; *social problems*; *transportation*; *health*; and *none*. Table 2 shows the categories and definitions for ways of coping and resources needed. Categories were mutually exclusive, and only the primary stressor, coping strategy, and resource needed were coded for each entry. Two coders coded each journal entry independently; they resolved disagreements by discussion with a third coder. Intercoder reliability was within an acceptable range. Kappas for the 3 weeks were .94, .66, and .81 for the stressors; .63, .52, and .63 for ways of coping; and .72, .55, and .80 for resources needed.

TABLE 2. Journal Coding Categories: Definitions and Number of Incidents

Type	Definition	Incidents (<i>n</i>)
<i>Ways of coping</i>		
Proactive	Doing something to try to solve the problem, such as planning and organizing, working harder, staying up later, going to a library, or finding resources (on one's own)	45
Seek Support	Doing something to try to solve the problem by involving others; getting help; going to a teacher, tutor, or study group; or talking to others to deal with the situation	23
Distancing/avoidance	Distancing oneself from the problem, but with the clear (stated) purpose that the action is intended to relax and refresh so that one can later return to the problem; or Doing something to distance oneself from the problem to forget or by-pass the problem. The act in itself does not lead to a solution	8
Acceptance	Acceptance of the problem; seeing it as something one must live with	7
Positive Reframing	Looking at the problem in a positive way. Includes statements that show a positive outlook and confidence in dealing with it, but without specific actions that lead to a solution	2
No coping needed	—	5
<i>Resources needed</i>		
Emotional	Understanding and emotional support from counselors, instructors, friends, family, or boss	25
Academic	Academic support from instructors, fellow students, study groups, or resource center	4
Tangible	Tangible, material resources, such as money, car, equipment, or space to study	16
None	None needed or not applicable	45

Results

We analyzed data in several ways. We first carried out quantitative analyses to identify the correlates of successful coping in the 90 incidents reported in the journals (3 for each of 30 participants). Next, we examined the relationship between the degree of the students' success in coping and the type and difficulty of stress, type of coping, and resources needed. Then, we explored the demographic and personal characteristics of the 30 participants in relation to their overall reported success. Lastly, we examined the coping process as a whole, using the narratives to illustrate the coping process among selected students who were either very high or very low in their success in coping.

Predictors of Successful Coping Incidents

The mean rating of success over 90 incidents was 3.44 ($SD = .78$, range = 2–5), just above the midpoint of the 5-point Likert-type scale.

Success in relation to stress. We calculated mean success ratings for each type of stressful event across the 90 journal reports. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that success in coping was unrelated to the type of stress.

The rated difficulty level of the stressful events was high overall, with a mean of 3.59 ($SD = 1.10$) on a scale from 1 to 5. To determine whether success in coping was related to the difficulty level of the stress, we calculated the correlation between difficulty of the stress and the success of the coping efforts. There was a significant negative correlation between difficulty and success, $r(n = 90) = -.28$, $p < .01$. Not surprisingly, students reported greater success in dealing with less difficult stress; however, an alternate interpretation of this result is that students perceived as less difficult those problems that they were able to handle. Additional analyses showed no significant relationship between type of stress and difficulty level.

Success in relation to coping. Table 2 shows the frequencies for each of the 90 coping incidents. Proactive coping was by far the most frequent type, followed by seeking support.

We calculated mean success ratings for each coping strategy. A one-way ANOVA of success by type of coping was significant, $F(5, 79) = 2.99$, $p = .016$. Post hoc analyses showed that the most successful way of coping, seeking support ($M = 3.73$, $SE = .20$), was significantly more successful than the least successful, distancing/avoidance ($M = 2.17$, $SE = .54$). The remaining three ways of coping were intermediate in rated success and did not differ from each other or from the other types; the means were the following: proactive ($M = 3.51$, $SE = .15$), positive reframing ($M = 3.00$, $SE = 1.00$), and acceptance ($M = 2.71$, $SE = .42$).

Success in relation to resources needed. We compared the types of resources that students reported that they needed in dealing with stress in each situation in terms

of success of outcome, using an ANOVA. There was a significant difference in success by resources needed, $F(3, 86) = 3.38, p = .02$. Students rated coping as significantly less successful in situations where they reported needing understanding and emotional support ($M = 2.88, SE = .25$) than in situations in which they reported needing academic support ($M = 3.50, SE = .50$), material support ($M = 3.63, SE = .24$), or no support ($M = 3.69, SE = .15$).

Individual Predictors of Successful Coping

We used ANOVAs to examine differences in success in coping among the 30 students by gender, ethnicity (Latino or Asian), birthplace (U.S. or foreign born), and parental education (secondary education or less; or some college or college degree). There were no significant differences in success in coping in terms of these demographic variables.

To examine the relationship of students' success in coping to other aspects of their lives, we calculated correlations between coping success and academic units in which students were enrolled, hours per week at a job, and time spent in household chores. There were no significant relationships among these variables.

We next examined the relationship of rated success to three personal variables reported in the survey: grade goal, confidence in achieving goal, and self-efficacy. Grade goal and confidence were unrelated to success, but self-efficacy was significantly correlated with rated success in coping, $r(n=30) = .46, p < .01$. Descriptive statistics revealed a mean for self-efficacy of 3.44 ($SD = .78$). However, there was a wide range of individual means, from 2.00 to 4.67, on a 5-point scale. We standardized scores on self-efficacy for comparison across participants; standard scores ranged from -3.36 to 0.81.

Summary

The quantitative results showed that rated success in coping was unrelated to the type of stress but was higher when the stress was low. Participants rated seeking support as the most successful coping strategy, significantly more successful than avoidance. Coping was least successful in situations in which students reported needing understanding and emotional support. Students who reported a stronger sense of self-efficacy in the survey rated coping as more successful.

The Coping Process: Qualitative Analyses

We studied the coping process as a whole by examining the overall coping experience of each participant. We first considered patterns of coping. Seven students were consistent in their type of coping across situations; 6 of these students were consistently proactive, and 1 consistently sought support. Twelve students used the same strategy in two of the three situations (7, proactive; 4, seek support;

1, avoidance), but they used a different type of coping in the third. The remaining 11 students used a different type of coping in each situation. There is thus relatively little evidence of consistent coping styles.

Individual ratings for reported success over the three journals ranged from 2.0 to 4.7 ($M = 3.4$, $SD = .78$); 12 participants reported low success in coping (2.0 to 2.9; $M = 2.7$, $SD = .44$), 9 reported moderate success (3.0 to 3.9; $M = 3.5$, $SD = .18$), and 9 reported high success (4.0 to 4.9; $M = 4.4$, $SD = .35$). For in-depth analyses of coping, we selected 3 participants with very low success ratings and 3 with high success ratings. These 6 students were all born in the United States from immigrant parents. They did not differ on any of the demographic variables or on the kinds of problems that they were dealing with. However, the 6 students differed strikingly in their success in coping. The experiences of these students illustrate the complex interactions of situational and personal characteristics in the coping process.

Low Success in Coping

Three students—Mei, Ana, and Tri¹—reported very low success in dealing with stress. Their journals showed them to be lacking a belief in their ability to succeed and to be needing support from those around them. Each was proactive only once; they rather sought support, were avoidant, or accepted the situation.

Mei: Overwhelmed, lacking support, and avoiding problems. Mei was born in the United States to immigrant Chinese and Vietnamese parents who had no education beyond secondary school. She reported taking 12 units (a full academic load), working 20 hr per week, and spending 3–4 hr per day at household chores. In the survey, she reported a low sense of self-efficacy, $z = -.58$.

Mei reported feeling highly stressed. In two of the three weekly journals, she reported that she was overwhelmed with schoolwork and that “more and more work is being presented.” “I am not a good writer, and I try really hard but it doesn’t show improvement.” To deal with this situation, she made an appointment with her English professor but said she has trouble “talking to people about herself.” Besides talking to her professor, “I ignored [the writing problem], just skipping over it and concentrating on other things.” Two weeks later, she was “totally stressed out and about to explode I still have many assignments due. I still have to work [i.e., at her job].” To deal with her stress, “I bought time from my sleep; I barely slept.” However, the “assignments were so overwhelming and far from reach that I just didn’t do it I did whatever I can, and if not, then I just ignored it.”

Mei was also dealing with transportation problems associated with her family not letting her get a car. “They are really old fashioned and traditional with me They say I don’t need [a car].” Money was a problem (“We aren’t well off”), but she wouldn’t mind having an old car. However, her family would not

or could not help her, and she saw no solution. "I just try to ignore it, because I can't do anything about it."

Mei's journals revealed that the resources that she needed were support from friends and family. "I don't have that many friends, so it's hard. If I had more support from people that are close to me, like some family, it would be easier They are too busy for me." The following week, dealing with her lack of transportation, she stated, "I wish my parents were there for me." Overall, she felt a lack of control. Regarding her schoolwork, she said "I guess I have to try harder [but] no one has complete control over it." Her family problem "really stresses me out No one can really help."

For Mei, the academic stressors were compounded by a sense of inadequacy (being a poor writer) and the absence of support from family and friends, leading to feelings of anxiety and lack of control over her life. She tried to cope proactively but ended up ignoring the problems. Her rating of her success in dealing with her problems was at the lowest level that the participants reported: 2.0.

Ana: Meeting the demands of others rather than her own needs. Ana is a Mexican American who had been born in the United States. Both parents had immigrated from Mexico. Both had only an elementary education. Ana was taking 13 units and not working. Like Mei, Ana rated herself as having low self-efficacy: -58.

Her problems over the 3 weeks of the journal all involved the demands of other people—family, friends, and a boyfriend—that kept her from doing her schoolwork. In the 1st week, "Since my boyfriend does not go to school, he does not understand that sometimes it is not possible for me to see him." In the 2nd week, she had to help her family move. "I could not do my school work because I knew that having the house in order was important that week." In the 3rd week, "My friends call and they get upset when I don't have time to share with them." She dealt with these problems initially (in the 1st week) by trying to explain her need to study, but then gave up. In the 2nd week, "I did what needed to be done at home and ignored my schoolwork." In the 3rd week, "I put my schoolwork aside and spent a little time with my family, friends, and boyfriend. Although it probably affected my midterm grade, my friends and family were pleased."

Ana perceived her family as unsupportive of her schoolwork. They expected her to help them even if she had schoolwork, and she felt obliged to do so. "I would have liked my father to be more understanding of the females in the household Since I knew [getting moved] was important to him, I had to drop my schoolwork." Her friends similarly did not provide support. "I would have liked to talk to my best friend, but ... I could not get her to listen to my problems." Her comments suggest that her parents and friends did not understand or support her academic goals, perhaps contributing to her low self-efficacy. Like Mei, Ana rated her coping as unsuccessful; 2.0.

Tri: Lacking support, trying to go it alone. Tri was born in the United States to parents who immigrated from Cambodia and who had no formal education. He was taking 12 units and working at a job 15 hr per week. Like Mei and Ana, he had low self-efficacy: $-.58$.

Because of his job, he found it hard to find time to study and stay "committed to school." He dealt proactively with the time problems by deciding to quit his job. He was also having problems with his girlfriend; to deal with this, he tried alternate activities: "I go jogging ... or also go work out." Finally, he was not getting along with his father. To avoid family problems, he decided to get his own apartment.

Although this student seemed to be using appropriate coping strategies, he felt that his family did not support him. "I wish I had some support from my mom and dad They never went to school so I guess that they don't really know how hard it is for me to go to school everyday." The following week, he stated "I would have liked the support from my family, but ... they are never around to help me cope with my problems." Even his friends were unavailable: "I would like to have had the support from my friends, but they were nowhere to be found." Tri appeared to be dealing with his problems, but he lacked confidence in himself. It was not clear how he would get along financially without a job and not living at home. His overall rating of success was low, although somewhat higher than that of Mei and Ana: 2.7.

High Success in Coping

In contrast to the three students that were having difficulty in coping, Jose, Lorena, and Rosa reported that they were coping well. These students generally believed that they had the ability to succeed. They either felt supported by friends or family or felt that they did not need support. They were more likely to make choices that kept them focused on schoolwork. All three used proactive coping in most of the stressful situations that they experienced.

Jose: Strong sense of self-efficacy, confident of support. Jose was a Mexican American man who worked 30 hr per week, was taking 16 units, and reported 3-6 hr per week in chores. His parents had no education beyond secondary school. His self-efficacy was as high as any in the sample: $.81$

His problems included doing poorly on an exam, having a serious family argument, being short of money, and trying to decide whether to quit his job. To deal with his poor grade, "I just promised myself that I was going to apply myself to my studies more I need to put work [i.e., his job] second and my studies first." He reported needing no additional resources. "On this issue, it is something that I need to do on my own. No one else can help me attain to where I want to go but myself."

In dealing with the other problems, he relieved his stress by doing something to relax, such as listening to music and seeing his girlfriend. With his girlfriend,

he was "trying to get my mind off of my problems and trying to get her over hers. It made me realize that it's okay and I am not the only one who has problems." He reiterated his self-reliance. "I was the only one that could take care of all of the obstacles ahead of me." He indicated that he had support but did not need it: "Although there are people out there who can push me along the way, I need to get out there and take action before anything else." His overall success rating was relatively high: 4.0.

Lorena: Planning, self-reliance, adequate resources. Lorena was born in the United States to parents from Central America. Neither parent had education beyond secondary school. She was taking 12 academic units and not working. Like Jose, she had high self-efficacy: .81.

Lorena reported difficult academic problems that were complicated by commitments to her family. She dealt with her academic problems proactively by seeing tutors and talking to her teacher. She also planned her time carefully. "I dealt with the problem by setting out what I had to do and finishing everything I also took time away from leisure to finish all my work." When family visitors wanted to spend time with her, "I dealt with the problem by doing my homework early and then going out. I spaced my time out to satisfy myself and everyone else."

She reported needing no additional resources. "I had many resources. I just had to find the time to go and get help." She expressed determination and self-reliance. "The problem could have only been solved by me." "I have to stay focused because I am determined to be successful." Her success rating was very high: 4.7.

Rosa: Dealing confidently with real problems. Rosa was a Mexican American whose parents completed high school only. She was taking 12 units, working 35 hr per week, and spending 1-2 hr per day on chores. She had high self-efficacy: .81.

Much of her stress stemmed from her long work hours and a manager who often gave her difficult schedules that meant working late at night. She dealt with her problem by drinking a lot of coffee to stay awake in class or, on one occasion, calling in sick to her job to complete a paper. She was also having trouble with noisy roommates who made it difficult for her to study in her room in the evening when the library was closed. Her solution was to go to sleep and get up at 3 a.m. to study. The resources she needed were a quiet place to study and financial aid, so that she could work less. She put her problem in perspective: "It was just a classic problem of too many things to do and little time to do it." Like Lorena, she rated herself as very successful: 4.7.

Discussion

The goals of this study were to gain a better understanding of the complex and interactive process of coping, using narrative accounts of coping incidents supplemented by survey data. The results confirm prior research on factors that

contribute to successful coping but provide more evidence regarding the interactive nature of the process.

The participants in the study were from a population facing continually high levels of stress. As ethnic minority college freshmen who were predominantly the first generation in their family to attend college, they represent a group that faces a high probability of not completing college (Porter & Stone, 1996). Most had difficult financial problems, held jobs while going to college, and had domestic responsibilities in addition to heavy academic loads. They experienced specific stressors that included time conflicts, academic pressure, and family difficulties. Yet some of the students saw themselves as coping well with college stress, whereas others did not.

The present results show that these differences can not be explained by demographic variables (ethnicity, gender, birthplace, and parental education) or the types of stress that the students experienced. Furthermore, contrary to expectations, holding a job and having family responsibilities were unrelated to success in coping. In agreement with prior researchers (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), avoidance was the least successful way of coping. However, in contrast with prior researchers' results, in this population, seeking support—rather than proactive coping—was the most successful coping strategy.

The most important factors in successful coping were self-efficacy and social support. The quantitative analyses showed that those who were doing well, compared with those who were doing poorly, differed in both personal characteristics and in social support. The more successful students reported believing that they had the ability to succeed, and they did not feel that they were lacking social support. These findings are in accord with prior research on self-efficacy and social support. Levels of perceived social support have been found to directly affect levels of self-efficacy (Torres & Solberg, 2001). In research examining the role of self-efficacy and social support, investigators have found both to be related to measures of academic success, such as persistence and adjustment (Chemers et al., 2001; Cutrona et al., 1994; Newby-Fraser & Schlebusch, 1997; Solberg, Valdez, & Villarreal, 1994; Solberg & Villarreal, 1997; Zea et al., 1995).

Social support appears to be particularly important for these students. They rated seeking support in situations of stress to be the most successful coping strategy, slightly (although not significantly) more successful than proactive coping, which Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described as the most effective type of coping. Furthermore, reporting the lack of, or need for, support was associated with less successful coping. Social support may be particularly important for students who have few if any family members who have attended college.

However, a sense of self-efficacy is also important, and self-efficacy and social support interact in complex ways too. The narratives provide valuable insights into the interaction among factors in the coping process. Common to all the students were academic pressures, and staying focused on schoolwork was an important basis for feeling successful. The students who felt unsuccessful

reported that they could not stay focused on their schoolwork in part because they did not feel supported in their academic efforts. For example, Ana put aside her schoolwork because of demands from family and friends, whom she felt were not supportive of her educational goals. However, this lack of support was closely tied to feelings of lack of control; Ana felt that she had no choice but to do what was expected. In contrast, Lorena, who also had family members who made demands on her, did not mention lacking support. She felt that she could solve her problem, and she dealt proactively with family demands by scheduling her time more effectively. Support, or lack thereof, depends in part on the perceptions of the individual. Individuals who feel able to accomplish their goals may be more self-reliant and thus less sensitive to whether others support them, whereas those who lack a sense of self-efficacy may be more dependent on and sensitive to support.

Therefore, it is difficult to separate social support and self-efficacy in coping situations such as these. It may be that students who feel that they have more sources of support if needed also feel more confident in their ability to succeed; on the other hand, the more efficacious students may actually need less support because they feel able to handle situations on their own. It is likely that those who feel more confident have received support in the past, allowing them now to be self-sufficient or to feel that there is support available to fall back on if needed. Those who are least confident may not have been given assurance in the past that they could be successful. Longitudinal studies beginning in high school or before would be valuable in identifying the precursors of a strong sense of self-efficacy and determining the role of support as an underlying factor.

Narrative accounts make clear also the difficulty of defining discrete variables in coping research in academic settings. For example, it is difficult to determine objectively both the stressfulness of particular situations and the participants' success in coping with them, because both depend on the way in which they are appraised (Lazarus, 2000). The same set of circumstances will be seen as more stressful by someone who can not handle them and less so by someone who can. Objective measures of stress, such as physiological measures, would provide a means of resolving this issue.

The narratives also give insight into other factors that may influence coping in academic settings. Many of the more successful students expressed—in addition to a sense of self-efficacy—a sense of commitment to getting an education that helped them keep focused. Some students spontaneously referred to their determination to complete college as a basis for their handling of a problem. For example, Lorena said that she had to stay focused because she was determined to be successful. In the education literature, investigators have described commitment as a predictor of college success (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). However, the connection between commitment and outcome is less common in the coping literature. Determination to accomplish a particular goal may be an important component in dealing successfully with problems that interfere with the goal.

There are several limitations of the present study that should be kept in mind in interpreting its results. The sample was relatively small, and there was a possible self-selection bias in those who completed the journals. Students who did not agree to participate or who dropped out before completing all the journals are likely to have been those who were under more stress and felt less efficacious. Furthermore, the financial incentive for participating may have led to higher numbers of students who particularly needed the money. Nevertheless, the wide range of responses suggests that the participants were typical of many ethnic minority students from families with limited educational background.

Furthermore, the results are strengthened by the convergence of the data from the journals with that of the survey. In particular, self-efficacy—as the participants assessed it objectively about a month before the journals were written—was a strong predictor of rated success in coping in the journals, and those who rated themselves as high on self-efficacy made spontaneous comments in the journals about their feelings of confidence and self-reliance. In addition, the importance of social support is shown by the association of successful coping both with seeking support as a coping strategy and with not reporting the need for social support as a resource. Overall, the study suggests the value of using narrative techniques to gain understanding of the complexity of the coping process in a college setting among students who are at risk of dropping out.

NOTE

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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