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Luo Lu ^a; Shu-Fang Kao ^b; Ting-Ting Chang ^c; Ya-Wen Lee ^d

^a National Taiwan University, Taiwan, Republic of China

^b Hsuan Chuang University, Taiwan, Republic of China

^c Lunghwa University of Science and Technology, Taiwan, Republic of China

^d National Central University, Taiwan, Republic of China

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Individual differences in coping with criticism of one's physical appearance among Taiwanese students

Luo Lu

*National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan,
Republic of China*

Shu-Fang Kao

*Hsuan Chuang University, Hsinchu City, Taiwan,
Republic of China*

Ting-Ting Chang

*Lunghwa University of Science and Technology,
Taoyuan, Taiwan, Republic of China*

Ya-Wen Lee

*National Central University, Zhongli, Taiwan,
Republic of China*

When someone is criticized for some failure or deficiency, he or she is faced with a dilemma about whether or how to respond. To date, most research on responses to criticism has adopted a communication approach and has focused on general social complaints. The present study instead adopted the perspective of stress and coping and aimed to delineate possible responses to criticism pertaining to one's physical appearance. We investigated the efficacy of three coping styles, namely acceptance, avoidance, and retaliation in explaining emotional reactions towards such criticism, and we additionally controlled for personality characteristics, in particular assertion and harmony beliefs. A sample of Taiwanese university students ($N = 300$) was surveyed for their coping styles and psychological outcomes, and personality traits were examined as possible predictors of response options. We found that (1) acceptance, retaliation, and avoidance were three broad coping styles in this problematic social situation; (2) the individual trait of assertion was negatively related to the use of avoidance, while harmony beliefs were positively related to acceptance and avoidance, but negatively related to retaliation; and (3) the use of acceptance and avoidance were positively related to positive emotions, whereas retaliation was positively related to negative emotions. Males tended to use more acceptance. Implications of these findings were discussed in relation to existing studies of communication, stress and coping. Possible influences of the Chinese collectivist culture on people's responses to criticism were also delineated, such as valuing interpersonal harmony and face-work in social situations.

Lorsque quelqu'un est critiqué pour un échec ou un défaut, il est se demande s'il doit répondre et, si oui, comment. À ce jour, la recherche sur les réponses à la critique adopte surtout une approche basée sur la communication et focalise sur les plaintes sociales générales. La présente étude a plutôt adopté une perspective basée sur le stress et le coping et visait à décrire les réponses possibles à la critique se rapportant à l'apparence physique. Nous avons examiné l'efficacité de trois styles de coping, incluant l'acceptation, l'évitement et la vengeance, pour expliquer les réactions émotionnelles face à une telle critique. Nous avons également contrôlé les caractéristiques de la personnalité, plus particulièrement l'assertion et les croyances d'harmonie. L'échantillon était composé d'étudiants universitaires taiwanais ($N = 300$) qui ont complété des questionnaires sur leurs styles de coping et sur les variables psychologiques. Les traits de personnalité ont aussi été examinés en tant que prédicteurs potentiels des options de réponse. Nous avons trouvé que (1) l'acceptation, la vengeance et l'évitement étaient trois larges styles de coping dans cette situation sociale problématique; (2) le trait individuel d'assertion était négativement associé à l'utilisation de l'évitement, tandis que les croyances d'harmonie étaient positivement associées à l'acceptation et l'évitement, mais négativement reliées à la vengeance; et (3) l'utilisation de l'acceptation et de l'évitement était positivement associée aux émotions positives, tandis que la vengeance était positivement reliée aux émotions négatives. Les hommes avaient tendance à utiliser davantage l'acceptation. Les implications de ces résultats furent discutées en relation avec les études menées sur la communication, le stress et

Correspondence should be addressed to Prof. Luo Lu, Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University, No.1, Sec. 4, Roosevelt Road, Taipei 106, Taiwan, ROC (E-mail: luolu@ntu.edu.tw or luolu@management.ntu.edu.tw).

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le coping. Les influences possibles de la culture collectiviste chinoise sur les réponses des gens face à la critique ont aussi été présentées, tout comme la valeur accordée à l'harmonie interpersonnelle et les relations de travail dans les situations sociales.

Cuando alguien está siendo criticado por algún fallo o deficiencia tiene que decidir si quiere contestar y cómo hacerlo. Hasta la fecha de hoy, la mayoría de las investigaciones sobre las críticas han adoptado un enfoque de comunicación y se han centrado en quejas sociales generales. Por el contrario, el presente estudio adopta una perspectiva de estrés y afrontamiento y su propósito consistió en delinear las posibles respuestas a las críticas sobre el aspecto físico. Hemos investigado la eficacia de tres estilos de afrontamiento, literalmente aceptación, evitación y represalia en explicación de reacciones emocionales hacia este tipo de críticas y adicionalmente hemos controlado las características de personalidad, en particular afirmación y creencias sobre la armonía. Una muestra de estudiantes universitarios taiwaneses ($N = 300$) fue examinada en cuanto a sus estilos de afrontamiento y sus resultados psicológicos junto con los rasgos de personalidad como posibles predictores de las opciones de respuesta. Hemos encontrado que (1) aceptación, represalia y evitación fueron tres amplios estilos de afrontamiento en esta problemática situación social (2) el rasgo individual de afirmación estaba negativamente relacionado con el uso de evitación mientras que las creencias sobre la armonía fueron positivamente relacionadas con aceptación y evitación pero negativamente relacionadas con represalia; y (3) el uso de aceptación y evitación fue positivamente relacionado con emociones positivas mientras que represalia fue positivamente relacionada con emociones negativas. Los varones tendían a usar más aceptación. Las implicaciones de estos resultados fueron discutidas en relación con estudios existentes sobre comunicación, estrés y afrontamiento. Las posibles influencias de la cultura colectiva china en las respuestas de las personas a las críticas también fue delineada, teniendo en cuenta la valoración de armonía interpersonal e imagen en las situaciones sociales.

Keywords: Responses to criticism; Coping strategies; Acceptance; Avoidance; Retaliation.

When someone is criticized for some failure or deficiency, he or she is faced with a dilemma about whether or how to respond. This personal dilemma is compounded by sociocultural norms for what kind of behaviour is acceptable or desirable in such a face-threatening social situation. To date, most research on responses to criticism has adopted a communication approach and has focused on general social complaints such as protesting to a noisy neighbour (e.g., Bresnahan, Shearman, Lee, Ohashi, & Mosher, 2002; McCampbell & Ruback, 1985; Nomura & Barnlund, 1983). Instead, taking the perspective of stress and coping, the present study aimed to delineate possible responses to a particular type of criticism—one pertaining to a person's physical appearance. We further investigated the efficacy of various coping strategies.

Since the 1990s, body image has become an important theme of research for social scientists. Having reached a consensus that the "body image" is a social-cultural construct, as well as a psychological state of mind (Grogan, 1999), existing psychological research has focused primarily on describing people's state of body image and its correlates (Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001). While some researchers identified family stress (negative comments from a family member) as a significant source of body image dissatisfaction (Fabian &

Thompson, 1989; Twamley & Davis, 1999), no direct examination has been made to understand people's reactions and subsequent consequences when facing criticism of their bodies, possibly from lovers, family, friends, classmates, neighbours, salespersons, and other acquaintances. For adolescents and young adults, who generally view physical attraction as a valuable asset and important goal (Kao, Chen, & Lu, 1997), personal failure in pursuit of beauty and being criticized for appearance would be even more frustrating and damaging (Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Phelps et al., 1993). Thus, the present study focused on college students to understand their coping behaviours and emotional responses when their physical appearance is criticized.

What are the options?

What, indeed, can one do about criticism? As in Nomura and Barnlund (1983), criticism is defined as the expression of dissatisfaction concerning the personal qualities or behaviour of another person. Research adopting the communication approach has identified four possible responses to general social complaints: verbal aggression, assertiveness, nonassertiveness, and silence (Bresnahan et al., 2002). *Verbal aggression* is described as the use of personal strategies to call attention to the personal failings and social limitations of other people

(Infante & Wigley, 1986), for instance challenging the right of the neighbour to criticize one's behaviour in Bresnahan et al.'s study. Aggression may be a face-saving strategy in responding to criticism. *Assertiveness* involves focusing on the consequences of one's own behaviour, the value placed on self-expression, and concern with personal rights (Gervasio & Crawford, 1989). In the aforementioned study, for instance, simple agreement with criticism was labelled as an assertive reaction, while apologetic response was regarded as *nonassertive*. *Silence* is an avoidant strategy suggesting that a person is either incapable of or unwilling to respond to criticism (Infante & Wigley, 1986). These options seem equally likely to be adopted in responding to criticism of physical appearance, though Bresnahan et al.'s operationalization of an "assertive reaction" (e.g., simple agreement with criticism) is controversial and incongruent with the definition of assertion (Gervasio & Crawford, 1989). We thus defined an assertive reaction in responding to criticism of physical appearance as behaviours valuing self-expression and personal rights, such as accepting criticism if it is factual, and being honest with oneself; or, upholding one's rights and letting the adversary know that you are happy to be just the way you are.

Complimenting the communication approach, we believe that criticism of physical appearance can also be construed as a stress situation—more specifically, an interpersonal stress situation—thus the vast literature on stress and coping may provide us with fruitful insights in answering the following questions: (1) What are available coping strategies (responses to criticism)? (2) Who chooses what options? and (3) How efficacious are these coping behaviours? Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed the most influential dichotomy of coping behaviours applicable to generic stress situations: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping aims at directly solving the problem that causes stress and trying to change the reality of the troubled person–environment relationship. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping aims at regulating the emotions tied to the stress situation. As examples of problem-focused coping strategies, one may simply accept the criticism (an assertive response in the communication approach, cf. Bresnahan et al., 2002), and further try to do something about the focal personal defect (such as dieting). Or, as examples of emotion-focused coping strategies, one can fight back by challenging the other's right to criticize (an aggressive response in the communication

approach, cf. Bresnahan et al., 2002) and vent out frustration.

Appropriate responses to criticism are also governed by sociocultural norms. Bresnahan et al. (2002) found that Americans responded more assertively than did Chinese and Japanese. In the communication literature, China and Japan are characterized as high-context cultures, where nonassertive responses are more desirable than assertive ones (Hall, 1976). Numerous studies have also noted that in such collectivistic cultures, competent social behaviour is manifest through face-saving and high regard for interpersonal harmony with the in-group (Bond, 1996; Hamid, 1994; Yang, 2004). It is conceivable that when criticized for personal deficiencies, Chinese people may use silence to show embarrassment (Bresnahan et al., 2002) or superficial compliance (avoidance) to maintain interpersonal harmony.

Thus, integrating the communication and coping literature, it is conceivable that Taiwanese students will have three options for responding to criticism of physical appearance: (1) acceptance, which is problem-focused and assertive; (2) retaliation, which is emotion-focused and verbally aggressive; and (3) avoidance, including silence, which is emotion-focused and nonassertive. It needs to be stated that although the traditional Chinese culture places a high value for face-saving and avoiding interpersonal conflicts, the ever-increasing influence of Western individualistic values on Taiwanese youth is not to be overlooked (Lu & Kao, 2002). For instance, Lu and Yang (2006) proposed "Chinese biculturalism" to depict the coexistence of traditional Chinese and modern Western cultural bases. For Taiwanese youth, responding to criticisms assertively or aggressively was observed earlier (Kao et al., 1997). We thus predicted that Taiwanese students would use three broad coping strategies for responding to criticism of physical appearance: acceptance, retaliation, and avoidance (including silence) (H1).

Are there personal correlates of coping styles?

Assertion has been construed as a stable personality trait to characterize people who place a high premium on self-expression and personal rights (Gervasio & Crawford, 1989). Eisler, Mille, and Hersen (1973) found that in problematic situations, assertive participants acknowledged and addressed the problems more effectively than did the nonassertive participants, who preferred avoidance. Although men from the US, China,

and Japan were all found to be more assertive on the personality trait, they did not respond more assertively to criticism (Bresnahan et al., 2002). Similarly, in the stress literature, no consistent sex differences in overall coping preference have been identified, though in some studies women were found to use more emotional coping strategies (Lu & Chen, 1996; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002).

On the other hand, Bresnahan et al. (2002) found that Americans responded more assertively to criticism than did Chinese and Japanese, who value interpersonal harmony more strongly than their American counterparts. Lu et al. (2001) also found that people with strong harmony beliefs actually had more harmonious and less conflicted experiences in various social relationships, presumably through their use of face maintenance and conflict avoidance strategies. In the same study, researchers noticed that Taiwanese students endorsed harmony beliefs and primary control beliefs (conceptually close to assertion) equally strongly, which is congruent with the aforementioned "Chinese biculturalism." We thus believe that both assertion (reflecting Western individualistic values) and harmony beliefs (reflecting Chinese collectivist values) are likely to be individual differences factors among the Taiwanese youth. The following prediction was thus warranted: People who exhibit higher assertion will be more likely to adopt acceptance, but less likely to use avoidance as a coping strategy. People who endorse higher harmony beliefs will be more likely to adopt acceptance and avoidance as coping strategies, but less likely to use retaliation for responding to criticism of physical appearance (H2). We did not expect sex differences in coping preference.

How efficacious are these coping strategies?

One important conclusion reached in the stress and coping literature is that the efficacy of a coping strategy varies across situations, individuals, time, and outcome indicators (Lazarus, 1999; Lu, 1991). However, with due caution, some general statements can still be made. Problem-focused coping is generally adaptive while emotion-focused coping is maladaptive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lu, 1991). As we conceptualized earlier, acceptance is more in line with problem-focused coping, while both retaliation and avoidance are more in line with emotion-focused coping. When body image is in the spotlight, emotions are rather salient and thus good indicators of coping

efficacy (Kao et al, 1997). Hence, the following hypothesis was warranted: Acceptance will be more strongly associated with more positive and fewer negative emotions. In contrast, both retaliation and avoidance will be more strongly associated with fewer positive and more negative emotions (H3).

METHOD

Participants

To obtain a heterogeneous sample of college students in Taiwan, a total of 350 questionnaires were distributed in five large universities, yielding 300 useable responses. There were 116 male and 184 female students, with a mean age of 20.14 years ($SD = 1.57$, range 17–29), and all were single.

Measures

Coping styles were measured by the 23-item Coping Scale (Lee & Lu, 2005), which covered three distinct dimensions. Responding to the probing question of "What did you do when someone criticized your appearance?" participants rated each item on a 5-point scale (1 = *never use*, 5 = *always use*) was adopted. For *acceptance* (10 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$), sample items are: "Improving myself to meet the others' expectations," "Thanking the person for pointing out my deficiencies," and "Happily accepted the criticism with gratitude." For *retaliation* (5 items; $\alpha = .84$), sample items are: "Telling the person that he/she is not perfect either," "Fighting back with vigour," and "Mocking her/his shortcomings". For *avoidance* (8 items; $\alpha = .83$), sample items are: "Playing dull," "Treating it as a joke and laughing it away," and "Making excuses to get out of the scene". This three-dimensional scale structure was tested in an earlier study (Lee & Lu, 2005).

Assertion was measured with five of six original items of the Confronting others subscale in Gambrill and Richey's (1975) Assertion Inventory. These items were adopted because they were especially relevant to responding in problematic interpersonal situations. Discomfort in acting assertively was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much so*). One particular item ("Ask a person who is annoying you in a public situation to stop") was dropped to improve scale reliability from $\alpha = .67$ to $\alpha = .75$. Standing up for one's rights in public is regarded as rather face-threatening and harmony-destroying for the

Chinese (Chu, 1991). After reversed scoring, higher scores indicated *higher* assertion.

Harmony beliefs were measured with the nine-item short version ($\alpha = .81$) of the Harmony Beliefs Scale (Lu & Gilmour, 2004). A sample item is "We should try to preserve the dignity of others in interpersonal interactions." Respondents rated each statement on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), with high total scores indicating *higher* endorsement of harmony beliefs.

Emotions were measured by adapting the Chinese Emotions Scale (Yang, 2004), composed of four subscales: depression, anxiety, shame, and happiness. Six of the original items (emotions) were judged as irrelevant in the context of criticism for appearance and were dropped; instead six new items were added based on emotional responses generated in a previous study (Lee & Lu, 2005). This modified emotions scale immediately followed the Coping Scale, with a probe: "What did you feel immediately after you had responded to criticism for appearance as indicated above?". The 35 emotions were each rated for frequency on a 4-point scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *always*). Previous research has found that, for Chinese university students, depressive and anxious feelings have a high comorbidity as responses to stressful events (Lu, 1994). For Chinese children too, when personal failings are made public, shame is a highly prevalent reaction often accompanied by distressful feelings of depression and anxiety (Fung, Liebert, & Leung, 2003). In line with this reasoning, depression, anxiety, and shame showed very high interrelations in a pre-test ($N = 97$, $r = .73 - .89$), thus the 27 items of these three subscales were combined to form the *negative emotions* measure ($\alpha = .95$), while the 8 items of the happiness subscale remained to measure *positive emotions* in the present study ($\alpha = .86$). High scores indicated *more* positive or

negative emotions. Sample items are joyful (*positive emotions*), sad (*negative emotions*), irritated (*negative emotions*), and loss of face (*negative emotions*).

RESULTS

The hypothesized three-factor structure for coping styles was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation, using AMOS 5.0. The measurement model was defined with coping styles as the latent factor, and acceptance, avoidance, and retaliation scale scores as the manifest variables, with free loadings to be estimated. The overall fit of the model ($\chi^2 = 1.81$, $df = 1$, $p = .07$) was acceptable, which was further confirmed by approximate fit tests: GFI = .98, CFI = .97, NFI = .97, and RMSEA = .03. The three factor loadings were all significant, with loadings of .66 (acceptance), .45 (retaliation), and .32 (avoidance). Thus, our H1 was supported.

Pearson correlation analysis was used to provide a preliminary test for our Hypotheses 2 and 3 (see Table 1). Assertion had only a negative correlation with avoidance, while harmony beliefs significantly correlated with all three coping styles in the expected direction. Retaliation positively correlated with negative emotions, while avoidance positively correlated with positive emotions.

To provide a more stringent test for H2, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted with acceptance, retaliation, and avoidance as dependent variables. In all three analyses, we entered sex at the first step as a control variable, but not age, as it did not correlate with any coping styles (see Table 1). Assertion and harmony beliefs were then entered at the second step. Results are summarized in Table 2. Although overall regression models were all significant, the variance

TABLE 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. Sex | – | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Age | .01 | – | | | | | | | |
| 3. Assertion | .05 | –.10 | – | | | | | | |
| 4. Harmony beliefs | .17* | –.08 | –.06 | – | | | | | |
| 5. Acceptance coping | .14* | .03 | .06 | .27** | – | | | | |
| 6. Retaliation coping | –.02 | .05 | –.06 | –.15** | –.15** | – | | | |
| 7. Avoidance coping | .14* | –.03 | –.18** | .14** | .22** | .03 | – | | |
| 8. Positive emotion | .10 | –.06 | .11 | .06 | .20** | .02 | .19** | – | |
| 9. Negative emotion | –.10 | .11 | –.23** | –.05 | .00 | .14* | .00 | –.06 | – |
| <i>M (SD)</i> | 0.39 (0.49) | 20.14 (1.57) | 19.03 (3.08) | 33.22 (4.71) | 28.98 (4.89) | 11.20 (2.50) | 22.68 (4.96) | 16.19 (4.58) | 51.67 (14.11) |

For sex, 0 means female and 1 means male. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Hierarchical regression predicting three coping styles

| Predictors | Acceptance | | Retaliation | | Avoidance | |
|-----------------|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| | β | ΔR^2 | β | ΔR^2 | β | ΔR^2 |
| Sex | .12* | .02* | .01 | .00 | .11 | .02 |
| Assertion | .00 | | -.07 | | -.16** | |
| Harmony beliefs | .26*** | .07*** | -.16** | .03* | .12* | .04** |

For sex, 0 means female and 1 means male. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

accounted for was small. Sex was related to acceptance. Assertion was negatively related to avoidance while harmony beliefs were related to all three coping styles. Specifically, males tended to use more acceptance, people who were high in assertion were less likely to use avoidance, and those who were high in harmony beliefs used more acceptance and avoidance, but less retaliation. H2 was partially supported regarding assertion, but fully supported regarding harmony beliefs.

To provide a more stringent test for H3, another series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted with positive and negative emotions as dependent variables. In both analyses, we entered assertion and harmony beliefs at the first step. Acceptance, retaliation, and avoidance were then entered at the second step as predictors. Since neither age nor sex correlated with the emotions (see Table 1), they were not included in these regression analyses. Results are summarized in Table 3. Both acceptance and avoidance coping were related to more positive emotions, while retaliation coping was related to more negative emotions. H3 was thus partially supported regarding the efficacy of all three coping styles.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study has explored Taiwanese young people's reactions to criticism for physical appearance, which so far has received very little attention.

TABLE 3
Hierarchical regression predicting emotions

| Predictors | Positive emotions | | Negative emotions | |
|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | β | ΔR^2 | β | ΔR^2 |
| Assertion | .14* | | -.23*** | |
| Harmony beliefs | -.08 | .01 | -.06 | .06*** |
| Acceptance coping | .18** | | .06 | |
| Retaliation coping | .04 | | .12** | |
| Avoidance coping | .16** | .07*** | -.06 | .02 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

We identified three distinct coping styles in this problematic social situation: acceptance, avoidance, and retaliation.

We defined *acceptance* as the sincere acceptance of criticism, possibly even showing heartfelt gratitude, and seriously considering self-improvement in the focal aspect. If the criticism has some truth in it and the individual is willing to face the deficiency, this can be a rather positive and constructive reaction to criticism, which usually can effectively avert interpersonal tension in this situation. Responding with sincere gratitude may even serve to strengthen the relationship with the antagonist. Contemplating self-improvement and subsequent execution of the improvement regime may indeed remove the source of initial criticism. Acceptance thus construed includes the action of simple agreement with the criticism, termed "assertive reaction" in communication research (Bresnahan et al., 2002), but goes beyond this to incorporate both relationship work (offering gratitude) and self-improvement. The latter two elements are characteristics of the collectivistic Chinese culture, where the core of social life is to foster interpersonal harmony through diverse, intricate relationship work such as face maintenance and display of gratitude (Bond, 1996; Yang, 2004). The social participation of Chinese people is characterized too by the constant striving for self-improvement (Lu & Yang, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As acceptance overlaps substantively with the construct of problem-focused coping (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it is understandable that positive emotions are generated. To reiterate, such positive outcomes may also partly be attributable to its efficacy for relationship work.

In our terminology, *avoidance* contrasts with acceptance in lack of sincerity. The individual does not agree with the criticism but, for various reasons, decides to observe the prevailing social norm of interpersonal harmony. Apologetic responses, termed "nonassertive reaction" in communication research (Bresnahan et al., 2002), may be included in this category, but many more options are also

available. For instance, the use of humour is rather creative. We also found that people who strongly uphold harmony beliefs are more inclined to use avoidance in responding to criticism. In contrast, those who value self-expression and standing up for oneself, namely the assertive individuals, are less likely to engage in this kind of face work. Thus construed, avoidance may serve both the problem-focused coping function (avoiding conflict), and the emotion-focused coping function (avoiding feeling humiliated). The positive yield for adopting this style manifests in positive emotions.

However, not everyone is ready to go the extra mile to protect social conventions when the self is under threat. We defined *retaliation*, after Infante and Wigley (1986), to describe the use of strategies to call attention to the personal failings and social limitations of the antagonist. This category includes various actions such as fighting back, pointing out the other party's deficiencies, and challenging the other's right to criticize. Obviously, resorting to this strategy runs the risk of escalating interpersonal tension and possibly open conflict. No wonder we found that people who value interpersonal harmony will refrain from this kind of action. However, we did not find that assertion as a personality trait was related to responding aggressively to criticism. This finding corroborates Bresnahan et al.'s (2002) cross-cultural results, highlighting the conceptual distinctiveness between assertion and aggression (Gambrill & Richey, 1975). Responding to criticism aggressively, though, is inclined to heighten negative emotions. Thus, as a coping style, retaliation may serve both the problem-focused coping function (fighting back a personal attack), and the emotion-focused coping function (venting anger and frustration), but the consequence is mostly negative, at least when emotions are concerned.

Although our hypotheses were largely supported, the study is not without limitations. One shortcoming is inherent in our almost exclusive focus on the individual. The generic approach we adopted accounts for only a rather small amount of the variance in predicting coping and emotions. This suggests that both personality traits and situational factors must be considered in future studies. Although we briefly collected some situational information in the present study and found no systematic effects on coping and emotions, a complete paradigm shift may be necessary to bring out the "situation" more systematically. That is, coping may be construed as a dynamic process of the person-environment transaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), rather than a stable personal

style. Techniques such as critical incident can then be used to collect event-specific information (Lu, 1997).

Another limitation of the present study is the potential for common-method bias. In future studies, alternative ways of collecting data should be attempted, such as laboratory simulation or informants' reports. Such study designs can not only verify the validity of self-report findings, but also add more social reality into our understanding of people's responses to criticism. In addition, some items were dropped while measuring assertion to achieve a more internally consistent scale. However, this creates a potential problem for comparing results with previous research.

Despite these limitations, we have uncovered three broad coping styles: acceptance, retaliation, and avoidance, in response to criticism of one's physical appearance. We have also explored some personal correlates of these coping styles, and understood their efficacy within the Chinese cultural context of relatedness.

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