Reviewer's report

Title: Relationships between stress, coping and depressive symptoms among overseas pre-undergraduate Chinese students: a cross-sectional study

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Reviewer: Mian-Yoon Chong

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This study employed structural equation model (SEM) to determine the relationship of stress, coping strategies and depressive symptomatology among 756 overseas Chinese students of a university preparatory program in Taiwan. The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire with measurement of stress, corresponding coping strategies and CES-D for the evaluation of depression. The results showed that the students did not choose the active coping strategy in dealing with severe stress, while the passive strategies mediated the relation between stress and depressive symptoms. The method employing cross-sectional design with analysis of the association of the latent construct with multiple measures using SEM is plausible and valid. The results are clearly displayed except truncated words in the figures, and the discussion is relevant to the questions raised.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. Study population: The sample was drawn from students of the school previously called “National University Preparatory School for Overseas Chinese Students” which has been merged as an institution for college preparatory program at the National Normal University (p5). Since the term “pre-undergraduate students” is rather broad and also included the high school students, it is better to hold on to this old and more common term “university preparatory students” than “pre-undergraduate students” in order to avoid any ambiguity. The course is only lasted for a year, and most students therefore have been staying only for a few months and/or were new to Taiwan, and only very few of them have been residing in Taiwan since their high school. Perhaps the authors would like to make the background more informative to the reader, as the country of origin of these students and their length of stay in Taiwan differs greatly as well as their stresses they encountered.

2. Chinese by definition is the people of Chinese nationality, or one of several Chinese ethnicities. The school enrolls only overseas Chinese students whose country of original residency is not Taiwan and China. Under such circumstances, terms in page 3 “foreign Chinese students” and page 4 “Chinese who grew up in Taiwan” should be avoided and could be clearly defined as “overseas Chinese students in Taiwan” and “Taiwanese students” which could also indicate the differences in the environment where they were brought up. Likewise, the term Chinese students (p3), with no specification of where they come from, are generally regarded as students who are from China. But the
description in page 3 might not be this and it could be referring to the overseas Chinese and not those from Mainland China. Consistent terms should be used throughout the paper and the authors need to explain the terms clearly.

Minor Essential Revisions:
3. Words in the figures are truncated, please be corrected.
4. Discussion: Other than coping strategies, personality also plays an important role in the development of depression. Although it is not the focus in this study, it should be mentioned and discussed either in the discussion or limitation of the study design.

Discretionary Revisions:
5. The assessments and results: The CES-D is a self-report instrument that is used as a screening tool in the general population to assess the severity of depressive symptoms over the past 4 weeks. Its assessment is commonly based on threshold scores rather than the continuous scores. In applying structural equation modeling to test the association of stress, coping, and depressive symptoms, the authors had presumably predicted that the model to be linear. Perhaps the authors would like to explain why continuous rather than cut-off scores of CES-D were used (p7), since the scores of depressive symptoms in a general population are a skew and not a normal distribution. Besides, what is the average score of CES-D of this sample and were there any differences with the local Taiwanese adolescents or adults? In addition, what is the proportion of this sample being screened as depression?

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.