



Courage as a potential mediator between personality and coping



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 September 2016

Received in revised form 23 January 2017

Accepted 28 January 2017

Available online 3 February 2017

Keywords:

Courage

Positive psychology

Big Five

Coping

Strengths

ABSTRACT

Courage is an ancient construct that has historically been regarded as a great virtue because it helps people to face their intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges. However, psychologists have conducted only limited research on the psychology of courage: recently, in the framework of positive psychology, courage has been included in the classification of core character strengths and virtues. Considering that other constructs of positive psychology, in previous research, have been related to personality and coping strategies, the present study investigates the relationship between courage, personality traits, and coping strategies, hypothesising that courage could mediate between personality and coping. The participants were 500 Italian adults, aged 18 to 60 years, paired for gender. The results showed that courage can be considered a mediator between personality and coping, affecting the use of self-directed strategies. Suggestions for the intervention were provided.

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1. Courage as a potential mediator between personality and coping

The construct of courage has received little attention from psychological research: using courage as a keyword in PsycInfo, we can find only 416 articles, 324 of which have been published since 2000 (Ginevra & Capozza, 2015). Courage has historically been regarded as a great virtue because it helps people to face their intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges. Over the past centuries, efforts to construct a socially relevant view of courage transported it from the heart of the brave soldier on the battlefield to the experience of daily life and the mind of every person (Lopez, O'Byrne, & Petersen, 2003).

Psychological courage, according to Putman's (1997) definition, is strength in facing one's destructive habits. More specifically, Lopez et al. (2003) described psychological courage as "the cognitive process of defining risk, identifying and considering alternative actions, and choosing to act in spite of potential negative consequences in an effort to obtain 'good' for self or others" (p. 191). Peterson and Seligman (2001) included courage within the Values in Action classification of strengths, conceptualising it as a core human virtue comprising such strengths as authenticity, enthusiasm, perseverance, and valour. All of these strengths are trait-like, fulfilling, morally valued, and specific to the individual. Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, and Sternberg (2007), through qualitative research, found four dimensions of courage: (a) intentionality of action, (b) presence of personal fear, (c) nobility of purpose, and (d) known substantial personal risk.

The presence of fear is also highlighted in other research. For example, Woodard (2004) identified courageous people as those who, despite perceiving a danger or threat beyond which their resources are capable of effectively managing, move forward and act anyway. Gould (2005) underlined that courage allows one to effectively act under conditions of danger, fear, and risk. Finally, using a behavioural approach, Norton and Weiss (2009) stated that courage is distinct from fearlessness in that the courageous individual completes the same act as the fearless individual, despite experiencing fear.

All these definitions of courage are characterised by common points: (a) the presence of fear, (b) intentionality and voluntariness in action, and (c) meaningful purpose.

2. Courage and personality

Courageous action involves voluntarily pursuing a socially worthy goal despite the accompanying risk and the fear produced by a challenging event. At present, little research exists on the factors that describe the antecedents, enablers, and processes of courageous actions (Schilpzand, Hekman, & Mitchell, 2014). Recent theoretical work on the classification and delineation of core character strengths and virtues has convincingly related most of these attributes to various sets of personality dispositions (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Clearly, certain traits facilitate or impede the development of specific strengths and virtues (e.g., agreeableness facilitates compassion, conscientiousness facilitates perseverance, and openness fosters creativity); at the same time, the cultivation of these virtues consolidates the same personality dispositions from which these virtues sprang (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Woodard (2004) examined the role that courage plays in the construct

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of hardiness as a mediator between hardiness and physical health. Hardiness (Kobasa, 1979) is a personality style or pattern associated with performance under stress.

As Maddi (1998) stated, “the more recent concept of hardiness constitutes a sufficient concretization of the concept of courage to have led to relevant research in support of this existential formulation” (p. 9). However, the results of Woodard’s (2004) study were not definitive in establishing the relationship between hardiness—as personality disposition—and courage.

Hannah, Sweeney, and Lester (2007) suggested that openness to experience and conscientiousness, together with other positive traits and states, moderate the linkages between perceptions of risk, intensity of experienced fear, and courageous behaviour. As Hannah et al. (2007) underlined, openness to experience encompasses an actor’s ability to be imaginative, nonconforming, unconventional, and autonomous. Conscientiousness, on the other side, significantly correlates with an actor’s sense of duty and with tenacity and persistence (McCrae, Costa, & Busch, 1986). Hannah et al. (2007) proposed that conscientiousness promotes courage in that duty, persistence, and tenacity closely parallel the purpose and action commonalities required for courageous behaviour (Goud, 2005). Finally, emotional stability (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999) may further promote broadening and courage under risk; in fact, low levels of arousal under stress have been shown to be related to courage (O’Connor, Hallam, & Rachman, 1985), suggesting that actors with greater emotional stability (i.e., those with low neuroticism) will tend to be secure, steady, and confident (Judge & Bono, 2001) and less likely to experience or ruminate over fear.

3. Personality and coping

The role of personality in coping strategies has been well-studied. In fact, as suggested by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989), there are two ways to think about how individual differences can influence coping. The first possibility is that people have stable coping styles or dispositions for dealing with the stressful situations that they encounter. The second mode of thinking states that certain personality characteristics may predispose people to cope in certain ways when confronting adversity.

Somerfield and McCrae (2000), studying the relationship between Big Five personality traits and coping, found the following correlations: neuroticism with emotion-focused coping, extraversion with social support-seeking, openness with seeking new information and solutions, and conscientiousness with perseverance in personal meaning-seeking. Carver et al. (1989) explored the possible existence of individual differences in preferred coping styles; they assumed that people tend to adopt certain coping tactics as relatively stable preferences. Stable preferences may derive from personality or develop for other reasons. Their findings suggest the possibility that personality traits and coping dispositions both play roles in situational coping. Other studies (e.g., Uehara, Sakado, Sakado, Sato, & Soomeya, 1999) have found that different coping methods are related to personality. Vollrath and Torgersen (2000) underlined that persons high in neuroticism engage in passive and maladaptive ways of coping, whereas persons high in extraversion engage in active coping strategies and seek social support (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Moreover, conscientiousness is strongly related to coping; in fact, individuals high in conscientiousness engage in planning and active problem-solving and refrain from passive, maladaptive coping (Jelinek & Morf, 1995). In comparison, the relationships between coping and each of the two remaining factors of the five-factor model, openness to experience and agreeableness, are weaker (Jelinek & Morf, 1995).

4. Courage and coping

The relationship between courage and coping has been investigated directly only in a few studies, but it is present in broader definitions of

courage. Koerner’s (2013) definition of courage—which comes from Gould’s (2005) studies—highlighted the intentionality of action in the face of risks, threats, or obstacles in the pursuit of morally worthy goals. Endurance and perseverance are often needed to ensure that the goal is achieved. In Maddi’s (2006) statements, the link between courage and coping is more explicit: in fact he underlines how courage represents “the strength to face stressful circumstances directly” (p. 306), being motivated to cope with them by turning them from potential disasters into growth opportunities. Courage is also involved in coping with the stressful circumstances that are imposed on us in unexpected ways.

Lopez et al. (2003) indicated that courage may be considered necessary to the coping process, depending on the circumstances, because it is involved in dealing with the challenges and stresses that inevitably accompany life. Finally, a qualitative study conducted by Capozza, Nota, and Soresi (2015) aimed to compare implicit theories of courage with researchers’ definitions with a sample of 850 Italians, highlighted that the term most strongly and frequently associated with courage is *to cope*.

In conclusion, researchers have largely investigated the relationship between coping and the constructs of positive psychology, such as positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), optimism (Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Magnano, Paolillo, Giacomini, 2015), hope (Alexander & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), and resilience (Leipold & Greve, 2009). At the moment, an investigation of the relationship between coping and courage, which is included in the constructs of positive psychology, is lacking.

Therefore, the present study can be considered one of the first to explore this relationship.

5. Aim of the study

Only few systematic investigations have been conducted to determine emotional, cognitive, and situational correlates of courageous action (Hannah et al., 2007). Although the literature that describes the antecedents of courage is very limited, Peterson and Seligman’s (2003) classification of the core character strengths and virtues (including courage) related these attributes to different sets of personality. Hannah et al. (2007) suggested that a combination of positive traits and states reduces the level of fear experienced when facing a risk, and, given this reduced level of fear, the same positive constructs promote courageous behaviours despite that fear. The positive emotions facilitate greater adaptability under stress, building personal resources. Considering that coping strategies allow a host of adaptive responses that achieve their intended purpose and maladaptive responses that direct one’s energy away from the true source of a threat (Moos & Schaefer, 1993), we hypothesise that courage complements coping strategies in working toward goals. This influences positive coping strategies that are centred on one’s own resources—which could change the troubled person’s relationship with the environment by acting on the environment or on the person (Lazarus, 1993). This is as opposed to avoidance strategies, which are centred on the absence of responsibility in the stressful situations and which impede adjustment (see Felton, Revenson, & Hinrichsen, 1984). Then, considering that courage is involved in facing one’s psychological challenges and that personality characteristics may play a role in coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989), we hypothesise that courage is a mediator of this relationship, playing a role in individuals’ choices of coping strategies.

Given the extent of support among these links, Fig. 1 serves as the base courage model in our study of coping strategies.

We focus on the component of courage defined as “persistence or perseverance despite having fear” (Howard & Alipour, 2014).

We assume, then, that the model produces the following answers:

1. The personality traits are antecedents of courage because they can promote or impede courageous behaviours that give the necessary push to action.

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