



PERSONALITY, COPING, AND OBJECTIVE OUTCOMES: EXTRAVERSION, NEUROTICISM, COPING STYLES, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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Summary—The framework for the present research is that the relationship between coping and objective outcomes can be understood through a consideration of the coping patterns of different personalities. It is thought that personality gives rise to particular types of coping. It should also be possible to observe departures from the general personality-coping-outcome trend in that some people with potentially distracting (personality-based) coping tendencies can modify these tendencies in order to perform well. Undergraduate subjects reported their coping strategies, with respect to academic stressors. They filled out the Eysenck Personality Inventory, to assess their levels of Extraversion and Neuroticism. Ss' exam scores in Introductory Psychology were used as the performance criterion. Analyses suggest that Introverts cope in ways that are amenable to better academic performance. In contrast to predictions, better performing Extraverts' coping did not appear to be similar to Introverts' coping. Discussion centers around the ideas that (1) objective coping outcomes can be understood by including personality in the relationship; and (2) it may be important to think of coping in terms of personality, rather than in terms of the stressor. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the relationships among personality, coping styles and objective performance. The guiding hypothesis regarding these relationships is that certain types of coping are related to objective outcomes while personality gives rise to tendencies to cope in unique ways. This is not to suggest, however, that personality is destiny. It is possible to modify a tendency toward potentially maladaptive coping styles, in order to achieve desired outcomes. Given this general framework, it should be possible to observe trends suggesting personality-related coping tendencies, but there should also be notable departures from these trends, in the context of objective performance.

The manner in which people cope with stressful situations should lead to outcomes that are generally positive when coping efforts are successful, and generally negative when these efforts are unsuccessful. One set of important outcomes concerns the experience of subjective-well-being and, indeed, most research concerned with the assessment of coping outcomes has focused on psychological and emotional indices of well-being (e.g. Folkman & Lazarus, 1986; Holahan & Moos, 1986; Taylor, Aspinwall, Guiliano & Dakof, 1993; Tolor & Pehon, 1987; Wallbott & Scherer, 1991).

Although there has been much research conducted concerning relationships between coping and well-being, there has been relatively little work done in attempts to discover the relationships among coping strategies and objective indices of success (or lack of success) in life endeavors. An intuitively appealing notion is that, in addition to well-being, the style of coping adopted is related to the degree of objective success in life endeavors. That is, the strong form of this thesis argues that there should be predictive associations between objective accomplishment and coping, whether the coping style seems directly intended to moderate emotional experience, or to take productive instrumental action. Successful coping intended to mediate the potentially deleterious effects of the experience of unpleasant emotional states (emotion-focused coping) might allow the individual to pay sufficient attention to tasks that are important to attainment of desired objective outcomes, even if this type of coping is proximally immature (e.g. irrational blaming of others, or the self). Additionally, the kinds of coping that are intended to result in direct and productive action (problem-focused coping) should, obviously, lead to increments in objective attainment. The weak form of the thesis argues that some types of coping may lead to enhanced achievement, while other coping strategies might

be important for emotional and psychological well-being only (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), these latter strategies being unrelated to objective success.

Although it is theoretically consistent to predict objective outcome differences based on coping differences, the failure of prior research attempts to demonstrate relationships between coping and performance outcomes (Bolger, 1990; Collins, Baum & Singer, 1983; Krantz, 1983) suggests that these predictions may not be warranted, empirically.

However, evidence demonstrates relationships between personality and academic performance (e.g. Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Lynn & Gordon, 1961), on the one hand, and personality and coping (Heikkinen, 1986; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Parkes, 1986; Rim, 1986; 1987), on the other, leading to the suggestion that a consideration of the confluence of personality and coping styles may provide a better understanding of coping and outcomes.

The criterion of interest in the present study is performance on academic examinations and there have been somewhat inconsistent findings from past research investigating the relationship between examination performance and personality (Mehta & Kumar, 1985; Schneider & Overton, 1983). However, the *most* consistent finding has been that introverts perform at higher levels than do extraverts, in the academic domain (Bendig, 1960; Broadbent, 1958; Lynn, 1959; Lynn & Gordon, 1961). Thus, the present research is expected to replicate the finding that introverts should score higher than extraverts on the present criterion.

One must wonder, however, given that introverts do indeed outperform extraverts, if extraverts are destined to perform less well, at least on academic tasks. Informally, it seems that *some* extraverts do quite well in their academic work. A reasonable way to think about extraverts' good performance is to imagine they have managed to adjust their coping in a way that allows them to focus their energy on academic work. Introverts tend to keep to themselves, and perhaps, are better academic performers because they are less distracted by their social environment. Good performing extraverts might have modified their tendency to be sociable to the extent that they create a quieter environment in which to focus on their academic work. The present research, thus, includes the idea that those extraverts who perform as well as introverts should report coping styles that appear similar to those utilized by introverts.

Research has failed to demonstrate linkages between Neuroticism and academic performance (e.g. Bolger, 1990). One way to think about the place of Neuroticism, in the context of performance, is to suggest that Neuroticism influences performance by necessitating different coping strategies for Neurotic and Stable Introverts. That is, Neuroticism may demand that Introverts focus on quite serious, worry-oriented (perhaps pessimistic) styles of coping similar to that suggested for high achieving "defensive pessimists" (Norem & Cantor, 1986). In contrast, the Stable Introverts may be ones who are doing well academically, but through a style of coping that can be characterized as more sanguine, more positively (or less negatively) oriented.

The present work is intended to further understanding of the relationship of coping and objective life outcomes by including a consideration of the particular coping styles adopted by different individuals. Specifically, it is hypothesized that Introverts are better performers by virtue of coping styles that can be characterized as non-social, primarily. Additionally, it is expected that Introverts can be further described on the basis of the emotional character of their coping styles, which should map onto Neuroticism. Moreover, under the assumption that personality and coping are conceptually independent entities, it is expected that the data will support the idea that those with a tendency to cope in detrimental ways (extraverts) can adopt more adaptive coping responses to increase the probability of good outcomes. By the same reasoning, it should be that some introverts will adopt the coping styles characteristic of extraverts and will, thus, experience poorer academic performance.

These predictions were tested by asking undergraduate students about their typical academic coping behaviors and their personality. These constructs were examined with respect to students' exam scores in an introductory psychology course.

METHOD

Subjects

Ss were 364 male and female introductory psychology students at a large university. Ss took a mid-term exam mid-way through the semester and a final exam at the end of the semester. They

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