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# Impulsive/careless problem solving style as predictor of subsequent academic achievement

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## Abstract

A previous study (D’Zurilla, T. J. & Sheedy, C. F. (1992). The relation between social problem-solving ability and subsequent level of academic competence in college students. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 16, 589–599) has shown that social problem-solving ability significantly predicts academic performance in college students after accounting for their academic aptitude. In this study we use a recently proposed five-dimensional model of social problem solving to investigate which social problem solving dimension is responsible for this effect. To further assess the cross-cultural validity of previous findings, our study was performed in a different educational system (that of Spain). Also, we used a measure of previous academic achievement instead of one of academic aptitude. Despite these differences, our results are remarkably similar to previous ones. Furthermore, we found that the dimension responsible for this relationship was impulsive/careless problem-solving. This establishes some interesting links between social problem solving theory and existing research on impulsivity as predictors of GPA. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Interpersonal problem solving

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## 1. Introduction

Current research on college academic achievement considers that high school academic performance and scores obtained on college admission’s tests, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are the best predictors of academic competence (Mathiasen, 1984). However, many

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other factors could increase or decrease the chances of academic success of college students such as academic achievement motivation (Edwards & Waters, 1981), study habits (Elliott, Godshall, ShROUT & Witty, 1990; Houston, 1987), and personality variables (Cowell & Entwistle, 1971), among other psychological variables (Kanoy, Wester, & Latta, 1989). The present research addresses the influence of problem-solving dimensions on college academic achievement.

Problem-solving is considered a coping strategy that increases general competence and adaptation (D’Zurilla, 1986; D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1990) in real-world settings. The theoretical framework for the present study is the social problem solving model developed by D’Zurilla and Nezu (1982, 1999). Their model hypothesizes that problem-solving outcomes in real-life settings are determined by two major processes: (1) problem orientation and (2) problem-solving proper. *Problem-orientation* is a motivational process involving a set of relatively stable cognitive-emotional schemas that describe how a person generally thinks and feels about problems in living, as well as his or her own problem-solving ability. *Problem-solving proper* refers to the rational search for a solution through the application of problem-solving skills and techniques that are designed to maximize the probability of finding the ‘best’ or most adaptive solution for a particular problem.

Maydeu-Olivares and D’Zurilla (1995, 1996) empirically found support for this model, although their results suggest that problem solving in real-life environments is best described by five inter-related dimensions: two problem solving dimensions and three problem solving proper dimensions. These dimensions are: (1) *Positive problem orientation* (PPO), a constructive, problem-solving cognitive ‘set’ (e.g. generalized challenge appraisals, self-efficacy, positive outcome expectancies); (2) *Negative problem-orientation* (NPO), a set of dysfunctional cognitive-emotional schemas (e.g. generalized threat appraisals, low self-efficacy, negative outcome expectancies); (3) *Rational problem-solving* (RPS), a constructive problem-solving pattern characterized by rational, deliberate, and systematic application of effective problem-solving skills; (4) *Impulsiveness/carelessness style* (ICS), a dysfunctional problem-solving dimension characterized by active problem-solving attempts that are impulsive, careless, hurried and incomplete; and (5) *Avoidance style* (AS), another dysfunctional dimension characterized by procrastination, passivity or inaction, and attempts to shift the responsibility for problem solving to others.

In a college environment and particularly for first-year students the main indicator of their adaptation is probably their academic success. Thus, according to social problem solving theory, students’ social problem solving should be related to their academic performance. Two studies have reported a modest but significant positive influence of social problem-solving on college freshmen GPA scores (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1990; D’Zurilla & Sheedy, 1992). These studies found problem solving proper to be significantly related to cumulative GPA, but not Problem Orientation. However, as these studies were performed before Maydeu-Olivares and D’Zurilla proposed a dimensional model of social problem solving, the specific impact of the different problem solving proper dimensions on GPA remains to be studied.

The present study aims at filling this gap. Of the three problem solving proper dimensions, we hypothesize that Impulsivity/Carelessness style will be the best predictor of GPA as impulsivity has been found to be significantly related to poor academic performance in a study by Kipnis (1971).

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