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## Maladaptive personality traits, coping styles and psychological distress: A study of adult male prisoners

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### Abstract

The current study explores the structure of maladaptive personality in adult prisoners, and examines relationships between coping, personality and psychological distress. One hundred and forty one adult male prisoners took part. It was predicted that there would be evidence of co-morbidity between personality and psychological distress, that coping would mediate the relationship between these variables, and that maladaptive personality would comprise of a number of factors. Maladaptive personality traits were found to be associated with maladaptive coping and greater psychological distress. A three factor structure was found amongst maladaptive personality traits, with correlated factors emphasising antisocial and asocial personality and a third representing anxious/dramatic personality. Exploratory Structural Equation Modelling showed that maladaptive coping may mediate the relationship between asocial and anxious/dramatic personality and psychological distress. The results are discussed with regards to issues of co-morbidity between maladaptive personality and psychological distress and the importance of accounting for individual coping style in understanding this association.

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*Keywords:* Maladaptive personality; Psychological distress; Coping; Prisoners

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## 1. Introduction

Maladaptive personality can be described as inflexible traits related to psychological distress (McMurran, 2003). Such definitions are commonly applied to personality disorder, described as enduring, pervasive and stable patterns of experience and behaviour that deviate markedly from the expectation of an individual's culture, manifesting itself in areas such as cognition, affect, interpersonal functioning and/or impulse control and leading to significant distress or impairment (DSM-IV-TR, 2000). Community prevalence rates for personality disorder are reported to be between 6% and 15% (Ekselius, Tillfors, Furmark, & Fredrikson, 2001), and between 64% and 78% for male prisoners (see McMurran, 2003).

Although personality disorder can be diagnosed using either DSM-IV-TR or the ICD-10 systems, there are differences between them with regards to the number of specific, primary personality disorders. DSM-IV-TR also refers to 'personality clusters', namely Cluster A—odd/eccentric; Cluster B—dramatic; and Cluster C—anxious/fearful, whereas the ICD-10 does not. Research has, however, questioned the validity of the DSM-IV-TR clusters, with some studies arguing for a four factor structure of personality, termed the four A's (i.e. 'Antisocial'—antisocial, borderline, histrionic and narcissistic; 'Asocial'—schizoid; 'Asthenic'—avoidant and dependent and; 'Anankastic'—obsessive-compulsive; Austin & Deary, 2000; Mulder & Joyce, 1997).

Research exploring the association between maladaptive personality (in the form of Axis II personality disorders: DSM-IV) and psychological distress (specifically Axis I disorders: DSM-IV) have found associations with all DSM-IV clusters, with it generally accepted that there is a high degree of co-morbidity between Axis I and Axis II, and indeed within Axis II itself (Dolan-Sewell, Krueger, & Shea, 2001; Millon, 1996). There are a number of theoretical perspectives that seek to explain why maladaptive personality and difficulties in psychological distress may co-exist. Among models outlined these include the Vulnerability Model, i.e. that the existence of one disorder makes it more likely the other will occur; and the Scar Model, i.e. that both disorders are distinct but that one continues after the remission of the other as a complication of the disorder in remission (Dolan-Sewell et al., 2001). Although applied to personality disorder diagnoses, such models may also have utility in explaining the relationship between maladaptive personality *traits* and psychological distress. None, however, account for the role of influencing variables in this relationship although the Scar Model may potentially lend itself to a mediation model if it is argued that poor psychological functioning is a complication of maladaptive personality that remains once the traits are managed effectively, serving to exacerbate psychological distress.

Individual coping styles represent an important consideration when accounting for psychological distress. This may particularly be the case in prisons where stressors are arguably common (Ireland, Boustead, & Ireland, 2005; Nieland, McCluskie, & Tait, 2001), and yet the environment serves to reduce the range of coping strategies available (Zamble & Porporino, 1988). Equally it could also suggest that an individual coping 'style' is unhelpful in prison where, by virtue of the constraints of the environment, an individual is forced to utilise a style that would not be their usual approach. Even accepting that the environment may influence the relationship between coping, stress and psychological distress, individual factors are also likely to be important. Personality is one such factor that may contribute to a further understanding of how prisoners cope with stressors, particularly when accounting for the finding that disturbances in personality are higher in prison than community samples (Hart, 2001; McMurran, 2003).

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