



Coping with daily stress: The role of conscientiousness

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined how specific coping strategies mediate the relationship between Conscientiousness (C) and positive affect (PA) in a large, multiethnic sample. Using an internet-based daily diary approach, 366 participants (37.6% Caucasian, 30.6% Asian American, 20.7% Hispanic, 9.1% African American) completed measures that assessed daily stressors, coping strategies used to deal with those stressors, and PA over the course of five days. In addition, participants completed a measure of the Five-Factor Model of Personality. Problem-Focused coping partially mediated the relationship between C and PA. Individuals higher in C used more Problem-Focused coping, which, in turn, was associated with higher PA. The findings of the current study suggest C serves as a protective factor from stress through its influence on coping strategy selection. Other possible mediators in the C–PA relationship are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The college environment has proven to be a great source of stress for students and the amount of psychological distress experienced by students is presumed to have increased over the last few decades (Rosenthal & Schreiner, 2000). Studies have shown high levels of stress are related to higher levels of psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, anger, and depression (Dyson & Renk, 2006). The adjustment to college life seems a particularly difficult aspect of the college experience. Many students battle feelings of homesickness and are forced to adapt to a new environment without their usual support systems, such as old friends and family. New stressors present challenges to students' coping abilities. The failure to develop coping strategies to respond to new stressors often results in poor psychological adjustment to university life (Dyson & Renk, 2006).

The aim of the current study was to examine the effects of the personality dimension Conscientiousness (C) on coping and positive affect (PA). Past research has shown C is associated with the use of health related behaviors and active coping strategies (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, Galloway, & Davidson, 2007). Thus, C is conceptualized by some as a general protective factor from stress. However, to the best of our knowledge, research has not examined how coping might mediate the C–PA relationship using a daily diary design with a large, multieth-

nic sample. C is one of the “Big Five” traits that make up the Five-Factor Model of Personality (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness)—the most commonly used model to define personality (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). C is characterized by an individual's tendency to be well organized, diligent, thorough, achievement-oriented, reliable, and self-determined. Individuals high in C, as opposed to those low in C, typically show high levels of self-regulation, persistence, and impulse control (McCrae & John, 1992). High levels of C have also been related to greater perceived health, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Hayes & Joseph, 2003; Roesch, Aldridge, Vickers, & Helvig, 2009). Negative relationships have been found between C and depression, negative mood, and perceived stress (Besser & Shackelford, 2007).

It has been empirically established that C is an important factor in how individuals assess and respond to stressful situations; however, the exact role C plays in the coping process is not clear (e.g., Lee-Baggley, Preece, & DeLongis, 2005). C is believed to be related to an increase in stress management, stress tolerance, and the ability to avoid stress (Besser & Shackelford, 2007) and has been conceptualized as a personality process (see Vollrath, 2001). These suggestions are consistent with a theoretical model that proposes a specific temporal sequence relating personality variables to outcomes of interest (PA) via coping mediators. According to the differential coping-choice model (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), individuals may be more or less reactive to stress because individuals with certain personality traits (e.g., individuals high in C) employ more (or less) adaptive coping strategies. Coping choice, then, is proximally associated with the outcome of interest. An example of this mediated effect proposed by Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) is shown in Fig. 1 (see compound paths represented by solid lines).

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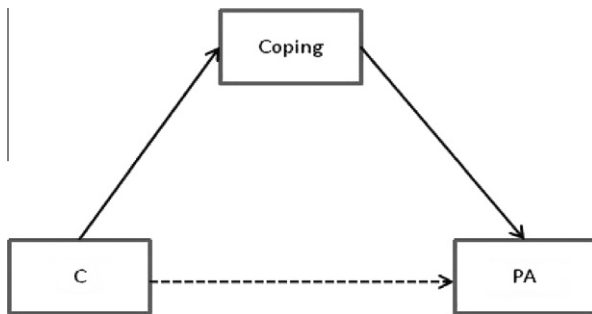


Fig. 1. Proposed coping-choice mediational model.

This model does not assume that the relationship between personality and outcomes of interest are completely explained by coping. Thus it is possible that C is also directly related to PA because of factors beyond coping choice. This possibility is represented by the direct effect from C to PA in Fig. 1.

A recent meta-analysis has shown that C facilitates the use of specific coping strategies and potentially inhibits the use of other coping strategies (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007).

C is positively associated with the use of more approach than avoidance strategies, which generally results in more positive affective experiences (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Higher C is associated with the use of problem solving, cognitive restructuring, emotional social support, instrumental social support, and emotion regulation (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Roesch, Wee, & Vaughn, 2006; Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000). Individuals high in C generally use less denial, negative emotion-focused, avoidant coping, and substance use as forms of coping (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Saklofske et al., 2007). O'Brien and DeLongis (1996) argued that the differences in coping strategy selection are due to how people appraise stressful situations, with these appraisals dependent upon characteristics of both the person and the situation. Shewchuk, Elliot, and MacNair-Semands (1999) found that regardless of how the stressor is appraised, higher C is associated with the use of a more instrumental, proactive style of coping. Similarly, O'Brien and DeLongis (1996) found that, across situations, individuals higher in C use less escape-avoidance and self-blaming strategies. Individuals high in C tend to use more Problem-Focused coping strategies, which appear effective when used in situations over which the individuals perceive they have some control (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). In sum, while individual studies have shown a relationship between C and various coping strategies, the Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007) meta-analysis found that C was primarily associated with forms of Problem-Focused coping.

While theories of coping are becoming more refined, there still remains contention regarding theoretical conceptualizations, structure, and measurement methods (see Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Traditionally researchers have used two primary measurement approaches to operationally define coping. The first approach simply asks individuals how they cope with stress *in general*, whereas the second approach asks individuals how they coped with reference to a *target stressor* (either defined by the researcher or self-identified) at a single time-point. These single time-point assessments are limited in that they are unable to model stress and coping as a dynamic, unfolding process, which is best operationalized through repeated assessments of individuals over smaller time-frames (Stone, Shiffman, Atienza, & Nebeling, 2007). Through these repeated assessments, ecological momentary assessment/daily diary designs allows variability of the stress and coping process to be captured *in situ*, and subsequently modeled at the within-person (e.g., daily) level. The aggregation of within-per-

son assessments across time reduces the noise inherent in single time-point measures error relative to single assessments and provides a more statistically reliable and powerful measure of the construct(s) of interest (Schwarz, 2007).

As suggested by Carver and Connor-Smith (2010), the personality and coping literature is lacking in studies examining how both personality and coping relate to PA using innovative methodologies that assess coping and outcomes of interest in a more intensive way. In the current study, a daily diary methodology was implemented to measure coping in multiple situations over multiple days. Thus, the role of coping as a mediator of the relationship between C and PA could be more rigorously evaluated. Moreover, these relationships were evaluated in a large, multiethnic sample. While daily diary designs have been used to model the stress and coping process (e.g., Park, Armeli, & Tennen, 2004), the type of sample used in these studies has been overwhelmingly Caucasian (over 90% Caucasian). Based on the differential coping-choice and effectiveness model and previous research linking C, coping, and PA (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010), it was hypothesized that individuals high in C would use more Problem-Focused coping, which, in turn, would be associated with higher PA.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were college students recruited from a large western university. Three hundred and sixty-six participants completed all target measures (to be described below). There were more female than male participants (68.5% vs. 31.5%) and their ages ranged from 17 to 25 years ($M = 20.14$, $SD = 2.10$). This multiethnic sample was composed of Caucasians (37.6%), Asian Americans (30.6%), Hispanics/Latinos (20.7%), African Americans (9.1%), and individuals who were either biracial or another ethnic group (2%). The sample also represented a cross-section of majors at the university, with larger percentages of Business (24.0%) and Psychology (15.9%) majors, respectively. Moreover, 51% of the participants were 1st year students.

2.2. Measures

Daily diary pages assessed three primary variables: stress, coping, and positive affect. Personality and demographic variables were completed at one administration point.

2.2.1. Perceived stress

Participants were asked to first describe the most stressful or bothersome event that had occurred to them during each day using an open-ended format. Next the participants rated the perceived stressfulness of the event using a 5-point rating scale (1 = *very slightly* to 5 = *extremely*).

2.2.2. Perceived control

Participants were asked how much control they had over the onset of the stressful event that they had described using a 5-point rating scale (1 = *no control* to 5 = *absolute control*).

2.2.3. Coping

Daily coping was assessed with 28 items reflecting 14 specific coping strategies using a 4-point rating scale (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *a lot*). These items were taken from Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist and the How I Coped Under Pressure Scale (Ayers & Sandler, 2000) and the Responses to Stress Questionnaire (Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000). Four daily coping variables were used

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