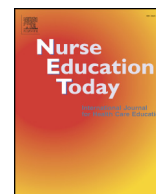




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Coping, stress, and personality in Spanish nursing students: A longitudinal study☆☆☆

Joana Fornés-Vives^{a,*}, Gloria Garcia-Banda^b, Dolores Frias-Navarro^c, Gerard Rosales-Viladrich^d

^a Department of Nursing and Physiotherapy, University of Balearic Islands, Spain

^b Department of Psychology, University of Balearic Islands, Spain

^c Department of Methodology of the Behavioural Sciences, University of Valencia, Spain

^d Association for Mental Health "Estel de Llevant", Manacor (Illes Balears), Spain

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to examine the dominant stress coping style in nursing students, its relationships with stressful life events and personality traits, and the students' changes during their academic training. A non-experimental two-wave longitudinal design was carried out in 199 nursing students recruited from three Spanish nursing schools. The Stressful Life Events Scale, NEO-FFI, and COPE questionnaire were administered at the beginning (T1) and end (T2) of their nursing studies. Descriptive statistics, Anova(s), NPar tests, and Pearson correlations were carried out. Results show that nursing students' dominant coping style was emotion-focused coping, both at T1 and T2. Highly significant correlations between emotional coping and the neuroticism trait were found. Coping, stress, and personality changed positively during the training program. At T2, the use of problem-focused strategies increased, and participants became more extroverted, agreeable, and conscientious. Coping and personality changes experienced by nursing students throughout their degree program seem to mirror the professional competences needed by future licensed nurses.

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Introduction

Research in nursing students reveals that they are significantly stressed (for a review, see [Lim et al., 2010](#)), although the sources of stress studied are usually limited to the academic context ([Gibbons et al., 2011](#)). In an attempt to control and reduce their stress levels, students use different coping strategies ([Yamashita et al., 2012](#); [Klainin-Yobas et al., 2014](#)). However, few studies have explored the association between coping and personality traits ([Deary et al., 2003](#); [Watson et al., 2008](#)); to our knowledge, in the last decade no studies have related coping strategies, stressful life events, and personality traits in nursing students.

Identifying students' dispositional tendency to handle everyday life stress and determine its potential relationship with personality traits

can guide nursing educators in designing specific course credits to improve curricula, ensuring that nurses are well prepared to enter the nursing workforce. Along these lines, and from the perspective of the stress-coping transactional theory, this two-wave longitudinal study is carried out to examine nursing students' dominant coping style, its relationship with stressful life events and personality traits, and the students' changes during their academic training.

Background

The transactional theory of psychological stress and coping ([Lazarus and Folkman, 1984](#)) defines coping as a dynamic, changing process between a person and his/her environment. During this process, the person tries to solve problems by changing the environment (problem-focused coping), or the meaning of the event, in order to reduce the negative feelings associated with the problem (emotion-focused coping). However, the distinction between these two coping strategies is too simple ([Carver et al., 1989](#)). Actually, emotion-focused coping strategies are often quite different in nature (e. g. denial, positive reinterpretation, escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility, or seeking social support), and, therefore, will have different consequences in responding to stress ([Folkman et al., 1986](#)).

Cross-sectional studies have shown that emotion-focused coping is less effective in reducing stressful demands than active or problem-focused coping among professional nurses ([Rowe, 2006](#)) and nursing

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Nursing and Physiotherapy, University of Balearic Islands, Edifici Guillem Cifre de Colonya, Ctra de Valldemossa, km 7.5, 07122 Palma de Mallorca (Illes Balears), Spain. Tel.: +34 971 172662; fax: +34 971 173190.

E-mail addresses: joana.fornes@uib.es (J. Fornés-Vives), ggbanda@uib.es (G. Garcia-Banda), M.Dolores.Frias@uv.es (D. Frias-Navarro), gerardrosales@hotmail.com (G. Rosales-Viladrich).

students (Lo, 2002; Gibbons et al., 2011). Similarly, students who regularly use problem-solving methods report lower levels of distress, while those who show high levels of distress use emotion-focused coping (Tully, 2004). Moreover, in a two-wave longitudinal study, Deary et al. (2003) found significant increases in the use of emotion, avoidance, and distraction coping strategies as the nursing study program progressed. These less functional aspects of coping at T1 were related to different sources of stress (clinical stress, confidence stress, educational stress and financial stress) at T2 (12 months later). Moreover, another longitudinal study exploring the effects of coping and stressful life events on anxiety found that stress and emotion-oriented coping before the clinical training predicted anxiety at the end (Shikai et al., 2009).

Stress seems to be an almost inevitable spin-off of modern life (Jones and Bright, 2001). Psychological stress is considered by Folkman et al. (1986) to be a personal response that appears after perceiving an imbalance between environmental demands and the resources available to address them. Several studies have shown that nursing students are under high levels of academic stress and the resulting distress (Beck and Srivastava, 1991; Deary et al., 2003; Goff, 2011; Yamashita et al., 2012). Moreover, student health professionals are also exposed to demands from the interface between personal and extracurricular factors (Jones and Johnston, 1999; Prymachuk and Richards, 2007). While academic stress has been extensively investigated, the personal stressors need further enquiry. In our opinion, when there is not yet a commitment to the work context, stressful life events would be especially relevant in the lives of nursing students (Wolf et al., 2015), and quite similar to the adult population (Kardum and Krapic, 2001). If these episodic stressors are not effectively managed, they may become chronic and affect psychological and physical health in the long term (Shikai et al., 2009; Cheng and Li, 2010).

Longitudinal studies have shown that nursing students' stress increases during their educational training, finding higher stress levels at the beginning of their third year (Edwards et al., 2010; Timmins et al., 2011). Moreover, Watson et al. (2008), in 158 nursing students in Hong Kong, showed an increase in academic stress 7 months after entering their nursing program and prior to undertaking clinical practice. Likewise, in an initial sample of 168 Scottish nursing students, Deary et al. (2003) found increasing levels of psychological distress, assessed by the GHQ, as the program progressed. However, Lo (2002) obtained a decrease in the stress percentage among Australian nursing students (44.2% first-year, 28.4% second-year, and 21.8% third-year), and Jiménez et al. (2010) found similar stress levels in all three training years in Spanish nursing students. In light of these contradictory findings, there is a need for more data about the longitudinal course of stress and coping in student nursing.

DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) have pointed out that coping strategies vary depending on characteristics of the individual and contextual factors (stress). Personality has been conceptualized as more or less stable and enduring dispositions (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors), which may explain why some people are more vulnerable to stress than others (Ryckman, 2004). A widely used personality model is the Five-Factor-Model (FFM; Costa and McCrae, 1992), based on a taxonomy with five dimensions: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to Experience (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). The FFM approach has been particularly useful in understanding dispositional coping, which involves typical responses to a broad range of stressors (see Connor-Smith and Flachsbar, 2007 for a meta-analysis). Most research examining the role of personality in coping strategies has focused on N and E traits, whereas other personality dimensions have remained relatively unexamined in the literature (DeLongis and Holtzman, 2005). Studies have shown that individuals with persistent stress (Niiyama et al., 2009) or high N (Burgess et al., 2010) choose ineffective strategies – mainly focused on emotion – to cope with stressful situations, such as ignoring the problem, distracting, venting or avoidance. Meanwhile, individuals with higher E use active

and effective coping strategies (Knoll et al., 2005). Regarding other personality dimensions, openness to experience and conscientiousness have been found to be related to active and less evasive coping (Lee-Baggeley et al., 2005).

Of the few longitudinal studies that have investigated the relationship between coping, stress, and personality traits in nursing students, Deary et al. (2003) found that neuroticism and emotional coping at T1 (entry to program) were associated with increased stress at T2 (12 months later). Moreover, Watson et al. (2008), in their two-wave study (with 7 months between T1 and T2), found that neuroticism was positively related to stress and emotional coping, while conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness were positively related to problem coping.

After several decades of studies on the impact of stress and coping strategies, substantial gaps and inconsistencies still remain (see Connor-Smith and Flachsbar (2007) for a meta-analysis). Thus, the aims of this study were: 1) to identify the dominant coping style of nursing students; 2) to ascertain the relationships among the response to coping styles, stressful life events, and personality traits; 3) to find out whether the coping strategies used vary during their 3-year academic training and are accompanied by changes in stress and personality.

Methods

Design

A non-experimental longitudinal design was used with nursing students recruited from Spanish nursing schools in three geographically diverse universities (University of Balearic Islands–UIB, University of Cantabria–UC and University of Granada–UG), located in the north, south, and east of the country, respectively.

Participants

In the first year of the study, participants were 249 nursing students (94 from UIB, 67 from UC, and 88 from UG) with an age range of 17–43 years, and a mean of 20.97 ± 5.13 years. Three years later (at the end of their studies), the final sample was composed of 199 students (79.92% response rate), and the majority of the participants were women (87.96%).

Procedure

First-year students from three nursing schools were invited to participate in a longitudinal survey spanning their 3 years of nursing training. Prior to administering the batch of questionnaires, a full explanation of the project aims was provided. Informed consent was obtained from all the students who agreed to participate. Likewise, to guarantee confidentiality, participants were assured that no information would be published individually. Moreover, they were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants completed the questionnaires in a regular lecture class at the beginning of nursing training (T1, 2007) and at the end of their studies (T2, 2010). On both occasions, students were asked to return the completed questionnaires by hand to the office of the professor in charge of the study within 15 days.

Measurement

Stress was measured with the Stressful Life Event Scale (SLE; Holmes and Rahe, 1967), adapted for the Spanish population by Labrador (1992). This scale contains 57 potentially stressful events, and individuals must indicate whether they have been exposed to them in the two preceding years and the importance the events had for them (0 = not important, 4 = maximum importance). In our sample, the T1–T2

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