



Coping strategies, self-esteem and levels of interrogative suggestibility



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ABSTRACT

The theoretical model of interrogative suggestibility predicts that levels of suggestibility are related to cognitive sets and coping strategies in dealing with interrogative pressure. Active coping strategies, involving a critical cognitive set, should be associated with reduced suggestibility. Whilst there are mixed results regarding the role of specific coping strategies in suggestibility, some evidence suggests that individuals most concerned with managing their emotional states may be more likely to engage in avoidance, emotion-focused styles of coping and consequently demonstrate higher levels of interrogative suggestibility. In line with this, self-esteem has been identified as a factor affecting how people cope with interrogative pressure. This study further investigated the role of coping strategies and self-esteem in measuring interrogative suggestibility. Participants completed the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale (GSS 2), the COPE, and the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory. Total self-esteem was not related to any of the GSS 2 measures, but correlated negatively with emotion-focused coping. Regression analyses found significant predictive models for Yield 1, Yield 2 and Total Suggestibility. Emotion-focused coping emerged as the only significant predictor of these measures. Results are discussed in terms of their theoretical implications.

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1. Introduction

Suggestibility effects resulting from police interviewing have been referred to as interrogative suggestibility (Gudjonsson, 1983), which has been defined as “the extent to which, within a closed social interaction, people come to accept messages communicated during formal questioning, as a result of which their subsequent behavioural response is affected” (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986, p. 84). Two discrete forms of suggestive influence have been identified as central to suggestible responding in this context; the use of suggestive or leading questions, and the influence of negative feedback or criticism (Gudjonsson, 1983). Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) integrated these two forms of suggestive influence in their theoretical model of interrogative suggestibility, which postulates that interrogative suggestibility is a result of an individual’s cognitive appraisal of the interrogative, or interview situation, and their ability to cope with that.

Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) propose three central factors that are likely to shape an individual’s response to the interview situation; uncertainty, expectation and trust. Varying degrees of uncertainty and expectations are thought to shape the interviewee’s

cognitive appraisal and result in them adopting a “general cognitive strategy” (Gudjonsson, 2003, p. 348) to cope with the demands of the interview. This coping strategy may result in a suggestible or resistant response to the interviewing procedure. The cognitive appraisal of each question is further affected by uncertainty and expectation. Interviewees may be uncertain about answers to specific questions because they have a poor memory, or no memory for the events in question. They may be reticent to admit their uncertainty because of a perceived expectation that they should be able to provide answers. Interpersonal trust may further affect cognitive appraisal. Interviewees may trust the intentions of the interviewer as being genuine and honest, or they may be suspicious of them. Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) propose that these three factors combine such that interviewees with high levels of uncertainty, expectation and interpersonal trust, respond suggestibly. In contrast, where interviewees have low levels of these factors, resistant responding is more likely.

The model further postulates that feedback is a central aspect of interrogative suggestibility and emphasises the practical implications of negative feedback. Interviewers may explicitly state that they believe the interviewee is lying or mistaken, or they may use repetitive questioning to communicate that a given response is incorrect (Gudjonsson, 2003). Such feedback is thought to affect subsequent responding only where it is accepted by the interviewee.

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Interviewees who reject negative feedback are likely to remain resistant to subsequent suggestive questioning, but those who accept it may be more likely to change previous answers and experience increased uncertainty in relation to subsequent questioning (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986). The model also holds that accepting negative feedback may reduce an individual's self-esteem and increase their feelings of anxiety. Consequently, their coping strategies are likely to be affected such that they become distracted by their own emotional state and attend to external cues at the expense of internal cues to accuracy.

Coping with perceptions of interpersonal trust, uncertainty, and the expectations of the interview situation are central to the theoretical model of interrogative suggestibility (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986). Therefore, one basic hypothesis is that coping strategies are significantly related to outcomes on the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS 1 and 2), instruments measuring levels of interrogative suggestibility for forensic and research purposes (Gudjonsson, 1997). Active coping strategies, involving a critical cognitive set, should be associated with reduced scores on the scales, whereas avoidance forms of coping where interviewees do not engage in a critical evaluation of the situation and the questions should be associated with increases in GSS scores.

Previous research examining the role of specific coping strategies in interrogative suggestibility offers mixed results. Gudjonsson (1988) compared the GSS scores of participants classified as using either avoidance or active coping strategies during the GSS procedure. Participants reporting active coping had significantly lower Yield 1, Yield 2 and Shift scores than those who reported avoidance coping. These results are consistent with the Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) model and support the role of coping strategies in suggestible responding. This study relied on self-report of coping style from a relatively small sample ($N = 30$). Participants verbally described how they had coped with the demands of the GSS procedure. However, introducing the idea that participants have been misled and perhaps as a consequence given inaccurate answers, may have influenced their perceptions of their own decision making and coping strategies.

Forrester, McMahon, and Greenwood (2001) tested the relationship between coping styles and responses on the GSS 1. Participants completed the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), which provides measures of two coping styles: 'emotion-focused' and 'problem-focused'. Neither problem-focused nor emotion-focused coping significantly correlated with any of the GSS 1 scores, nor did these coping styles predict outcomes on the GSS 1. It should be noted that Forrester et al. (2001) conceptualised coping differently to Gudjonsson (1988). Results of these two studies may therefore not be directly comparable. Forrester et al. (2001) suggest that whilst their results indicate there is no direct relationship between coping strategies and suggestible responding, other personality variables may be important, a point demonstrated in other studies (e.g., Bain, Baxter, & Fellowes, 2004; Baxter, Jackson, & Bain, 2003; Gudjonsson & Singh, 1984).

Howard and Hong (2002) provide evidence in support of a direct relationship between coping style and suggestibility. Using the COPE, participants were identified as either emotion-focused or problem-focused in their coping style. The emotion-focused group scored significantly higher than the problem-focused group on the Yield 1 and Total Suggestibility measures of the GSS 1 supporting the findings of Gudjonsson (1988) and suggesting that an avoidant coping style which focuses on managing emotional reactions to situations, results in higher levels of suggestibility in response to leading questions. The results further support the Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) model and indicate that emotion-focused coping styles are central to explaining suggestibility. No group difference was found for the measure of Shift suggesting that only pre-feedback scores are affected by differences in coping strategies.

A potential explanation for the contrast between Forrester et al. (2001) and Howard and Hong's (2002) results may be found in the classification and grouping of individuals as either emotion or problem-focused. Dichotomous classification of coping strategies may be problematic because this suggests that participants use one method of coping exclusively (Forrester et al., 2001). Other research on coping responses suggests that individuals can be flexible in their use of coping strategies with more than one strategy employed to deal with a situation (e.g., Cheng & Cheung, 2005). Differences between groups may emerge where style of coping is controlled for, i.e., in dichotomous classification, but the relationship between coping and interrogative suggestibility may be moderated by other personality variables.

Although Howard and Hong (2002) confirmed significant differences between groups in terms of coping style, no within-group analysis was conducted. Therefore, there is no evidence given that scores within groups were distinctly either problem-focused or emotion-focused. The mean scores for the problem-focused group suggest that they were significantly more inclined to use problem-focused ($M = 65.96$) than emotion-focused coping ($M = 37.32$). However, the emotion-focused group had broadly similar scores for emotion-focused ($M = 50.28$) and problem-focused coping ($M = 53.84$), and in fact were marginally more likely to engage in problem-focused coping. The emotion-focused group were not distinct in their coping style which may account for no differences being found between the groups in their post-feedback scores of Yield 2 and Shift.

Previous research has suggested that higher levels of self-esteem are associated with increased resistance to interrogative pressure. Lower self-esteem appears to result in greater sensitivity to increases in interrogative pressure (Bain et al., 2004; Baxter et al., 2003). In Baxter et al.'s (2003) study, participants with low self-esteem gained significantly higher scores than participants with high self-esteem on all suggestibility measures of the GSS 1. The results also demonstrated an interaction. Participants with low and high levels of self-esteem did not display the same pattern of results between conditions of psychological distance. The low self-esteem group's scores increased on Yield 2 and Shift with increases in psychological distance, whilst participants with high self-esteem displayed lower scores on these measures under conditions of increased psychological distance (cf. Bain & Baxter, 2000). Baxter et al. (2003) concluded that increasing psychological distance between interviewer and interviewee can result in increased resistance to interrogative pressure for those with high levels of self-esteem. In contrast, participants with low levels of self-esteem may experience increased vulnerability to interrogative pressures under conditions of increased psychological distance. Increases in psychological distance may further reduce the self-esteem of individuals with lower levels of self-esteem and increase feelings of anxiety. As a result, their coping strategies may be affected such that they become distracted by their own emotional state and attend to external cues rather than "relying on their own judgement and internal frame of reference" (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986, p. 95).

A perception of low competence in dealing with situations may render an individual more vulnerable to the influence of both leading questions and interrogative pressure (cf. Peiffer & Trull, 2000; Terry, 1994). By attending to the interpersonal dynamics and attempting to reduce any psychological discomfort associated with interrogative pressure, low self-esteem interviewees may be less able to attend to internal cues for accuracy (Baxter et al., 2003). Low self-esteem individuals may therefore evidence higher scores on the GSS as a consequence of reduced attention to discrepancies between their own memory for details of the GSS narrative and the misleading content of the GSS questions (Bain et al., 2004; cf. Schooler & Loftus, 1986).

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