



The role of the Five Factor Model of personality with proactive coping and preventative coping among college students



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 December 2014

Received in revised form 19 March 2015

Accepted 27 March 2015

Available online 9 April 2015

Keywords:

Five Factor Model

Proactive coping

Preventative coping

Coping

Personality

ABSTRACT

Psychological researchers have long emphasized the need to identify dispositional aspects of coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Over the years a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the relationship between coping and personality. However, limited dispositional research has been conducted on two alternative approaches to coping: proactive coping and preventative coping (Schwarzer, 2001). Proactive coping and preventative coping deviate from traditional conceptualizations of coping because both are active, future oriented approaches to coping with stressors. Preventative coping remains in line with the traditional view of coping as an effort to minimize risk, whereas proactive coping is defined as challenge-focused and stressors are viewed as an opportunity for growth. The goal of the present study was to analyze the role of the Five Factor Model (FFM) with proactive and preventative coping. Participants ($n = 251$) completed a battery of questionnaires that included measures of personality and coping. Results indicated that all five personality traits were significantly correlated with proactive and preventative coping. Additionally, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience were predictive of both styles of coping, while Extraversion and Neuroticism were only predictive of proactive coping.

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1. Introduction

Coping with stressful situations is an essential characteristic of the human experience. It is a complex process based on a number of variables related to the individual, the environment, and the type of stressor experienced. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is perhaps one of the most empirically supported coping theories (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus, coping is based upon an interaction between the individual's appraisal and response to a stimulus. An individual first appraises a stimulus to determine if a threat is present. If there is a perception of harm, the individual then engages in a coping response. Lazarus and Folkman (1987) state that a coping response can be either problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping can be defined as strategies to influence the situation, whereas emotion-focused coping is described as efforts to minimize emotional distress. While there is a substantial amount

of research that describes coping as a response to a threat, more recently researchers have focused on coping as a future-oriented, challenge based process. For instance, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) proposed that future-oriented, challenge based coping had been overlooked by past research and that individuals do not simply react to stimuli, but also make efforts to prepare for future stressors. Schwarzer (2001) identified two types of active, future-oriented coping styles, preventative coping and proactive coping. Preventive coping involves building up resources in an effort to minimize negative outcomes, whereas proactive coping involves developing resources to address challenges and pursue personal growth (Greenglass, 2002; Schwarzer, 2001). While preventative coping maintains the traditional view of coping as efforts to address a threat, proactive coping reframes stressors as challenges.

1.1. Coping and personality

The second construct measured in this study was the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality. The FFM is a trait-based approach of personality (McCrae & John, 1992). Traits can be defined as innate underlying dimensions of an individual that reflect cognition,

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behavior, and emotion (Carver, 2010). The five factors are commonly labeled as, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and Agreeableness. Neuroticism represents individual differences of experiencing stress, depression, and anxiety. Individuals high in Neuroticism tend to engage in irrational thinking, have lower self esteem, and tend to utilize ineffective coping strategies (McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Extraversion is characterized by gregariousness, warmth, and positive emotionality (Costa & McCrae, 1988; Watson & Clark, 1997). Conscientiousness is defined as the ability to be goal driven, to delay immediate gratification, to be future oriented, and the tendency to be guided by social norms (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992). Openness to Experience is defined as intelligence, imaginative, perceptive, creative, flexible, and a willing to experience different things (McAdams, 1992). Agreeableness is characterized as altruistic, nurturing, trustworthy, and being emotionally supportive (Graziano & Tobin, 2009).

Psychological researchers have long emphasized the need to identify dispositional aspects of coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Over the years a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the relationship between coping and personality, and particularly on the FFM. Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007) conducted a meta-analysis to study the overall relationship between the FFM and coping across studies. Findings indicated that the relationship between coping and personality differed based on the type of coping style. Personality was weakly related to broad coping styles, such as engagement and disengagement. However, all five personality traits were predictive of specific coping styles, particularly Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness. For example, Extraversion and Conscientiousness were predictive of problem-focused coping, while Neuroticism was predictive of maladaptive coping styles. Penley and Tomaka (2002) found that high levels of Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience all relate to perceiving events as challenges, rather than threats. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) has also indicated that high levels of Conscientiousness and Extraversion, and low levels of Neuroticism are related to active-oriented coping. Proactive coping and preventative coping were not included in this meta-analysis. Surprisingly, there is a paucity of literature focusing on the role of personality with proactive coping and preventative coping. In a literature review, the authors found only one article (Hambrick & McCord, 2010) that focused on this topic. Hambrick and McCord found that all five personality traits were related to proactive coping except for Openness to Experience, while Conscientiousness and Agreeableness were the only two personality traits related to preventative coping. The goal of the present study was to analyze the role of the Five Factor Model (FFM) with proactive and preventative coping.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants & procedures

Participants ($n = 251$) completed a self-report questionnaire battery that included the Big Five Inventory (BFI) and the proactive coping and preventative coping subscales of the Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI). The sample included undergraduate students who were voluntarily recruited from introductory psychology courses in exchange for partial course credit. The sample was comprised of 125 males ($M_{age} = 20.31$, $SD_{age} = 3.90$), 126 females ($M_{age} = 19.58$, $SD_{age} = 2.51$) with an overall mean age of 19.96 years old ($SD_{age} = 3.33$). Reliability statistics, bivariate correlations, and hierarchical regression analyses were computed.

3. Measures

3.1. Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI)

The PCI (Greenglass, Schwarzer, & Taubert, 1999) is a 55 item instrument rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true to 4 = completely true). It was developed as a multidimensional coping inventory with the ability to assess different facets of coping used by individuals during stressful times, as well as in anticipation of stress and difficult situations ahead (Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum, & Taubert, 1999). The proactive coping subscale consists of 14 items. An item example from this subscale is “I turn obstacles into positive experiences.” The preventative coping subscale contains 10 items. An example of an item from this subscale is “I think ahead to avoid dangerous situations.” The PCI has been identified as a reliable and valid instrument within two samples (Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec et al., 1999). Principal component analyses supported the factor validity and homogeneity of the PCI. The proactive coping subscale demonstrated high internal consistency and reliability within both samples ($\alpha = .85$, $\alpha = .80$). The preventative coping subscale also demonstrated strong internal consistency in both samples ($\alpha = .83$, $\alpha = .79$).

3.2. Big Five Inventory (BFI)

The BFI (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) consists of 44 items and contains five personality dimensions that include, Extraversion (8 items), Conscientiousness (9 items), Neuroticism (8 items), Agreeableness (9 items), and Openness to Experience (10 items). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Disagree Strongly to 5 = Agree Strongly) and begins with the statement, “I see myself as someone who. . .” The BFI has been shown to have strong internal consistency and reliability, $\alpha = .83$, (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). The BFI has also demonstrated strong convergent validity (.93) with the NEO-PI-FFI, another established measure of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

4. Results

Results of bivariate correlation analyses and reliability analyses are presented in Table A.1. All of the correlations between the FFM personality traits and the two styles of coping were significant. Every inter-correlation between the FFM traits was significant except for the associations of Conscientiousness and Agreeableness with Openness to Experience. There was also a significant correlation between the two styles of coping. Fisher z analyses were conducted to determine if there were significant differences between proactive coping and preventative coping in relation to the FFM. Results indicated that there were significant differences between the two styles of coping on Extraversion, $z = 2.36$, $p = .02$, and Neuroticism, $z = -2.03$, $p = .04$.

Two five-step hierarchical regressions were also conducted to explore the predictability of FFM personality variables for proactive coping and preventative coping. Tables A.2 and A.3 provide summaries of both hierarchical regression results where each FFM personality variable was entered successively. Both regressions used the same steps for the FFM personality variables. Conscientiousness was entered first followed by Openness to Experience in the second step, Extraversion in the third step, Neuroticism in the fourth step, and finally Agreeableness. Results indicated that Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience positively predicted both coping styles. Additionally, Extraversion was positively predictive of proactive coping, while Neuroticism was negatively predictive of proactive coping. Conscientiousness accounted for the greatest amount of variance in both coping

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