



Emotional maturity, dispositional coping, and coping effectiveness among adolescent athletes



Adam R. Nicholls^{a, *}, Andrew R. Levy^b, John L. Perry^c

^a Department Sport, Health, and Exercise Sciences, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK

^b Department of Psychology, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, L39 4QP, UK

^c Department of Sport, Health, and Nutrition, Leeds Trinity University College, Leeds, LS18 5HD, UK

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Although some scholars have suggested that coping is constrained by emotional maturity, little is known about the relationship between these constructs. In this paper we assessed a model that included emotional maturity, dispositional coping, and coping effectiveness. We predicted that emotional maturity would have a direct effect on coping effectiveness in addition to an indirect effect via task-, distraction-, and disengagement-oriented coping.

Design: Cross-sectional.

Methods: Seven hundred and ninety athletes completed measures of emotional maturity, dispositional coping, and coping effectiveness. The data was analyzed using structural equation modeling, which revealed partial support for our model.

Results: Several of the predicted paths were significant. In particular, there was a significant path between emotional maturity and task-oriented coping, but the paths between emotional maturity and distraction- and disengagement-oriented coping were not significant.

Conclusion: Our findings indicate that how an athlete copes might be limited by his or her level of emotional maturity, which provides further evidence that coping is constrained by maturation among adolescent athletes.

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Adolescents have to contend with a variety of physical, emotional, educational, and social changes, which can be stressful (Boekaerts, 1996). Coping develops throughout the maturation process in adolescence, which results in adolescents progressively having more variety in the strategies they can deploy (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Indeed, it is thought that coping is constrained by biological, cognitive, social, and emotional maturation (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Harding Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). A person's level of biological maturity influences how a person copes through the development of physiological systems in the body that are related to coping, such as the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis (HPGA; McCormick & Mathews, 2007). Coping may also be constrained by cognitive maturity, because a person needs sufficient meta-cognitive abilities, which is associated with maturation (Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999), to be able reflect on coping. Finally, coping is thought to be constrained by emotional maturity. Theoretically, a less emotionally mature individual would

be unable to regulate his or her emotions and may respond to stressful situations by only venting his or her emotions, because the individual does not have alternative way of responding to stress (Amirkhan & Auyeung, 2007). Little, however, is known about the relationship between coping and emotional maturity among adolescent athletes. In order to address this gap in the literature, we assessed a model that included emotional maturity, dispositional coping, and coping effectiveness among adolescent athletes.

Emotional maturity refers to “the ability of facilitating and guiding emotional tendencies to reach intended goals” (Yusoff, Rahim, Pa, Mey, 2011, p. 294). According to Yusoff et al. (2011), individuals who are emotionally mature are outcome-oriented, have a high desire to achieve goals, take calculated risks, search for information to minimize uncertainty, hope for success rather than fear failure, and view setbacks as controllable rather than a personal flaw. There is only a limited amount of research concerning emotional maturity among athletic populations. Rathee and Singh Salh (2012) explored emotional maturity among 120 international, national, or state level handball players. The international level athletes scored significantly higher on emotional maturity

* Corresponding author.

than the national or state level athletes, although these scholars did not assess how emotional maturity was related to coping.

Coping refers to all conscious cognitive and physical efforts aimed at managing demands that are evaluated as taxing a person's resources, whereas coping effectiveness refers to the successfulness of a coping strategy in managing demands that are appraised as taxing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, strategies that are successful in eliminating stress could be considered effective; whereas coping that has little impact on reducing stress could be considered ineffective (Lazarus, 1999). However, Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood (2003) suggested that distinguishing between effective and ineffective coping represents a challenge to researchers. This is because a particular strategy might be effective in one situation but not another, for one person but not another person, or in the short-term but not the long-term (Lazarus). Although Skinner et al. (2003) also suggested that some strategies will be inherently ineffective (e.g., social withdrawal or helplessness) for all people and across all situations. Therefore, understanding more about coping effectiveness is important for the development of interventions to help athletes manage stress more effectively.

Scholars have distinguished between situation and person analyses of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping can be measured at the situation level, which is referred to as process coping (Lazarus & Folkman), and is concerned with the strategies a person used in a specific situation. Researchers can also investigate coping at the person level and assess how an individual would normally cope, which is known as dispositional coping. Lazarus and Folkman viewed person analyses of coping as the structure that influences the coping process. According to Fleeson (2004), the debate regarding whether psychological constructs should be measured as a process or trait is over, because both measurements can be accurate. That is, process assessments are more accurate than trait measurements regarding how a person behaves or thinks in a specific situation, because behavior can vary within a situation. However, dispositions are highly accurate in predicting trends over long periods of time and are therefore useful in explaining differences between people. In support of dispositional analyses of coping, Louvet, Gaudreau, Menaut, Genty, and Deneuve (2007) reported that coping remained relatively stable over three competitions within a six month period.

Regardless of whether coping is assessed at the situation or person level, researchers tend to classify coping within dimensions. Gaudreau and Blondin (2004) were among the first coping scholars to classify coping within the three higher-order task-, distraction-, and disengagement-oriented coping dimensions. Task-oriented coping includes attempts to change or master stressful situations and includes strategies such as mental imagery and thought control. The purpose of distraction-oriented coping is to direct the person's attention onto unrelated aspects and includes strategies such as mental distraction and distancing. Finally, the aim of disengagement-oriented coping is to help the person disengage from attempts to attain personal goals. Withdrawal and venting of emotions are examples of coping strategies classified within the disengagement-oriented coping dimension.

It is thought that coping changes throughout a person's lifespan, with many changes occurring during adolescence (Compas et al., 2001). Adolescence spans from 12 to 22 years of age, with three different sub-categories: early adolescence (12–16 years of age), middle adolescence (17–18 years of age), and late adolescence (19–22 years of age; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). In the past, researchers have tended to explore how athletes of different ages cope (e.g., Amirkhan & Auyeung, 2007). For example, both Groër, Thomas, and Shoffner (1992) and Gamble (1994) reported that younger adolescents used more strategies to regulate their

emotions than older adolescents, whereas older adolescents used more problem-focused coping strategies. In contrast to these findings, Plancherel, Bolognini, and Halfon (1998) and Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (1999) found that coping strategies employed to regulate emotions increased with the chronological age of the participants. These equivocal findings may be due to the scholars only assessing chronological age and ignoring maturation. Maturation may be more meaningful than chronological age, because people mature at different rates (McCormick & Mathews, 2007). Nevertheless, the findings by Plancherel et al. (1998) and Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi suggest that coping may be related to emotional maturity.

In response to Compas et al.'s (2001) assertion that coping is constrained by maturation, two studies have specifically explored the relationship between maturation and coping among athletes. With a sample of 527 athletes, Nicholls, Polman, Morley, and Taylor (2009) explored how athletes of different biological maturity and chronological age coped during competitive events and whether there were any differences in coping effectiveness among athletes of different biological maturity. Biological maturity was categorized into one of four pubertal status groups: beginning-pubertal, mid-pubertal, advanced-pubertal, and postpubertal. The authors found some subtle differences, with beginning- and midpubertal athletes using more distancing than advanced- or postpubertal athletes. Interestingly, distancing belongs to the distraction-oriented dimension of coping, which has been found to be a less effective form of coping (Nicholls, Perry, Jones, Morley, & Carson, 2013).

As a follow up to Nicholls et al. (2013) explored the relationship between cognitive-social maturity and dispositional coping and coping effectiveness. Conscientiousness and peer influence, which represented two of the three subscales of cognitive-social maturity, were associated with task- and distraction-oriented coping. As such, these authors found further support for Compas et al.'s (2001) claim that coping is related to cognitive and social maturity. In contrast to the findings of Nicholls et al. (2009) and the authors' hypothesis, however, there was not a significant path between task-oriented coping and coping effectiveness. There were negative paths between distraction- and disengagement-oriented coping and coping effectiveness. That is, although task-oriented coping was not associated with the adolescents coping more effectively, distraction- and disengagement-oriented coping was associated with the athletes coping less effectively.

Aims and hypotheses

The aim of this study was to assess a model that included emotional maturity, dispositional coping, and coping effectiveness among a sample of early and middle adolescent athletes. Our hypotheses are illustrated in Fig. 1. We hypothesized that there would be a positive path between emotional maturity and task-oriented coping, but negative paths between emotional maturity and both distraction- and disengagement-oriented coping. Although scholars have not specifically explored the relationship between coping and emotional maturity, researchers have explored the relationship between a somewhat similar construct and coping, known as optimism. Conceptually, a key behavior of emotional maturity is similar to a characteristic associated with optimistic individuals, which is goal striving (Scheier & Carver, 1985). That is, both emotional mature and optimistic people have a strong desire for goal attainment and continue to pursue their goals (Scheier & Carver; Yusoff et al., 2011). Due to the lack of theoretical propositions or empirical data regarding emotional maturity and coping, the hypothesized relationship between these constructs is based on the relationship between optimism and coping. A meta-analysis by Solberg Nes and Segerstrom (2006) revealed that optimistic

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