Personality and Coping

Alyssa Seely
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition

Part of the Clinical Psychology Commons, Cognitive Psychology Commons, Comparative Psychology Commons, Counseling Psychology Commons, Health Psychology Commons, Personality and Social Contexts Commons, and the Social Psychology Commons

Running head: PERSONALITY AND COPING

Personality and Coping

Alyssa Marie Seely

Brigham Young University

Abstract

Everyone experiences stress. The way in which people handle stress is classified as coping. Using the five-factor model of personality, coping strategies can be predicted based on a person's personality type. Research shows that those with higher N levels do not cope effectively, often choosing to avoid conflict and stress. The other four personality types tend to use approach-focused coping strategies, although there are exceptions within each category. Those with higher E, O, and A levels use social coping strategies that often lead to positive and successful outcomes. Higher O levels have been correlated with the ability to adapt from situation to situation. Research also indicates that those with higher C levels approach stressors through logic rather than support seeking in social settings. The ability to predict and understand coping strategies based on personality could be foundational in positive changes within the field of clinical therapy and ultimately help people improve their lives by teaching them alternative ways to cope based on their personality type.

Personality and Coping

Stress is an inevitable part of people's lives (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003). Whether that stress comes from external pressures, internal frustrations, daily nuances, or any other of the many possible sources, it's something that heavily influences people worldwide. Stambor (2006) found that over half the working class, and 47% of all Americans, were concerned with the amount of stress they experienced on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, Beiter et al. (2015) reported that "seven out of ten United States adults claim to experience stress or anxiety at least at a moderate level on a daily basis" (p. 1). According to Beiter et al. (2015), these percentages are likely to rise in coming years.

The way people manage stress is referred to as coping (Folkman, 2013). Although coping has been defined differently throughout the years, Markovic, Rose-Krasnor, and Coplan (2013) explained that coping is any response to internal or external stressors. There are many strategies that can be used to respond to such a stressor; however, most can be broken down into two categories: "*Approach-focused*, which reflects efforts to deal with stressors directly (e.g., seeking social support, problem-solving); and *avoidance-focused*, or efforts to avoid stressors or control their emotional impact (e.g., self-blame)" (Roberts & Mroczek, 2013, p.4; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997).

Just as coping has been defined differently throughout the years, *personality* has been equally debated by philosophers and psychologists alike (Uher, 2017). Connor-Smith (2007) defined personality as "patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors over time and across situations" (p. 2). Carver (2010) defined it as "the dynamic organization […] that underlie [a] person's patterns of actions, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 3). Roberts (2008) defined it as "the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that distinguish individuals from

one another" (p. 1). Although the definitions may vary slightly, each is comprised of the necessary elements of thought, feeling, and behavior. In 1932, McDougall proposed a theory indicating that personality was comprised of five essential factors (Digman, 1990). Over time his theory developed into what is now called the five-factor model of personality, colloquially known as the Big Five. This five-factor model separates elements of a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors into 5 categories: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). Various studied have been completed testing the validity of the Big Five, and the model has continuously showed positive results (Brokenau & Ostendorf, 1990; Davaraj, Easley, & Crant, 2008). Because of the reliability of the five-factor model, it will be used in this article as the basis of personality.

Analyzing and comprehending personality is fundamental in understanding and predicting coping strategies. Personality has been shown to be a foundational factor in determining whether a person will use coping strategies that lead to empathy, problem-solving, and cognitive reframing, or to self-blame, avoidance, and withdrawal (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). Understanding and predicting such reactions could aid in creating an accurate awareness of a person's coping strategies, which could then assist them in developing healthier and more effective coping strategies in the future. This is made possible by first analyzing the existing literature in order to determine how coping strategies vary based on higher levels achieved on the five-factor model of personality.

Neuroticism (N)

Those who score higher in N are more likely to experience negative emotions (Lee-Baggely, Preece & DeLongis, 2005). They are often more anxious, self-conscious, moody, and prone to depression, having higher levels of anger and paranoia in comparison to those with

lower N levels (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Lee-Baggley, Preece & DeLongis, 2005). Higher N levels are also tied to lower job performance and satisfaction, as well as negative career expectancy, which has been shown to have lasting negative emotional effects on workers who score higher in N (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Neal, Yeo, Koy & Xiao, 2012). Those with higher N levels also experience more stressful events and tend to feel more negatively affected and distressed while experiencing stressful events (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000).

Lee-Baggley et al. (2005) studied 71 married couples from a stepfamily context, meaning that each couple that participated had either been married previously or had had children with a previous partner. Stepfamilies were used because "on average, those in stepfamilies face both higher levels of stress and a greater variety of stress than do those in first-marriage families" (Lee-Baggley, et al., 2005, p. 9). Couples were used because individuals within a couple often have different personalities and subsequently cope differently than one another, even when experiencing the same stressor. As part of the study, each person was interviewed individually and then asked to fill out daily journal entries for two years, relating the stressors their family experienced and how both they and their partner responded to the stressors they experienced. Each couple was interviewed prior to beginning their journal entries to determine the participants' personality using the NEO-FFI Personality Inventory.

The results from the study completed by Lee-Baggley et al. (2005) were consistent with the finding from similar studies. Due to the overall negative emotions they experienced, those with higher N levels coped in predominantly ineffective ways. One of the principle reasons behind the use of ineffective coping strategies lies in the tendency of those with higher N levels to use avoidance techniques when facing stressors (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Ayers, Sandier, Sest, and Roosa (1996) stated the following:

Avoidant responses are indirect methods [that] reflect cognitive or behavioral attempts to avoid thinking about a stressor or its implications, to accept or resign oneself to an existing situation, to seek alternative rewards, or to try to manage tension by expressing it openly. (p. 2)

The characteristics of avoidance, resignation, blame (of self or others), over-emotionality, confrontation, and withdrawal are all made evident when testing those with higher N levels. This leads to lower levels of problem-solving and ineffective coping abilities due to the avoidant techniques subsequently developed (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005; DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). It's important to note that those with higher N levels don't lack the ability to cope; they simply tend to do so in ineffective ways.

Extraversion (E)

Those with higher E levels are predominantly social and outgoing people. Subsequently, the characteristic of E is most dominant in social settings such as group work (Neal et al., 2012). Those with higher E levels value close relationships and tend to enjoy maintaining a relatively active lifestyle (Devaraj, Easley, & Crant, 2008). They also tend to experience both more stressful events and more pleasurable ones, indicating that they are often emotionally invested people (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000). Those with higher E levels have been found to be more assertive, warm, cheerful, and energetic when compared to other personality types and usually demonstrate a greater ability to adapt from situation to situation (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005; Neal et al., 2012). Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) explained that "sometimes [E] is based in assertiveness, sometimes in spontaneity and energy. Sometimes [E] is based in dominance, confidence, and agency, sometimes in a tendency toward happiness" (p. 18). In spite of possible differences in definition, E is fundamentally rooted in the same social elements of personality.

DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) completed a study in which 88 couples from a stepfamily context were interviewed and then sent weekly questionnaires for a period of two years. One person from each couple was suffering from severe rheumatoid arthritis. DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) used couples and stepfamilies for the same reason as Lee-Baggley et al. in their 2005 study. However, DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) used couples in which one participant suffered from an incurable, painful, and life-threatening disease in an attempt to have a more extreme and therefore clear result in determining exactly how coping related to personality.

What they discovered is that those with higher E levels engage in active and effective approach-focused coping strategies (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). One such approach-focused strategy is demonstrated in their tendency to seek out social support in their coping efforts while simultaneously taking personal responsibility for their actions (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000; DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005; Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Those with higher E levels can adapt to their surroundings through efficient problem-solving strategies and cognitive reframing, including the ability to think positively (even when facing challenging stressors such as divorce), reinterpret meaning, substitute negative emotional responses for more positive ones, or by demonstrating restraint (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Especially when tested in a familial setting, higher E levels led to both an increase in personal responsibility and in the ability to compromise (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005).

Openness (O)

Those with higher O levels are most commonly motivated by new or exciting experiences. They often seek out change, diversity, unconventional ideas, and variety in order to facilitate an atmosphere where new experiences are made possible (Devaraj et al., 2008). Those with higher O levels have been found to respond empathetically to those they feel close to,

implying that they are just as open with others as they are with themselves (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Additionally, those with higher O levels are known for their curiosity, openness of mind, imagination, innovation, adaptability, and flexibility of thought. Researchers have yet to determine whether these characteristics result from a desire to experience new things or are the motivators that inspire those with higher O levels to seek out new experiences. (Neal et al., 2012).

The desire to seek out new experiences plays a crucial role in the coping strategies of those with higher O levels. Whether that role is positive or negative depends on the situation, person, stressor, etc. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) explained that those with higher O levels often use positive coping strategies such as considering new perspectives, avoiding withdrawal, and engaging in cognitive restructuring, positive reappraisal, and problem solving. They also respond by using strategies such as humor and preemptive planning should a stressor arise (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Those with higher O levels, however, also utilize negative coping strategies such as wishful thinking (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).

Unfortunately, research is limited as to what coping strategies are most often used by those with higher O levels. However, it has been found that they adapt and cope in creative ways. It is in part due to this creativity and diversity of coping strategies that has made it difficult to find definitive results thus far (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005).

Agreeableness (A)

Those with higher A levels are similar to those with higher E due to their mutual tendency to seek out social interaction. Those with higher A levels are focused on the needs of the people around them, showing characteristics such as kindness, courteousness, and tolerance (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Devaraj et al., 2008). They also tend to be more trusting,

cooperative, helpful, and likable (Neal et al., 2012). A unique trait found in most people with

higher A levels is their tendency to adopt altruistic perspectives, which in turn not only affects

the way they view the world but also the coping strategies they use (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005).

The strong social networks built by those with higher A levels influence whether they use

approach-focused or avoidant-focused coping strategies. (Lee-Baggley, Preece, & DeLongis,

2005). Those with higher A levels seek the support and involvement of others when confronting

personal stressors, indicating approach-focused coping strategies (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005).

Additionally, those with higher A levels tend to cope using positive reappraisal and effective

problem solving, often preemptively planning which coping strategies to use. However, those

with higher A levels typically desire to avoid confrontation in social settings, indicating

avoidant-focused coping strategy. Researchers have theorized that the desire to avoid

confrontation could be a rare example of when avoidant-focused coping strategies lead to

potentially positive outcomes (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005).

Conscientiousness (C)

Those with higher C levels are predominantly categorized by their awareness of their

surroundings. Higher C levels have been shown to demonstrate high motivation, determination,

self-discipline, reliability, and organization (Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Devaraj et al. (2008)

explained that those who have higher C levels are intrinsically motivated, which often leads to a

higher level of achievement, persistence, proficiency, and self-control. Because of this intrinsic

motivation, and the goal-oriented nature of those with higher C levels, they are often sought after

in workplace settings (Devaraj et al., 2008). Additionally, those with higher C levels demonstrate

the ability to plan effectively, show higher levels of responsibility, and control impulses (Carver

& Connor-Smith, 2010).

Just as those with higher C levels tend to be more disciplined and proficient by nature, they cope using similarly organizational and problem-focused techniques. Those with higher C levels tend to participate in active, approach-focused coping strategies (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000). Unlike many of the other personality types that use social factors in order to effectively approach stressors, those with higher C levels approach stress through logic, problem-solving, disengagement of negative thoughts, planning, positive reappraisal, and task-related efforts (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). Those with higher C levels also have a tendency, however, to use the coping strategy of self-blame, especially in dealing with interpersonal stress (DeLongis & Holtman, 2005).

Discussion

Coping strategies vary based on the levels achieved on the five-factor model of personality. Research shows that those with higher N levels do not cope effectively, often choosing to avoid conflict and stress. The other four personality types tend to use approach-focused coping strategies, although there are exceptions within each category. Those with higher E, O, and A levels use social coping strategies that often lead to successful and positive outcomes. Higher O levels have been correlated with the ability to adapt from situation to situation. Research also indicates that those with higher C levels approach stressors through logic rather than support seeking in social settings.

Understanding the ways coping strategies differ based on personality type can expand the field of clinical psychology and provide a way for psychologists to predict and improve their clients' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses to stress. Although some personality types, such as N, tend to utilize negative coping strategies overall, there are active and healthy strategies within each of the five personality types that can be developed. If clients were taught

to utilize these positive coping strategies (within their perspective personality types) it could lead to more effective outcomes within therapy. More research should be done to test if significant improvement can be made to the psychological stability of clients when attempts are made to manipulate the coping strategies they utilize.

The majority of the research thus far has focused on those who score significantly higher in one of the five outlined personality types. Most people, however, are a mix of several personality types (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000). Indicating that although the research completed thus far has the potential to help those who score higher in one personality type, more research would need to be done in order to help the majority of people who score higher in two or more of the five personality types within the five-factor model. This is most likely to be accomplished by testing coping strategies of every possible combination of personality types, similar to the work started by Vollrath and Torgersen (2000). Until then, only a small percentage of the population can benefit from the findings outlined previously.

Additionally, the majority of research thus far has been conducted in regard to the personality types of N and E. This is primarily due to the belief that they're easier to recognize, in that O and A are often detectable only when in groups, and C is difficult to detect unless in solitude. However, if more research could be done explicitly testing the coping strategies of the personality types of O, A and C, the results would likely have as equally impactful implications as the research regarding N and E has thus far demonstrated. This research would allow us to more fully comprehend the ways in which people cope based on personality, and subsequently prepare us to assist others in dealing with the vast stressors of life.

References

Ayers, T. S., Sandier, I. N., West, S. G., & Roosa, M. W. (1996). A dispositional and situational

    assessment of children's coping: Testing alternative models of coping. *Journal of*

    personality, *64*(4), 923–958.

Beiter, R., N., R., McCrady, M., Rhoades, D., Linscomb, M., Clarahan, M., & Sammut, S.

    (2015). The prevalence and correlates of depression, anxiety, and stress in a sample of

    college students. *Journal of affective disorders*, *173*, 90–96.

Borkenau, P., & Ostendorf, F. (1990). Comparing exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis:

    A study on the 5-factor model of personality. *Personality and Individual*

    differences, *11*(5), 515–524.

Carver, C. S., & Connor-Smith, J. (2010). Personality and coping. *Annual review of*

    psychology, *61*, 679–704.

DeLongis, A., & Holtzman, S. (2005). Coping in context: The role of stress, social support, and

    personality in coping. *Journal of personality*, *73*(6), 1633–1656.

Devaraj, S., Easley, R. F., & Crant, J. M. (2008). Research note—how does personality matter?

    Relating the five-factor model to technology acceptance and use. *Information systems*

    research, *19*(1), 93–105.

Digman, J. M. (1990). Personality structure: Emergence of the five-factor model. *Annual review*

    of psychology, *41*(1), 417–440.

Folkman, S. (2013). Stress: appraisal and coping. In *Encyclopedia of behavioral medicine* (pp.

    1913-1915). Springer New York.

Graziano, W. G., & Eisenberg, N. (1997). Agreeableness: A dimension of personality. *Handbook*

    of personality psychology (pp. 795–824).

Jensen-Campbell, L. A., Gleason, K. A., Adams, R., & Malcolm, K. T. (2003). Interpersonal

Conflict, Agreeableness, and Personality Development. *Journal of Personality*, *71*(6),

1059. doi:10.1111/1467-6494.7106007

Lee-Baggley, D., Preece, M., & DeLongis, A. (2005). Coping with interpersonal stress: Role of

Big Five traits. *Journal of personality*, *73*(5), 1141–1180.

Markovic, A., Rose-Krasnor, L., & Coplan, R. J. (2013). Shy children's coping with a social

conflict: The role of personality self-theories. *Personality and Individual*

Differences, *54*(1), 64–69.

McCrae, R. R. (1993). Openness to experience as a basic dimension of personality. *Imagination,*

Cognition and Personality, *13*(1), 39–55.

McDougall, W. (1932). Of the words character and personality. *Journal of Personality*, 1(1), 3–

16.

Neal, A., Yeo, G., Koy, A., & Xiao, T. (2012). Predicting the form and direction of work role

performance from the Big 5 model of personality traits. *Journal of Organizational*

Behavior, 33(2), 175–192.

Roberts, B. W., & Mroczek, D. (2008). Personality trait change in adulthood. *Current directions*

in psychological science, *17*(1), 31–35.

Stambor, Z. (2006). Stressed out nation. *American Psychological Association, 37(4), 28.*

Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/monitor/apr06/nation.aspx

Uher, J. (2017). Basic definitions in personality psychology: Challenges for conceptual

integrations. *European Journal of Personality*, *31*(5), 572–573.

Vollrath, M., & Torgersen, S. (2000). Personality types and coping. *Personality and Individual*

Differences, *29*(2), 367–378.