

PERSONALITY TRAITS AND MENTALIZATION AMONG ADOLESCENTS AS PREDICTORS OF STRESS COPING STRATEGIES^{1,2}

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Abstract

Stress has many consequences for our well-being, both physically and psychologically. While stress helps us to overcome challenges and to achieve our goals, stress can also have many detrimental health consequences if it continues for a long time (Tollenaar, & Overgaauw, 2020). More knowledge is warranted about differential sensitivity to stressful situations to predict how people will respond to (socially) demanding contexts (Romić, & Ljubetić, 2021). The aim of the research was to examine whether personality traits (activity, aggressiveness/hostility, impulsive sensation seeking, neuroticism/anxiety, sociability) and mentalization (mentalization of self, mentalization of others, motivation for mentalization) can predict stress coping strategies (task-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, avoidance-focused coping) among emerging adults. The sample was convenient and consisted of 291 respondents ($N_{\text{female}} = 72.5\%$), high school students and students in Niš, Serbia. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 24 years ($M = 19.19$ years, $SD = 1.37$). The following instruments were used to operationalize the aforementioned constructs: The ZKPQ questionnaire for measuring basic personality traits, UM mentalization scale and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS). For task-oriented coping with stress, the model explained 18% of the total variance. Significant predictors were activity ($\beta = .21$, $t = 3.08$, $p = .002$) and motivation for mentalization ($\beta = .29$, $t = 3.42$, $p = .001$). The model within emotion-focused coping explained 40% of the variance ($p < .001$), while the significant predictors were aggressiveness ($\beta = .16$, $t = 2.92$, $p = .004$), neuroticism ($\beta = .56$, $t = 10.25$, $p < .001$) and mentalization others ($\beta = .14$, $t = 1.93$, $p = .050$). For avoidance-oriented coping, the model explained 12% of the variance ($p < .001$). Significant predictors were impulsive sensation seeking ($\beta = .23$, $t = 3.06$, $p = .002$) and sociability ($\beta = .16$, $t = 2.17$, $p = .031$). Activity and the need to understand the needs and intentions of others contribute to constructive solutions in stressful situations. On the other side, neuroticism contributes to the greatest extent to the less desirable strategy of overcoming stress that is focused on emotions, which is logical because a disturbed person first tries to regulate emotions, and this does not necessarily lead to a constructive solution, but to the consumption of drugs, withdrawal or self-preoccupation. Considering that the tendency to neuroticism makes it difficult to successfully overcome stress, its regulation through counseling and therapeutic work can significantly contribute to better coping with stress.

Keywords: *Adolescence, personality traits, mentalization, stress coping strategies.*

1. Introduction

Stress is an inevitable part of life, influencing individuals in various ways. While moderate levels of stress can enhance performance and facilitate adaptation to challenges, excessive or prolonged stress can have detrimental effects on both mental and physical health. Given that individuals do not experience or manage stress in the same way, understanding the psychological factors that contribute to differences in stress responses is essential. Identifying the mechanisms underlying stress coping strategies is particularly important during adolescence, a period characterized by significant psychological and social changes that can heighten vulnerability to stress.

Personality traits play a key role in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to stressors. Certain traits may predispose individuals to more adaptive coping strategies, while others may increase susceptibility to maladaptive responses. For the purposes of this research, we decided to examine personality traits within the framework of the Zuckerman-Kalman five-factor model of personality. The dimensions of this model are: *Activity* - general need for activity, as well as anxiety in situations where there is no possibility to satisfy this need, and the tendency towards difficult and challenging jobs

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(work activity); *Aggressiveness* - verbal aggression, rude, reckless behavior, malice, vindictiveness, and impatience; *Impulsive Sensation Seeking* - impulsive reactions and a need for excitement and novelty; *Neuroticism/anxiety* - emotional distress, tension, worry, fearfulness, and sensitivity to criticism; *Sociability* - propensity to socialize and party, and tolerance to social isolation (Zuckerman et al., 1999).

In addition to personality, the ability to mentalize—that is, to understand one's own and others' mental states—may also influence stress regulation. The concept of mentalization was defined by Fonagy and Bateman as a mental process during which someone implicitly or explicitly interprets their own or other people's actions as meaningful based on intentional mental states such as desires, needs, feelings and intentions (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004). Mentalization facilitates emotional self-regulation and social interaction, which are crucial aspects for effective coping. However, the extent to which personality traits and mentalization jointly contribute to stress coping strategies remains an open question.

Coping strategies play a vital role in helping adolescents adapt to these challenges. Personality traits are key factors that influence how adolescents cope with stress. Stress coping strategies can be presented as a process of investing cognitive and behavioral efforts with the help of which the external or internal demands placed on the person are reduced (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Parker and Endler (1992) identified three primary coping strategies: *Problem-focused coping*: Addressing the source of stress through problem-solving, seeking information, planning, taking action, and cognitive reconceptualization; *Emotion-focused coping*: Managing negative emotions associated with stressors and *Avoidance-oriented coping*: Avoiding stressful situations through social diversion or distraction.

2. Method

2.1. Objective

The aim of the research was to examine whether personality traits and mentalization can predict stress coping strategies among adolescent.

2.2. Sample

The sample was convenience and consisted of 291 respondents ($N_{\text{Female}} = 72.5\%$), high school students and first and second year students at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, Serbia. The average age was 19.19 years ($SD = 1.37$), while the age range was from 18 to 24 years ($M = 19.19$; $SD = 1.37$).

2.3. Instruments

Personality traits were measured using **Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire - 50 - CC (ZKPQ-50-CC)**; Aluja et al., 2006) contains 50 true and false statements, and 5 subscale. In this research measures of reliability were: activity $\alpha = .70$, aggressiveness $\alpha = .62$, sociability $\alpha = .74$, impulsive sensation seeking $\alpha = .62$, neuroticism $\alpha = .74$.

The Questionnaire for Mentalization Assessment - QM (MentS; Dimitrijević, Hanak, Altaras-Dimitrijević, & Jolić-Marijanović, 2017). The questionnaire contains three subscales (28 items): mentalizing one's own states, mentalizing others' states and motivation for mentalizing. In this sample, the scale has satisfactory internal consistency reliability of the measurement (mentalization of self: $\alpha = 0.74$; mentalization of others: $\alpha = 0.82$; motivation to mentalize: $\alpha = 0.67$).

CISS - Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (Endler & Parker, 1990). The questionnaire has 48 items divided into three subscales: problem-focused strategies, emotion-focused strategies, and avoidance-focused strategies. The reliability of the problem-focused strategy scale is $\alpha = .85$, the emotion-focused strategy scale is $\alpha = 0.85$, while the reliability of the avoidance-focused strategy scale is $\alpha = 0.83$.

3. Results

In the following, the basic descriptive statistical results are presented first.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	AS	SD	Min	Max	Sk	Ku
Activity	3.99	2.21	0.00	9.00	.13	-.74
Aggression-hostility	4.41	2.32	0.00	10.00	.18	-.63
Sensation Seeking	5.10	2.30	0.00	10.00	.09	-.58
Neuroticism	5.07	2.48	0.00	10.00	-.03	-.94
Sociability	4.38	2.53	0.00	10.00	.14	-.89
Mentalization of self	29.70	7.00	12.00	45.00	-.15	-.49
Mentalization of others	38.21	7.51	17.00	50.00	-.64	.15
Motivation for mentalizing	32.07	5.34	15.00	45.00	-.26	.23
Task-focused	55.75	9.79	16.00	80.00	.13	-.74
Emotion-focused	46.22	11.39	18.00	79.00	.18	-.63
Avoidance-focused	46.47	11.98	21.00	75.00	.09	-.58

The results of the regression analysis follow.

Table 2. Regression analysis.

	β	t	p	
Task-oriented coping				$R^2 = .18$,
Activity	.21	3.08	.002	$F_{8,221} = 7.16$,
Motivation for mentalization	.29	3.42	.001	$p < .001$)
Emotion-oriented coping				$R^2 = .40$,
Aggressiveness	.16	2.92	.004	$F_{8,220} = 18.33$,
Neuroticism	.56	10.25	.001	$p < .001$
Mentalization others	.14	1.93	.050	
Avoidance-oriented coping				$R^2 = .12$,
Impulsive sensation seeking	.23	3.06	.002	$F_{8,221} = 3.86$,
Sociability	.16	2.17	.031	$p < .001$

For task-oriented coping with stress, the model consisting of personality traits and mentalization explained 18% of the total variance. Significant predictors were activity and motivation for mentalization. The model within emotion-focused coping explained 40% of the variance, while the significant predictors were aggressiveness, neuroticism and mentalization others. For avoidance-oriented coping, the model explained 12% of the total variance. Significant predictors were impulsive sensation seeking and sociability.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the research was to examine whether personality traits and mentalization can predict coping strategies with stress. The results showed that neuroticism, which is characterized by emotional distress, tension, anxiety, fear, and sensitivity to criticism, contributes most to an emotion-focused coping strategy, as expected. The overflow of unpleasant emotions should first be remedied and then focused on other strategies. However, given the overflow of negative emotions in various stressful situations, a person may avoid everything that threatens emotional balance, even for the development of positive, albeit stressful stimuli, such as exam situations, speaking up in a broader social context, etc. (Schneider, 2004). Aggression also contributes to this coping strategy, because it also leads to an unpleasant emotional imbalance. Mentalizing others helps us predict the intentions and reactions of people around us and thus avoid or prepare for unpleasant situations and reduce stress. Enjoying company distracts us from serious situations, provides us with social support and alleviates the consequences of stress. The search for new excitement makes it difficult to focus on the problem if we find ourselves in a stressful situation, but it also distracts us from potentially mitigating the effects of stress. However, it also distracts us from seeking more mature actions that can help us overcome stress. Activity and initiative direct efforts to deal with stressful situations and reflect a proactive attitude towards reality. Of course, people who are characterized by pronounced activity probably do not have such a pronounced palette of negative emotions, which are experienced by a person with pronounced neuroticism. Finally, the motivation for mentalization is also a reflection of a kind of proactive attitude towards people, and the environment and as such facilitates focus on problem solving in stressful situations.

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