Psychological Distress and its Relation to Attributional Styles and Coping Strategies among Adolescents

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Psychological distress and its relation to attributional styles and coping strategies were studied in a sample of 300 (150 male and 150 female) eleventh grade students. It was found that composite attribution for positive events and its three dimensions (i.e. internal-external, stable-unstable and global- specific) were negatively correlated with psychological distress and composite attribution for negative events and its three dimensions (i.e. internal-external, stable-unstable and global-specific) were positively correlated with psychological distress. It was also found that problem focused coping strategies negatively related to psychological distress and avoidance coping positively related to psychological distress. Further more, it was found that Science students scored higher on composite negative and its two dimension i.e. stable-unstable and global-specific negative. It was also found that Science students used more problem focused coping while Arts students used more avoidance coping, The result also revealed that Arts students experience more psychological distress as compared to Science students.

Keywords: Psychological Distress, Attributional Styles, Coping Strategies

Psychological distress is a major problem of present era, specially for students population. Any situation that evokes negative thoughts and feelings in a person such as unpleasant, frustrating, irritable, worrisome, and anxious is considered psychological distress. According to Chalfant et al, (1990) psychological distress is "a continuous experience of unhappiness, nervousness, irritability and problematic interpersonal relationships". The same situation is not necessarily stressful for all people and all people do not experience the same negative thoughts and feelings when distressed. One model that is useful in understanding stress among students is the person- environment model. According to this model, stressful events can be appraised by an individual as "challenging" or "threatening" (Lazarus, 1966). Psychological distress is effected by many factors like personality characteristics, demand of situations, type of attributional styles and which kind of coping strategies are opted to deal with a stressful situation.

One important factor which plays significant role in experiencing psychological distress among adolescents is their attributional style. The term attribution is used to refer to the individual's perception of causations, that is his explanation as to why the experiences and events have taken place. In other words how people perceive and explain the causes of their own as well as others' behavior. There are three dimensions of attributional style: i.e. locus, stability and globality. Locus of causality refers to whether the outcome was due to something about the person (internal) or something about the situation or circumstances (external). Stability refers to whether the cause will again be present (stable) or is temporary (unstable) (Rotter, 1966). The third dimension is globality. Globality, refers to whether the cause influences just this particular situation (specific

explanation) or whether it influences other areas of respondent's life (global explanation) (Tenner & Herzberger, 1985).

A pessimistic (or depressive) attributional style is the tendency to explain negative life events with internal, stable and global causes and to explain positive events with external, unstable and specific causes. In contrast, an optimistic attributional style is the tendency to explain negative events with external, unstable and specific causes and to explain positive events with internal, stable and global causes (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Pessimists are more likely than optimists to display helplessness deficits when they experience a negative event (Schulman, Castellon & Seligman, 1989). Attributional style has been demonstrated to play a mediating role between negative events and problems in living such as depression (Sweeney, Anderson, & bailey, 1986), loneliness (Anderson, 1983), and shyness (Alfano, joiner, & Perry, 1994).

For example, a pessimistic attributional style appears to increase the risk for depression through the negative impact of the attributions on self-esteem (locus attributions) and expectations about future events (stability and globality attributions) (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Researchers believe that attributional style can help provide a better understanding of behaviors and consequences that affect one's performance and actions (Peterson, 1991).

The second important factor which plays significant role in experiencing psychological distress is utilization of coping strategies. Coping can be described as the cognitive and behavioral efforts an individual uses to manage specific demands or stressors (e.g., Dressler, 1991). Coping is defined as cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce or tolerate internal and external demands, and conflicts among them that tax or exceed the persons' resources (Folkman & Lazarus,1980), coping is also considered a

key concept in theory and research on adaptation and health (Lazarus,1983).

Park and Adler (2003) emphasized that utilizing effective coping strategies can help alleviate the negative effects of stress. Coping strategies can be viewed as what an individual actually thinks and does in a particular stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). In general, coping efforts may change constantly for any one individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The stress-strain relationship is a function of coping strategies or mechanism used by the individuals. Adaptive coping reduces stress and promotes long term health. Whereas maladaptive coping reduces stress but promotes long term ill health. Positive thinking and problem focused responses in the face of stressors are normally referred to as adaptive coping strategies; negative thinking and avoidance responses are referred to as maladaptive coping strategies (Nowack, 1990).

It is found by many studies that avoidance coping predicts higher levels of psychological distress (Blalock & Joiner, 2000; Carver et al., 1993; Terry & Hynes, 1998), and primary and secondary control engagement coping predict lower levels (Compass et al., 2001; Connor Smoth & Compas, 2002; Weisz, McCabe, & Dennig, 1994).

The purpose of present paper was to study psychological distress and its relation to attributional style and coping strategies among adolescents, as well as comparative study of attributional style and psychological distress among stream group (i.e. Science and Arts group).

Hypotheses:

1. Different dimensions of attribution for positive events will negatively correlated with psychological distress.

2. Different dimensions of attribution for negative events will positively correlated with psychological distress.

3. Problem focused coping will negatively correlated to psychological distress.

4. There will be significant difference among Science and Arts students on different dimensions of attribution for positive and negative events.

5.There will be significant difference among Science and Arts students on problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and avoidant coping, and psychological distress.

Method

Sample:

For the present study a sample of 300 students (150 boys and 150 girls) was randomly drawn from the senior secondary schools of Aligarh Muslim Universtiy, Aligarh. Age of the subjects ranged between 16 to 19 years, the mean age being 17.6 years. All the students came from middle class (moderate) socio-economic background.

Tools:

Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ): It was developed by Peterson, Semmel, Von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky and Seligman (1982), and revised by Peterson and Seligman (1984). The ASQ is a self report measure of patterns of explanatory style which is the tendency to select certain explanations for good and bad events.

The ASQ consists of 12 hypothetical events, out of which 6 are good and 6 are bad events. Additionally half of events are interpersonal/ affiliative while other half are achievement related. The three attributional dimensions rating scales associated with each event description are scored in the direction of increasing internality, stability and globality. Scores are derived by simply averaging within dimension and across events for individual dimension scores and across dimension and across events for composite scores. Each individual dimension score ranges from 1 to 7. Therefore, composite scores range from 3 to 21 for both composite positive and composite negative. Several studies have explored the ASQ's internal consistency. Peterson, Semmel, Von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky and Seligman (1982) found that the three scales i.e., locus, stability and globality have modest reliability with Cronbach's (1951) alpha ranging from 44 to 69.

Scale for Measuring Coping Strategies (COPE Scales): The multi-dimensional coping strategies scale developed by Carver, Scheier and Weinlraub (1989) was used to assess the different ways in which people respond to stress. This scale measures different aspects of problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and avoidant coping strategies. The scale consist of 52 items measuring 13 dimensions of coping strategies. There are four items in each different subscales. Each item in the scale has to be rated on a four point scale- from "1" (usually don't do this at all) "never" to 4 (usually do this a lot) "most of the time", and the measure is obtained summing up the ratings for each of the four items. This scale has shown good reliability and validity with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .62 to .92.

PGI Health Questionnaire : It was developed by Verma, Wing and Pershad (1985). It is 38 items questionnaire based on Cornell Medical Index. The items yield scores on A (physical) and B (psychological) sections. (1).The respondent is required to put a. tick (Ö) against questions he/she agrees with. The number of ticks on section A and B indicate the respective scores which can be then added up to give a total distress score also. (2).There is no fixed number of questions (a cut off point) above which all neurotics should score on this test but in his studies of over 500 persons Verma et al (1985) found that if a person ticks more than 10 items (questions)chances are high that he has got marked neurotic trends. (3). A high score does not always indicate neurosis, but (a) it shows a propensity to develop neurotic symptoms under stress and (b) Neurotics score higher than normal's.

Results

Table1. Psychological Distress and its Relation with Attributional Style, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping (N=300).

Variables	Computed value of 'r'
Attribution for Positive Events (Composite)	-.310**
Internal vs External (Positive)	-.243**
Stable vs Unstable (Positive)	-.272**
Global vs Specific (Positive)	-.284**
Attribution for Negative Events (Composite)	.284**
Internal vs External (Negative)	.152*
Stable vs Unstable (Negative)	.211**
Global vs Specific (Negative)	.253**
Problem Focused Coping	-.167*
Emotion Focused Coping	0.022
Avoidance Coping	642**

**p<.01; * p<.05.

This table shows that there is significant negative relationship between attribution for positive events (composite as well as three dimensions) and psychological distress. In other words there is strong negative relationship between attribution for positive events (i.e. composite attributions for positive events r=-.310, p<.01, Internal vs External Positive r=-.243, p<.01, Stable vs Unstable Positive r=-.272, p<.01 and Global vs Specific Positive r=-.284, p<.01) and psychological distress. It is also observed that there is significant positive relationship between attribution for negative events (composite as well as three dimensions) and psychological distress. In other words we can say there is strong negative relationship between attribution for negative events (i.e. composite attributions for negative events r=.248, p<.01, Internal vs External negative r=.152, p<.05, Stable vs Unstable negative r=.211, p<.01,and Global vs Specific negative r=.253, p<.01) and psychological distress.

A perusal of the values in above table also shows that there is significant negative correlation between problem focused coping and psychological distress (r=.167, p<.05). It is also observed from the table that emotion focused coping is not significantly related to psychological distress (r=.022; p>.05). The table also shows the significant strong correlation between avoidance coping and psychological distress (r=.642, p<.01).

Table 2. Comparision of Attributional Style Scores of Science and Arts Students (N=300).

Attributional style and dimensions	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value
Composite Positive	Science	151	16.24	2.37	0.82
	Arts	149	16.47	2.55	
Internal-External Positive	Science	151	5.59	0.99	1.96
	Arts	149	5.82	1.01	
Stable-Unstable Positive	Science	151	5.46	0.95	0.4
	Arts	149	5.51	1.05	
Global-Specific Positive	Science	151	5.22	1.03	0.5
	Arts	149	5.17	0.92	
Composite Negative	Science	151	10.1	2.4	2.72**
	Arts	149	9.38	2.17	
Internal-External Negative	Science	151	3.84	1.09	0.33
	Arts	149	3.88	1.09	
Stable-Unstable Negative	Science	151	3.09	0.99	2.39*
	Arts	149	2.81	0.97	
Global-Specific Negative	Science	151	3.19	1.08	4.12
	Arts	149	2.71	0.95	

**p<.01; * p<.05.

In this table (table-4.3) it is observed that there is no significant difference between Science and Arts students on 6 out of 8 dimensions of attributional style. The significant difference is found only in two dimensions of attributional style, i.e. composite negative and specific-global negative dimension. Science students (mean=10.10) as compared to Arts students (mean=9.38) scored significantly higher on these dimensions.

Table 3. Comparision of Coping Strategies and Psychological Distress Scores of Science and Arts Students(N=300)

Variables	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value
Problem Focused Coping	Science	151	60.45	6.54	4.45
	Arts	149	56.54	8.53	
Emotion Focused Coping	Science	151	57.79	7.23	0.17
	Arts	149	57.99	12.84	
Avoidance coping	Science	151	26.34	5.53	3.94
	Arts	149	28.99	6.08	
Psychological Distress	Science	151	11.01	4.55	1.97
	Arts	149	12.23	6.07	

Table-3 displayed that there is significant difference between Science and Arts students on problem focused coping. In other words Science students scored significantly higher (mean=60.45, SD=6.54) as compared to Arts students (mean=56.54, SD=8.53, t-value=4.45, p<.001)on problem focused coping. The table also indicates that there is no significant difference between Science and Arts students on emotion focused coping strategies. The significant difference is observed between Science and Arts students on composite of avoidance coping. In other words Arts students scored significantly higher (mean=28.99, SD=6.08) as compared to Science students (mean=26.34, SD=5.53, t-value=3.94, p<.01) on avoidance coping.

Above table also indicates that there is significant difference between Science and Arts students on psychological distress. In other words Arts students scored significantly higher (mean=12.23, SD=6.07) as compared to Science students (mean=11.01, SD=4.55, t-value=1.97, p<.05) on psychological distress. If we look at the results in the light of the hypotheses formulated for the present study, it is revealed that our first to fifth hypotheses are confirmed and sixth hypothesis is not proved as true but seventh hypothesis is proved true. Similarly our eight and ninth hypothesis are not confirmed but hypothesis tenth is proved as true. Hypothesis eleventh is partially confirmed, as well as hypotheses twelfth and fourteen are proved as true but hypothesis thirteen is not confirmed. Our last hypothesis is also prove as true.

Discussion

A close scrutiny of the results of the present study revealed that there is significant negative relationship between attribution for positive events (composite as well as three dimensions) and psychological distress. It is also found that there is significant positive relationship between attribution for negative events (composite as well as three dimensions) and psychological distress. Present study is also supported by many previous findings. Fresco, Alloy, and Harington (2006), also found that the tendency to see negative events arising from internal, stable, and global causes and positive events arising from external, unstable, and specific causes, was associated with higher levels of clinician assessed depression symptoms. In a study of college students, Corr and Gray (1996) found that trait anxiety was positively correlated with negative attributional style and

negatively correlated with positive attributional style. Fazio and Palm (1998) examined the attributional style and depression among students. They also found in their study that students with pessimistic attributional style had higher depression scores than students with optimistic attributional style and those with higher depression score had lower grade point averages (Haugen & Lund, 2002; Alfano, Joiner & Perry, 1994; Dixon & Ahrens, 1992).

It was also found that there is significant negative correlation between problem focused coping and psychological distress. It is also observed that emotion focused coping is not significantly related to psychological distress. This finding gets support from the study conducted by Higgins and Endler (1995), who found that task oriented coping was negatively related to distress. This finding is partially supported by Hasida (2005), they conducted a study to examine the association between demographic variables, problem focused and emotion focused coping and distress among adults. They found that emotion focused coping showed strong positive associations with distress, whereas problem focused coping was negatively related to distress.

It is also confirmed from the result that avoidance coping strongly correlated with psychological distress. This finding corroborates the results of earlier studies (Billing & Moos, 1981; Endler & Parker, 1990; Steiner, Erickson, Hernandez, & Pavelski, 2002; Dunkley et al, 2000; Suzuki, 2003). Neill (2007) also found in his study that the best predictor of psychological distress was the use of avoidant coping strategies. Reland et al. (2000), while examining the relationship between possible selves, depression and coping style among students revealed that depressed students reported more avoidant coping as compared to non depressed students. Highighatgou, et al, (1995) also found that students who had active coping style reported fewer depressive symptoms

than did those who had an avoidant coping style.

Though when attributional style was taken to compare among Science and Arts students, the difference is found only in composite negative and two dimensions of attributional style for negative events, i.e. stable-unstable negative and specific-global negative dimension.

Similarly when coping strategies were taken to compare among stream group, it was found Science students utilized more problem focused coping than Arts students. It was also found that Arts students used more avoidance coping. Present finding also indicated that Arts students experience more psychological distress in compared to Science students. Because Arts students have limited scope and opportunity to grow and choose better job in future while Science students have wide area to go any field. Therefore Arts students experiencing more psychological distress as compared to Science students. There is no any study were conducted on these variables in terms of stream groups, that is why no any previous study were mention which could indicate support of these results.

Conclusion

Conclusion of this study is that there is significant negative relationship between composite attribution for positive events and its three dimensions (i.e. internal-external, stable-unstable and global- specific positive) with psychological distress and positive relationship between composite attribution for negative events and its three dimensions (i.e. internal-external, stable-unstable and global-specific negative) with psychological distress. It is also concluded that problem focused coping negatively related to psychological distress and avoidance coping positively related to psychological distress. As well as it is concluded that Science students have more pessimistic attributional style and used more problem focused coping than Arts students, who have more optimistic attributional style

and used greater avoidance coping. From the result it is also concluded that Arts students experience more psychological distress as compared to Science students.

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