



RELIGIOSITY, EXPERIENTIAL SYSTEM AND COPING WITH STRESS: THEORETICAL PREMISES

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Abstract: *The paper aims to analyze the theoretical premises of research on the link between religiosity and experiential system concerning coping. A lot of empirical data confirm the impact of religiosity as an individual characteristic on coping with stress. Mainly, the research considers the findings in the context of Lazarus's psychological stress theory and suggests that religious persons apply specific coping strategies which positively or negatively affect mental health. Only a few explore the role of religiosity in the context of Cognitive-experiential self-theory (CEST), which focuses on the adaptive function of implicit beliefs operationalised in the construct of Constructive thinking. At the same time, recent surveys have indicated a negative relationship between constructive thinking and perceived stress. Also, CEST establishes the similarity between the cognitive-experiential system and religiosity and motivates scientific research in this field. However, the question "How am I religious" or which religious attitudes are resourceful or harmful in overcoming stressful situations remains open-ended. Exploring religiosity's impact on coping in the Cognitive-experiential self-theory paradigm could enrich understanding of the adaptive and non-adaptive religious coping mechanisms.*

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Contemporary research from the last three decades in mental health has found that religiosity as an individual characteristic of the personality significantly impacts cognitive appraisal and coping (Pargament, 1990, 2011; Seybold, Hill, 2001; Park, 2005; Koenig, 2012). Various specifics of individual religiosity, such as intrinsic, extrinsic and quest orientation (Allport, 1966; Allport, Ross, 1967; Batson et al., 1993) and religious coping (Pargament et al., 1997, 2007, 2011) are explored to reveal how religiosity influences coping with stressful situations. It is essential to acknowledge that owing to the complexity of the religious phenomenon, the inferences among various studies exploring the religiosity impact on stress and coping are contradictory and need to be clarified. Moreover, the empirical data reveals the problem of Janus's face of religion (Kranz et al., 2020). Respectively, religiosity can serve as a resource in coping with stress but can also worsen its negative consequences (Szałachowski, Tuszyńska-Bogucka, 2021).

Mainly research on the relationship between religiosity and stress is analyzed in terms of Lazarus' theory of stress (Lazarus, 1966) and cognitive evaluation processes that determine the development of stress. In the latest edition of the theory, Richard Lazarus defined stress as an interaction (transaction) between the person and the environment, representing the stressor's perception and how it affects psychological well-being and coping (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus, 1993). The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1987) explained coping as a phenomenon that involves both cognitive and behavioural responses that individuals use to manage internal and external stressors perceived to exceed their resources. The research in this field has established that individual characteristics as personality traits are determined factors in cognitive appraisal and coping - responses to adversity and to the distress that results (Connor-Smith, Flachsbart, 2007; Carver, Connor-Smith, 2010). Bulgarian psychologists have also contributed in this area, having studied several factors that predict coping with stress, such as personality traits and typology (Hristova, Karastoyanov, 2000), identity (Bakracheva, 2017), social support (Rasheva, 2006) and self-esteem (Karastoyanov, Petkova, 2021), coping strategies, anxiety, and dominant attitudes (Hristova, Karastoyanov, 2021; Bakracheva, 2021). The surveys conducted regarding Lazarus' transactional theory paradigm confirm that the more frequent use of problem-focused coping strategies and the emotionally focused strategy – positive reappraisal is associated with lower levels of experi-

encing stress. The more frequent use of emotionally focused strategies, such as mental and behavioural disengagement, focusing on emotions and their expression, is associated with higher stress levels (Hristova, Karastoyanov, 2000). Regardless of the substantial number of studies on stress, there is still a lack of research on the relationship between religiosity and stress in the Bulgarian context.

Lazarus' theory established religious coping as a passive emotional focusing coping strategy based on its capacity to regulate emotions (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984). Other surveys suggest a variety of religious attitudes and coping strategies related to different active or passive, defensive coping strategies (Pargament et al., 1990, 1992). However, whether religiosity is explained entirely in terms of active and passive coping remains an unanswered question about its adaptive function.

The answer could come from the latest research on stress based on Cognitive experiential self-theory (CEST), which is associated with dual process nomenclature of experiential/intuitive (emotion-based) and rational systems (Epstein, 1994; Epstein et al. 1996). CEST posited that people process information by two parallel but interacting modes of cognitive styles: analytical-rational style and experiential-intuitive style. The analytical-rational style operates at the conscious level and is intentional, analytic, logical, and affect-free. In contrast, the experiential-intuitive style is assumed to be automatic, more rapid processing oriented, and associative (Epstein, 1990, 1994, 2003; Epstein et al., 1996, 1999; Epstein, Pacini, 2001). An experiential thinking style on the positive side, it is associated with spontaneity, emotional expressiveness, agreeableness, extraversion, and establishing favorable interpersonal relationships. On the negative side, it is associated with superstitious beliefs, naïve optimism, and stereotypical thinking (Epstein et al., 1996; Pacini & Epstein, 1999). Therefore, constructive, and destructive thinking are theoretical components of the experiential system (Epstein et al., 1996). Constructive thinking is defined as automatic thinking that contributes to effective coping with everyday problems in living at a minimal cost in stress to the individual (Epstein, 1990). The constructive components of the experiential system are global constructive thinking, emotional coping, and behavioural coping and their respective subscales. The destructive components are personal superstitious thinking, categorical thinking, esoteric thinking, and naïve optimism (Epstein, 2001). Two facts revealed by CEST is in interest of our research. Firstly, CEST confirmed that religion provides the most impressive evidence of two fundamentally dif-

ferent modes of processing information. Second, in the ubiquity of religion, CEST found the revelation of the universal psychological importance of the experiential system (Epstein, 1994).

Given that the experiential system is responsible for influencing conscious thinking, including feelings and behaviour, it is worth investigating how constructive or destructive this system is in relation to religiosity. Hence the future analyses on the adaptive and non-adaptive coping mechanisms concerning religiousness and the search for an answer to which individual aspects of religiosity are associated with adaptive coping remains relevant. Furthermore, the equivocal results in the field of religiosity and coping with stress continue to prompt the need for follow-up studies in diverse cultural settings.

The study aims to explore the premises of future research on the link between religiosity, experiential system and coping in the context of the revelations of CEST.

METHOD

The research aims to summarize the research from last two decades dedicated on the relation between religion and coping and Epstein's experiential system and coping with a systematic review of studies that specifically involved religiosity as orientation, religious coping and constructive and non-constructive thinking and coping with stress. Searches were conducted in PsycNet and were included articles that were peer-reviewed and empirical, measured and reported results on religion on an individual level, and were available in English.

RELIGIOSITY AND COPING WITH STRESS

Is religiosity resourceful or harmful in coping with stress? There is much empirical evidence about the positive impact of religiosity on mental health (Koenig, 2012; Seybold, Hill, 2001). A growing number of studies confirm that people often turn to various aspects of religion during stressful situations: spiritual conversion (Zinnbauer et al., 1998; Koenig, 2009), attachment to God (Cassibba et al., 2014), regaining mental balance after experiencing stress (Zinnbauer, Pargament, 1998). Religious beliefs provide a sense of meaning and purpose during difficult life circumstances (Pargament, 1997, Ai, A. et al., 2007); they usually promote an optimistic and hopeful worldview that explains stressful events and thus reduce their negative impact (Spilka et al., 1985; Koenig, 2012); they provide role models in

Scriptures that facilitate acceptance of suffering; they give people a sense of indirect control over circumstances (Sasaki, Kim, 2011), reducing the need for personal control; and they offer a community of support, both human and divine, to help reduce isolation and loneliness. Unlike other coping mechanisms, religion is available to anyone at any time, regardless of financial, social, physical, or mental circumstances (Koenig, 2009). Latest research has established a growing interest in religiosity, especially during the pandemic (Bentzen, 2021; Plomecka et al., 2021) and demonstrated that religious people possess a higher level of well-being and display lower scores within the sphere of perceived stress (Ramsay et al., 2019; Vishkin et al., 2019). Recent studies have found that religious people exhibit high emotional regulation, which contributes to coping with pandemic-related stress (Vishkin et al., 2019). The data from the study reveals that higher levels of spiritual well-being and religiosity are linked to reduced pandemic-related affect and lower stress levels (Himcinschi et al., 2022).

On the other hand, empirical data also supports the understanding that religious people are reluctant to follow the advice of health professionals (Plohl, Musil, 2021) and that they have a lower level of intelligence and analytical thinking (Pennycook et al., 2016; Zuckerman et al., 2020). Two in-depth examinations of religiosity confirm the weak but consistent positive association between religiosity and worry across a number of validated measures of facets of religiosity (i.e., extrinsic, and intrinsic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal commitment, and attitudes toward God as comforting or angry (Sweeny, et al., 2023). Previous studies also show that religious doubts correlate negatively with well-being (Krause et al., 1999). Mental health research has found that religiosity can involve maladaptive coping strategies contributing to depressive symptoms and diminishing well-being (Bjorck & Thurman, 2007). Studies also have demonstrated that religious struggle and tensions are linked with high emotional distress, poorer indicators of health, and lower quality of life and well-being (Exline, 2013). In summary, though religiosity can serve as a resource in coping with stress, it can also exacerbate its negative consequences (Szałachowski, Tuszyńska-Bogucka, 2021).

RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION AND COPING

The approach made the most significant contribution to the study of individual differences in religiosity is based on the theory of mature and infantile religiosity of G. Allport (Allport, 1959, 1961). It is operational-

ized as a religious orientation construct, examining extrinsic, intrinsic and, subsequently, autonomous or quest orientation with the Questionnaire of Allport and Ross, which has undergone numerous revisions (Allport, 1966; Allport, Ross, 1967; Kahoe, Meadow, 1981; Gorsuch, Venable, 1983; Gorsuch, McPherson, 1989; Leong, Zachar, 1990; Batson, Schoenrade, 1991; Maltby, 1999).

The concept of intrinsic religiousness in Allport's writings is integrative, unifying, meaning endowing; makes for mental health; relates to all of life. It is associated with regular church attendance, open-mindedness, tolerance, and maturity; it negatively correlates with depression (Genia, Shaw, 1991). Extrinsic religiousness is instrumental, compartmentalized, prejudiced, exclusionary, immature, and dependent, based on searching for comfort and security. It is instrumental, utilitarian, self-serving and related to irregular church attendance, defense or escape mechanism (Allport, 1950, 1954, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1966; Allport, Ross, 1967). When intrinsics are compared with extrinsics, the intrinsics come out on the healthier sides of such measures as psychological well-being (Alker, Gawin, 1978), internal locus of control, and existential and trait anxiety (Sturgeon, Hamley, 1979). McClain (1978) found intrinsics higher than nonreligious respondents on self-control, personal and social adequacy, and stereotyped femininity and lower on egocentric sexuality and restlessness (Wiebe, Fleck, 1980)

Batson (1976; Batson, Gray, 1981; Batson et al., 1978; Batson, Ventis, 1982) proposed an alternative to the intrinsic-extrinsic conceptualization. The authors proposed a new instrument called the *quest* scale to tap three essential aspects of mature religiosity which were missing among the items of the intrinsic scale: readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity; self-criticism and perception of religious doubts as positive; openness to change (Batson et al., 1993). The term *quest* refers to a specific dimension of religiosity, intended as an open-ended, questioning approach to religious issues, a responsive dialogue with existential questions. The Q scale is designed to capture the religious sentiment of those who, though not necessarily aligned with any formal religious institution or creed, continually raise questions about the existing social structure and the structure of life itself (Batson, 1976). People with quest religious orientation treat their religion not as the center and meaning of their lives but as a search for truth, honestly meeting existential questions without reducing complexity and avoiding easy answers (Batson, 1991). Batson and colleagues (1993) also proposed two

new concepts to grasp more precisely the essence of intrinsic-mature and extrinsic immature religiosity: respectively, religion as an end (where religion is seen as an ultimate end in itself) and religion as means (where religion is a means to achieve other self-serving ends).

Evidence has accumulated over the last 20 years linking intrinsic religiosity to several positive outcomes: internal locus of control (Kahoe, 1974), purpose in life (Crandall, Rasmussen, 1975), and lack of anxiety (Baker, Gorsuch, 1982), less perceived stress during COVID-19 pandemic (Ting, et al., 2023). Furthermore, internally oriented religious individuals used specific problem-solving strategies (collaborative and problem-solving) more than externally oriented individuals (Pargament et al., 1990). In contrast, extrinsic religiousness positively correlates with prejudice, dogmatism (Hoge, Carroll, 1973), trait anxiety (Baker, Gorsuch, 1982), and fear of death (Minton, Spilka, 1976). It is also negatively associated with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ting et al., 2023) and is not linked with altruism (Batson, Gray, 1981; Benson et al., 1980).

Regarding the quest orientation - the results are ambiguous (Donahue, 1985). The validity of the scale has been challenged by some researchers who have examined whether the religiosity-quest scale does not instead measure agnosticism, anti-orthodoxy, or sophomoric religious doubt or religious conflict to ensure that the scale measures precisely what it is intended to measure (Donahue, 1985; and Kojetin et al. 1987). A data from survey revealed the quest religious orientation rated as anti-religious by individuals with an intrinsic orientation (Watson et al., 1998). Quest orientation predict the identity crisis related to a lack of interest in religion, self-consciousness, anxiety, neuroticism, and a lack of autonomy (Watson et al., 1990). In addition, it was found that religious orientations differentially predict perceived stress (Navara et al., 2005). Intrinsically oriented individuals used specific religious problem-solving strategies (collaborative and deferring problem-solving) more than extrinsically oriented individuals (Pargament et al., 1990). A follow-up study (Pargament et al., 1992) examined the relationship between religious orientation and coping strategies and found that different religious coping strategies (i.e., strategies involving religion in problem-solving, avoidance, or reappraisal) and nonreligious coping strategies (i.e., completely secular strategies) correlate with intrinsic and extrinsic orientations. Other study established that the intrinsic scale and type predicted constructive thinking (Watson et al., 1999). At the same time, results for

the extrinsic scale and for the extrinsic type documented that a maladjusted commitment to religion may promote destructive thinking. Data for the quest scale similarly, though not completely, negative impact on the experiential system (Watson et al., 1999).

Although the benefits and disadvantages of different religious orientation have been well established, research has yet to determine whether it is linked to the CEST information-processing systems. Few research studies have focused on areas such as religious people's internal cognitive processes and reveal that such research is promising (Watson et al., 1999). In response to questions about how information-processing systems are connected to religious orientation, part of the answer may be found in how religious individuals engage in information processing according to the principles of the CEST.

RELIGIOUS COPING AND STRESS

The inclusion of religion in coping is based on its being both an accessible orienting system and coping. As a resource, religiousness provides specific coping strategies – actions relating to God or a higher power for the purpose of dealing with stressful experiences. In addition, religiousness may involve affiliation and belonging within a religious community, beliefs, and values. Religious coping is cognitive or behavioural techniques used in stressful life events arising out of one's religion or spirituality (Tix, Frazier, 1998). Religious coping strategies often stem directly from an individual's religious belief system and help them construct meaning and interpret stressful situations and events. They are a distinct form of coping separate from secular forms (e.g., cognitive restructuring) (Pargament, Tarakeshwar, 2001).

Pargament (1997) defines coping as searching for meaning in stress. According to Pargament and Raya (2007), religious coping methods are related to the sacred ways of understanding and coping with adverse life circumstances. He (1997, 2007, 2011) emphasised that what religion contributes to coping is based on authentic cognitive attitudes and practices related to the sacred. Acting complexly rather than simply as a defense mechanism, religion is actively and dynamically involved in every moment of the coping process, helping people to discover, maintain and transform meaning.

Religious coping has three main functions: finding meaning, maintaining control, gaining comfort and solace from communion with God, maintaining close relationships with others, and life transformation. These features are integrated into the RCOPE, a multidimensional religious coping research instru-

ment developed by Pargament (Pargament et al., 2000).

Religiosity also has a dark side that can contribute to deepening stress and problems (Pargament et al., 2001). Pargament, Smith, Koenig and Perez hypothesised two high-order patterns of religious coping: one pattern made up of positive religious coping methods and others of negative religious coping methods. The positive religious coping methods reflect a secure relationship with God, a belief that there is a greater meaning to life and a sense of spiritual connectedness with others (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016). In contrast, the negative religious coping patterns express a less secure relationship with God, reflect a tenuous and ominous view of the world, and are characterised by religious conflict and religious struggles to find and conserve the meaning of life (Pargament et al., 1998; Abu-Raiya et al., 2016).

People who use positive religious coping are thought to better adjust to and overcome life stressors (Koenig et al., 1988). Positive religious coping is associated with less depression and anxiety disorders and posttraumatic growth (Rosmarin et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2013). In contrast, people with negative religious coping suffer more often from alcoholism, depression, anxiety, and mental disorders (Holt et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2019).

Arévalo et al. (2008) found that positive religious coping was associated with less stress. Furthermore, results indicate that religiosity is positively associated with peace and less stress (Peres et al., 2018). Lee (2014) demonstrated a negative correlation between spiritual well-being and perceived stress. Positive religious coping increases the quality of life (QOL) and decreases stress, while negative religious coping is negatively related to the quality of life and increases stress (Gardner et al., 2014). Additionally, positive religious coping has a protective role on perceived stress and depressive symptoms in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Mahamid et al., 2021).

Although the benefits of positive religious coping and disadvantages of negative religious coping have been well established, research has yet to address the issue of the adaptability of religious coping and the relationship between specific religious strategies and constructive and non-constructive thinking in terms of CEST.

EXPERIENTIAL SYSTEM AND STRESS

The main focus in CEST is the adaptive function of implicit beliefs, operationalised in the concept of Constructive thinking. Epstein developed the

concept of constructive thinking as a broad coping mechanism with specific components (Epstein & Meier, 1989). Coping ability, reflected by constructive thinking, is a broad concept encompassing adaptive perception, cognition, emotion, and behaviour (Epstein & Katz, 1992). It is distinguished from the narrower view of coping as a mental and behavioural reaction to an event identified as stressful (Epstein & Katz, 1992).

By examining the automatic thoughts and interpretations guiding people's behaviour in everyday life, the degree of constructive thinking determines how effectively people adapt to their environment and manage stress (Karastoyanov, Petkova, 2021). Constructive thinking is a non-intellective cognitive and coping variable with specific components (Epstein, Meier, 1989). It refers to a set of cognitive productive and counterproductive automatic habitual thoughts that affects one's problem-solving ability (Epstein, Meier, 1989; Katz, Epstein, 1991; Epstein, 1992). Constructive thinking is usually measured by the CTI (Constructive Thinking Inventory: Epstein, Meier, 1989). CTI measures adaptive experiential functioning (Epstein, 1993; Epstein, Meier, 1989) associated with cognitive flexibility, reasoned optimism, acceptance of self and others, and active, direct problem-focused coping. Factor analysis revealed the existence of a global coping factor and six more specific coping factors: emotional coping, behavioral coping, categorical thinking, personal superstitious thinking, naive optimism, and esoteric thinking. Good emotional coping emphasises self-acceptance, absence of negative over-generalisation and dwelling. Behavioral coping focuses on positive thinking, action orientation and conscientiousness. Categorical thinking, superstitious thinking, naive optimism, and esoteric thinking refer to patterns of cognitive distortion or irrational thinking which reflect the veridicality of a person's interpretations of reality (Epstein, Meier, 1989). There is evidence that constructive thinking relates to various aspects of success in everyday life, such as work, marriage, and social relationships (Epstein, Meier, 1989). Emotional and behavioral coping are related to maintaining a sense of self-esteem and self-worth, whereas categorical thinking, superstitious thinking, naive optimism, and negative thinking are negatively related to self-esteem measures (Hurley, 1990; Karastoyanov, Petkova, 2021). In another study, Hurley (1991) showed that emotional and behavioral coping are related to rational thinking. In contrast, categorical thinking, superstitious thinking, naive optimism, and negative thinking are negatively related to rational thinking.

The question of the effectiveness of coping strategies is studied in relation with the level of perceived stress and with a method of studying individual differences in the intelligence of the experiential system utilizing the concept of Constructive thinking. Surveys has revealed a negative correlation between constructive thinking and perceived stress, behavioral coping and emotional coping and perceived stress, also a positive correlation between personal superstition thinking and perceived stress (Karastoyanov, Hristova, 2015; Hristova, Karastoyanov, 2021). The research confirmed the potentiality of CEST as a global personality theory and Constructive thinking inventory as tool to explore the predictors of perceived stress.

It is important to note that the author of CEST, Epstein himself, was intrigued by his theory's explanatory possibilities regarding religion's good and dark sides. He is convinced that the cognitive-experiential self-theory provides an essential understanding of religion. His unpublished manuscript "Understanding Religion: The Good and the Bad", mentioned in Seymour Epstein's Query letter, is a spin-off of CEST and addresses why religion provides people with a system that they find more appealing and authentic than rational thinking. According to the author, the answer lies in the experiential system's compelling attributes.

Concerning Epstein's thought that the experiential system and its adaptive function could explain the resourceful and damaging impact of religion, further research in the field on stress and coping with it needs to explore how individual religiosity as orientation and coping are related to the constructive and non-constructive thinking of experiential system.

CONCLUSION

The article emphasizes the specifics of the individual religiosity and religious coping, which determines Janus's face of religiosity in coping with stress or positive and negative influence of religiosity in this process. In addition, the impact of the intelligence of the empirical system and its coping strategies on effectively managing stressful situations is analysed.

Considering the above findings on the impact of constructive thinking on perceived stress and the complex and ambivalent influence of religiosity on stress, future research should explore the relationship between constructive and non-constructive thinking and religiosity. Further analysis of different experiential coping strategies and their adaptive and non-adaptive function and relationship with individual religious characteristics and coping would

provide a more profound knowledge of mature and immature forms of religiosity and its constructive and non-constructive functioning.

Although there is abundant applied research on religious orientation and coping, there remains an identified need to evaluate the many network linkages explaining how religious orientation and coping work in stressful situations, including the thought processes involved when religious individuals attempt to manage difficulties. Assessing how religious individuals process information and testing, applying CEST, may provide an essential link between the individual's internal cognitive processes and religiosity.

Further, relating religiosity as orientation and coping to the principles of CEST could be seen as a doorway into the inner world of beliefs, controlling assumptions, and sensitivities of religious individuals in many fields, especially during stressful situations. At the practical level, understanding how religious individuals process information can improve their rational and experiential processing and develop effective religious coping skills. The findings of the future research: (a) contribute to the development of effective coping training programs for religious individuals and community, (b) facilitate the use of mentoring and coaching within religious education, and (c) influence further research efforts that examine the relationship between the CEST information-processing systems and religiosity.

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