PERSONALITY, STRESS AND COPING IN STEP-FAMILIES:
A DAILY PROCESS STUDY

by

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Abstract

The current study examined the role of dimensions of personality derived from the five-factor model (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) in coping with interpersonal family stressors (marital conflict and child misbehavior). The study used a daily process methodology and a hierarchical linear modeling analysis strategy to examine the independent and interactive effects of personality and situation on coping strategy use. Seventy-seven couples living in a stepfamily context reported interpersonal family stressors and coping twice daily for a week. Nine subscales of coping were examined based on the three main functions of coping: problem-, emotion- and relationship focused. Both the situational context and all of the five dimensions of personality examined were significantly and independently related to coping strategy use. Moreover, there were significant interactions of personality with context in predicting coping responses to stress. The present study highlights the importance of considering personality in context when examining coping behaviours.
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Stress and coping processes involves a dynamic interplay between the person and the environment (DeLongis & O’Brien, 1990; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis & Gruen, 1986). Given this, it is critical to assess both the person and contextual factors to understand coping. While research has documented the role of stressor in coping choice (e.g., Eckenrode, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wethington & Kessler, 1991), less emphasis has been placed on the role of personality in the stress and coping process and even less research has been done on the interaction between context and personality. The current study seeks to understand the ways in which married couples cope with daily interpersonal-family stress in a stepfamily context by examining the roles of both context, personality and the interaction between the two.

The context of coping

A key aspect to understanding the stress and coping process is to understand the context in which coping is occurring. According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), to understand coping it is critical to know what the person is coping with. The more specific the context, the easier it is to link coping responses to the contextual demands. Coyne and Gottlieb (1996) argue that one cannot adequately understand or evaluate coping without a thorough examination of the stressful circumstances to which coping is a response. Accordingly, a great deal of research has examined how individuals cope with stress in specific situations such as Alzheimer disease (DeLongis & O’Brien, 1990), spousal heart disease (Coyne, Ellard & Smith, 1990), or chronic illness (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001).

Increasingly, researchers have become interested in stress and coping involving interpersonal stressors in close relationships. Research has demonstrated that
interpersonal factors play a major role in physical and psychological well-being (Cramer, 1985; Feldman, Downey & Schaffer-Neitz, 1999) as well as in the ability to successfully deal with stress (Kramer, 1993; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). In a study by Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler and Schilling (1989) on the impact of interpersonal stressors (e.g., conflicts or tensions in social relationships) compared with work overload stressors (e.g., household or job demands) on mood, interpersonal stressors accounted for more than 80% of the explained variance in daily mood. Additionally it was found that the negative effects of interpersonal stressors persisted over several days. Bolger and Schilling (1991) found that interpersonal conflicts were the most important daily stressor in explaining the relationship between neuroticism and distress. Coping in close relationships may involve distinct processes from "solitary" coping (Eckenrode, 1991; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1990). For example, the relationship itself may be a source of stress (e.g., marital conflict) in addition to being a source of coping resources (e.g., social support). Moreover, the coping choice made by one individual often affects others within the family or friend system (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997). Researchers have noted that the outcome of coping may be "effective" for an individual but can have a deleterious effect on the well-being of others within the system (Bodenmann, 1997; DeLongis, Bolger, & Kessler, 1987).

Arguably the single most important unit of close interpersonal relationships is the family. Increasingly families are structured as stepfamilies. Given the high rate of divorce and the consistency with which the vast majority of divorced adults (many of them with children from previous unions) either remarry or establish common-law relationships, the stepfamily has become increasingly more common. Sadly the divorce
rate in stepfamilies exceeds that of first marriages (Bumpass, Sweet & Castro-Martin, 1990; Glick, 1989).

Individuals in stepfamilies face more and different kinds of stress than first married families (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987; Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1993). The stepfamily structure is often more complicated than a first marriage structure given the wider range of relationships that may occur. In the creation of a stepfamily, the roles and interactions of all members are immediately changed. Moreover, the roles of stepparent and stepchild are less defined resulting in role ambiguity. Different members of the stepfamily may have different expectations for individuals in these roles. There is frequently a lack of a “honeymoon” period for the newly remarried couple, because of the presence of children from previous unions. This may prevent or limit the development of a strong marital bond between the couple and may have implications for the amount of and ability to resolve marital conflict. Marital conflict is a crucial factor in both first marriages and remarriages (Bray & Jouriles, 1995) and often impacts children’s behavior and overall adjustment (Bray & Berger, 1993a). There may be difficulty in strengthening the intimacy bond between the couple; parents will have longer histories with their children than with their spouses and may turn to their children inappropriately. Children may not want to be part of the stepfamily and may actively engage in behavior to sabotage the remarriage. Child misbehavior and/or “acting out” behavior is common in stepfamilies. It represents one of the most common stressors with which couples of stepfamilies cope (Kheshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997). Parenting and stepparenting are the most difficult and stressful aspects of stepfamily life, both initially and long term (Bray, 1988; Bray & Berger, 1997). The ability of parents and stepparents to
successfully deal with child misbehavior can have serious implications for the stability and long term outcome of externalizing behavior problems in the children of stepfamilies (Bray, 1999).

The effects of divorce and remarriage can play an important role in the psychological well-being of all those involved. Both parents and children face a significant and difficult transition during the development of a stepfamily that requires considerable adaptation and coping (Kurdek, 1991; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). The stress in stepfamilies is typically higher than that of first marriages and does not reach the same level as first marriages until the 14th year of marriage (Zeppa & Norem, 1993). Stress in stepfamilies is related to family processes and conflict, and affects both parent and child psychological adjustment (Bray, 1999). Because stepfamilies face numerous stressors, exploring the way individuals in stepfamilies cope may be an important avenue for understanding why some stepfamilies stay together and others do not.

The Role of Personality

Dispositional differences have important implications for the resources and potential options available to individuals in their attempts to cope. For example, someone very sociable will likely have greater availability of social support and thus may be more likely to use social support in coping. Personality is related to the way individuals perceive situations (Gallagher, 1990), the way individuals perceive their own abilities (Gunthert et al., 1999) and the types of resources available to them (McCrae & Costa, 1986) all of which may influence an individual’s coping.

While there are different typologies for conceptualizing personality, the Five-Factor model of personality is the most widely used by both personality and coping
researchers (e.g., David & Suls, 1999; Wiggins, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). It is a broad-based taxonomy of personality dimensions that represents the minimum number of traits necessary to describe personality (McCrae & Costa, 1985). These personality dimensions are Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A) and Conscientiousness (C).

Individuals high on the N scale tend to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression or anger, and tend to be impulsive and more self-conscious (for reviews see McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Extraverts tend to be warm, cheerful, gregarious, fun-loving and assertive (McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Those high on O tend to be curious, imaginative, creative, original, artistic, psychologically minded, and flexible in their thinking. They tend to have differentiated emotions, broad interests, and a preference for variety and unconventional values (McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Those high on A tend to be good-natured, acquiescent, courteous, helpful, and trusting (McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Finally, those high in C tend to be reliable, hard-working and self-disciplined (McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987).

Research indicates that personality plays an important role in almost every aspect of the stress and coping process. For example, personality has been linked to the likelihood of experiencing stressful situations (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Bolger & Schilling, 1991), the appraisal of an event as stressful (Gunthert, Cohen & Armeli, 1999), the likelihood of engaging in certain coping strategies (McCrae & Costa, 1986; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; David & Suls, 1999; Watson & Hubbard, 1996), and the
Personality and Coping

There are three main functions of coping that have been discussed in the coping literature: problem-focused coping (PF), emotion-focused coping (EF) and relationship-focused coping (RF). PF coping refers to responses that are geared towards directly altering or resolving the stressful situation while EF coping refers to efforts to manage and regulate one’s emotional reactions to the stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen & DeLongis, 1986).

Relationship-focused coping (RF; Coyne & Smith, 1991; DeLongis & O’Brien, 1990; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1997) refers to modes of coping that are aimed at managing, regulating, or preserving relationships during times of stress (DeLongis & O’Brien, 1990; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1997). Despite mounting evidence that interpersonal factors affect every aspect of the coping process, many coping strategy measurements do not incorporate interpersonal modes of coping. Because research has examined coping in a social vacuum, the perception has been created that individuals exist and adapt in an autonomous, solitary fashion. However research has demonstrated the importance of interpersonal factors in coping with stress (Kramer, 1993; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996) and in both physical and psychological well-being (Cramer, 1985; Feldman, Downey & Schaffer-Neitz, 1999). Additionally, the coping choice made by one individual can have important implications for the social relationships and the well-being of others in their social network (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1997: Bodenmann, 1997; DeLongis, Bolger, & Kessler, 1987). The addition of interpersonal forms of coping adds
to a growing recognition of the need to examine interpersonal factors in the stress and coping process (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997; Kramer, 1993).

Increasingly, research has examined the role of personality in coping. Generally, this research has been more focused on the role of N and E resulting in a more limited study of other dimensions. However the limited research that has been done suggests that these latter dimensions may add meaningfully to our understanding of the stress and coping process (Watson & Hubbard, 1996; David & Suls, 1999; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Hooker, Frazier & Monahan, 1994).

**Neuroticism (N)** has been found to be related to every aspect of the stress and coping process. Specifically, N has been shown to be related to the use of coping strategies that are typically related to poorer outcomes. Consistent with models of N, those higher on N have been found to use more passive or emotion-focused strategies such as escape avoidance, self-blame, wishful thinking, relaxation and less problem-focused coping (Endler & Parker, 1990; Hooker et al., 1994; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Gunthert et al., 1999; David & Suls, 1999). Studies also suggest that those higher on N are more likely to engage in interpersonally antagonistic means of coping such as hostile reaction, catharsis (venting of negative emotion) or confrontative coping (Gunthert et al., 1999; David & Suls, 1999; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). These strategies tend to be related to maladaptive outcomes (Holahan & Moos, 1987; Maitlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990; Vitaliano, Mairuro, Russo, & Becker, 1987), such as an increase in end-of-day distress (Gunthert et al., 1999).

However not all studies have demonstrated this pattern of maladaptive coping among those high on N. Surprisingly, a daily record study by Bolger and Zuckerman
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(1995) found that, in response to interpersonal stressors, those high on N were more likely to report using two types of coping strategies, both of which are at odds with the findings of previous research. First, those high on N reported using more planful problem-solving to cope than did those low on N which is in direct contradiction to the findings of McCrae & Costa (1986), Hooker et al., (1994), O'Brien & DeLongis (1996), and Watson & Hubbard (1996). Second, they found that those higher on N reported more of what they termed “self-controlling” methods of coping. However, particularly within the interpersonal context they examined many of the items used to assess self-control strategies (e.g., “I tried to keep my feelings to myself”, “kept others from knowing how bad things were”) might also be conceptualized as interpersonal withdrawal. In fact, when conceptualized in this manner, the findings of this study are consistent with those of O’Brien and DeLongis (1996). These latter researchers found interpersonal withdrawal to be associated with higher levels of N.

**Extraversion (E).** Those higher on E tend to see stressful situations as challenges (McCrae & Costa, 1986, Gallagher, 1990). As compared to those lower on E, research suggests that those higher on E engage in higher levels of problem-focused coping (Hooker et al., 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1986) and employ less maladaptive forms of emotion-focused coping like self-blame, wishful thinking, and avoidance (Hooker et al., 1994). Individuals higher on E tend to use more adaptive forms of emotion-focused coping (Hooker et al., 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1986) such as support seeking (Hooker et al., 1994; Watson & Hubbard, 1996), positive thinking or reinterpretation (McCrae & Costa, 1986; Watson & Hubbard, 1996), and substitution and restraint (McCrae & Costa, 1986). However in the only daily record study of E, contrary to previous findings, E was
positively associated with a variety of emotion-focused coping strategies (not simply adaptive forms; David & Suls, 1999). Consistent with previous results, this daily record study found that those higher on E engaged in more emotional support seeking (David & Suls, 1999).

There are other contrary results concerning the role of E in coping. One study found no significant relationship between E and emotion-focused coping and found a significant positive relationship between E and use of task-focused coping but only for women (Endler & Parker, 1990). Moreover, when the independent effects of E are examined (holding the other personality dimensions constant) several studies have failed to find a significant relationship between E and problem-focused coping (Hooker et al., 1994; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Additionally, the relationship between adaptive emotion-focused forms of coping such as seeking support and accepting responsibility was not significant when other personality dimensions were held constant (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996).

Openness (O) Those higher on O are more likely to employ humor (McCrae & Costa, 1986), more likely to think about or plan how to deal with stress (Watson & Hubbard, 1996) and less likely to rely on faith to cope with stress (McCrae & Costa, 1986; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Those higher in O tend to cope via positive thinking such as positive reappraisal (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996) which fits with their characteristic divergent thinking, flexibility of thought, creativity and originality (Costa & McCrae, 1998). Those higher on O are also able to respond empathetically to close family members and friends even during high stress, suggesting that they are not only more open to their own feelings (Costa & McCrae, 1998), but to
those of others (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996). However, some studies have found O to be unrelated to coping (Hooker et al., 1994) or have found O to be a weak predictor of coping (McCrae & Costa, 1986; Vickers et al., 1989).

Agreeableness (A). Consistent with models of A, individuals higher on A are more likely to cope in ways that use or protect relationships such as engaging in seeking support (Hooker et al., 1994; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Vickers et al., 1989) and avoiding confrontation (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996) as compared to those low on A. Those higher on A are less likely to employ emotion-focused coping such as self-blame, avoidance, wishful thinking (Hooker et al., 1994) or alcohol-drug disengagement (Watson & Hubbard, 1996) when compared to those low on A. Those higher on A also seem to attempt to view their stressful experience as positive, using such coping strategies as positive reinterpretation/reappraisal and growth (Watson & Hubbard, 1996; Vickers et al., 1989) as compared to those low on A. Further, they tend to plan ways to deal with their stress (Watson & Hubbard, 1996). The findings related to A have generally been modest in strength (Vickers et al., 1989; Hooker et al., 1994). In the only daily record study, A was unrelated to coping strategy use (David & Suls, 1999).

Conscientiousness (C). The findings on the relationship between C and coping have also been contradictory. In some studies C is a strong predictor of coping styles. For example, Watson and Hubbard (1996) found that C accounted for 29% of the variance in coping styles, which was exceeded only by N, which accounted for 40% of the variance. Vickers, Kolar, and Hervig (1989) found that along with N, C was the best predictor of coping. Other studies have found that C is related to the use of more active, problem-focused strategies (Hooker et al., 1994), such as planning, problem solving,
positive reappraisal active coping, and suppression of competing activities (Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Additionally, studies have found that those higher on C are less likely to engage in avoidant emotion focused coping such as escape avoidance or self-blame (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Hooker et al., 1994) or distraction such as behavioral, alcohol-drug or mental disengagement (Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Thus they are more likely to deal directly with the stressor and less likely to avoid dealing with it. However, some studies have failed to find a significant relationship between C and coping. For example, in the one daily record study of C, C was only related to the decrease use of religion and was unrelated to active coping strategies (David & Suls, 1999). Many studies had not even investigated C citing other personality traits (usually N) as the “true” determinants of coping (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Gunthert et al., 1999).

This review of existing literature raises several issues. First, while research on the relationship between personality and coping has found that there are relationships between the two, there are also numerous contradictions within the literature. Second, it is apparent that there are important reasons to examine all five personality dimensions within the same study. For one, the limited research that has been done has found relationships between O, A and C with coping (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996; David & Suls, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1986). This suggests that failing to examine these personality dimensions can lead to gaps in our understanding of the personality-coping relationship. Moreover, several researchers have noted that failing to control for the other personality dimensions when examining a specific personality dimension can lead to spurious (and potentially contradictory) results (Hooker et al., 1994; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Many researchers have argued that because N is so...
highly correlated with coping, it is actually N that accounts for all the personality-coping relationships by virtue of the correlation between N and the other personality dimensions (especially E; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Costa et al., 1996; Hooker et al., 1994; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). For these reasons, the proposed study will examine all five personality dimensions of the five-factor model of personality in an attempt to aid in the clarification of the relationship between personality and coping.

A second problem with the existing literature is that many researchers have failed to examine or clarify the stressor or context being reported. Thus in the only study of the five personality dimensions, using a daily process methodology, respondents simply reported the “most bothersome event of the day” (p.273, David & Suls, 1999). The failure to examine dimensions of the stressor leads to serious confounds in the examination of the stress and coping process.

**Person-Situation Interactions**

Few studies have examined the interaction between personality and situation. The studies that have been done indicate that it is a promising area of research. For example, Fleishman (1984) found that the trait of mastery was associated with problem-focused coping (i.e. direct action) in work contexts but was not associated with problem-focused coping (i.e., negotiation and discipline) in marital and parenting contexts. Further, Parkes (1986) examined relations between N and the use of direct action under conditions of low, moderate, and high work demands. For those low on N, the use of direct action was highest when work demands were at a moderate level. For those higher on N, the use of direct action was not affected by work demands. In the only study that examined all five of the personality dimensions and their interactions with situation, O'Brien & DeLongis
(1996) found that those higher on N tended to employ more confrontive coping when the stressor was agentic or when the stressor involved someone close than when the stressor involved someone more distant. Those higher on N were also less likely to use empathic responding when the stressful situation involved someone close than someone distant. O was also found to interact with situation, whereby those lower on O reported relatively more empathic responding in stressful situations involving close others than stressful agentic situations. Finally those higher on C were more likely to use planful problem solving in a stressful agentic situation than in a stressful interpersonal situation. These results indicate that the examination of the interaction between the person and the environment suggests a promising avenue in understanding the stress and coping process.

The Daily Process Methodology

One of the most limiting aspects of stress and coping research is the extensive reliance on an exclusively cross-sectional methodology. A typical methodology is to administer a coping questionnaire in which subjects are asked to recall a single stressful event in the past week, month, year or more (e.g., O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1986), and then to indicate if, or to what extent, they used a variety of coping strategies. Another standard method is for subjects to describe how they usually, or generally, cope with stressors (e.g., Hooker et al., 1994; Watson & Hubbard, 1996).

Increasingly there have been criticisms of these cross-sectional, between-person research designs (e.g., Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). Researchers have noted this methodology fails to capture the nature of the stress and coping process (Tennen et al., 2000; David & Suls, 1999; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). Coping involves the concept of changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress;
it is by definition a process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Using single assessments to examine coping between individuals has inherently missed the within-person-idiographic process of coping over time. As well, reports of long-past coping responses tend to be plagued by memory biases and distortions (DeLongis, Hemphill & Lehman, 1992).

There is increasing evidence to support these criticisms of retrospective, cross-sectional studies. In two studies conducted by Ptacek, Smith and colleagues (Ptacek, Smith, Espe & Raffety, 1994; Smith, Leffingwell, & Ptacek, 1999) college students were given daily structured diary assessments as well as single retrospective assessments of their coping during the week before an upcoming exam. These two studies found an average of only 26% and 37% shared variance between daily and retrospective measures, indicating that retrospective measures are poor reflections of daily reports. Moreover, the correspondence between daily record and retrospective measures of coping was less when the participant was experiencing more stress. These authors suggest that the insidious use of retrospective studies, which have dominated the field, may have contributed to the inconclusive and contradictory findings that have frequently occurred in the coping literature (Smith et al., 1999). Given the plentiful evidence of inaccuracy and bias in retrospective accounts in other fields (e.g., Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994; Loftus & Hyman, 1998) it is hardly surprising that the same problems are present within the stress and coping research domain.

Furthermore, the development of new statistical methods has permitted a more meaningful examination of the data derived from daily process studies. For example, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) allows the simultaneous analysis of both within persons and between persons variation as well as the examination of same day and cross
day effects. The use of HLM in combination with repeated measures (i.e., daily process studies) provides a promising avenue to untangle the inconsistencies in the stress and coping literature.

The Current Study

The current study is an examination of the roles of context and personality in coping with family stress among married couples living in a stepfamily context. As noted previously, specifying the stressor or context with which the individuals are responding is critical to understanding the stress and coping process. It is expected that family stress will be associated with different patterns of coping depending upon who is involved in the stressful situation. Previous research has found that stressors such as marital conflict and child misbehavior are some of the most common stepfamily stressors reported (Bray, 1988; Bray, 1999). This evaluation of the situation will permit the exploration and understanding of how remarried couples cope with specific family stressors.

Hypotheses

Dimensions of personality derived from the five-factor model (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; Costa & McCrae, 1985) will be examined in association with the use of coping strategies (RF, EF, and PF coping) in response to these family-interpersonal stressors.

Neuroticism. Despite some inconsistencies in the literature, I expected that higher scores on N would be associated with higher scores on forms of coping that have generally been found to be maladaptive. These include confrontation, escape-avoidance, interpersonal withdrawal, seeking emotional support, and self-blame. This expectation is consistent with clear findings that those higher on N tend to experience more negative
emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1985). Given this, those higher on N maybe more likely to use a panopoly of relatively maladaptive emotion-focused coping methods in an attempt to manage their distress. Based on previous findings it was also expected that those higher on N would report lower levels of relationship-focused coping. Because individuals higher on N tend to have difficulty managing their own distress, it is expected that they will be similarly less able to deal with the distress of close others (DeLongis & O’Brien, 1996).

**Extraversion.** One of the clearest descriptors of those higher on E to emerge in the interpersonal literature is that they tend toward dominance (e.g., Schmidt, Wagner & Kiesler, 1999). Given this, we expected higher scores on E to be associated with greater use of confrontation in coping with interpersonal stressors. Further, it was expected that those higher on E would report less use of emotion focused coping strategies that have generally been associated with maladaptive adaptational outcomes.

**Openness.** The relationship between O and coping has not been consistent. However, it is expected that scores higher on O will be related to a decreased use of distancing when compared to those lower on O. This has been found in a previous daily process study with O (David & Suls, 1999) and is consistent with models of O that suggest that those higher on O are more open to different emotions and diverse experiences thus they may be less likely to try to suppress their emotional experiences through distancing. Due to this openness to feelings associated with those higher on O it is also expected that higher scores on O will be related to greater use of relationship-focused coping when compare to those with lower scores on O. Given that those higher
on O are more open to their own feelings they may also be more open to the feelings of others (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996).

**Agreeableness.** Based on the few studies that have examined the role of A in coping, it is expected that those higher on A would report less use of avoidant emotion focused coping strategies (Watson & Hubbard, 1996), less confrontation (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996) and more support seeking (Watson & Hubbard, 1996; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996).

**Conscientiousness.** There have been relatively few studies that have examined the role of C in coping. However, based on these few studies and models of C that suggest those higher on C are more dependable and reliable, it is expected that those higher on C would report greater use of coping strategies that have generally been associated with positive adaptational outcomes, such as problem solving, compromise, and relationship focused coping.

Finally, the interactive nature between context and personality will be examined. The transactional model of stress and coping indicates that coping is determined by the interaction between the environment and the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus the interactions between personality and specific family stress is critical in understanding the stress and coping process. Due to the paucity of previous work on the interactive nature between N, A, O, C and E, these relationships are exploratory.

**Method**

Data are from a larger study of stress, coping and support within stepfamilies. Only those measures used in the present study will be discussed here.
Sample

Eligibility for the study required that the couples: 1) be married or living together in a common law relationship; 2) have at least one child from a previous union residing in the home for at least three months of the past year; and 3) be fluent in English. Only couples who completed all phases of the study were included in this study. This resulted in 82 couples.

The average age of men was 47.53 (range = 28-64) and the average age of women was 47.10 (range = 33-67). The mean years of education was 14.04 for men (range 8-17) and the mean years of education was 13.84 for women (range 7-17). Median family income was $ 68,000 CDN, indicating a comfortable middle-class standard of living. This is only slightly higher than the average family income reported by Statistics Canada for the area where they lived ($64,778). The majority of respondents were born in Canada (73%). The countries of origin for those not born in Canada were primarily English speaking (United States, 7% and Britain, 8%).

Procedure

Couples were recruited from the lower mainland of British Columbia, Canada, by means of newspaper and radio advertisements, notices in school newsletters, posters on community bulletin boards, and solicitation at several community stepfamily groups and organizations. Seventy one percent of participants reported hearing of the study through the newspaper or radio, and 29% were notified through posters, or by a friend. Couples who met the qualifications for participation and agreed to participate in the study were asked for various participant and family demographics information including age, gender, and socio-economic status. Respondents were then mailed a set of structured diaries to be
completed twice daily over a period of one week. Also included was a set of self-report measures. Participants were asked to complete the diary entries “around lunch time or mid afternoon” and “just before going to sleep at night”. Participants recorded the time of each of their diary entries. Respondents were asked to complete the diary materials and return them in the stamped envelopes provided. The importance of each spouse completing these materials independently was emphasized in the instructions. The instructions read: “We ask that you and your spouse complete all the study materials separately and that you do not discuss your responses with one another until after the materials have been returned to us.” Each spouse was also provided with a number of adhesive tabs with which to seal each diary entry after completion. These measures were intended to increase confidentiality and reduce collusion between spouses.

**Measures**

**Demographics.** Various participant and family demographics were collected including age, gender, and socio-economic status (SES). SES was operationalized as the estimated total family income as well as the years of formal education.

**Personality.** Personality was assessed by the NEO-FFI Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1989), which is a shortened 60-item version of the 181-item NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985). This measure was contained in the self report questionnaire package. The NEO-FFI assesses five personality dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Substantial psychometric research has been conducted on these scales which indicate that it has excellent psychometric properties (for a review see Costa & McCrae, 1992). While the NEO-FFI shows lower reliability and validity than the NEO-PI, its psychometric properties are still
very strong (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and a shortened version was more practical considering the many scales and forms required to be filled out by the participants.

**Stressor.** The stressful situation with which participants were coping was assessed through an open ended question: “Please describe briefly the most bothersome event or problem you had with someone in your family today. It might have been something as minor as your child’s distress over something that happened at school or it might have been a major argument or disagreement. Whatever your most serious family problem was today (no matter how minor or trivial it may seem to you), please describe it here.” These open ended responses were coded by four different individuals based on a detailed coding scheme. Any discrepancies were resolved by the author. The inter-rater reliability was high (83% agreement). These responses resulted in eight categories: marital (18.9%), co-parenting (6.53%), child misbehavior (31.04%), other child stressor (21.24%), spouse stressor with an external others (3.38%), demands (9.22%), and issues with ex-partners (3.62%). Fifty percent of the stressful situations fell into one of two categories: marital conflict (18.9%) and child misbehavior (31%). Given the high frequency of occurrence of these two categories, and the relatively infrequent mention of other types of stressful situations by our participants, the current analyses focus on these two types of family stressors. Twelve subjects were dropped from the sample because they did not report either a marital or child misbehavior stressor. This resulted in a final sample size of 154 participants.

**Coping.** Coping strategies were measure using the three top-loading items from each of the eight coping scales in a revised version of the Ways of Coping scale (WOC; Folkman et al., 1986). This version is the result of preliminary psychometric work that
was completed on three previous data sets (Bishop, 1990; DeLongis & Kessler, 1986; Preece, 1996). An additional 12 items were also included to tap coping dimensions not assessed by the original WOC. Items were developed to assess each of the following dimensions: empathy, support provision, compromise, and interpersonal withdrawal. A factor analysis yielded nine coping factors (Preece, 1996): Relationship-focused coping (including empathy and support provision; efforts to experience the other person’s perspective, to respond sensitively and offer support), Compromise (efforts to resolve through concessions), Confrontive coping (aggressive attempts to change the situation), Interpersonal Withdrawal (efforts to withdraw emotional or verbal communication from others), Planful problem-solving (analytic efforts to formulate plans of action and behavioral instrumental actions to alter the situation), Self-blame (acknowledge and/or criticizing one’s own contribution to the problem), Distancing (efforts to detach oneself), Seeking emotional support (efforts to gain emotional support), Escape-avoidance (wishful thinking and behavioral efforts to escape or avoid the problem).

Results

Analyses of Aggregated Data

Descriptive statistics and Zero order correlations. Table 1 presents the intercorrelations among the coping scales and stressor type. Several of the coping scales were significantly intercorrelated. Although some of the correlations between the coping scales were relatively high (over .45) they were not collapsed into fewer scales for several reasons. First, these coping scales are standard scales in the field resulting from several factor analyses across different populations (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986; Vitaliano et al., 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Preece, 1996). The present study uses a brief
version of these standard scales based on the top three loading items from a previously published factor analysis of a longer version of the scale (Folkman et al., 1986). A brief form was necessarily developed for use here given the multiple assessments required of the participants. This brief scale has shown similar psychometric properties (Preece, 1996) to the full version (Folkman et al., 1986). Previous studies with the brief form used in the present study have found that a second order factor structure is not conceptually meaningful (Preece, 1996). Additionally, intercorrelations found here among the coping subscales are of a similar size as have been reported in other studies (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986). The second reason for not collapsing across the coping subscales is that they are conceptually distinct. Based on coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) the scales would not be expected to be independent. Some types of coping may be expected to occur together. For example, being empathic and sensitive to others through the use of relationship focused coping may facilitate the use of problem solving coping. Moreover, previous studies as well as the present study illustrate that the coping scales are working in different ways and do not reveal the same pattern of coping. Thus although some of the correlations between the coping scales are high, given the theoretical reasons and previous findings, they were seen to represent meaningful distinctions in coping and were not collapsed into fewer scales.

Based on the zero-order correlations, all the coping scales except for distancing and problem solving were significantly related to the stressors of marital conflict or child misbehavior. This is consistent with previous literature that suggests interpersonal stressors like the ones in the present study do not elicit distancing or problem solving (Folkman et al., 1986; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996).
Table 2 presents the intercorrelations between the personality scales and aggregated coping scales (based on daily reports aggregated over seven days) as well as means and standard deviations for the personality scales. Higher scores on N was related to more interpersonal withdrawal ($r = .34, p < .01, df = 150$), escape avoidance ($r = .42, p < .01, df = 150$), support seeking ($r = .19, p < .05, df = 150$) and self blame ($r = .24, p < .01, df = 150$). Higher scores on O was related to less distancing ($r = -.28, p < .01, df = 150$), and higher scores on A was related to less escape avoidance ($r = -.19, p < .05, df = 150$), and self blame ($r = -.21, p < .01, df = 150$). Higher scores on C was related to more distancing ($r = .17, p < .05, df = 150$) and problem solving ($r = .18, p < .05, df = 150$), and higher scores on E was related to less escape avoidance ($r = -.16, p < .05, df = 150$). These zero order correlations are consistent with previous research (Hooker et al., 1994; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). However, these correlational analyses based on aggregated data fail to take advantage of the within-person variation available in the daily reports. Thus the multi-level analyses are a more accurate reflection of the results.

Multivariate analyses.

Because the repeated assessments, inherent in daily record methodology, violate the assumption of independence required for standard regression techniques, alternative methods of analyses were required. The analyses in the proposed study followed the recommendations of West and Hepworth (1991), Fabes and Eisenberg (1997), and Affleck, Zautra, Tennen, and Armeli (1999). These authors recommend the use of multilevel modeling for repeated measures (daily process) data.

Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM), a procedure for multilevel modeling, allows the simultaneous analysis of between-subject and within-subject variation.
Standard linear models such as linear regression cannot analyze both sources of variation simultaneously and either fail to distinguish between-subject from within-subject variation resulting in incorrect error terms or eliminate within-subject variation altogether, ignoring valuable information. A growing number of studies in this area have used multilevel analyses of daily records and other similar data involving multiple measurements within persons (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; David & Suls, 1999; Gunthert, Cohen & Armeli, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999; Marco, Neale, Schwarz, Shiffman, & Stone, 1999).

This technique offers a number of advantages. First, it adjusts for and takes advantage of the repeated units of analyses. In doing so, HLM has a great deal more power than analyses involving single assessments. While there are no power analyses formulas available to calculate the power in an HLM study, there is sufficient power for a regression analyses and HLM is a much more powerful technique. Experts in the field, Tom Schneider and Steve West, were also consulted concerning the proposed study to ensure that enough participants were recruited for an appropriate level of power. Second, HLM allows an analysis of the within-person variation allowing for a more proximal assessment of daily stressors and daily coping efforts, using each subject as their own control. Third, HML permits the simultaneous analysis of between-person data, in which the effect of different personalities on coping can be assessed.

The analyses for the present study consist of three levels. Level one, the within-subject level, reflects twice daily variation in coping and stressor within individuals over time. Level two, the between-subject level, reflects differences between individuals on average. Level three, the between-couple level, serves to control for the fact that the
participants were married couples and thus were not independent. The within-subject level of analysis was used to estimate the variance in each participant’s coping choice that was due to stressor type: either marital tension or child misbehavior. Stress was dummy coded as either marital conflict (1) or child misbehavior (-1). At the within-subject level of analysis, intercepts and slopes are estimated separately for each individual participant. The predictor variables were left uncentered. Because the stressor variable was dichotomous, leaving it uncentered is the most valid way to interpret the results (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). The intercept represents the mean level of coping.

The between-subject level of analysis was used to examine the extent to which individual differences in these processes were associated with the five personality dimensions. At the between-subject level the personality dimensions were centered around their grand mean. The between-subject level of analysis provides the mean level use of the coping strategy (the intercept), the relationships between and unique effects of the personality dimensions as well as the interactions between personality and the stressor (the coefficients). The five personality dimensions were modeled both onto the intercept and the slope of the stressor. Conceptually, modeling onto the intercept gives the direct effect of the personality dimensions on coping, while modeling onto the slope of the stressor examines the interaction between personality and the stressor. Although these coefficients are not traditional interactions derived from product terms, they indicate whether relations between the stressor and coping (slopes) vary as a function of personality score. This is equivalent to the main effects and the interactive effects being examined in standard multiple regression and controls for the direct effects of personality and stressor in examining the interaction. Having all five of the personality variables in
the model controls for the other personality variables and permits examining the unique
or incremental effects of each personality dimension. The between-couple level of
analysis is included merely as a control to allow interpretation of variables included in the
first two levels of analysis. This final level is necessary given the participants were
married couples and thus were not independent; it essentially controls for variance
attributable to this pairing in the data.

The within-person variables resulted in an equation that follows:

\[ C_t = P_0 + P_1 \text{marital}_t + E_t \]  

\( C_t \) is the score for the coping strategy (e.g., escape avoidance) and “marital\_t” is the
dummy-coded variable indicating whether a marital conflict was the stressor or whether
child misbehavior was the stressor. \( P_0 \) is the intercept (representing the mean amount of
coping), \( P_1 \) is the slope for stressor, and \( E_t \) is the random component of coping on day \( t \).

The between-personal variables results in an equation that follows:

\[ P_0 = B_{00} + B_{01} (N) + B_{02} (O) + B_{03} (A) + B_{04} (C) + B_{05} (E) + R_0 \]  

\[ P_1 = B_{10} + B_{11} (N) + B_{12} (O) + B_{13} (A) + B_{14} (C) + B_{15} (E) \]  

All of the personality predictors were centered around the grand mean. \( B_{00} \) is an
estimate of the direct effect of personality on coping, while \( B_{01} \) represents the unique
effects of \( N \) on coping holding the other personality dimensions constant. \( B_{02}, B_{03}, \)
\( B_{04}, \) and \( B_{05} \) are the unique effects of \( O, A, C \) and \( E \) respectively on coping when
holding the other personality dimensions constant. \( B_{10} \) is an estimate of the direct
effects of stressor on coping. \( B_{11} \) is an estimate of the interactive effects of \( N \) and
stressor on coping holding the other personality dimensions constant. \( B_{12}, B_{13}, B_{14} \) and
B15 are estimates of the interactive effects of O, A, C and E respectively holding the other personality dimensions constant.

The between-couple variables results in an equation that follows:

\[ B_{00} = \gamma_{000} + U_{00} \quad (4) \]
\[ B_{01} = \gamma_{010} \quad (5) \]

Equation five (5) is repeated for \( B_{02} (= \gamma_{020}) \) to \( B_{15} (= \gamma_{150}) \).

This equation controls for the fact that the participants were married couples and thus were not independent.

The equation was repeated nine times to predict each coping strategy. Results of multilevel hierarchical level modeling indicate that context was significantly and independently predictive of the likelihood of engaging in various coping strategies (Table 3). As compared to child misbehavior, if the stressor was marital, couples in this sample were significantly more likely to report engaging in relationship focused coping (\( t = 3.92, p < .001, df = 408 \)), compromise (\( t = 5.73, p < .001, df = 408 \)), interpersonal withdrawal (\( t = 6.72, p < .001, df = 408 \)), escape avoidance (\( t = 1.97, p < .05, df = 408 \)) and self blame (\( t = 5.97, p < .001, df = 408 \)). In coping with a marital stressor, as compared to child misbehavior, they were significantly less likely to report engaging in confrontation (\( t = -2.26, p < .05, df = 408 \)) and support seeking (\( t = -1.98, p < .05, df = 408 \)).

As discussed below and shown in Table 3, results of multilevel hierarchical modeling indicate significant independent effects of the role of personality in the likelihood of engaging in various coping strategies. Results also indicated several significant interactions of personality with stressor. In each analysis, the other four
personality dimensions were entered into the model and thus were held constant at their own mean.

Consistent with expectations, those who are higher on neuroticism, compared to those lower on N reported using more relatively maladaptive modes of coping. Specifically, they engaged in more confrontive coping ($t = 2.03, p < .05, df = 144$), interpersonal withdrawal ($t = 4.13, p < .001, df = 144$), escape avoidance ($t = 4.77, p < .001, df = 144$), seeking emotional support ($t = 2.87, p < .001, df = 144$) and self blame ($t = 2.14, p < .05, df = 144$). N did not significantly interact with context in predicting coping.

Somewhat consistent with expectations, those higher on extraversion were significantly more likely to report engaging in compromise ($t = 2.01, p < .05, df = 144$) and self blame ($t = 1.95, p = .05, df = 144$) and somewhat, but not significantly more likely to report engaging in confrontation ($t = 1.68, p < .10, df = 144$). Numerous interactions were also found. As shown in Figure 1, those higher on E as compared to those lower on E were more likely to report the use of relationship focused coping in response to a child misbehavior but were less likely to report the use of relationship focused coping in response to a marital stressor ($t = -2.19, p < .05, df = 408$). Those higher on E were more likely to report confronting during a marital stressor and were less likely to report confronting when a child misbehaved (see Figure 2; $t = 2.11, p < .05, df = 408$) as compared to those lower on E. As shown in Figure 3, those higher on E were more likely to report using self-blame in response to a marital stressor and less likely to report using self-blame in response to child misbehavior ($t = 2.87, p < .01, df = 408$). And finally those higher on E were more likely to report the use of interpersonal
withdrawal in coping with marital problems than those lower on E, while those higher on E were less likely to report the use of interpersonal withdrawal in coping with child misbehavior (see Figure 4, t = 2.30, p < .05, df = 408).

Consistent with expectations based on previous findings, those higher on openness were significantly less likely to report using distancing (t = -2.71, p < .01, df = 144) and somewhat, but not significantly, more like to report using relationship focused coping (t = 1.80, p < .10, df = 144). O did not significantly interact with context in predicting coping.

Consistent with expectations, those higher on agreeableness were significantly less likely to report engaging in self blame (t = -2.32, p < .05, df = 144). There were also several significant interactions between agreeableness and context. As shown in Figure 5, those higher on A compared to those lower on A were more likely to report using relationship focused coping with a marital stressor and were less likely to report using relationship focused coping when their child misbehaved (t = 1.99, p < .05, df = 408). Additionally, as shown in Figure 6 those higher on A were more likely to report confronting their children and were less likely to report confronting their spouses as compared to those lower on A (t = -2.12, p < .05, df = 408).

Finally, consistent with expectations, those higher on conscientiousness were significantly more likely to report engaging in relationship focused coping (t = 2.52, p < .05, df = 144), compromise (t = 2.12, p < .05, df = 144) and somewhat but not significantly more likely to report the use of problem solving (t = 1.83, p < .10, df = 144). C also interacted significantly with context in predicting coping. As shown in Figure 7, those higher on C were more likely to report seeking emotional support during a marital
stressor while those higher on C were less likely to report seeking emotional support during child misbehavior ($t = 2.17, p < .05, \text{df} = 408$) as compared to those lower on C. As shown in Figure 8, those higher on C were less likely to report using self-blame with a child misbehavior stressor but were more likely to report using self-blame during a marital stressor ($t = 2.46, p < .05, \text{df} = 408$) as compared to those lower on C.

Discussion

The primary issue addressed in the current study was the role of personality and context in coping behavior. Specifically, the study examined both the direct and interactive effects of five basic personality dimensions (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness) and two prevalent sources of interpersonal stress among parents living in stepfamilies (child misbehavior and marital conflict) in coping responses.

The Context of Coping

The two most common sources of family stress that emerged in the current study were marital conflict and child misbehavior. This was consistent with my expectations and with research on both families and stepfamilies (e.g., Kheshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997). Hierarchical linear modeling revealed that respondents coped differently depending on the stressor, indicating that contextual factors played a significant and independent role in coping. Given a marital stressor, as compared to child misbehavior, respondents were significantly more likely to report the use of relationship focused coping, compromise, interpersonal withdrawal, escape avoidance, and self-blame. They were significantly less likely to report the use of confrontation and support seeking. Thus in dealing with a marital stressor, respondents were more likely to report
using strategies that took an egalitarian or shared perspective such as trying to see their spouse’s perspective, offering social support, compromising and acknowledging their own contributions to the conflict. They were also more likely to report avoiding directly dealing with the stressor either through the use of interpersonal withdrawal or escape avoidance. It may be that it is not possible to avoid dealing with child misbehavior given the necessity for responsibility in the parental role. The consequences of ignoring child misbehavior may also be more serious, which may limit the use of such coping strategies. Thus, it appears that in dealing with child misbehavior, a different set of coping responses is elicited, and respondents were more likely to report dealing with the situation directly.

As compared to their coping with marital conflict, respondents were less likely to report accepting blame for their child’s misbehavior and trying to understand their child’s point of view. In this context they were also more likely to report seeking social support. Reasons for this latter finding may include that parents might find it easier to seek help concerning parenting than marital concerns. When seeking support within the immediate family, it is generally considered appropriate to ask one’s spouse for help in dealing with their child, but inappropriate to ask their child for help in dealing with their spouse. Further, in seeking support outside the immediate family, there is perhaps less social stigma associated with seeking help with a misbehaving child than with a marital problem. Given that most of our participants had already experienced one failed marriage, they may feel particularly reluctant to admit problems in their current marriage to others. Finally, it is possible that participants felt a greater need to seek support in dealing with their parenting problems than with their marital problems and that this greater need, in turn, led to its use as a way of coping.
Marital conflict and child misbehavior were not significantly associated with the use of distancing and problem solving. This is consistent with previous research that suggests that people are less likely to use distancing and problem solving in response to an interpersonal stressor (as compared to more agentic sources of stress; Folkman et al., 1986; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Interestingly, although respondents did not report significant levels of distancing, they did report significant use of other strategies to remove oneself from the situation such as interpersonal withdrawal and escape avoidance. The distancing scale was comprised largely of emotional suppression strategies (e.g., went on as if nothing happened, tried to forget the whole thing, made light of the situation, refused to get too serious about it). It may be that it is difficult to use such a suppression strategy in dealing with close relationships. However, other strategies such as interpersonal withdrawal (I gave the other person involved the “silent treatment”; I sulked, tried to keep my feelings to myself; tried to keep other from knowing about the problem or about my feelings) or escape avoidance (hoped a miracle would happen; wished the situation would go away or somehow be over with) that are efforts to manage the emotions but not suppress them may be more likely to be used.

The present findings point to the importance of context in understanding and predicting coping behaviour. All stressors examined in the present study occurred within the context of the family. However there were meaningful differences in coping within these interpersonal family stressors. This suggests that there are important distinctions among interpersonal stressors that may need to be examined separately to understand coping with interpersonal stressors.
The Role of Personality Dimensions in Coping

The results of hierarchical linear modeling suggest that each of the five basic personality dimensions (N, E, O, A, C) examined in the present study were independently and significantly related to coping responses. In addition, personality was found to interact with context in predicting coping responses. Consistent with previous research and my expectations, those higher on Neuroticism (N), compared to those lower on N, were more likely to report engaging in what are generally considered to be maladaptive emotion focused strategies such as interpersonal withdrawal and self blame (Endler & Parker, 1990; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). This is consistent with the characterization that those higher on N have a propensity for experiencing negative emotions (McCrae & Costa, 1987) and thus may be more likely to channel their coping efforts towards managing their disruptive emotions. However, it appears that those higher on N have problems coping in constructive ways and tend to report using more typically maladaptive emotion focused coping strategies that may not alleviate their negative emotions and may even create negative affect (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). Those higher on N also appear to report the use of strategies that disrupt their relationships such as confrontive coping and interpersonal withdrawal without reporting the use of strategies that maintain their relationships such as relationship focused coping or compromise. And while they were more likely to report seeking emotional support, they were not more likely to report offering support or taking the perspective of other involves, and as such appear unable to cope in ways that provide support or protect their relationships.
Interestingly, N was not significantly involved in any interactive effects with situation. This supports research that suggests that those high on N are more inflexible in their coping strategies (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). The lack of significant interactions with stressor suggests that those higher on N are unable to change their coping strategy in response to the needs of the situation. This would also account for their poor outcomes in coping, as a hallmark of good coping is being flexible in one’s coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Those higher on extraversion (E) were significantly more likely to report engaging in compromise and self blame and somewhat, although not significantly more likely to report engaging in confrontation. This is somewhat consistent with the hypotheses that those higher on E would use less maladaptive coping strategies, self blame being the exception. These results are consistent with previous research (Watson & Hubbard, 1996; David & Suls, 1999) that suggests those higher on E tend to use typically adaptive emotion focused strategies like compromise.

A number of significant interactions were also found. Those higher on E as compared to those lower on E were more likely to report the use of relationship focused coping in response to a child misbehavior but were less likely to report the use of relationship focused coping in response to a marital stressor. Those higher on E were more likely to report the use of confrontation, self blame and interpersonal withdrawal during a marital stressor and were less likely report the use of confrontation, self blame and interpersonal withdrawal when a child misbehaved. Together, these results indicate that those higher on E tend to report using what are typically found to be more adaptive strategies in dealing with child misbehavior but tend to report the use of typically
maladaptive strategies in response to a marital stressor. I hypothesize that this may be
due to the dominant aspect of the E personality. In a parent-child relationship this
dominance is already established. However in the more egalitarian relationship with a
spouse, those higher on E tend to be using coping strategies that demonstrate dominance
such as interpersonal withdrawal, and confrontation. While they are able to be empathic
and supportive during child conflict they were not able to do the same for their spouses.
As a whole the results of E indicate that they are flexible copers who adapt their coping
response depending on the situation but express their dominant interpersonal style during
marital conflict.

Previous research has found contradictory results with extraversion. Some studies
have found no independent effects of E on coping (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996), while
other have reported significant relationships of E with coping responses (Watson &
Hubbard, 1996; David & Suls, 1999). The findings of the present study suggest that one
reason for the discrepancy in findings across studies may be that the role of E in coping
appears to be highly context dependent. That is, those high on E appear to cope quite
differently depending upon the specific dimensions of the stressful situation with which
they are coping. Such situational specificity in coping behaviour may be considered to be
a sign of flexibility in coping, and as such, potentially indicative of adaptive coping
efforts. Flexible coping has often been referred to as the hallmark of good coping skills
(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and this is consistent with the generally positive view of
those high on E that emerges in the literature (Hooker et al., 1994; Watson & Hubbard,
1996).
Those higher on Openness (O) were significantly less likely to report the use of distancing. This result is consistent with expectation, previous research and models of O that suggest that those higher on O are comfortable experiencing a range of emotions, (David & Suls, 1999; Costa & McCrae, 1989; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996). As such, they may not feel as great a need to distance themselves from the potentially distressing emotions elicited by stressful circumstances. Consistent with descriptions that those high on O are open with their own feelings and experiences, previous research has suggested that those higher on O are also more open and sensitive to the feelings of loved ones (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Consistent with these findings and expectations, those higher on O reported somewhat, but not significantly higher, levels of relationship-focused coping.

Those higher on Agreeableness (A) were less likely to report engaging in self blame. This is consistent with my expectations and previous research that suggests those higher on A are less likely to use avoidant emotion focused strategies (Watson & Hubbard, 1996; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Hooker et al., 1994). There were also significant interactions between Agreeableness and context. Compared to those lower on A, those higher on A were more likely to report using relationship focused coping with a marital stressor and were less likely to report using relationship focused coping when their child misbehaved. Additionally, those higher on A were more likely to report confronting their children and were less likely to report confronting their spouses as compared to those low on A. Together these results suggest that those higher on A may not be as comfortable with the dominant or authoritative role sometimes called for in parenting and thus respond in typically less adaptive ways. While those higher on A are
able to respond empathically and non-confrontationally during a marital stressor, they appear unable to use such adaptive strategies during a conflict with their children. While my expectations of a direct effect such that those higher on A would report more support seeking and less confrontation was not found, this was supported within the context of relating to another adult. That is, it is only in coping with stress involving their spouse, but not their children, that coping reported by those high on A fit the standard description of A as non-confrontational and highly agreeable (McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). As I am aware of no previous studies of A with parenting, this study offers an interesting picture of how those higher on A deal with children and is suggestive that they may not cope well with child misbehavior or parenting. Future research should examine whether high A individuals are at risk for parenting difficulties. The findings of the present study suggest that they might have trouble setting limits with their children and may tend to be overly permissive in their parenting.

Finally, those higher on conscientiousness were significantly more likely to report engaging in both relationship focused coping and compromise and somewhat but not significantly more likely to report using problem solving than were those lower on C. Previous research suggests that those higher on C tend to use direct, active, problem focused strategies and to eschew avoidant emotional strategies (Watson & Hubbard, 1996; O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996). These results are consistent with previous research and my expectations indicating that those higher on C are more able to cope in active and relationship protecting ways (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Conscientiousness also interacted significantly with context in predicting coping. Those higher on C, as compared to those lower on C, were more likely to report seeking emotional support in
coping with a marital stressor while those higher on C were less likely to report seeking emotional support in coping with child misbehavior. Those higher on C were less likely to report the use of self-blame in coping with a child misbehavior stressor than were those lower on C, but were more likely to report the use of self-blame during a marital stressor as compared to those lower on C. Although those higher on C take responsibility for their actions and the potentially associated blame during a marital conflict, they do not do so regarding their children. While it is unclear why this is so, future research might examine whether, consistent with their own high standards for themselves, they have heightened expectations for their children’s behaviour. If so, high C parents may be less inclined to accept responsibility for their child’s misdeeds, lack of conscientiousness, or irresponsibility.

In coping with stress involving both their children and their spouses, those higher on C reported higher levels of relationship-focused coping and compromise, suggesting that they coped with family stress with empathy and sensitivity. Thus although those high on C may be somewhat demanding of their children, they were able to respond empathically to their children even in times of child misbehavior. Together these results add to a picture of those high on C as being effective copers who adapt to the demands of the situation and respond in appropriate ways (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996).

It is important to note that the multiple scales that were analyzed both in terms of the big five and the coping scales increased the likelihood of a type I error. Although no corrections were made for this elevated error rate, there were more significant findings.
than one would expect by chance at .05 level. Additionally, it was decided that the risk of a type II error would be more detrimental in the present study than a type I error.

Limitations

There are several limitations of the study. One set of issues involves the use of a volunteer sample and the problem of participant attrition, limiting the generalizability of the study. However, as the use of diary data allows each person to function as their own control, our results are geared more toward the understanding of intraindividual processes.

Reliance on self-report measures is another limitation. Such measures do provide a more feasible method of collecting relatively detailed data on a number of participants. Additionally they facilitate the assessment of unobservable, internal cognitive processes. Both theory and a large volume of empirical research has indicated that it is these internal processes that play a key role in determining the effects of stress and the process of coping (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Further, the use of a daily process methodology can alleviate some of the biases inherent in relying on retrospective self-reports. The daily process methodology reduces the recall period to hours, rather than weeks or months most typically used in standard survey research methods (see DeLongis et al., 1992 for a discussion). Thus there is a minimizing of retrospective contamination.

Conclusion

The stress and coping literature is plagued with inconsistencies and discrepancies (for a review see Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). The present study addresses many of the concerns being raised as reasons for these inconsistencies both through the use of a daily
process methodology (e.g., Tennen et al., 2000) and in clearly evaluating the situation, person dimensions and the interactions between the two (e.g., Coyne & Gottlieb, 1996). It is clear from the present study that all of these aspects play important roles in understanding how couples deal with interpersonal-family stress. The inconsistencies in the personality literature on coping may also be due to a failure to consider context. It may be that the way personality manifests itself in the stress and coping process is dependent on context.

The stress and coping process appears to be a complex and intricate process involving both the environmental and person factors along with multiple interactions. The findings of this study highlight the importance of examining coping behavior within an interactional context in which both the person and features of his or her environment are considered in tandem.
References


Table 1

Intercorrelations Among Coping Scales and Stressor Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>RFC</th>
<th>COMP</th>
<th>CONFT</th>
<th>INTWTH</th>
<th>ESCAVD</th>
<th>DIST</th>
<th>SUPSK</th>
<th>PROBSV</th>
<th>SLFBLM</th>
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Note. RFC = relationship focused coping, COMP = compromise, CONFT = confront, INTWTH = interpersonal withdrawal, ESCAVD = escape avoidance, DIST = distancing, SUPSK = support seeking, PROBSLV = problem solving, SLFBLM = self blame, STRSTYP = marital stress (=1) child misbehavior (-1). *p < .05. **p < .01.
Table 2

Intercorrelations Between Personality Scales and Coping Scales

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Note. N = 150. RFC = relationship focused coping, COMP = compromise, CONFT = confront, INTWTH = interpersonal withdrawal, ESCAVD = escape avoidance, DIST = distancing, SUPSK = support seeking, PROBSV = problem solving, SLFBLM = self blame, N = neuroticism, O = openness, A = agreeableness, C = conscientiousness, E = extraversion.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Table 3

Multilevel Models of Personality Dimensions and Stressor Type as Predictors of Coping

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Note. CONFT = confront, INTWTH = interpersonal withdrawal, ESCAVD = escape avoidance, SLFBLM = self blame, SUPSK = support seeking. *p < .05. **p < .01, ***p < .001, t p < .10.
Table 3 cont...

<table>
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Note. RFC = relationship focused coping, COMP = compromise, DIST = distancing, PROBSLV = problem solving. *p < .05. **p < .01, ***p < .001, t p < .10.
Figure 1: Interaction Between Extraversion and Relationship Focused Coping as a Function of Stressor Type.
Figure 2: Interaction Between Extraversion and Confrontation as a Function of Stressor Type
Figure 3: Interaction between Extraversion and Self Blame as a Function of Stressor Type
Figure 4: Interaction between Extraversion and Interpersonal Withdrawal as a Function of Stressor Type
Figure 5: Interaction Between Agreeableness and Relationship Focused Coping as a Function of Stressor Type
Figure 6: Interaction Between Agreeableness and Confrontive Coping as a Function of Stressor Type
Figure 8: Interaction Between Conscientiousness and Self-Blame as a Function of Stressor Type