The Mediating Effect of Coping Strategies on the Relationship between Agreeableness

on Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

A quantitative study

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How do coping strategies mediate between resilience and the personality trait agreeableness during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Abstract

This study investigated the association between resilience and the personality trait agreeableness and the possible mediator effect of coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative study was conducted by designing a questionnaire that tested participants' level of resilience, the score for personality trait agreeableness and the use of problem solving coping strategies (N=95). The results have shown no significant direct effect for agreeableness on resilience and therefore also no mediator effect. These results contradict the findings of previous studies that indicated associations between coping strategies and resilience and agreeableness and coping strategies. This underlines the need for further research of the associations to investigate the role of personality traits on coping strategies and resilience. Future research is suggested to also investigate the association of other personality traits to coping strategies and resilience.

Introduction

In the beginning of 2020 the global COVID-19 pandemic started and changed the life of many people. Some governments tried to take care of this threat by introducing so called 'lockdowns', a phase in which the lives of many people got limited by restrictions, such as the closure of schools, work places, restaurants or conventions (Osimo et al., 2021). These lockdowns have also limited the social interactions and challenged the psychological well-being of most people. A study of Webb and Chen (2021) found out that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased anxiety and depression. While anxiety and depression rates increased in both the older and the younger generations, the rates in younger people increased more than in older people. Shanahan et al. (2022) have shown that the level of stress in young adults have increased during the pandemic compared to the time before the pandemic.

There are multiple factors that can contribute to an individual's capability to deal with these kinds of challenges, one of these factors is resilience. According to the American Psychological Association (2020: para. 4), resilience is "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress - such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors". Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) stated that resilience evaluates new stressors and is responsible for the interpretation of challenges as being positive or negative. If an individual has high levels of resilience, new challenges are likely to be interpreted as chances for development instead of threatening experiences. These findings implicate that resilience is closely linked to psychological and mental well-being. This assumption has also been proven by research conducted by Haddadi and Besharat (2010). They reported a positive relationship between resilience and psychological well-being and a negative relationship of resilience with psychological distress. Furthermore, some of the characteristics of resilient individuals that have been identified by Lecic-Tosevski et al. (2011: p. 290) are the "ability to cope in

stressful situations, continuing engagement in activities, flexibility to unexpected changes in life, ability to seek social support, perceiving stress as a challenge".

These findings underline the influence of resilience on mental health, but also introduces coping strategies as another factor to look into. The American Psychological Association describes coping strategies as "an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation" (APA, 2022). Vannini and her colleagues found out that higher resilience was associated with a greater use of adaptive coping behaviours and the use of maladaptive coping strategies was found to be associated with higher levels of stress (2021). Webb et al. (2022) stated that protective behaviour such as avoiding contact with sick others or reduced use of public transportation reduced virus related anxiety in older adults.

While the importance of resilience and coping strategies for dealing with new life challenges have been shown in several studies, it also raises the question, what other factors contribute to the extent to which people differ from each other. One possible explanation are differences in character traits. According to Osimo et al. (2021), one important factor that contributes to resilience are personality traits. They state that openness, neuroticism and extraversion influence the response to stress. Furthermore, Barańczuk has shown in his research that agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness and extraversion are positively linked to social support (2019) and social support was found to confer resilience to stress (Ozbay, 2007). Additionally, high levels of certain personality traits such as openness or agreeableness have shown to be linked to better problem focused coping, while neuroticism is linked to maladaptive emotional coping (Agbaria & Mokh,2021). Meléndez et al. (2020) found out that agreeableness positively predicted problem-oriented coping strategies through positive appraisal. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic agreeableness has also shown to be a relevant factor for health-oriented behaviour. Asselmann et al. (2020) have shown that

agreeable people were more likely to perform protective behaviour such as washing their hands or limiting their social interactions.

These findings raise the question, how agreeable people are able to be resilient while actively limiting their social interactions. Since agreeable people are reported to use problem oriented coping strategies (Meléndez et al., 2020), it seems like coping strategies, especially problem solving skills, are a relevant factor that contributes to resilience. It can be assumed that problem solving coping strategies mediate between agreeableness and resilience. Therefore, this study aims to gain more insight into the associations between agreeableness, resilience and the coping strategy of problem solving, especially the mediating effect of coping strategies. This leads to the following research question that will be investigated:

Is there a mediator effect for coping strategies on the relationship between resilience and agreeableness?

Methods

Design

The study was conducted by means of a quantitative analysis of an online questionnaire. The participants were not assigned to specific groups or conditions and took the same questionnaire. The variables that are investigated are the dependent variable resilience, the independent variable agreeableness and coping strategies as mediator variables. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Twente.

Participants

A convenience sampling method was chosen to recruit participants. All three researchers distributed the questionnaire to their social network either through the social media platforms Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram or by asking them personally. Further, the snowball sampling method was applied, where already recruited participants were asked

to send the questionnaire to their own social network. Participants that were students at the University of Twente had the opportunity to receive 0.25 SONA-points as reimbursement by participating via the university's SONA-system webpage. There were no other reimbursements for participants. The only exclusion criteria were being underage or not completing the questionnaire. In total, the data of 96 participants were gathered. After excluding participants that have not completed the entire questionnaire, the data of 95 participants were analysed. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 58 years and the average age was 25.4 years (SD = 8.4). 56 (59%) participants identified as male and 39 (41%) as female.

Materials

The online platform Qualtrics was used to build and provide the questionnaire to participants. The questionnaire was a combination of parts from different existing questionnaires, namely the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), the Big Five Inventory (BFI) and the Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) (see Appendix A).

The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) was used to measure the level of resilience of participants. Participants were asked to answer questions about their self-perceived resilience using a Likert Scale that ranged from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The test-retest reliability for the BRS has been reported as 0.69 and its overall psychometric properties as one of the best, compared to 14 other resilience scales (Windle, 2011).

To measure the personality trait agreeableness, The Big Five Inventory (BFI) was used. Only the subscale that aims at agreeableness was included. Participants were asked to answer questions regarding their personality traits using a Likert Scale that ranged from "1 - disagree strongly" to "5 - agree strongly". The subscale of agreeableness has a reliability of 0.79 and a validity of 0.92 (John & Srivastava, 1999).

To measure coping strategies the Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) was used. The CSI also uses a likert scale which ranges from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). Only the subscale for problem solving was used, which consists of 9 items. According to Tobin, this subscale has a reliability of 0.82 (1984).

Participants were required to have an internet connection and email-address since the questionnaire was only available online.

Data collection

Data collection took place between 6th April 2022 and 27th April 2022. After being recruited for the study, all participants received an online-link to the questionnaire (see Appendix A). After giving consent, participants were asked to give information about their age, gender, nationality, highest education and current occupation.

Analysis

The gathered data were downloaded from qualtrics and analysed using the program SPSS. Data from underage participants or participants that have not completed the entire questionnaire were excluded. First, demographics of all remaining participants were analysed to identify the characteristics of the sample. Next, the mean scores for agreeableness, resilience and coping strategies of each participant were calculated. Then a simple linear regression analysis was performed to analyse the total effect of agreeableness on resilience, with resilience as dependent variable and agreeableness as independent variable. Afterwards, a linear regression analysis for agreeableness on coping strategies and then for agreeableness and coping strategies on resilience was executed. Finally, a Sobel Test was performed.

Results

Demographics

The demographics, including participants' nationality, highest level of education and current occupation, are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1

Samples demographic characteristics: Nationality, Education, Current occupation

Sample Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Nationality		
German	76	80
Dutch	13	13.7
Other	6	6.3
Total	95	100
Education		
Lower secondary school	3	3.2
General secondary school	8	8.4
A-Level	50	52.6
Bachelor's degree	25	26.3
Master's degree	6	6.3
Other	3	3.2
Total	95	100
Current occupation		
Student	72	75.8

IT	5	5.3
Food retailing	4	4.2
Economy	2	2.1
Finance	1	1.1
Care service	1	1.1
Other	10	10.5
Total	95	100

Mediation-Analysis

For the total effect of agreeableness on resilience a beta-score of 0.21 with a standard error of 0.13 was found. This effect was found to be not significant ($p = .118$).

Then a linear regression analysis to analyse the direct effect of the independent variable agreeableness on the dependent variable coping strategies was executed. The beta score was -0.09 with a standard error of 0.11. This effect was not significant ($p = .39$).

Next, the direct effect of both independent variables agreeableness and coping strategies on resilience was calculated by performing another linear regression analysis. For agreeableness, a beta score of 0.24 and a standard error of 0.13 was found ($p = .071$). For coping strategies, the beta score was 0.303 and the standard error 0.12 ($p = .017$).

Finally, the aforementioned results were used to perform a Sobel Test. The Sobel Test shows a t-value of -0.81 and standard error of 0.03. The p-value is above the critical value of 0.05 ($p = .417$). Therefore, no significant effect of agreeableness on resilience was found.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the association between resilience and the personality trait agreeableness and if the coping strategy of problem solving serves as a mediator. It was expected that there is an association between agreeableness and resilience and that the sub-scale problem solving serves as a mediator.

Main findings

The results indicate that agreeableness has no significant effect on resilience. Opposed to the hypothesis, the influence of agreeableness on resilience was not significant and consequently there was also no mediating effect for coping strategies found. This leads to the conclusion that agreeableness is not an important factor to predict resilience and people that score high on the personality trait agreeableness do not differ from low scoring people in terms of resilience. This is in contrast with previous research by Barańczuk (2019), that has shown an association between the personality trait agreeableness and an individual's level of resilience, and Vannini (2021), who found an association between agreeableness and coping strategies. In this study, neither the association between agreeableness and resilience, nor between agreeableness and coping strategies have been confirmed. No total effect between agreeableness and resilience was found, which implies that the personality trait agreeableness can not be predictive for an individual's level of resilience.

Strengths and limitations

One strength of this study is that it was easy to access for participants. Due to the nature of this study, participants are only required to have access to a computer or mobile phone with an internet connection. The fact that participants can decide themselves at what time they want to fill out the questionnaire and that the questionnaire approximately takes 15 minutes to fill out, has the advantage that more participants were able to participate. Thereby, participants with limited time were able to fill out the questionnaire at any time that was suitable for them and it did not consume too much time.

One weakness of the study is the sample. Due to the fact that participants were mostly recruited within and around the researchers social environment, the population shows high levels of homogeneity. 75.8% of the participants were students and 80% were German. Therefore, the findings can not be generalised to the general western culture, but is limited to Germany. It is possible that a more heterogeneous sample in which multiple, different nationalities are represented, would lead to other results. This homogeneity is also shown in the age distribution and the distribution of the current occupation. Besides a few outliers, the most participants were young students. As research has shown, age can be a relevant factor for coping strategies (Webb & Chen, 2022). Their findings implicated that older people have shown a greater use of coping strategies. Therefore, the contradictory findings for coping strategies could be a result of the different age of participants. This limitation is also shown by the educational level of the participants. Participants with a lower educational level are underrepresented (11.6% for lower secondary school and general secondary school). Although the studies of Morgan (2009) and Wister (2016) imply that higher educated people show higher levels of resilience, this fact had no influence for this study, as there was no comparison between higher and lower educated participants possible. Therefore, the homogeneity of the sample also prevented the possibility to confirm or refute these kinds of findings.

Another limitation is the language of the questionnaire. Since most participants that were recruited are German but the questionnaire was designed in English, only participants with sufficient English skills were able to participate in this study. This limitation has arguably decreased the number of potential participants and, thereby, also contributed to the difference between the number of participants from lower educational levels and higher educational participants.

Future research

While this study has not found a significant effect of the personality trait agreeableness on resilience, this might not be the case for other personality traits. Since the importance of personality traits on various aspects of mental health has been proven in multiple past studies (Athota et al., 2020; Barańczuk, 2019; Osimo et al., 2021; Ozbay et al., 2007), in future research the influence of other personality traits on resilience besides agreeableness should be investigated. Osimos et al. (2021) have found a relation between the personality traits openness, neuroticism and extraversion and an individual's response to stress. Therefore, the impact of these personality traits on resilience should also be investigated in future research.

Another factor that has to be considered is the educational level of participants. Research has shown that socioeconomic status can have an impact on resilience (Wister, 2016) and socioeconomic statuses correlated to education (Morgan et al., 2009). Therefore, the impact of agreeableness on resilience should also be investigated for specific educational and socioeconomic subgroups in order to find possible differences within these groups. Furthermore, if a generalised conclusion about the influence of agreeableness on resilience wants to be made, it has to be ensured that the participants reflect the characteristics of the general population.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Mental health and resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Start of Block: Informed consent block

Informed consent Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. This research investigates the broader topic of mental health and resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to help people through these tough times, the purpose of this study is to identify promoting factors for resilience. Therefore we examine psychological variables that are related to the concept of resilience, including personality traits, psychological flexibility and coping strategies.

This survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete, but you can take as much time as you want. There are no risks of participating in this study. Your data will be anonymized, treated confidential and deleted at the end of this study. You have the right to withdraw from participating at any given time without giving explanation or justification.

If there are any further questions regarding this study, please contact one of the researchers.

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I hereby declare that (1) I agree to participate in this study, (b) I have been informed about the nature of the study, (c) I am aware that participation is voluntary, (d) I can stop and withdraw at any time without explanation or justification, (e) I am at least 18 years old.

Yes, I want to participate in this study. (1)

No, I do not want to be part of the study. (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. This research investigates the broad... = No, I do not want to be part of the study.

Page Break

End of Block: Informed consent block

Start of Block: Demographics

Age How old are you? (in years)

Gender What gender do you identify with?

Male (1)

Female (2)

Non-binary / third gender (3)

Prefer to self-describe: (4) _____

Nationality What is your nationality?

Dutch (1)

German (2)

Other (9) _____

Education What is your highest education?

Lower secondary school (1)

General secondary school (2)

A-Level (3)

Bachelor's degree (4)

Master's degree (5)

Ph.D. (6)

Other (7) _____

Occupation What is your current occupation?

Student (including part-time students) (1)

Care service (2)

IT (3)

Finance (4)

Agriculture (5)

Law (6)

Economy (7)

Food retailing (8)

Other (9) _____

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Personality block

Personality

Here are a number of characteristics that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

I see myself as someone who..:

	Disagree strongly (1)	Disagree a little (2)	Neither agree or disagree (3)	Agree a little (4)	Agree strongly (5)
Is talkative (1)					
Is reserved (2)					
Is full of energy (3)					
Generates a lot of enthusiasm (4)					
Tends to be quiet (5)					

Has an assertive personality (6)

Is sometimes shy, inhibited (7)

Is outgoing, sociable (8)

Tends to find fault with others (9)

Is helpful and unselfish with others (10)

Starts quarrels

with others (11)

Has a forgiving nature (12)

Is generally trusting (13)

Can be cold and aloof (14)

Is considerate and kind to almost everyone (15)

Is sometimes rude to others (16)

Likes to cooperate with others (17)

End of Block: Personality block

Start of Block: Resilience 2

Resilience 2 Please indicate the extent to which these statements apply for you:

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times. (1)					
I have a hard time making it through stressful events. (2)					
It does not take me long to recover from a					

stressful event. (3)

It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens. (4)

I usually come

through difficult times with little trouble. (5)

I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life. (6)

End of Block: Resilience 2

Start of Block: Social Skills block

Social Skills

Please indicate the extent to which the statements reflect your general behaviour/ feelings:

	Not at all like me (1)	A little like me (2)	Like me (3)	Very much like me (4)	Exactly like me (5)
I usually feel uncomfortable touching other people. (1)					
Sometimes I have trouble making my friends and family realize how angry or upset I am with them. (2)					
I often touch my friends					

when talking to them. (3)

I rarely show my feelings or emotions. (4)

I can easily tell what a person's character is by watching his or her interactions with others. (5)

I always seem to know what peoples' true

feelings are no matter how hard they try to

conceal them. (6)

I can accurately tell what a persons character is upon first meeting him or her. (7)

I can instantly spot a "phony" the minute I meet him or her. (8)

I am not very skilled in controlling my emotions. (9)

It is very hard for me to control my

emotions. (10)

I am very good at maintaining a calm exterior even if I am upset. (11)

I am rarely able to hide a strong emotion. (12)

I love to socialize. (13)

I always mingle at parties. (14)

At parties I enjoy talking to a lot of

different people. (15)

I enjoy going to large parties and meeting new people. (16)

I am very sensitive of

criticism. (17)

It is very important that other people like me. (18)

I am generally concerned about the impression I am making

on others. (19)

I am often concerned what others are thinking of me. (20)

When I am with a group of friends I am often the spokesperson for the group. (21)

I find it very difficult to speak in front of a large group of people (22)

I am usually very good at leading group

discussions. (23)

I am often chosen to be the leader of a group. (24)

End of Block: Social Skills block

Start of Block: Satisfaction block

Satisfaction Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Indicate your agreement with each item by tapping the appropriate box, from strongly agree, to strongly disagree. Please be open and honest in your responding.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Slightly disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Slightly agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
In most ways my life is close to							

my ideal. (1)

The conditions of my life are excellent. (2)

I am satisfied with my life. (3)

So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life. (4)

If I could live my life over, I would change almost

nothing.
(5)

End of Block: Satisfaction block

Start of Block: Acceptance block

Acceptance & Action Below you will find a list of statements. Please rate how true each statement is for you.

	Never true (1)	Very seldom true (2)	Seldom true (3)	Sometimes true (4)	Frequently true (5)	Almost always true (6)	Always true (7)
My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I							

would value. (1)

I'm afraid of my feelings. (2)

I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings. (3)

My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life. (4)

Emotions cause problems in my life. (5)

It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am. (6)

Worries get in the way of my success. (7)

End of Block: Acceptance block

Start of Block: Coping block

Description

In the following section, you will read a scenario that reflects a typical day in the Covid

19 crisis. You will then need to answer some questions about how you would have reacted. If some information does not apply to you, simply imagine how you would have acted.

Coping strategies Imagine that yesterday the policy decided that you cannot meet with more than two friends at the same time. You go out alone for some fresh air, thinking about your grandparents who have been alone for three weeks and might need some support at home. You want to visit them and decide to go to their house. On your way there, you get a call from your friends you met with three days ago - they tell you that they tested positive for Covid-19. When you arrive at your grandparents' house, you think about their age and health problems. You want to take care of them, but the risk of negative health consequences is great. You are afraid of unknowingly infecting them - you wrestle with yourself because you really want to support them, but ultimately decide not to visit. You go home and worry about the consequences of infection, which could have serious consequences for your own health, for your close friends as well as for your family. You feel stressed and sad. To what extent have you taken the following actions:

	Not at all (1)	A little (2)	Somewhat (3)	Much (4)	Very much (5)
I tried to get a new angle on the situation. (1)					
I looked for the silver lining, so to speak; tried to look on the bright side of things. (2)					
I told myself things that helped me feel better. (3)					
I looked at things in a different light and tried to make the best of					

what was available. (4)

I asked myself

what was really important, and discovered that things weren't so bad after all. (5)

I convinced myself that things aren't quite as bad as they seem. (6)

I stepped back from the situation and put things into

perspective. (7)

I reorganized the way I looked at the situation, so things didn't look so bad. (8)

I went over the problem again and again in my mind and finally saw things in a different light. (9)

I just concentrated on what I had to do next; the next step. (10)

I changed something so that things would turn out all right. (11)

I stood my ground and fought for what I wanted. (12)

I made a plan of action and followed it. (13)

I avoided being with people.

(14)

I knew what had to be done, so I doubled my

efforts and tried harder to make things work. (15)

It was a tricky problem, so 1 had to work around the edges to make things come out OK. (16)

I worked on solving the problems in the situation. (17)

I struggled to resolve the problem. (18)

End of Block: Coping block