

Measuring S/R Coping : Positive S/R Coping Methods and Struggles – Jan. 2013

Theoretical Background

Theorists in the area of stress, trauma, and coping have generally neglected the religious and spiritual dimension. To address this gap, in 1997, Pargament [1] developed a theory of S/r coping which stresses several points:

- S/r coping serves multiple functions: although the primary function is to foster the search for the sacred or spirituality itself, s/r coping can also serve other purposes that may or may not have a larger spiritual significance, including the search for meaning, intimacy with others, identity, control, anxiety-reduction, and transformation.
- S/r coping is multi-modal: it involves behaviors, emotions, relationships, and cognitions.
- S/r is a dynamic process that changes over time, context, and circumstances.
- S/r coping is multi-valent: it is a process leading to helpful or harmful outcomes, and thus, research on s/r coping acknowledges both the “bitter and the sweet” of religious life.
- S/r coping adds a distinctive dimension to the coping process by virtue of its unique concern about sacred matters.
- Because of its distinctive focus on the ways s/r expresses itself in particular life situations, s/r coping adds vital information to our understanding of religion and its links to health and well-being, especially among people facing critical problems in life.

This theoretical perspective has important implications for the measurement of s/r coping. Clearly, global indices, such as frequency of religious attendance or denominational affiliation, or stable dispositional measures of religiousness, such as intrinsic or extrinsic religiousness, cannot capture the rich, multi-dimensional, transactional, dynamic, and multi-valent character of s/r coping. To that end, a different method of assessment was created.

Initial Efforts to Measure S/R Coping (1988 – 1998)

Several initial approaches were taken to measuring S/r coping. Each, however, is limited in some important respects.

- One initial approach assesses s/r coping that remains quite popular involves using a few items that ask how often the individual turns to prayer or engages in religious activities with a religious congregation in times of stress. In research on samples of people who are dealing with stressful life events, these items have often been assumed to tap into the “s/r channels” people may use to cope with stressful situations. But these items do not provide explicit information about actual methods of s/r coping (i.e., the programs playing on the channels). For example, the knowledge that an individual prays frequently if he or she is in the midst of a crisis does not specify *why* the individual prays, *when* the individual prays, *where* the individual prays, *how* the individual prays, or *what* the individual prays for -- questions all potentially vital to an understanding of the coping function of prayer.
- A second initial approach that continues to be popular has involved embedding a few explicit s/r coping items within more general measures of coping, such as the Ways of Coping Scale by Lazarus and Folkman (“Found new faith,” “I prayed”) [2] and the COPE scale by Carver and colleagues (“I’ve been praying or meditating,” “I’ve been trying to find comfort in my religion

- or spiritual beliefs”) [3]. However, this method, at best, covers only a few types of s/r coping, and can obscure the distinctive contribution that s/r makes to the coping process.
- A third early approach focused on studying styles of of s/r coping methods in more depth[4]. For example, Pargament and his colleagues [5] conceptualized and measured three s/r coping “styles” that people use in their search for control in response to stressful life events:
 - Seek control through oneself (Self-Directing)
 - (e.g., *I act to solve my problems without God’s help; After I’ve gone through a rough time, I try to make sense of it without relying on God*)
 - Seek control through God (Deferring)
 - (e.g., *I do not think about different solutions to my problems because God provides them for me; Rather than trying to come up with the right solution to a problem myself, I let God decide how to deal with it*).
 - Seek control through a relationship with God (Collaborative)
 - (e.g., *When it comes to deciding how to solve a problem, God and I work together as partners; When I have a problem, I talk to God about it and together we decide what it means*).
 - Empirical research points to the distinctiveness of these three s/r coping styles and supports their discriminant validity in relationship to measures of health and well-being. Again, however, this “s/r styles of coping” approach to measurement does not provide a comprehensive picture of s/r coping because it focuses exclusively on people’s efforts to rely on s/r to gain a sense of control when faced with stressful and often uncontrollable stressful life events. *This approach does not tap into the many other functions that s/r can serve in the coping process.*
 - A related initial approach to measuring s/r coping has involved identifying various types of s/r coping activities (e.g., pleading for a miracle, doing “mitzvot” or good deeds) from the “ground up” through interviews and narrative accounts about how people make use of s/r in coping [6]. While this approach has greater ecological validity, it can yield measures that are difficult to decipher theoretically or functionally. For example, the Spiritually Based Coping subscale of the Religious Coping Activities Scale includes items that may serve very different purposes (e.g., experienced God’s love and care; found the lesson from God in the event; used my faith to help me decide how to cope with the situation). It is also important to note that most of these qualitative methods to uncover ways to measure s/r coping zeroed in on adaptive rather than potentially harmful forms of s/r coping.
 - To redress this emphasis on adaptive s/r coping, another early approach focused on identifying various problematic forms of s/r coping that might be signs of trouble in the coping process. These include feelings of punishment by God, anger at God, s/r apathy, s/r doubts, and interpersonal s/r conflict. A measure of s/r red flags was developed and linked with a variety of indicators of distress [7]. However, this measure has not been widely used.

The Development of the RCOPE (1998 -)

The RCOPE and the Brief RCOPE (which grew out of this larger measure) were designed to address the limitations associated with these initial approaches to the assessment of s/r coping.

The RCOPE was intended to provide researchers with a tool they could use to measure the myriad manifestations of s/r coping and to help practitioners better integrate religious and spiritual dimensions into treatment (see [8, 9] for full description). The construction of the RCOPE was guided by the elements of Pargament's [1] theory of s/r coping noted above as well as by interviews and reviews of narrative reports of s/r coping.

- First, the instrument is multi-functional. The specific s/r coping items included in the RCOPE were selected and designed to reflect five religious functions – meaning, control, comfort, intimacy, life transformation - and the search for the sacred or spirituality itself. These functions are not mutually exclusive.
- Second, the RCOPE is multi-modal. Scale items were selected that represent how people employ s/r coping methods cognitively, behaviorally, emotionally, and relationally through actions that involve others.
- Third, the multi-valent nature of the RCOPE is built on the assumption that s/r coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive. Hence s/r coping items were selected that reflect positive s/r coping methods – those that rest on a generally secure relationship with whatever the individual may hold sacred – and negative s/r coping methods. Negative s/r coping methods assess what we call s/r struggles -- expressions of tension, conflict, and struggle with the sacred.
 - It is important to stress that we did not assume that the positive coping methods would be invariably adaptive or that the negative s/r coping methods would be invariably maladaptive. S/r coping theory posits that the efficacy of particular coping methods is determined by the interplay between personal, situational, and social-cultural factors, as well as by the way in which health and well-being are conceptualized and measured [1, 9]. Thus, a “positive” s/r coping method that might be helpful in one situation or context might very well be more problematic in another. Conversely, a “negative” s/r coping method might be linked not only to immediate signs of psychological distress, but also to longer term growth and well-being. For this reason, the term “s/r struggle” has been used interchangeably with negative s/r coping because the notion of struggle embodies the possibility of growth and transformation through the process of coping.

Items for the RCOPE were drawn from previous empirical studies and from existing s/r coping scales. Material for the specific items was also gathered from clinical experience and from interviews with individuals who were accessing their religious and spiritual resources to cope with a variety of major stressors. Table 1 provides a list of these subscales organized by the five religious functions. The full RCOPE consists of five items for each of the 21 subscales for a total of 105 items. The full 21-subscale RCOPE can be found **[WHERE?]** and evidence for the reliability and validity of the measure can be found in [8, 10, 11]. Note that a 17 factor scale was derived from one empirical study [8], but these factors have not as yet been replicated within other samples.

Table 1. RCOPE Subscales and Definitions of S/r Coping Methods.

<i>Religious Methods of Coping to Find Meaning</i>	
Benevolent Religious Reappraisal	Redefining the stressor through religion as benevolent and potentially beneficial
Punishing God Reappraisal	Redefining the stressor as a punishment from God for the

	individual's sins
Demonic Reappraisal	Redefining the stressor as an act of the Devil
Reappraisal of God's Powers	Redefining God's power to influence the stressful situation
<i>Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Control</i>	
Collaborative S/r coping	Seeking control through a problem solving partnership with God
Active Religious Surrender	An active giving up of control to God in coping
Passive Religious Deferral	Passive waiting for God to control the situation
Pleading for Direct Intercession	Seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or divine intercession
Self-Directing S/r coping	Seeking control directly through individual initiative rather than help from God
<i>Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Comfort and Closeness to God</i>	
Seeking Spiritual Support	Searching for comfort and reassurance through God's love and care
Religious Focus	Engaging in religious activities to shift focus from the stressor
Religious Purification	Searching for spiritual cleansing through religious actions
Spiritual Connection	Experiencing a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the individual
Spiritual Discontent	Expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with God's relationship to the individual in the stressful situation
Marking Religious Boundaries	Clearly demarcating acceptable from unacceptable religious behavior and remaining within religious boundaries
<i>Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Intimacy with Others and Closeness to God</i>	
Seeking Support from Clergy or Members	Searching for comfort and reassurance through the love and care of congregation members and clergy
Religious Helping	Attempting to provide spiritual support and comfort to others
Interpersonal Religious Discontent	Expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with the relationship of clergy or congregation members to the individual in the stressful situation
<i>Religious Methods of Coping to Achieve a Life Transformation</i>	
Seeking Religious Direction	Looking to religion for assistance in finding a new direction for living when the old one may no longer be viable
Religious Conversion	Looking to religion for a radical change in life
Religious Forgiving	Looking to religion for help in shifting to a state of peace from the anger, hurt, and fear associated with an offense

Helpful Hints. Here are some hints in using the RCOPE.

- Researchers can tailor the RCOPE to a specific life stressor or to life events in general. To tailor the RCOPE to a specific life stressor, individuals indicate the extent to which they use specific methods of s/r coping in dealing with a critical life event using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 3 ("a great deal"). To tailor the RCOPE to stressors in general, individuals indicate the degree to which they use specific methods of s/r coping in dealing with stressful life situations in general.

- Researchers can also tailor the RCOPE to events that took place in the past or to events that continue to unfold in the present. Simply change the tense of the items of the RCOPE from past to present.
- Feel free to select specific subscales of the RCOPE based on your sample and the functions of coping that you are most interested in exploring. You do not have to use the full scale.
- The RCOPE was developed and validated in the U. S. among samples of theists. Thus, it has a theistic emphasis and tone. However, participants can be encouraged in the instructions to replace the term “God” with other representations that they use themselves, such as the divine, sacred, Higher Power, Jesus, Allah, and so on.
- A few versions of the RCOPE have been developed in other languages (e.g., Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese). Please contact us to see whether there is a version of the RCOPE available in your particular language of interest.
- You do not need to request permission to use the RCOPE. We do ask that you keep us posted on your findings.

While the full RCOPE is a valuable, theoretically-based comprehensive tool for measuring s/r coping its extensive length limits its utility. It cannot be easily included in a standard battery of assessments that might be used in clinical and counseling situations, nor can it be readily applied to research situations where space for questions is at a premium. The clear need for a condensed version of the RCOPE led to the development of the Brief RCOPE.

Development of the Brief RCOPE

The Brief RCOPE was designed to provide researchers and practitioners with an efficient measure of s/r coping which retained the theoretical and functional foundation of the RCOPE Higher order factor analysis of the full RCOPE yielded two factors consisting of positive and negative s/r coping items (see 12 for full description of the development of the Brief RCOPE). A subset of items selected from both factors was used to create the final Brief RCOPE which is divided into two 7-item subscales, which identify clusters of positive and negative s/r coping methods (see Table 2 for the Brief RCOPE). The negative s/r coping subscale items assess the construct of s/r struggles.

Table 2. The Brief RCOPE: Positive and Negative Coping Subscale Items.

<i>Positive S/r coping subscale items</i>	
1.	Looked for a stronger connection with God.
2.	Sought God’s love and care.
3.	Sought help from God in letting go of my anger.
4.	Tried to put my plans into action together with God.
5.	Tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation.
6.	Asked forgiveness for my sins.
7.	Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems.

<i>Negative S/r coping Subscale Items</i>	
8.	Wondered whether God had abandoned me.
9.	Felt punished by God for my lack of devotion.
10.	Wondered what I did for God to punish me.
11.	Questioned God's love for me.
12.	Wondered whether my church had abandoned me.
13.	Decided the devil made this happen.
14.	Questioned the power of God.

The positive s/r coping subscale (PRC) of the Brief RCOPE taps into a sense of connectedness with a transcendent force, a secure relationship with a caring God, and a belief that life has a greater benevolent meaning. The negative s/r coping subscale (NRC) of the Brief RCOPE is characterized by signs of spiritual tension, conflict and struggle with God and others, as manifested by negative reappraisals of God's powers (e.g. feeling abandoned or punished by God), demonic reappraisals (i.e. feeling the devil is involved in the stressor), spiritual questioning and doubting, and interpersonal religious discontent.

Helpful Hints. Here are some hints in using the Brief RCOPE.

- Researchers can tailor the Brief RCOPE to a specific life stressor or to life events in general. To tailor the Brief RCOPE to a specific life stressor, individuals indicate the extent to which they use specific methods of s/r coping in dealing with a critical life event using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 3 ("a great deal"). To tailor the Brief RCOPE to stressors in general, individuals indicate the degree to which they use specific methods of s/r coping in dealing with stressful life situations in general.
- Researchers can also tailor the Brief RCOPE to events that took place in the past or to events that continue to unfold in the present. Simply change the tense of the items of the Brief RCOPE from past to present.
- The Brief RCOPE was developed and validated in the U. S. among samples of theists. Thus, it has a theistic emphasis and tone. However, participants can be encouraged in the instructions to replace the term "God" with other representations that they use themselves, such as the divine, sacred, Higher Power, Jesus, Allah, and so on.
- A few versions of the Brief RCOPE have been developed in other languages (e.g., Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese). Please contact us to see whether there is a version of the Brief RCOPE available in your particular language of interest.
- Versions and adaptations of the Brief RCOPE have been developed for Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist samples. [13 – 15] You do not need to request permission to use the Brief RCOPE. We do ask that you keep us posted on your findings.

- In scoring the Brief RCOPE, simply sum the positive items and then sum the negative items to create two subscale scores. DO NOT sum the positive and negative subscale scores since the two subscales are generally uncorrelated. Treat each subscale score separately in your analyses.

Strengths and Limitations. There are several positive features of the Brief RCOPE:

- It has received a great deal of research attention. It is the most commonly used measure of s/r coping.
- This body of research as a whole suggests that the Brief RCOPE is a reliable and valid measure.
- Because it is short, the Brief RCOPE can be integrated into many studies.

There are also some limitations of the Brief RCOPE:

- More studies are needed to determine the extent to which the Brief RCOPE is useful in cultures outside of the Western, largely Christian context.
- Significant alterations of the Brief RCOPE are needed before it can be applied to nontheistic contexts.
- Although the PRC is generally related positively to measures of well-being, cross-sectional studies have occasionally linked positive s/r coping with higher scores on distress indices. One interpretation of this finding is that distress mobilizes higher levels of s/r coping; this “s/r coping mobilization effect” may counter-balance the direct effects of positive s/r coping on well-being. Longitudinal studies can help tease out these effects.
- Although the brevity of the Brief RCOPE is its greatest strength – it is also its greatest weakness. The Brief RCOPE does not offer an extensive or intensive look into full variety of s/r coping methods. For example, although Pargament *et al.* [16] and Exline and Rose [17] articulated three types of s/r struggle (divine, intrapsychic, interpersonal), the NRC focuses mostly on divine types of struggle. A more extensive measure of s/r struggle is currently in development with Julie Exline. However, in spite of its brevity, Brief RCOPE appears to be a good instrument that does what it was intended to do: assess religious methods of coping in an efficient, psychometrically sound, and theoretically meaningful manner.

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