

Coping with Harassment Experiences: The Use and Effectiveness of Religious Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Religion is often referenced as a strategy that is used to successfully cope with negative life events. One such event, harassment, has been found to adversely impact the mental health and well-being of many people. All types of harassment including physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual, are serious and widespread issues. However, the current literature contains very few studies that have investigated the relationship between harassment and religious coping. The aim of the current study is to narrow this gap and determine 1) what types of religious coping strategies students use and how often they do so, 2) how effective such strategies may be when coping with harassment experiences, and 3) if a student's religiosity predicts their likelihood of using religious coping strategies. To investigate these questions, an online survey was developed and distributed through Qualtrics and SONA, a research experience system. The sample consists of undergraduate students at a large southeastern university who were currently enrolled in an introductory psychology class. Apart from answering a harassment experiences questionnaire and a religious coping questionnaire, participants were also asked questions regarding their perceived religiosity and their demographics, including gender, race, spiritual beliefs, and sexual orientation. Data collection is complete. Preliminary analyses reveal that up to 58% of students report that using religious coping strategies was effective for coping with harassment experiences. Based on the final results, we predict that, among the five subscales of religious coping, certain strategies will be more effective than others for coping with harassment. Specifically, we predict that the methods of finding meaning will be the most effective and the methods of gaining control will be the least effective. Furthermore, we predict that religiosity will be a significant predictor of one's likelihood of engaging in religious coping. The conclusions and implications of our findings will be discussed.

Keywords: Religious Coping, Harassment, Religiosity

1. Introduction

Across time and cultures, religion has often been used as a way to successfully cope with negative life events, which is mainly due to how religion encompasses a diverse set of beliefs and allows for the exploration of the meaning of life. When coping with such negative life events, using religious coping strategies is correlated with improved physical and mental health¹. Specifically, maintaining a personal relationship with a higher power serves as a protective factor and means of successful coping for survivors of harassment². According to Pargament, Koenig, and Perez, there are five general types of religious coping strategies that form the foundation of the Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE)¹. The five functions are listed as follows: methods of coping to find meaning, methods to gain control, methods to gain comfort and closeness to God, methods to gain intimacy with others and closeness to God, and methods to achieve a life transformation¹.

Religiosity is defined as the combination of engagement in religious activities, attendance of religious services, and how important one considers religion to be. The closer an individual identifies with their religion, the greater the

impact that religion has on the individual's life and well-being³. Having a religious or spiritual belief system during adolescence can alleviate the effects of negative life events one may experience, and alternatively, enduring negative life events also influences these beliefs in adulthood⁴.

A previous research study investigated the use of spirituality as a means of coping with childhood sexual abuse among adult survivors. The results indicated that the more important a survivor considered their spirituality to be, the less they experienced negative mental health outcomes, such as depression². Additionally, research shows that in the midst of crisis situations, individuals often reference the areas of their identity that are most important to them⁵.

Harassment, a commonly experienced negative life event, involves behaviors that may be physical, verbal, sexual, and/or emotional, and that are aimed at an individual with the intent to harm. Harassment experiences are rarely single occurrences, but rather reoccurring combinations of different types of behaviors⁶. Experiencing harassment has been found to adversely impact the mental health and well-being of many people, thankfully, such effects can be minimized if one is able to cope successfully⁷.

Despite the impacts of these negative life events, researchers know very little about the relationship between harassment and religious coping. There are studies that have looked into negative life events and religious coping, but largely these have taken a Judeo-Christian view point and have not been manipulated to be inclusive of all religious belief systems. The aim of the current study is to narrow this gap in the literature, take an all-inclusive approach towards religious coping, and investigate the following hypotheses: 1) college students who have experienced, and have attempted to cope with, harassment, have likely used a religious-based skill as part of their coping strategy, 2) when coping with harassment, religiosity will predict how likely someone is to engage in religious coping and 3) out of the five main categories of religious coping strategies¹, the strategies that focus on finding meaning will be the most effective when coping with harassment, whereas, the strategies that focus on gaining control will be the least effective.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

In total, 224 participants took the online survey. The data of 174 participants were used in statistical analyses. Participants whose data were not used in the analyses did not give their consent to participate, did not specify their age, did not complete the survey in full, completed the survey in an inappropriate amount of time (3.5 minutes or less, or 95 minutes or more), or answered “no” to every BullyHarm question, indicating they had not experienced any of the harassment behaviors. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older to partake in the survey. Participant's ages ranged from 18 years to 54 years ($M = 19.89$ years, $SD = 3.67$ years). The majority of the sample was female ($n = 118$, 67.8%), 31% was male ($n = 54$), and 1.1% identified as “other” ($n = 2$). In regards to race, 59.8% of participants identified as White or Caucasian, 20.1% as African or African American, 10.3% as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish, 3.4% as Asian or Asian American, 3.4% as multi-racial, 0.6% as Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern American, 0.6% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1.7% identified as “other.” The last demographical question that was asked in the survey asked participants to identify their present spiritual belief system, if any. Out of the sample, 68.4% identified as Christian (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, etc.), 11.5% as agnostic, 10.9% claimed having no religious affiliation, 2.3% identified as Jewish, 1.7% as atheist, 1.1% as Muslim, and 1.1% as Buddhist, and 2.9% identified as “other.”

2.2 Measures

In the 94-item online survey, a harassment questionnaire, a religious coping questionnaire (RCOPE), a religiosity survey, and a demographics survey were included. To assess if participants had experienced harassment and what forms of harassment they might have experienced, an adapted version of the Bullying, Harassment, and Aggression Receipt Measure (BullyHARM) was used⁸. The BullyHARM scale was originally worded so that the children taking part in the initial study could understand the language⁸. For the current study, the items were adapted to better suit an adult sample. For example, the item “said something to scare or intimidate me” was changed to “threatened me.” Other items from the original scale were combined into a single item and a few new items were added, such as “stalked me” and “had sex with me without my consent.” In total, there were 21 items ($\alpha = .81$) and participants indicated whether the behavior had ever happened to them by answering either “yes” or “no.”

The Religious Coping (RCOPE) questionnaire was developed and validated by Pargament, Koenig, and Perez¹. This portion of the survey asked participants to indicate *how much or how frequently* they used each religious coping strategy when coping with their previous harassment experience(s). Answer choices were based on a 4-point Likert Scale and ranged from “never” to “frequently.” The RCOPE contains five main subscales that are based on the following goals: finding meaning, gaining control, gaining comfort and closeness to God, gaining intimacy with others and closeness to God, and achieving a life transformation¹. The complete RCOPE contains 110 items, yet the authors specify a shortened version in which each subscale contains 3 items. In the current study, this 3-item version was used with a few strategies being excluded due to repetition. In total, the RCOPE used in this study included 60 religious coping items ($\alpha = .96$). To be inclusive of all religions and beliefs, the term “higher power” was used throughout the survey in the place of “God.” Higher power was operationally defined as any spirit or being who is at the center of a particular religion, such as God, Jesus, Allah, or the Hindu triumvirate. Participants were asked to apply whichever term was most applicable to them and their religious beliefs. Similarly, the term “evil being” was used in place of “devil.” In order to assess participants’ perceived effectiveness of each scale of the RCOPE, the question “In general, how effective were the above strategies that you used in helping you cope with your experience with harassment?” was asked after each of the five scales.

Participants were then asked three questions regarding their religiosity ($\alpha = .86$). The first two asked participants to indicate how frequently they attend religious services and how frequently they engage in religious activities (i.e. praying, meditating, reading religious texts). Answer choices were on a 4-point Likert scale (0 “never,” 1 “rarely,” 2 “sometimes,” and 3 “frequently”). On the last item, participants rated how important they considered religion to be in their life. Answer choices were on a 4-point Likert scale (0 “unimportant,” 1 “somewhat unimportant,” 2 “somewhat important,” and 3 “important”). The last portion of the survey included a demographics questionnaire comprised of items about gender, race, age, and spiritual belief system.

2.3 Procedure

Undergraduate college students taking an introductory psychology course were recruited through SONA, a research experience system. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, and all participants gave their consent to participate via an online consent form at the start of the survey. After completing the 15-minute survey, participants received research credit for their introductory psychology course.

3. Results

The first hypothesis stated that college students who have experienced harassment, and have attempted to cope with that experience, have likely used a religious-based strategy as part of their overall coping plan. To address this hypothesis, participants were assigned a religious coping score that was calculated by summing all of their answers to the RCOPE questions together. Scores could range from a minimum of 60 (all strategies “never” used) to 240 (all strategies “frequently” used). The mean religious coping sum score was 142.4 ($SD = 34.7$). The minimum score was 62.0 and the maximum score was 207.0, indicating that every participant used at least one coping strategy “rarely” when coping with their harassment experience(s). There was not a single participant who reported using no religious coping strategy. Thus, hypothesis one was supported.

A standard multiple regression was used to determine if the three religiosity items were a significant predictor of participants’ likelihood of engaging in religious coping. The three religiosity items (attendance of religious services, frequency of engaging in religious activities, and importance of religion in one’s life) were the predictor variables. The religious coping sum scores from hypothesis one served as the criterion variable. Preliminary analyses revealed no violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, collinearity, homoscedasticity, and the independence of observations. The analysis did not include any outliers. The results of the regression were statistically significant, $F(3, 163) = 49.78, p < .001$. The model as a whole explained 47.8% (R squared) of the variability in religious coping scores. Two of the three religiosity predictors made statistically significant contributions to the prediction of religious coping. The first predictor was frequency of engaging in religious activities, which was statistically significant ($beta = .38, p < .001$) and indicated that frequently engaging in religious activities and using religious coping strategies were positively correlated, $r = .66$. The second predictor was importance of religion in one’s life, which was also significant ($beta = .28, p = .004$) and was found to be positively correlated with religious coping, $r = .64$. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more important one considers religion to be, the more likely they are to use religious strategies

when coping with harassment experiences. These results support the second hypothesis that religiosity is a significant predictor of religious coping when coping with harassment.

A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted to compare the five RCOPE subscales and their self-reported effectiveness scores for coping with harassment experiences. The test revealed that there was a significant effect of RCOPE subscale on effectiveness, Wilk's Lambda = .83, $F(4, 166) = 8.32$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .17. Pairwise comparisons were conducted to compare all possible pairs of subscales; six of these comparisons were statistically significant (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pairwise Comparisons Of RCOPE Subscale Effectiveness

Subscale (A)	Subscale (B)	Mean Difference (A-B)	Std. Error	Sig. ^b	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^b	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-.259*	0.079	0.013	-0.484	-0.033
1	3	-.271*	0.079	0.007	-0.494	-0.047
1	4	-0.029	0.082	1	-0.262	0.204
1	5	-.353*	0.081	0	-0.584	-0.122
2	1	.259*	0.079	0.013	0.033	0.484
2	3	-0.012	0.067	1	-0.203	0.18
2	4	.229*	0.074	0.023	0.018	0.44
2	5	-0.094	0.076	1	-0.311	0.122
3	1	.271*	0.079	0.007	0.047	0.494
3	2	0.012	0.067	1	-0.18	0.203
3	4	.241*	0.068	0.005	0.049	0.433
3	5	-0.082	0.075	1	-0.296	0.132
4	1	0.029	0.082	1	-0.204	0.262
4	2	-.229*	0.074	0.023	-0.44	-0.018
4	3	-.241*	0.068	0.005	-0.433	-0.049
4	5	-.324*	0.078	0.001	-0.546	-0.101
5	1	.353*	0.081	0	0.122	0.584
5	2	0.094	0.076	1	-0.122	0.311
5	3	0.082	0.075	1	-0.132	0.296
5	4	.324*	0.078	0.001	0.101	0.546

Based on estimated marginal means.

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

^b Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

The first test indicated that there was a significant difference between the effectiveness of subscale one, “methods of coping to find meaning” ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.19$), and subscale two, “methods of coping to gain control” ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.02$), $p = .013$. The second test indicated that the effectiveness of subscale one, “methods of coping to find meaning” ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.19$), and subscale three, “methods of coping to gain comfort and closeness to a higher power” ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.04$), were significantly different, $p = .007$. The third significant test compared subscale one, “methods of coping to find meaning” ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.19$), and subscale five, “methods of coping to achieve a life transformation” ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.12$), and found that there was a significant difference between the effectiveness of these two subscales, $p < .001$. The fourth test showed that there was a significant difference between the effectiveness between subscale two, “methods of coping to gain control” ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.02$), and subscale four, “methods of

coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to a higher power” ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.07, p = .023$). The fifth comparison was between subscale three, “methods of coping to gain comfort and closeness to a higher power” ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.04$), and subscale four, “methods of coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to a higher power” ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.07$). The results demonstrated that there was a significant difference between their effectiveness scores, $p = .005$. The final test indicated a significant difference between the effectiveness of subscale five, “methods of coping to achieve a life transformation” ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.12$), and subscale four, “methods of coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to a higher power” ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.07, p = .001$).

Based on the mean effectiveness scores, the fifth subscale, “methods of coping to achieve a life transformation”, is the most effective type of religious coping for coping with harassment. This subscale has a mean effectiveness score of 3.64. Subscale one, “methods of coping to find meaning”, and subscale four, “methods of coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to a higher power”, are not significantly different from one another and have the lowest mean effectiveness scores of 3.29 and 3.32, respectively. Overall, these results do not support the third hypothesis that the strategies that focus on finding meaning are the most effective (subscale one) and the strategies that focus on gaining control are the least effective (subscale two).

4. Discussion

Our first hypothesis, that college students who have experienced harassment have likely used a religious based coping strategy, was supported. Every single participant, whether they identified as religious or not, indicated that they used at least one of the religious strategies when attempting to cope with their experiences. An explanation of this may be that, in times of intense stress, trauma, or anxiety, people are more likely to emphasize spirituality than they would in everyday situations⁹. Thus, after experiencing such an event as harassment, those who identify as non-religious may find comfort when engaging in behaviors largely considered to be religious.

The second hypothesis was also supported, as religiosity predicted religious coping. Specifically, two out of the three religiosity items, frequency of engaging in religious activities and the importance of religion in one’s life, were significant. Consistent with previous research³, we conclude that the more important one considers religion to be, the more likely they are to depend upon religion when coping with stressful experiences.

For the third hypothesis, we investigated which of the five different types of religious coping were the most and least effective for coping with harassment. Although our initial predictions were not supported, the findings are particularly interesting. Based on results of the statistical analyses, the more effective subscales were “methods of coping to achieve a life transformation,” “methods of coping to gain comfort and closeness to a higher power,” and “methods of coping to gain control.” On the contrary, the subscales that were rated as least effective were “methods of coping to find meaning” and “methods of coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to a higher power.” Knowing which types of religious coping that survivors of harassment state are most effective is valuable information that can be implemented in a variety of environments. Counseling and other psychological services, medical services, and religious environments, can base their treatments and therapy plans on the most effective types of religious coping. This may result in an increase in successful coping, mental health, life satisfaction and well-being in those who have experienced harassment and are seeking professional help.

As with any research study, these conclusions must be considered in the context of the study’s limitations. For example, the effectiveness of each RCOPE subscale was based solely on participant’s self-reporting of the scales’ effectiveness. Self-report measures may be biased and based on personal opinions. Future studies could improve upon ours by using additional measures to assess effectiveness, such as measuring mental health status before and after the use of religious coping strategies, and taking notes of any improvements. Due to the use of a convenience sample of college students in the southeast, the findings and conclusions of this study may not be representative of all populations. Conducting a similar study with a more diverse sample would reduce the effects of this limitation and would provide more external validity. In the current study, data were not collected on participants who answered “no” to all of the harassment experience questions. Future research could build upon the current research by investigating which coping strategies people use, and how often they use them, if they have not been harassed. Comparisons could then be made between those who have experienced harassment and those who have not.

Overall, the findings from this study provide valuable insight into the high prevalence of religious coping, the factors that may prompt one to engage in religious coping, and the specific types of religious-based coping that are most effective for successfully coping with harassment experiences. Furthermore, this information can be implemented to better serve those who have experienced harassment and can provide ways in which to cope with and overcome such experiences.

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