

The Association between the Frustration of Relatedness Needs and Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

Introduction: Emotions are known to be part of our self-regulation and the key to our adaptation and healthy functioning, generally speaking. In this study, coping mechanisms refer to both cognitive and behavioral efforts to alleviate or overcome stressful situations, especially when an automatic response is not readily available.

Objectives: The present study aims to examine the association between relatedness needs, frustration, and adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms (self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement), and the extent to which these adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms predict relatedness needs frustration.

Methods: Online survey on a convenience sample of 403 Romanian respondents, using COPE Brief Scale and The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale.

Results: Using multiple regression analysis, the results show that 21% of the relatedness needs frustration is explained by self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement, as coping mechanisms.

Conclusions: Given that few recent studies have addressed how maladaptive and adaptive coping mechanisms of the general population are associated with the frustration of the need for relatedness, this study responds to a more general need for research in the field of psychology.

Keywords: self-determination theory, relatedness needs frustration, coping mechanisms, self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, behavioral disengagement

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I. Introduction

It is generally known about emotions that they are part of our self-adjustment modalities, of our key to adaptation and to our healthy functioning (Gross, 2001, 2002, 2007). As a matter of fact, Gross highlights two strategies for emotional adjustment:

- Cognitive reappraisal – regarding thinking, connected to the experienced situation; in what way can the understanding of things be seen from different perspectives to find alternative meanings.
- Expressive suppression – the trial to inhibit or reduce the effects of any type of ulterior manifestation after the event.

The two types of strategies that orient our adaptive emotional process are: 1) a strategy that has an antecedental focus, as the first one, which acts before activating the tendency for emotional responses, and 2) a strategy focused on the answer, so that it appears after the emotions consequent to the response are triggered (Gross & John, 2003).

These strategies are in relation to the active coping modalities, more precisely, with the positive reinterpretation dimension, with which the cognitive reappraisal is in direct correlation and the expressive suppression is in reverse correlation. Namely, the individuals who utilize cognitive reappraisal have the capacity to consider the bright side of events and thus to find a positive meaning in everything that happens to them. The active coping modalities correlate negatively with the expressive suppression because, through this strategy, individuals are keeping their emotions under control, mask them, and rather tend to hide them instead of letting them be seen. Cognitive reappraisal is in positive relation with the positive affect and thus contributes to the social dimension, to being in relationships more naturally, more adequately, to having a relationship-oriented mindset, which leads to a better social functioning. Conversely, expressive suppression creates distant and not always adequate relationships (Balzarotti, John & Gross, 2010).

In our social relationships, the social behaviors emerged during our development bring positive dimensions in our life, like love, communication, communion, affiliation, etc., but also negative dimensions like chagrin, hatred, enviousness, inadequacy, disunion, etc. The negative ones end up being stressors. Throughout our development we are always confronted with the stress agents and thus we develop a series of mechanisms to cope with them. Stress-adaptive mechanisms are labelled, in scientific literature, as ‘coping’. This word was introduced by

Lazarus and Launtier in 1978. We can define stress as an interactional organism-environment result. From this configuration – the organism reacts to stress agents, developing and using its resources and adaptive methods, and this leads to either solution or blockage, exhaustion, or even ailment. The concept of ‘coping’ represents the ensemble of mechanisms and conduits that the individual is putting in between them and the events perceived as stress agents, to minimize, tolerate, control their effect on their own state of physical or mental comfort. Lazarus and Folkman define ‘coping’ referring to the relationship between one person’s resources and the capacity to face the aversive events that one is going through (apud Jurcău, 2003). This definition highlights four essential characteristics of coping:

1. Cognitive processes and action play important roles in adaptation.
2. Coping is always a process of transaction between the person and the environment (but it also implies inter-conditioning between coping, evaluation, emotion, response, re-evaluation, etc.).
3. The necessity of the voluntary effort for the adjustment mechanisms (even though it also activates the unconscious mechanisms).
4. It contains both the possibility to adjust and the probability that the adjustment does not occur, thus it is noted that there are both efficient coping mechanisms, and also less efficient ones.

Coping implies changes in relation to context, domain, age – for example, the context determines the way in which we accomplish coping; young people prefer problem-oriented forms of adjustment, compared to older people who prefer passive, emotion-oriented forms of adjustment. When the stress sources cannot be controlled, there is another efficient way of coping, which allows one to tolerate or, eventually, even ignore the stressor. The functionality of coping depends on *who*, *when*, and *how* a specific strategy is used, the threat type, and the contextual, environmental factors.

One classification of the coping mechanisms was elaborated by Miclea (1997), as follows: behavioral, cognitive, and biochemical coping.

1. Behavioral coping – groups all behaviors that function to prevent, reduce or resolve the action of stress factors.
2. Cognitive coping – comprises the totality of the mechanisms that process information which have the function to diminish the stress reaction. Thus, this does not have as object the factual stressful situation, but its informational mediation.

3. Biochemical coping – the biological component of the stress response involves different reactions of the body at a biochemical level. The means to optimize the biochemical reaction to stress are either spontaneously generated by the human body or deliberately induced by the subject himself.

In relationships with others, an important part is represented by two processes that presume a common frame of interaction – collaboration and cooperation (Lelord & Andre, 2003). These imply, in this common frame, the interaction based on the common interest, but also the existence of a complementary relationship between abilities and information. These subsume our need to have relationships, which is normal, and lead to developing certain abilities to relate, such as communication skills, work and teamwork competences, the ability to remain focused on the task, to fulfil multiple roles, the ability to trust, etc. (Cristescu, 2008). If one's relationships are not satisfying for them, they bring frustration. This is often directly related to aggressiveness, which can be characterized as being a response to frustration (Neculau, 2003).

The relationship between frustration and aggressiveness is often described by the idea which sustains that blocking the expression of an impulse determines frustration, that sets off the aggressive behavior, which further motivates a behavior to remove the blockage (Atkinson, 2002). One other approach to reduce the frustration to relate is also the acquisition of prosocial behavior. The development of such behaviors is an efficient way to reduce the manifestation of frustrations. Prosocial behavior can be defined as a voluntary conduct, to benefit others, whose realization does not depend on expecting rewards (Petermann & Petermann, 2006). The prosocial behavior can occur from someone's own initiative, or upon request from other people and it relates to: social gatherings (sympathy, commendation, recognition); looking for a positive feedback (for example, social acceptance); negative experiences with others who make cooperation difficult; and the need to get out of social isolation, as a facilitating factor to the cooperation behavior.

Communication, as an impact factor for interhuman relationships, is mediated by attitudes, and these are constantly related to our values. This way of reporting to our values ensures our evaluative function, and makes us engage, stay engaged or disengage from our relationships (Milcu, 2005). Communication with others ensures containing relationships, which create feelings of belonging, calm, comfort and safety.

Among the mediators in relationships, we can mention: acceptance, humor, emotional support.

Acceptance is also used as a way to manage stress – as it can have positive valences, when we acknowledge our limits, when we understand what is and what is not in our control, what we can do in the given situation, but it can also be a negative coping strategy, when we allow anything that may come upon us and give up, or when we accept not to fight, not to be part of the solution, resigning ourselves to the situation.

Humor facilitates communication and brings on a good way to relate to others. In each culture there is a set of typical situations, which contain preordained roles, the types of reactions to these being broadly known – such as jokes, to which the general reaction is laughter; but, based on the joke's content, the reaction may vary, depending on the person, or differing from a culture to another (Mucchielli, 2005).

Humor is considered, from Freud onwards, a defense mechanism, often being seen as the best defense mechanism of all. One definition of humor makes reference to presenting a situation, especially if disagreeable, through its agreeable aspects, or even by mocking the actions, or reactions to it. Humor can also be associated with excessive or recurring usage of spirited words, in order to reduce anxiety, the distress that appears in stressful situations, or when we have disturbing thoughts or emotional reactions. Humor is individual, as it is collective. We find it in its collective facet in jokes, humorous moments, stand-up comedy acts. Jokes have a folkloric component as they have anonymous authors and are most commonly conveyed orally. The universality of humor is proved by comedy shows, that are written by different authors, in various countries and are successful around the world, everywhere they are played. Equally pervasive are roles or characters that win universality – heroes that frequently have some features that can be endlessly funny.

Guilt, in its most subjective form, is a feeling experienced by someone who failed in fulfilling certain obligations, responsibilities or who hurt another person in some way. Guilt can also have the self as its core-orientation, not just others. One of the trigger factors for guilt is the responsibility for the carried-out actions, which is part of a larger dimension called conscientiousness. Especially because it is triggered by not respecting a rule or not assuming responsibility, guilt also has a reparatory function – through its contribution to mend the relationship it affected. Though the feeling of guilt is a personal one, and lived subjectively by each of us, it is the result of an evaluation tied to social norms, and thus contributes to the way we stay in relationships (Leary, 2007).

II. Objectives

Given the above, the purpose of this study is to analyze the association between relatedness needs frustration and adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as: self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement, and the extent to which these adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms predict relatedness needs frustration in current times.

III. Methods

Participants and tools

This study is a quantitative exploratory one, that analyzes data from 403 Romanian respondents of an online survey on coping strategies, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with fundamental psychological needs. Out of the total of 403 participants in this research, 1% of the respondents declared their level of education completed as professional attestation, 14.1% baccalaureate, 34.5% university studies, 43.2% master's degree and 7.2% doctorate. Regarding residence, 25.8% come from the rural and 74.2% from urban areas. Regarding the age of the respondents, 11.4% are between 18 and 25 years old, 25.3% are between 26 and 35 years old, 32.8% are between 36 and 45 years old, 24.3% are between 46 and 55 years old, 4% are between 56 and 65 years old and 2.2% are over 65 years old. 83% of all respondents are women and the remaining 17% are male.

Since the object of this investigation was exploratory, we used the opportunistic sampling technique. In line with the idea of accessibility, the total number of participants was chosen in the order of completion of the online questionnaire posted on social media sites. The answers were registered between April and June 2020.

COPE Brief Scale. To assess coping mechanisms, a variety of scales have been developed (Ways of Coping Scale, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Measure of Affect Regulation Styles, Larsen & Prizmic, 2006; Coping Schemas Inventory – Revised, Wong, Reker & Peacock, 2006). The COPE Inventory – Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989), a multidimensional inventory of 15 scales, with four items each, is one of the most common. Carver (1997) proposed an abbreviated version of the original instrument, Brief-COPE, which has been extensively used in health contexts, due to the controversial expansion of the original tool. This tool

has 14 subscales, each with two items: (a) Acceptance entails embracing the truth of the situation and trying to deal with it; (b) Use of emotional support entails finding warmth and understanding; (c) Humor entails making jokes about and having fun about it; (d) Positive reframing attempts to see the case in a new way, to make it seem more positive, to find something positive in it; (e) Religion seeks solace in religious or philosophical values, reflection, or meditation. (f) Active coping is the subject of attempts to change the condition by doing something about it; (g) Use of instrumental support is seeking input and guidance from others, hoping to get advice or help from others on what to do; (h) Planning attempts to come up with a solution for what has to be done, think about what steps to do next; (i) Behavioral disengagement, or give up on coping; (k) Self-distraction entails going to work or engaging in other tasks in order to divert attention away from the issue; (l) The term “self-blame” refers to self-criticism and blaming oneself for what has occurred; (m) Substance use is described as the use of alcohol or other substances to improve one's mood; (n) Venting refers to saying things that allow bad thoughts to circulate freely and convey negative emotions.

Acceptance, Use of emotional support, Humor, Constructive reframing, and Religion are all classified as emotion-centered techniques, by Carver (1997). Active coping, Use of instrumental support, and Planning, on the other hand, are called problem-oriented techniques. Finally, dysfunctional coping mechanisms include Behavioral disengagement, Denial, Self-distraction, Self-blame, Drug use, and Venting.

Given that coping mechanisms can be categorized as adaptive or maladaptive based on a variety of causes, there is enough observational data to indicate which are most often associated with emotional distress or well-being. To this end, Meyer (2001) classified the strategies measured by Brief-COPE in the maladaptive approach, which included Venting, Denial, Substance use, Behavioral disengagement, Self-distraction and Self-blame, and adaptive coping, including Positive reframing, Planning and Use of emotional support, Active coping, Use of instrumental support, Acceptance, Religion, and Humor. According to Meyer (2001), maladaptive strategies are most closely associated with mental health conditions, such as depression. On the other hand, adaptive strategies provide a stronger connection to psychological well-being. As a result, maladaptive strategies were discovered to be related to perceived stress and life satisfaction adaptation (Alveal & Barraza, 2015).

The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale. The self-determination model recognizes three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and claims that these needs must be met on a regular basis for people to perform at their best. Scales for meeting basic social needs are arrays of items that assess how comfortable people are with all three of these needs. Recently, questionnaires that measure both happiness and dissatisfaction, such as the Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (NSFS), have been created (the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale – BPNSFS). Research has concluded that satisfied need is associated with well-being, while frustrated need is associated with decreased well-being (Chen et al., 2015).

The scale consists of 24 items, the respondents being instructed to choose the answer that indicates the extent to which the statement is true, on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Not true at all, to 5 = Completely true. To obtain the score for each dimension, the following items are summed up: Autonomy satisfaction: 1, 7, 13, 19, Autonomy frustration: 2, 8, 14, 20, Relatedness satisfaction: 3, 9, 15, 21, Relatedness frustration: 4, 10, 16, 22, Competence satisfaction: 5, 11, 17, 23, Competence frustration: 6, 12, 18, 24.

IV. Results

This research uses a multiple regression analysis to predict the variance of relatedness needs frustration, based on the values obtained for the adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms: self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement.

In Table 1, we show the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the present research: relatedness needs frustration (m = 6.37; SD = 2.68), use of emotional support (m = 4.75; SD = 1.73), behavioral disengagement (m = 2.59; SD = 1.11), humor (m = 4.49; SD = 1.56), acceptance (m = 6.36; SD = 1.26), and self-blame (m = 2.91; SD = 1.20).

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics for research variables

		Relatedness needs frustration	Use of emotional support	Behavioral disengagement	Humor	Acceptance	Self-blame
N	Valid	403	403	403	403	403	403
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		6.37	4.75	2.59	4.49	6.36	2.91
Median		6.00	5.00	2.00	4.00	6.00	3.00
Std. Deviation		2.680	1.734	1.115	1.563	1.261	1.205
Variance		7.184	3.007	1.243	2.445	1.590	1.453
Minimum		4	2	2	2	2	2
Maximum		16	8	8	8	8	8
Percentiles	25	4.00	3.00	2.00	3.00	6.00	2.00
	50	6.00	5.00	2.00	4.00	6.00	3.00
	75	8.00	6.00	3.00	5.00	7.00	4.00

In the following table (Table 2), we present the correlation coefficients obtained. The results depict a significant positive correlation between relatedness needs frustration and behavioral disengagement (r = .327, p < 0.01), humor (r = .123, p < 0.05), and self-blame (r = .338, p < 0.01), and a significant negative correlation between relatedness needs frustration and use of emotional support (r = -.139, p < 0.01), acceptance (r = -.159, p < 0.01). These results emphasize that high scores on relatedness needs frustration associate with high scores on behavioral disengagement, self-blame and humor as coping mechanisms and with low scores on use of emotional support and acceptance. It was expected that high scores on relatedness needs frustration would be positively correlated with maladaptive coping mechanisms and negatively correlated with adaptive coping mechanism. We can see that humor is positively correlated with relatedness needs frustration.

Table 2 – Correlation coefficients between research variables

		Relatedness needs frustration	Use of emotional support	Behavioral disengagement	Humor	Acceptance	Self-blame
Relatedness needs frustration	Pearson Correlation	1	-.139**	.327**	.123*	-.159**	.338**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005	.000	.013	.001	.000
	N	403	403	403	403	403	403
Use of emotional support	Pearson Correlation	-.139**	1	-.032	.118*	.219**	.178**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005		.519	.018	.000	.000
	N	403	403	403	403	403	403
Behavioral disengagement	Pearson Correlation	.327**	-.032	1	.047	-.158**	.293**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.519		.351	.001	.000
	N	403	403	403	403	403	403
Humor	Pearson Correlation	.123*	.118*	.047	1	.223**	.060
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.018	.351		.000	.233
	N	403	403	403	403	403	403
Acceptance	Pearson Correlation	-.159**	.219**	-.158**	.223**	1	-.038
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.001	.000		.445
	N	403	403	403	403	403	403
Self-blame	Pearson Correlation	.338**	.178**	.293**	.060	-.038	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.233	.445	
	N	403	403	403	403	403	403

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
 * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Largely in line with the hedonic versus eudaimonic well-being framework, the results suggested that humorous messages lift people’s spirits by providing pleasure, while moving messages bring comfort by providing realism, optimism, and by illustrating core human values (Strick, 2021). In Strick’s research, results showed that viewing non-moving humorous messages significantly reduced negative emotions but did not increase positive emotions, implying they are particularly valuable as mood-enhancers during crises, like COVID-19.

Regarding the modelling of predictive factors, our team has used regression analysis having as dependent variable relatedness needs frustration and independent variables the adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms of self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement, to measure how much of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables.

As described in Table 3 and Figure 1, the independent variables IV1, IV2, IV3, IV4, IV5 of our research explain 21% of the relatedness need frustration variance, with all five independent variables coping mechanisms: self-blame (Beta = .295, at $p < 0.01$), acceptance (Beta = -.107, at $p < 0.05$), humor (Beta = .141, at $p < 0.01$), use of emotional support (Beta = -.177, at $p < 0.01$), and behavioral disengagement (Beta = .211, at $p < 0.01$) being calculated as significant predictors, at an $F = 23.441$, significant at a threshold $p < 0.01$.

Table 3 – Linear regression coefficients

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Model Summary ^b		Change Statistics			Sig. F Change
				Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	
1	.477 ^a	.228	.218	2.370	.228	23.441	5	397	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Self-blame, Acceptance, Humor, Use of emotional support, Behavioral disengagement
b. Dependent Variable: Relatedness needs frustration

Model	Sum of Squares	df	ANOVA ^a		Sig.
			Mean Square	F	
Regression	658.312	5	131.662	23.441	.000 ^b
Residual	2229.857	397	5.617		
Total	2888.169	402			

a. Dependent Variable: Relatedness needs frustration
b. Predictors: (Constant), Self-blame, Acceptance, Humor, Use of emotional support, Behavioral disengagement

Model	Coefficients ^a				
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.814	.777		6.195	.000
Use of emotional support	-.274	.071	-.177	-3.840	.000
Behavioral disengagement	.508	.113	.211	4.511	.000
Humor	.241	.078	.141	3.086	.002
Acceptance	-.227	.100	-.107	-2.280	.023
Self-blame	.656	.105	.295	6.266	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Relatedness needs frustration

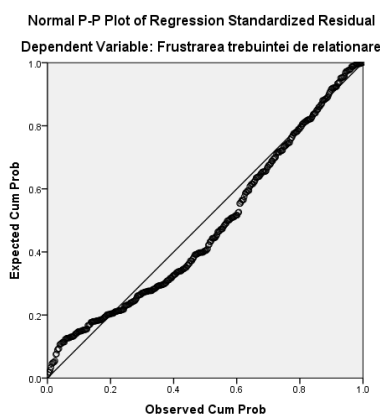


Figure 1 – Plot of residual coefficients

Thus, the hypothesis of our study according to which the coping mechanisms: self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement represent significant predictors of relatedness needs frustration is confirmed.

High scores on relatedness needs frustration associate with high scores on behavioral disengagement, self-blame and humor as coping mechanisms and with low scores on use of emotional support and acceptance, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

V. Conclusions

One has to take into account that our study has several limitations, the first of which is that the data are focused on self-reporting. Although the regression analysis obtained a statistically significant result, namely 21% of the variance of relatedness needs frustration, as explained by self-blame, acceptance, humor, use of emotional support, and behavioral disengagement, it is not possible to draw a singular conclusion regarding causality, namely we did not study experimentally how the studied mechanisms of maladaptive and adaptive coping influence the increase of frustration of the need for relatedness, in the context of the pandemic.

It is important to expand our study, as future research could build on our findings (e.g., longitudinal studies, providing a closer look at the coping mechanisms that frustrate the need for relatedness), and address these issues, for the benefit of those affected.

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