

Abstract

The theoretical model of interrogative suggestibility predicts that levels of suggestibility are related to cognitive sets and coping strategies in dealing with interrogative pressure. Active coping strategies, involving a critical cognitive set, should be associated with reduced suggestibility. Whilst there are mixed results regarding the role of specific coping strategies in suggestibility, some evidence suggests that individuals most concerned with managing their emotional states may be more likely to engage in avoidance, emotion-focused styles of coping and consequently demonstrate higher levels of interrogative suggestibility. In line with this, self-esteem has been identified as a factor affecting how people cope with interrogative pressure. This study further investigated the role of coping strategies and self-esteem in measuring interrogative suggestibility. Participants completed the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale (GSS 2), the COPE, and the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory. Total self-esteem was not related to any of the GSS 2 measures, but correlated negatively with emotion-focused coping. Regression analyses found significant predictive models for Yield 1, Yield 2 and Total Suggestibility. Emotion-focused coping emerged as the only significant predictor of these measures. Results are discussed in terms of their theoretical implications.

Suggestibility effects resulting from police interviewing have been referred to as interrogative suggestibility (Gudjonsson, 1983), which has been defined as “the extent to which, within a closed social interaction, people come to accept messages communicated during formal questioning, as a result of which their subsequent behavioural response is affected” (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986, p. 84). Two discrete forms of suggestive influence have been identified as central to suggestible responding in this context; the use of suggestive or leading questions, and the influence of negative feedback or criticism (Gudjonsson, 1983). Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) integrated these two forms of suggestive influence in their theoretical model of interrogative suggestibility, which postulates that interrogative suggestibility is a result of an individual’s cognitive appraisal of the interrogative, or interview situation, and their ability to cope with that.

Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) propose three central factors that are likely to shape an individual’s response to the interview situation; uncertainty, expectation and trust. Varying degrees of uncertainty and expectations are thought to shape the interviewee’s cognitive appraisal and result in them adopting a “general cognitive strategy” (Gudjonsson, 2003, p. 348) to cope with the demands of the interview. This coping strategy may result in a suggestible or resistant response to the interviewing procedure. The cognitive appraisal of each question is further affected by uncertainty and expectation. Interviewees may be uncertain about answers to specific questions because they have a poor memory, or no memory for the events in question. They may be reticent to admit their uncertainty because of a perceived expectation that they should be able to provide answers. Interpersonal trust may further affect cognitive appraisal. Interviewees may trust the intentions of the interviewer as being genuine and honest, or they may be suspicious of them. Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) propose that these three factors combine such that interviewees with high levels of

uncertainty, expectation and interpersonal trust, respond suggestibly. In contrast, where interviewees have low levels of these factors, resistant responding is more likely.

The model further postulates that feedback is a central aspect of interrogative suggestibility and emphasises the practical implications of negative feedback. Interviewers may explicitly state that they believe the interviewee is lying or mistaken, or they may use repetitive questioning to communicate that a given response is incorrect (Gudjonsson, 2003). Such feedback is thought to affect subsequent responding only where it is accepted by the interviewee. Interviewees who reject negative feedback are likely to remain resistant to subsequent suggestive questioning, but those who accept it may be more likely to change previous answers and experience increased uncertainty in relation to subsequent questioning (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986). The model also holds that accepting negative feedback may reduce an individual's self-esteem and increase their feelings of anxiety. Consequently, their coping strategies are likely to be affected such that they become distracted by their own emotional state and attend to external cues at the expense of internal cues to accuracy.

Coping with perceptions of interpersonal trust, uncertainty, and the expectations of the interview situation are central to the theoretical model of interrogative suggestibility (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986). Therefore, one basic hypothesis is that coping strategies are significantly related to outcomes on the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS 1 and 2), instruments measuring levels of interrogative suggestibility for forensic and research purposes (Gudjonsson, 1997). Active coping strategies, involving a critical cognitive set, should be associated with reduced scores on the scales, whereas avoidance forms of coping

where interviewees do not engage in a critical evaluation of the situation and the questions should be associated with increases in GSS scores.

Previous research examining the role of specific coping strategies in interrogative suggestibility offers mixed results. Gudjonsson (1988) compared the GSS scores of participants classified as using either avoidance or active coping strategies during the GSS procedure. Participants reporting active coping had significantly lower Yield 1, Yield 2 and Shift scores than those who reported avoidance coping. These results are consistent with the Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) model and support the role of coping strategies in suggestible responding. This study relied on self-report of coping style from a relatively small sample (N=30). Participants verbally described how they had coped with the demands of the GSS procedure. However, introducing the idea that participants have been misled and perhaps as a consequence given inaccurate answers, may have influenced their perceptions of their own decision making and coping strategies.

Forrester, McMahon and Greenwood (2001) tested the relationship between coping styles and responses on the GSS 1. Participants completed the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), which provides measures of two coping styles: 'emotion-focused' and 'problem-focused'. Neither problem-focused nor emotion-focused coping significantly correlated with any of the GSS 1 scores, nor did these coping styles predict outcomes on the GSS 1. It should be noted that Forrester et al. (2001) conceptualised coping differently to Gudjonsson (1988). Results of these two studies may therefore not be directly comparable. Forrester et al. (2001) suggest that whilst their results indicate there is no direct relationship between coping strategies and suggestible responding, other personality variables may be important, a point

demonstrated in other studies (e.g. Bain, Baxter & Fellowes, 2004; Baxter, Jackson, & Bain, 2003; Gudjonsson & Singh, 1984).

Howard and Hong (2002) provide evidence in support of a direct relationship between coping style and suggestibility. Using the COPE, participants were identified as either emotion-focused or problem-focused in their coping style. The emotion-focused group scored significantly higher than the problem-focused group on the Yield 1 and Total Suggestibility measures of the GSS 1 supporting the findings of Gudjonsson (1988) and suggesting that an avoidant coping style which focuses on managing emotional reactions to situations, results in higher levels of suggestibility in response to leading questions. The results further support the Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) model and indicate that emotion-focused coping styles are central to explaining suggestibility. No group difference was found for the measure of Shift suggesting that only pre-feedback scores are affected by differences in coping strategies.

A potential explanation for the contrast between Forrester et al. (2001) and Howard and Hong's (2002) results may be found in the classification and grouping of individuals as either emotion or problem-focused. Dichotomous classification of coping strategies may be problematic because this suggests that participants use one method of coping exclusively (Forrester et al., 2001). Other research on coping responses suggests that individuals can be flexible in their use of coping strategies with more than one strategy employed to deal with a situation (e.g. Cheng & Cheung, 2005). Differences between groups may emerge where style of coping is controlled for, i.e., in dichotomous classification, but the relationship between coping and interrogative suggestibility may be moderated by other personality variables.

Although Howard and Hong (2002) confirmed significant differences between groups in terms of coping style, no within-group analysis was conducted. Therefore, there is no evidence given that scores within groups are distinctly either problem-focused or emotion-focused. The mean scores for the problem-focused group suggest that they were significantly more inclined to use problem-focused ($M = 65.96$) than emotion-focused coping ($M = 37.32$). However, the emotion-focused group had broadly similar scores for emotion-focused ($M = 50.28$) and problem-focused coping ($M = 53.84$), and in fact were marginally more likely to engage in problem-focused coping. The emotion-focused group were not distinct in their coping style which may account for no differences being found between the groups in their post-feedback scores of Yield 2 and Shift.

Previous research has suggested that higher levels of self-esteem are associated with increased resistance to interrogative pressure. Lower self-esteem appears to result in greater sensitivity to increases in interrogative pressure (Bain et al., 2004; Baxter, et al., 2003). In Baxter et al.'s (2003) study, participants with low self-esteem gained significantly higher scores than participants with high self-esteem on all suggestibility measures of the GSS 1. The results also demonstrated an interaction. Participants with low and high levels of self-esteem did not display the same pattern of results between conditions of psychological distance. The low self-esteem group's scores increased on Yield 2 and Shift with increases in psychological distance, whilst participants with high self-esteem displayed lower scores on these measures under conditions of increased psychological distance (cf. Bain & Baxter, 2000). Baxter et al. (2003) concluded that increasing psychological distance between interviewer and interviewee can result in increased resistance to interrogative pressure for

those with high levels of self-esteem. In contrast, participants with low levels of self-esteem may experience increased vulnerability to interrogative pressures under conditions of increased psychological distance. Increases in psychological distance may further reduce the self-esteem of individuals with lower levels of self-esteem and increase feelings of anxiety. As a result, their coping strategies may be affected such that they become distracted by their own emotional state and attend to external cues rather than “relying on their own judgement and internal frame of reference” (Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986, p. 95).

A perception of low competence in dealing with situations may render an individual more vulnerable to the influence of both leading questions and interrogative pressure (cf. Peiffer & Trull, 2000; Terry, 1994). By attending to the interpersonal dynamics and attempting to reduce any psychological discomfort associated with interrogative pressure, low self-esteem interviewees may be less able to attend to internal cues for accuracy (Baxter et al., 2003). Low self-esteem individuals may therefore evidence higher scores on the GSS as a consequence of reduced attention to discrepancies between their own memory for details of the GSS narrative and the misleading content of the GSS questions (Bain et al., 2004; cf. Schooler & Loftus, 1986).

The purpose of the present study was to further examine the relationships between coping styles, self-esteem and interrogative suggestibility. Specifically, the role of different coping strategies in suggestible responding was examined by considering the relative contributions of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies in explaining GSS scores. The study also examined the role of self-esteem and the assumption made in previous research (e.g. Bain et al., 2004; Baxter et al., 2003) that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem

are less likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies. It was hypothesised that problem-focused coping and self-esteem would be negatively related to suggestibility scores, whereas emotion-focussed coping would be positively related to suggestibility scores. It was further hypothesised that self-esteem and emotion-focused coping would be negatively related.

Method

Participants

Seventy-six individuals (45 male, 31 female) participated. Three participants had incomplete data so the final sample size for analysis was 73. Participants were members of the general public recruited at the Glasgow Science Centre (Mean age = 31.37, S.D. = 12.42).

Materials

Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS 2; Gudjonsson, 1997)

The scales comprise a spoken narrative and 20 questions about the narrative's content. Both immediate and delayed recall can be obtained, but in line with much research using the scales, only immediate recall was collected in the current study (see Gudjonsson, 1997). The scales provide 4 suggestibility scores based on responses to the 20 questions, 15 of which contain misleading suggestions. An initial score of Yield 1 is provided by the number of suggestions accepted by interviewees. A standard statement of negative feedback is then administered. The feedback is delivered firmly and tells participants that, 'You have made a number of errors. It is therefore necessary to go through the questions once again, and this time try to be more accurate'. The 20 questions are then repeated, providing 3 further scores:

Yield 2, Shift and Total Suggestibility. Yield 2 is a measure of the number of suggestions accepted subsequent to the negative feedback. Shift is a measure of the number of substantive changes to responses following the negative feedback and includes all 20 questions. Total Suggestibility is the sum of Yield 1 and Shift.

Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory for Adults (CFSEI-2; Battle, 1992)

This scale comprises 40 questions to which participants answer 'Yes' or 'No'. Items include questions such as 'Are you happy most of the time?' and 'Do people like your ideas?' Three subscales measure general self-esteem, personal self-esteem and social self-esteem from which a total score of 32 is possible. The eight remaining items represent a Lie scale which was not used in this study. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher self-esteem. Reliability for total self-esteem in the current sample was high ($\alpha = .80$).

COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989)

The COPE inventory comprises 60 items and assesses a range of coping responses to stress in everyday life on a number of subscales. Items include 'I get upset and let my emotions out' and 'I make a plan of action'. Responses are given on a four-point Likert-scale where 1 = "I usually don't do this at all" and 4 = "I usually do this a lot". In line with Howard and Hong (2002), items were grouped to create scores for problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Items from the following subscales provided the problem-focused coping scores (α coefficients for current data): Active Coping (.72), Planning (.84), Suppression of Competing Activities (.73), Positive Reinterpretation and Growth (.87), and Restraint Coping (.48). Emotion-focused scores were obtained from the remaining subscales: Focus On and Venting

of Emotions (.87), Denial (.68), Mental Disengagement (.47), Behavioural Disengagement (.68), and Alcohol/Drug Use (.96). Combined reliability for the problem-focused (.92) and emotion-focused (.81) subscales was high.

Procedure

Participants were tested individually by the same female experimenter. All participants initially completed the CFSEI-2 and the COPE. These measures were counterbalanced between participants to avoid order effects. The GSS 2 was then administered according to the guidelines provided by Gudjonsson (1997).

Results

Descriptive statistics associated with the GSS 2, COPE subscales and total CFSEI-2 scores are shown in Table 1. A series of simultaneous multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive power of problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and total self-esteem scores in explaining the variance in the four GSS 2 suggestibility scores. Significant models emerged for Yield 1 ($F(3, 72) = 4.751, p = 0.005$), Yield 2 ($F(3, 72) = 2.963, p = 0.038$) and Total Suggestibility ($F(3, 72) = 3.033, p = 0.035$). For Yield 1, the model explained 17% of the variance. Emotion-focused coping was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .424, t = 3.460, p = .001$). For Yield 2, the model explained 11% of the variance. Emotion-focused coping emerged as the only significant predictor ($\beta = .322, t = 2.545, p = .013$). For Total Suggestibility, the model explained 12% of the variance. Again, emotion-focused coping emerged as the only significant predictor ($\beta = .364, t = 2.877, p = .005$).

Two of the COPE subscales, restraint coping and mental disengagement, which contribute to problem-focused and emotion-focused scores respectively had low alpha coefficients (.48 and .47), raising concerns about internal reliability. As a precaution, problem-focused and emotion-focused scores were calculated without the restraint and mental disengagement subscales, and the regression analyses were conducted again. These further analyses showed the same relationships between the predictor and criterion variables. Because removing the restraint and mental disengagement subscales did not influence the outcome of the regression, they were not excluded from the final analysis.

Because the regression analyses did not find a relationship between total self-esteem and GSS 2 scores, further analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the component self-esteem subscales and suggestibility scores. CFSEI-2 subscale scores were correlated with the GSS scores. A negative correlation was found between general self-esteem and Yield 1 ($r = -.21, p < 0.05$). None of the other GSS 2 measures were found to be related to the CFSEI-2 subscales.

Correlations were conducted to test the hypothesis that self-esteem and emotion-focused coping would be negatively related. Results demonstrated that total self-esteem correlated negatively with emotion-focused coping ($r = -.45, p < .001$). No significant relationship was found between self-esteem and problem-focused coping.

Table 1 approximately here please

Discussion

Participants were assessed on measures of coping style, self-esteem and interrogative suggestibility. The COPE subscales measuring emotion-focused coping styles can be conceptualised as avoidant in nature, as they involve attempts to either avoid a stressful circumstance, or release tension by means of emotional expression (Billings & Moos, 1981). Consistent with the findings of Gudjonsson (1988) and Howard and Hong (2002), the present results show that self-reports of these coping strategies are predictive of tendencies to yield to suggestive forms of questioning. Yield 1, Yield 2 and Total Suggestibility scores on the GSS 2 were predicted by emotion-focused coping scores. This finding is also in support of Gudjonsson and Clark's (1986) theoretical model which posits that the likelihood of suggestible response repertoires is increased when individuals are engaged in avoidant types of coping. It is argued that such coping strategies divert cognitive resources towards the management of emotion and so away from the task of accurate recall making it difficult to detect misleading information.

The correlational and regression analyses revealed no significant relationship between emotion-focused coping styles and the tendency to change initial answers following negative feedback. Emotion-focused coping scores did not predict Shift scores on the GSS 2. This finding is consistent with that of Howard and Hong (2002) who found no significant difference in Shift scores when comparing emotion-focused and problem-focused participants

as measured by the COPE. That no relationship was found between emotion-focused coping scores and Shift is in contrast to the findings of Gudjonsson (1988) and conflicts with Gudjonsson and Clark's (1986) theoretical model. According to the model, when negative feedback is accepted, the result is likely to be strong affective and physiological reactions, and an increase in uncertainty. In an attempt to maintain affective equilibrium, in this scenario, some individuals may engage in emotion-focused coping and adopt a suggestible general cognitive set. With respect to the GSS procedure, the post-feedback Shift measure should be sensitive to such a coping strategy. The present results suggest instead that the leading questions, but not the negative feedback aspects of suggestibility (Gudjonsson, 1984) are related to emotion-focused coping.

Problem-focused coping, as measured in the present study, relates to problem solving and facilitative strategies to deal with sources of stress. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no statistically significant relationship between problem-focused scores and the GSS 2 suggestibility measures. This result echoes that of Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (2003) who found that COPE subscale scores relating to problem-focused coping did not correlate with compliance, a concept which bears a close relation to suggestibility (Gudjonsson, 2003; Woolston, Bain & Baxter, 2006).

The present findings appear to suggest that emotion-focused coping styles may result in individuals being distracted from the task of accurately answering the GSS questions, as shown by increased Yield scores, but they may be no more vulnerable to the pressure of negative feedback than individuals utilising problem-focused coping styles. One explanation for this finding may be that, following negative feedback, tendencies towards emotion-

focused coping lead to a range of different behavioural responses rather than a single, apparently suggestible response. Some individuals prone to avoidant types of coping may, as Gudjonsson and Clark's model predicts, respond to interrogative pressure by acceding to interviewer demand and changing previous answers. Others, perhaps those who deny the existence of interrogative pressure, may repeat their original answers, not because they are actively resistant to interviewer demands, but because they have disengaged with the interview altogether. Such an interpretation is consistent with the view that emotion-focused coping strategies are diverse rather than homogenous in nature (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Another possibility is that the discrepant finding is a consequence of methodological differences between studies. It is worth noting that Gudjonsson (1988) asked his participants how they coped *specifically with the demands of the GSS interview*. Verbal descriptions relating to how participants coped during pre- and post-feedback questioning were written down and classified as either 'active cognitive-behavioural' or 'avoidance coping'. By contrast, participants in Howard and Hong's study and in the present study completed the COPE Inventory which invites respondents to rate pre-written statements of how they cope *generally with difficult or stressful events in their lives* (Carver et al., 1989). This may be an important distinction. The negative feedback delivered as part of the GSS procedure, although challenging for some participants, is contained within an experimental setting and so is not likely to be regarded as a difficult or stressful life event. Hence, it cannot be assumed that characteristic responses to stressful circumstances, as measured by instruments such as the COPE, necessarily operate during the GSS procedure.

Previous research investigating the relationship between dispositional coping styles and situational coping responses (i.e. responses to a recent, specific stressful event) has found correlations to be at a low-moderate level (see Carver et al., 1989). Testing participants on both dispositional and situational versions of the COPE, Forrester et al. (2001) also found low-moderate correlations between the two scales. These findings indicate that measures of dispositional coping styles may be of limited use in predicting behaviour in specific situations such as a forensic interview. Further investigation of the relationship between coping strategies and interrogative suggestibility may more productively be focused on which situational coping methods individuals employ when faced with interrogative pressure (cf. Forrester et al., 2001).

Previous correlational studies investigating the relationship between self-esteem and interrogative suggestibility have produced equivocal results, perhaps as a consequence of differing self-esteem measures and samples across studies (e.g. Drake, Bull & Boon, 2008; Gudjonsson & Singh, 1984). In the present study, general self-esteem scores were found to correlate negatively with Yield 1, but with no other GSS 2 measure. Neither personal self-esteem nor social self-esteem scores correlated with suggestibility scores. General self-esteem is considered to be an overall perception of self-worth and, in the CFSEI-2, is measured by such items as ‘Are you happy most of the time?’ and ‘Are you lacking in self-confidence?’ The present findings suggest that this general type of self-evaluation, rather than those involving intimate perceptions of self-worth (personal self-esteem), and perceptions of the quality of one’s relationships (social self-esteem), is associated inversely with susceptibility to leading forms of questioning. It should be noted, however, that regression analyses in the present study showed no significant predictive relationship between self-esteem scores and performance on the GSS 2.

It may be that experimental studies employing large initial samples and screening for low and high scoring ‘outliers’ on self-esteem measures may be better placed to detect significant associations between self-esteem and interrogative suggestibility than relatively smaller correlational studies. The findings of Bain et al. (2004), and Baxter et al. (2003) would seem to be broadly consistent with this interpretation (cf. McGroarty & Baxter, 2009).

The present findings question the notion of a linear relationship between self-esteem and interrogative suggestibility. Levels of interviewee self-esteem may be most relevant when actively manipulated during interrogation. Gudjonsson and Lister (1984) argued that interviewees may become susceptible to suggestive influences when perceptions of their own self-esteem are lowered as consequence of interrogative pressure. Interaction effects between interrogative pressure and self-esteem, as demonstrated by Baxter et al. (2003), may be more reliable than suggestibility effects based solely on individual differences in cognitive and personality functioning.

Following previous research, it was anticipated that individuals reporting the highest levels of self-esteem would be those less likely to employ emotion-focused coping strategies. The current data are consistent with this expectation. Emotion-focused coping scores correlated negatively with self-esteem. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies using both adolescent and adult participant samples (e.g. Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2003; Lo, 2002; Mullis & Chapman, 2000). It seems when persons with low self-esteem acknowledge the existence of threat to their personal well-being, they take steps of a specific nature to

modify the threat. They are less likely to confront the threat directly by problem-solving activity, and more likely to lessen the discomfort associated with the threat by regulating emotions. Within the present sample, the self-report data indicate that as self-esteem decreased, there was an increased tendency towards a coping style encompassing the venting of emotions, denial, behavioural disengagement, mental disengagement and alcohol-drug disengagement. It may be the case that levels of self-esteem moderate choice of coping strategy and this might be addressed in further research.

In summary, emotion-focused coping strategies are related to the cognitive, leading questions aspects of suggestibility. It would seem that individuals faced with suggestive questioning, who respond by managing their emotions, do so at the expense of vigilance and discrepancy detection. Taking both present and previous findings into account, the relationship between emotion-focused coping and patterns of responses to negative feedback is less clear. To further examine this issue, future research might employ measures of coping styles which are specific to the demands of the interrogative situation, rather than more general dispositional measures.

Compared with high self-esteem individuals, individuals with low self-esteem may be more preoccupied with managing the interpersonal dynamics of interrogation, thereby compromising accurate recall. However, self-esteem and suggestibility were not related in this study. Together with some previous findings, this may point to a less than straightforward relationship between the two constructs. Alternatively, it may be that levels of interrogative pressure applied in the standard GSS procedure are not sufficient to significantly affect the performance of low self-esteem individuals. Associations between

self-esteem and interrogative suggestibility may be more reliably detected in instances where interrogative pressure is systematically varied, an idea that further research might seek to confirm.

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Table 1. Means and standard deviations for GSS 2, COPE and CFSEI-2

<i>GSS 2</i>	Mean	S.D.
Immediate recall	14.16	5.90
Yield 1	5.03	3.14
Yield 2	6.12	3.80
Shift	2.93	2.75
Total suggestibility	7.96	4.94
<i>COPE</i>		
Problem-focused	56.00	10.13
Emotion-focused	38.12	8.65
<i>CFSEI-2</i>		
Total self-esteem	25.54	5.50