

## **Autonomy in University Students: Predictive Role of Problem Focused Coping**

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The objective of this study was to investigate the predictive role of problem focused coping with autonomy (Sub domain of psychological well-being) among university student of Karachi, Pakistan. The entire sample consisting of 105 students (51 males & 55 females) was selected from university of Karachi, Pakistan. Their age range was 19-35 years (mean age = 24.85; SD =.489). Autonomy (sub domain of Psychological Well-Being Scale-Urdu version; Ansari, 2010), Self-developed Coping Styles Scale-Urdu version (Zaman, 2015) along with demographic information form was administered. It was found that use of problem focused strategies predicts autonomy among university students. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to address the research objectives. Results indicate that problem focused coping predicts autonomy among university students. Implications of results have been discussed.

*Keywords.* Problem focused coping, autonomy, positive relations with others, self-acceptance

The experiences of autonomy and/or control defined by self-determination theory have been most thoroughly studied in the context of people's achievement of their personal goals and individual well-being, but the current study intends to examine the implications of these experiences in the context of predictor of problem focused

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coping (PFC) in autonomous behavior of university students.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explained that the stress is not in the situation itself but it's in the evaluation of the situation which is considered or perceived as a stressful thing. Appraisal varies from person to person. Positive thinkers as compared to negative thinkers appraise the stressful situation/event as less threatening and cope effectively.

Problem focused coping strategies (PFCS) are useful action focused tactics to confront and tackle the life problems in the most effective manner. Folkman and Moskowitz, (2000) stated that PFCS comprises of all the thoughts and helpful behaviors, used to resolve or manage the fundamental causes of negative stress. Furthermore, they reported that these strategies are usually used in situations, where one has a personal control over an outcome. Whereas in those circumstances where one has no personal control these strategies are not considered to be effective.

Problem focused coping (PFC) deals with the management of the problem which is the main reason behind any stress and it is mostly action oriented. Mastroianni (2011) stated that PFC uses problem solving actions to have an alternative solution of the problem such as through cost benefit analysis. Additionally, these strategies intended for self by finding alternative forms of gratification or lowering one's ambition. Individuals engage in PFCS, mostly pay attention to all those resources with which they can come up with the solution of any problem. This basically deals with the strategies like collecting the complete information, planning out the things and coming up with effective decisions to deal with the issues (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus the PFC aims to manage the problem.

It is observed during clinical practice that coping impacts one's happiness and well-being, that's how one can perceive and interpret the situation by reacting to the problem, matters a lot. Thus the core of the well-being is happiness and satisfaction. Lykken (2000) mentioned that removal of stress is not ensuring the happiness in one's life but make them less unhappy. Thus the way one use to cope with their problems is a significant factor for survival, growth and psychological well-being. Multiple research examined the relationship between psychological well-being and psychological constructs such as, Lopes, Salovey, and Straus (2003) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence, personality and (social relationships) psychological well-being; self-enhancing cognitions (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003); coping strategies (Kling, Seltzer, & Ryff, 1997) personal goals (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005) and

role of autonomy in romantic relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Autonomy* in the current study is the sub domain of psychological well-being and taken from the psychological well-being model of Ryff (1989) and Ryff and Keyes (1995). An autonomous behavior is called when an individual's behavior is experienced as willingly ratified and he fully endorses his own actions. Ryff and Singer (2008) defined autonomous behavior as having a sense of self-determination. The precept of autonomy needs control and independence, and given that independence is a component of autonomy (Ryff & Singer, 2006).

An autonomous behavior is considered to be self-determining and independent; evaluates self by personal standards, able to resist social pressure and can regulate behavior from within. Ryan and Deci (2000) reported that globally fulfillment of needs for autonomy and self-direction has long been considered important to people's functioning. Furthermore, they assert that according to self-determination theory, individuals who undergo autonomous feelings, experience a sense of self-governance and independence about their behaviors, whereas who do not feel autonomous experience a sense of pressure and control from alien impulses or externally imposed incentives. Thus, in accordance with the evidence it is well documented that experience of autonomy has generally positive consequences and should be something that all individuals wish for.

The current study endeavors to explore the predictive role of PFC in autonomy in university students of Karachi, Pakistan. Pakistan is a sovereign growing country, encompassing more than 180 million people. If there is one thing that Pakistan has in abundance is youth. Youth of any country is considered to be a significant tool and labor force in the economic development of that region. Present study intends to draw special attention on Pakistani youth (university students) by exploring their coping styles and personality attributes and/or domains.

Coping is significantly related to the group of variables, which are essential for psychological and/or mental health, therefore, its study is enormously advantageous especially among university students. Students are considered to be a vital part of the economic growth of any country. University time is challenging as well as exciting for students. Lyrakos (2012) asserts that university students go through major life changes like going to and then leaving university are major contributors of stress regardless of their gender. Most the researches on this topic are conducted in western culture (Dyrbye, Thomas, & Shanafelt, 2006; Mosley, Perrin, Neral, Dubbert, Grothues & Pinto, 1994) and only few are carried in

Pakistani culture (Jadoon, Yaqoob, Raza, Shehzad, & Choudhry, 2010). Those researches which were conducted in Asian culture only catered the medical students sample (Elzubeir, Elzubeir, & Magzoub, 2010; Saipanish, 2003; Sherina, Rampal, & Kaneson, 2004; Sreeramareddy, Shankar, Binu, Mukhopadhyay, Ray, & Menezes, 2007; Yusoff et al., 2011) and clinical data (Gracely et al., 2004; Katie & Jennie, 2006; Tepper, Rogers, Coleman, & Malony, 2001) ignoring the rest of the population. Additionally, those researches on the construct made use of western scales to measure coping. Among several other constructs, the concept of coping also varies culture to culture. Pakistan for having a collectivistic culture, keeping family interests over personal interests is an important factor that affects people's coping strategies as well. In the current study the self developed coping styles scale in Urdu language along with PLW scale Urdu version was used. The rationale behind this study was to foster the positive personality aspects, better coping strategies and autonomous behavior of young generation and help them in their successful life survival. As Kennedy (1968) said that, we must continue to strive to measure, which makes life worthwhile (Para. 22) and thus provide crucial information for professionals; educators, psychologists and policy-makers interested in fostering the welfare of youngsters. This study would be a significant step in this regard.

## Method

### Sample

The sample consisted of 105 participants (51 males & 54 females) age ranging from nineteen years to thirty five years, University of Karachi, Pakistan. 60.95% university students belong to the joint family structure and 39.04% belonged to a nuclear family structure. Language-wise 45.71% were Urdu speaking 14.28% Punjabi, 5% Sindhi, 6.66% Balochi, 5.71% Saraiki, 1.90% Pashto, 5.71% and 20% others. 51.42% university students in this sample were married and 48.57% were unmarried. The mean number of siblings of the sample was 5, in which 35.23% belonged to 1<sup>st</sup> birth order, 41.90% from 2<sup>nd</sup> birth order and 22.85% were last borns. The minimum qualification of the entire sample was intermediate level and the maximum and maximum was PhD level. Out of  $N = 105$ , 24.76% students belonged to single parents and for 75.23% student's both parents were alive.

### Instruments

**Coping Styles Scale-Urdu Version.** The self-report question-

naire was developed by Zaman in 2015. It consists of 22 items. Its response options are 5 point likert scale ranging from 5 “*always*” to 1 “*not at all*”. Coping Styles Scale indicated high levels of alpha level of PFC (.88) and emotion focused coping (.89), respectively (Zaman, 2015). The Cronbach’s alpha of problem focused domain in the current study is .86.

**Psychological Well-Being Scale.** For present study the Urdu version by Ansari (2010) was used. It was originally developed by Ryff (1989). It consisted of 54 items and has 6 point rating scales, response options. It’s subscale of autonomy was used for the assessment of autonomy. The Cronbach’s alpha of PWLS-Urdu is .85 (Ansari, 2010). The Cronbach’s alpha of sub domain of autonomy in the current study is .61. High score indicates the high level of autonomy and low indicates low level of autonomy.

### Procedure

At the start different departments of Karachi University were approached for getting consent for data collection. Brief description about the nature of research work was given to them. They kindly permitted to gather data from their departments. After that, the students were approached in classroom settings. Brief description about the nature of the study was given to them; they were assured about the confidentiality and anonymity. Before administering the scales, efforts were made to develop rapport with the participants. The information was collected only from students with their consent for voluntarily participation in it. They were taken into confidence that all individual information would remain confidential and collective data would be utilized in the research only.

## Results

The correlation coefficient show significant positive relationship between PFC and autonomy among university students ( $r = .40$ ;  $p = .00$ ). Table 1 shows linear regression for predicting autonomy from problem focused strategies.

Table 1

*Linear Regression for Predicting Autonomy from Problem Focused Coping Strategies (N = 105)*

	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$B$	$SE$	$\beta$
Constant			16.01	2.99	.40***
Autonomy	.40	.16	.36	.08	

\*\*\* $p < .00$ .

Linear regression was computed to explore the level to which the PFC strategies predict the autonomy among university students (Table 2). There is a significant positive relationship between the autonomy and the PFC strategies. The model was a fit for the data ( $F = 19.71$ ,  $p < .00$ ).

Table 2

*Moderating Effect of Duration in University on Autonomy and Problem Focused Coping (N = 105)*

Variables	Autonomy	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1		
Duration in university		.40
PFC		.44***
Step 2		
Duration in university	.02**	
PFC		.18**
$R^2$	.20**	

\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .00$ .

There is a positive relationship between the PFC strategies and the autonomy. The relationship between the PFC strategies and autonomy is moderated by the duration of student in university. It is adding the 2% variance in it.

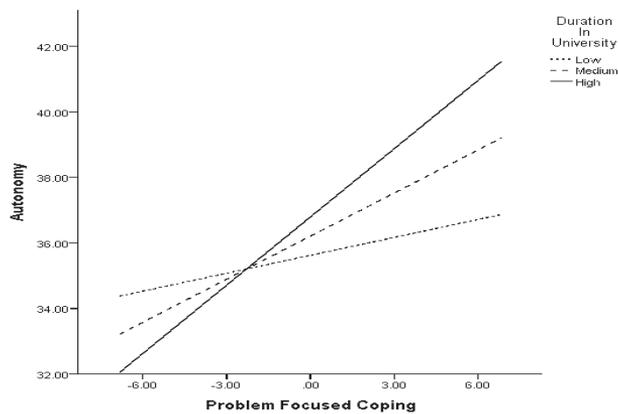


Figure 1. Relationship of duration in university on autonomy and PFC

There is a positive relationship between the autonomy and PFC strategies (Figure 1). This relationship is moderated by the duration of student in the university. As the duration increases the PFC strategies

also increases.

Table 3

*Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Values of Problem Focused Coping and Autonomy Strategies of Male and Female University Students (N=105)*

	Female (n = 54)		Male (n = 51)		t	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD		UL	LL	
PFC	28.57	6.87	29.41	6.86	.63	-3.50	1.82	-0.12
Autonomy	34.70	6.12	37.78	8.79	2.10*	-5.10	-.16	-0.67

\* $p < .00$ .

There is statistically significant difference on the level of autonomy among male and female university students. Results indicate that autonomy is high among male students as compared to females.

Table 4

*Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Values of Problem Focused Coping and Autonomy Strategies on Marital Status of University Students (N = 105)*

	Single (n = 54)		Married (n = 51)		t	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD		LL	UL	
PFC	30.09	6.76	27.80	6.80	1.73	-.34	4.91	0.46
Autonomy	38.11	9.10	34.18	5.09	2.71*	1.06	6.81	0.53

\* $p < .00$ .

There is statistically significant difference on the level of autonomy among single and married university students. Results indicates that it's high among single ( $M = 38.11$ ,  $SD = 9.10$ ) students as compared to married ( $M = 34.18$ ,  $SD = 5.09$ ).

## Discussion

University students who have high analytical personality mostly use PFC (Chai & Low, 2015). Claire (2012) also reported that international university students use PFC. Thus, university student's academic achievement and adjustment was significantly predicted by their use of effective coping strategies (Abdullah, Elias, Uli, & Mahyuddin, 2010).

Statistical analysis of present study reported here was based on a

sample of 105 university students, who participated in this research, which is intended to measure the predictive role of PFC in autonomous behavior among university students. It was hypothesized that “*Problem Focused Coping* predicts autonomy among university students”. Our findings show that there is a positive correlation between use of PFC and autonomy ( $p < .00$ ) among university students and PFC contributes 16% variance of autonomous behavior among university students. Our results are consistent with the findings of Bozoglan (2013) and Nelson, Hammen, Daley, Burge, and Davila (2001) who suggested a clear relationship between autonomous personality and stress coping. Coon (2008) also found that students using avoidant coping strategies were slow in career decision making, self-efficacy and career optimism.

The underlying factor behind the construct of autonomous behavior denotes that students who use this attribute is supposed to be clear headed in their decision making and attitudes towards self and world. They don't want to distract themselves by using maladaptive and avoidant coping strategies. In current study students who use PFC are found to be more autonomous.

The concept of autonomy is linked with both things (cognition and action). It is related to the decision freedom, which is linked with the “decision authority” and “intellectual discretion” (p. 290) Karasek's (1979). Allen and Greenberger (1980) explained that when a person perceives a low control over their environment may try to adjust with the environment and distractive acts for the restoration of the feelings.

Coping stratagems differ culture to culture (Lam & Zane, 2004). Different researches ascertained PFC effective and favorable by high lightening its mechanism of action in terms of directly approaching and confronting the issues (Park, 1990). Sonnentag and Frees (2012) reported self-efficacious attitude of an individual and credence of competence encourages him to use PFC during work related stress in any organization. Charles, Carver, and Connor-Smith (2010) stressed the notion of conscientious and use of PFC among school children. Chinese middle to high grade mostly students use PFC to deal with their academic stress (Huang, 2009; Cheng, 2002; Chen, 2004).

Autonomy is an individual's capacity for self-determination or self-governance. Maslow and Rogers were well supporters of the concept, autonomy and the ideal of developing one's own self. According to their viewpoint, the most developed person is most autonomous and autonomy is explicitly associated with not being dependent on others. Findings of the current study are well supportive

of the precept that PFC and autonomous behavior is interrelated. Thus, PFC is a predictor of autonomous behavior of university students, which is a significant tool in progress and well-being of individuals.

Gender played significant role in use of autonomous behavior in current research (see Table 5). As men are socialized to be more independent and autonomous, their opinions are considered and decisions matter. Autonomy is the ability to make choices according to one's own free will. It is well documented that altruistic actions will fail to produce satisfaction and happiness if it's coerced. Shankland, França, Genolini, Guelfi, and Ionescu (2009) emphasized autonomy supported behaviour of classmates and teachers in academic settings, which has a significant impact on student's intrinsic motivation, competence and school performance. These behaviour can absolutely encourage autonomous and responsibility taking behaviour among students (Castellanos, 2003; Shankland, 2007).

Marriage is a ubiquitous social status that is consistently linked to mental health. In present study married university students were more autonomous as compare to female university students (see Table 6). One possible explanation might be that marriage gives emotional comfort and feelings of being cared and belongingness. Consequently person feel stress free attitude and feel autonomy in taking decisions. So married people take things in a realistic manner and deal with their problems in the most effective way. A number of researches indicated several advantages of being married over singlehood. Dush and Amato (2005) assert that marriage is an institution, endorsed by the legal system, religion, societal norms and has a strong power to provide a sense of identity/social status to people embracing this institution by making marital bond. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) reported that married citizens as compared to unmarried ones enjoy better mental and physical health. So, use of PFC style leads autonomy among university students.

## **Conclusion**

The current study provides to measure the impact of PFC in autonomy among university students. These findings are supportive of its statistically significant results in general. Thus, use of PFC is associated with autonomous behavior among university students that should be focused upon.

## **Implications**

Pakistan is a sovereign growing country, having a population of

over 180 million people and quite a big chunk of it comprises of the youth. Youth of any country is considered to be a significant working force in the economical development of that particular region. The rationale behind the two studies was to foster the positive personality aspects, better coping strategies and autonomous/independent behavior of young generation and help them in their successful life survival. As Robert Kennedy (1968) said that, we persistently struggle to evaluate, which creates living valuable. Through this study, it is endeavored to provide crucial information for professionals, educators, psychologists and policy maker engrossed in the development of the betterment/well-being of youngsters. It would be a significant step in this regards.

### Limitations

As many researches in social sciences have certain limitations, even carefully designed due to which the findings are not considered to be generalized on diverse populations. The sample of 105 university students is relatively a small and all data of the research comprised of Karachi University, which limits the generalizability of the results.

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