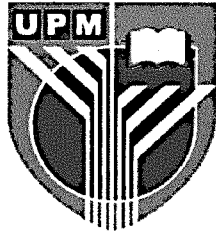




***INFLUENCE OF COPING STRATEGIES AND GENDER ON
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERSONALITY TRAITS AND TEST
ANXIETY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN IRAN***

AREZOU ASGHARI

FPP 2013 51



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By

AREZOU ASGHARI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

May 2013

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DEDICATION

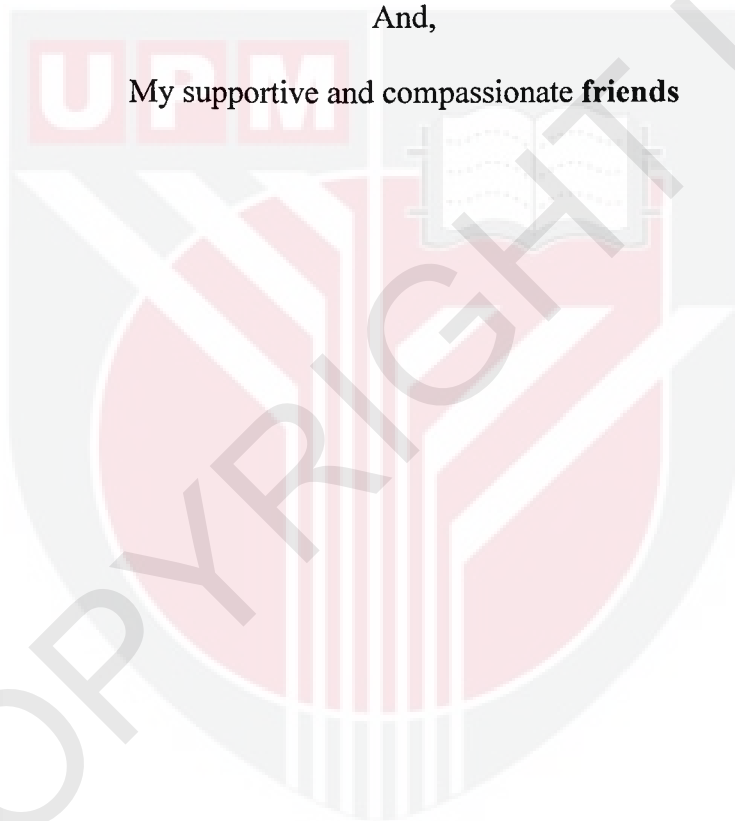
This thesis is dedicated to:

My beloved **parents** who have supported me all the way since the beginning of my
studies,

My encouraging **siblings**

And,

My supportive and compassionate **friends**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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By

AREZOU ASGHARI

May 2013

Chairman: Rusnani Abdul Kadir, PhD

Faculty: Educational Studies

The purpose of this study is to examine the mediating role of coping strategies and moderating role of gender on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety among Iranian high school students in Iran. The respondents of the study were 375 high school students (193 males, 182 females) aged 15-18. They were selected by random cluster sampling method from 6 public high schools in Gorgan city, Iran. The participants responded to a brief demographic questionnaire and four valid and reliable questionnaires including the NEO-FFI-3 (McCrae & Costa, 1992), the trait anxiety inventory (TAI, Spielberger et al., 1980), the cope inventory (COPE; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), and the state anxiety inventory (STAI, Form Y1, Spielberger, 1983).

The study recruited a quantitative method with cross-sectional design. The researcher sought to examine the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety as well

as the mediation role of coping strategies on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety. Furthermore, it sought to examine the moderating role of gender on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety. Data analysis included frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation, structural equation model (SEM) for validity of the instruments, and both mediational and moderation analysis.

Findings revealed that from personality dimensions, neuroticism had a positive significant relationship with test anxiety while extraversion and conscientiousness had negative significant relationship with test anxiety. Yet, agreeableness and openness did not show any significant relationships to test anxiety. Furthermore, trait anxiety showed positive significant relationship with test anxiety.

Mediation analyses indicated that problem-focused coping mediated the relationship between extraversion, and neuroticism with test anxiety but it did not mediate the links between agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness and trait anxiety with test anxiety. Emotion-focused coping merely mediated the relationship between trait anxiety and test anxiety but it failed to mediate other personality dimensions. Finally, avoidant coping mediated the links between extraversion and neuroticism with test anxiety but it failed to mediate the paths between other personality dimensions with test anxiety. In addition, it mediated the link between trait anxiety and test anxiety.

Lastly, results illustrated that gender moderated the paths between two personality dimensions including, extraversion and conscientiousness with test anxiety but it did

not moderate the paths between other personality dimensions and also trait anxiety with test anxiety.

Results of the study substantiated that coping dimensions mediated several paths between personality traits and test anxiety. Thus, it has clear directions and applications for clinicians, school psychologist and counselors, and other health workers to perceive the patterns of coping in Iranian high school students prior to any intervention or treatment programs.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENGARUH STRATEGI DAYA TINDAK DAN GENDER TERHADAP
HUBUNGAN ANTARA TRAIT PERSONALITI DAN KEBIMBANGAN
UJIAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR
SEKOLAH TINGGI DI IRAN**

Oleh

AREZOU ASGHARI

Mei 2013

Pengerusi : Rusnani Abdul Kadir, PhD

Fakulti: Pengajian Pendidikan

Tujuan kajian ini ialah untuk meneliti peranan perantara strategi daya tindak dan peranan penyederhana jantina ke atas hubungan antara trait personaliti dan kerisauan ujian dalam sampel pelajar sekolah tinggi di Iran. Responden kajian terdiri daripada 375 pelajar sekolah tinggi (193 lelaki, 182 perempuan) berumur antara 15-18 tahun. Mereka dipilih menggunakan kaedah persampelan rawak berkelompok daripada 6 buah sekolah tinggi awam di Bandaraya Gorgan, Iran. Responden kajian telah menjawab soalselidik demografi ringkas dan empat soalselidik lain termasuk NEO-FFI-3, inventori kerisauan trait, inventori daya tindak dan inventori kerisauan keadaan. Semua soalselidik telah diedarkan kepada pelajar oleh penyelidik dan dikumpulkan semula setelah disempurnakan.

Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif dengan reka bentuk keratan rentas. Penyelidik ingin meneliti hubungan antara trait personaliti dan kerisauan ujian serta peranan perantara strategi daya tindak ke atas hubungan antara trait personaliti dan kerisauan ujian. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga meneliti peranan penyederhana jantina ke atas hubungan antara trait personaliti dan kerisauan ujian. Analisis data termasuk kekerapan, peratusan, min dan sisihan piawai, *structural equation model* (SEM) untuk kesahan instrument dan analisis perantara serta penyederhana.

Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa daripada dimensi personaliti, neurotisme mempunyai hubungan yang positif dan signifikan dengan kerisauan ujian, manakala ekstraversi dan *conscientiousness* menunjukkan hubungan yang negatif tetapi signifikan dengan kerisauan ujian. Namun persetujuan dan keterbukaan tidak menunjukkan sebarang hubungan yang signifikan dengan kerisauan ujian. Tambahan lagi, kerisauan trait menunjukkan hubungan positif dan signifikan dengan kerisauan ujian.

Analisis perantara menunjukkan bahawa daya tindak berfokus masalah menjadi perantara dalam hubungan antara ekstraversi, neurotisme dengan kerisauan ujian tetapi ia tidak menjadi perantara dalam hubungan antara persetujuan, *conscientiousness*, keterbukaan dan kerisauan trait dengan kerisauan ujian. Namun ia menjadi perantara dalam hubungan antara kerisauan trait dan kerisauan ujian. Daya tindak berfokus emosi hanya menjadi perantara dalam hubungan antara kerisauan trait dan kerisauan ujian tetapi ia gagal menjadi perantara bagi dimensi personaliti yang lain. Akhir sekali, daya tindak mengelak menjadi perantara dalam hubungan

antara ekstraversi dan neurotisisme dengan kerisauan ujian tetapi gagal untuk menjadi perantara dalam laluan antara dimensi personaliti lain dengan kerisauan ujian. Di samping itu ia menjadi perantara dalam hubungan antara kerisauan trait dan kerisauan ujian.

Akhir sekali, keputusan menunjukkan bahawa jantina menjadi penyederhana antara dua dimensi personaliti iaitu ekstraversi dan *conscientiousness* dengan kerisauan ujian, tetapi ia tidak menjadi penyederhana bagi laluan antara dimensi personaliti yang lain dan juga kerisauan trait dengan kerisauan ujian.

Keputusan kajian menyokong dimensi daya tindak menjadi perantara beberapa laluan antara trait personaliti dan kerisauan ujian. Oleh itu ia mempunyai arah dan aplikasi yang jelas untuk ahli klinikal, ahli psikologi sekolah dan kaunselor serta pekerja kesihatan lain untuk mempersepsi pola daya tindak di sekolah tinggi di Iran sebelum menjalankan sebarang program intervensi atau rawatan.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter consists of seven parts. First, it will begin with overview, background of the study, statement of the problem, and research objectives. Then, significance of the study and scope and limitations will be discussed. Finally, variables will be defined operationally.

1.2 Background of the Study

1.2.1 Adolescents and Stressors

Adolescence is identified as a particularly stressful period of development. During this period adolescents are involved with physical and cognitive transformations simultaneously (Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2000). Thus, the impact of daily stressors in the lives of adolescents is inevitable. Experiencing stressful situations have been associated with various psychological and physical symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia (Abdullatif, 2007).

According to Legerstee, Garnefski, Verhulst, and Utens (2010), anxiety disorders are highly prevalent among adolescents, and are associated with significant impairments in social and academic functions. They also constitute a risk factor for subsequent psychiatric disorders later in life. Among adolescents, there can be a considerable

damage in social and academic functions due to anxiety from test taking (Aysan, Thompson, & Hamarat, 2001).

Aysan et al. (2001) have pointed out that adolescents, over their growing years can accumulate the effects of daily life and other stressors to such an extent that they will need to reduce such stress and other related emotional arousal or suffer considerable psychological and emotional damage. As such, those adolescents who manage cognitive and behavioral coping efforts to reduce stress may have the ability to decrease the negative consequences of the stress response.

1.2.2 Test Anxiety

In this modern day and age, with high technology and success-oriented mindsets, there has evolved different sets of stressors (Zeidner, 1998). It is therefore not surprising that the latter half of the 20th century acquired various labels like the age of stress, age of anxiety and age of coping (Endler, Kantor, & Parker, 1994). Stress, anxiety and coping are part and parcel of the human experience, universal and timeless as history has shown, and it is an area of the human emotional condition that cannot be ignored (Zeidner, 1998).

Test anxiety has been the subject of substantial literature since the early 1950s that has established the 'antecedents, correlates of and treatments for 'test anxiety' (Stober & Pekrun, 2004). Test anxiety is a form of social-evaluation anxiety experienced in an assessment context. Besides theories proposed, books and journals published, there have been tools developed and group norms established to handle

the negative effects of test anxiety on assessment performance. From North America where the bulk of the research was originally drawn, the popularity of test anxiety constructs since the 1970s has spread into Western Europe, as well as the Middle and Far East (Putwain, 2007).

The modern education system heavily utilizes tests as the main means of assessment, evaluation and comparison. This, however, causes some students to be very distressed by the negative experience of test taking that they are not able to reach their potentialities (Rothman, 2004). The entire examination experience for these students becomes excruciatingly painful, which in turn threaten their self-esteem and motivation. Students who repeatedly experience test failures or low-test performances despite putting in much effort commonly feel shame, worthless, and incompetence (Rothman, 2004). The effect of test anxiety on motivation can also influence the success expectancy. Consequently, students with higher test anxiety might minimize the success expectancy's level and relegate significant learning outcomes protectively (Bembennutty, 2008).

Other negative connotations include memory interruption, particularly concerning phonological processing (Keogh & French, 2001; Peleg, 2009). The experience of test anxiety also slows down the mind by suppressing clear thought and confusing it so that the problem-solving process becomes more complex (Akca, 2011).

To sum up, practically everyone in today's world experiences anxiety and test situations and the universality of these stressors makes them educationally, socially and clinically significant areas of study. In any case, researching stress, anxiety, and coping in evaluative situations is scientifically convenient (Zeidner, 1998).

1.2.3 The Prevalence of Test Anxiety

It is not unusual for many to experience test anxiety because the impact of tests on one's life is considerable, including effect on one's educational, vocational, emotional experiences and other aspects (Rothman, 2004; Zeidner, 1998).

In the absence of a large-scale epidemiological study, it is difficult to estimate the number of students who are faced with test anxiety (Zeidner, 1998). Early studies reported prevalence rates of 10% to 25% or 30% among elementary and secondary school students (Hill & Wigfield, 1984). However, the approximation of 33% to 40% of students has been mentioned in more recent studies (Huberty, 2009; Salend, 2011).

1.2.4 The Importance of Personality Traits and Coping Strategies

Longitudinal studies of subjective well-being show that some individuals consistently see life more positively and that these differences can be explained by dispositional traits (Leandro & Castillo, 2010). In short, it is believed that traits can affect the manner in which individuals experience stressors (Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009).

Many research highlighted the role of personality traits in stress and coping (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Ferguson, 2001; Leandro & Castillo, 2010; Vollrath, 2001). The most accepted model for describing personality is “The Big Five”, so named because it consists of five global factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) (McCrae & John, 1992). The influence of personality can be noted on the selection or modeling of stress producing situations and the kind of coping or interpretation of a situation chosen (Vollrath, 2001).

Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) presented a model in which a script to help systematize the study of the relationships between the stress processes and the coping strategies with personality dimensions is suggested. These authors state that personality may influence the stress process in three ways: first, in the exposure to the stressor, second, in the reactivity to the stressor, and finally, in both. Similarly, an individual’s personality may influence the reactivity to the stressor, thus resulting in the choice of the coping method, the degree of effectiveness of the chosen coping strategy, or both (Leandro & Castillo, 2010).

Therefore, in all research regarding stress, the coping process is the most pertinent aspect, which tries to manage stressful situation based on transactional model and encounters students with a less stressful condition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

1.2.5 The History of Test Anxiety, Personality and Coping in Iran

In Iran, research on test anxiety has been going on since 1980s (Sharma, Parnian, & Spielberger, 1982). Test anxiety is a type of prevalent anxiety that affects an estimated 10 – 30 percent of Iranian students (Lashgari, Bakhshani, & Solaimani, 2005). Test anxiety is one of the crucial problems in educational settings which has negative consequences such as educational failure, low self-esteem and dropout among students (Khosravi & Bigdeli, 2008) that resulted in more pressures from the schools and parental blaming (Noorjah & Gharehghozli, 2002). Annually, many Iranian students in schools face educational failure for various reasons. High test anxiety is assumed to be one of the main reasons of educational failure with a prevalence of 20-30 percent in Iranian high school students (Abolghasemi, 1999). The prevalence of academic failure has been mentioned about 25% of high school students in report in 2011 regarding dropping out of Iranian high school students (Iranyar, 2011).

Bodas and Ollendic (2005) in a study, attempted to review the construct of test anxiety from a cross-cultural perspective. They collected previous cross-cultural studies from some countries, which compared test anxiety scores. In their report from high school students, the mean score of Iranian male students were 46.2, however Iranian female students indicated mean score of 51.8.

In a study on the prevalence of test anxiety in high school students in Ahvaz city in Iran, it was found that 17.3 percent of students had test anxiety (Mehrabizadeh, Najarian, Abolghasemi & Shokrkon, 2000). Based on previous research (e.g,

Lashgari et al., 2005; Sharma et al., 1982), it appears that high school students experience a moderate to high level of test anxiety. The reasons provided are, exposure to a competitive educational environment and high expectations from their families and schools for success in all exams (Biabangard, 2000). A case in point is the taking of the university entrance examination (Konkooor) in which students have to study hard and obtain perfect scores in the exams in order to be accepted in the universities or colleges that probably result in high levels of test anxiety.

Konkooor stem from the French word *Concours* or competition. Konkooor as a difficult comprehensive exam is held annually and consists of multiple-choice test with four choices and one correct answer. Common topics in high school period are questioned in this exam (Sobhani & Shahidi, 2007). In Iran, Konkooor is the only way to entrance in universities and plays a determinant role in students' perspective, hence it leads to many social and psychological problems like anxiety both in students and their parents (Farokhi-Khajeh et al., 2012). Students have to concentrate on preparation for the exam in high school period, so one of the most important targets in schools is preparation for this exam, which change schools to centers for examination cramming (Kamyab, 2007).

In Iran, research on personality traits and coping strategies, which has attracted so much attention, was started around 1990 (MohamadKhani, 1992; MolaZadeh, 1993). There are numerous studies which have been done in the field of personality and coping such as research on the relationship between coping styles and psychological adaptation in the recovery process (Besharat et al., 2008), coping and mental health

(Amini khooyie, Shaykhani, & Fakoori, 2011; Ghazanfari & Kadampoor, 2008), depression and coping styles in patients with chronic back pain (Rezayee, Afshar, Kafi, Soltani, & Falahkohan, 2009) as well as research on the relationship between personality dimensions, religious tendencies and coping strategies as predictors of general health (Mirsaleh, Rezai, Khabaz, Afkhami, & Abdoli, 2011), personality and test anxiety (Khosravi & Bigdeli, 2008), personality traits and positive and negative mood in emotional information processing (Rafienia, Azadfallah, Fathi-Ashtiani, & Rasoulzadeh-Tabatabaie, 2008), and coping styles and gender on academic procrastination (Sepehrian & Jabari Lotf, 2011).

Although the aforementioned studies investigated the association of personality and coping, but the influence of coping on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety is downplayed in last studies. According to MacCan, Lipnevich, Burrus, and Roberts (2012)'s claim, coping strategies and outcome variables are related to each other in high school students, which reflect mental health and well-being in students. In the present study, it is expected that there is a relationship between coping strategies and test anxiety, it means that dysfunctional coping strategies would enhance the test anxiety level of students and vice versa. To reveal what strategies are utilized by Iranian high school students to cope with stressors, examination plays a significant role to consider coping strategies in students' academic life.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Of the many emotional reactions to stressful situations, anxiety is considered to be the most typically experienced (De Anda et al., 2000). In fact, high pressure and expectations experienced in the school environment might be one of the most reported complaints from students, particularly among adolescents (De Anda et al., 2000).

Students may experience a significant reaction before and during examinations, known as Test anxiety (Akca, 2011). A growing body of research found that test anxiety has so many negative effects on students such as poor performance, poor motivation, negative self-evaluation, and concentration difficulties (Hancock, 2001), school dropout rates and general anxiety (King, Mietz, Tinney, & Ollendick, 1995; Whitaker Sena, Lowe, & Lee, 2007), low self-esteem, poor reading and math achievement, failing grades, disruptive classroom behavior, negative attitudes toward school, and feelings of nervousness and dreadfulness that stem from an intense fear of failure (Peleg, 2009).

Personality dispositions and coping strategies both are considerable factors which may affect test anxiety. As aforementioned, many studies have confirmed the importance of personality traits in stress and coping processes. It is declared that applying coping strategies such as problem-focused strategies have been related to many positive outcomes (Gracia, 2010) whilst using emotion-focused coping and avoidant strategies have been associated with more negative outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Cicognani, 2011). Therefore, the connection between the

personality of adolescents and their coping mechanism may be related to health-risk behaviors, involving major risks especially when there are inadequate or inefficient coping abilities (Rew, 2005).

Among main demographic variables, gender is a considerable factor, which studied in personality traits literature (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae 2001; Derlega, Winstead & Jones, 2005; Weisberg, DeYoung, & Hirsh, 2011) and anxiety research (Chapell et al., 2005; Putwain, 2007; McLean & Anderson, 2009). In fact, men and women have different personality characteristics and thus may behave differently in response to stressors such as examination. Hence, gender differences may play a determinant role in association of personality traits and test anxiety.

The present study views coping as various strategies which helps students to cope with many stressful circumstances including examination. Thus, strategies for coping may have a crucial role on test anxiety and should be considered in academic settings to make a reduction in stress and anxiety situations.

Despite a number of studies about test anxiety, there are a few research regarding the impact of coping strategies on the association of personality traits and test anxiety among Iranian high school students. Moreover, investigating coping behaviors of Iranian high school students in examination context have been ignored in last studies. Therefore, much attention is needed to perceive the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety and also how various coping strategies influence on this association. In other words, this study will assess both the personality traits and test

anxiety and the impact of different coping strategies on the association of these two variables.

Moreover, present study attempts to take gender into account as a moderating variable so that gender differences as a significant factor on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety can be examined.

1.4 Research Objective

The general objective of this study is to investigate the mediating effect of coping strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant), and the moderating role of gender on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety among Iranian high school students.

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the relationships between personality traits (personality types and trait anxiety) and test anxiety.
2. To examine the mediating effect of problem-focused strategies on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety.
3. To examine the mediating effect of emotion-focused strategies on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety.
4. To examine the mediating effect of avoidant strategies on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety.
5. To determine the moderating role of gender on the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety.

1.5 Research Hypotheses

Ha₁-There is a significant relationship between personality traits and test anxiety:

Ha_{1.1}. There is a significant relationship between extraversion and test anxiety

Ha_{1.2}. There is a significant relationship between agreeableness and test anxiety.

Ha_{1.3}. There is a significant relationship between conscientiousness and test anxiety.

Ha_{1.4}. There is a significant relationship between openness and test anxiety.

Ha_{1.5}. There is a significant relationship between neuroticism and test anxiety.

Ha_{1.6}. There is a significant relationship between trait anxiety and test anxiety.

Ha₂: Coping strategies mediate the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety:

Ha_{2-1a}. Problem-focused coping mediates the relationship between extraversion and test anxiety.

Ha_{2-1b}. Problem-focused coping mediates the relationship between agreeableness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2-1c}. Problem-focused coping mediates the relationship between conscientiousness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2-1d}. Problem-focused coping mediates the relationship between openness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2-1e}. Problem-focused coping mediates the relationship between neuroticism and test anxiety.

Ha_{2-1f}. Problem-focused coping mediates the relationship between trait anxiety and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.2a}. Emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship between extraversion and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.2b}. Emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship between agreeableness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.2c}. Emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship between conscientiousness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.2d}. Emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship between openness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.2e}. Emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship between neuroticism and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.2f}. Emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship between trait anxiety and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.3a}. Avoidant coping mediates the relationship between extraversion and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.3b}. Avoidant coping mediates the relationship between agreeableness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.3c}. Avoidant coping mediates the relationship between conscientiousness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.3d}. Avoidant coping mediates the relationship between openness and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.3e}. Avoidant coping mediates the relationship between neuroticism and test anxiety.

Ha_{2.3f}. Avoidant coping mediates the relationship between trait anxiety and test anxiety.

Ha₃. Gender moderates the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety:

Ha_{3.1}. Gender moderates the relationship between extraversion and test anxiety.

Ha_{3.2}. Gender moderates the relationship between agreeableness and test anxiety.

Ha_{3.3}. Gender moderates the relationship between conscientiousness and test anxiety.

Ha_{3.4}. Gender moderates the relationship between openness and test anxiety.

Ha_{3.5}. Gender moderates the relationship between neuroticism and test anxiety.

Ha_{3.6}. Gender moderates the relationship between trait anxiety and test anxiety.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This section is categorized into two parts; theoretical and practical significance of the study. The former refers to utilization of five-factor model of personality, which is a reputable model due to result's consistency and validity. Trait anxiety is added to the current study as a stable condition of the individuals to five-factor personality types. It is noticeable that both personality types and anxiety trait are nominated as personality trait.

Zeidner (1998) pointed out that anxiety trait is related to the individual's predisposition such as anxious experiences or involved with anxiety behaviors in a stressful condition, hence he introduced anxiety trait as a personality trait. This sheds light on the awareness regarding personality traits and its connection to anxiety

during the test. Further, the study also examined the mediating role of coping strategies between personality traits and test anxiety in order to understand the role of predispositions and traits in test anxiety and besides perceive the role of coping strategies in the face of test anxiety.

Practical significance of the study section attempted to determine whether the particular coping strategies will be helpful to protect adolescents from higher anxiety level. Understanding which coping behaviours can protect adolescents from the high level of test anxiety would benefit clinicians, school psychologists and counselors to help students to develop more adaptive coping responses. They can foster more adaptive strategies rather than maladaptive in students and encourage them to use more adequate strategies when dealing with the stressors.

In addition, the findings attempt to raise policy makers' awareness about the important role of personality traits and coping responses in students when they are exposed to stressful situations in academic settings. Therefore, they may benefit from the results of the study by obtaining a deeper understanding of the investigated variables so that they may help schools to design protocols and intervention programs to boost students' academic life.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of Study

This study will utilize questionnaires to collect the data. However, using questionnaires in a study depends on the truthful answers from subjects in order to derive meaningful results. Due to social desirability, sometimes the participants

might believe that the information they report need to conform to socially acceptable values, gain social approval or avoid criticism (Mortel, 2008). In other words, the respondents tend to conform to the actual or perceived norm of the society in terms of certain values, traits, attitudes, interests, opinion and behaviours to facilitate in presenting a favourable self-image (Lee & Woodliffe, 2010). Therefore, the questionnaire applied would not be defective, if the respondents answered socially desirable.

The present study administered two weeks before the final examination. The researcher attended in all high schools to make sure that the process of filling up the questionnaire executes properly so that she could not do the whole process in the same time. Consequently, students who participated in this study in the first days might have different level of examination anxiety compare to those who will respond at the final days, which leads to a limitation that anxiety level of students might be different due to participation in the administration process in different time?

The present study, in particular, will be administered only on high school students in Gorgan city (Iran) and may not generalize to other student populations (primary and middle schools and university students). Thus, generalization of the research findings will be fairly limited to this particular setting.

The present study only examines the patterns of coping that are applied by high school students before the examination. Thus, it cannot be generalized to other stages like during and after the examination.

1.8 Conceptual definition

In this section, both conceptual and operational definitions of the key terms are as follows:

Personality traits. Personality traits refer to individual characteristics, which includes behavior, emotion, and cognition patterns (Paris, 1998). In the present study both big five factors and trait anxiety are considered as personality traits.

The five dimensions that make up the big five personality types include (McCrae & Costa, 2010):

Neuroticism. Negative emotional stability or emotionality is referred to as neuroticism. Neuroticism concerns about how individuals see the world as threatening, problematic, or distressing.

Extraversion. It is an individual's preparedness to be objective and is often linked to positive emotionality, sociability, energy, impulsiveness, and excitement-seeking.

Openness to experience. Openness refers to imagination, culture, curiosity, open-mindedness, and intelligence.

Agreeableness. Courtesy, flexibility, trust, compliance, altruism and tender-mindedness make up agreeableness.

Conscientiousness. It comes from being dependable, responsible, organized and diligent.

Trait anxiety as another personality trait is defined as follows:

Trait anxiety. It is conceptualized as “relatively stable individual differences in anxiety proneness; that is, differences in the disposition to perceive a wide range of stimulus situations as dangerous or threatening” (Spielberger et al., 1978).

Coping strategies. It has been defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The three dimensions which make up coping strategies include:

Problem-focused coping. It is aimed at problem solving and doing something to change the stressful situation at hand (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000).

Emotion-focused approach. It considers attempts to regulate or reduce distressing emotions associated with the situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000).

Avoidant coping. It includes taking one’s mind off a problem and using alternative activities to take one’s mind off a problem (Vollrah, 2001).

Test anxiety. Putwain, Woods, and Symes (2010) declare that test anxiety is reflection of anxiety experiences of students during an examination. Moreover, Akca (2011) believes that test anxiety is a negative emotional reaction that be experienced by students before and during an assessment condition.

In the context of the study, the term “state anxiety” was used to measure test anxiety as the time of data collection was two weeks before the final examinations when students have to take some exams everyday in order to get prepare for final examination. Therefore, they may experience a high level of stress and anxiety during this time.

State anxiety. State anxiety refers to the specific level of anxiety experienced in a particular evaluative or test situation, such as an important college examination or athletic competition (Spielberger et al., 1978).

1.9 Operational definition

Personality traits. The personality traits were measured using NEO-FFI-3 developed by McCrae and Costa (1992), and the Trait Anxiety Inventory (Form Y2; Spielberger et al., 1983).

Coping strategies. In the context of this study coping strategies scores were acquired by the cope inventory developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). It is noticeable that, the initial cope inventory includes 14 subscales. Then, Zeidner attempted to do a factor analysis of the Cope Inventory (1995) in which coping subscales were categorized into three main dimensions such as problem-focused (active coping, planning & suppression of competing activities), emotion-focused (emotional social support, ventilation, positive reinterpretation, instrumental social support, restraint and humor) and avoidant coping strategies (mental disengagement,

behavioral disengagement, religion, and denial). Therefore, Cope Inventory is utilized in the current study in accordance with the factor analysis by Zeidner.

Test anxiety. In the present study, state anxiety scores were obtained from the State Anxiety Inventory (Form Y1, Spielberger et al., 1983).

1.10 Summary

In this chapter the first parts were devoted to a discussion about overview, background of the study, statement of the problem, and research objectives. Then, significance of the study and limitations were considered through details. Finally, operational definitions of the variables were presented in order to provide precise explanations.

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