

Anxiety Among Older Australians: Coping Strategies and the Mediating Effect of Resilience

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships between coping strategies (proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping, instrumental support seeking, emotional support seeking and avoidance coping), resilience and anxiety among older Australians. Baron and Kenny's (1986) method of assessing mediation was used to assess whether resilience mediates the relationships between particular coping strategies and anxiety. The study found resilience to be a strong mediator of the relationships between proactive coping and anxiety and preventive coping and anxiety. This study furthers our understanding of anxiety among older people by highlighting the complexity of the relationship between resilience, coping and anxiety.

Introduction

While older age can be associated with stressful life events, many older people do not experience significant levels of anxiety. These individuals may be able to effectively engage their mental resources to buffer against stress and positively influence their mental health. Such mental resources include coping and resilience.

- **Coping** refers specifically to the cognitive and behavioural skills and strategies that one employs to meet the demands of stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
- **Resilience** is characterised by positive adaptation in the face of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). It is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of dispositional traits as well as concrete skills (Campbell-Sills, Cohan & Stein, 2006).

There is currently little empirical research into the relationship between coping, resilience and anxiety among older people.

Aim: To assess whether resilience is a mediator of the relationship between coping and anxiety.

Method

Sample

- Participants were recruited from three state capital cities and one regional city through senior citizen clubs and community groups.
- $N = 302$ (57.9% female and 42.1% male)
- Ages ranged from 50 to 93 ($M_{age} = 64.7$, $SD_{age} = 10.05$).

Variables Measured

- Coping strategies (proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping, instrumental support seeking, emotional support seeking, and avoidance coping) were measured using the Proactive Coping Inventory (Greenglass et al., 1999).
- Resilience was measured using the RS-14 (Wagnild & Young, 1993).
- Anxiety was measured using the Clinical Assessment Scales for the Elderly (CASE) Form S (Reynolds & Bigler, 2001).

Results

- All coping strategies, other than avoidance coping, were found to positively correlate with resilience.
- Resilience, proactive coping and preventive coping were found to negatively correlate with anxiety. For this reason mediation analysis was restricted to proactive coping and preventive coping.

Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal-steps approach to assessing mediation was used. The method involves four steps:

1. Demonstrate a significant relationship between X (proactive coping/preventive coping) and Y (anxiety).
2. Demonstrate a significant relationship between the X and M (resilience).
3. Demonstrate a significant relationship between the M and Y .
4. Demonstrate that the strength of the relationship between X and Y is reduced when the M is added to the model.

If there is a reduction in the strength of this relationship a mediated effect is said to be present.

Does resilience mediate the relationship between proactive coping and anxiety?

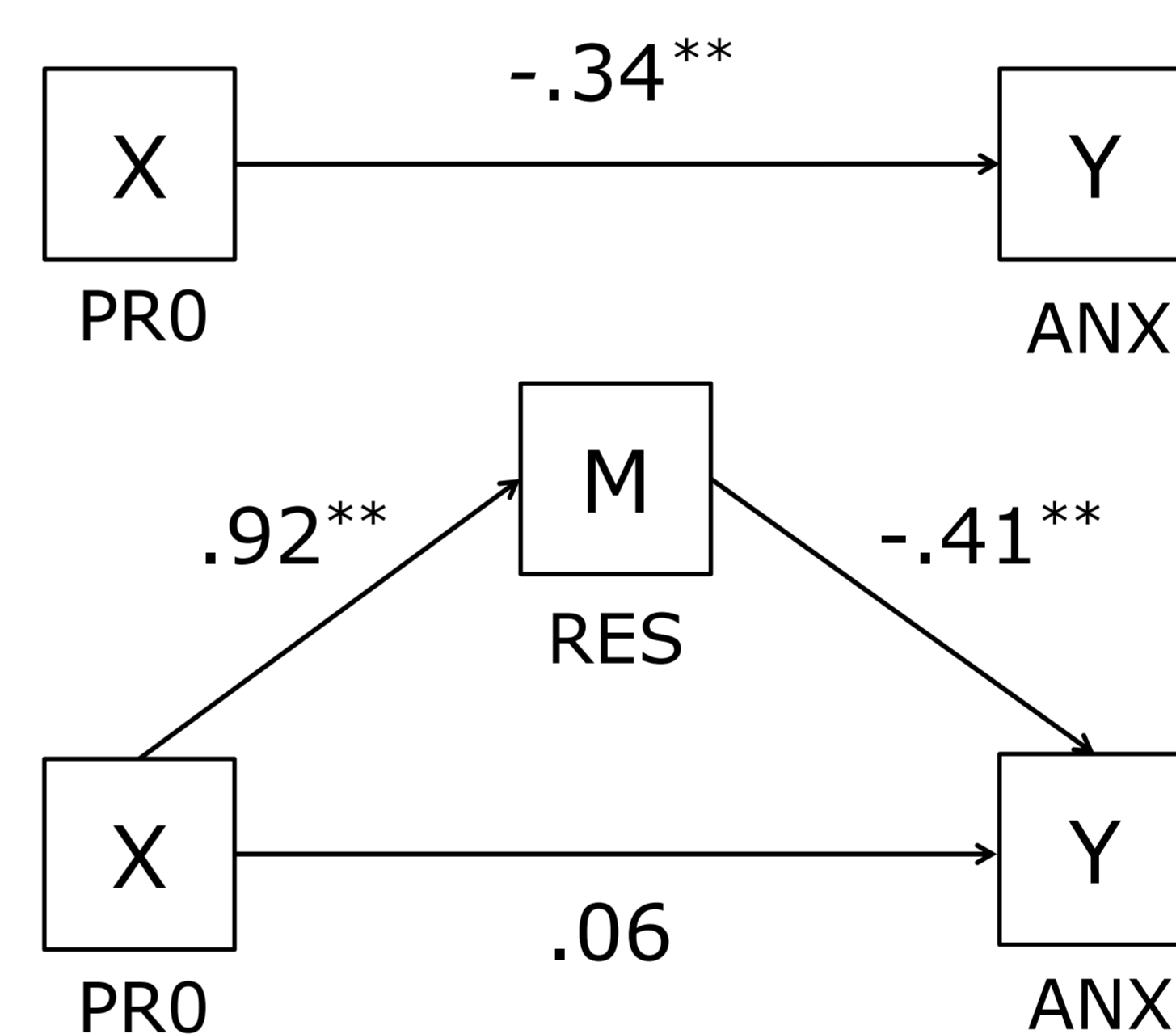


Figure 1. Unstandardised regression coefficients (B values) indicate that when resilience is adjusted for the relationship between proactive coping & anxiety diminishes, indicating mediation.

Does resilience mediate the relationship between preventive coping and anxiety?

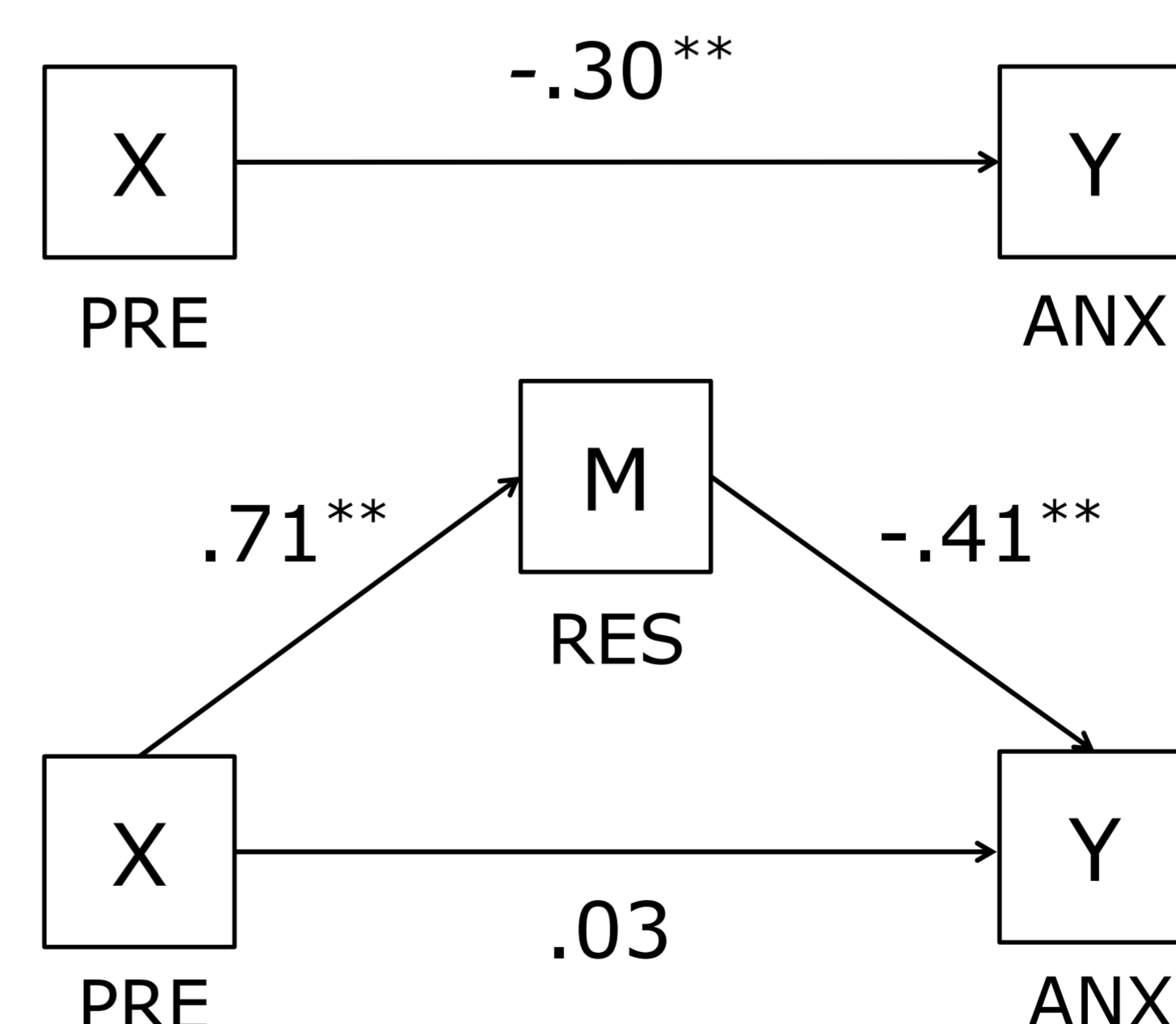


Figure 2. Unstandardised regression coefficients (B values) indicate that when resilience is adjusted for the relationship between preventive coping & anxiety diminishes, indicating mediation.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Discussion

The findings suggest that proactive and preventive coping skills bolster resilience which in turn reduces stress. These findings highlight the important role that both resilience and coping skills play in healthy aging. The study suggests that those involved in working with older people (e.g., aged carers, GPs/nurses, psychologists) should aim to foster their clients' coping skills as this may bolster resilience and ultimately attenuate anxiety.