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### Article

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## The Factor Structure of the Four-Item Perceived Stress Scale in English Adolescents

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Word count: 2,922

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and PSS-4 Item Frequencies.

Figure 1: Factor Structures for the PSS-4.

### Author note

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## Summary

This study investigated the factor structure, internal consistency, and known-groups validity of the four-item Perceived Stress Scale in a large sample of 29,388 English adolescents. Results indicated that the original unidimensional structure was not viable and instead provided support for a two-factor structure. Examination of a bifactor- $(S - 1)$  model indicated that this multidimensionality can be attributed to reverse-worded items; however, beyond method effects, these factors appear to capture distinct, though inter-related, constructs. As this multidimensional structure relies on two-item factors, we advise use of longer versions of this measure where possible.

*Keywords:* perceived stress, coping, adolescence, reverse-worded items, bifactor modeling

## The Factor Structure of the Four-Item Perceived Stress Scale in English Adolescents

Stress is a salient issue in adolescence, a period encompassing many potentially stressful biological and sociocultural changes (Arnett, 1999). Current perspectives emphasise the need to measure *perceived stress* as appraised by the individual, as opposed to the presence of stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Here, we examine the four-item version of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) in an adolescent sample. The PSS was developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) to assess the extent to which individuals appraise their lives as “unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloading”, relative to their ability to cope (p. 387).

The original PSS-14, comprising seven positively- and seven negatively-worded items, was reported to be a better predictor of health outcomes than objective stressful life-event scales (Cohen et al., 1983) and has been found to be reliable across various populations, including adolescents (e.g., Nguyen-Rodriguez, Chou, Unger, & Spruijt-Metz, 2008; Zhang, Yan, Zhao, & Yuan, 2014). Originally proposed as unidimensional, later validation indicated two factors: *perceived distress* and *perceived coping* (Hewitt, Flett, & Shawn, 1992).

Ten-item (PSS-10) and four-item (PSS-4) versions have also been developed (Cohen et al., 1983). The brevity of the PSS-4 makes it attractive for studies with large samples, time limitations, and repeated measurement, but validation remains limited. Evidence suggests mixed findings for internal consistency, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  frequently found to be below the standard .70 threshold (Lee, 2012). The PSS-4 was proposed as unidimensional, but examination of its factor structure is rare and has produced mixed findings, with support for a one-factor (Lesage, Berjot, & Deschamps, 2012; Mitchell, Crane, & Kim, 2008) and two-factor (Leung, Lam, & Chan, 2010) structure, or both in the same sample (González-Ramírez et al., 2013; Wu & Amtmann, 2013). Across all PSS versions,

where a two-factor solution is found, it corresponds to groups of positively- and negatively-worded items. This is unsurprising, as reverse-worded items have been shown to interfere with scale reliability and factor structure, potentially creating a multifactorial structure (Wang, Chen, & Jin, 2015).

To date, the factor structure of the PSS-4 has not been examined with adolescents and the influence of reverse-worded items on its dimensionality has not been explored. We set out to explore the factor structure, internal consistency, and known-groups validity of this measure in an adolescent sample, with attention to the influence of reverse-worded items.

### Method

Data were drawn from a major longitudinal research project focused on the mental health and wellbeing of 30,843 young people, attending 114 education settings across six disadvantaged areas of England. Areas were selected in part based on the high proportion of households and neighbourhoods living in deprivation. Education settings across these areas take part in the main research project and pupils complete a number of measures annually to facilitate evaluation.

### Sample

Participants with missing data on all four PSS items ( $n = 1,455$ ) were excluded from analysis. The final sample included 29,388 adolescents aged 11–16 ( $M = 13.31$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). 52.2% of participants were female ( $n = 15,505$ ). Ethnicity reflected the national pattern (Department for Education [DfE] & Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2017); the majority of participants were White (74.2%), followed by Asian (9.6%), Black (5.7%), mixed (3.9%), other/unclassified (2.6%) and Chinese (0.2%). Remaining participants had incomplete data (3.8%). Free school meal eligibility (15.8%) was slightly higher than national levels (14%; DfE & ONS, 2017). 10.8% of participants were identified as having special educational needs, slightly lower than the national average (14.4%; DfE & ONS, 2017).

## Measures

**PSS-4.** Participants rate four items (e.g., “in the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?”; Cohen et al., 1983) on a five-point scale, from 0 to 4 (never, almost never, sometimes, often, and very often, respectively). The second and third items are reverse-scored, and items are summed to create a total score, where a higher score indicates greater perceived stress. Evidence on the internal consistency of PSS has been mixed, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  values often lower than .70 (Lee, 2012). It was shown to have good convergent validity with measures of mental health constructs (Jovanović & Gavrilov-Jerković, 2015; Karam et al., 2012), though this has not been investigated in adolescents.

### **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; emotional problems subscale).**

Participants rate five items (e.g., “I worry a lot”) on a three-point scale from 0 (“somewhat true”) to 2 (“certainly true”), summing a total score of 0–10. Research has shown acceptable psychometric properties for this subscale, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency and inter-rater reliability (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). The SDQ can be used as a screening instrument to detect child psychopathology (Goodman et al., 1998). For known-groups analysis, we classified participants scoring 7 or higher as experiencing abnormal levels of emotional problems (SDQ Info, 2016).

## Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to explore one-factor (overall perceived stress); two-factor (perceived distress and perceived coping); and bifactor- $(S - 1)$  models (see Figure 1). A bifactor- $(S - 1)$  model specifies a general factor and a specific factor, but with one less specific factor than theorized (Eid, Geiser, Koch, & Heene, 2017). Bifactor- $(S - 1)$  models are less susceptible to anomalous results compared to classic bifactor models (Eid et al., 2017; Heinrich, Zagorscak, Eid, & Knaevelsrud, 2018). The approach allows isolation of

method effects and has been used to examine the effects of reverse wording on multidimensionality (Gnambs & Staufenbiel, 2018; Zhang et al., 2016). Models were examined in Mplus 8.2 with weighted least squares means and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation to account for the categorical nature of items (Brown, 2015). Type = complex was used to control for data clustering across schools (mean cluster = 257.79; intraclass correlations = .007–.012). Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below .06, standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) below .08, and comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) values above .95 were considered to indicate acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). For Model 3, latent correlations were fixed to 0 (Eid et al., 2017), and loadings for the specific factor were constrained to equality to allow model identification.

Internal consistency was assessed using McDonald's  $\omega$  and Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . The latter was used to allow comparison with the greater literature. Independent t-tests were conducted to assess known-groups validity, or the degree to which the PSS-4 could discriminate between groups with and without abnormal levels of emotional problems, consistent with evidence of an association (e.g., Hewitt et al., 1992).

## Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and item frequencies. Bivariate correlations indicated acceptable values below the .70 threshold for multicollinearity (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). No normality violations were identified and floor and ceiling effects were not excessive. Little's (1988) missing completely at random test was significant at the .001 alpha level and missing values for survey items (0.6–2.1%) were assumed missing at random.

Figure 1 displays factor loadings and factor correlations. The fit of the one-factor model (Model 1;  $\chi^2(2) = 2469.70, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .21, 90% CI [.20, .21],  $p < .001$ ;

SRMR = .08; CFI = .89, TLI = .66) was poor, with large residual correlations ( $>.10$ ) and inconsistent loadings. The two-factor structure (Model 2) showed acceptable fit: ( $\chi^2(1) = 104.16, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .07],  $p = 1.00$ ; SRMR = .01; CFI = 1.00, TLI = .97).

The bifactor- $(S - 1)$  model (Model 3) showed the same fit to that of the two-factor model, as these were equivalent. Salient factor loadings ( $> .40$ ) were observed for items 2 and 3 onto the specific method factor, indicating covariance that could be attributed to reverse wording. Items 1 and 4 loaded substantially onto the general factor of perceived stress, while reverse-worded items showed loadings below .40.

The internal consistency of the one-factor PSS-4 ( $\alpha = .62$ ;  $\omega = .63$ ) was lower than the commonly used threshold of .70 (Terwee et al., 2007); item-total reliability coefficients further supported the poor fit of the unidimensional structure. Values for the two-item perceived distress factor were comparatively higher ( $\alpha = .72$ ;  $\omega = .72$ ), while those for the perceived coping factor were slightly lower ( $\alpha = .60$ ;  $\omega = .60$ ).

Known-groups analysis indicated that participants reporting abnormal levels of emotional symptoms (18.4%;  $n = 5,408$ ) scored significantly higher on the unidimensional PSS-4 ( $t(28,101) = 77.66, p < .001, d = 1.19; n = 28,110$ ); on the two-item perceived distress subscale ( $t(28,591) = 73.69, p < .001, d = 1.11; n = 28,593$ ); and lower on the two-item perceived coping subscale ( $t(28,621) = 44.68, p < .001, d = 0.69; n = 28,623$ ).

## Discussion

Results indicate support for a two-factor, rather than unidimensional, structure. The bifactor- $(S - 1)$  model suggests that reverse-worded items could contribute to multidimensionality, with items loading more strongly on the specific factor of “reverse wording effects”, relative to the general factor, mirroring previous findings for the PSS-10 (Perera et al., 2017). However, it is also feasible that, beyond method effects, these factors



capture distinct experiences. The correlation between perceived distress and coping was relatively low ( $r = .39$ ) given that these items could also theoretically represent a singular stress construct. Instead, this finding provides support for the conceptualization of these factors as separate, but inter-related, constructs.

Overall, findings provide support for a two-factor structure, though it is unclear the extent to which this is attributable to reverse-wording effects, conceptual differences, or both. Both structures were shown to discriminate well between populations with normal and elevated mental health symptoms; however, the reliance on two-item factors leads us to caution against its use. Conceptually, two items may not fully assess a given construct; it is generally recommended that factors should comprise at least three items (Brown, 2015). Statistically, two-item factors must borrow information from other parts of a model (e.g., items of other measures) in order to be identified, which can lead to distorted parameters and an inability to assess residual correlations (Muthén, 2009). For clinical usage, two-item subscales likely cannot offer an appropriate level of information to support decision-making (Emons, Sijtsma, & Meijer, 2007). Thus, we advise that researchers and practitioners consider use of longer versions of the PSS in order to gather reliable information.

### **Limitations**

We are cautious in our findings of a two-factor structure given the use of two-item factors, which as noted can be problematic. Additionally, our sample may not be representative, as the main project focused on disadvantaged areas.

### Electronic Supplementary Material

ESM 1. Unidimensional CFA output (unidimensional.out)

ESM 2. Two-factor CFA output (twofactor.out)

ESM 3. Bifactor-( $S - 1$ ) CFA output (bifactor.out)

ESM 4. Known-groups validity output (groups.spv)

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# Running head: PSS-4 FACTOR STRUCTURE IN ADOLESCENTS

Table 1

## *Descriptive Statistics and PSS-4 Item Frequencies*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min–Max	Skewness/ Kurtosis	1	2	3	4
1. PSS-4 total score	6.73	3.17	0-16	.18/-.14	–			
2. PSS-4 perceived distress (items 1 and 4)	3.04	2.14	0-8	.35/-.58	.82***	–		
3. PSS-4 perceived coping (items 2 and 3) <sup>1</sup>	3.69	1.88	0-8	.21/-.29	-.76***	-.25***	–	
4. SDQ emotional problems <sup>2</sup>			0-10		.55***	.53***	-.33***	–
Item frequencies (%) <sup>3</sup> and item-total correlations	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often		Item-total <i>r</i>	
Item 1: Unable to control the important things	21.8	26	31.4	13.7	7.1		.42	
Item 2 <sup>R</sup> : Confident about ability to handle personal problems	16.2	28.4	31.0	15.8	8.6		.33	
Item 3 <sup>R</sup> : Things were going your way	8.1	23.7	40.8	18.1	9.3		.39	
Item 4: Difficulties were piling up	28.8	25.3	25.2	13.0	7.8		.47	

*Note.* PSS-4 = four-item Perceived Stress Scale; SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. <sup>1</sup> Assessment of the perceived coping subscale treats it in its original format rather than using a reversed version. <sup>2</sup>Descriptive and normality statistics are not presented for the SDQ due to its use as a grouping variable rather than a continuous measure.

<sup>3</sup> Valid percent frequencies are reported. <sup>R</sup> Items are reverse worded.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

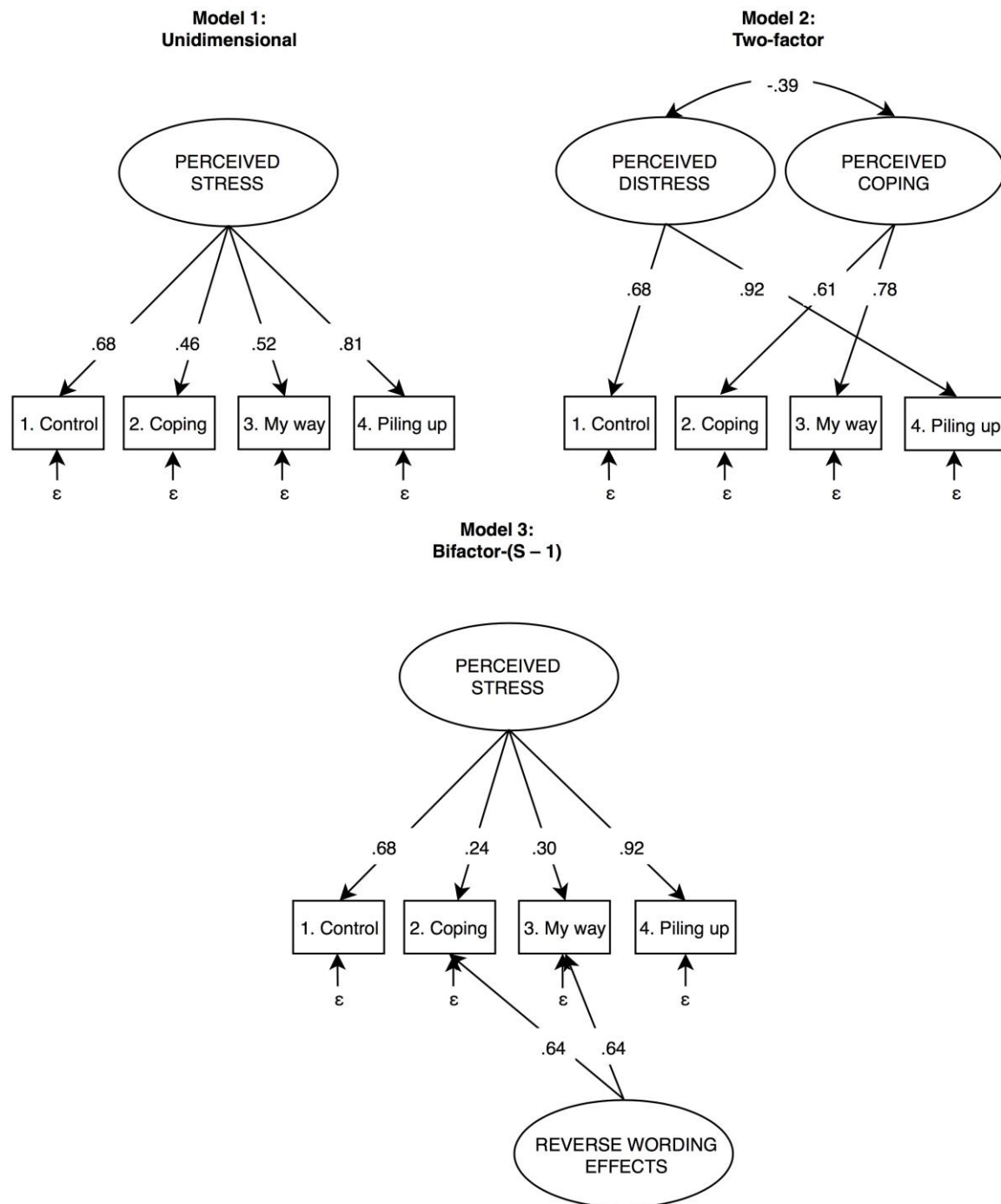


Figure 1. Factor structures for the PSS-4. All parameter estimates significant at the .001 alpha level.