INTRODUCTION

One feature common to many cognitive behavioral theories of emotional disorders has been an emphasis on the content of thoughts. For example, two of the cognitive behavioral theories of depression consider dysfunctional attitudes (Beck, 1961, 1967, 1976) or depressive explanatory style (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) as vulnerability factors for depression in the face of negative life events. Similarly, Lazarus and colleagues (i.e., Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) highlighted the contributions of cognitive appraisal and specific styles of coping in relation to psychological well-being. Emerging from these traditions, recent research has begun to de-emphasize content in favor of the process by which individuals assign causes to negative events (explanatory flexibility) or choose a course of action in response to negative events (coping flexibility). Explanatory flexibility (Fresco, et al., 2000) represents the degree to which individuals balance their interpretation of events with historical and current contextual factors and make effective use of that information. Coping flexibility is a stable individual difference variable representing the extent to which individuals differentially employ their coping styles in different situations (Williams, 2002). Although sharing conceptual similarities, explanatory flexibility and coping flexibility have not yet been assessed simultaneously to ascertain their respective relationship to levels of depression and anxiety symptoms. The present study sought to integrate these promising avenues of conceptualization, by assessing the respective contributions of cognitive and coping flexibility to current levels of depression and anxiety symptoms. In addition, we sought to test a particular mediation model in which the association of cognitive flexibility to depression and anxiety symptoms was mediated by coping flexibility. The logic of this hypothesis is that flexible thinking about the origins of negative life events leads to flexible decision making in how to respond to these events.

METHODS

Participants
- 263 undergraduate students
- 22% male, 78% female
- 16% Asian, 9% African American, 3% Hispanic, 22% Latin American, 42% Caucasian, 3% Other
- Participants ranged from 17-52 years of age (M = 21.34, SD = 4.10)

Measures
- Attributional Style Questionnaire (Peterson et al., 1982)
- Coping Styles Questionnaire (Williams, 2002)
- Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979)
- Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck, Brown, Epstein, & Steer, 1988)

RESULTS

In terms of model fit, two models demonstrated an excellent correlation of main effects in the prediction of negative affect. The second model was a mediation model with coping flexibility as a mediator of the association between cognitive flexibility and negative affect.

Table 1: Standardized Regression Weights

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<th>Explanatory Flexibility</th>
<th>Coping Flexibility</th>
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Note: Standardized regression weights of simple regression models not including the alternate predictor variable.

DISCUSSION

These findings support the significant and independent contributions of explanatory and coping flexibility to general negative affect as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory and the Beck Anxiety Inventory. Specifically:
- Coping flexibility significantly predicts negative affect
- Explanatory flexibility significantly predicts negative affect
- Taken together, both coping flexibility and explanatory flexibility contribute to negative affect
- Coping Flexibility did not mediate the relationship between Explanatory Flexibility and negative affect

Limitations
- Participants consisted of relatively high functioning college students.
- Due to the sample used, levels of life stress may be relatively low compared to clinical populations.

Future Studies
- Replication of the current study using treatment seeking populations or community populations with clinically elevated levels of depression and anxiety

REFERENCES