

## Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology

Mr. Rithvik S Kashyap<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Basavarajappa<sup>2</sup>, Dr. SK Kiran Kumar<sup>3</sup>, Dr.  
Sahithya B.R.<sup>4</sup>

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Indian philosophy often refer to Triguna as the key element which determines personality. Personality is the chief determinant of individual coping styles. Coping is primarily a cognitive act; which is determined by the preponderant *guna* (personality trait) in the individual. The aim of the present study is to find the influence of Triguna on the way individuals copes with stressful life situations. **Method:** The study was cross sectional, using convenience and snowball sampling technique to recruit the samples. The participants were given Sociodemographic datasheet, Triguna Questionnaire – revised version and Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences Inventory, and were requested to complete it. Inclusion criteria laid for the study: English speaking males and females, 18 to 40 years, and living in Mysore, India. Individuals with diagnosed past history of mental disorders were excluded from the study. A total of 121 individuals filled in the questionnaires. **Results:** The sample consisted 61 males and 60 females, with the mean age  $22.83 \pm 4.68$  years, had graduate education (60%), and were currently in college (74%). Sattvic personality was positively associated with active coping ( $b = 0.321, p < .001$ ) and planning ( $b = 2.657, p = .009$ ). The Rajasic personality was positively associated with denial ( $b = .287, p = .001$ ) and focus on venting of emotions ( $b = .174, p = .048$ ), and negatively with instrumental social support ( $b = -.226, p = .012$ ). The Tamasic personality was positively associated with substance use ( $b = .264, p = .002$ ), denial ( $b = .249, p = .004$ ), focus on venting of emotions ( $b = .288, p < .001$ ), and behaviour disengagement ( $b = .165, p = .050$ ), and negatively with active coping ( $b = -.165, p = .040$ ). **Conclusion:** The results offer preliminary data-based insight into the influence of Triguna on individual coping styles. The findings could be useful for the indigenous psychology researchers who are interested in cross-cultural implications of eastern spiritual concepts.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, JSS Medical College & Hospital, Mysuru, India

<sup>2</sup>Former professor, Department of studies in Psychology, University of Mysore, Mysuru, India

<sup>3</sup>Former professor, Department of studies in Psychology, University of Mysore, Mysuru, India

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Udupi, Karnataka, India

\*Corresponding Author

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## Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology

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In Indian traditions, personality is studied and understood with reference to two conceptual classifications. One is rooted in the Ayurveda and the other is rooted in Samkhya system of philosophy. Vata (circulation of oxygen), Pitta (digestion processes), and Kapha (anabolic functions) are the primary concepts used in understanding both biological and psychological functioning in Ayurveda. Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas are another set of concepts widely used to explain human behaviour. Out of these two set of concepts, Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas together known as Triguna, are considered to be fundamental even for Ayurveda (Shilpa and Murthy, 2012). The Sattva *guna* (personality trait) is characterised by high self-awareness, sensitivity, and flexibility, and mental equilibrium (Mathew, 1995). The Rajas *guna*, is generally associated with active energy, aggressiveness, and passion. On the positive side, individuals with dominant rajas tend to be ambitious, action oriented, hardworking, enthusiastic, and competitive. However, on the negative side, individuals with dominant rajas tend to be self-centred, restless, and envious. Tamas is the principle of passivity and negativity in things. Individuals with increased levels of Tamas tend to be passive, dull, confused, sad, inattentive, inactive, insensitive, angry, fearful, and lethargic. These individuals tend to hold narrow worldviews, have insomnia or sleep in excess, and feel helpless. All three of them are present in all beings at all times, only the combinations and dominations are different, which results in different personality typology viz, The Sattvic, the Rajasic, and the Tamasic personalities. Researchers such as Murthy and Kumar (2007) and Salagame (2013) attempted to summarise the descriptions of triguna in human nature (Table 1). Many of the different scriptural sources of India, such as the Vedas, the Upanisads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Samkhya, and the Yoga have interpretations of different characteristics of how people are to be assessed and understood to be of different kinds based on the Triguna model (Shilpa and Murthy, 2012).

With the increasing realization that many of the Western psychological concepts and methods lack relevance to different cultural systems, the need for developing indigenous models of understanding human behaviour is gaining momentum all over the world. In recent times researchers are taking an active interest in Indian philosophy and developing indigenous Psychology (Salagame, 2011; Paranjpe, 2006; Srivastava, 2001). In the same direction, many attempts have been made to relate Triguna personalities to behaviour and personality as understood from modern psychological view point, and to empirically elaborate the understanding of these indigenous concepts in light of modern psychological perspectives. Coping is one such concept which is defined as “the process of managing demands (external or internal) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping strategy represents a specific individual difference in how people respond to stress, and is a general disposition to deal with stressful events in a particular way. These coping styles are thought to be influenced by the personality. In other words, the personality that each individual brings to a stressful event influence how he or she will cope with that event. Some personality characteristics make stressful situations worse, whereas others try to overcome them successfully. However, although coping styles have been largely studied in association with western classification of personality types, there are hardly any studies that have examined coping styles from Indian perspectives. Therefore, in the present study an attempt made to empirically study the association between the Triguna and the different stress coping strategies. The findings of this empirical study would be useful for better understanding of the indigenous concept of Triguna personality.

**Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology**

**Table 1: Description of Triguna as conceptualized by modern researchers.**

<b>Author (Year)</b>	<b>Sattvic guna</b>	<b>Rajasic guna</b>	<b>Tamasic guna</b>
Misra and Mohanty (2002)	Austerity, wisdom, determination, dutifulness, perseverance, freedom from fear, pride and anger, truth, righteousness, consistency, nonviolence, steadiness, love for knowledge.	Passion, wrath, lust, anger, greed, desires, thirst for power and wealth, deceit, insolence, ignorance, conceit.	Distortion, delusion, indolence, despondency, procrastination, confusion, ignorance, sleep, dullness, inertia, negligence.
Sharma (1999)	Unaffected by failures, or success, non-egoistic, belief in values.	Egoism, aggressivity, active, high motivation.	Laziness, vulgarity, unsteadiness, immorality, harmfulness, destruction.
Wolf (1998)	Cleanliness, truth, discipline, mental equilibrium, determination, detachment, etc.	Desire for sense gratification, envy, dissatisfaction, materialistic mentality.	Mental imbalance, anger, arrogance, depression, procrastination, feelings of helplessness
Sitamma, Sridevi, and Krishna Rao (1995)	Purity, noble qualities, wisdom, love of knowledge, spiritual excellence.	Rise in passion, emotions, and desires.	Ignorance, idleness, errors, and delusions
Uma (1969)	Self-control, generosity, faith, steadiness, intelligence, humility, guiltlessness, purity, unselfishness, contentment, truthfulness, devotion, yearning for liberation.	Lack of control on emotions, passionate, restlessness, anxiety, desires, attachments, greed.	Stupidity, doubt, dullness, inadvertence, uncertainty, negligence, cynicism, delusions, fear, inactions, misunderstanding, sorrow, lassitude, undisciplined.
Pathak, Bhatt, and Sharma (1992)	Knowledge, illumine, light, peace	Activity, pain	Inertia, darkness, delusion
Mathew (1995)	Stability, High-self-awareness sensitivity, freedom, flexibility, control, stress tolerance, and freedom from maladjustment tendencies.	Activation, restless, over activity, uncontrolled energy, high drive, inability to remain silent or alone, extraverted instability.	Inertia, introverted instability, lethargy, fear, and inhibition, anxiety, shallowness of emotions, low initiative, low self-

## Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology

			confidence, and low self-respect.
Marutham, Balodhi, and Mishra (1998)	Essence, purity, harmony, noble and divine.	Motion, passion, activity	Inertia, inactivity, sloth, foolishness.

*Source: Murthy and Kumar (2007), and Salagame (2013)*

### **METHOD AND MATERIALS**

The aim of the present study was to examine the association between Triguna composition and stress coping disposition of an individual.

#### **Study Design**

A cross-sectional, survey design was adopted to obtain the data. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling technique. Inclusion criteria laid for the study: English speaking males and females, 18 to 40 years, and living in Mysore, India. Individuals with diagnosed past history of mental disorders were excluded from the study.

#### **Tools**

The following tools were used to collect data for the present study.

- **Demographic Sheet:** A sociodemographic data sheet which elicited sociodemographic information such as age, gender and occupation was developed for the present study.
- **Triguna Questionnaire – Revised version:** The Vedic Personality Inventory was devised by Wolf (1998) to assess the validity of the Vedic concept of the three *gunas*, or modes of nature, as a psychological categorization system. The original 90-item was shortened to 56 items on the basis of reliability and validity analyses. The loading of every item on the scale was stronger for the intended subscale. The Inventory with 56 items measures the three *gunas* with Sattva measured by 15 items, rajas measured by 19 items and tamas measured by 22 items. Cronbach’s alpha reliability test was calculated based on a sample of 619 people (*Sattva*  $\alpha = .89$ ; the *Rajas*  $\alpha = .91$  and the *tamas*  $\alpha = .85$ ) (Wolf, 1998). The participant is asked to read each of the 56 statements, and choose one of the seven options to indicate his level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. Scoring is as following: 1 = very strongly disagree; 2 = strongly disagree; 3 = somewhat disagree; 4 = neutral; 5 = somewhat agree; 6 = strongly agree; and 7 = very strongly agree. The items under each of the personality factors are totalled to give a raw score. Higher scores indicate higher level of the personality trait in the individual.
- **Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (COPE) Inventory:** The COPE Inventory is a multidimensional coping inventory to assess the different ways in which people respond to stress. It was developed by Carver and Scheirer (1989) to assess a broad range of coping responses. There are 60 questions in this current version of the COPE questionnaire, each of which the participant is asked to rate based on how often they do it. Each response is scored as following: 0 = I usually don't do this at all; 1 = I usually do this a little bit; 2 = I usually do this a medium amount; and 3 = I usually do this a lot. Items measuring a specific coping style are added up. Higher scores indicate higher level of that coping style. The dimensions of coping strategies measured by this inventory are: positive reinterpretation and growth, mental disengagement, focus on

## Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology

and venting of emotions, use of instrumental social support, active coping, denial, religious coping, humour, behavioural disengagement, restraint, use of emotional social support, substance use, acceptance, suppression of competing activities, and planning. Information concerning the internal consistency of the COPE scales comes from Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients, which were computed for each scale. In general, these values are acceptably high (Litman, 2006; Rasskazova, Gordeeva, & Osin, 2013).

### *Procedure and administration of the tools*

Data was collected from the students of various under-graduate and post graduate colleges, and also from individuals working in various work settings in Mysore. The participants were contacted directly, and given a brief about the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation. It was also conveyed to the participants that their data will be used only for the study purpose and the same will be kept confidential. After a rapport was established, appropriate instructions were given to them and they were allowed to fill in their personal information and start responding to the questionnaires. Sufficient time was given to them to respond to all items.

### *Ethical considerations*

The study was evaluated for scientific and ethical considerations, and approved by the Department of Studies in Psychology, University of Mysore. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained.

### *Analysis of data*

Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 20.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp. STROBE (Von Elm et al., 2007) reporting guidelines were followed. The statistical techniques of correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis was done to analyse the data.

## **RESULTS**

Table 2 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. The sample consisted 61 males and 60 females, with the mean age  $22.83 \pm 4.68$  years, had graduate education (60%), and were currently in college (74%).

*Table 2: sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.*

Sociodemographic characteristics	Numbers (%) / Mean $\pm$ SD
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	61 (50%)
Female	60 (50%)
<b>Age</b>	22.83 $\pm$ 4.68
<b>Education</b>	
Graduation	73 (60%)
Postgraduation	48 (40%)
<b>Occupation</b>	
Students	90 (74%)
Employee	31 (26%)

**Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology**

Table 3 shows the association between the three personality dimensions - the Sattvic, the Rajasic, and the Tamasic personalities with 15 coping responses using Pearson's correlation. The Sattvic personality was significantly positively associated with positive re-interpretation of growth ( $r=.357, p<.001$ ), active coping ( $r=.402, p<.001$ ), restraint coping ( $r=.183, p=.045$ ) and planning ( $r=.345, p<.001$ ), and negatively associated with substance abuse ( $r=-.196, p=.031$ ). The Rajasic personality was significantly positively associated with denial ( $r=.255, p=.005$ ), behaviour disengagement ( $r=.204, p=.025$ ) and substance abuse ( $r=.192, p=.035$ ). The Tamasic personality was significantly positively associated with focus on venting of emotions ( $r=.220, p=.015$ ), denial ( $r=.380, p<.001$ ), humour ( $r=.238, p=.009$ ), behavioural disengagement ( $r=.358, p<.001$ ), and substance abuse ( $r=.422, p<.001$ ); and negatively associated with active coping ( $r=-.241, p=.008$ ) and planning ( $r=-.209, p<.001$ ).

**Table 3: Showing association between Triguna and Coping styles**

Coping Styles	Sattva	Rajas	Tamas
positive re-interpretation of growth	.357**	-.096	-.135
Mental disengagement	.107	.078	.096
Focus on Venting of Emotions	.049	.160	.220*
Instrumental Social Support	.178	-.149	-.159
active coping	.402**	-.017	-.241**
Denial	-.156	.255**	.380**
religious coping	.129	.085	.074
Humour	-.046	.084	.238**
Behaviour Disengagement	-.142	.204*	.358**
Restraint coping	.183*	-.060	-.016
Emotional Social Support	.006	-.075	.027
substance use	-.196*	.192*	.422**
Acceptance	.148	-.171	-.051
Suppression of competing activities	.100	-.033	-.004
Planning	.345**	-.173	-.209*

\**p values significant at .05 level, \*\*p value significant at .01 level*

Regression analysis was performed to find those coping style variables that were independently associated with Triguna personality dimensions (table 4). Sattvic personality was positively associated with active coping ( $b = 0.321, p<.001$ ) and planning ( $b=2.657, p=.009$ ). The Rajasic personality was positively associated with denial ( $b=.287, p=.001$ ) and focus on venting of emotions ( $b=.174, p=.048$ ), and negatively with instrumental social support ( $b=-.226, p=.012$ ). The Tamasic personality was positively associated with substance use ( $b=.264, p=.002$ ), denial ( $b=.249, p=.004$ ), focus on venting of emotions ( $b=.288, p<.001$ ), and behaviour disengagement ( $b=.165, p=.050$ ), and negatively with active coping ( $b=-.165, p=.040$ )

**Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology**

**Table 4: showing stepwise linear regression for variables that predict personality.**

Variable	B	SE B	B	t	p
<b>The Sattvic Personality</b>					
active coping	1.471	.401	.321	3.669	.000
Planning	1.003	.378	.232	2.657	.009
R2= .209, F for change in R2 =15.598, Sig. <0.001					
<b>The Rajasic Personality</b>					
Denial	1.607	.491	.287	3.271	.001
Instrumental Social Support	-1.114	.435	-.226	-2.565	.012
Focus on Venting of Emotions	.848	.425	.174	1.997	.048
R2 = .135, F for change in R2= 6.062, Sig. <0.001					
<b>The Tamasic Personality</b>					
Substance use	2.049	.631	.264	3.248	.002
Denial	1.899	.649	.249	2.926	.004
Focus on Venting of Emotions	1.916	.499	.288	3.843	.000
Active coping	-1.206	.579	-.165	-2.081	.040
Behaviour disengagement	.956	.482	.165	1.982	.050
R2 = .392, F for change in R2= 12.245, Sig. <0.001					

*Dependent variable: Triguna, independent variables: coping styles, gender, age and education.*

## **DISCUSSION**

In the present study an attempt was made to empirically investigate the influence of Indian indigenous concept of Triguna on individual stress coping strategies. The data was collected from a sample of 121 individuals aged between 18-40 living in Mysore, India. Participants filled out Sociodemographic datasheet, Vedic personality Inventory (56 item), and COPE inventory. The data was statistically treated with Pearson’s correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis. The present study found significant associations between Vedic personality dimension – the Triguna and the coping styles.

The results showed that individuals with Sattvic personality traits were more likely to use active coping and planning, both of which are adaptive coping strategies involving taking active steps to solve the problem. The individuals with Rajasic personality traits were more likely to use denial and focus on venting emotions, both of which avoids actively working to solve the problem. Individuals with higher Rajasic quality are also less likely to seek instrumental social support. Individuals with Tamasic personality traits are more likely to use substance to cope, as well as use denial, focus on venting emotions and behavioural disengagement, all of which are unhealthy ways of coping with stress. They are also less likely to use active coping.

## **Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology**

Sattva is described as pure light with the power of illumination, enlightenment, and goodness. It functions as the ability to think which helps with the clarity of mind (Jha, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that the present study found sattvic personality to be associated with adaptive coping styles. Active coping is a problem–focused coping strategy which can be understood as the tendency to concentrate on efforts to remove or circumvent the stressors. In other words, it is taking action to deal with the problem. The Sattva functions as the ability to think which helps with the clarity of mind. It has been reported that a person with dominant Sattva tends to be attentive, alert unmoved by success or failure, and possess a great amount of stress tolerance (Mathew, 1995), which is probably the reason they are more likely to use active coping and planning as their coping styles.

In the present study Rajasic personality was associated with denial and focus on venting of emotions. They are less likely to seek help from others to solve the problem. These findings are in corroboration with the description of rajasic quality as being volatile, egoistic, with high levels of passion, emotions, and desires (Sharma, 1999; Sitamma, Sridevi, and Krishna Rao, 1995), which probably leads them to deny the existence of problem, or indulge in ventilation of emotions, without making efforts to take help from others to cope with the stressor. The present study also found that Tamasic personality is associated with behavioural disengagement, denial and substance abuse, which is in corroboration of the Tamasic quality of mental imbalance, inaction, depression, procrastination, and feelings of helplessness (Wolf, 1998).

Overall, in the present study, the findings imply that Sattvic personality trait is beneficial as they tend to use adaptive coping styles, whereas Rajasic and Tamasic personality traits are associated with maladaptive coping styles. These findings are in tune with the Vedic descriptions of Sattvic *guna* which is described in terms of adaptive behaviours, emotions and attitudes, whereas Rajasic and Tamasic personality traits are characterised by unhelpful behaviours, emotions and attitudes (Misra and Mohanty, 2002).

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study is one of the few studies that has attempted to bridge the knowledge between Indian understanding of personality traits with modern western concepts. The study is helpful to better understand the concepts of Triguna and their manifestations on human behaviour especially, their influence on individual stress coping styles. However, the present study is not without limitations. The sample size was small, and was conducted among the student and working population in Mysore, and hence the results cannot be generalized. Future studies can compensate for these limitations by using large representative samples, and using more variables to study the Triguna apart from coping styles. Nevertheless, given the dearth of research on Indian Psychology, the present study findings have important theoretical implications.

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## **Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology**

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**Triguna and Coping Style: A Quantitative Cross-sectional Study to Bridge the Gap between Vedic Concept of Personality and Western Psychology**

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