

Coping with discrimination in the First Epistle of Peter and in modern social psychology

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Abstract

This article begins by describing the origin and forms of the suffering which the readers of 1 Peter experienced in the first century AD. It then surveys the strategies offered in the letter for coping with prejudice and discrimination. A further section discusses the problem and emotion focused coping strategies described and used in modern social psychology. Finally, it compares the coping strategies of 1 Peter to those of social psychology. The authors point out similarities and differences and suggest where and how both sets of strategies can help suffering Christians.

Keywords Suffering, discrimination, persecution, coping, 1 Peter, modern social psychology.

From the beginning, followers of Jesus Christ were presented with the challenge of facing and enduring suffering. Shortly after the crucifixion of Christ, suffering came in different forms and levels of intensity. The first believers were predominantly afraid of the Jews (John 7:13; 9:22; 12:42; 19:38; 20:19). However, one of the oldest books in the New Testament also refers to suffering caused by pagan neighbors (1 Thes 2:14). In the midst of these circumstances, the authors of the New Testament not only describe the origin and forms of suffering, but also provide strategies for coping with such suffering.

The First Epistle of Peter is the letter which focuses the most on discrimination against and oppression of the early Christians.³ Its author uses the terms “to suffer” (*paschó*) and “suffering” (*pathéma*) more than any other New Testament author.⁴ He describes in detail the origin and forms of suffering that the predominantly gen-

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3 Webb (1997:1135) emphasizes: “Certain New Testament books are more focused on the subject of suffering than are others. The authors of 1 Peter and Revelation are intensely interested in understanding and interacting with the problem of suffering in their communities.”

4 1 Peter 2:19,20,21,23; 3:14,17,18; 4:1,15,19; 5:10 and 1:11; 4:13; 5:1,9.

tile Christian addressees⁵ endured amidst their neighbors, and he provides strategies for coping with suffering.

Beyond any doubt, these strategies in the New Testament are invaluable for Christians today who face adversity because of their commitment to Christ. Nevertheless, due to their significance in the letter and the widespread suffering of Christians in today's world – as well as their need to cope with it constructively – it is interesting to examine these strategies in the light of modern social psychology. Two questions present themselves: “Are these same coping strategies used in modern psychology?” and “How can Christians who currently suffer from discrimination benefit from them?”

We begin with a brief description of the origin and forms of suffering and strategies for coping with discrimination, as reflected in 1 Peter. We then provide a more detailed overview of coping strategies in modern social psychology and, in light of these, assess one representing the coping strategies of 1 Peter. A final section briefly indicates how such strategies can support suffering Christians today.

1. The situation of the addressees of 1 Peter

Regarding the central theme of suffering in 1 Peter it is clear that the focus is not on the general suffering which the readers share with all humans. The question is not why Christians suffer under sicknesses, war or natural disasters. 1 Peter focuses on the question of why Christians suffer *because of* and *based on* their belonging to Christ and how they can deal with it.

1.1 Origin of suffering

1 Peter mentions different reasons for suffering (cf. 2:12, 14-15, 19-20; 3:14-17; 4:14-15,19) that cannot be described here in detail.⁶ As a summary, it can be said that people in the area of first-century Asia Minor (1:1) had turned away from their former lifestyle with all its implications and had become followers of Christ. This transformation, through *new birth* (1:3, 23), provided Christians with a new identity and a new citizenship in heaven. This new identity led to a change in behavior. No longer did they “conform to the evil desires they had when they lived in ignorance” (1:14) nor did they live any longer “in the empty ways of life handed down to them from their forefathers” (1:18). They no longer spent time as “in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry” (4:3). Therefore, their neighbors “think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you” (4:4). Their new identity and behavior alienated them from the society in which they

⁵ Achtemeier 1996:50f; Carson and Moo 2010:779; Feldmeier 2005:29, Stenschke 2008b:222-223.

⁶ For a more detailed description cf. Graser 2012:46-76.

continued to live. Now these believers found themselves in a *diaspora* situation – still living amongst their own families and pagan neighbors, but now perceived as *aliens* and *foreigners* (1:1; 2:11).⁷ By drawing on Old Testament terms and traditions, the author draws a parallel between the status and fate of the readers and the experiences of the patriarchs and the people of God in the Old Testament. He reminds the readers of the root cause of their alienation. As Old Testament Israel was rejected because they were chosen by God, belonged to him and lived differently, so the followers of Christ are rejected in the same way because they are chosen by God and live according to his will (4:2). Being “alien” because of a new identity and lifestyle based on godly standards becomes the label affixed to Christians. Here lies the origin and the reason for the hostility and discrimination by pagan society: slaves now suffered under their masters because of their awareness of God (2:19), women suffered under their husbands who were not (yet) believers (3:1). All believers were challenged to follow Christ in his suffering (2:21; 3:18). His followers also have to suffer as he suffered: “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude” (4:1). In this way “First Peter challenges Christians [today] to reexamine our acceptance of society’s norms and to be willing to suffer the alienation of being a visiting foreigner in our own culture wherever its values conflict with those of Christ” (Jobes 2009:5).

1.2 The forms of suffering

1 Peter uses the terms “suffer/suffering” (*paschó/pathéma*) mainly as *pars pro toto* for different forms of suffering without specifying them in detail. Elsewhere the letter describes the forms of suffering in some detail. For example, 1 Peter 1:4 and 4:12 speak about suffering grief in various trials. The majority of passages that indicate the nature of suffering speak about psychological suffering (rather than physical) in particular under verbal discrimination: Christians suffer from being accused (2:12), insulted, and slandered (3:9, 14). The pagan neighbors “speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ” (3:16) and “heap abuse on you” or “malign you” (4:4). Christians are insulted for the name of Christ (4:14).

This verbal animosity, the discrimination through devaluation, slander, calumny, defamation and insult exacerbates the suffering and makes it tougher for Christians to live a Christian life in a non-Christian environment. In 1 Peter, “suffering” becomes a synonym for experiencing suspicion, prejudices, hate and aggression that are brought on Christians simply because of their identity of “being Christian” and corresponding behavior.

⁷ Horrell (2007:127) explains: “The recipients of 1 Peter were probably not literally geographically displaced aliens, even if a certain number among them might have been” (for a metaphorical understanding of this word see also Achtemeier 1996:56; Feldmeier 1992:203-210; against Elliott 1981:37-49; 67-84).

1.3 Strategies for coping with discrimination

1 Peter takes these demanding circumstances seriously and suggests a variety of strategies for coping with various situations. The first charge is to focus on the “inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you” (1:4). Beyond the present sufferings, which are just for now and which last only for a little while (1:6; 5:10), the readers should keep their eyes fixed upon the goal of their faith and the salvation of their souls (1:5; 1:9). Just as Jesus has received glory after his sufferings (cf. 1:11, 21), they will receive praise, honor and glory (1:7; 5:4; 5:10) after sharing in the sufferings of Christ when his glory will surely be revealed (4:13). They can be confident that they will reach that goal because God himself – in whom they have faith and hope (1:21) – has given them, in his great mercy, a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:3). Hope, as a central element of Christian existence, is in line with other writings of the New Testament (Feldmeier 2004:300).

Another strategy of coping concentrates on the manner in which Christians live in the midst of suffering. How should believers live their Christian lives among their unbelieving neighbors? Such instructions in the letter address three groups: 2:1-2, 11-12 and 4:2-3 describe the behavior of individuals and their willingness to give an answer (3:8-17); 2:13-3:7 focus on the readiness to submit and 1:22; 2:17; 3:8-17; 4:8-11 address the quality and promise of Christian fellowship (cf. Graser 2012:136). The last aspect is particularly important for people who undergo discrimination. Showing proper respect to one another (2:17) and living in harmony, being sympathetic, compassionate and humble (3:8) create a “brotherhood of believers” and provide a strong community in which individuals find the support to bear and overcome the discrimination and hostility imposed on them by the pagan society in which they find themselves.

A further instruction for coping with suffering appears in 1 Peter 4:12: “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” Stenschke (2008a:244) explains:

Although it is a new experience for them, what is happening to the Gentile Christians is *not* strange! They now share what the people of God of old had to face in the midst of Gentile nations. The position of a distinct religious minority with all its implications, which was common and therefore not surprising to the Jewish communities of the Diaspora (and the homeland), has now become the calling of these Gentile Christians.

This experience is not unique to the believers in Asia Minor. They share it with the “brothers throughout the world [who] are undergoing the same kind of sufferings”. Through the reference to the worldwide Christian community, the author

indicates that the readers are not alone in their suffering as Christians. It is “common” and “normal” for the pagan world to discriminate against Christians because of their belonging to Christ and their new behavior. “With all other Christians, the readers share the necessity of resisting the devil, thus sharing the suffering of Christ (4:13), knowing that they do not stand alone with suffering arbitrarily visited only on them, but that what they must undergo is being undergone by all other Christians [and Christ] as well” (Achteimer 1996:343f).

A final strategy for coping with discrimination consists of rebuilding and strengthening the self-esteem of the readers by pointing out their new identity in Christ and their group affiliation (1:14-2:10).⁸ This strategy will be examined in more detail below.

2. Overview of the coping strategies of modern social psychology

Modern social psychology distinguishes between two major strategies of coping with prejudice: the problem-focused and the emotion-focused strategies (Miller & Major 2000:250f). Problem-focused strategies address the source of stress and attempt to actively change stressful situations in order to reduce the extent of discrimination, while emotion-focused strategies are used “to regulate emotions associated with stressors” (Miller & Major 2000:257). Both strategies can be subdivided into three types of coping strategies:

Problem-focused strategies		
(1) concentration on the self as the target of prejudice	(2) concentration on the situation	(3) concentration on others as the perpe- trators of prejudice
reduce or remove conceal compensate	avoid interaction with similarly stigmatized others	change others or limit another’s potential to act out his or her prejudice

The first strategy (1), concentrating on the self, shows at least three ways of coping with prejudice. A first option is to *reduce or remove* “the applicability of stigma to the self”, a second option seeks “to *compensate* for the problems stigma creates in social interaction” (Miller & Major 2000:252f). The third option of coping tries to *conceal* the stigma. Tröster (2008:144) explains that the attempt to conceal or

⁸ Horrell (2007:132) calls this segment therefore “identity-defining narrative”.

disguise a stigma, is the most common strategy, but also the one that entails great physical efforts.

The second strategy (2) focuses on the situation and the reasons for a stigma. Victims of prejudice try, on the one hand, to avoid places, persons, and activities that expose them to discrimination by others (:144). On the other hand, they interact increasingly with people of the same stigmatized group (Miller & Major 2000:255). “By affiliating with similarly stigmatized others, stigmatized people gain a respite from prejudice, in addition to all of the benefits that may ordinarily occur as a consequence of affiliation with similar others” (:256).

The third strategy (3), concentrating on others as the perpetrators of prejudice, seeks “to change others, or at least to limit another’s potential to act out his or her prejudice”. The most obvious strategy here is education and/or persuasion” (Holloway 2009:119). Another possibility to gain acceptance is to point out biological or medical factors for the diversity and the resulting discrimination.

People are held less responsible for stigmas caused by genetic endowment or illness, and others generally have more sympathy for people whose stigmatizing condition is perceived as outside their control than for people who are perceived as being responsible for their stigmatizing condition (Miller & Major 2000:256).

In general, it can be said: “problem-focused coping is seen as an effective strategy because it is task-oriented and addresses the source of the stress” (Ashkanasy, Ashton-James & Jordan 2004:12).

The second type of coping with discrimination is emotion-focused strategies. It is important to mention that, as a rule of thumb, “emotion-focused strategies are more appropriate when the problem cannot be changed” (Ashkanasy, Ashton-James & Jordan 2004:12).

Emotion-focused strategies		
(1) strategies involving social comparisons with another individual or with another group	(2) strategies that involve the attribution of negative outcomes	(3) strategies that involve a restructuring of one’s self-esteem
comparison with people in the same, or a similar situation upward comparison downward comparison	attributing negative outcomes to prejudice and discrimination rather than to the own personal deservingness	change others or limit another’s potential to act out his or her prejudice

Strategies (1) involving social comparisons are used on two different levels: either individuals compare themselves with other individuals or an entire group is compared with another group. The comparison of one individual or group with another individual or group can be accomplished in three ways. Comparison with:

(a) another person or group that is in the same or a similar situation. Thereby, “stigmatized persons can protect themselves from exposure to, and the potential painful emotional consequences of, upward comparisons with nonstigmatized others” (Miller & Major 2000:258).

(b) a person or group that is in a worse situation (downward social comparison). In that case, a person or group can also regulate negative emotion following threat. The emotional benefits of comparisons with others who share a stigmatizing attribute account, in part, for the prevalence of support groups for individuals with various disabilities, and for the popularity of ethnically and religiously oriented clubs on campuses (:258).

(c) a person or group that is not stigmatized (upward social comparison). Upward comparisons with others who are dissimilar to the self in some way, even a minor way, “may be dismissed as not self-relevant, thereby protecting affect and self-esteem. Furthermore, upward comparisons with advantaged others may be inspiring rather than demoralizing, if they are accompanied by the belief that one’s own situation may improve” (:258).

Miller and Major (2000:258) conclude: “In short, various comparison strategies may help the stigmatized to regulate emotion and protect personal and collective self-esteem in the face of stigma-related stressors.”

Holloway (2009:124) explains the second type (2) of the emotion-focused strategies (attribution): “When confronted with negative outcomes in their daily experience stigmatized persons face what researchers call ‘attributional ambiguity’”. Since negative outcomes can either be explained by the personal inability and/or the negative performance of a person or by the prejudices of others – an affected person tries to devalue these negative results as mere prejudices (:124). Such attributions help stigmatized people “to protect self-esteem and regulate emotional reactions in the face of stigma-related stressors” (Miller & Major 2000:258).

In dealing with prejudice and discrimination, this attribution does not always guarantee protection of self-esteem, particularly in situations where prejudices cannot be denied. “Furthermore, a tendency to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice in the absence of clear situational clues that prejudice is a plausible cause of outcomes is not self-protective” (:259). Therefore denial or minimizing of prejudice is an indication of stigmatized persons’ emotional ability to handle stress factors. “. . . denial of discrimination can sometimes be an adaptive strategy, at least in the short run, compared to acknowledging oneself as a victim and relinquishing

a sense of control over one's own outcomes" (:260; cf. Major & Vick 2005:146). However, it has to be kept in mind "that using denial as a coping strategy is associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes over time" (Miller & Major 2000:259f).

Whether denying or acknowledging prejudice as a potential cause of one's outcomes is adaptive or not is likely to depend on a variety of factors, such as the extent to which prejudice is flagrant, the extent to which others agree with one's own interpretation of events, and the degree of control one perceives oneself to have over the situation (:260).

The last emotion-focused strategy (3) focuses on the reestablishing of self-esteem so that stress-factors caused by a stigma become less damaging to the self-esteem. One option for reestablishing self-esteem is by depreciating the domains in which someone performs poorly and by distinguishing and emphasizing domains of good performance.⁹

Holloway (2009:126) describes another way of restructuring self-concept:

The empirical literature distinguishes between psychological "disengagement" and psychological "disidentification". Both intentionally devalue domains in which one's performance, or the performance of one's group, is negatively evaluated. However, in the first case (disengagement) the devaluing is temporary, responding to a specific threat, whereas in the second (disidentification) the devaluing has become more permanent and alters one's enduring set of values.

Beside these strategies, coping can also be achieved through building self-esteem by understanding self-concept and self-worth. Vye, Scholljegerdes and Welch (2007:57) explain:

Self-concept relates to the idea of identity and knowing who we are. In order to build self-esteem, we need to have a good understanding of our self-concept – those characteristics that make us who we are ... Once we have established some ideas about who we are (self-concept), we can attach values to this identity or, in other words, increase our self-worth.

Ashkanasy, Ashton-James and Jordan (2004:12) indicate that "emotional-focused coping ... is perceived as less effective, because it merely ameliorates the appraisal of stress so that the stress trigger still remains."

⁹ Holloway (2009:126) provides two examples: "A person failing in academics may therefore choose to restructure her or his self-concept to value, say, success in sports ('I am an athlete not a scholar') or, vice versa, a person failing in sports may choose to shift her or his emphasis to academics ('I am a scholar not an athlete')."

3. Coping strategies of 1 Peter in the light of modern social psychology

Our description of coping strategies in 1 Peter and in modern social psychology suggest that many of the strategies in 1 Peter are also used in modern social psychology even though they are labeled with the technical terms of a different academic discipline (cf. Holloway 2009; Graser 2012:175-186). We will now compare one of the strategies of 1 Peter with the emotion-focused strategy of (re)building and strengthening self-esteem, as used in social psychology. While other strategies could also be examined with benefit, we focus on this strategy because it is dominant in 1 Peter and also appears in other New Testament writings.

From a social psychological view, “both the awareness of being perceived in a stereotype manner and the actual experience of refusal and exclusion shape the self-esteem and the self-concept of a stigmatized person” (Tröster 2008:141; trans. AG). In order to rebuild and/or strengthen the self-esteem and self-concept of a person, some of the emotion-focused strategies come into action.

Precisely this happens in 1 Peter. Because the reasons for being discriminated against cannot be changed¹⁰, predominantly emotion-focused strategies are proposed. The experience of discrimination and exclusion can threaten and shatter the self-esteem of the readers. To strengthen their self-esteem, the author emphasizes the new group affiliation and gives an extended understanding of their self-concept and self-worth.

1 Peter 1:14 assures the readers that they are children of God (referring back to 1:3 where God is shown as a father who has given new birth [1:3; 1:23]). As newborn children they now belong to the family of God. As members of this family they have an exceptionally high status, along with all the corresponding privileges associated with this position. As God’s children they can call upon him as their father (1:17) and may cast all their anxiety on him because he cares for them (5:7).

The believers are also called to become “living stones”, built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood (2:5). The author speaks explicitly of a new “community” to which they belong. “Only as a building, as a collective, the living stones, can they fulfill their purpose of being a spiritual house” (Feldmeier 2005:90; trans. AG).

1 Peter 2:7-8 describes the contrast between the believers and the non-believers. Christ as the cornerstone of the whole building is precious to those who believe in

¹⁰The main reason for discrimination and suffering is the simple fact that Christians are followers of Christ. This “problem” and reason for suffering cannot be changed or removed but was and will always be a reason for suffering for Christ’s sake. It is not an option, it is a calling (cf. Matt 10:25; Mark 8:34; John 15:20; Acts 14:22; 1 Pet 2:20-21; 4:1,12; 5:9; 2 Tim 3:12; Heb 13:12-14).

him. “But to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone” (2:7). Non-believers “stumble because they disobey the word” (2:8). Then the author not only stresses once more the contrast between the non-believers and the believers by the words “but you are” in verse 9, but he also highlights the outstanding status of the believers:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2:10).

The terms used to describe the new status of the believers are taken from Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 43:20-21 (LXX). By using the Old Testament honorific titles of Israel, the author again draws a parallel between the believers and their situation and the situation of Old Testament Israel. The believers not only partake in the destiny and the sufferings of Israel, but also share the unique privileges of Israel (cf. Stenschke 2009:108), regardless of how others may perceive and treat them.

Holloway has rightly noted, “that 1 Peter marks one of the earliest attempts, perhaps the earliest attempt...to craft a more or less comprehensive response to anti-Christian prejudice and its outcomes” (cf. Graser 2012:175-186). These examples and many others indicate that the strategies of coping with discrimination used in 1 Peter are very much up-to-date. Some of them have been described and are used in similar fashion in modern social psychology. Therefore, not only from a Christian perspective, but also from a psychological point of view, 1 Peter has all the potential and promise to guide and help Christians to cope with discrimination and prejudice in our day and age. The above described strategies¹¹, such as focusing on the goal, not being surprised, knowing that brothers throughout the world suffer in the same way and the knowledge of belonging to a divinely chosen group, can help Christians to endure suffering. The awareness that suffering is temporary and that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18) will also help Christians to endure suffering for Christ’s sake.

4. Conclusion

After comparing the strategies of 1 Peter and modern social psychology, it is obvious that the letter provides coping strategies that coincide with the strategies of social psychology. In fact, 1 Peter indicates that people in situations that cannot be changed or controlled mostly use emotion-focused strategies. However, 1 Peter

¹¹ Cf. 2.3 Strategies of coping with discrimination, see also Graser 2012:134-163; 175-189.

does not use all of the strategies of modern social psychology: it lists strategies to cope as effectively as possible with suffering, but does not offer strategies that might lead to denial of faith or to a refusal of Christ in order to avoid suffering. The aim of 1 Peter is faithful discipleship of Christ even, and particularly in, suffering for and with him.

While social psychology can (and should) be used to aid Christians who suffer and those called to support them, it is not the cure-all for Christians.

With the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of both the Holy Spirit and of fellow Christians, as well as the many promises of God's Word, Christians can and should draw on resources that surpass anything that human science has to offer, however valuable some of its insights prove to be.

The New Testament not only indicates that followers of Christ will have to suffer because of their belonging to Christ; it also provides them with good and helpful guidelines as to how to cope with suffering.

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