

MISSING HOME: SOCIOTROPY AND AUTONOMY AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND HOMESICKNESS IN COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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The study was an attempt to extend Aaron Beck's formulation of the sociotropic and autonomous vulnerabilities involved in depressogenesis to a population experiencing depressive symptoms due to adjustment related difficulties, namely freshman college students beginning their first semester. The results obtained from 167 college freshmen, assessed 6–7 weeks after beginning their first semester at college, were generally consistent with the research predictions. Specifically, sociotropic persons displayed the classic symptoms of "homesickness" in that they were more likely to be preoccupied about home and display depressive symptoms after the transition to college. Attachment to home scores also mediated effects of sociotropy on depression. By contrast, autonomous persons were less attached to home, although they did report depressive symptoms as a result of the transition. Exploring this trend, it was observed that autonomy was related to disliking the university scores which did mediate indirect effects of autonomy on depression.

Keywords: Sociotropy; Autonomy; Personality; Homesickness; Depression

Over the past 15 years theorists and researchers have given considerable attention to the manner in which certain personality variables interact with life events to predict psychological distress. Two personality dimensions in particular have received a great deal of theoretical and empirical attention. The first of these dimensions focuses on the interpersonal domain and involves needs for intimacy, affiliation, and dependency. This interpersonal orientation has been variously labeled as sociotropy (Beck, 1983), dependency (Blatt, 1974), communion (Bakan, 1966), dominant other (Arieti and Bemporad, 1980), femininity (Bem, 1974), and anxious attachment (Bowlby, 1977). By contrast, the second orientation is focused on needs involving goal achievement and individual autonomy. This orientation has been alternatively labeled as autonomy (Beck, 1983), self-criticism (Blatt, 1974), agency (Bakan, 1966), dominant goal (Arieti and Bemporad, 1980), masculinity (Bem, 1974), and compulsive self-reliance (Bowlby, 1977).

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Much of the empirical research in the cognitive-behavioral literature has focused its attention on the sociotropy/autonomy diathesis-stress formulation for depression onset proposed by Aaron Beck. Specifically, Beck (1983) has proposed that highly sociotropic individuals would be particularly vulnerable to life events involving interpersonal disruption or loss. Alternatively, highly autonomous individuals should be vulnerable to life events involving goal-related failure or achievement setbacks. Consequently, according to Beck's proposal, it is the interaction of personality type with thematic negative life events which predicts the onset of depressive symptoms. Over the years, Beck's formulation has received fairly consistent empirical support (Robins and Block, 1988; Hammen *et al.*, 1989a,b, 1992; Nietzel and Harris, 1990; Robins, 1990; Clark *et al.*, 1992; Rude and Burnham, 1993; Robins *et al.*, 1994; Bartelstone and Trull, 1995; Robins *et al.*, 1995; Allen *et al.*, 1996). Specifically, sociotropic persons, who have heightened interpersonal needs for dependency, appear more likely to develop depressive symptoms in the face of interpersonal chaos or loss. By contrast, autonomous individuals, who focus on goal-related achievement and personal independence, appear to experience depression in the face of achievement failure or restrictions in personal freedom.

The present study was an attempt to expand the applicability of Beck's formulation by employing the sociotropy and autonomy dimensions to predict dysphoria and related symptomatology resulting from adjustment problems. Much of the work in the sociotropy and autonomy literature has focused on clinically depressed populations. However, adjustment problems with depressive symptomatology also make up a significant portion of those seeking psychological help. Epidemiological evidence indicates that 5% to 20% of individuals in outpatient treatment have Adjustment Disorder as their principal diagnosis (APA, 1994). Adjustment Disorder is also associated with interpersonal dysfunction, impairment in the workplace, and increased suicide risk (APA, 1994). If Beck's (1983) formulation can be successfully extended to adjustment-related difficulties, his theory will have greatly extended its clinical utility by offering an etiological model for a much wider range of emotional problems.

Homesickness, Sociotropy and Autonomy

The phenomena of homesickness has received only modest attention over the years. However, we do know that homesickness involves a sense of loneliness, dysphoria, emotional distress, and ruminations about home (Fisher, 1988). Some have even characterized homesickness as a grief reaction (Fisher, 1989). Obviously, homesickness occurs when a person has left behind a well developed social support network and has subsequent difficulty adapting to a new environment. The homesick response may be a sign of separation anxiety and subsequent grief, as conceptualized in the attachment literature (Ainsworth, 1979), or it may reflect strain in trying to cope with a novel environment (Fisher and Hood, 1987). Researchers have investigated the phenomena of homesickness, and the depressive symptomatology associated with it, in military personnel as they go to training (Eurelings-Bontekoe *et al.*, 1996a; Agterberg and Passchier, 1998), boarding school students (Fisher *et al.*, 1986), children going to camp (Thurber and Weisz, 1997a,b), immigrants coming to a new country (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981; Tikoo, 1994), and college students beginning school (Fisher and Hood, 1987; Pennebaker *et al.*, 1990; Lu, 1990; Eurelings-Bontekoe *et al.*, 1996b; Kazantzis and Flett, 1998; McAndrew, 1998). Although "homesickness" is not a formal

diagnostic term, the symptoms of homesickness would most commonly be diagnosed as Adjustment Disorder with Depressed Mood (APA, 1994) bringing the phenomena under the umbrella of etiological models for depression.

The present study examined the phenomena of homesickness in freshmen college students during their first semester at the university. More specifically, we attempted to use the dimensions of sociotropy and autonomy to predict both post-transition depression and homesickness within this population. The basic goal of the study was straightforward: We wanted to test Beck's sociotropy–autonomy formulation to predict emotional dysfunction that, although of significant clinical interest, is mostly sub-syndromal in nature. In addition, we felt that studying the transition to college provided unique opportunities to assess the construct validity of the sociotropy and autonomy dimensions. Specifically, leaving a strong family and social support network to move to college could, following Beck's (1983) formulation, be particularly dramatic for sociotropic persons. By contrast, getting out from under the roof of “Mom and Dad” and beginning one's “adult life” could be, again following Beck (1983), particularly energizing to autonomous individuals. Consequently, we predicted that sociotropy would be predictive of both depression and homesickness in incoming college freshmen, whereas it was expected that autonomy would be unrelated to both post-transition homesickness and depression.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 167 incoming freshmen enrolled in their first semester of college at Abilene Christian University. The mean age of the sample was 18.10 ($SD = 0.93$). Seventy percent of the sample was female. Seventy-eight percent of the sample had moved to the university from out of state. Six weeks after the start of the fall semester, the authors made presentations in a variety of freshman courses. Participants interested in becoming involved in the study contacted the experimenters after the presentation. All participants completed the assessment 6 to 7 weeks after the start of their first fall semester. Participants completed an assessment battery assessing personality, homesickness, depression, and other variables that were expected to potentially covary with the personality, symptomatology, and mood measures.

Assessment Instruments

Homesickness Questionnaire (HQ) Responding to the lack of a psychometrically sound homesickness assessment instrument in the literature, Archer *et al.* (1998) developed the HQ to replace the single item homesickness assessments commonly found in the literature (e.g., Fisher and Hood, 1987). The 33-item HQ scale was developed to assess grief-related homesickness themes such as: Preoccupation/intrusive thoughts (“I can't help thinking about my home.”), distress related to the missed attachment (“I really get upset when I think about home.”), seeking to maintain the attachment (“I visit home as often as I can.”), restlessness (“I can't seem to settle here at the university.”), anger/blame (“I hate this place.”), and guilt (“I wish I had never come to the university.”). Each item is rated using a 1–4 Likert scale. Overall, the HQ items sum

to form two subscales: Disliking the university (13 items) and Attachment to home (20 items). The Attachment to home scale captures themes relating to rumination about home and distress about being away from home. The Disliking the university scale captures themes related to dislike of the university and difficulties adjusting to the new environment. Overall, the HQ has demonstrated, in multiple samples, excellent internal consistency and factor structure, good convergent validity with measures of homesickness and psychological distress, and the ability to discriminate between homesick and non-homesick populations (Archer *et al.*, 1998). In this sample the Disliking the University and Attachment to Home subscales yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.89 and 0.88 respectively.

Personal Style Inventory (PSI) The PSI (Robins *et al.*, 1994) was used to assess the constructs of sociotropy and autonomy. The PSI was developed to address some of the psychometric limitations of the Sociotropy and Autonomy Scale (Beck *et al.*, 1983). The PSI consists of 48 items (24 autonomy, 24 sociotropy) which are rated on a 6-point Likert scale. Examples of Sociotropy items include: "I often put other people's needs before my own" and "I try to please other people too much." Examples of Autonomy items include: "I tend to keep other people at a distance" and "It is hard for me to take instructions from people who have authority over me." In the literature, the PSI has demonstrated strong internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Zuroff, 1994; Robins *et al.*, 1995). The PSI has also demonstrated good convergent and discriminant validity with theoretically related constructs such as the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire and the Sociotropy and Autonomy Scale (Robins *et al.*, 1994; Zuroff, 1994; Alden and Bieling, 1996). In this sample the sociotropy and autonomy items generated alpha coefficients of 0.89 and 0.79 respectively.

Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) The CES-D (Radloff, 1977) is a 20-item self-report scale that assesses depressed mood and symptomatology. Participants were asked to rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale indicating the degree to which they experienced depressive symptoms "since coming to ACU." In this sample the CES-D yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.91. Also, 35.4% of this sample scored above the cutoff (17+) set by Radloff (1977) to denote mild to severe depressive symptoms when compared to clinically depressed populations; this number is slightly higher than the 21% reported by Radloff (1977) for community samples scoring above the cutoff. This is most likely due to the fact that this college sample had recently undergone a major life transition.

Covariates Since we were employing a correlational design we were concerned about other variables which might covary with the personality and symptomatology measures and, potentially, interfere in our interpretations of the data. Each of the potential covariates assessed in the battery (e.g. gender, in state vs. out of state residence, car availability, number of friends already present on campus, number of friends starting school with the participant, family cohesion) were assessed using a single item. Only three potential covariates were identified by their zero-order associations with the personality and/or adjustment measures. The "How successful have you been at making friends since starting school at ACU?" item (1 = not at all successful; 5 = extremely successful) was observed to be significantly associated with Depression

ratings ($r = -0.24$, $p < 0.05$) as well as with Sociotropy ($r = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$) and Autonomy ($r = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$) ratings. Gender (point-biserial correlations using a coding where Males = 1 and Females = 0) was also associated with the personality measures, with women slightly more sociotropic than males ($r = -0.26$, $p < 0.05$) and males more autonomous than females ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, the “How much control do you feel you had over your decision to come to ACU?” item (1 = no personal control; 5 = total personal control) was negatively associated with Attachment to Home ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.05$), Disliking the University ($r = -0.21$, $p < 0.05$), and Depression ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$) ratings. The influences of these and all other covariates were assessed in separate analyses and none of these variables accounted for, or qualified, the findings presented below. Consequently, covariates were not included in the main analyses.

RESULTS

Correlational Analyses

The descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the personality and adjustment measures are presented in Table I. Descriptive statistics for the PSI Sociotropy and Autonomy scales were similar to published means for college samples (e.g. Allen *et al.*, 1996). As expected, sociotropy was positively associated with both attachment to home and depression ratings. Sociotropy was unrelated to liking or disliking the university. By contrast, autonomy was positively associated with dislike of the university ratings. In addition, although autonomy was unrelated to attachment to home scores, it was positively correlated with overall CES-D ratings. It was unexpected to observe the relationship between autonomy and HQ-Disliking the University subscale ratings. This association appeared to indicate that autonomy was predictive of some transition-related difficulty.

Path Analyses

One of the goals of this study was to assess the expectation that sociotropy, but not autonomy, would confer a vulnerability to experience both homesickness and depression related to the transition of leaving home and beginning college. However, the pattern of relationships observed in Table I indicated that Sociotropy was only associated with Attachment to Home ratings rather than homesickness generally. In

TABLE I Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between personality and adjustment variables

	2.	3.	4.	5.	Mean	SD
1. PSI-Sociotropy	0.20*	0.12	0.19*	0.40**	94.59	16.66
2. PSI-Autonomy		0.37**	0.11	0.41**	78.44	12.90
3. HQ-Disliking the University			0.57**	0.70**	24.34	7.86
4. HQ-Attachment to Home				0.55**	36.24	10.26
5. CES-D					14.44	10.47

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); HQ = Homesickness Questionnaire; PSI = Personal Style Inventory; CES-D = Center for Epidemiological Studies — Depression Scale.

addition, autonomy was unexpectedly associated with Disliking the University ratings, indicating that autonomy was predictive of some transition-related difficulty. Due to the interrelatedness of the personality and adjustment measures, and the pattern of correlations observed in Table I, we conducted a path analysis to formally assess the relationship between these variables. A path analysis would also allow for tests of mediational effects of the personality variables upon depression via homesickness.

To accomplish the first path analysis, two separate regression analyses were conducted. In the first analysis, sociotropy and autonomy were used to predict homesickness (we used the Attachment to Home subscale for this particular analysis). In the second analysis, sociotropy, autonomy, and attachment to home scores were simultaneously used to predict CES-D scores. Standardized path coefficients (standardized betas) and disturbance variance estimates ($1 - r^2$) are presented in Fig. 1. Overall, sociotropy and autonomy accounted for 5% of the variance in attachment to home ratings ($F_{2,165} = 4.08, p < 0.05$). Sociotropy, autonomy, and attachment to home ratings accounted for 46% of the variance in depression scores ($F_{3,164} = 46.30, p < 0.001$). As can be seen in Fig. 1, the path coefficient for sociotropy ($t = 2.60, p < 0.05$), but not autonomy ($t = 0.65, p > 0.05$), was significantly predictive of increased attachment to home scores. In addition, sociotropy ($t = 4.02, p < 0.001$), attachment to home ($t = 7.67, p < 0.001$), and autonomy ($t = 5.31, p < 0.001$) had significant path coefficients predicting depression scores. This pattern of results suggests that although each variable was accounting for unique variance in depression scores, the significant path coefficient from sociotropy to attachment to home indicated that, as theorized, homesickness might mediate some of the effects of sociotropy on depression. However, a significance test of this mediated effect was necessary.

Table II presents the decomposition of the direct, indirect, and total effects¹ of sociotropy, autonomy, and attachment to home upon depression. As can be seen in Table II, and as was predicted earlier, sociotropy did display a significant ($z = 2.80, p < 0.01$) indirect effect upon depression mediated by attachment to home. By contrast, no such indirect effect was observed for autonomy ($z = 0.20, p > 0.05$). This analysis suggests that, insofar as persons were possessing sociotropic traits, they were vulnerable to homesickness and that this tendency may additionally explain any depressive responses they might have been experiencing.

We had intended to conclude our analyses at this point, having predicted that autonomy would be unrelated to homesickness and depression generally. However, because autonomy was related to a homesickness construct – disliking the university – and depression ratings, we conducted a second path analysis replacing the Attachment to Home subscale of the HQ with the Disliking the University subscale. Similar to the

¹ The significance tests for the indirect effects were computed using a formula noted by Baron and Kenny (1986), Sobel (1982), and Kline (1998; see pp. 120–122 and pp. 150–152 for a detailed step-by-step procedure). The formula computes a ratio. The numerator is the estimate of the indirect effect: The product of the unstandardized regression weights forming the path from independent variable to criterion via the mediating variable. The denominator is the standard error estimate of the indirect effect. As Kline (1998) notes, in a large sample this ratio is interpreted as a z -statistic whose value can be tested for significance in the standard manner through comparison with the z -distribution. Total effects are computed as the sum of direct and indirect effects. Total effects are tested for significance by computing the respective regression weights for the independent variables simultaneously predicting the criterion without mediating variables in the analysis. The significance tests for the respective regression weights test the significance of that independent variable's total effect (Kline, 1998).

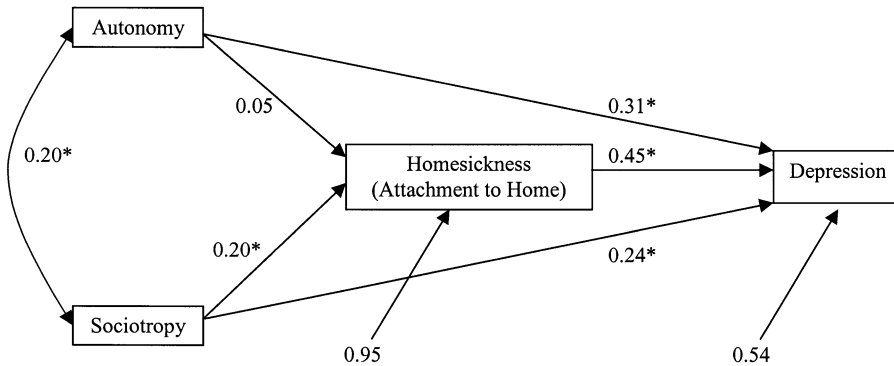


FIGURE 1 Path coefficients and disturbance variance estimates for autonomy, sociotropy, homesickness (Attachment to Home subscale), and depression ratings. Note: * $p < 0.05$.

rationale above, but now focusing on autonomy, this analysis would allow for a significance test of the effect of autonomy upon depression scores mediated by Disliking the University scores (a homesickness construct).

This path analysis was conducted in the same manner as before with the only difference being a change of the homesickness construct. The path diagram and the decomposition of effects are presented in Fig. 2 and Table III, respectively. Autonomy and sociotropy accounted for 12% of disliking the university ratings ($F_{2,165} = 11.00, p < 0.001$), with autonomy, sociotropy, and disliking the university ratings explaining 60% of CES-D score variance ($F_{3,164} = 81.27, p < 0.001$). The intriguing pattern that emerged from this analysis involved the relationship between autonomy and the homesickness construct of disliking the university. Specifically, this pattern paralleled the previous relationship observed between sociotropy and the homesickness construct of attachment to home. In short, autonomy had a significant ($z = 4.33, p < 0.01$) indirect effect upon depression via HQ-Dislike of the University scores; whereas sociotropy did not ($z = 0.40, p > 0.05$).

TABLE II Decomposition of direct and indirect effects for Autonomy, Sociotropy, and Attachment to Home ratings

Causal variable	Endogenous variable	
	Attachment to Home	Depression
<i>Autonomy</i>		
Direct effect	0.05	0.31**
Indirect effect via Attachment to Home		0.02
Total effect	0.05	0.33**
<i>Sociotropy</i>		
Direct effect	0.20*	0.24**
Indirect effect via Attachment to Home		0.09**
Total effect	0.20*	0.33**
<i>Attachment to Home</i>		
Direct effect		0.45**

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

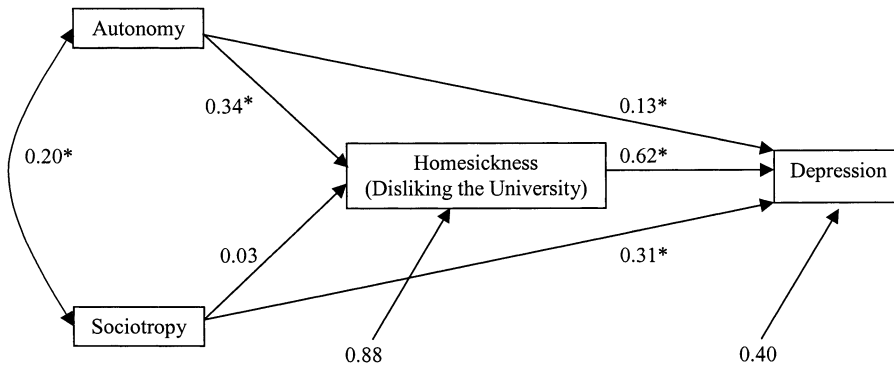


FIGURE 2 Path coefficients and disturbance variance estimates for autonomy, sociotropy, homesickness (Disliking the University subscale), and depression ratings. Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Summary of Results

To summarize the overall results, sociotropy and autonomy were each correlated with facets of homesickness as well as with overall depression scores. This finding was somewhat unexpected in that it was anticipated that sociotropy, but not autonomy, would be positively related to adjustment measures. However, it was observed that sociotropy and autonomy were related to relatively unique facets of homesickness – dislike of the university versus attachment to home – highlighting the different ways these personality traits might affect coping or convey differential vulnerabilities in the face of life stress.

DISCUSSION

Sociotropy and Autonomy: Difficulties with Adjustment

Overall, the results of the study generally confirmed Beck’s (1983) formulation of the sociotropy and autonomy constructs, but in ways we did not anticipate fully at the

TABLE III Decomposition of direct and indirect effects for Autonomy, Sociotropy, and Disliking the University ratings

Causal variable	Endogenous variable	
	Disliking University	Depression
<i>Autonomy</i>		
Direct effect	0.34**	0.13*
Indirect effect via Disliking University		0.22**
Total effect	0.34**	0.35**
<i>Sociotropy</i>		
Direct effect	0.03	0.31**
Indirect effect via Disliking University		0.02
Total effect	0.03	0.33**
<i>Disliking University</i>		
Direct effect		0.62**

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

outset. Specifically, we had predicted that sociotropy would be associated with increased depression and homesickness since the transition to college is a significant disruption to one's social support network. The results supported this conclusion in that sociotropy was predictive of both increased depression and the homesickness construct of attachment to home. Further, path analytic results indicated that sociotropy had an indirect effect upon depression mediated by attachment to home. Consequently, as was predicted, the personality dimension of sociotropy appears to involve attachment-related distress which partly explains why individuals possessing sociotropic traits might experience difficulty with the transition to college.

Although we did not expect autonomy to be related to depressive symptoms or homesickness, those possessing autonomous traits were not immune to the effects of this life transition. Specifically, autonomy was positively associated with dislike of the University which implied that autonomy was related to difficulties with feeling comfortable after the transition. In fact, the second path analysis suggested that, dislike of the university scores mediated effects of autonomy on depression ratings, indicating that highly autonomous persons did experience adjustment-related distress, contrary to our expectations.

However, although both sociotropy and autonomy were related to homesickness, they clearly differed in the facet of homesickness they manifested. Sociotropy was associated with grief-related symptoms, whereas autonomy was related to themes of restlessness and anger/blame. This pattern of results appears consistent with Beck's (1983) formulation of the sociotropy and autonomy constructs. Reflecting back on the etiological models of homesickness, we suggest that sociotropic homesickness is driven by separation anxiety and attachment grief. This suggestion seems consistent with the interpersonal dependency associated with sociotropic motives (Beck, 1983). By contrast, autonomous homesickness does not appear to involve attachment grief, but may be due to the strain of attempting to master a new environment (Fisher and Hood, 1987); and mastery is a salient theme for autonomous persons (Beck, 1983). Clearly, future research is required to test these characterizations.

Limitations

Beyond the correlational nature of the design employed in this study, two limitations of the present research stand out. First, the participants involved in the study were students at a private southwestern university. Most of the sample was Caucasian. Consequently, we are hesitant to generalize our findings to more diverse samples. In addition, the stress of the college transition may not be representative of other life stressors, particularly in adulthood. This obviously limits our ability to predict how the constructs of sociotropy and autonomy would predict how, let's say, older populations cope with retirement.

Secondly, it would have been beneficial to assess pre-transition functioning and personality prior to the beginning of school. As it was, it was difficult to determine, in our sample, the degree to which depression scores were solely due to the transition to college. Although it is reasonable to assume that most of the psychological distress observed in the sample was due to the stress of beginning college, our inability to be more precise about this issue is reason for caution in interpreting our findings.

Implications and Future Directions

In general, our findings are supportive of Beck's (1983) formulation of the sociotropy and autonomy constructs. The results also suggest that these constructs may have wider clinical utility than has been previously recognized. Specifically, Beck's (1983) diathesis-stress formulation for sociotropy and autonomy may have a continuous nature where life stressors can vary in intensity and the level of symptom expression can also range from mild to moderate to severe. Obviously, the distinction between "depressed" and "non-depressed" populations is necessary to study the etiology of depressive disorders. However, few would insist that such a dichotomy is an accurate reflection of the underlying continuum. In addition, sub-syndromal levels of depression can cause significant impairment. Understanding the causes of emotional dysfunction, across all levels of severity, should warrant continued empirical attention. The present results suggest that the constructs of sociotropy and autonomy have predictive validity for a broad range of emotional disturbance. Specifically, our results suggest that the personality dimensions of sociotropy and autonomy may shed light on how individuals cope with life transitions that are often associated with adjustment disorder diagnoses. Since life transitions involve different challenges, future research might continue to examine how personality affects our ability to adjust to specific life transitions. We may find that certain life transitions are particularly trying for certain individuals, who may manifest qualitatively different symptom profiles despite a shared distress. In the present study, both sociotropy and autonomy were related to overall post-transition depression. However, the reactions of those possessing autonomous or sociotropic traits were distinctly different, yet consistent with the salient needs and motives involved with each orientation. We have even suggested that the actual source of the distress – separation anxiety versus strain to obtain mastery – differed for each personality construct. These findings are intriguing and suggest that continued attention should be given to how personality affects coping during major life transitions.

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