

SECOND EDITION

# ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS

*A Review and Critique of Theory, Research, and Applications*

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## COPING WITH JOB STRESS

Research in the field of stress illustrates the growing belief that coping is a fundamental element in the relationship between stressors and strain (Dewe, 2017; Dewe & Cooper, 2021). Still little is known about how individuals cope with various stressors, the strategies important to coping, and the role of coping in the work stress process. The present chapter draws attention to conceptual (definitional) and methodological (measurement) issues surrounding the study of coping in workplace contexts, points to some of the limitations and concerns about existing coping research and offers some suggestions for future research in this area. Our aim is not to present final solutions to all the problems and dilemmas associated with research on stress coping but more modestly to contribute to the debate on how these difficulties may be approached and resolved.

Although there exist several theoretical approaches to the definition and classification of coping, this chapter, in line with the general stress literature, will draw on the transactional theory of stress perspective and its classification of coping (Bliese et al., 2017; Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Folkman, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Zhang et al., 2019). In addition, we will discuss a selection of other conceptualizations (i.e., conservation of resources theory and cognitive activation theory of stress) and approaches to coping, including higher order categories of coping (i.e., promotion and prevention-oriented coping), to facilitate a platform of inspiration for future research and practice in the field of coping. Although we have chosen to build our discussion on a certain selection of theoretical frameworks, it does not mean that the definition of coping from other theoretical lenses is irrelevant. On the contrary, other theoretical coping frameworks may be valuable for the reader to consider and we refer the interested reader to the original sources of those particular theories (see for example references to the theories described in Chapter 1). The theoretical frameworks of focus in this chapter are mainly selected based on what has been the major frameworks applied in the organizational stress-coping literature. We have also chosen to focus on the theoretical frameworks that are clearly underlying frameworks of the organizational stress process depicted in Chapter 1. Our

hope is that this chapter about stress coping may be helpful to facilitate further understanding of the organizational stress process (see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1).

## **COPING THEORIES, DEFINITIONS, AND THE RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Like the concept of stress itself, various definitions of coping have been proposed, including coping as a psychoanalytic process; as a personal trait, style, or disposition; as a description of situationally specific strategies; and as a process. Traditional approaches to conceptualizing coping defined it in terms of a relatively stable trait or some enduring behavior or characteristic of the person. The notion that coping is a stable dispositional characteristic is however vigorously debated (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Some empirical evidence suggests that personality only has a modest influence on an individual's preferred coping style, thus coping styles are suggested to only be modestly heritable (Jang et al., 2007). The debate needs to be kept separate from the role of individual differences and their moderating effect on coping. Meta-analytic evidence also shows some gender differences in coping. When compared to men, women have been found to engage in more coping strategies, particularly ruminating about problems, using positive self-talk, and seeking emotional support (Tamres et al., 2002). Also, the empirical evidence suggests that women appraise certain stressors as being more severe than men (Tamres et al., 2002). Although a portion of our stress response is a result of biological heritage (Folkman, 2011), Lazarus (1991) has suggested that the static model implied by a dispositional definition of coping does not fit well with the dynamic, process-oriented nature of coping and tends to overlook the situational context in which coping behaviors occur.

*Transaction theory* views coping as thoughts and actions that are initiated in response to a specific encounter and that change over time as efforts are reappraised and outcomes are evaluated. This implies a dynamic interaction between the person and the environment, whereby the individual imposes a particular appraisal on the environment, while the environment is also influential in shaping that appraisal (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). It also highlights the fact that efforts initiated in relation to a particular encounter will affect subsequent appraisals of the demand and hence further coping efforts. Clearly, if our interest in coping is to capture what individuals actually think and do in any encounter, then definitions and assessments of coping need to express a breadth and range of strategies that reflect the diversity and complexity of coping behaviors (Skinner et al., 2003). Definitions that reflect a static approach (e.g., person-environment fit) are simply not designed to do this or to deal with the empirical issues raised by the process-oriented perspective (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). Using a *transactional perspective*, one can define coping as 'cognitive and behavioural efforts to master, reduce or tolerate the internal or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction' (Folkman, 1984, p. 843). Coping efforts can be conceptually distinguished from the results (success or failure) of these efforts. The three key features of this definition are (a) the emphasis it places on the process in contrast to the more interactional (cause-effect) nature of

traditional approaches (Cox, 1987; Edwards, 1988); (b) the positioning of coping in the relationship between the person and the environment (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004); and (c) the link it provides with other components of the stress process. Central to this definition of coping is the integrating role of cognitive appraisal. Defined in this way, coping is offered as a conceptually distinct variable, capable of assessment independently of stressors and resultant strains (Folkman, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). As a result of ongoing transactions with the environment, individuals are confronted with demands that impinge on their cognitive processes and activate a requirement to cope or adapt. The unit of analysis that captures the transactional nature of stress is appraisal, of which there are two kinds (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus, 1991). The first is *primary appraisal* – where individuals give meaning and significance to the situation and evaluate what is at stake for them and whether the situation (or events within it) pose a potential or actual threat to their well-being. *Secondary appraisal*, on the other hand, refers to the perceived availability of coping resources for dealing with a stressful encounter. At this stage, coping options are evaluated in terms of available social, personal, economic, and organizational resources and the level of control that individuals perceive they have over the situation. Intense negative emotions characterize these appraisals (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Coping behaviors are initiated in an emotional environment as a consequence of primary and secondary appraisal (illustrated in Chapter 1). These processes are interdependent, influencing each other and shaping the nature of any encounter (Folkman, 1984). With a successful resolution, positive emotions are expected to dominate while with an unfavorable or unclear resolution, negative emotions are expected to dominate (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In the case of organizational stress, emotions are tied to variables – such as an employee's beliefs systems, personal values, goals, personal resources, environmental events, and goal hierarchies – which will form the appraisals on which each emotion rests (cf. Lazarus, 1999). The presence of positive emotions (e.g., hope, joy, love, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion) in the stress process has been emphasized as 'an exciting new development in the field of coping' (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 764). This emphasis derived from what has been referred to as the positive psychology movement – a study of the processes and conditions which facilitate optimal functioning, flourishing and growth of individuals, groups and institutions – and the awareness that positive emotions can occur even in terribly stressful situations (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Fredrickson, 2001; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Given that psychology is encompassing both the positive and the negative (McNulty & Fincham, 2011), in stressful encounters, positive emotions have been found to co-occur with negative emotions (Dewe & Cooper, 2012; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This means that even in very stressful situations individuals tend to look for positive meaning (or even infuse it) which can lead to positive emotions and an opportunity to rebuild resources that can help sustain coping and facilitate growth (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Future research needs to clarify further the coping processes

employees use to develop positive emotions in stressful work-related encounters, as well as to clarify how the co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions may contribute to determine effective coping and thriving versus strain outcomes at work.

A further development of appraisal centered research, which is in line with the theorizing of the transactional theory of stress, has pointed to the relevance of distinguishing between the appraisal of job demands as either challenges or hindrances (O'Brien & Beehr, 2019). *Challenge appraisals* are evident when a stressful situation has the potential for growth, mastery and rewards, while *hindrance appraisals* are evident when stressful encounters are perceived to potentially threaten and thwart development, goal attainment, and personal well-being (Webster et al., 2011). This distinction is relevant because such different appraisals translate into diverging outcomes (Lepine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007). Still, the distinction may not always be clear, as employees may appraise the very same job demand as being both challenging and hindering to some extent (Webster et al., 2011). When job demands (stressors) are appraised as both challenges and hindrances they are likely to have maladaptive influence on employees (Webster et al., 2011). In a more recent study, Li, Taris, and Peeters (2020) found that although the presence of high job demands was associated with negative outcomes (e.g., burnout), these maladaptive influences were weaker when employees engaged in challenge appraisal. Although the relevance of challenge and hindrance appraisals have been acknowledged and supported in the literature, more knowledge is needed on how employees cope with challenge and hindrance stressors, particularly over time (Zhang et al., 2019).

Identifying coping behaviors as the processes that link the individual to the environment shifts the focus of research toward developing an understanding of what people actually think, feel, and do in a stressful encounter (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Understanding coping therefore may require researchers to focus on the individual level. As we shall see in Chapter 8, this by no means undermines the importance of investigating organization-level stress management interventions, which may be necessary to deal with certain kinds of stressors, especially those over which individuals can exert little or no control. Nevertheless, even in these interventions, individual appraisals and activities must be taken into account. Still, recent advances in demands-resources theories on organizational stress acknowledge the relevance of taking a multilevel perspective (e.g., individuals nested within their work group and organizational culture) to understand and explore the important coping functions of resources (Dewe, 2017; Holmgreen et al., 2017). This may add an important insight for future research to consider when further exploring the nature and relevance of resources from the lens of coping (Dewe, 2017).

*Conservation of resources theory (COR)*, which we described in Chapter 1, considers that threat and loss can have objective elements and that appraisals are not only individualistic, they can be common, i.e., individuals sharing a culture/biology can jointly experience them (Hobfoll, 2010). This points to the importance of the objective reality and the circumstances in which stressors occur (Hobfoll, 2010; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

A strength of the COR perspective is that it suggests that stressful encounters may be experienced in social groups and that coping can emerge as a combined individual and group effort (Hobfoll et al., 1994). To get around what is referred to as ‘rugged individualism’ in the field of coping, social/communal aspects of coping should therefore also be considered (Dunahoo et al., 1998; Hobfoll et al., 2003). *Social/communal coping* refers to responses that are influenced by and are in reaction to the context (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Wells et al., 1997). To be invested effectively, individual resources must fit the context (Hobfoll, 2001). When one or more employees perceive a stressor as a common (‘our’) problem, communal coping based on a social appraisal and a joint collaboration to handle it occurs (Lyons et al., 1998; Zajdel & Helgeson, 2021). The responsibility for dealing with the stressful encounter is shared by two or more individuals in a social unit. The multiaxial coping model that distinguishes coping into pro-social/antisocial and active/passive dimensions has been commonly applied to study communal coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Wells et al., 1997). Active, prosocial coping represents communal coping and has been linked to better emotional outcomes (Wells et al., 1997). More recent research indicates that communal coping is associated with better individual coping, reduced psychological distress, better physical health, more collaboration and support, enhanced relationship well-being, and more positive mood after a stressor is shared in dyads (e.g., Van Vleet et al., 2018; Wells et al., 1997; Zajdel & Helgeson, 2020, 2021). Recent research addresses the importance of distinguishing between the two components of communal coping: (1) the shared appraisal of the stressor, and (2) the common collaboration to manage it (Zajdel & Helgeson, 2021). There is a need for more (intervention) studies on communal coping – incorporating both of these dimensions – in the work setting (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Zajdel & Helgeson, 2021).

COR proposes four principles: (1) ‘resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain’; (2) ‘people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources’; (3) ‘resource gain increases in salience in the context of resource loss’; and (4) ‘when their resources are overstretched or exhausted, individuals enter a defensive mode to preserve the self that is often aggressive and may become irrational’ (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 106). When individuals invest resources they are better able of coping more effectively with stressors, and thus the second principle of COR addresses the importance of proactive coping (Hobfoll, 2001). According to COR, both individuals and groups are coping proactively when (a) they strive to gain and preserve their reservoirs of resources, (b) when they engage in action as they experience initial cautionary signs of a stressful encounter, and (c) when they position themselves according to the fit between their resources and the stressful encounter or in another way position their social group, family, or themselves in an advantageous position (Hobfoll, 2001). Employees who have sufficient resources are better able to anticipate potential stressors and act to position themselves and plan for how to handle such future stressful encounters (Aspinwall, 2011; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Those who lack resources have to shield them and therefore are not taking the risk to invest them, or they may simply

not have the proper resources (Hobfoll, 2001). The approach to proactive coping in COR is in line with the theorizing of Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) as well as Greenglass (2002) who view proactive coping as a future oriented anticipation or detection of potential stressors which makes it possible to act in advance to either mute stressor impact or prevent it. Contrary to the traditional reactive coping framework (i.e., risk appraisal), in which stressful events are dealt with when they have occurred, proactive coping is more active and positive in its approach by seeing the stimulating and challenging aspects of stressful situations and actively dealing with these beforehand (Greenglass, 2002; Hobfoll, 2001). This means that those who cope proactively do not engage in threat appraisal, rather they engage in challenge appraisal where they focus on demands, risks, and opportunities in the future (Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2015). Coping in these terms becomes goal management and not management of risks (Greenglass, 2002). By being proactive, employees initiate action in advance of potential future stressful encounters and pursue opportunities for growth. When proactively coping, employees need to engage in various behaviors to eliminate, modify, or reduce negative stress. Such behaviors include organizing, planning, setting goals and rehearse cognitively (mental stimulation; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Further, the constant effort of employees to build up their resources that can help them to achieve self-imposed challenging goals and promote their personal growth is critical (Aspinwall, 2011; Koen & Parker, 2020). This means that proactive coping can help to control potential stressors by building resources that can reduce their impact; however it may all depend on the employee's pool of resources (Aspinwall, 2011; Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2015).

Empirical evidence shows that proactive coping is beneficial for individual well-being as it relates to reduced levels of depression, higher levels of engagement, increased positive affect, and overall well-being (Gan et al., 2007; Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009; Greenglass et al., 2006; Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2015). More recently, in a three-wave design study, Koen and Parker (2020) investigated how employees proactively cope with job related insecurities. The findings showed that employees who coped proactively with a stressful situation (i.e., their temporary work contract was close to expiring) did not experience the same amount of uncontrollability and job insecurity as the employees who were coping less proactively. The future of work, which we discuss in Chapter 10, brings along several potential stressful encounters in which research needs to further clarify the role of proactive and communal coping from a resource perspective.

In *cognitive activation theory of stress (CATS)* appraisal is an important component of the stress process because employees develop *expectations* through their appraisal (Meurs & Perrewé, 2011). Appraisals determine whether a certain stimulus is perceived as a work stressor and whether employees believe that it is possible to cope with it (Eriksen, 2017).

While most theories on stress coping are focused on the coping strategies individuals select when they are confronted with stressful encounters (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zhang et al., 2019), CATS is concerned with *the result* of coping strategies, regardless of actions such as problem-focused actions (Eriksen, 2017; Meurs & Perrewé, 2011). According to CATS, coping can only be predictive of employee's arousal, stress, and health with a focus on the result (Eriksen, 2017; Ursin, 1998). In line with Higgins (1997)

emphasis on the importance of expectancy for self-regulation, which we will touch upon later in this chapter, CATS draws on expectancy theory of motivation, which suggests that a motivating force for employees is the expectation that certain efforts will lead to valued outcomes (Meurs & Perrewé, 2011). Accordingly, CATS defines coping as positive response outcome expectancies – ‘the acquired expectancy that most or all responses lead to a positive result’ (Eriksen, 2017, p. 49; Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, 2010). When the brain (see Chapter 2) has stored information about coping success in previous stressful encounters, it produces a positive response outcome expectancy (i.e., coping) (Eriksen & Ursin, 2004). The outcome of this is a reduced level of arousal (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004). When individuals do not experience a relationship between their previous action and subsequent results, the brain stores this information as an expectancy of *helplessness* (Eriksen & Ursin, 2004; Meurs & Perrewé, 2011; Reme et al., 2008). An even more critical form of expectancy, *hopelessness*, develops when employees experience that all their actions lead to devastating results – a negative response outcome expectancy (Eriksen, 2017; Meurs & Perrewé, 2011). Hopelessness (e.g., depression) is considered to be the direct opposite of coping (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004).

Instead of being concerned with the coping strategies in themselves, CATS fronts the importance of the belief in chosen coping strategies (Eriksen, 2017). To exemplify, Ursin, Baade, and Levin (1978) conducted a study on parachutists in the military. The findings suggested that the trainees’ beliefs in their ability to perform developed early in the learning phase (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004). Further, trainees’ endocrine and vegetative responses to the jump as well as their reported fear was reduced after the first session in a training tower situation. This was long before the trainee’s performance had reached a satisfactory level. Interestingly it was the trainees’ feelings of being able to perform that mattered, not their performance or the performance feedback they received. In terms of coping, this means that when potentially stressful encounters have been dealt with in a successful manner in the past, such learning will strengthen individuals trust in their own abilities to be successful again. Thus, the concept of *self-efficacy* comes close to being identical to the CATS coping concept’, particularly when the expectancy relates to an encounter of high affective value and when it is generalized (Reme et al., 2008, p. 179).

According to CATS measuring coping strategies, coping behaviors or ways of coping, which we will discuss more in the following sections, is troublesome because such strategies and behaviors typically occur under various degrees of arousal and future expectancies (Meurs & Perrewé, 2011; Ursin & Eriksen, 2004). This is important to consider in future research on coping in work settings.

## TAXONOMIES OF COPING

Central approaches to the study of coping in work settings have been described as *taxonomic* (Cox, 1987) or *families of coping* (Skinner et al., 2003), where researchers describe and categorize coping behaviors that are broadly applicable to all or most work situations. The most common approach is based on the work of Lazarus and his



colleagues (Dewe et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2019). In the next sections we will present Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping categories as well as a selection of other 'additions' to these categories. This further leads to the discussion of higher order coping action types.

The transactional theory of stress has identified two broad categories of coping strategies: *problem focused*, in which attempts are made to deal with the demands of the encounter (e.g., making an action plan), and *emotion focused*, in which attempts are made to deal with the emotional disturbance resulting from those demands (e.g., distracting activities, using alcohol or drugs). These coping strategies are 'used by everyone in virtually every stressful encounter' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 157). Empirical evidence suggests that problem focused coping is associated with lower levels of strain, while the opposite is evident for emotion focused coping (e.g., Adriaenssens et al., 2015; Jex et al., 2001).

Although several scholars have found these major strategies to be a good starting point, other strategies have been identified (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) and reflect additions to overcome the 'major gaps in the original formulation' of coping strategies. The first addition was *meaning-focused coping* – the application of cognitive strategies to search for meaning when a situation is appraised as stressful (Park, 2011). Despite being in the middle of a stressful work encounter, employees may instill this experience with positive meaning helping them to respite, sustain, and restore their resources (Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In this sense, coping can be thought of as having the potential to also create positive psychological states, which helps employees to deal with stressful experiences at work. In terms of the transactional perspective, this may be linked to the cognitive strategies that employees may apply to reinterpret a stressful encounter at work in a positive way, i.e., positive reappraisal.

The second addition was *social/relation-focused coping*, which refers to the seeking of instrumental and social support (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Various approaches exist under this label, and in this chapter we have focused on communal coping and a resource (e.g., social support) approach to coping (see Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004 for a further discussion). In addition to the 'ways of coping' already mentioned, other approaches have been discussed in the stress coping literature. For example, *emotion regulation*, which refers to employees attempt to influence the emotions they have as well as how they are experienced and expressed (Gross, 1998); *religious/spiritual coping*, which addresses the role of religion and how it is embedded in the entire stress process, influencing appraisal of stressful encounters as well as how individuals respond to such encounters over time (Pargament, 2011; Pargament et al., 2000); *leisure coping (beliefs and strategies)*, which addresses how leisure can help employees cope with stress (Iwasaki et al., 2005; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000); and more recently *cyberloafing coping*, which refers to employees' voluntary acts to surf non-work-related web sites for nonwork purposes during office hours as an energizing experience, helping employees to feel more healthy (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Lim & Chen, 2012). We refer the interested reader to other reviews and chapters that cover these important topics more in depth

(Dewe & Cooper, 2017, 2021; Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Although all of these ways of coping have contributed to the coping framework, no clear consensus has been reached as to how best to classify coping strategies. As Skinner et al. (2003) pointed out, a good taxonomy has yet to be achieved in the continuous search for a structure of coping. Although several alternative proposals have been suggested (Dewe et al., 2010; Skinner et al., 2003), these do not appear to totally satisfy the precision required, to encapsulate the different functions that coping strategies may perform, or to adequately capture the range of potential coping responses. Any schema for classifying coping strategies must take into account not just the focus (e.g., problem vs. emotion) of a particular strategy but also its form (cognitive/behavioral) and the variety of different strategies used (Dewe et al., 2010). Skinner et al. (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of the general coping literature in which they concluded that coping categories such as *emotion- and problem-focused coping* are **not** useful as higher order coping categories because any coping strategy may serve both or potentially many other functions (Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Skinner et al., 2003). Thus, treating the emotion-versus problem-focused coping functions as distinct types of coping may be too simplistic. They should rather be considered as *action types* that can have several functions (Lazarus, 1996; Skinner et al., 2003).

Furthermore, it is also important to not assume that one action type necessarily is better than the other, thus the richness of such coping action types makes the categorization of them a challenging task (Dewe et al., 2010). Several scholars have suggested that we abandon two other commonly applied approaches to coping, i.e., *approach* (efforts to handling a demand) *versus avoidance* (efforts to escaping the stressful situation) (see Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010) and *cognitive* (e.g., adopt a positive perspective on the situation) *versus behavioral* (e.g., taking positive steps to address the problem) (Dewe et al., 2010; Skinner et al., 2003). Coping is considered to be much more complex and may be represented by a coping system consisting of 13 higher order categories of coping behaviors (Skinner et al., 2003):

- problem-solving (e.g., instrumental action, planning)
- support seeking (e.g., seeking help or comfort)
- escape (e.g., disengaging, stay away from stressful encounter, denial)
- distraction (e.g., engage in alternative pleasurable activity)
- cognitive restructuring (e.g., active effort to change view of stressful encounter)
- rumination (having intrusive, repetitive and negative cognitions, self-blame, worry)
- helplessness (e.g., inaction, pessimism, giving up)
- social withdrawal (e.g., staying away from others, avoidant attachment)
- emotional regulation (e.g., emotional control, relaxation, emotional expression)
- information-seeking (e.g., attempt to learn more about stressful condition, observation)
- negotiation (e.g., prioritizing, reducing demands)
- opposition (e.g., projection, anger, aggression)
- delegation (e.g., dependency, maladaptive help seeking, self-pity)

Still, uniformity in definitions and categorization of coping strategies does not exist making it impossible to draw firm conclusions (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Dewe et al., 2010). Furthermore, although research on coping is very much alive in general psychology, so far there only exists one systematic investigation of coping strategies in the organizational stress literature (Zhang et al., 2019).

### **Extending Previous Coping Research: Promotion and Prevention Focused Coping**

By drawing on the work of Skinner et al. (2003), Zhang et al. (2019) conducted the first meta-analysis on coping in the domain of work, where they decided to extend previous coping research by conceptualizing coping within a self-regulation framework. Zhang et al. (2019) draw on the challenge-hindrance framework of stress (Cavanaugh et al., 2000) to argue that the problem versus emotion focused coping categorization does not sufficiently account for the differential influence of challenge and hindrance stressors and appraisals. To rectify this, the authors empirically integrate regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and transactional theory to propose a new taxonomy of coping action types represented by the self-regulatory motivational systems of prevention and promotion focused coping. These systems address how individuals self-regulate when they experience various stressful situations at work, such as threats of potential losses (e.g., hindrance stressors) or chances for potential growth (e.g., challenge stressors) (Zhang et al., 2019). When employees engage in *prevention focused coping*, they are driven by safety and security needs (e.g., safety of receiving a high performance evaluation or the danger of receiving a poor performance evaluation) to strategically strive for alignment (avoid mismatch) with their ought self, i.e., the attributes that they believe they should possess, which is based on a sense of duty, responsibility and obligation (Gorman et al., 2012; Higgins, 1997; Zhang et al., 2019). Thus, an employee engages in prevention focused coping through behavioral and cognitive efforts which are instigated to avoid mistakes, potential losses (e.g., failed attempts), or letting others down (Brockner et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2019). When employees engage in *promotion focused coping*, they are driven by growth needs (e.g., pursuing advancement), which motivate them to strategically strive for an alignment with their ideal selves – attributes that they ideally would like to possess – (aspirations, wishes, and hopes; e.g., accomplishing more at work) (Higgins, 1997; Zhang et al., 2019). This helps them increase the opportunity for attaining positive gains (match between current situation and dreams/aspirations). These coping action types are proposed to serve both the function of emotion regulation and problem solving, meaning that both prevention and promotion focused coping can encompass emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zhang et al., 2019). For example, when employees deny or suppress the experience of negative emotions when under stress, they apply prevention- and emotion-focused coping (Zhang et al., 2019). When employees engage in reappraisal and construe a stressful work encounter in a positive way to change the emotional impact, promotion and emotion-focused coping strategies are applied to attain positive gains (Zhang et al.,

2019). Promotion- and problem-focused coping strategies are applied when employees use tactics such as making action plans, seeking support, or working harder to achieve goals and enhance their performance (Zhang et al., 2019). Prevention- and problem-focused coping strategies are applied when employees engage in actions such as helping them to fulfil required job duties and avoid errors of commission in their work (Zhang et al., 2019).

The meta-analytical evidence (Zhang et al., 2019), which was based on 156 samples and over 75,000 employees, supported that challenge and hindrance stressors differentially predicted prevention and promotion focused coping. Challenge stressors positively predicted promotion focused coping while hindrance stressors positively predicted prevention focused coping. In turn, prevention and promotion focused coping action types (with the underlying emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies) mediated the relationship between work related stressors and outcomes. Promotion focused coping was *positively* associated with task performance and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), job attitudes, and employee well-being. Prevention-focused coping was, on the other hand, negatively associated with task performance, OCB, job attitudes, and employee well-being. Although these findings are promising with respect to applying the promotion-prevention coping distinction as higher order action types of the underlying problem-emotion focused coping framework, we believe that it is only a starting point. This interesting approach has the potential for further development that would also encompass the role of other ways of coping, such as meaning-focused coping, social/relational coping, etc. (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Further, anticipatory coping (e.g., proactive coping; Aspinwall, 2011) would be an intriguing next step to explore, as Higgins (1997) original theory emphasizes the importance of regulatory anticipation, a specific form of expectancy. In support of exploring this topic, the transactional theory, COR, CATS, and regulatory focus theory of coping all address the relevance of anticipation to facilitate a better understanding of the stress process. (Aspinwall, 2011; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Hobfoll, 1989; Meurs & Perrewé, 2011; Zhang et al., 2019). In research on daily workload anticipation and its influence on well-being, Casper et al. (Casper & Sonnentag, 2020; Casper et al., 2017) found that employees engage in both productive and counterproductive coping when anticipating high job demands in the form of workload. The anticipatory coping strategies were in turn associated with exhaustion and vigor. Still, the research did not clarify how anticipated stressors shape reactions to current stressors and to what extent beliefs about stressors may change over time. DiStasio and Shoss (2020) used COR theory as a foundation to show that when employees anticipated an increase in job demands (i.e., workload), the relationship between the perceived stressor and strain increased. However, when employees anticipated a decrease in job demands, the relationship between the perceived stressor and strain was buffered (see also discussion in Chapter 10). Although the study does not directly discuss coping strategies, these findings depict coping as defined by COR. It would be interesting for future research to clarify the anticipatory coping action

types that are operating under such circumstances, and the promotion versus prevention focused coping framework may serve as a novel contribution.

Despite the promising contribution of the Zhang et al. (2019) meta-analysis, more comprehensive approaches to understanding coping in the work setting are needed, particularly to facilitate the development of valid promotion and prevention focused coping measures.

## THE ROLE OF COPING

The functions of coping in the stress process have also been of considerable interest to job stress researchers, who have endeavored not simply to describe variations in coping responses but also to delineate the conditions under which different coping strategies are used and to assess the effectiveness of such strategies. One of the dilemmas in this type of research is that the relationship between coping and other stress-related constructs is reciprocal. Coping operates as both a cause (an independent variable) and an effect (a dependent variable) of other stress-related constructs (Litt et al., 2011). Similarly, coping responses may function as both mediators and moderators of stressor-strain relationships (Litt et al., 2011). Consequently, researchers have examined, for example, (a) the influence of personality, gender, and race on the use of different coping strategies; (b) strategies used when coping with specific stressful work experiences; (c) the relationship between coping and adaptational outcomes; (d) the effectiveness of coping strategies; and (e) the mediational properties of coping strategies. The basic proposition that environmental and personality variables influence the choice of coping strategies has been generally supported in empirical research, but the relationships between coping strategies and outcomes are inconsistent, and moderating effects of coping have not always been demonstrated (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Litt et al., 2011).

To understand these results, it is important to consider the theoretical role of coping in the stress process. A number of themes emerge. The first is whether coping functions as a mediator or moderator. The transactional model of stress views coping as a mediating variable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Treating coping as mediating the link between stressors and strain entails a different research design from considering it as moderating the stressor-strain relationship.

There is sometimes both theoretical and methodological confusion between coping 'behaviors' and coping 'styles'. Whereas dispositional styles are more likely to moderate linkages between environmental conditions (stressors) and individual reactions (strains), specific behaviors may function as mediators between these variables. For instance, increased job demands may lead to an individual's working harder to achieve required goals, which in turn reduce the strain associated with the initial demands.

Inferential support for this distinction comes from studies that have demonstrated a clear relationship between personality and coping (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Although there are powerful arguments for measuring coping behaviors rather than style or personality variables (Dewe et al., 2010), equally strong arguments can be mounted for considering the relationship between personality and coping (Carver & Connor-Smith,

2010; Dewe & Cooper, 2017). For example, secondary appraisals of what coping resources are available to the person include assessment of dispositional factors such as the person's resilience or hardiness and self-efficacy as possible buffers of the impact of stressors on an individual's well-being (see Chapter 6). Clearly, individual differences may play an important role in both the selection of coping strategies and their effectiveness.

## **COPING EFFECTIVENESS**

Another approach to conceptualizing the functions of coping behaviors is to consider whether they are effective or ineffective in removing stressors or alleviating strain (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004): i.e., to evaluate them on the basis of their outcomes. Effective coping strategies result in outcomes that are favorable for the individual, whereas ineffective strategies may not produce favorable outcomes or, worse, may lead to unfavorable outcomes. In particular, differences between situations and individuals make it impossible to judge a priori whether a coping effort has been successful or unsuccessful. Furthermore, definitions and measures of 'effectiveness' must be based upon the perceptions and goals of the individuals enacting the behaviors rather than developed around so-called objective indexes. For example, both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping may contain both effective and ineffective strategies (Zhang et al., 2019). Studies of coping effectiveness must assess the cognitive processes that individuals engage in when evaluating their coping efforts. How individuals themselves define effectiveness is an issue that has yet to be explored and raises the interesting questions of effectiveness for whom and at what cost, in addition to consideration of the best methodology to tease out such distinctions.

An alternative approach to judging coping effectiveness is to examine the notion of goodness of fit (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Using this approach, the focus shifts to considering the fit between situational appraisals and coping. The greater the misfit between how a situation is appraised and a coping response, the greater the probability that coping will not be effective. This approach requires measures of both appraisal and coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), and perhaps for this reason it has received less attention in settings involving work stress.

Researchers focusing on coping effectiveness should carefully consider (a) the context within which coping is being judged, particularly the level of control individuals have over the situation; (b) the outcome that is being used as the criterion variable, given that different outcomes are associated with different coping strategies; (c) the role of individual differences in the selection of a coping strategy; (d) the nature of the situation and the demands it places on the individual, together with how such demands are appraised; (e) the impact of confounding between coping and outcomes; (f) the merits of longitudinal versus cross-sectional research design, including issues like the episodic or chronic nature of demands and short-term versus long-term effects; and, finally, (g) whether contradictory findings concerning coping effectiveness are due to the difficulties inherent in self-report measures of coping rather than to the nature of the coping strategy being judged (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Dewe et al., 2010;

Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). It is difficult to understand the meaning of fit without knowledge about the particular context and the role played by individual differences (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This underlines the complexity of understanding what it means to cope effectively (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Dewe et al., 2010), which future research needs to clarify (Dewe & Cooper, 2021).

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND MEASUREMENT**

Coping can operate both as a dependent or an independent variable, thus researchers must be mindful about their methodological choices regarding research design. Coping research should therefore address both the effects of appraisal and strain on coping and the effects of coping on appraisal and strain (Harris, 1991; Litt et al., 2011).

The research methods employed to generate measures of coping are of some concern. There has been debate over the merits of using deductive or inductive methods for constructing coping instruments. Coping measures have been constructed both deductively – that is, from existing literature and research on coping – and inductively, by examining, describing, and developing coping items based on strategies that individuals report using (Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Skinner et al., 2003). The major advantage of the inductive method is that it makes no assumptions about how individuals might respond and does not prescribe the range or type of response that individuals may engage in during a stressful encounter (O’Driscoll & Cooper, 1994). Coping measures constructed inductively are based on what individuals actually think and do and therefore expose meaning rather than impose it (Dewe et al., 2010; Skinner et al., 2003). However, it is this very feature – the classification of such information into meaningful and reliable self-report categories – that may also be its greatest weakness. Such classification may prove to be impossible without losing the very richness of the data, the dynamic nature of the coping process (Litt et al., 2011), and perhaps the very advantage of using the inductive approach in the first place.

Difficulties when constructing coping measures are not limited just to identifying and classifying coping strategies. A number of reviews (e.g., Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Skinner et al., 2003) have drawn attention to a range of other issues that confront researchers wishing to measure coping. These include (a) whether measures should focus on how individuals cope with stress in general or on assessing coping with specific encounters; (b) whether the response category should ask individuals to rate how frequently they used a particular strategy or whether to obtain ratings of coping effectiveness; and (c) whether self-report rating scales are the most appropriate vehicle for measuring how people actually cope. Researchers may also consider whether a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures should be used, or whether coping is best tested indirectly, asking no direct questions about coping at all but capturing how people cope by having them describe the nature of stressful encounters and their responses within those situations (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

The above issues raise two significant questions. First, are coping strategies best determined deductively (from existing research and the literature on coping) or inductively (from individuals' own accounts of what they have done to manage stressors in their work environment)? If researchers rely on the former, how can they ensure that the coping responses identified through the literature actually reflect the experiences and responses of the population under investigation? On the other hand, if inductive procedures are favored, how should questions be framed to elicit valid accounts of individuals' actual responses to various environmental demands, bearing in mind the constraints of social desirability and selective recall of behaviors? As stated by Folkman and Moskowitz (2004, p. 751), 'the measurement of coping is probably as much art as it is science'. It is important to choose the approach of conceptualizing and measuring coping that is most aligned with the research question at hand. Potentially the best approach may sometimes be to address the research question from several approaches. For example, a narrative approach – where the participants would be asked to tell a story about a stressful situation, what they were thinking and what they did as the situation developed – could be applied as a baseline for defining a range of stressors to explore further with a quantitative measure (Dewe et al., 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

To overcome the well-known challenges with retrospective reports of coping, approaches such as daily and momentary assessments of coping (e.g., experience sampling methods; see Chapter 9) could contribute to clarify how coping ebbs and flows in monthly, weekly, daily and momentary events (Litt et al., 2011). This is particularly relevant because in order to advance coping assessment and measurement it is important to better understand the trajectories of coping as well as the context in which coping occurs as it facilitates meaning to the understanding of coping (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Litt et al., 2011).

Researchers wishing to investigate coping with work stress may also need to consider alternative qualitative methods that capture the richness and idiographic nature of the process in order to overcome some of the structural limitations imposed by self-report quantitative measures. Examples of other alternative approaches to studying coping include critical-incident analysis (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007; Caldas et al., 2020; Monnier et al., 2002), the use of open-ended/idiographic questioning (Haynes et al., 2009), and a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Mazzola, Walker, et al., 2011). Use of multimethod approaches would enable simultaneous exploration of the extent of use of various coping strategies, as well as the meaning and relevance of those strategies for the individual under study, thereby producing a more complete understanding of the stressor-coping-strain process. The antagonism between qualitative and quantitative approaches will need to be overcome, and the challenge will be to achieve precision in measurement while at the same time considering how best to capture the richness and complexity of the stress coping process (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Mazzola, Schonfeld, et al., 2011; Mazzola, Walker, et al., 2011).

When measuring coping behaviors by getting individuals to describe a potentially stressful encounter, it is as important to understand the 'event' as it is to acknowledge the



distinction between coping behaviors and style. Conversely, a specific event may not necessarily involve an individual's full coping repertoire (Dewe et al., 2010), and what is gained in terms of specificity may be lost in terms of breadth, so researchers must decide clearly what they want to measure – style or behavior.

What emerges from the debate surrounding coping measurement is the question of whether traditional methodologies have provided an adequate basis for exploring and understanding the coping process (Dewe & Cooper, 2021; Litt et al., 2011; Mazzola, Schonfeld, et al., 2011). A growing body of opinion and research suggests that greater use of qualitative methods will enhance our understanding of coping. On the other hand, as researchers use self-report measures – the traditional approach to measuring coping – it becomes possible to identify an array of measurement issues that will continue to impede our understanding of coping and our ability to adequately assess the efficacy of this approach to the measurement of coping. The issue is not abandoning one approach in favor of another. A balance of quantitative and qualitative approaches may provide the conceptual richness and generalization that coping researchers are seeking.

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## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the intensity of the debate surrounding coping as a field of study reflects its fundamental importance to our understanding of the stress process. The research literature is dominated by the issues of how coping should best be defined, measured, and how coping strategies should be classified. Even when the primary aim has been to explore the broader context within which coping takes place, measurement issues have dominated and influenced results. To ensure that coping measures provide comprehensive information on the coping process, an integrated analysis of coping is required that captures the reality of those experiencing stressful events at work. This can be achieved only by considering various methods that capture the richness of the process and the idiographic nature of the experience.

How coping with job-related stress will be investigated in the future will be decided by how well the strengths of all methods can be integrated into research designs. The importance of coping and how it should best be measured is too important an issue to allow the debate to degenerate into mutual antagonism and distrust between advocates of alternative methodologies. Research on coping and the appraisal process represents the most likely means of enhancing our understanding of the stress process and for fulfilling our obligations to those whose working lives we research. We should not allow it to be obstructed by arguments about the superiority of one conceptual or methodological approach over another.

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