Job Stress, Coping with

Coping with job stress is a key concept in understanding people's adaptation to their work roles. In their jobs employees are confronted with various kinds of demands, which may become 'stressors' when they tax or exceed the employee's adaptive capabilities. Examples of common job stressors include work overload, role problems, poor job control, lack of support from supervisors and co-workers, and interpersonal conflicts. These stressors may lead to negative psychological (e.g., depression, irritability, burnout), physical (e.g., headaches, heart palpitations, hyperventilation) and behavioral (e.g., absenteeism, turnover, violence) symptoms or 'strains.' The psychological process that is involved in dealing with these job stressors in order to reduce strain is called 'coping.' More specifically, coping with job stress refers to the things employees do to handle the stressors they encounter in their work roles (see *Stress and Coping Theories*). These individual coping efforts may or may not be supported by the employing organization.

1. The Concept of Coping

Rather than a homogeneous concept coping represents a diffuse umbrella term. Nevertheless, a widely used definition of coping exists that refers to the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts a person makes to manage demands that tax or exceed their personal resources (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Coping refers to an interplay between person and environment that occurs when an individual appraises a situation or an event as stressful. As far as coping with job stress is concerned, this interplay involves the employee and his or her job environment or work setting that is appraised as stressful. It is important to note that coping refers merely to the effort made and not to the quality of the outcome. That is, coping may be either effective or successful in preventing, avoiding, or controlling individual distress or it may be ineffective or unsuccessful. For instance, compensatory or comfort behaviors such as excessive eating, smoking, drinking, or working commonly are cited as examples of maladaptive coping strategies. Furthermore, coping may refer to overt actions or observable behaviors as well as to covert, unobservable thoughts and events.

2. The Historical Development of Coping

As far as the conceptualization of coping is concerned, three approaches can be distinguished. Initially, coping was studied from a psychodynamic point of view in the general context of human adaptation. In

the first half of the twentieth century, leading psychoanalysts like Freud, Adler, and Jung described adjustment and defense mechanisms by which individuals deal with intrapsychic conflict. Building upon this earlier work, in the 1960s and 1970s ego-psychologists distinguished between coping as an advanced or mature ego process leading to successful adaptation and defense as an unsuccessful neurotic mode of adaptation.

The second approach emerged from the 1960s and conceived coping in terms of personality traits. Relatively stable dispositions or coping styles (i.e., denial, repression, vigilance) were expected to determine the individual's coping behavior across various situations. Although empirical research has shown that people possess stable and consistent coping preferences it is likewise true that individuals are able to vary their responses to stressful situations in accordance with the demands posed by these situations. Personality traits have made a comeback in the 1970s and 1980s as so-called personal coping resources like 'hardiness,' 'dispositional optimism,' 'internal locus of control,' 'self-efficacy,' 'sense of coherence,' and 'self-esteem.' Such coping resources were expected to foster successful coping since the individual can draw upon them when under stress.

The currently dominant transactional approach originates from the work that Lazarus and his colleagues have performed since the 1950s. In contrast to the psychoanalytic approach, coping is defined in this approach by an effort that is independent from its success and includes pro-active as well as defensive strategies. Furthermore, coping is considered to be a dynamic and transactional process involving person as well as environment rather than the result from a relative personality disposition.

Coping has been applied to various aspects of human life. Initially, it was used predominantly in clinical and health psychology to understand how patients deal with chronic disease, substance use, loss, chronic pain, and trauma. More recently, minor coping efforts involving so-called daily hassles have been investigated. Coping with job stress (including unemployment) has been studied since the end of the seventies and involves long-term chronic job stressors (e.g., future job insecurity), short-term daily hassles at the job (e.g., interpersonal conflict), as well as acute severe stressors (e.g., armed robbery).

3. General Coping Theory

The leading cognitive-behavioral theory of stress and coping of Richard Lazarus and his co-workers (see *Stress and Coping Theories*) is usually applied to work situations as well. It assumes that a particular situation or event is appraised negatively as stressful in terms of threat, loss, or harm. Alternatively, the situation or event may also be appraised neutral or positive as a

challenge. In this so-called 'primary appraisal,' the person asks 'What do I have at stake in this encounter?' For instance, in a conflict with a colleague the employee's self-esteem may be threatened, whereas unemployment is likely to be perceived as a loss, rather than a challenge. In 'secondary appraisal' the concern of the person is 'What can I do? What are my options for coping?' The answer depends to a large extent on personal characteristics, such as motivation, beliefs about oneself and the world, and recognition of personal and situational resources for coping such as financial means, social and problem-solving skills, particular personality traits, and a favorable work situation that includes for instance social support from one's colleagues and supervisor. It is important to note that both appraisal processes—primary (demand) appraisal and secondary (resource) appraisal—are two components of one cognitive process that take place simultaneously, instead of one process (secondary appraisal) taking place after the other (primary appraisal).

Generally speaking a main distinction is made between two targets: (a) problem-focused coping, which involves attempts to deal with stress by directly altering the situation and (b) emotion-focused coping, which involves attempts to regulate the emotional responses to a stressful situation. For instance, employees might consult their supervisors after a conflict with a colleague (problem-focused) or they may try to relax or distract themselves (emotion focused). In addition, various methods of coping are distinguished such as active–cognitive (i.e., intrapsychic attempts to manage the appraisal of the stressor through, for instance, constructive dialogue or positive comparison), active–behavioral (i.e., overt attempts to deal directly with the stressor), and avoidance (i.e., avoiding or denying the stressor). Although targets and methods of coping can be distinguished theoretically this distinction is usually quite difficult to make at the practical level.

After the coping effort has been completed, a reappraisal of the initial stressful event takes place along the same lines as the original primary appraisal: 'Is there still something at stake in this encounter?' The conflict with one's colleague may be solved or one may have found a new job. In that case the reappraisal is positive and there is no need for further coping efforts. However, in case initial coping efforts failed and the event is reappraised as stressful coping attempts continue.

4. The Individual and Organizational Perspective

In Fig. 1 a taxonomy of individual ways of coping with job stress is displayed, including some examples of coping behaviors. Typically, in occupational settings workplace strain and coping are individual *as well as* organizational issues. This means that interventions to reduce workplace strain may be targeted at the individual or the organizational level (Quick et al. 1997). Interventions that focus on the individual include job stress education activities, relaxation programs, cognitive-behavioral programs, and employee skills training in such areas as time management and assertiveness (see *Stress Management Programs*). Interventions that focus on the organization seek to reduce strain by changing and improving macrolevel factors operating within organizations (e.g., jobredesign, selection and training policies, organizational development). Although organization-based interventions offer considerable potential for reducing or eliminating job stressors, most workplace initiatives focus on the individual employee. That is, their adaptability to the existing work environment is improved by changing their behavior and improving their life-style or stress management skills and augmenting their coping resources. In the last decades different programs have been developed to increase individual stress resilience and promote health and wellbeing at the workplace, including on-site fitness facilities, health screening, dietary control, smoking cessation, cardiovascular fitness programs, relaxation classes, stress-management training, antiburnout workshops, stress and health education, and psychological counseling.

Generally speaking, individual-based interventions, particularly relaxation programs and cognitivebehavioral programs, seem to be effective in reducing employee strain (i.e., burnout, distress, depressed mood, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms), whereas the effectiveness of organization-based strategies is still to be demonstrated unambiguously.

5. Research

Earlier studies on coping with job stress often found that employees use fewer problem-focused than emotion-focused strategies directed at changing the problems encountered in the context of work. This was interpreted by noting that the very nature of problems at work are perhaps not ameliorated easily by attempts to change them. It was reasoned that employees are perhaps better off by developing a renewed cognitive perspective and by regulating their negative emotions. More recent studies, however, point to the opposite: currently employees seem to favor problem-focused coping instead of emotionfocused coping. More detailed investigations have shown that the level of job control plays a crucial role. When a high level of job control exists, problemfocused strategies prevail, but when job control is poor employees seem to favor emotion-focused strategies. Unfortunately, the latter are generally less effective compared to the former. For instance, studies on organizational changes, such as corporate restructuring and downsizing, suggest that employees cope

	Problem/Task	Emotions/Reactions
Cognitive	Control Planning, organizing, and prioritizing assignments	Control Try to think of oneself as a winner, as someone who always comes through
	Escape Try to pay attention only to your duties in order to overlook difficulties	Escape To tell oneself that difficulties are unimportant
Behavioral	Social Sit down and talk things out	Social To express ones irritation to other colleagues to let off steam
	Solitary To do what has to be done, one step at a time	Solitary Spend time on a hobby
	Control Delay or leave some of ones normal job responsibilities	Control Show no emotional reaction and do not communicate distress to anyone
	Escape Get busy with other things to keep ones mind off the problem	Escape Change to nonwork activity; take pills, smoke more

METHOD (row label spanning Cognitive and Behavioral)

Figure 1
Ways of coping with job stress (adapted from Latack and Havlovic 1992)

rather poorly with these events which are largely beyond their control. They use predominantly emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies and suffer long-term adverse mental health.

As a general rule, the more active, problem-focused, and control-oriented the coping strategy the less (mental) health symptoms and the higher employee wellbeing. In contrast, emotion-focused strategies as well as escape-oriented or avoidant strategies generally are associated with poor (mental) health and unwellbeing. However, two factors seem to be important for successful coping: time frame and availability of coping resources. It seems that emotion-focused or escape/avoidant-oriented strategies are effective when dealing with short-term stressors, whereas problem-focused and control-oriented strategies are more effective when dealing with chronic or recurrent job stressors. Furthermore, employees who have more coping resources at their disposal appear to use active coping efforts more and avoidant coping less. Consequently, employees who can draw upon coping resources are more likely to deal successfully with job stress.

As far as the relationship between employee coping and sociobiographical factors (e.g., age, gender, education) and job factors (e.g., level and type of job) is concerned, no conclusive empirical evidence is available (Cartwright and Cooper 1996). For instance, among employees no consistent gender-specific or job-specific coping patterns have been observed. Most likely this lack of conclusive evidence has to be attributed to the complex interaction patterns that exist among the factors involved.

6. Methodological Issues and Future Directions for Research

The measurement of coping is fraught with problems that are partly imputed to the fact that almost exclusively self-report questionnaires are used. More specifically, inductively or empirically developed coping scales yield different dimensions or coping behaviors compared to deductively or theory-based coping scales. Furthermore, the number of coping dimensions included in various questionnaires ranges

from two to 28 and there is neither agreement on the hierarchy of these dimensions nor on the fact whether coping should be assessed dispositionally (as a trait) or episodically (as a state). Most importantly, to date, no generally accepted measure exists to assess coping in an occupational context.

At the theoretical level, the crucial distinctions between coping and coping resources, between coping styles and coping behaviors, and between appraisal and (cognitive) coping needs further clarification.

See also: Occupational Health; Stress at Work; Workplace Safety and Health

Bibliography

Cartwright S, Cooper C L 1996 Coping in occupational settings. In: Zeidner M, Endler N S (eds.) *Handbook of Coping: Theory, Research, Applications*. Wiley, New York, pp. 202–20

Latack J C, Havlovic S J 1992 Coping with job stress: A conceptual evaluation framework for coping measures. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* **13**: 497–508

Lazarus R S, Folkman S 1984 *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. Springer, New York

Quick J C, Quick J D, Nelson D L, Hurrell J J (eds.) 1997 *Preventive Stress Management in Organizations*. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC

W. B. Schaufeli

Joint Action

For the purposes of this article a 'joint action' is the action of two or more people. Thus, two or more people may hold a conversation, go for a walk (together), and so on. The participants will naturally refer to what 'we' did, as in 'We had a conversation,' and 'We went for a walk.' Joint actions are ubiquitous and it is hard to imagine a human life without them. At the same time it is not easy to say precisely what is required for the performance of a joint action. A variety of accounts have been envisaged by philosophers. This article explains some of the relevant considerations and issues, and reviews some of the central answers that have been given.

1. Some Initial Considerations on Joint Action

1.1 Joint Intentions are Integral to Joint Actions

Contemporary philosophy of action has tended to focus not on joint action but on the action of an individual person. A notion central to the philosophy of action is that of intention. It is commonly argued that what distinguishes an action (such as a man raising his arm) from a mere bodily movement (such as his arm rising) is an intention. When a man raises his arm, his arm rises in part by virtue of his intention to raise it. The sociologist Max Weber made a similar point when he characterized action as meaningful behavior.

Joint actions, similarly, appear to presuppose intentions, in this case joint intentions. Thus, for example, people cannot be conversing unless there is a joint intention to converse. The parties to a conversation act in light of a joint intention to converse, so as to implement that intention. A joint intention may be referred to by such statements as 'We intend to go shopping,' where our intending to go shopping is not, or is not simply, a matter of each of the people in question personally intending to go shopping. Precisely what is at issue is not obvious. Much of the growing body of philosophical work relevant to joint action is concerned with the nature of joint intention, or, in less formal terms, what it is for us to intend.

1.2 Joint Action Must be Cooperative Only in a Broad Sense

Joint action is not necessarily a matter of amicable cooperation. We may be quarrelling with one another or engaged in a fight. Quarrelling and fighting are species of joint action. Though it need not be amicable, there is clearly a broad sense in which joint action is always cooperative or collaborative. I cannot quarrel with you unless you quarrel with me; I cannot fight with you unless you fight with me. If you refuse to take me seriously we cannot quarrel. If you lay down your arms, we are no longer fighting.

1.3 Some Consequences of Involvement in Joint Action

Informal observation of the way people behave when doing things together makes it clear that the parties often rebuke one another for behavior contrary to the relevant joint intention. Such rebukes are commonly understood to be in order. For example, Jill and John are walking together, John begins to lag behind, and Jill rebukes John for doing so. John understands that, in the context of their walking together, Jill has the standing to rebuke him.

Less punitive responses are also commonplace, and routinely understood to be in order. For example, Jill asks John why he is lagging behind. John may not like being questioned like this, but he understands that Jill has a legitimate interest in the matter.

Underlying these responses is the understanding that, all else being equal, participation in a joint intention entitles each of the parties to relevant actions