

# EXAMINING THE PARADOX OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESSORS

# RESEARCH IN OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND WELL-BEING

Series Editors: Pamela L. Perrewé, Peter D. Harms  
and Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang

- Volume 1: Exploring Theoretical Mechanisms and Perspectives
- Volume 2: Historical and Current Perspectives on Stress and Health
- Volume 3: Emotional and Physiological Processes and Positive Intervention Strategies
- Volume 4: Exploring Interpersonal Dynamics
- Volume 5: Employee Health, Coping and Methodologies
- Volume 6: Exploring the Work and Non-work Interface
- Volume 7: Current Perspectives on Job-stress Recovery
- Volume 8: New Developments in Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to Job Stress
- Volume 9: The Role of Individual Differences in Occupational Stress and Well Being
- Volume 10: The Role of the Economic Crisis on Occupational Stress and Well Being
- Volume 11: The Role of Emotion and Emotion Regulation in Job Stress and Well Being
- Volume 12: The Role of Demographics in Occupational Stress and Well Being
- Volume 13: Mistreatment in Organizations
- Volume 14: The Role of Leadership in Occupational Stress
- Volume 15: The Role of Power, Politics, and Influence in Occupational Stress and Well-Being
- Volume 16: Occupational Stress and Well-Being in Military Contexts
- Volume 17: Examining the Role of Well-Being in the Marketing Discipline
- Volume 18: Entrepreneurial and Small Business Stressors, Experienced Stress, and Wellbeing
- Volume 19: Examining and Exploring the Shifting Nature of Occupational Stress and Well Being

# EDITORIAL REVIEW BOARD

Terry Beehr – Department of Psychology, University of Central Michigan, USA; [beehr1ta@cmich.edu](mailto:beehr1ta@cmich.edu)

Yitzhak Fried – Rawls College of Business, Texas Tech University, USA; [yitzhak.fried@ttu.edu](mailto:yitzhak.fried@ttu.edu)

Dan Ganster – Department of Management, Colorado State University, USA; [Dan.Ganster@business.colostate.edu](mailto:Dan.Ganster@business.colostate.edu)

Leslie Hammer – Department of Psychology, Portland State University, USA; [hammerl@pdx.edu](mailto:hammerl@pdx.edu)

Russ Johnson – Department of Management, Michigan State University, USA; [johnsonr@bus.msu.edu](mailto:johnsonr@bus.msu.edu)

John Kammeyer-Mueller – Center for HR Labor Studies, University of Minnesota, USA; [jkammeye@umn.edu](mailto:jkammeye@umn.edu)

E. Kevin Kelloway – Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University, USA; [Kevin.Kelloway@smu.ca](mailto:Kevin.Kelloway@smu.ca)

Jeff LePine – Department of Management, Arizona State University, USA; [Jeff.LePine@asu.edu](mailto:Jeff.LePine@asu.edu)

Paul Levy – Department of Psychology, University of Akron, USA; [pelevy@uakron.edu](mailto:pelevy@uakron.edu)

John Schaubroeck – College of Business Department of Management, University of Missouri, USA; [schaubroeck@bus.msu.edu](mailto:schaubroeck@bus.msu.edu)

Norbert Semmer – Department of Psychology, University of Berne, USA; [norbert.semmer@psy.unibe.ch](mailto:norbert.semmer@psy.unibe.ch)

Sabine Sonnentag – Department of Psychology, University of Mannheim, Germany; [sonnentag@uni-mannheim.de](mailto:sonnentag@uni-mannheim.de)

Paul Spector – Department of IS and Management, University of South Florida, USA; [pspector@usf.edu](mailto:pspector@usf.edu)

Lois Tetrick – Department of Psychology, George Mason University, USA; [ltetrick@gmu.edu](mailto:ltetrick@gmu.edu)

Mo Wang – Department of Management, University of Florida, USA; [mo.wang@warrington.ufl.edu](mailto:mo.wang@warrington.ufl.edu)

**Editors:**

Pamela L. Perrewé – Department of Management, Florida State University, USA; pperrewe@cob.fsu.edu

Peter D. Harms – Department of Management, University of Alabama, USA; pdharms@cba.ua.edu

Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang – Michigan State University, USA; cchang@msu.edu

RESEARCH IN OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND  
WELL-BEING VOLUME 20

# EXAMINING THE PARADOX OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESSORS

Building Resilience or  
Creating Depletion

EDITED BY

**PAMELA L. PERREWÉ**  
*Florida State University, USA*

**PETER D. HARMS**  
*The University of Alabama, USA*

AND

**CHU-HSIANG (DAISY) CHANG**  
*Michigan State University, USA*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan –  
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

Editorial matter and selection © 2022 Pamela L. Perrewé, Peter D. Harms, and Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang.

Published under exclusive licence.

Individual chapters © 2022 Emerald Publishing Limited.

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80455-086-1 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80455-085-4 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80455-087-8 (Epub)

ISSN: 1479-3555 (Series)



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# OVERVIEW

Volume 20 of *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being* features chapters that expand our understanding of how occupational stressors can build employee resilience and enhance their well-being while at the same time creating negative employee outcomes such as depletion, exhaustion, and depression. Much of the prior literature in occupational stress and well-being have emphasized the negative aspects of experienced stress at work. However, there is also research that examines how individuals and teams can become stronger and more resilient by being exposed to occupational stressors. To this end, we take a hard look at examining the seemingly paradoxical outcomes of work stressors, the circumstances or conditions that can change or even reverse the relationship between stressors and outcomes, and theoretical accounts for apparent contradictions in this literature. We begin with several chapters examining the more positive aspects of experienced work stress (e.g., resilience) and end with chapters focusing on the more negative aspects of work stress (e.g., mistreatment).

In the first chapter, Anita C. Keller and Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang examine the paradoxical effects of coping and argue that coping can be best understood by disentangling between- from within-person effects. The aim of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the positive and negative outcomes of coping in the workplace by integrating between- and within-person perspectives on coping with learning approaches. They offer a brief overview of the state of knowledge on the paradoxical effects of coping in the workplace and then discuss the between-person followed by the within-person perspectives on the effects of coping. Further, they integrate the multi-level perspective with the learning-based approach to explain why paradoxical effects of coping may exist and offer an agenda for future research on coping at work.

In the second chapter, Danielle D. King, Richard P. DeShon, Cassandra N. Phetmisy, and Dominique Burrows take an in-depth look at resilience research. They use a self-regulation perspective to outline a nomological network scheme for resilience research. They address “quicksand” concerns by differentiating between and providing a framework for the importance of both behavioral and emotional regulation in resilience effects. They highlight distinctions between trait versus behavioral resilience and clarify distinctions between resilience and other concepts in the persistence domain (e.g., grit, hardiness). Further, they address “shadow” side resilience concerns by theoretically detailing that the absence of negative emotions nor the presence of success or well-being are characteristic of resilience. They define resilience as continued, self-regulated goal striving despite adversity and they model the direct effect of adversity factors (e.g., severity) on resilience. This work offers important insights for research, organizational practice, and broader society concerning stress effects, well-being, success, and resilience.

The third chapter also examines the paradoxical role of resilience in a customer-facing workplace. In this chapter, Nicolina Taylor, Esther L. Jean, and Wayne S. Crawford detail how and when emotional labor induced stress can lead to episodic and prolonged resilience. They outline a paradoxical event in which employees engaging in emotional labor can create and sustain resiliency by not deploying an acting strategy and instead, breaking character. Employees may feel empowered and be able to acknowledge their lack of resources after breaking character. Such actions are paradoxical of course, due to simultaneously improving employee well-being and potentially damaging the organization–customer relationship. They further explore individual and organizational factors that impact this process such as personality and organizational culture, which they argue can serve as boundary conditions to workplace resilience capacity.

In the fourth chapter, Karen Landay and Joseph Schaefer examine the paradox of passion in the workplace. They integrate the Dualistic Model of Passion, which includes both harmonious and obsessive passion, with identity theory, and identity threat. Specifically, they provide a unique theoretical lens through which to examine the paradox of passion by which individuals overidentify with their work, which can result in “too much of a good thing”. Further, they discuss the various reactions that individuals enact in response to threats to their passion-related identities, and how these reactions impact well-being, experienced stress, and burnout.

In the fifth chapter, Andrea Bazzoli and Tahira M. Probst examine an intriguing construct, that of job insecurity. They argue that although job insecurity has been seen as a hindrance stressor, certain positive psychological variables, such as self-efficacy, might influence the perceptions of job insecurity. Using a cross-lagged dataset, they find five distinct latent profiles of employee perceptions. Specifically, employees might view job insecurity as irrelevant, simultaneously moderately challenging and hindering, primarily hindering, both highly challenging and highly hindering, or primarily challenging. They discuss implications for theory and practice considering the paradoxical findings indicating both positive as well as negative outcomes from job insecurity.

In the sixth chapter of Volume 20, Alexander R. Marbut and Peter D. Harms tackle the role of vigilance in the workplace. They argue that some characteristics, such as vigilance, that make employees successful, may fail in the long-term because of burnout or fatigue. They pay particular attention to neuroticism and argue that vigilance-related professions, such as information technology, have a higher rate of neuroticism. Thus, vigilance work could be an area in which neurotic individuals thrive because it requires prolonged physiological arousal to maintain attention and mental concentration. These authors also examine contextual and individual moderators and explain how neuroticism might be associated with positive as well as negative performance outcomes.

In the final chapter of this volume, Katharine McMahon, Jamie Pockrandt, Stefanie Fox, Nick Zike, and Liu-Qin Yang examine the paradoxical relationships of workplace mistreatment. Workplace mistreatment encompasses several negative relational experiences ranging in severity from incivility to physical violence.

The literature commonly finds evidence of an array of negative individual and organizational outcomes due to mistreatment incidents in the workplace. However, they argue that the literature often fails to prominently address the paradoxical occasions in which certain forms of workplace mistreatment might be beneficial, or at the very least non-disruptive to desirable work outcomes. This chapter presents a qualitative review of the literature on workplace mistreatment, with the intention of identifying findings from empirical studies that indicate the contingencies of processes in which workplace mistreatment leads to these paradoxical outcomes and the circumstances under which they occur. Their review suggests that different forms of aggression such as bullying, abusive supervision, incivility, and ostracism have positive relationships with paradoxical outcomes and characteristics such as resilience, prosocial behaviors, socially desirable behaviors, job performance, job satisfaction, and creativity. The authors encourage researchers and practitioners to utilize the information to further their understanding of the nomological network of workplace mistreatment and its underlying mechanisms, such as social learning and coping.

Together, these chapters represent theoretically sound and rigorous research examining the paradoxical roles of occupational stress. We are thrilled with our authors and the depth of their research. This volume represents insightful, intriguing, and timely research into the paradox of experienced stress in the workplace. We hope you will enjoy Volume 20 of *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being*.

**Pamela L. Perrewé\*, Peter D. Harms, and  
Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang**

---

\**Personal note from Pamela L. Perrewé:* I accepted the Lead and Founding Editor position for *Research in Occupational Stress and Well Being* over 20 years ago. Given this is Volume 20, I thought the timing was right to step away from my position as Editor. I would like to thank all my authors, my editorial review board members, and my co-editors for working with me over the years on this research series. It has been my distinct pleasure to work with so many amazing scholars who are not only my colleagues, but they have become my friends. I have the utmost confidence in Peter D. Harms and Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang to continue to push *Research in Occupational Stress and Well Being* forward. It has been a true honor to have been the editor of this series and I thank all of you.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# CONTENTS

<i>About the Contributors</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Becoming Comfortable with the Uncomfortable: The Paradoxical Role of Learning in the Coping Process</b> <i>Anita C. Keller and Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>Chapter 2 What is Resilience? Offering Construct Clarity to Address “Quicksand” and “Shadow Side” Resilience Concerns</b> <i>Danielle D. King, Richard P. DeShon, Cassandra N. Phetmisy and Dominique Burrows</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>Chapter 3 Walking the Tightrope: How and When the Paradoxical Act of Breaking Character Leads to Resilience</b> <i>Nicolina Taylor, Esther L. Jean and Wayne S. Crawford</i>	<i>51</i>
<b>Chapter 4 My Work is Who I Am, But It’s Killing Me: An Identity-based Approach to the Paradox of Passion</b> <i>Karen Landay and Joseph Schaefer</i>	<i>79</i>
<b>Chapter 5 The Role of Positive Psychological Variables in the Cognitive Appraisal of Job Insecurity: A Latent Class Approach</b> <i>Andrea Bazzoli and Tahira M. Probst</i>	<i>107</i>
<b>Chapter 6 The Paradox of Neuroticism and Vigilance Work</b> <i>Alexander R. Marbut and Peter D. Harms</i>	<i>129</i>
<b>Chapter 7 Paradoxical Relationships of Workplace Mistreatment</b> <i>Katharine McMahon, Jamie Pockrandt, Stefanie Fox, Nick Zike and Liu-Qin Yang</i>	<i>151</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>171</i>

*This page intentionally left blank*

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Andrea Bazzoli** is a Doctoral student at Washington State University, Vancouver. His research focuses on the intersections between economic stressors (i.e., job insecurity and financial strain), safety behaviors, and employees' well-being. In addition to this substantive line of research, he is interested in advanced quantitative methods (e.g., latent variable modeling and Bayesian statistics) to develop and refine measurement scales and answer original research propositions. His research has been published in top-tier outlets such as the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, and *Applied Psychology: An International Review*.

**Dominique Burrows** is currently a PhD student in Rice's Industrial-Organizational Psychology program. She earned her Master's degree at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. Her research interests focus on issues of diversity in the workplace. Specifically, looking at how the intersection of race and gender creates workplace disparities and how to counteract these. She also studies aspects of employee resilience under her advisor Dr Danielle D. King. In addition to being a student, she is also a Junior Associate on the Human Factors Consulting Team at Deloitte, where she uses data and research to improve organizational operations for their clients.

**Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang** is a Professor at the Department of Psychology of Michigan State University. Prior to joining Michigan State, she was a Faculty Member at the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health of University of South Florida, and Department of Psychology of Roosevelt University. She received her PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from the University of Akron in 2005. Her research interests focus on occupational health and safety, leadership, and motivation. Specifically, she studies issues related to occupational stress, workplace violence, and how employee motivation and organizational leadership intersect with issues concerning employee health and well-being. Her work has been published in *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Psychological Bulletin*, and *Work & Stress*.

**Wayne S. Crawford** is an Assistant Professor at University of Texas at Arlington. He received his PhD from the University of Alabama. His research focuses on employees' work and life domains, identity, and supervisor-subordinate dynamics in the workplace, including leadership and abusive supervision.

**Richard P. DeShon** is an Organizational Psychologist actively engaged in both research and practice designed to improve organizational effectiveness and increase the experienced meaningfulness of work. His research is highly cited, published in top tier journals such as *Psychological Bulletin*, *Psychological Methods*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Research Methods*, and the *Journal of Management*, and has been substantially funded by the Air Force Office of Scientific Research and NASA. He is a fellow of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the Association for Psychological Science. He has earned numerous awards, such as the McCormick Early Career Contributions Award from SIOP and has been privileged to work with many great graduate students who now hold both academic and practice positions all over the world.

**Stefanie Fox** is a fourth year Doctoral student in Portland State University's Industrial and Organizational Psychology program. Over the past six years, she has had training and research experiences focusing on research methodology and statistical analysis to identify processes and constructs related to worker mistreatment and well-being. Her research interests include workplace mistreatment, workers with stigmatized identities, psychological measurement, and emotions in the workplace. Additionally, she has worked with public and non-profit organizations to improve volunteer motivation and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion practices.

**Peter D. Harms** received his PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is a Marilyn Hewson Faculty Fellow in Data Analytics and Cyber Security at the Culverhouse College of Business of the University of Alabama. His research focuses on the assessment and development of personality, leadership, and psychological well-being. He has published over 110 articles in leading management and psychology journals. He is a fellow of both the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the Association for Psychological Science and has engaged in research partnerships with the US Army, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the US Department of Labor.

**Esther L. Jean** is a PhD candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research focuses on identity, leadership, psychological processes, and research methods.

**Anita C. Keller** is an Associate Professor at the Organizational Psychology Department at the University of Groningen. She received her PhD from the University of Bern in Work and Organizational Psychology. Her research focuses on occupational health and career psychology with a particular interest in how working conditions interact with employee behavior and well-being over time. Her current projects investigate the temporal patterns of self-regulation behavior and adaptation processes during stressful periods (e.g., coping with work interruptions and work role transitions). Her work has been published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, and *Work & Stress*.

**Danielle D. King** is an Assistant Professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology at Rice University and the Principal Investigator of the Working Resilience Research Laboratory. Her research focuses on the topics of employee resilience, resources, identity, and voice. Her work has been funded by the National Science Foundation and has been published in both peer-reviewed scientific journals, such as *Academy of Management Journal*, and in popular press outlets, including *Harvard Business Review*. She received her BA in Psychology from Spelman College and her MA and PhD in Organizational Psychology from Michigan State University.

**Karen Landay** is an Assistant Professor in the Henry W. Bloch School of Management at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She holds a PhD in Management from the Culverhouse College of Business at the University of Alabama, an MBA from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, and a Bachelor of Music from the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. Her research interests include work passion, leadership, and music listening at work. Her research has been published in journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, and *Human Resource Management Review*, among others, and has been featured in media outlets such as *Forbes*, *Business Insider, Inc.*, and *BBC Worklife*.

**Alexander R. Marbut** is a late-stage PhD student at the University of Alabama. He received his MA in Experimental Psychology from the University of Alabama in Huntsville in 2019. His research involves occupational power dynamics and interpersonal perceptions, invoking theories of personality, leadership, and statistical conclusion validity to address practical issues in personnel selection and development.

**Katharine McMahon** is a fifth year Doctoral student at Portland State University's Industrial and Organizational program. Over the past nine years, she has had training and research experiences in psychological, physiological, neurological, and cultural processes underlying health. Her research interests include workplace mistreatment, occupational stress, motivation, and affect. She has worked with public and private organizations, including healthcare networks, to address workplace mistreatment as well as examining other environmental factors that influence health and behavioral outcomes.

**Cassandra N. Phetmisy** is a PhD student in Industrial-Organizational Psychology at Rice University. She received her BS in Psychology from the University of Houston. She broadly researches how stressful experiences, especially those unrelated to one's direct job description, affect employee well-being, goal pursuit, and work behaviors. She particularly focuses on topics related to financial stress, resilience, discrimination, and voice. Her research and contributions have appeared in *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *The Cambridge Handbook of Workplace Affect*, and *Journal of Management Studies*.

**Jamie Pockrandt** is a Data Analyst at the Democracy at Work Institute where she supports data management and systems design, as well as a Project Specialist in Dr Emily Huang's Safety Climate Lab at Oregon Health & Science University where she supports research in respectful workplace climate. She received a BA in Psychology from Portland State University in 2021, with a focus on applications at work and in community. Her research interests include social and economic outcomes in relation to the worker cooperative model, systems science, workplace climate, and the sociology of work.

**Tahira M. Probst** is a Professor of Psychology and directs the Coalition for Healthy and Equitable Workplaces lab at Washington State University, Vancouver. Her research focuses on the health, safety, and performance-related outcomes of economic stressors (including job insecurity, financial strain, economic deprivation, and underemployment), as well as multi-level contextual variables that influence these relationships. She has published over 125 journal articles and book chapters on stress and health-related topics. She is past Editor of *Stress & Health* and sits on seven additional Editorial Boards.

**Joseph Schaefer** is a Doctoral candidate of Management in the University of Mississippi School of Business Administration in Oxford, Mississippi. He holds an MBA and Bachelor of Science from the University of Southern Indiana. His research interests lie at the intersection of entrepreneurship and organizational behavior including subjective entrepreneurial success, venture failure, affect, motivation, and the individual differences of entrepreneurs.

**Nicolina Taylor** is a PhD candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research focuses on emotions in the workplace, emotional labor, how employees meet the emotional demands of their jobs, and organizational justice, including customer mistreatment.

**Liu-Qin Yang** is a Professor of Psychology at Portland State University. She holds a PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, from the University of South Florida. She specializes in workplace mistreatment and emotion regulation, in relation to the health/well-being, motivation, and productivity of workers. She also has expertise in issues of psychological measurement and statistical analyses. Her work has been published in various high-quality journals across multiple disciplines (e.g., psychology, management, and international business). Her work has been funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)/CDC, the National Institute of Mental Health, among other funders.

**Nick Zike** is a third year Doctoral student in Portland State University's Industrial and Organizational Psychology program. For seven years, he has studied psychology and developed research method skills. His specific research interests include employee motivation and affective shifts, workplace fairness, mistreatment, and safety.

# CHAPTER 1

## BECOMING COMFORTABLE WITH THE UNCOMFORTABLE: THE PARADOXICAL ROLE OF LEARNING IN THE COPING PROCESS

Anita C. Keller and Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang

### ABSTRACT

*Research on coping at work has tended to adopt a between-person perspective, producing inconsistent findings on well-being outcomes. This focus on inter-individual differences is in contrast to many theories that position coping as process, hence, as an intraindividual process that unfolds over time in response to job stressors and appraisals. The authors propose that focusing more on the within-person coping processes and integrating them with learning perspectives has the potential to advance our understanding. More specifically, coping behavior and well-being can be seen as an outcome of current and past learning processes. In this chapter, the authors discuss three mechanisms that explain how coping processes can produce positive versus negative effects on well-being, and how coping can be integrated into a learning framework to explain these pathways. First, the stress process entails encoding and evaluation of the situation and, as a consequence, deployment of suitable coping behavior. Over and above the efforts that have to be invested to understand the stressful situation, the coping behavior itself also requires time and energy resources. Second, coping behavior likely co-occurs with learning processes such as reflection, exploration, and exploitation. These learning processes require further time and*

---

Examining the Paradox of Occupational Stressors: Building Resilience or Creating Depletion  
Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being, Volume 20, 1–23

Copyright © 2022 by Emerald Publishing Limited

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved

ISSN: 1479-3555/doi:10.1108/S1479-35552022000020004

*cognitive resources. Third, although coping behaviors and their accompanying learning processes have the potential to drain resources at the within-person level, they can also build up interindividual coping resources such as a broader repertoire and coping flexibility. These between-level differences equip employees to deal with future stressors.*

**Keywords:** Coping; job stressors; well-being; learning; within-person; multilevel perspective

In response to occupational stressors, employees use various strategies to regulate their reactions to promote adaptive responses and to minimize maladaptive responses. These goal-directed cognitive, emotional, and behavioral coping efforts are prominently featured in many stress theories (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and have received attention in organizational research. However, research findings on the role of coping in the work stress process have been inconclusive (Zhang, Zhang, Ng, & Lam, 2019). For example, while strategies such as problem-solving and active coping tend to correlate with positive well-being (Zhang et al., 2019), they can come with short-term ill-being such as heightened fatigue and exhaustion (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2019). Such a linkage between coping behavior and well-being may indicate that engaging in coping behaviors can lead to paradoxical outcomes: while coping may be draining, it could also activate a learning process for employees to make sense of the situation and explore adequate behaviors to address the situation.

Majority of research to date focuses on coping styles, which capture stable individual preferences to use certain coping strategies over others (e.g., problem- vs emotion-focused coping). This focus on the relatively stable content of coping behaviors created various useful insights. However, it does not capture what strategies employees have at their disposal and if and how they adjust strategy selection to cope with specific demands (e.g., Cheng, Lau, & Chan, 2014; Eatough & Chang, 2018). In reality, demands and individuals' responses to these demands fluctuate over time. Deviations in coping behaviors are likely a representation of flexibility and a learning process. For example, on a particularly stressful day, employees may explore new strategies to master the demands. Such exploration behavior reflects a learning process, which is costly for time and energy resources (Prem, Ohly, Kubicek, & Korunka, 2017), but may represent one step toward building up the coping repertoire and flexibility (i.e., outcomes of the learning process). Combining the multilevel perspective with a learning-based approach will allow us to better understand the dynamic within-person functioning of coping behaviors and how it relates to stable between-person attributes of coping styles.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the positive and negative outcomes of coping in the workplace by integrating coping theories and research with learning approaches. We will first offer a brief overview of the state of knowledge on coping in the workplace. Second, we will integrate the multilevel

perspective with the learning-based approach to explain why paradoxical effects of coping may exist. Third, we will explore how the coping and learning process may translate to interindividual differences in coping styles, repertoire, and flexibility. Finally, we will close the chapter with an agenda for future research on coping at work.

With this chapter, we aim (a) to advance research on coping in the workplace by highlighting its inherent within-person nature and the fundamental question of how employees can possibly learn from straining experiences; and (b) to provide a roadmap to researchers interested in understanding how employees dynamically regulate their reactions to demands and how these dynamics link to stable, between-person differences.

## COPING AT WORK

To deal with various demands and stressors at work, employees use coping strategies which entail goal-directed cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts to manage demands (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Coping is a crucial part of the stress process and featured in prominent theories. For example, the transactional stress model theorizes that stress arises as a result of a cognitive evaluation of a situation. Individuals evaluate whether a situation poses a threat or challenge to their well-being (primary appraisal) and if so, they engage secondary appraisal to determine if they have options to deal and cope with the challenging situation. As a consequence of the appraisal process, employees initiate a coping process, which impacts well-being and performance outcomes (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Different taxonomies of coping have been proposed. One of the most commonly used taxonomy differentiates between problem- and emotion-focused coping. *Problem-focused coping* entails strategies that aim to directly change a stressful situation and alleviate or eliminate the stressor, for example through trying to solve the problem at hand or plan to take a course of action to address the situation (e.g., problem-solving or planning). Overall, problem-focused coping styles<sup>1</sup> tend to be associated with positive well-being (Aeon, Faber, & Panaccio, 2021; Zhang et al., 2019), but studies also report opposite patterns and null-findings (e.g., Acker, 2010; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999; Wickramasinghe, 2010). Some scholars propose that the effectiveness of coping depends on the match with the situation, particularly the level of control (De Rijk, Blanc, Schaufeli, & De Jonge, 1998; Eatough & Chang, 2018; Semmer, 2006; Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2007). Often, studies focusing on within-person processes do not find meaningful relationships of these coping behaviors on well-being indicators (Smith, Barrett, & Sandal, 2019), but some studies find negative relationships with energy-related well-being (Casper & Sonnentag, 2020). For example, in a daily diary study, the researchers found that employees who actively tried to change the stressors they were exposed to on that day reported increases in energy depletion and decreases in work engagement (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2019).

*Emotion-focused coping* strategies aim at changing or regulating the way one feels about a situation and are reported to be less beneficial compared to problem-focused coping (Zhang et al., 2019), however, their use might be of importance nevertheless. For example, stressful situations often elicit intense emotions and first need to be regulated before the problem can be approached (e.g., Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2007). Of particular importance in the workplace are reappraisal and suppression (Eatough & Chang, 2018; Gan et al., 2014). *Reappraisal* describes a form of coping that aims at changing the interpretation of a situation (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Gross, 2015). For example, employees try to see something positive in a conflict at work and therewith change how they feel about the conflict. Between-person effects of reappraisal on well-being tend to be positive (Hommelhoff, Weseler, & Niessen, 2021; Penley, Tomaka, & Wiebe, 2002; Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & De Witte, 2018), but the effect size seems to be moderate to small (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). *Suppression* of emotions is a fundamental part of work as employees either have to adhere to occupational or organizational display rules or want to maintain positive relationships with coworkers and supervisors in the workplace (e.g., Eatough & Chang, 2018; Gabriel, Koopman, Rosen, Arnold, & Hochwarter, 2020; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Studies tend to show negative effects of suppression and well-being indicators for coping styles and processes (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Scheibe, 2021; Van Gelderen, Bakker, Konijn, & Demerouti, 2011).

Although often employed, the problem-/emotion-focused taxonomy and its usefulness is debated. For example, the assessment tools of the emotion-focused coping strategies have been criticized for their lack of content validity, as many items tend to be very broad, not behaviorally oriented, or capture strain reactions instead of coping behaviors (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004; Chronister & Chan, 2007). In addition, scholars have proposed a number of additional meaningful higher-order categories such as avoidance coping or social support, while others propose to focus more on specific coping strategies that match specific stressors instead of higher order categories to understand coping (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Carver et al., 1989; Dewe, O'Driscoll, & Cooper, 2010; Folkman et al., 1986; Naragon-Gainey, McMahon, & Chacko, 2017; Newton & Keenan, 1985; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003).

### *The Complexities of Coping*

Research on the role of coping in the occupational well-being context has focused on between-person relationships; either on the direct effects of coping on well-being or the mediating/moderating role of coping on the stressor – well-being relationship. These studies are particularly useful to understand the trait-like quality of coping styles, as they allow the investigation of what a general pattern of coping behaviors works for employees in response to any stressor. However, this body of literature tends to report mixed and inconsistent results and the effects of coping on well-being seem to depend on the stressor the employee attempts to deal with, other situational and personal characteristics (e.g., job

control and self-efficacy), the measurement of coping, and the well-being indicator under consideration (e.g., [Dewe, 2017](#); [Eatough & Chang, 2018](#); [Penley et al., 2002](#)). Unfortunately, extant research has not focused on coping as a state, or the coping process as it unfolds over time. As a result, we know little about the specific coping processes that lead to positive or negative well-being and/or performance outcomes. For example, we lack knowledge on questions such as how coping fluctuates in response to occurrence of a specific job stressor; when an individual employee may select a specific coping behavior versus engaging in multiple strategies in response to a specific stressor; or how an individual employee decides to engage in the same coping behavior versus switching to a different coping behavior in a given situation.

We propose that focusing on the coping process in response to a dynamic work environment, how individuals learn how to cope, and how this intraindividual process informs interindividual differences could advance our understanding of the nature and role of coping in the stress process significantly. Integrating learning perspectives with coping literature has the potential to advance our theorizing and understanding of how employees select coping behaviors in response to certain stressors and how effortful these processes are. Integration of the trait- and state perspectives on coping seems promising given findings that coping exists at both levels. For example, a study investigating the structure of coping at the between- and within-person levels concluded that coping fluctuates as a function of the situation (i.e., state), but some strategies seem to be more trait-like ([Roesch et al., 2010](#)).

## **COPING AS A WITHIN-PERSON PROCESS AND THE ROLE OF LEARNING**

The coping process itself and the outcomes of it (e.g., coping effectiveness and well-being) are a result of a reciprocal relationship between the employee and the work environment ([Lazarus & Folkman, 1984](#)). Hence, the stress process includes the stressor, the evaluation of the stressor, the coping process, and the well-being reaction of the employee ([Dewe, 2001](#); [Lazarus, 1993](#)). As a starting point, employees react to a demand or stressor in their work environment which is dynamic in itself. Recently, a number of studies have demonstrated that job stressors can fluctuate daily or weekly and more fundamentally over longer time periods such as months and years (e.g., [Keller, Meier, Elfering, & Semmer, 2020](#); [Li, Schaubroeck, Xie, & Keller, 2018](#); [Prem et al., 2017](#)). To deal with the dynamic nature of the work environment, coping behavior is needed – a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response that addresses a changing situation which triggers a reinterpretation of the situation and the stress process. Employees tend to vary their coping behaviors and try to identify which strategies are most effective in what situation ([Lazarus, 1993](#)). This variation is further amplified by novel or unusual levels of job demands employees have to deal with. Confronted with an increase in the frequency or intensity of a job stressor, employees need to learn how to best approach the situation and how to deal with it effectively.

Hence, employees explore and experiment with coping to address a specific situation and reflect on the effectiveness of these coping behaviors afterwards. Such behaviors (e.g., exploration, experimentation, reflection) are part of the learning process. For example, Kolb's (1984) influential theory on experiential learning describes learning as a process in which people learn through recognizing and responding to demands and includes behaviors such as experimentation and reflection.

### *Theoretical Approaches to Stressors and Learning*

Learning can be thought of as a process (e.g., action through which knowledge is acquired) or an outcome (e.g., knowledge acquisition). There are theories in occupational health that assume learning to play a role in the stress process. Most prominently, the job demand–control model proposed the active learning hypothesis (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). The model argues that there are two relevant dimensions to a job: stressors (e.g., workload) and autonomy (i.e., the employee's ability to influence and decide on tasks, methods, and means). Jobs that are characterized by high stressors and low autonomy are assumed to lead to lower levels of well-being because employees do not have the resources they need to cope with the high demands. Jobs that are characterized by high stressors and high autonomy are assumed to promote well-being because they are challenging and have a high potential for learning, growth, mastery, and skill development. In such a job, the demands motivate employees to explore and experiment with different work strategies to achieve their goals and the high levels of autonomy allow for these learning behaviors. Research on the learning potential of certain job characteristics concluded that not only autonomy, but also skill variety and feedback availability foster informal learning at work (Parker, 2017; Wielenga-Meijer et al., 2010). However, this theoretical approach focuses on how a combination of certain job attributes could promote individual growth and learning, and less on the implications of learning processes as a consequence of high demands.

Learning also plays a central role in the cognitive activation theory of stress (Ursin & Eriksen, 2010), a theory that started to receive some attention in organizational science (Meurs & Perrewé, 2011). One of the core assumptions in this theory is that (job) stressors can lead to straining but also training effects and therewith not only have negative implications for individuals. When confronted with a stressor, employees initially react with (cognitive, emotional, or behavioral) strain, however, individuals can adapt their reaction to the stressor through repeated experience of the stressor. This repeated stressor experience can induce chronic strain, but it also allows for a different mechanism – learning (Crane & Searle, 2016; Meurs & Perrewé, 2011; Ursin & Eriksen, 2010). Although there are initial costs of the stressor exposure for everybody, the longer-term implications depend on whether the individual has or has not learned something about the situation. An important learning outcome according to the cognitive activation theory of stress is the acquisition of expectancies which means that individuals hold an expectation if they will be able to successfully cope with the situation (Ursin & Eriksen, 2010). This theoretical approach clearly positions learning as

part of the stress process that can determine adaptation and long-term outcomes of stressor exposure.

### *Coping and Learning*

Some studies started to explore the functionality of coping within a learning perspective. In this stream of literature, learning is thought of as a coping strategy itself or an outcome of the coping process. In a recent meta-analysis, [Zhang et al. \(2019\)](#) used the regulatory focus theory to conceptualize coping, and argued that such conceptualization would be useful to better understand the interplay between stressors and outcomes in the work context. They categorized different strategies into promotion- and prevention-focused coping. Promotion-focused coping is motivated by strivings for achievements, growth, and learning (e.g., planning and reappraisal) while prevention-focused coping is motivated by security, safety, and avoidance of negative outcomes (e.g., restraint and disengagement). In addition, they proposed to differentiate between challenge and hindrance stressors as two type of stressors that affect not only well-being but also coping differently. Challenge stressors such as high workload or task complexity require investment of effort, but they also offer opportunities for growth and mastery. Hindrance stressors such as role conflict or red tape, however, are demands that hinder personal development and task accomplishment ([LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005](#); [LePine, Zhang, Crawford, & Rich, 2016](#); [Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007](#)). Because both are oriented toward development and growth, challenge stressors prompt employees to use promotion-focused coping, whereas hindrance stressors are mismatched with the use of promotion-focused coping. On the other hand, when confronted with hindrance stressors, employees tend to engage in prevention-focused coping behaviors. In turn, promotion-focused coping was related to better physical and psychological well-being while prevention-focused coping negatively linked to well-being ([Zhang et al., 2019](#)). It is notable that this pattern of results was independent of problem- versus emotion-focused coping. What seems to make a difference is if employees get the opportunity to grow and learn from the adverse situation, not whether they try to tackle the stressor directly versus managing their emotions.

Some studies also tested if learning could function as a coping strategy in itself. For example, [Zhang, Mayer, and Hwang et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated that learning something new buffers the adverse effects of hindrance stressors on negative emotions and deviance on the within- and between-person level while relaxation did not. Similarly, in a daily diary study, problem-solving demands increased learning on that day, which in turn increased positive affect ([Daniels, Boocock, Glover, Hartley, & Holland, 2009](#)). These authors argue that learning offers gains and increases resources such as knowledge and skills and personal experiences of competence and mastery ([Daniels et al., 2009](#); [De Rijk et al., 1998](#); [Zhang et al., 2018](#)). These resources, in turn, are crucial for problem-solving and goal accomplishment. Hence, learning something new when faced with stressors may give employees the opportunity to make some progress toward their work goals, even if the progress is not direct. Having the feeling that one moves

in the right direction and comes closer to accomplish the goals typically feels good and increases positive emotions (e.g., [Chang, Johnson, & Lord, 2009](#)). In addition, when confronted with hindrance stressors, learning may offer something that the stressor did not – an opportunity to experience meaningfulness and take something out of the situation. This is particularly important because overcoming hindrance stressors is not expected to offer individuals with opportunities to experience a sense of achievement or meaning ([Kronenwett & Rigotti, 2019](#)). Although the need for meaning can fluctuate from day-to-day, research demonstrated that employees generally seek meaning in their work. If the need for meaning is not matched (i.e., needs-supply misfit; [Edwards, 2008](#)), employees experience lower engagement and heightened exhaustion ([Vogel, Rodell, & Sabey, 2020](#)), and employees may be able to overcome this misfit by actively seeking learning opportunities ([Zhang et al., 2018](#)).

### *Learning Processes*

The theoretical propositions and empirical findings we have reviewed above acknowledge learning as part of the stress and coping process – either as an outcome or as a process that determines if the outcome of the process is positive or negative. So far, fine-grained processes by which individuals learn during the stress process have not been reviewed and we propose that three learning processes are particularly relevant when coping with work stressors – reflection, exploration, and exploitation.

*Reflection* is a learning process during which employees think about an experience or situation, make sense of it, and evaluate it in terms of success or failure including the causes for the outcome ([Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009](#); [Ellis & Davidi, 2005](#); [Li, Chen, Chen, Bai, & Crant, 2020](#)). Accordingly, after a stressful situation has passed, employees reflect on the situation and evaluate which behaviors were more successful and which behaviors were less successful. In this situation, employees stop exploration behaviors and shy away from proactively exploring new techniques and strategies, but will evaluate which employed strategies are beneficial. Studies in organizational psychology have shown that reflection on successes and failures is beneficial for performance (e.g., [Anseel et al., 2009](#); [Li et al., 2020](#)). Similarly, [Crane and Searle \(2016\)](#) propose that reflection after coping processes is essential for individuals to learn from stressors. In line with the cognitive activation theory of stress, they propose that exposure to stressors not only comes with immediate costs, but these situations offer the opportunity to learn how to effectively cope and build up resilience. In their systematic self-reflection model, [Crane and Searle \(2016\)](#) propose that individuals reach insights into their coping behaviors through reflection and that these insights lead to positive outcomes such as increased well-being in the long run. According to their model, reflection on daily stressors and coping entails situation- (i.e., self-awareness, trigger identification, and reappraisal) and development-focused (i.e., evaluation and future focus) cognition. These reflection activities in turn create coping insights which refer to the understanding of thoughts, feelings, and behavior as it relates to the coping process. Daily