

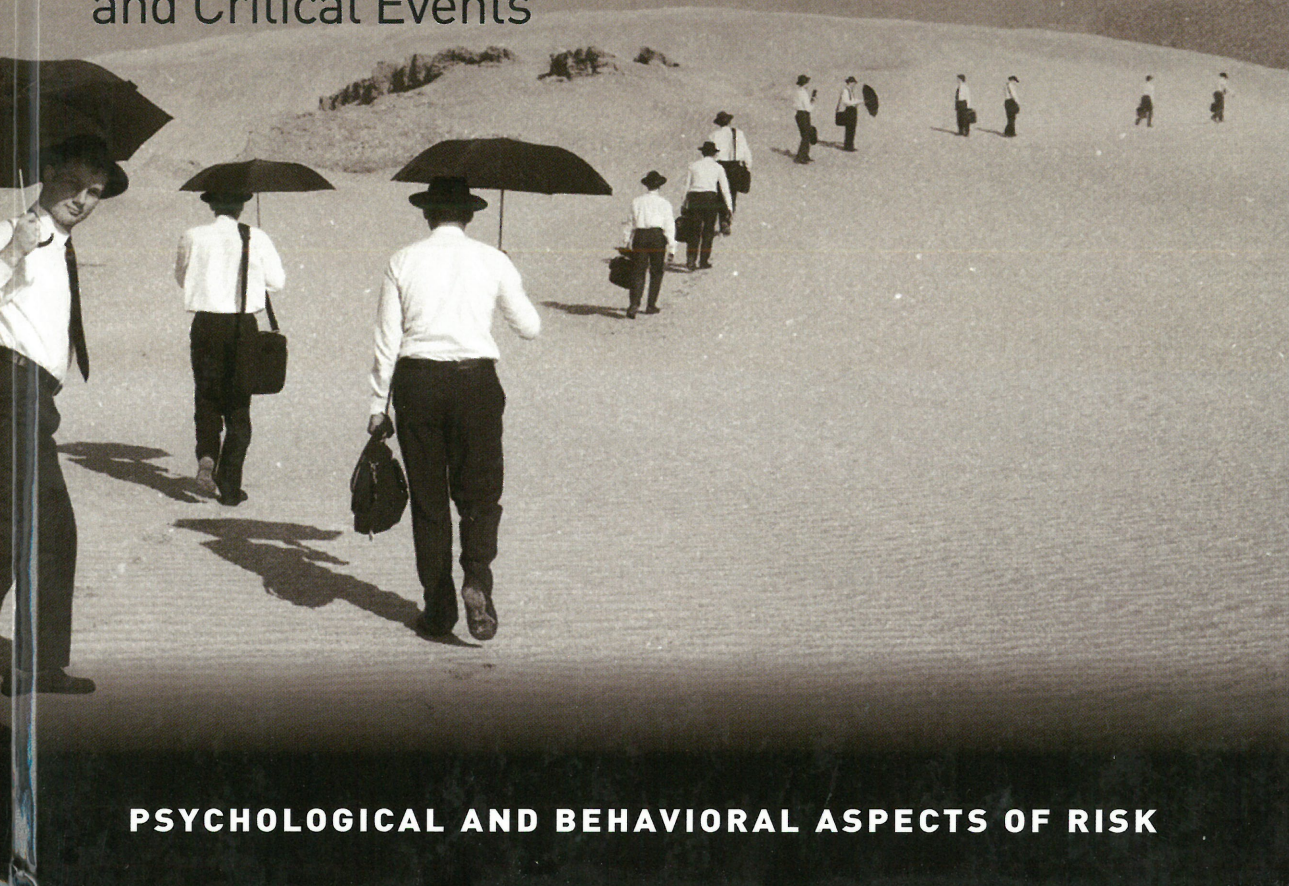
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# Coping, Personality and the Workplace

Responding to Psychological Crisis  
and Critical Events



**PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF RISK**

# *Coping, Personality and the Workplace*

Responding to Psychological Crisis and Critical Events

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GOWER

# The Role of Personality Traits in the Perception of Occupational Stress and the Coping Style of Teachers: A Few Points to Consider

Alexander-Stamatios Antoniou and Antigoni Garyfallaki

## Introduction

Educators' occupational stress and wellbeing are increasingly becoming a crucial issue among researchers. Teaching has been suggested to be among the most stressful occupations (Johnson et al. 2005), as the nature of the job encompasses high levels of stress and professional exhaustion, broadly referred to as 'burnout' (Jalongo and Heider 2006). Surveys report rates ranging from 5% up to 30% of teachers suffering from burnout symptoms (Rudow 1999; Schaufeli, Daamen and Van Mierlo 1994) as well as an increasing number of referrals of teachers to occupational therapists with stress-related disorders (Austin, Shah and Muncer 2005). The alarming rates of teachers experiencing psychological and occupational strain have been observed both in Eastern (Chan 1998; Gaziel 1993; Shen 2009; Yang, Ge, Hu, Chi and Wang 2009; Yang, Wang, Ge, Hu and Chi 2011) and Western societies (Austin et al. 2005; Johnson et al. 2005; Laugaa, Rasclé and Bruchon-Schweitzer 2008; Lewis 1999; Parker, Martin, Colmar and Liem 2012).

Therefore, occupational stress and the ways in which teachers cope with this are of great interest to researchers. It is widely suggested that a better understanding of the factors influencing occupational stress as well as the factors determining response to psychological strain, may enable occupational therapists and policy makers to effectively help teachers build resilience and prevent negative outcomes, namely low performance, burnout and poor wellbeing. In this chapter the

emphasis is upon teachers' work-related stress, ways of coping with stressful situations at the workplace as well as the influential role of personality in selecting coping strategies.

## Coping with Stress

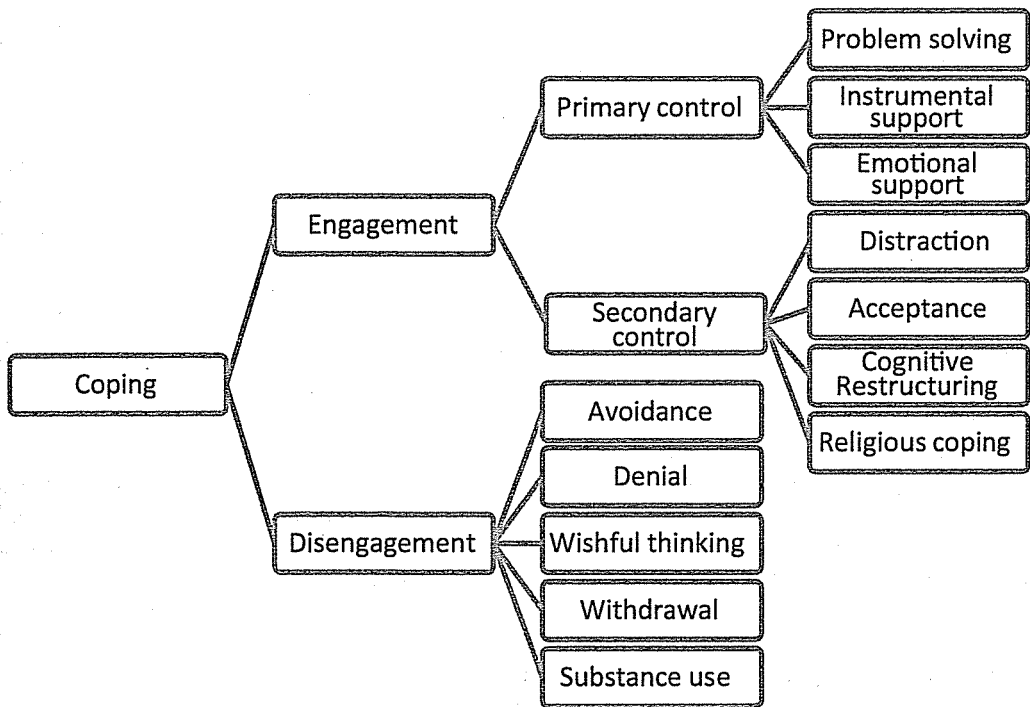
Initially coping was conceptualized as a psychodynamic defence mechanism, which was stable, influencing perceptions of events and dictated adaptive and maladaptive responses. Many theorists conceived coping as unconscious and involuntary responses (Eisenberg, Fabes and Guthrie 1997). Contrary to this definition, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) introduced the *transactional model of coping*. In this model coping is defined as a conscious, intentional, goal-directed response, tailored to the specific demands of a stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The processes used in order to respond to a stressor and minimize the effect on the individual are called *coping strategies* (Lazarus 1996) and are widely defined as the specific efforts, both behavioural and cognitive, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize the internal and external demands resulting from the interaction between the individual and the environment. What is of central importance in this theoretical framework is that coping becomes activated after the individual's appraisal of the demands as taxing his personal resources, and being at risk (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen and DeLongis 1986). Thus, the emphasis is shifted from the subconscious or non-conscious strategies (e.g. defence mechanisms) towards more adaptive or constructive coping strategies (i.e. strategies that reduce stress levels) (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).

Many researchers have attempted to address and categorize different ways of coping in order to bridge the general conceptual definitions and the actual responses of the individuals when they deal with psychological distress (Skinner and Wellborn 1994). The most widely used categorization is that of the *Problem-focused* and *Emotion-focused coping*. Problem-focused coping is conceptualized as an action-centred response aiming towards the direct resolve of challenges. On the contrary, emotion-focused coping refers to an active attempt to manage, reinterpret and alter the meaning of challenges as well as the associated emotions (Folkman et al. 1986; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Problem-focused coping involves, among others, the rationalization of the stressful situation and positive thinking of self, while emotion-focused coping encompasses strategies such as escape and avoidance of the stressful situation, distraction and turning to religion (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010; Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007; Folkman et al. 1986; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Although this dichotomy has been used in numerous studies across the decades, it has been critiqued for failing to incorporate the entire range of coping strategies. Specifically, researchers argue that this categorization neglects the role of the engagement-disengagement dimension and incorporates strategies to overly broad categories (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen and Wadsworth 2001; Skinner, Edge, Altman and Sherwood 2003).

Apart from problem-/emotion-focused coping, numerous taxonomic approaches have been proposed. These approaches place the emphasis on the extent to which the individual becomes activated and is oriented towards confronting the problem, and strategies that call for an effort in order to minimize or eliminate strain by avoiding dealing with the problem (Moos and Billings 1982). Latack (1986) went a step further by combining the control/escape dimension with the level of action (cognitive/behavioural) yielding four types of coping strategies: active behavioural; active cognitive; inactive behavioural; and inactive cognitive coping strategies. A critique cited upon this issue is that researchers failed to reach a consensus regarding the necessary number and kind of coping strategies that should be used (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989; Skinner and Wellborn 1994).

Beyond these classifications, recent reviews and meta-analysis (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007; Skinner et al. 2003) mention that over 100 coping categorization schemes and scoring systems for common coping measures have been reported, which makes the aggregation across studies a difficult task. Hence, using factor analyses a more complex model of coping was proposed based on a hierarchical structure. The highest level of categorization is *engagement* (approach, active) coping and *disengagement* (avoidant) coping. At the second level of the hierarchy, engagement coping is further distinguished in *primary control* and *secondary control*, a distinction focusing on the coping goals. That is, primary control is used towards the stressor and the related emotions while the secondary control refers to the adaptation to stress.

Each of these coping dimensions involves three specific strategies. Primary control engagement coping involves *problem solving*, *instrumental support* and *emotion regulation/support*, while for secondary control engagement coping, *distraction*, *cognitive restructuring*, *acceptance* and *religious coping* are involved. On the other side of categorization, there is the disengagement dimension which involves strategies such as *avoidance*, *denial*, *wishful thinking*, *withdrawal* and *substance use* (Figure 12.1) (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).



**Figure 12.1** Hierarchical structure of coping

Source: Connor-Smith and Flachsbart, 2007.

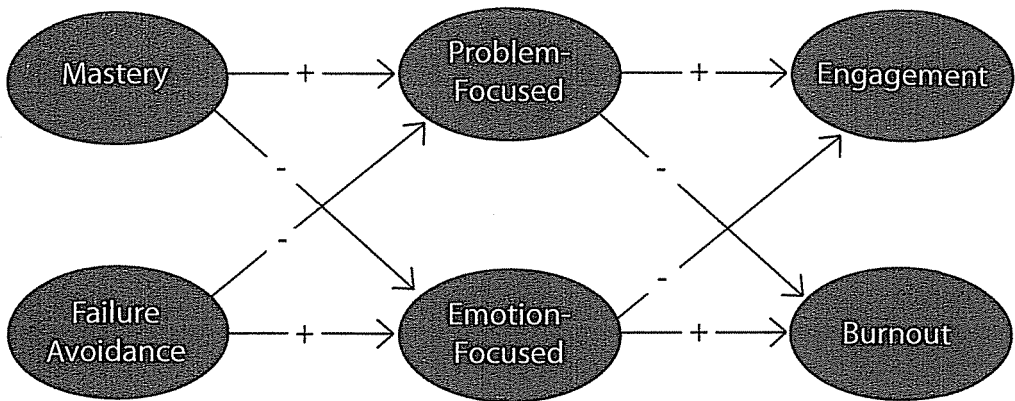
What is crucial within the coping research is the differentiation between coping strategies and its consequences. Albeit, early theories attempted to define coping by its outcomes ('All responses to stressful events or episodes', Compas 1987, p. 393), later theorists suggested that coping must be regarded independently of its outcomes and its effectiveness (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Yet the taxonomic approach followed by most researchers results from factor analysis of open-ended questions concerning the individual's response during a recent stressful event. This dimensionalization fails to recognize the coping's independence from coping resources and outcomes (Skinner and Wellborn 1994). However, it would be naïve if we assumed that the outcomes play no role in the selection of a coping strategy later in life. That is, an effective coping method might reinforce the individual to reselect the strategy used before.

The criticism of the taxonomies of coping strategies have gone a step further by arguing that the dimensionalization of strategies based on their nature and the level of function is not sufficient, and more finely designed models, incorporating the factors that lead to the individual's selection of certain strategies, on a longitudinal basis, should be used (Macrodimitris and Endler 2001; Parker et al. 2012). Parker and his colleagues (Parker et al. 2012) in investigating coping in teacher populations attempted to construct a model of coping by combining the transactional model (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), self-worth and goal-orientation theories and the outcomes of coping strategies (engagement or burnout). In this sense, self-worth is a motivating drive which is evaluated, maintained or threatened by achievement domains.

In the occupational field, work-related stress, work conditions and job nature as well as achievement domains, might pose threats to self-worth and, in turn, might affect the appraisals of stressful events. Simultaneously, goal orientation is a key factor regarding individuals' efforts to protect their sense of identity in order to preserve conceptions of self-results (Nias 1999, in Parker et al. 2012). Goal orientation provides two components; mastery (orientation to seek out challenges, define goals and engage tasks for their intrinsic value) and failure avoidance (orientation towards reducing the chances to failure). Adaptive behaviours, such as problem-focused coping, were suggested to be direct outcomes of a mastery orientation, whereas palliative behaviours (emotion-focused coping and short-term avoidant strategies) were associated with failure avoidance oriented individuals which result in engagement behaviours in the first case and burnout in the latter one (Figure 12.2).

Regarding the effectiveness of coping strategies, cumulative research findings suggest that active coping aiming to confront and change the stressful situation (positive thinking, planning, positive reinterpretation, etc.) is concerned with adaptive ways of coping and is associated with individuals' well-being and lower stress levels. While denial, behavioural and mental disengagement are negative coping strategies and are linked to burnout and poorer mental health (Austin et al. 2005; Compas et al. 2001; Shen 2009). However, the notion of positive/adaptive and negative/maladaptive coping has been recently criticized. Positive and negative coping, although opposites, are relative concepts. It has been argued that a person can effectively cope with stress when selected strategies are compatible with the stressful event and stress stage (Lazarus 2000). That is to say, a perceived negative coping strategy (e.g. turning to religion) may be functional in minimizing the psychological strain at an initial coping stage, and may strengthen the individual's ability to cope with the problem. However, in the long-term this might impede the coping process (Austin et al. 2005; Carver et al. 1989; Shen 2009).

Further support for the above notions emerges from researchers claiming that coping, although targeting stress reduction, is not universally beneficial (Compas et al. 2001). Some strategies are shown to be effective for some individuals, while for others such strategies could be non-effective or even harmful (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). Thus, concerning the influencing factors of coping, there is an ongoing debate. Some researchers claim that individual (i.e. personality) and situational differences (i.e. work conditions) determine coping selection



**Figure 12.2** Process model of goal orientation, coping, engagement and burnout

Source: Parker et al., 2012.

(Carver et al. 1989; Lazarus and Folkman 1984), whilst others argue that coping styles are stable and should be conceived as dispositions brought about by people in every stressful situation that they encounter (McCrae 1984). In the following section, the link between personality and coping will be discussed.

## Personality and Coping

Personality is generally defined as characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours over time and across situations, influenced by both biological predispositions (temperament) and environmental factors (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). Studying personality, researchers aim to understand human nature by defining basic similarities among individuals (e.g. humans are biological creatures, self-protective, etc.) as well as differences that make individuals unique (e.g. five-factor model of personality traits) (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010).

Coping, on the other hand, has been described as 'personality in action under stress' (Bolger 1990, p. 525) and it has been argued that coping should be redefined as a personality process. This notion gained support on a theoretical basis as Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that individuals' personality traits may influence the appraisal process and therefore the selection of coping strategies. Apart from the theoretical basis, empirical evidence links personality to coping strategies (Bolger 1990; Kato and Pedersen 2005; Mosher 2006).

It has been proposed that personality affects coping in both direct and indirect ways (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). At a biological level, it is suggested that responses to stressful situations result from temperament based systems which either make the individual approach (active/engagement coping) or avoid (disengagement coping) the threat (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007) and thus affect coping selection throughout the lifespan (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). Moreover, taking into account that the coping process is generated and reinforced by stress exposure and that personality affects whether each individual experiences a situation as stressful (intensity and frequency), we could assume the association between coping processes and personality traits. Thus, people who perceive more situations as negative and stressful and experience more negative feelings, are also more prone to disengage in order to buffer and regulate their intense emotions. On the other hand, people who are low in stress reactivity and have more positive appraisals towards adversities are more likely to make use

of active/engagement coping strategies (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010; Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).

As mentioned above, empirical evidence suggests that certain coping strategies may prove beneficial for some individuals and less effective or even harmful for others with different personality traits (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). Although a coping strategy (e.g. problem solving) might have beneficial long-term outcomes, the short-term costs and benefits might have a more crucial role in selecting future coping strategies. For instance, the short-term benefits of disengagement may reinforce a person with high levels of stress reactivity to continue selecting strategies with poor long-term outcomes (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).

Research into personality and coping is relatively diverse. In their effort to define the individual differences that make certain strategies optimal for some individuals and harmful for others, as well as to investigate the strategy selection process, researchers have proposed several models. In this chapter we review the well-established five-factor model, the role of self-efficacy feelings as well as the role of locus of control of a stressful situation.

## THE FIVE-FACTOR MODEL

The five-factor model, being a well-established construct, offers a useful set of individual differences measures which have been found to be relatively stable across age cohorts and cultures (McCrae and John 1992). In order to investigate the role of personality in coping with stress and its consequences, namely burnout, numerous studies have used the 'Big Five' model (Bolger 1990; Carver and Connor-Smith 2010; Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007; Grant and Langan-Fox 2006; McCrae and Costa 1986; Swider and Zimmerman 2010). A recent meta-analysis of 165 samples (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007) has linked each personality trait to certain coping strategies.

*Extraversion* has its roots in the approach temperament system and is characterized by sensitivity to reward, positive emotions, sociability and assertiveness (McCrae and John 1992). Empirical evidence links this trait to more frequent use of engagement coping, namely problem solving, seeking social support and cognitive restructuring, and less frequently to disengagement coping, such as wishful thinking and withdrawal (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).

On the other hand, *Neuroticism*, deriving from an avoidance temperament system, reflects a trend towards vulnerability to fear, sadness and distressful experiences, that is frequent negative affectivity, negative emotionality and behavioural inhibition (McCrae and John 1992). Consequently, neuroticism has been associated to less engagement coping, mainly to distraction and social support and more strongly related to disengagement (wishful thinking and withdrawal) and emotion-focused coping (expression of negative emotions).

*Conscientiousness* involves self-discipline, organization, goal-orientation, persistence and planful properties (Lengua et al. 1999; Vollrath 2001) leading to the association towards engagement coping strategies such as problem solving and cognitive restructuring rather than seeking social support and disengagement strategies (denial and substance use). Moreover, conscientiousness is negatively related to expression of negative emotions.

*Openness* to experiences entails creativity, imagination, curiosity, flexibility and tendency towards intellectual and innovative activities (McCrae and John 1992). Possessing these characteristics, individuals high in openness are more likely to engage with stressful situations through problem solving and cognitive restructuring from negative thinking to positive activities and thoughts. Yet it is also possible for these people to disengage, by selecting wishful thinking and using their fantasy and imagination (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).

Last but not least, *Agreeableness* suggests altruism, compliance and concern for others (Caspi et al. 2005; McCrae and John 1992). People high in agreeableness often have a strong social



network, which in turn leads them to rely on their social contacts during stressful situations. Similar to conscientiousness, agreeableness negatively predicts expression of negative emotions (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010; Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007).

Meta-analytic findings suggest that although individual studies provide correlations between personality traits and coping of strong effect size, when it comes to summarizing the studies, the magnitude of the relationship is modest (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). This is partially explained by the diversity of samples and measures of variables. Notwithstanding, the effect of such a link in everyday life remains significant, taking into account that personality affects every stressor an individual encounters, resulting in shaping his/her coping style over time. Moreover, authors argued that relationships were more interesting when specific coping strategies were under examination, rather than broad categories. They also proposed that in the future researchers should address specific facets of each personality trait in order to further the insight of the mechanisms that underlie the relationship between personality and coping.

## SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy is a crucial component in the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to successfully carry out a particular course of action, and overcome barriers by investing effort and strategies. According to Bandura (1997), there are four sources of self-efficacy beliefs: *enactive mastery experiences*; *vicarious experiences*; *verbal persuasion*; and *personal physiological and affective states* from which people judge whether or not they are capable of accomplishing a task or confronting a situation. Efficacy beliefs determine the way individuals perceive events as opportunities or obstacles (Bandura 2006). Hence self-efficacy influences the choice of tasks undertaken, the effort put into these, and the extent to which the individual will persist in confronting a problem (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2010). Given this framework, we could assume the important role of self-efficacy in the coping process.

Reviewing the literature from research within the the occupational psychology field, self-efficacy beliefs seem to affect individuals' wellbeing in both a direct and indirect way. To begin with, a sizeable amount of studies have revealed an inverse relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and burnout (Betoret 2006, 2009; Fives, Hamman and Olivarez 2007; Shen 2009; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2010; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2007). High levels of self-efficacy in teachers were significantly and negatively associated with work-related stressors and in turn negatively linked to burnout dimensions (Betoret 2009; Fives et al. 2007).

Moreover, self-efficacy has been directly linked to job satisfaction, commitment to profession, good cooperation with colleagues and supervisors (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca and Malone 2006; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2010) as well as positive relationships with parents (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2010), better classroom management (Martin, Sass and Schmitt 2012) and greater motivation and performance (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk 2001). Therefore, self-efficacy seems to play an important role in the promotion of a rich and stimulating learning environment, which in turn limits certain environmental stressors related with the teaching occupation (student misbehaviour, fear of losing control), thus promoting occupational wellbeing and preventing teachers from burnout.

In addition, the concept of self-efficacy has been directly associated with positive coping of stress (Devonport et al. 2003; Devonport, Lane, City, Campus and Road, 2006; Lane et al. 2002; Laugaa et al. 2008; Shen 2009). More specifically, self-efficacy is conceptualized as a key factor in cognitive evaluation of a stressful situation. Hence, teachers with high levels of self-efficacy feel more empowered to act on the stressor instead of avoiding it. There is empirical evidence linking teachers' high self-efficacy to problem-focused coping strategies (problem solving, positive

reinterpretation, planning and acceptance), whereas low self-efficacy predicted emotion-focused disengagement coping strategies, such as denial, turning to religion and behavioural disengagement (Shen 2009).

Furthermore, the relationship between coping strategies and self-efficacy seems to be reciprocal. This is illustrated by the fact that research evidence suggests that self-efficacy predicts active coping strategies, while simultaneously it is argued that problem-focused coping behaviours derive from mastery and tend to reinforce self-worth attributes, such as self-efficacy and competence. This in turn provides the individual with resources for successful confrontation of stressful situations, resulting in increased achievements and consequently improved self-worth and competence feelings (Parker et al. 2012).

However, the relation between self-efficacy and coping does not remain intact by mediating factors, such as control of situations. Researchers suggest that although high self-efficacy is linked to adaptive coping strategies, where there is greater stress intensity whereby individuals have limited control over the situation, active, problem-focused coping tends to be replaced by emotion-focused strategies (Shen 2009). Locus of control has been suggested to act as a mediating factor influencing the relationship between work-related sources of stress and mental wellbeing. Traits such as hardiness (a component of internal locus of control) may buffer the effects of stress and have been associated with lower levels of stress and better performance. These individuals, who have a greater sense of internal control, prefer active coping strategies aiming to alter the stressful situation. Contrary to internal locus of control, there is also the external locus of control, where individuals select palliative coping strategies in order to regulate their emotional arousal. Recent empirical evidence support this theoretical framework, suggesting that people who manifest higher levels of stress also exhibit higher levels of illness, and are more likely to perceive control as external and to have lower levels of self-efficacy (Roddenberry and Renk 2010).

## Coping with Occupational Stress in Educational Workplaces

As mentioned in the introduction section of this chapter, considerable interest has been given to research into teachers' stress, due to alarming rates of them dropping out of the profession (Martin et al. 2012) and increased symptoms of occupational stress and burnout (Austin et al. 2005; Parker et al. 2012; Shen 2009). Researchers aim to identify the elements that make teaching a stressful profession, by defining the main stressors that teachers encounter on a daily basis. Numerous studies both in mainstream educational settings (Antoniou, Polychroni and Vlachakis 2006; Austin et al. 2005; Forlin 2001; Pithers and Fogarty 1995) and special educational settings (Antoniou and Polychroni 2000; Jennett, Harris and Mesibov 2003) have identified the main stressors for teachers. Individual studies have highlighted work-related stress including excessive caseload, administration of lesson preparation, parental involvement, hours worked overtime (Austin et al. 2005; Pithers and Fogarty 1995; Yang et al. 2011), poor work conditions (Gaziel 1993; Yang et al. 2011), student misbehaviour (Boyle et al. 1995), lack of support, school policies, time and funds (Austin et al. 2005) as well as the discrediting of the profession (Laugaa et al. 2008) to be among the major job stressors for teachers.

Recent studies however have attempted to classify all of these factors into three broad clusters; that is, stressors that *directly refer to the teaching profession* (i.e. class structure, student misbehaviour, class heterogeneity, work overload), *personal factors* (i.e. individual differences concerning age, gender, years of experience, personality traits) and *administrative factors* (i.e. limited government support, deficient training, excessive demands from school administration, continuous changes in the curriculum and communication with parents) (Antoniou et al. 2006; Forlin 2001). However, there is still no consensus when it comes to defining the main stressors,

as inconsistencies emerge among research findings, underlining the dynamic nature of stressors which change over time and across different cultures and educational systems (Betoret 2009).

Nevertheless, an understanding of what causes teachers to become stressed will accommodate the discussion with regard to their coping strategies towards stressful situations. Research in teacher populations suggests that active/engagement coping, either behavioural or cognitive, is associated with relatively low stress levels, while palliative strategies, such as emotional expressive strategies, increase teachers' urge to escape, and decrease their involvement in the problem (Austin et al. 2005).

More precisely, problem-focused coping, involving strategies such as putting problems into perspective, rationalizing and analysing the situation, being coherent in the relationship with students and self-management and regulation, has been found to have positive and useful effects on confronting stress within the educational setting (Antonioni, Ploumpi and Ntalla 2013; Austin et al. 2005; Chan 1998; Martin 2008; Mattern and Bauer 2014; Shen 2009). Moreover, active coping was found to be the most frequent strategy used among Chinese teachers (Shen 2009). Problem-oriented coping has predicted higher levels of personal accomplishment, inversely linking active coping strategies to teachers' burnout (Antonioni et al. 2013; Betoret and Artiga 2010).

Other problem-focused strategies have also been suggested as positively relating to stress confrontation. For example, seeking social support and job control were found to actively contribute to teachers' wellbeing (Pisanti, Gagliardi, Razzino and Bertini 2003). Seeking social support has been linked with reduced burnout dimensions such as depersonalization (Chan and Hui 1995), which implies that by relying on seeking support from social contacts (colleagues, family, friends) teachers manage to reduce a negative attitude towards their students and colleagues, leading to a more positive climate within their workplace. Yet individual differences such as years of experience are moderating factors, as novice teachers were found to use such strategies less frequently, possibly due to difficulties in becoming integrated into an already well-established team during the first years of teaching (Laugaa et al. 2008).

On the contrary, palliative and emotion-focused coping strategies have been associated with higher perceived stress, low self-efficacy and limited social support among teachers (Austin et al. 2005; Chan and Hui 1995; Shen 2009). In addition, disengagement strategies, including escape, avoidance and denial were positively associated with distress and had a direct positive predictive effect on teachers' burnout components of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Antonioni et al. 2013; Austin et al. 2005; Chan and Hui 1995; Laugaa et al. 2008). That is to say, by denying or escaping the stressful situation without attempting to change it, teachers may become ineffective in overcoming problems and the demands of their profession, which inevitably results in their emotional exhaustion and affect their relationships with students, colleagues and supervisors.

Moreover, other maladaptive strategies, such as turning to religion (Shen 2009), uncontrolled aggressiveness (Austin et al. 2005) and adopting a traditional teaching style (Laugaa et al. 2008), have also been examined. Although the frequency with which teachers selected such strategies was significantly lower than for problem-focused ones, such coping styles were positively linked to subjective stress, that is highly stressed teachers tended to select them more frequently (Austin et al. 2005; Shen 2009). Additionally, maladaptive strategies predicting negative outcomes in teachers' wellbeing were negatively associated with teachers' self-efficacy (Austin et al. 2005; Shen 2009), while positively related to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced professional accomplishment (Laugaa et al. 2008).

Nonetheless, research studies on occupational stress and coping strategies have received important criticism regarding methodological as well as general concept and theoretical issues. To begin with, the vast majority of the research studies have adopted correlational, cross-sectional designs. Such methodologies fail to provide direction of the relationship between occupational stress and coping strategies, and also make it difficult to understand

the role of moderating factors. Consequently, it is not clear in a given possible positive correlation between subjective stress, disengagement strategies and low self-efficacy whether personality predisposes people to appraise situations as stressful and select certain coping strategies leading to negative outcomes, or certain strategies boost distress and negative feelings, affecting self-efficacy. Recently, however, the need for more complicated models rather than linear relation between variables, as well as a reciprocal relationship among factors, have been proposed (Betoret 2009).

Moreover, self-reports and retrospective responses are the main measures in the research literature (Antoniou et al. 2013; Betoret 2009; Betoret and Artiga 2010; Carver and Connor-Smith 2010; Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007; Parker et al. 2012) using principally dispositional coping. These studies fail to consider other factors, such as the combination of strategies, duration and order (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010). Hence, successive assessment and longitudinal designs as well as more objective measures, namely observations triangulated with multiple informant approaches, are needed (Compas et al. 2001; Skinner et al. 2003).

Finally, the coping process should not be considered as independent of the nature of the stressor and the context of assessment (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010; Prokopčáková 2004). Perceived intensity of stressful stimuli might moderate the relationship between personality and coping strategies (Shen 2009). Furthermore, different professions have profound effects on employees that might affect their resilience or vulnerability towards stress. In particular, teaching as a job enquires certain planning skills as most teachers are required by their supervisors to submit lesson plans beforehand. Additionally, cultural context plays an important role, given that the professional status and hence the expectations of the teachers change across different cultures (Gaziel 1993). Also, different educational systems and national policies may affect the stressful situations that teachers confront and in turn impact on their response to it (Laugaa et al. 2008).

## Implications

The practical implications for teachers, and educators in general, concerning stress and consequently burnout as well as teachers' attrition phenomenon are of significant importance (Parker et al. 2012). Pithers and Fogarty (1995) have drawn attention to the fact that in order to reduce work-related stress in teachers, a greater change at a whole educational system level is essential. Moreover, given the associations between teachers' stress, personality, coping strategies and psychological and professional outcomes, it has been suggested that apart from coping itself, an emphasis upon cognitions that generate coping behaviour and context in which coping takes place would be of greater utility (Parker et al. 2012). However, it would be naïve to believe that reducing stress and ill-being of teachers is solely a matter of optimizing their coping strategies. What is equally important is reducing the major stressors and improving the working conditions (Laugaa et al. 2008).

Consequently, intervention programmes of multiple levels seem to be the optimal way of dealing with occupational stress in educational workplace. Laugaa and colleagues (2008) presented an integrated programme consisting of three stages. More specifically, early prevention of work stress encompasses interventions implemented at the early stages of a teacher's career intensifying the personal resources of the professional through information programmes on job stress and effective ways of coping as well as teaching ways of identifying stressful situations and building up self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs.

Moreover, prevention entails a great change at an organizational level by improving working conditions and modifying government and school policies, considering the major stressors

(e.g. workload outside working hours, demands from parents, discredit by society, etc.). On a secondary level, interventions aiming to improve coping skills by focusing on problem solving instead of discharging emotions, through cognitive and behavioural approaches and peer support groups, are being suggested in order for teachers to function effectively under stressful conditions. Simultaneously, promoting lifelong learning at all teaching levels could empower teachers and boost their competence and self-efficacy beliefs. Last but not least, intervention in crisis, when burnout symptoms are manifested, constitutes the third level of the programme. In this case, occupational therapists and human resources specialists should play a crucial role in diagnosing and treating burnout as well as offering alternative options to the teachers.

Nevertheless, coping is a complex process and generalized methods are not relatively effective. Considering individual differences, namely personality and years of experience and contexts, it has been proposed that professional development programmes should be tailored to teachers' career stages (novice teachers may need general skills while experienced teachers may make greater use of more specific skills) (Klassen and Chiu 2010). Individual interventions may seem practically impossible to be designed and implemented. Hence, schools staffed with specialized personnel (i.e. psychologists and/or counsellors) may be of great use for teachers, as well as their supervisors and students (Betoret 2009).

## Conclusion

This chapter focused on the role of personality on perceiving occupational stress and teachers' coping strategies. Research has shown that personality plays an important role in conceiving occupational stress as it affects the way a person interprets a situation. Thus, individuals with low self-efficacy feelings and high stress reactivity (high neuroticism) are more likely to perceive a difficult situation as stressful. In turn, exposure to stress affects individuals' responses. Thus, individuals who tend to experience greater stress are more likely to respond by selecting a coping strategy that will discharge intense emotions rather than focusing on the problem and finding a solution.

On the contrary, individuals with higher self-efficacy, mastery oriented with greater social network (high agreeableness) and persistence (conscientiousness) are more likely to perceive a stressful situation as challenging and try to alter the problem by channelling their negative emotions in a more positive direction. Although research evidence reports small effect sizes of relations between personality and coping, the impact on individuals' lives is still of significance.

Nevertheless, coping is a complex process with numerous mediating factors. Hence, the educational context, which is reviewed here, provides a fertile ground for research as teachers encounter numerous stressors at multiple levels and on a daily basis. Ranging from the organizational level (government and school policies) to class level (class management, student misbehaviour) and personal level (personality traits, self-efficacy beliefs, relationships with parents) stressors and moderating factors work together to form the background of coping process for teachers.

In line with general research on coping, problem-focused strategies are suggested as being more efficient than avoidant and palliative coping styles, helping teachers to confront stressful situations, building up resilience and avoiding burnout symptoms. However, the relationship between personality, stress and coping strategies in teachers is not yet clear, with methodological gaps limiting the value of empirical evidence. As such, further research is needed in order to enhance our insight and implement findings at a practical level, through finely designed interventions.

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