SPECIAL ISSUE TITLE: Developmental and Clinical Approaches to
Coping and Emotion Regulation

Special Issue Editor: Professor Melanie J. Zimmer-Gembeck, Griffith University

Included Papers:

1. Compas et al.
2. Frydenberg
3. Yeo & Frydenberg
4. Monti et al.
5. Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck
6. Thompson et al.
7. Pepping et al.
8. de Castello et al.
The successful detection and confrontation of life's threats, challenges, and losses depend on many fundamental adaptive processes. These processes involve attentional systems that allow humans to alert and orient to events of adaptive significance. These processes also involve motivational systems that support motor control and action readiness. Cognitions and social understanding are also important to reflection and finding the best course of action under fast changing internal and external conditions, and to allow for the cooperative use of social partners for support and information. When taken together, these describe the complex processes involved in coping with threats and other stressful events.

Emotions, and other quick reactions, are also core to these complex stress responses and regulatory processes, however. Emotions provide quick information about the severity and personal relevance of potential stressors. Emotions signal and give meaning to threats and challenges. The importance of emotion is highlighted by functionalist theories, in which emotion is considered “a kind of radar and rapid response system,” or as “biologically endowed processes that permit extremely quick appraisals of situations and equally rapid preparedness to act to sustain favorable conditions and deal with unfavorable conditions” (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004, p. 319; see also Barrett & Campos, 1991; Lazarus, 2000). As explained by Williams (2010), “It is now commonplace to understand emotion as based on
Coping with stress is a process intimately linked to emotion and its regulation. In fact, Kopp (1989), in a seminal paper on the development of emotion regulation, argues that, “Emotion regulation is a term used to characterize the processes and characteristics involved in coping with heightened levels of positive and negative emotions” (p.343). Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997) make a cogent case for a close connection, noting that coping is “motivated by the presence or expectation of emotional arousal (generally resulting from stress or danger)” (p. 288), as does Compas et al. (2014) in this issue. Skinner and Wellborn (1994) and Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011) defined coping as *action regulation under stress*, which includes coordination, mobilisation, energising, directing and guiding behaviour, emotion, and orientation when responding to stress.

Overall, coping is often aimed at regulating emotional experiences, either by changing one's own reactions or by modifying the stressor that prompted the emotional response (Compas et al., 2014 – this issue; Losoya, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998). Emotion dysregulation, very often assessed via measures originally designed to capture coping, is thought to be a core aspect of many forms of psychopathology (see Aldao et al., 2010; Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010, 2012; Compas et al., 2014 – this issue; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Due to the clear conceptual and methodological overlaps, research on emotion regulation and the
dysregulation of negative affect and their links to mental health problems and psychopathology often seem to be tantamount to studies of stress and coping.

One common theme across studies of coping and emotion regulation that underlies these interrelations is the need to consider emotion and other core concepts of appraisals, attributions, and the multitude of ways that individuals respond to stress. In coping research, this often means considering ways that individuals modulate, regulate, or manage their emotions at the same time that they are attempting to address, change, or avoid the stressor itself. In emotion regulation research, this often means considering the type or level of emotional reaction that is the target of the regulation. Both of these areas depend on understanding how people appraise and interpret events and the meaning for themselves and their environments. The purpose of this special issue is to extend these views by bringing together developmental and clinical approaches to understanding emotion and its associations with coping and regulation.

**Papers in this Special Issue**

This special issue begins with two reviews from experts on stress and coping, especially among children and adolescents (Compas et al.; Frydenberg). Compas et al. provide in-depth coverage of the convergence of theories and research on coping and emotion regulation, while also outlining divergence by summarising clear differences in the definitions, approaches and conclusions from these bodies of research (Compas et al., 2014; however, also see Eisenberg, Valiente, & Sulik, 2009 for some ideas regarding relations between regulation and coping). Frydenberg provides much more history on the study of stress and coping and raises many important complexities and new directions emerging from this research.

Compas et al. provide an important and timely review, given that emotion regulation and coping are two areas of research that are monumental in size and growing rapidly. Yet, each area has its own particular theoretical history and has flourished somewhat in isolation from the other. Thus, the purpose of including this review here is to provide background on
Coping and Emotion Regulation: Introduction

current conceptualisations in order to stimulate more cohesive approaches to the study of coping and emotion regulation. Ultimately, the authors of this review hope a unified approach will provide more comprehensive and effective clinical interventions to assist children, adolescents, and adults to better recognise their emotions, regulate them, and cope with stress. Throughout this review, similarities in the ways that coping and emotion regulation have been defined and operationalised are used to make a strong case for why findings from these areas of research often converge and yield very similar conclusions. However, these authors also articulate the fine, but important, differences in how coping and emotion regulation are conceptualised and argue that these differences have important implications for research in both the developmental and the clinical domains.

Frydenberg adds significantly to the review of Compas et al. by providing background on stress and coping, defining stress, and covering the many ways of coping that have been identified and studied, while also highlighting the negative, but emphasising the positive, outcomes that can accrue from stress. Frydenberg particularly highlights two influential theories (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) in order to contrast classic theory with more recent evolutions of stress and coping theory. These most recent theories broaden the focus to include the roles of individual resources and adaption and personal development. This review also focuses on developmental approaches to coping, which promote a more cohesive framework to guide future research on emotion, emotion regulation, and coping. Development, positive psychology, and resilience are of utmost importance in many of the contemporary views of stress and coping that are described here, and they are particularly highlighted as important new directions for the field of stress, coping, emotion, and emotion regulation.

The two reviews by Compas et al. and Frydenberg are followed by reports on six empirical studies. All six studies maintain the joint developmental and clinical focus by either addressing the interface of emotion, coping, and regulation in childhood and adolescence
Coping and Emotion Regulation: Introduction

(Monti, Abaied, & Rudolph, 2014; Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck; Thompson et al., Yeo & Frydenberg) or focusing on young or older adults exhibiting symptoms of psychological disorder (de Castello et al.; Pepping, O'Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Hanisch). Moreover, the six empirical papers included in this special issue illustrate the diversity of ways researchers can capture concepts such as emotion and emotional reactivity; cognitions and appraisals about threats and other stressors; and emotion regulation and coping. For example, regarding emotional reactivity, Rudolph and Zimmer-Gembeck assessed emotional reactions to specific events via self-report, whereas others captured more general emotionality (e.g., temperament; Thompson et al.) or used physiological assessment (Monti et al.). These reactions were often part of a larger assessment of stress appraisals and other cognitions, which variously incorporated the level of threat and controllability (Yeo & Frydenberg; Thompson et al.), as well as other perceptions related to regulatory and/or coping processes (all papers). Emotion regulation and coping were also assessed in various ways, including specific coping and regulatory behaviours to manage emotion in response to particular events (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck; Monti et al.; Yeo & Frydenberg), assessing general coping strategies (Thompson et al.), or capturing emotion regulation using widely used scales (de Castello et al.; Pepping et al.). One study in this special issue (Thompson et al.) also specifically referred to, and measured, threat appraisal, and another study incorporated emotional reactions to specific stressful events (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck).

Adding additional complexity to the diversity of constructs implicated in emotional responses to stress, data were collected via self-report, other-report, observation, and the use of physiological measures. Such a diversity of methods is both a strength and a challenge when trying to integrate findings, but when taken together, the papers in this special issue address four very general themes: development, social influences and socialisation, the role of psychopathology and symptoms in emotion, emotion regulation and coping, and transactional models.
Themes in this Special Issue

1. Development. A developmental conceptualisation involves considering how people “mobilize, guide, manage, energize, and direct behavior, emotion, and orientation, or how they fail to do so” (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994, p. 113; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007, 2009) under stressful conditions across the lifespan. Thus, in this view, coping refers to how emotion, behaviour, cognition and attention, as well as other systems, are coordinated and sequenced during stressful encounters. Such coordination and sequencing depends on age and developmental level, which includes how much other social partners must or should be directly involved. Compas et al. and Frydenberg address such developmental processes. Also, four of the papers included in this special issue attend to development and/or the developmental level of their participants, even though most do not directly address development because they rely on cross-sectional (Monti et al.; Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck; Yeo & Frydenberg), rather than longitudinal designs (see Thompson et al., for the exception). Nevertheless, development is addressed either in the presentation of theory, in the design of the studies and models, or in the concluding points, regardless of whether the emphasis was placed on coping, emotion, or emotion regulation.

To describe one example, in their study of preschool age children, Yeo and Frydenberg illustrate the importance of development in understanding coping by suggesting that young children may have particular problems perceiving controllability and matching responses to controllable versus uncontrollable events, when compared to research on older children, adolescents, and adults. Perceiving controllability accurately is a particularly important skill for adaptive coping in later life; using more active and approach coping strategies in controllable situations, while using more emotion management strategies to cope with uncontrollable situations, has been associated with better adaptation and fewer symptoms of psychopathology in multiple studies of adolescents and adults (Clarke, 2006; Sorgen & Manne, 2002). Consistent with the theme of development in this special issue, these
findings illustrate how important it is to consider developmental level when assessing and investigating emotional reactions and coping responses.

2. Social influences and socialisation. Social influences and socialisation were particular themes in the review by Frydenberg and in two studies (Monti et al.; Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck) of children and young adolescents, in which behaviours were examined as correlates of children's (Monti et al.) and young adolescents' (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck) emotional reactions and coping with stress. These reactions were related to peer relationship challenges and threats in each study; and in addition, mothers' or children's distress or symptoms were examined. Based on these studies and the growing body of research in this area, it seems safe to conclude that socialisation and family relationships have an impressive influence on children's responses to threat, which includes how they emotionally react to it, regulate their emotions, and cope in a multitude of ways. These two studies also illustrate Frydenberg’s discussion of the importance of dyadic coping and social support by investigating social influences and socialisation. Overall the findings of these studies advance research that has examined how social contexts, particularly family and peer relationships, can be positive (or negative) forces in assisting young people to develop adaptive reactions to, and management of, threatening events.

3. Symptoms and their associations with emotion regulation and coping. All six of the studies in this special issue identified symptoms of psychopathology as correlates of emotional reactions, emotion regulation, threat appraisal, and/or coping. Monti et al. examined mothers' distress, Yeo and Frydenberg examined children's symptoms of anxiety, Rudolph and Zimmer-Gembeck examined depressive and social anxiety symptoms, and Thompson et al. examined children's problem behaviour. In addition, the final two papers bring us forward into the later part of the lifespan by examining groups of adults. In these two papers, the attention is on adults with elevated symptoms of psychosocial distress (Study 1; Pepping et al.) or adults who were seeking services to address either their eating disorders
(Study 2; Pepping et al.) or their social anxiety disorders (de Castello et al.). However, some studies were more focused on how symptomology or psychological adjustment may be a source of continuing negative or more maladaptive responses to threatening and stressful situations, whereas others argued that it is early social experiences and the ways of regulation and coping that arose from these experiences (or interactions between experiences and threat responses) that are the basis for symptom development over time. Although age mattered here, with the former studies more often focused on older participants and the latter interested in children and adolescents and their development, this does alert us to the possibility that stress, coping, and psychopathology have bidirectional or reciprocal effects across many age groups; stress can generate coping processes and good adjustment or psychopathological outcomes, but at the same time, adjustment and psychopathology generate later experiences of stress and the development of adaptive and maladaptive coping responses and resources (Conway, Hammen, & Brennan, 2012; Lazarus, 2000; Roesch & Weiner, 2001; Rudolph & Asher, 2000). Such a transactional (bidirectional) model is supported when findings across the studies included in this special issue are considered. Nevertheless, given that most of these studies were cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, and thus, could only examine links between measures at a single time point, it is not possible to determine a specific direction of effects (or to conclude that associations are bidirectional and reciprocally associated). Instead, the studies in this special issue provide some of the basic building blocks for such conclusions and await longitudinal studies to provide direct tests of how emotions, coping and emotion regulation, and symptoms (or well-being) unfold over time.

4. Transactional models. The above focus on symptoms and their associations with emotional reactions, emotion regulation, and coping leads to the final theme of this special issue, referred to as transactional models. The different models of the place of symptoms in the study of regulation and coping, as well as the range of constructs assessed across all of the studies in this special issue, make us aware of the complex processes and pathways involved
in stress and emotion and their links with coping, emotion regulation, and symptoms. It was these processes and pathways that were often explicitly the target of interest or were implicit in the aims of each study. All eight of the papers included in this special issue, however, highlight how coping, emotion, or emotion regulation are players in the complicated pathways of individual differences and processes involved in the development of adaptive functioning, mental health, and/or psychopathology. Across these papers, the studies incorporate physiological reactivity, temperamental factors and personality, cognition, and social influences as correlates or antecedents of coping, emotion reactions/responding, or emotion regulation. In some of these papers, processes among individuals exhibiting mental health problems or elevated symptoms are examined. In other papers, coping, emotional reactions, and/or emotion regulation are argued to be antecedents of mental health or problem symptoms.

It is also important to notice that many of the associations across these studies in this special issue are rather small to moderate. This makes it even more important to keep transactional theories and models in mind, which posit complex roles for emotions, appraisals, coping, emotion regulation, and coping resources when understanding responses to stress and the symptoms, well-being, or developmental pathways that may follow (Fields & Prinz, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moos & Holahan, 2003; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Taylor & Stanton, 2007). The simplest breakdown of these complex roles is to consider whether many important constructs in these studies may be moderators, mediators, or both. Moderators can minimise, buffer, or exacerbate the negative effects of stress on adjustment. Mediators can be links in a chain between stress and adjustment problems (or between other adaptive processes). Perhaps even more important would be examining changes in all of these processes throughout multiple episodes of stressful events over time to examine the development of adaptive processes as a whole, and how these changes may be implicated in the development of psychopathology or resilience.
Conclusion

The robustness of these findings is clear, despite the diversity of study designs. Nonetheless, it can be puzzling when reading these studies because of the many constructs and measures. There seems to be overlap among indicators of stress, emotion regulation, coping, and maladjustment. Sometimes, it appears that measures of maladaptive forms of coping are very closely connected to measures of distress, or that measures of emotion are very closely connected to measures of psychopathology or its symptoms. Because of these issues, researchers continue to encourage us to design studies in ways that minimise measurement overlap (Compas, Worhsham, & Ey, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, in press). For example, some researchers remove items from coping inventories that overlap with measures of stress, emotional distress, and internalising and externalising behaviours (Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roosa, 1996; Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000; Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003).

Such complexity and measurement concerns highlight the fact that coping and emotion regulation are complex processes that involve many human systems of adaptation, with emotions and appraisals of stressful events often at the core. Coping and emotion regulation take many forms across studies, but it is clear from the papers included in this special issue that both coping and regulation are important for responding adaptively to threats and other stressors, and each is an umbrella term for a multitude of ways of responding. Moreover, developmental perspectives are critical for continuing to explore change, transactional models, and complex interrelations over time. From such a perspective, parents and other close relationships can be particularly important, by, for example, socialising adaptive responses to stress, neglecting to provide appropriate socialisation, being a source of stress, or overtly undermining coping attempts. At the same time, clinical approaches show the challenges that can occur for those with mental health problems when they are faced with stress, and such approaches do not let us forget that all of this work is relevant to
psychological or related fields of clinical and support work. Taken together, the eight papers included in this special issue serve to illustrate some of the core concepts of theories and research on coping and emotion regulation. These include how children, adolescents, and adults appraise stress when it occurs, emotionally react to it, make attributions for both stressful events and one's own reactions, and respond via regulatory and coping processes to manage the stressful environment and the self.
References


Clinical Psychology Review, 17, 937-976. doi:10.1016/S0272-7358(97)00033-0


Developmental Psychology, 25, 343-354. doi:org/10.1037/0012-1649.25.3.343


doi:10.1080/016502598384388


doi:10.1002/jclp.10229


Thompson et al. (2014). Appraisal and coping styles account for the effects of temperament


doi:10.1177/0165025410384923