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**ACTION REGULATION, COPING, AND DEVELOPMENT**

*Ellen A. Skinner*

An intriguing theme is emerging in the field of coping. At its core is the idea that notions of “regulation” may be useful to conceptualizations of coping. The connection between coping and regulation has crystallized most clearly in work on emotion regulation in children (Dodge, 1989; Fox, 1994; Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). Some coping researchers suggest that emotion regulation may be a form of coping. For example, Rossman (1992) states, “In the case of emotion-focused coping, emotion regulation and coping become virtually synonymous” (p. 1375). At the same time, researchers studying emotion regulation sometimes offer definitions of their phenomena that lie well within the territory usually encompassed by coping. For example, Dodge (1989) posits that emotion regulation can be understood as “coordinating responses to aversive stimuli.”

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The overlap between emotion regulation and coping has been examined explicitly by several researchers (Barrett & Campos, 1991; Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997; Rossman, 1992).

Although perhaps not as noticeable as the burgeoning work on emotion, discussions of other kinds of regulation have also benefited conceptualizations of coping. Models of behavioral self-regulation have been used as a basis for theoretically derived ways of coping (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Self-regulation has become an element in descriptions of "proactive" coping or coping that aims to prevent or prepare for stressful encounters (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Attention regulation has been suggested as a "shuttle" between cognition and emotion regulation, and hence as a critical mediator between risk and psychopathology (Wilson & Gottman, 1996).

The connection between coping and regulation has been made in reference to almost every point in the life span. In theoretical accounts of how infants deal with interactive stress, mutual or interactive regulation is suggested as a key feature of coping (Gianino & Tronick, 1988). At the other end of the age continuum, descriptions of how people actively cope with the changes and losses of aging rely on notions of developmental regulation (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1998). Some life-span researchers have explicitly studied the functions of broad classes of coping responses, such as assimilative and accommodative coping, in intentional self-regulation of development (Brandstätter & Renner, 1990; Brandstätter, Rothermund, & Schmitz, 1998). Across the life span, regulatory resources, such as regulatory control, have been suggested as "highly relevant and critical to a complete understanding of individuals' responses to stressful contexts" (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1997, p. 1107; see also Block & Block, 1980; Mischel, 1983).

Taken together, variations on the theme of regulation seem to have much to offer conceptualizations of coping. Perhaps most important, the idea of regulation is consistent with the general perspective on coping that dominates the field today, namely, that posited by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to this definition, coping is "the process of managing demands (external or internal) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 283). Some of the issues involved in "managing demands" may be further delineated using theories of regulation. As Rossman (1992) notes, both coping and regulation include processes related to "an appraisal of the significance of the environmental circum-

stance, the attendant emotional experience, the selection of some action to regulate the heightened emotion and perhaps alter the environment, and some kind of feedback about the success of the regulation attempt" (p. 1375).

For the field of coping, theories of regulation offer access to rich explanatory systems. These can augment more descriptive accounts of coping that tend to focus on taxonomies or categories of coping (Compas, 1998). In addition, theories of regulation are often developmental and so focus on the emergence and development of many processes that may be related to coping, such as intentionality, volition, social referencing, and the coordination of action. Adapting some of this work may guide research on both age progression and socialization of coping (Aldwin, 1994; Compas, 1998; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Skinner & Edge, 1998; Wolchik & Sandler, 1997).

My goal in this chapter is to make progress in using work on regulation to enrich developmental conceptualizations of coping. Toward that end, I would like to articulate a view of coping that rests on concepts of regulation, in this case the view that coping can be defined as "action regulation under stress" (Skinner, 1995; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). After briefly arguing the merits of a conceptualization of coping that includes action, regulation, and stress, I focus on four implications of this perspective: the role of action tendencies in coping, intentionality of action, the social embeddedness of coping, and developmental processes and goals of coping. Rather than striving to be comprehensive, I have attempted to select implications that are interesting and may be mutually informative to researchers studying both coping and regulation.

MOTIVATIONAL MODEL OF COPING

The definition of coping defended in this chapter is the result of work on the development of children's motivation (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). At the heart of this motivational model is the notion of "patterns of action," with engaged versus disaffected patterns of action as the central outcomes of motivational processes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Skinner, 1995; Wellborn, 1991). According to this view, engagement, which refers to active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions with the social and physical environments, is the mechanism through which motivational processes contribute to the development of
adaptive functioning. In contrast, patterns of disaffected action, in which individuals are alienated, apathetic, rebellious, frightened, or burned out, turn people away from opportunities for development and toward psychopathology.

Fundamental Needs

The motivational model holds that individuals at any point in the life span will be engaged in an enterprise (e.g., school, family, work) to the extent that social contexts within that enterprise allow them to meet their basic psychological needs (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Three needs are posited as fundamental, meaning present at birth and common to all humans. These are the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy (see Figure 16.1).

Relatedness refers to the need to experience oneself as connected to other people, as belonging. This need is hypothesized to underlie processes of attachment (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1973), in which newborns show interest in other people and possess the capacity and desire to initiate contact with, respond to, enjoy, and be comforted by social partners (Papousek & Papousek, 1980). Competence refers to the need to experience oneself as effective in one’s interactions with the social and physical environments (Harter, 1978; Koestner & McClelland, 1990; White, 1959). It is hypothesized to underlie processes of control (Bandura, 1997; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993; Seligman, 1975), in which infants manifest interest in the external world and have the ability and desire to initiate contact with, respond to, enjoy, and explore environmental events (Finkelstein & Ramey, 1977; Morgan & Harmon, 1984; Piaget, 1976, 1978; Watson, 1979). Autonomy refers to the need to express one’s authentic self and to experience that self as the source of action. It is hypothesized to underlie processes of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1995), in which newborns evince interest in their own inner states and have the capacity and will to detect, express, protect, and defend their own states, desires, and preferences (Bridges & Grolnick, 1995).

Social Contexts

Social and physical contexts can be characterized by the extent to which they provide children (and people in general) with opportunities to fulfill their needs (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Grolnick &
Ryan, 1989; Skinner, 1995). Children are given opportunities to experience themselves as related and belonging when they interact with social partners who love them, who are involved and emotionally available, and who express affection, warmth, caring, and nurturance (Lamb & Easterbrooks, 1981). Children accumulate experiences of competence when they interact with contexts that respond to them and that are structured, predictable, contingent, and consistent (Gunnar, 1980; Suomi, 1980). Finally, children experience themselves as autonomous when they interact with social partners who respect them, allow them freedom of expression and action, and encourage them to attend to, accept, and value their inner states, preferences, and desires (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

Processes of Development

Mechanisms for development can also be organized with reference to the three needs. For example, based on the need for relatedness, children come with the desire and capacity to imitate others (Zeedyk, 1996). Imitation also creates feelings of relatedness in others, and so has the effect of prolonging positive social interactions. One manifestation of the need for competence is children’s curiosity about exploring and operating contingencies (Watson, 1966, 1979; Watson & Ramey, 1972; White, 1959). Creating contingent effects is intrinsically enjoyable and so is responsible for prolonged bouts of interactions with social and material partners, sometimes called practice (Piaget, 1976, 1978). The need for autonomy can explain the infant’s (and child’s) intrinsic desire for and enjoyment of self-expression, for example, through play, drawing, singing, and dancing (Morgan, Harmon, & Maslin-Cole, 1990).

Taken together, imitation, curiosity, and self-expression are powerful intrinsic mechanisms for development. All three have the effect of promoting engagement on the part of the individual, and through their effects on social and material partners, they also have the effect of prolonging interactions with the environment. This pattern of constructive engagement over time contributes to learning and the development of cognitive structures, sociability and the development of attachments, and intentionality and the development of expressiveness and personality.

Self-System Processes

By-products of these experiences are children’s appreciation of their relationships to the context and their views of themselves and their social/physical worlds. These are referred to as self-system processes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Early in development, they take the form of generalized expectations (e.g., Finkelstein & Ramey, 1977), but eventually they become organized and robust sets of beliefs. For relatedness, these have been studied as internal working models of attachment figures (Bretherton, 1985; Crittenden, 1990) and contain views about the self as lovable and loving and about the context as caring and trustworthy. For competence, self-system processes have been studied as perceptions of control (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 1991; Skinner, 1996; Weisz, 1986) and contain views about the self as able and effective and about the environment as structured and predictable.

For autonomy (which has received relatively less empirical attention than relatedness and competence), self-system processes have been studied as autonomy or goal orientations (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Dweck, 1991; Kuhl, 1987; Ryan & Connell, 1989) and contain views about the self as authentic and integrated and about the environment as accepting and supportive. Because these self-system processes serve to guide children’s initiation and interpretations of interactions with the social and physical environment (e.g., Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998), they become one pathway by which early experience is carried forward into later development and through which children continue to be active participants in their own development.

Motivational Model of Stress

Although this motivational model was originally constructed to explain ongoing action and the development of adaptive functioning, it can also be used as a model of stress and coping (see Figure 16.2; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). It makes strong claims about the nature of objective stress. Events and contexts are potentially stressful to the extent that they interfere with the three basic needs. Hence contexts that are negligent or hostile should thwart relatedness needs, events that are noncontingent or chaotic should tax competence, and interactions that are coercive or controlling should threaten autonomy needs. Together, these three broad categories of events explain the seemingly inherent stressfulness of a variety of specific experiences, such as separation, deprivation, or unavailability or loss of an attachment figure (instances of neglect); noncontingency, novelty, unpredictability, or failure (instances of chaos); and restraint, demands, controllingness, or pressure (instances of coercion).
Self-System Vulnerabilities

The motivational model also explains why certain self-system processes should render individuals more vulnerable to stressful circumstances. For example, individuals with insecure internal working models are more likely to appraise instances of separation as experiences of abandonment. Individuals with low perceptions of control tend to view difficulty and failure as evidence of incompetence. And individuals with an external autonomy orientation tend to view environmental demands as coercive. As a result, these individuals tend to experience a broader array of situations as thwarting basic needs, and hence as distressing.

Patterns of Action

Most interesting from a coping perspective are the patterns of action that are organized in response to stress (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Six basic patterns have been suggested, corresponding to the extent to which the event actually impinges (or is experienced as impinging) on one of the three needs (see Table 16.1). When a stress occurs in a context that the individual perceives as warm, involved, and available, a pattern of responding occurs that includes the individual's seeking out specific others for support (proximity seeking; Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). In contrast, if the individual expects the context to be negligent or unsafe, his or her response will be to avoid or fend off others. When the individual experiences stress in a context perceived as structured and predictable, then the response pattern will be for him or her to include information seeking and problem solving (mastery orientation; Dweck, 1991; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). On the other hand, if the individual views the context as chaotic or uncontrollable, his or her response will be confusion and withdrawal (helplessness; Seligman, 1975). Finally, if the individual sees the context as supporting autonomy, his or her response will be the assertion of preferences or flexible negotiation. If, however, the individual experiences the context as coercive or demanding, his or her response will be to fight back and oppose the source of coercion (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Effects on Engagement

As can be imagined, these patterns of action have their own effects on the individual, the social context, and the interactions between them. For example, actively seeking attachment figures tends to demonstrate the
availability and caring of the social context as well as the lovability of the self. In a parallel vein, actively collecting information and problem solving tend to reveal the structure and possibilities in the environment as well as the capacities of the self. And actively asserting preferences and negotiating tend to increase the likelihood that the environment will respond supportively and grant more autonomy. All three of these patterns of action have in common their effects on engagement. They tend to prolong constructive, goal-directed, focused interactions with the social and physical environments, and, in fact, contribute to interactions in which individuals experience their needs as being fulfilled.

In contrast, the other three patterns of action tend to cut off interactions or to provoke interactions in which the individual’s needs are thwarted. For example, avoiding others guarantees that the individual will be experienced as unavailable, and this prevents social partners from even being aware that he or she needs comfort. Likewise, withdrawal prevents children from discovering any strategies through which they might successfully exert control. And attacking a social partner may not only provoke more coercive reactions, it may also prevent both the attacking individual and the partner from accurately discerning what it is each other want or desire. In a fundamental sense, then, these different patterns of reactions contribute not only to the short-term resolution (or escalation) of the stressful situation, but also, through their effects on engagement and disaffection, to the individual’s long-term development.

COPING AS ACTION REGULATION UNDER STRESS

The motivational model, although designed to integrate work from a number of perspectives, is based on an action-theoretical framework (Boesch, 1991; Brandstätter, 1998; Chapman, 1984; Chapman & Skinner, 1985; Frese & Sabini, 1985; Heckhausen, 1991; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985). Action theories are theories that in general hold that the most useful units of analysis are not sets of behaviors or emotions or cognitions, but “actions.” In general, actions are considered to be goal-directed, emotion-colored behaviors that are carried out in social and cultural contexts. Actions are considered to have dynamic reciprocal relations with culture and with development (Brandstätter, 1998, p. 808, fig. 14.1). That is, social contexts constrain and facilitate actions at the same time that actions
select and provoke social contexts. Likewise, development limits and allows action, whereas actions in turn channel and shape development.

Action

An action approach, although not often mentioned in relation to theories of coping (see Brandstätter et al., 1998; Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998), nevertheless seems consistent with the basic tenets of those theories. Coping theorists have a long history of expressing dissatisfaction with unidimensional descriptions of coping processes (Lazarus, Coyle, & Folkman, 1984). In current conceptualizations, coping theorists have found a central place for cognition in the concept of appraisal and a central place for motivation in such concepts as commitments and discussions of what is “at stake” for individuals in specific encounters. The insistence that a full account of coping requires consideration of behavior, emotion, cognition, and motivation can find a meta-theoretical home in action theory.

Action as a Target of Regulation

Although many theories can be identified in which notions of regulation are central, no consensus is apparent with regard to the question of what exactly is regulated during stressful episodes and precisely who carries out the regulation (Thompson, 1994). Within coping, some definitions mention “internal and external demands” as targets of regulation, and some specify efforts aimed at the problem and at the individual’s own emotional reactions to it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Others suggest that coping attempts can focus on behavior, emotion, or appraisal (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Still others suggest that either the context or the self can be targeted (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1998; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982).

Theories of emotion regulation are equally diverse in their depictions of what is regulated (Thompson, 1994). Given the label, conceptualizations naturally focus on the regulation of emotion first and foremost, but many descriptions also refer to the deployment of attention or behavior in service of emotional modulation (Barrett & Campos, 1991; Bridges & Grohnick, 1995; Kopp, 1989; Saarni et al., 1998). The same point can be made about theories of behavior, attention, and “self” regulation, namely, that although each focuses on the phenomenon identified in its label, each also includes discussion of the other aspects involved in regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Kopp, 1982). In addition, most of these theories also emphasize the role of social partners, noting that (especially during childhood) people can play a role in regulating others.

Within an action theory of coping, the target of regulation is defined, not surprisingly, as action. This means that, under stress, what is coordinated, organized, or managed includes behavior, emotion, and attention. According to this perspective, every stressful encounter produces a set of emotional, motivational, and motor responses; the job of the individual is to regulate these. In functionalist theories, behavior, feeling state, and motivation have all been included as features of emotion itself (e.g., Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989). Including these as all part of a construct of emotion serves to emphasize their interrelatedness. However, according to an action perspective, it may also obscure the complexity of the task presented by regulation.

Under stress, the organism is not “merely” concerned with the expression or inhibition of emotion, even with all its social consequences. The individual must realize an entire action sequence, of which emotion is but a part. Emotion is in fact a critical and defining part, given its potential to energize and direct behavior and to mobilize and guide the actions of others. However, an action perspective insists on additional critical and defining features as well, arguing that any account of coping must include motor (or behavioral) features and attention (or motivational) features.

Regulation

Terms reminiscent of the concept of regulation are often used to describe the activities of coping. Terms such as manage and deal with are common in definitions of coping. The notion of regulation elaborates on these themes, suggesting verbs such as modulate, initiate, energize, guide, maintain, dampen, coordinate, and organize (Rothbart, 1991). The term dysregulation (Garber & Dodge, 1991) implies the failure to accomplish these activities or the attempt to accomplish them ineffectively, resulting in states sometimes referred to as underregulation and overregulation.

Theoretically, both coping theories and theories of regulation have acknowledged the importance of the dual processes of activation and modulation. However, careful reading of these literatures suggests a difference in emphasis. Coping theories, because they focus on external stressors, tend to emphasize the adaptive nature of activity, initiation, and approach (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Some theories of regulation, especially emotion and behavior regulation, seem to emphasize the adaptiveness of inhibiting
behavior or dampening emotions, especially in relation to rule following, social relations, and optimal cognitive functioning (Kopp, 1989; Mischel, 1983).

Bringing the two perspectives together reinforces the idea (present in both frameworks) that, when dealing with stress, both energization and inhibition of action are essential. All the important questions posed in stressful situations imply answers that specify initiation and modulation. For example, the basic question, “What should I do?” requires answers that inform the individual not only about the actions he or she should implement but also about those actions that should be inhibited (e.g., those that will interfere with implementation and those that will make things worse). Theories of volition emphasize the notion of shielding or buffer intended actions from competing action tendencies and note the problems with regulation that result when this cannot be accomplished (Heckhausen, 1977; Kuhl, 1984, 1987).

Stress

Most theories of regulation include some notion of “demands.” The central proposition is that individuals usually function well using relatively automatic processes under normal conditions (Bargh, 1997), but regulation is called for when these automatic processes are no longer able to guide behavior satisfactorily (or when individuals anticipate this state). Hence demands (internal or external) are a central condition under which regulation is called for. However, the term stress usually extends beyond the concept of demand to include situations in which, in the words of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), “demands tax or exceed resources.”

Regulation under stress is highly interesting for two opposing reasons. The first is that stressful situations (e.g., problems, threats, potential harm) are ones that by definition require better-than-average regulation. These are situations in which the individual has something at stake, and in which the coordination and effective deployment of action should make a material difference to the individual’s physical or mental well-being. However, at the same time, stress has the potential to interfere with regulation. In the very situations in which individuals need to operate at their peak, stress can interfere with access to cognitive resources, such as working memory capacity, higher-order problem-solving skills, and information about genuine goals and preferences (Kofa & Sedek, 1989; Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998; Sedek, Kofa, & Tyszka, 1993). Hence of interest to coping researchers are the particular processes and qualities of regulation in stressful situations—that is, in situations that both require and interfere with optimal action regulation.

IMPLICATIONS OF AN ACTION-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STRESS AND COPING

A view of coping as action regulation under stress has many implications for the conceptualization and study of coping processes. In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on four of these implications: action tendencies in coping, the role of intentionality, the embeddedness of coping in social relationships, and the progression of coping across age. I argue that consideration of these four is essential if the contributions of regulation to work on coping are to be fully realized. I hope that some of these issues will also provoke discussion in the broader field of coping and, in particular, in theories and research on the development of coping.

Coping as Constructed on Action Tendencies

The idea of an action tendency is basic to many theories within an action perspective. It has been most fully elaborated in work on volition (Brandstätter, 1998; Heckhausen, 1977, 1991; Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998) and in functionalist theories of emotion (Barrett & Campos, 1991; Frijda, 1987, 1988; Saarni et al., 1998). In general, the term action tendencies refers to emotionally colored flexible motor programs that are directed toward a goal. For emotion theorists, the defining features of action tendencies are emotions (Frijda, 1987, 1988; Saarni et al., 1998). However, not surprisingly, action theories focus on action and characterize action tendencies in terms of their joint properties in creating an “urge,” “desire,” “want,” or “impulse” that is redundantly experienced as a motor program (e.g., the urge to get out of the way or hide), an emotion (e.g., fear or shock), or a goal orientation (e.g., the desire to become small or disappear).

Action tendencies are adaptive in times of stress because, on the one hand, they organize action and speed up response time and, on the other hand, they are more flexible than reflexes. Action tendencies are triggered by specific context conditions, such as novelty or restraint. They are activated by an individual’s appreciation of the significance of an interaction with the context, but they do not require representation or other higher-order forms of cognition. Over time, through their realization and
refinement in interactions, action tendencies become modified, elaborated, and hierarchically organized.

Emotion theorists argue that humans come with basic action tendencies, which are hardwired to emotions (Frijda, 1987, 1988). These are sometimes referred to as primordial emotions, meaning emotional reactions that do not need to be acquired (Barrett & Campos, 1991). We are all familiar with three fundamental action tendencies in response to stress—fight, flight, and freeze. These three tendencies involve action (and not just behavior or emotion) because each describes a distinctive pattern of motor, emotional, and orienting responses. Flight, for example, includes fear, the urge to run, and an orientation away from the stressor. Fight, in contrast, includes an orientation toward the stressor or obstacle, anger, and the urge to attack or remove the stressor. These patterns make sense as basic action tendencies, because they are functional and adaptive in protecting individuals from harm. For example, if an organism freezes when its caregiver rushes away from it, then it will still be where the caregiver can find it when he or she returns.

The presence of inborn action tendencies is also posited, in some form, by many theories, including theories of attachment, temperament, competence, mastery, reactance, and helplessness. Terms such as proximity seeking, effectance motivation, reactance, sociability, and contingency detection should not disguise the fact that these organizational constructs all contain the essentials of action tendencies: appreciation of the significance of certain kinds of interactions with the context that trigger distinctive patterns of goal-directed, emotion-flavored behavior. As noted previously, the motivational model also hypothesizes three basic action tendencies based on the fundamental needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. These action tendencies are also adaptive because they support constructive engagement with the social and physical contexts.

Action Tendencies in Coping

An important implication of a definition of coping as action regulation is that all coping efforts are built on action tendencies. Simply stated, it could be said that all coping is an action tendency wrapped in a regulation, embedded in a set of social relationships in a particular context (see Figure 16.3). At its most basic, this definition implies that in response to environmental demands (or, more specifically, individuals' appreciation of those demands), individuals experience the urge or desire to act. If unobstructed
by the self or the social or physical context, this urge usually is followed; in other words, the action tendency is realized—the desired action is implemented.

According to this reasoning, stressful situations trigger action tendencies. At the same time, stressful situations are likely to be ones in which action tendencies are blocked and so require regulation. From this perspective, the targets of regulation during coping episodes are always the individual’s own action tendencies. In many cases, adaptive coping is possible—for example, if the individual’s action tendencies are compatible with the situational demands and can be boosted enough to be effective, or if action tendencies are incompatible but can easily be diverted by the regulatory capacities available to the individual in that situation. Although developmental researchers tend to focus on action tendencies that are normative and adaptive, coping researchers are also interested in individual differences and responses to stress that are maladaptive. Maladaptive coping can occur when the action tendency is incompatible with situational or personal demands, when the tendency is intense, and when compensatory regulatory capacities are lacking or incapacitated.

Individual Differences in Action Tendencies

If coping is based on action tendencies, one important implication is the idea that individuals who show more adaptive coping are not necessarily better at regulation (in any direct sense) than people who show more maladaptive coping. Instead, it is possible that they have very different action tendencies to regulate. For example, in work on helplessness, a pattern of responding to failure and noncontingency has been identified that includes passivity, dejection, self-blame, rumination, and the desire to withdraw from the situation (Dweck, 1991). The contrasting mastery pattern, in which children improve performance under the same conditions, does not seem to be a function of the mastery-oriented children’s superior regulatory skills. That is, it is not as if, when faced with failure, mastery-oriented children also ruminate and want to escape, but yet are somehow better at keeping themselves in the situation or at stopping intrusive thoughts. Instead, the action tendencies of mastery-oriented children seem to be completely different. They are attracted by the difficulties they encounter; they are more concentrated, focused, and involved in problem solving. These initial patterns of responding to challenge are not the result of intentional regulation; rather, they are built on relatively automatized action tendencies.

A parallel argument can be made about coping in the interpersonal domain. It is possible that aggressive-rejected children differ from socially accepted children in their basic action tendencies. When aggressive-rejected children experience an interpersonal slight, they infer hostile intentions and want to retaliate against the perpetrator (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Graham, 1998). However, in explanations of the radically different reactions of socially accepted children, it does not seem that socially accepted children experience the same urges to retaliate, but do not express them because they are able to use self-regulatory skills successfully to hold themselves back. The same objective events seem to trigger completely different action tendencies. Socially accepted children, when slighted, become more engaged, asserting their rights, soliciting information, or negotiating with the social partner.

The notion of coping as an action tendency shaped by regulation gives coping researchers several leads on how to approach coping theoretically. It allows work on temperament (Calkins, 1994; Kagan, 1998; Rothbart, 1991) to inform conceptualizations of individual differences in coping proclivities (Compas, 1998). It also describes how previous experience is carried forward in appraisals and action tendencies. It is also a beginning point for organizing the seemingly infinite ways of coping and their variations across contexts and ages. If ways of coping are all members of families of action tendencies, then they should have in common the root desire (e.g., proximity seeking or escape) but should take their specific form from the developmental capacities and the situational possibilities available during the stressful episode (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 1998).

Intentionality in Action Regulation

As in most areas of psychology, in work on coping, concepts relating to volition have not traditionally played a central role (see Brandstädter et al., 1998; Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998). Nevertheless, a few discussions have touched upon issues of intentionality. For example, definitions proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explicitly limit coping to “effortful responses” and exclude adaptational activities that are innate and temperamentally based or automatic and overlearned. It is common for descriptions of coping to reflect assumptions about coping’s intentional and voluntary nature through terms such as select or choose and references to coping efforts or strategies.

Perhaps the most explicit discussion of the issues of volition in coping has been undertaken by Compas, Connor, Osowiecki, and Welch. For
example, in their 1997 chapter titled "Effortful and Involuntary Responses to Stress: Implications for Coping With Chronic Stress," they lay out a framework that places the distinction between effortful and involuntary responses to stress as critical and defining features of coping. They state: "First, responses to stress can be distinguished as effortful or involuntary. This is the most fundamental distinction among stress responses and distinguishes coping (effortful responses) from other reactions to stress that are non-volitional" (p. 118).

According to this argument, coping researchers have tended to focus on effortful responses and have mistakenly included involuntary processes in discussions of coping and automatic responses in assessments of coping. Compas et al. (1997) suggest that category systems that classify responses to stress should have effortful versus involuntary responses at the top of the hierarchy—that is, as the most basic of mutually exclusive categories. This would result in classifications of ways of coping that include only effortful responses such as problem solving, information seeking, planning, help seeking, and distraction, and that exclude from coping involuntary responses to stress such as rumination, catastrophizing, denial, and venting.

From an action perspective, it does not seem like a good idea to restrict coping to effortful responses, nor does it seem desirable (or even possible) to classify in an a priori manner all potential ways of coping according to their effortfulness versus involuntariness. In fact, these suggestions would seem to be taking the field of coping in the wrong direction, if, as argued here, the roots on which all coping responses are constructed are automatic processes, namely, action tendencies.

**Terms of Intentionality**

Part of the difficulty is the relative immaturity of the study of volition. Theorists and researchers alike tend to use as interchangeable a variety of terms implying will, including goal directed, intentional, volitional, voluntary, active, purposive, autonomous, self-directed, effortful, and conscious (Zeedyk, 1996). As work on volition continues, the different characteristics and capabilities implied by these terms are being clarified. Some of them may be useful to distinguish in developmental accounts of coping.

From an action-theoretical perspective (and in functionalist theories of emotion), infants are born with the potential for "goal-directed" behavior, that is, with predispositions toward action. Infants are intrinsically motivated to recognize and express a variety of preferences, desires, or wants.
effortful and involuntary regulation of action tendencies characterizes a wide range of coping in infants, children, and even adults.

Effortful and involuntary coping processes are most noticeable (to both the social context and the individual) when they are maladaptive. Cognitive processes such as self-denigration, intrusive thoughts, rumination, and worry seem to be effortful, in that they interfere with other energetic (attentional, behavioral, or cognitive) processes that might be used for improving action, such as strategizing or persistence. At the same time, children and adults are aware of these cognitive activities; they can be captured in talk-aloud protocols or self-reports (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). However, it is hard to describe them as intentional, and they are certainly not voluntary. Adults who try to stop these processes find it very difficult (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). They are reminiscent of incidents in infancy in which attention is "captured" by certain environmental events and cannot be freed by the infant. In both cases, attention shifting or distraction seems to be one of the few ways of freeing attention (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998) and hence making executive energy again available to the person.

It is likely that adaptive coping functions in a similar manner. For example, mastery-oriented children who engage in strategy generation and problem solving show many signs of having their attention captured by the difficulty of the task. They move closer to the task, narrow their focus, increase concentration, exert effort, and persist. I would argue that these are also effortful and involuntary responses, but in this case executive energy is directed toward boosting action (Kuhl, 1984). There seems to be no evidence that mastery-oriented children "decide" or "choose" to problem solve; this is their action tendency, and it is boosted by effortful regulation (Kuhl, 1984, 1987).

Voluntary Coping

At some point in the coping process, individuals can try to exert voluntary control over their actions; they attempt to regulate action intentionally. This often happens at the point when individuals experience or anticipate that their actions are not working—for example, their actions are not effective in producing the desired outcome, are not in line with their true preferences, or are upsetting a social partner. Voluntary self-control turns out to use up a great deal of energy or executive capacity (Baumeister et al., 1998) and to be relatively limited in its possible effects.

For example, as noted by volition, emotion, and coping researchers, it is difficult to change one's goals, thoughts, or emotional states voluntarily; even directing attention and behavior can be difficult.

Part of the reason is that action tendencies, by their very nature, are compelling. They are constructed from appraisals of apparent reality (Frijda, 1988), and, as mentioned previously, they are automatized and redundantly directed by behavioral, emotional, and attentional urges. For some individuals and in some situations, these action tendencies are extremely intense. Tools such as cognitively represented "wishes" or "intentions" turn out to be no match for these organized and energized action programs (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985). Often, the best individuals can do voluntarily is to interfere with the undesired action tendency or to rigidly contain it. This kind of regulation does not leave many resources for implementing alternative preferred action tendencies.

Self-Determined Coping

Autonomous or integrated regulation, in which the true self is experienced as the source of action, seems to produce the highest quality of action (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 1995). During autonomous regulation, action tendencies (behaviors, emotions, and orientations) work in a synergistic fashion, and executive or ego energy is available for engagement without being used for self-awareness or conscious control (Kuhl, 1984). When action tendencies are formed that are counter to the individual's actual preferences, or when regulation is used to pressure overt actions from expressing action tendencies based on genuine preferences, executive or ego resources are depleted (Baumeister et al., 1998). This results in degraded actions, for example, in which behavior and emotion are opposed (e.g., high anxiety or guilt), in which attention and behavior are not coordinated (e.g., high distractibility), or in which energy is sapped (e.g., low persistence, tiredness; Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998).

Intentionality in Coping

From this perspective, no action can be classified a priori as effortful or voluntary. Most actions (except reflexes) are available to many different levels of volition, for example, automatic action tendencies, effortful action regulation, intentional action regulation, and autonomous regulation. This should hold not only for maladaptive ways of coping, such as intrusive
thoughts and perseverance, but also for adaptive ways of coping, such as problem solving or support seeking. Hence dimensions such as voluntary, effortful, or involuntary are not good for distinguishing between categories of coping. However, they do capture an important set of qualities for distinguishing within a family of action tendencies or coping categories. Understanding the situational, individual difference and the developmental characteristics that move actions up and down these levels—for example, that make coping available to voluntary regulation—is an important task for coping researchers and interventionists.

Social Context in Action Regulation

The role of social forces in coping has not been well-defined. On the one hand, issues of social support have been discussed continuously in work on coping (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996; Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987). On the other hand, coping theories seem ambivalent about the function of social partners, pointing out that social support and help are not always supportive and that it may be maladaptive or even a marker of vulnerability for a person to seek or accept aid. Traditional perspectives have been accused of characterizing coping as largely an individual enterprise, with social others relegated to the roles of stressors or resources (Berg, Meegan, & DeViney, 1998).

Action theory, functional theories of emotion, and work on coping in children all converge on the view that action, regulation, and coping are socially embedded. In terms of the view of coping as action regulation presented here, several specific social functions can be highlighted. Social contexts constitute one set of demands that call up the need for regulation. As pointed out by regulation researchers, they also provide one set of affordances and limitations that influence whether the capacities of the child will be sufficient for regulation to work. For example, for young children, simple proximity to a caregiver can be sufficient to allow them access to better regulation.

Coping as Support Seeking

Thinking about coping in terms of action regulation highlights the notion that accessing other people can be an explicit goal of coping (Thompson, 1994). Attachment research is informative about the developmental steps by which the action tendency of proximity seeking is supplemented and transformed by its intentional and discretionary use (Bretherton, 1985). This work suggests several lessons for coping theories. First, it highlights the affective bond that is created and sustained by proximity seeking. Hence one condition for the intentional deployment of support seeking in new contexts (e.g., day care, school, or peer relations) should be the construction of an affective bond or attachment (Ainsworth, 1989). By the same token, an affective bond toward the child from the potentially helpful adult should also be an important precondition for providing “supportive support.”

Second, this selective attachment, because it is based on a history of sensitive responsiveness of the caregiver to the child’s needs, ensures that the strategy of proximity seeking will have its intended positive effect. Specifically, it means that part of adaptive support seeking is seeking comfort from the “right” social partners, namely, those upon whom one can rely for responses that are constructive and genuinely supportive. As mentioned previously, answers to all the important questions about action initiation in coping, such as (in this case), “To whom do I turn?” also imply answers to questions about action inhibition, such as (in this case), “To whom do I not turn?” Staying away from potentially harmful social interactions is especially important for the individual in times of stress, because both individual and action may be more vulnerable than usual to the effects of additional stressors.

Third, selective support seeking does not imply only identification of appropriate social partners, it also implies discretionary access. Specifically, adaptive support seeking accesses others only when it is clear that the individual’s self-reliant attempts will not work or will be too costly in terms of resources. At young ages, certain levels of stress will almost always meet these criteria. However, as children mature, they can accomplish more and more in a self-reliant fashion, and when they seek others, they recruit those others for specific roles in action regulation (e.g., for information or advice). These processes allow social support to serve many functions: in the short term, to aid successful coping efforts and preserve social resources, but also in the long term, to build both individual regulatory capacity and close relationships.

Fourth, these interactions may also contribute to something like mutual regulatory capacity, which is sometimes experienced as “working well as a team.” If both partners (or all the members of a social group) have practice working together in stressful situations, they may develop some “collective action tendencies” (such as cooperation and joint problem solving) and
collective regulatory resources (such as open communication and mutual emotional availability) that will act as buffers when individuals or groups face stressful situations. These characteristics are often included in studies of family coping and resilience (e.g., McCubbin, Thompson, & McCubbin, 1996; Wills, Blechman, & McNamara, 1996).

Selective support seeking should not be confused with active attempts to avoid all social contact, such as through concealment or social isolation. These strategies cut off social avenues of regulatory support and eliminate opportunities to develop collective regulatory capacity. Such coping strategies may also be markers for other maladaptive conditions, such as unavailability of trusted social partners or the inability of the individual to benefit from the social involvement of others, for example, to derive comfort from others or to allow others to advise or help in stressful situations. The root causes of an individual’s difficulty in experiencing social interactions as supportive are an important topic for research on social support at all ages.

Coping as a Social Signal

Other means of coping that are not directly aimed at recruiting or discouraging social partners may nevertheless have strong effects on them. For example, coping through opposition or escape may not only reduce the likelihood of support but may actually escalate unsupportive context reactions, such as retaliation or rejection. Interestingly, other ways of coping, such as anxiety and dependence, although they increase social involvement, may do so at the cost of individual regulation. If distress leads social partners to take over the stressful encounter (through overprotectiveness or intrusion), this kind of social involvement may interfere with the child’s exercise of his or her full regulatory capacities.

An important avenue for further research involves the social consequences of different ways of coping (Skinner & Edge, 1998). Some of the more adaptive ways of coping, such as negotiation, problem solving, information seeking, and cooperation, may also have the unintended side effect of making interactions more attractive to social partners. For example, the close concentration and enthusiasm of mastery-oriented children, or the negotiation and perspective taking of socially accepted children, may have the effect of attracting others. However, in addition to increasing social involvement, these ways of coping also shape the roles of social partners so that the regulatory activities of the target individuals can still be exercised.

Expressiveness in Coping

A coping perspective also sheds light on an issue that appears from time to time in discussions of emotion and behavioral regulation. This issue centers on the goals of regulation in social contexts—that is, whether it is better for an infant (or child or adult) to modulate negative emotionality and inhibit socially proscribed behaviors or to express negative emotions or undesired action tendencies. Although the clinical utility of genuine expression of emotional states has sometimes been recognized (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994), the overall tone of discussion implies that social contexts will be more satisfied with lower levels of negative emotionality and higher levels of behavioral inhibition.

An action perspective on coping takes a strong position in favor of genuine expression of action tendencies. If one important function of children’s coping is to inform the social context about the nature and source(s) of their distress, then genuine expression will provide the most accurate information about children’s appraisals, wants, and desires. According to this perspective, children’s patterns of distress and coping provide essential information to caregivers about what is wrong and how to help. Although emotion theorists correctly point out the signaling value of emotion (Saarni et al., 1998), children’s behaviors and orientations provide additional diagnostic information to others. Children who, due to temperament or experience, are overreactive or inhibited pose a challenge to caregivers, not only because of the small range of situations in which their regulation can function, but because of the low diagnosticity of their action patterns.

A major goal of socialization then becomes to preserve or boost children’s access to their genuine action tendencies (and emotions, desires, and preferences) while at the same time offering acceptable channels for expressing them. The prototypical shift is from expressing action tendencies in behavior to expressing them in words. This conversion makes action tendencies easier to read and more amenable to regulation. As detailed in theories of socialization of metamotion, learning to accept and talk about feelings (and desires) may be an important part of effective action regulation (Dix, 1991; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996), perhaps in part because words provide an alternative, socially acceptable means of expressing action tendencies. At the same time, however, words help sharpen and focus the meanings of “urges,” allowing them to become the objects of discussion, representation, and reflection. Continued access to one’s own
preferences, goals, and emotions, especially if they are in a form that can be communicated but does not overpower behavior, is an important regulatory resource throughout the life span (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998).

The Development of Action Regulation

Thinking about coping as action regulation connects conceptualizations of coping to areas of vigorous research and theorizing, not only to work on regulation in all its guises, but also to work on attachment, temperament, learned helplessness, and self-determination (Compas, 1987, 1998). Perhaps most important, it links work on coping to the development of volition (Bullock & Lütkenhaus, 1988), intentionality (Zeedyk, 1996), and ego resiliency (Block & Block, 1980). These theories and bodies of research can already reveal the broad outlines of normative progression in children's coping capacities, and they provide rich explanations of the social contexts (especially parenting) that facilitate them.

Processes of Socialization

In general, coping research has focused on socialization of coping strategies through parent practices such as modeling, teaching, and coaching (Kliwier, Sandler, & Wolchik, 1994). An action perspective suggests that these activities may be a late point of entry into the social processes that influence the development of coping (Skinner & Edge, in press). Caregivers are partners in the long sequences of interactions that create action tendencies and so can be considered co-constructors of the roots of children's coping as well as of the self-system processes that shape appraisals of stressful situations. In addition, caregivers play a major role in children's acquisition of general competencies, many of which may not seem directly tied to coping but have been identified as resources for effective regulation. As mentioned previously, these include the development of emotional regulation.

Even when considering how parents are best able to "teach" coping in specific stressful situations, a focus on action regulation can be helpful in suggesting the kinds of parental activities, in addition to direct instruction, that might be helpful. Work on emotion regulation suggests that one important function of caregivers is to help children establish states in which optimal regulation is possible. Such states can be physiological—for example, when parents discourage regulatory activities such as problem solving when conditions are poor (e.g., when the child is tired or hungry). State also refers to emotion, behavior, and attention, with the notion being that when children are too upset, active, or distracted, they cannot regulate optimally. Parents use a wide array of strategies to alter children's states in ways that get them "ready for regulation." These strategies may inhibit actions that interfere with regulation (e.g., disrupting incompatible behavior, calming emotion, or distracting attention) and/or may initiate actions that facilitate regulation (e.g., bringing the child within proximity, inducing pleasant emotions such as laughter, or focusing attention). Certain strategies that do not obviously seem connected to coping, such as distraction, time-outs, or acknowledging a child's point of view, may nevertheless be handy tools for breaking up action tendencies and so may create a space within which action regulation can operate.

By the same token, parents (and other social partners) also seem to have a wide array of reactions that interfere with children's ability to regulate. In general, these include actions that overarouse children's emotions (e.g., fear, excitement, or anger) and so provoke strong action tendencies (e.g., escape or opposition) that are incompatible with the desired direction of regulation, that override autonomous regulation through coercion or pressure, or that do not require regulation that could have been successfully executed (e.g., backing down). From this perspective, an important role of the social context is to contribute to conditions in the environment and states in children that allow them the full use of their best regulatory capacities.

Development of Autonomous Action Regulation

The focus on regulation also points out that the processes through which coping is socialized matter to the quality of regulation that will develop (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). If parents (or others) use fear or guilt as tools to coerce children to control their actions, or if children are pressured to act against their own preferences and desires, then an external or introjected regulatory style results that uses ego energy to execute and that degrades the quality of action (Ryan & Connell, 1989). In contrast, if adults generally cooperate with children in the expression
and realization of their goals and use noncoercive means to alter children's behavior through influencing the children's own goals (e.g., through empathy, induction, or reasoning about consequences), then a more integrated and autonomous style of regulation will result that is more effective in guiding and sustaining constructive action.

**Interventions Into Coping Processes**

An action perspective expands on the goals and processes involved in interventions aimed at supporting coping. It suggests that coping interventions that focus only on the teaching of self-regulatory skills will be of limited effectiveness and may in fact place an additional burden on already strained regulatory capacities. Instead, intervention goals should concentrate on the construction of adaptive action tendencies and effortful regulation—that is, the construction of automatic coordinated responses to stress that are adaptive. Effective interventions will work with the features of the social context and individuals' appraisals that shape the sequences of interactions responsible for the construction of action tendencies.

A key issue for interventionists is how to help children who have already formed maladaptive ways of coping. The critical task is to identify maladaptive automatic action tendencies and bring them up to be open to voluntary regulation. At this level, then, it will be possible to alter them in the direction of intentional adaptive reactions. These new action tendencies must then themselves be "sent back down" to become automatized, so they will be effortlessly deployed or effortfully boosted as the new first line of defense against stress. Lifelong lessons will include the individual's ability to modify his or her own action tendencies voluntarily and to select and create contexts, intentionally and proactively, in which stresses are manageable and optimal coping is facilitated (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997).

**CONCLUSION**

Theories and research on regulation are beginning to surface in work on coping. If notions of regulation capture the imagination of coping researchers, these concepts may influence the scope, focus, and specific questions that define the area of coping. Hence, as perspectives on regulation are adopted, it is important that they also be adapted—that is, that they be transformed sufficiently that they are rendered useful to the particular goal: the study of coping.

In this chapter, I have explored how a definition of coping as "action regulation under stress" might serve as a bridge between work on the development of regulation and conceptualizations of coping. Most of the theories and empirical illustrations discussed here were drawn from work with infants and children. However, the perspective is intended to pertain to developments all across the life span. The use of an action-theoretical perspective suggests that at the root of all ways of coping are action tendencies that energize and direct compelling initial reactions to experienced stress. In stressful conditions, action tendencies are effortfully regulated—that is, boosted or deflected through processes that use up executive resources. However, such regulation is not always voluntary or autonomous, even in adulthood.

At all ages, action, regulation, and coping processes are embedded in social relationships (Skinner & Edge, in press). Social partners and groups play decisive roles in the co-construction of action tendencies and the self-systems involved in appraisals. Children and their parents as well as couples and their families and friends reciprocally create and buffer experiences of stress for one another (Berg et al., 1998). These close relationships facilitate and hinder regulation. A coping perspective also highlights the critical role of stress in these developments.

An action perspective makes explicit what is to be gained from coping. In the long term, the developmental goal is the construction and enhancement of individual and group regulatory capacity (Block & Block, 1980; Eisenberg et al., 1997; Fabes & Eisenberg, 1997; Mischel, 1996). Robust action regulation includes the capacity, under conditions of increasingly higher stress, to form, defend, and buffer genuine durable intentions and to coordinate actions (and their emotional, behavioral, and motivational features) sequentially in a way that allows them to become and remain organized, coherent, and meaningful and yet still flexible and responsive to changing environmental and personal demands. A key part of these processes is the capacity to maintain or boost access to all cognitive, volitional, and social resources while judiciously using as little of these as possible, in order to preserve them for future use. In a very real sense, regulatory capacity constitutes an important set of tools that allows people to shape their own actions intentionally and thereby influence their own development.
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