

Coping with acute stress in the military: The influence of coping style, coping self-efficacy and appraisal emotions



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ABSTRACT

It is of utmost importance to better understand how professionals in high-risk organizations, such as the military and police, appraise and cope with acute stress situations. The goal of this two-wave study was to investigate the role of two individual characteristics, coping style and coping self-efficacy, for recruits' appraisal emotions and subsequent coping behavior during a high-stress exercise at the end of a 18–33 week training period. Three different military samples were studied (officer cadets, special infantry and Marine corps recruits, and recruits). Multi-group comparison showed that coping style was directly related to coping behavior. Coping self-efficacy was indirectly related to coping behavior through threat and challenge emotions. Together, these findings provide insights for appraisal research and practice.

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1. Introduction

Professionals in high-risk organizations, such as the military and police, are increasingly faced with acute and demanding stress situations. Shootings, intimidation, terrorists threat, and foreign missions are some examples of the sudden, uncertain and threatening situations that place high demands on these professionals and can cause acute stress (Kleber & Van der Velden, 2003). Whereas acute stress situations can seriously hamper performance (Gaillard, 2008; Harris, Hancock, & Harris, 2005), they require professionals to remain calm and perform their tasks in line with the procedures and Rules of Engagement (Larsen, 2001). That is, high-risk professionals need to effectively cope with acute stress situations in order to maintain their performance level (Luria & Torjman, 2009). Moreover, effective coping contributes to professionals' well-being (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) and can buffer the impact of situational demands on health complaints and burn-out (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Individuals can differ in their response to stressful situations. For instance, they might differ in the coping style they have developed over time which can directly affect coping behavior (Delahajj & Van Dam, 2016). Moreover, individuals might differ in their beliefs in their abilities to cope with stressful situations (i.e. coping self-efficacy), and consequently in how they appraise a stressful situation (Bandura, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Whereas individuals with low coping self-

efficacy might appraise this situation as threatening, individuals with high coping self-efficacy might perceive it as a challenge (Bandura, 2001). These different appraisals will cause different emotions (Lazarus, 1991) and thus affect the effectiveness of individuals' coping behavior. Recent research has underlined the importance of stress appraisals for a number of work outcomes, such as strain, burnout, work engagement, job satisfaction, performance and withdrawal behavior (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007; Webster, Beehr, & Love, 2011). Similarly, research has shown the importance of emotions for subsequent behavior (Frijda, 1988; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). Yet, the question how appraisal emotions affect coping effectiveness under acute stress has not been answered yet. And whereas the impact of individual differences on stress appraisal and effective coping in chronic stress situations has been studied previously (see Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010), their impact on responses to acute stress situations has received less research attention (e.g., Penley & Tomaka, 2002).

Our purpose in this study was to investigate the role of coping style, coping self-efficacy and stress appraisal emotions for coping with acute stress. More specific, we examined whether appraisal emotions would mediate the relationship between coping self-efficacy and coping responses. Focusing on emotional responses as mediators, we used Bandura's (1997, 2001) social cognitive theory and Lazarus' (1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) appraisal theory as our theoretical framework. In order to increase the ecological validity of our study, we investigated military recruits' coping responses during a realistic stressful exercise at the end of an 18–33 week training period. To enhance generalizability, three different military basic trainings were studied. Our research model is presented in Fig. 1.

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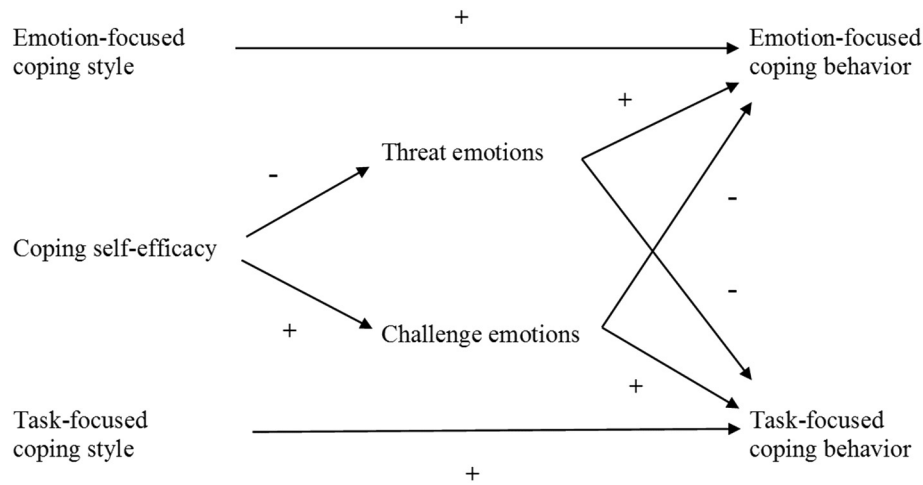


Fig. 1. Research model with hypothesized relationships between constructs.

1.1. Coping style as predictor of coping behavior

Coping behavior refers to the “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). A distinction is generally made between task-focused coping (TFC) and emotion-focused coping (EFC) (Endler & Parker, 1994; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The former refers to active attempts aimed at managing the problem or situation that is causing distress; the latter refers to strategies for dealing with the emotional distress. Whether coping efforts are effective depends on the situation at hand. In general, TFC behavior appears more effective in controllable situations, whereas EFC behavior appears more effective in uncontrollable situations (e.g., Bagget, Saab, & Carver, 1996; Terry & Hynes, 1998). In high-risk organizations, such as the military and police, professionals are usually expected and trained to gain control over the situation. Moreover, paying attention to one's emotions during high-risk situations might interfere with effective decision making and performance (Larsen, 2001). Therefore, within this specific context, TFC is considered more effective than EFC.

How individuals respond to a situation of acute stress is likely to depend on individual characteristics such as their coping style and coping self-efficacy. Coping style refers to people's habitual way of coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Delahajj & Van Dam, 2016), and is considered to mitigate the relationship between stressful events and physical and psychological functioning (Beasley, Thompson, & Davidson, 2003; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping style has been shown to affect coping behavior and performance in various situations (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Endler & Parker, 1994; Matthews & Campbell, 1998; Ptacek, Pierce, & Thompson, 2006; Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012). Ptacek et al. (2006), for instance, found that habitual coping related to actual coping behavior during different situations over time. We therefore hypothesized that a TFC style relates positively to TFC behavior (H1a), and that an EFC style relates positively to EFC behavior (H1b).

1.2. Coping self-efficacy as predictor of coping behavior: the role of appraisal emotions

Individuals' coping self-efficacy may also affect coping behavior under acute stress. Coping self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs about their capabilities to cope with stressful situations (Bandura, 1997). As Bandura (1997, p. 141) notes, people who have a high sense of coping efficacy are likely to adopt strategies and courses of action designed to change hazardous environments into more benign ones. Several studies

have shown that people with a strong coping self-efficacy use more adaptive ways of coping (e.g., Chwalisz, Altmaier, & Russel, 1992; Haney & Long, 1995). As such, we expected that coping self-efficacy relates positively to TFC and negatively to EFC behavior.

Coping self-efficacy will affect coping behavior because it impacts how the stress situation is appraised. Depending on their level of coping self-efficacy, individuals might appraise an acute stressful situation either as a threat, and consequently experience threat emotions, or as a challenge, experiencing challenge emotions. This distinction aligns well with Bandura's (1997, 2001) social cognitive theory and Lazarus' (1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) appraisal theory. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), self-efficacy beliefs influence whether people think pessimistically or optimistically and in ways that are self-enhancing or self-hindering. According to Lazarus' (1991) appraisal theory, individuals appraise a stressful encounter by determining what is at stake for them. Related to the assessment whether the encounter exceeds or meets the individual's resources, this encounter is evaluated as either a threat or a challenge. Several studies indeed found that individuals' self-efficacy predicted their appraisal of a stressful situation as a challenge or a hindrance (e.g., Karademas & Kalantzi-Azizi, 2004).

Moreover, Lazarus' (1991) appraisal theory of emotions describes how conscious and unconscious appraisals of a situation will elicit appraisal emotions that are in line with the appraisal and will evoke subsequent action tendencies (Frijda, 1988). Owing to their focus on possible harm, threat appraisals will give rise to negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety or anger, and thus may induce an inefficient energetic state. In contrast, challenge appraisals' focus on possible gain or growth will elicit positive emotions, such as eagerness and excitement, and thus mobilize an effective physiological state (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991). Based on this evidence, we hypothesized that coping self-efficacy will relate positively to challenge emotions (H2a) and negatively to threat emotions (H2b).

Both appraisals and emotions are considered to precede individuals' coping responses (e.g., Fugate, Harrison, & Kinicki, 2011; Lazarus, 1999; Rodell & Judge, 2009). As Frijda (1988) notes, emotions include a certain action readiness. Research generally shows that individuals engage in behaviors that are in line with their emotional responses (Lazarus, 1999). For example, both Fugate et al. (2011) and Kiefer (2005) found that negative appraisal emotions were related to withdrawal behavior. Rodell and Judge (2009) noticed, among other things, how hindrance appraisals, through anxiety and anger, had a positive effect on counter-productive work behavior.

Threat and challenging emotions have differing effects on responses to acute stress (Taylor, 1991). Whereas negative emotions have been found to elicit emotion regulation strategies such as rumination and

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