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Coping with job-related stress: The case of teachers

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In a study involving 67 veteran New York City teachers five occupational coping scales were constructed: advice seeking, positive comparisons, selective ignoring, discipline and direct action. Multiple regression analyses with controls for social-demographic factors and adversity in the job environment indicated that advice seeking and direct action were most consistently related to lower (depressive and psychophysiological) symptom levels and that positive comparisons and direct action were most consistently related to higher morale (job satisfaction and motivation to continue in the profession). Selective ignoring appeared to buffer the impact of adverse work environments on symptoms. The results suggest that teaching may constitute an occupational role which is an exception to Pearlin & Schooler's (1978) more general findings on the lack of efficacy of work-related coping behaviours.

Kyriacou (1980) wrote that research on teachers' job-related coping behaviours has been neglected. Kyriacou's (1980) own study of coping in teachers is descriptive but provides no clues about the efficacy of coping behaviours in mitigating distress. The research of Pearlin & Schooler (1978), by contrast, provides a framework within which to investigate the efficacy of coping at the workplace in general, if not in the teaching profession specifically.

In a cross-sectional study of a representative sample of more than 2,000 Chicago residents employed in a wide variety of occupations, Pearlin & Schooler (1978) found that each of four job-related coping strategies was unrelated to emotional distress. The coping strategies they studied included the substitution of rewards, positive comparisons, optimistic actions and selective ignoring. Reward substitution refers to obtaining satisfaction from sources other than work. Positive comparison refers to comparing one's job situation to that of others and to one's own at an earlier time. Optimistic action refers to the worker's attempts to change noxious aspects of his or her work environment. Selective ignoring refers to 'casting about for some positive attribute or circumstance within a troublesome situation' (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 6). Pearlin & Schooler (1978) argued that occupational roles, in comparison to the marital and parental roles, are more impersonally organized, thus making the work environment inhospitable to individual coping efforts.

Brenner, Sorbom & Wallius (1985), in a study of Swedish teachers, found that a coping strategy labelled 'direct action' appeared to mitigate job-related distress. This finding should be taken cautiously because a large number of coping strategies exerted no effect on job-related distress, and may, thus, reflect a Type I error. The result, however, is interesting because it conflicts with Pearlin & Schooler's (1978) findings on the lack of efficacy of workplace coping. It would be useful to discover if teaching constitutes an occupation that is an exception to the Pearlin-Schooler findings pertaining to coping at the workplace.

Three considerations bear on an investigation of the impact of occupational coping behaviours on distress: (1) the relation between the way in which coping behaviours are categorized in the study and the prevailing conceptualizations of coping should be made clear; (2) coping behaviours should be assessed independently of the stressors in the work environment as well as the distress and morale problems the coping behaviours are hypothesized to reduce; (3) coping behaviours should be clearly linked to the job context. Regarding the first consideration, Pearlin and his colleagues (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan & Mullan, 1981) identified three general types of coping: (a) the modification of the circumstances from which stressors issue; (b) the modification of the threat-arousing meaning of stressors; (c) the management of emotional distress resulting from an encounter with stressors. The coping behaviours identified in the present study are consistent with Pearlin's typology.

In regard to the second consideration, not all coping strategies are likely to reduce distress. As reported by Pearlin & Schooler (1978) many coping strategies may fail to affect distress. It is also possible that certain coping strategies exacerbate distress. In a study of a representative sample of San Francisco households Cronkite & Moos (1984) found that in women avoidance types of coping behaviours were associated with increased levels of alcohol consumption. Menaghan & Merves (1984), using two waves of the Chicago area data described by Pearlin and his colleagues (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pearlin *et al.*, 1981), found that a workplace coping strategy which involved restricting one's expectations was associated with higher levels of emotional distress.

These findings strongly suggest that investigators independently assess coping behaviours, outcome variables like distress and environmental adversity in order to minimize any operational confounding in the measures (Dohrenwend, Dohrenwend, Dodson & Shrout, 1984; Kasl, 1987; Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985; Menaghan, 1983). A widespread problem with the teacher stress literature is the lack of independence in measuring distress and the factors which have been hypothesized to affect it (see Schonfeld, *in press*).

In regard to the third consideration, the use of the same measures to assess coping behaviours across a large variety of work roles, a method employed by Pearlin and his colleagues (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pearlin *et al.*, 1981; Menaghan & Merves, 1984), is a Procrustean procedure. Information relevant to coping strategies employed in specific work roles is lost. An alternative strategy would be to develop job-specific coping measures that are related to overarching categories of coping (e.g. the modification of aversive job conditions) but which capture what workers actually do in a specific job. This alternative strategy was adopted in the present paper.

Dunham (1984) enumerated a number of coping strategies that are consistent with the teaching role but did not provide systematic measurement instruments to assess them. To

study teachers, Needle, Griffen & Svendsen (1981) employed Pearlin & Schooler's (1978) coping instrument. Needle *et al.* (1981) found that only positive comparisons were related to reduced distress in teachers and that reward substitution, optimistic actions and selective ignoring were unrelated to distress. They did not, however, control for possible confounders and they did not present zero-order correlations bearing on coping-distress relations. Although some of the Pearlin-Schooler occupational coping items are consistent with cognitions and behaviours in which teachers engage, the development of a schedule of coping behaviours that is more congruent with the teacher's role is needed to elucidate better the relation between coping and distress in teachers.

One aim of the present study was to develop measures of coping behaviours in veteran teachers. The measures reflect Pearlin & Schooler's (1978) conceptual distinctions and include: the use of discipline in response to serious student misbehaviour and direct positive action to improve student performance (coping behaviours aimed at modifying the stressors); selective ignoring of the unpleasant aspects of the job and positive comparisons with others and with oneself at an earlier point in one's career (the modification of the meaning of stressors); and advice seeking (managing distress). The behavioural coping items pertaining to advice seeking and discipline assess the teacher's propensity to employ those behaviours *if* confronted with a problem. The items do *not* assess frequency of use because frequency is confounded with the adversity of the teacher's work environment and, consequently, the need to employ these behaviours. Cohen & Wills (1985) and Wethington & Kessler (1986) argued similarly that the frequency of contacts with individuals who provide social support is confounded with environmental adversity and, therefore, the need for support. The cognitive coping items (selective ignoring and positive comparisons) were not thought to be so confounded, and simply assessed frequency of use. Like a job locus of control scale (Spector, 1988), the direct action items assess the teacher's beliefs about the potency of his or her actions in affecting student attainment.

Another aim of the study is to investigate the relation between coping measures and psychological distress and job-related morale. The items developed for use in the coping measures were based on a review of the stress literature (e.g. Dewe, 1985; Phillips & Lee, 1980) and on the suggestions of teacher informants. Items were worded to minimize operational confounding with psychological distress and environmental adversity.

Method

Subjects

Sixty-seven new York City schoolteachers, 29 men and 38 women, completed questionnaires (see Schonfeld, *in press*). Thirty-eight taught in secondary school, 20 in elementary school, and five in early childhood centers. Four did not report on their school. The average age of the teachers was 41.2 years ($SD = 8.7$) and their average experience was 13.2 years ($SD = 8.2$). Twenty-two per cent of the sample was non-white.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of the following sections: demographic; health/morale; stressor; colleague support; coping sections. Items in the demographic section assessed age, sex, marital status, parents' work and educational history, and race. The colleague support section and findings pertaining to the colleague support measures are described elsewhere (Schonfeld, *in press*) and not reported here.

Health/morale section. The health/morale section included items, derived from Cronkite & Moos (1984) and Dohrenwend, Shrout, Egri & Mendelsohn (1980), that assessed psychophysiological symptoms (e.g. headaches, stomachaches, constipation, etc.). The section also included the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D, Radloff, 1988). The response choices for all symptom items referred to the frequency of symptom occurrence during the previous week. One Likert-type item, derived from Quinn & Staines' (1979) research on large cross-sections of employed Americans, assessed job satisfaction ('Overall, how satisfied are you with your job?'). The author's as yet unpublished research on another sample of veteran teachers indicates that the item scales satisfactorily with other job satisfaction items. Response alternatives ranged from very dissatisfied (= 1) to very satisfied (= 5). Three Likert-type items (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1979) measured motivation to remain in teaching ('How likely is it that you will still be a teacher in two [five, ten] years' time?'). Response alternatives ranged from very unlikely (= 1) to very likely (= 5).

Stressor section. The stressor section included items that assessed the frequency of three types of school-related stressors: episodic events except crimes against the respondent, crimes in which the teacher was the victim, and ongoing types of stressors called 'strains' by Pearlin & Schooler (1978). The episodic events included: finding out that a student used illegal drugs, a confrontation with an insolent student, classroom damaged by vandalism, etc. The crime items included the occurrence of the following events: assault, robbery, deliberate damage to personal property, etc. The strains that were assessed included: an overcrowded classroom, jeopardy of involuntary transfer, underprepared students attending class, etc. In order to minimize confounding with the symptom measures, the stressor items were worded to provide 'neutral self-reports of exposure' (Kasl, 1987) to job conditions.

Coping section. The coping section included items that assessed seeking advice from others, applying discipline to a student who seriously misbehaved, making positive comparisons, selectively ignoring the job's difficulties, and taking direct positive action in helping students. With regard to advice-seeking, the teacher was asked, 'Since *school began*, how likely were you to ask any of these people for advice in response to a difficulty you encountered as a teacher? A relative, friend, paraprofessional, guidance counselor, supervisor and doctor/psychologist'. Regarding discipline, the teacher was asked 'Considering your teaching since *school began*, when a student seriously misbehaved, how likely were you to: Take away a privilege? Reprimand him/her? Threaten some kind of punishment? Refer the offender to a dean or someone in a similar position? Contact his/her parents? Invoke some form of punishment (e.g. mark a demerit in your records)?' The response alternatives for the advice-seeking and discipline items ranged from 'very unlikely' (= 0) to 'very likely' (= 4).

Examples of the selective-ignoring items include 'Since *school began*, how often have you "Told yourself that the difficulties related to teaching are unimportant in your life?" and "Paid attention to your teaching duties in order to overlook the job's difficulties?"' ('never' [= 0] to 'very often' [= 4]). Examples of the comparison items include 'Would you say that your *current* teaching position is better, the same, or worse than . . . your work/school life about a year ago?' and 'the jobs of most of other people you know?' ('much better' [= 0] to 'much worse' [= 4]); 'When you compared yourself to other teachers as experienced as you are, you have _____ problems' ('many more' [= 0] to 'many fewer' [= 4]). The items pertaining to direct positive action in helping students include 'On the basis of your experience since *school began*, how strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?: The way my students turn out depends upon their home lives and personal resources, and there is little I can do about that; There is only so much I can do as a teacher, and after that I just accept my students as they are; There is much I can do to turn a failing student into a successful one' ('strongly agree' [= 0] to 'strongly disagree' [= 4]).

Results

Aggregation of items and scale reliability

The coping items were aggregated to form five *a priori* coping scales: advice seeking, selective ignoring, positive comparisons, use of discipline and direct positive action. Table 1 presents the alpha coefficients, means and standard deviations of the coping scale as well as the symptom and stressor scales.

Table 1. The alpha coefficients, means and standard deviations of the scales

Scale	Alpha coefficient	M	SD
Advice seeking	.68	15.02	4.07
Positive comparisons	.66	15.02	4.07
Selective ignoring	.76	10.74	4.25
Discipline	.61	16.38	4.05
Direct positive action	.66	14.06	3.78
CES-D	.92	13.03	11.03
Psychophysiological symptoms	.84	5.30	6.52
Job satisfaction	n.a.	3.23	1.23
Motivation to continue in teaching	.86	9.95	3.97
Number of crimes	n.a.	0.57	.76
Episodic events	.79	1.40	.65
Strains	.85	1.80	.54

Note. CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies - Depression Scale.

Predictors of distress, job satisfaction and motivation

Table 2 presents the zero-order correlations between each predictor variable, including five social demographic factors with known links to elevated scores on mental health symptom measures (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Gove, 1972; Radloff & Locke, 1986), type of school, the stressor scales, and the coping scales, with the measures of symptoms and job-related morale. Although the social demographic variables were not significantly related to symptoms or morale, the correlations were in the expected directions. Table 2 indicates that the measure of strains was more consistently related to the symptoms and morale variables than the stressor scales measuring crimes and episodic events.

A number of multiple linear regression equations were developed to study the relation between the coping scales and the symptom and morale measures. In order to maximize power, means were substituted for missing values for the 12 subjects for whom a scorable value was absent (any subject with a missing value, lacked a value for only one predictor). Tests for systematic differences revealed no bias in the occurrence of missing values (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The two symptom variables, the CES-D and psychophysiological symptom scale, and the two morale variables, motivation and job satisfaction, were regressed on the predictors in two steps.

To be conservative, a number of factors was controlled before a coping scale was entered in each regression equation. The control factors included six social demographic control variables: age, sex, marital status, race, social class of origin and type of school. The strains scale was also controlled in the first step. The episodic events and crimes measured were not controlled because a separate study of the potency of the three environmental factors in predicting symptoms and morale found that only the strains scale attained conventional levels of significance when all three environmental variables were entered in the same regression equations.

Table 2. Zero-order correlations between predictor and symptom/morale variables

Predictors	Symptom and morale variables			
	CES-D	Psychophys. symptoms	Motiv.	Job satisf.
Age	-.03	.04	-.13	-.01
Sex	-.18	-.13	.02	.17
Marital status	-.04	-.05	-.04	-.17
Race	-.19	-.18	.11	.08
Social class of origin	.15	.11	-.11	-.20
School	-.07	-.04	-.18 ^f	.11
Episodic stressors	.09	.17	.11	.08
Crimes	.33**	.24*	-.04	-.13
Job strains	.38**	.31**	-.15	-.30*
Advice seeking	-.18 ^f	-.24*	.10	.33**
Positive comparisons	-.33**	-.23*	.26*	.40***
Selective ignoring	.03	.07	.07	.05
Discipline	-.16 ^f	-.09	-.02	.11
Direct positive action	-.23*	-.24*	.25*	.37***

* $P < .10$; * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$; *** $P < .001$.

Not. Sex is coded 0 = female, 1 = male; marital status is coded = not currently married; 1 = currently married; race is coded = non-white, 1 = white; social class of origin follows the categories developed by Hollingshead (1974) in which a code of 1 indicates professional and managerial levels of employment and a code of 5 indicates unskilled labourers; school is coded 0 = elementary or early childhood, 1 = secondary.

Table 3 presents the results, for every outcome measure, of five regression equations, one for each coping scale. The table provides the standardized regression coefficient for each coping scale when the scale was entered in a regression equation which already included the control factors described above. The advice seeking and positive comparisons scales were significantly ($P < .05$) related to lower levels of depressive symptoms and the discipline and direct positive action scales were marginally ($P < .10$) related to lower symptom levels. Advice seeking and direct action were significantly related to lower levels of psychophysiological symptoms. Positive comparisons and direct action were significantly related to increased motivation to remain in the profession. Advice seeking, positive comparisons and direct action were related to higher levels of job satisfaction.

A final set of regression analyses was conducted to explore further the relations among coping behaviours, adverse work environments and symptoms and morale. In each analysis, an interactive term, operationalized by the product of the strain scale and each coping scale, was entered into the appropriate regression equation. Only two interaction terms were significant when added to the equation last: the interaction of selective ignoring and strains was significantly related to the CES-D (beta = -1.09) and the psychophysiological symptom scale (beta = -1.02). The negative regression weights mean that the relation between environmental adversity and symptoms was weaker when there was more ignoring behaviour than when there was less.

Table 3. Standardized regression coefficients in predicting symptoms and morale from each coping category

Predictors	Symptom and morale variables			
	CES-D	Psychophys. symptoms	Motiv.	Job satisf.
Advice seeking	-.31*	-.37**	.19	.43***
Positive comparisons	-.26*	-.16	.27*	.33**
Selective ignoring ^a	-.06	-.03	-.13	.15
Discipline	-.22 ^t	-.13	-.00	.13
Direct positive action	-.24 ^t	-.29*	.29*	.34*

^t $P < .10$; * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$; *** $P < .001$.

Note. In each regression equation, job strains, sex, marital status, race, social class of origin and school (elementary or early childhood vs. secondary) were controlled.

^a The interactive effect of selective ignoring and job strains on the symptoms scales is described in the text.

Discussion

Five teacher coping scales, Advice Seeking, Positive Comparisons, Selective Ignoring, Discipline and Direct Positive Action, were constructed. Positive Comparisons, Direct Action and Advice Seeking tended to have zero-order relations with the symptom and morale scales. Multiple regression analyses with controls for social-demographic factors and job environment indicated that Advice Seeking and Direct Action were most consistently related to lower symptom levels and that Positive Comparisons and Direct Action were most consistently related to higher morale. Selective Ignoring appeared to buffer the impact of environmental adversity on symptoms.

The results bear on Pearlin & Schooler's (1978) findings which suggest that workplace coping may be ineffective. In line with this view, Farber (1984) argued that because individual coping efforts are likely to be ineffective in mitigating distress in the workplace, schools need to be changed from an organizational standpoint. The findings of the present study suggest that teachers who employ identifiable occupational coping behaviours are less likely to experience psychological symptoms and low morale. Such behaviours can be included in a number of different higher-order coping categories (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The behaviours include attempts at modifying: the aversive work environments (e.g. direct actions in helping students), the meaning of the stressors (e.g. positive comparisons), and the distress experience (e.g. advice seeking).

In contrast to the variety of occupations Pearlin and his colleagues studied, it is possible that the school is less impersonally organized than many other work settings, making for a work environment in which coping behaviours can alleviate distress and enhance job satisfaction. This is not to say that schools do not have rigid traditions and routines (Sarason, 1971). I am not arguing against reorganizing schools for the purpose of developing more effective and humane centres of learning. Many occupational settings are to some degree impersonally organized—teaching is no exception. Nonetheless, teaching may be comparatively less impersonal because the steady contact with children and parents required by the role weakens the forces of impersonality.

Whether or not the relations found here are causal in nature requires further investigation. Owing to the relatively small sample size, the findings are suggestive, and should provide hypotheses to be pursued in future research. Studies which follow teachers prospectively are needed. Controls for prior levels of symptoms and morale would be required to rule out the possibility that the occupational coping behaviours in question merely reflect the effects of pre-existing symptoms and morale problems. It might also be useful to study the successful and unsuccessful adaptations of new teachers to the school setting. The author currently has in the field a longitudinal study of newly appointed teachers and hopes it will shed further light on these issues.

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