Coping resources, coping strategies and adaptation to organizational change: Direct or buffering effects?

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Abstract

Few studies have investigated the impact of organizational change upon the well-being of employees. The present study examined the effects of appraised stress (associated with organizational change), coping resources (locus of control, self-confidence, self-esteem, professional support), and coping strategies (problem- and emotion-focused) on levels of anxiety and depression. In relation to the effects of resources and coping strategies, two different models were tested. The main effects model proposes that, irrespective of the level of stress, coping resources and coping strategies have direct effects on well-being. In contrast, the buffering model predicts that the effects of coping resources and strategies are only evident at high levels of stress. One hundred lawyers completed a structured self-administered questionnaire that measured their personal and social resources, use of problem and emotion-focused coping strategies, and perceptions of the stressfulness of the situation. Results revealed that high levels of appraised stress associated with organizational change were associated with higher levels of depression. In relation to the effects of resources and coping strategies, there was support only for the main effects model. The personal resource variables of higher levels of self-esteem and a more internal locus of control predicted better adjustment among lawyers. In addition, while problem-focused strategies were linked to lower levels of both anxiety and depression among lawyers, the use of emotion-focused coping was associated with higher levels of anxiety.

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Organizations in many countries are currently experiencing massive changes to their structures, procedures and personnel in efforts to become more efficient and competitive. For employees, organizational change can create job loss, reduced status, interpersonal conflict at work and home, and threats to levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being (Ashford, 1988; Schweiger & Ivancevich, 1985; Schweiger & Denisi, 1989). Individuals report feeling anxious and uncertain about their future in the organization, especially how changes will affect the nature of their work, career paths, and co-worker relationships. Despite such impact upon employees, few studies have actually examined the factors that distinguish between those employees who adapt successfully to organizational restructuring and change, from those individuals who fail to adjust. Various writers (e.g. Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Bennis & Nanus, 1985) have suggested that people of certain personality type, organizational position or vision do seem to cope better than others with organizational change and merger, but these employee profiles have not been investigated in any considerable depth through more empirical research. The aim of the present study was to provide a more conceptually rigorous analysis of how individuals cope with organizational change, especially testing alternative conceptualizations of how various personality and social resources of employees, and their methods of coping, might help them deal with the stress caused by organizational change.

Prior to discussing the effects of coping resources and coping strategies on adaptation to stress, it is necessary to consider the relations among these variables, levels of appraised stress, and adaptation. According to one conceptualization labelled as the buffering model, the level of stress is proposed to moderate the effects of resources and coping strategies on well-being. This is an interactive model, which proposes that resources and adaptive coping strategies protect the individual from the adverse effects of stress; thus, their effects are expected to be most marked at high levels of stress. An alternative model is a direct effects or additive model, which suggests that coping resources and adaptive coping strategies have positive effects on well-being, irrespective of the level of stress (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Overall, the empirical literature has failed to provide convincing support for either model, and both models require further investigation especially

in organizational rather than more narrowly defined community-based and psychiatric contexts. In addition, it appears that the extent of support for a particular model is dependent on the variables under consideration, and a more complete understanding of such variables is needed (see Cohen & Wills, 1985).

According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive-phenomenological model of stress and coping, situational appraisals, coping resources, and coping responses should influence employees' adjustment to major events like organizational change. The central dimension on which events can be appraised is the extent to which the event is considered to be stressful or, in other words, a threat to the individuals' level of well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Because high levels of stress are likely to exceed the coping resources and skills of individuals (Thoits, 1983), the level of appraised stress can be proposed to have a negative effect on adaptation to organizational change. Although researchers have not directly examined this proposal, studies in the wider stress literature have generally found a negative relationship between appraised stress and scores on measures of well-being (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987).

Coping resources in the Folkman and Lazarus model are relatively stable characteristics of a person's disposition and environment, and refer to what is available to individuals when they develop their coping strategies (see also Moos & Billings, 1982). Researchers typically distinguish between personal and social resources. In relation to personal resources, Chan (1977) predicted that individuals with high self-esteem are likely to have a past history of coping with stress. They should be more likely than people with low self-esteem to cope effectively with additional stress. In her study of organizational change, Ashford (1988) found support for this proposal. High levels of employee self-esteem were associated with low levels of psychological symptomatology (see also Israel et al., 1989). Similar findings emerge for the personal resource of levels of self-confidence (Holahan & Moos, 1987; Kobasa, Maddi & Khan, 1982), while research on locus of control has shown that individuals with internal control beliefs adapt better to stress than individuals with an external locus of control. This pattern of results has been attributed to the fact that individuals with external control beliefs are likely to doubt the efficacy of active coping behaviours (Wheaton, 1983). The few studies concerned with how employees cope with organizational change reveal that

individuals with internal control beliefs not only have higher levels of adjustment (Ashford, 1988; Israel et al., 1989; Kobasa et al., 1982), but they also use more effective coping strategies than their counterparts with external control beliefs (Callan & Dickson, in press). Irrespective of levels of stress, the personal resources of internal control beliefs (Holahan & Moos, 1986; Kobasa et al., 1981) and self-esteem (Folkman et al., 1986) seem to have direct, rather than a buffering effects, on employee adaptation.

Coping resources also include the availability of support from one's social support network. Cohen and Wills (1985), however, concluded that the effects of social support vary as a function of the type of measure of support. The extent of a person's social support network as measured by its size tends to have a direct effect on his or her psychological adjustment, presumably because a large network provides the person with a sense of belongingness. The perceived supportiveness of this social network , on the other hand, appears to buffer the negative effects of stress. Cohen and Wills (1985) attributed this result to the fact that the perceived availability of social support is likely to reflect the extent to which the person has access to resources that will be useful in times of stress. When organizational researchers have examined the role of social support, a number of studies have failed to find buffering effects for social support (e.g. Ganster, Fusilier & Mayes, 1986; Israel et al., 1989), and Kaufmann and Beehr (1986) actually reported that the availability of social support exacerbated the negative effects of occupational stress on well-being. However, Terry and her associates (Terry, Nielsen & Perchard, 1992) have recently found some support for the buffering model. Under high levels of stress, employees who believed that they had support from their supervisors for work-related problems had higher levels of well-being than their colleagues with low levels of supervisor support.

In their model, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) further propose that the coping strategies people choose to use in response to an event will influence their level of adaptation to stress. These researchers distinguish between problem-focused and emotion-foused coping strategies. Problem-focused strategies are directed towards the management of the problem, while emotion-focused strategies involve a failure to confront the problem, dealing instead with the associated level of emotional stress. Because it concentrates on the concomitant level of stress rather than the problem, emotion-focused

coping is, in general, thought to impair adaptation to stress, while the use of problem-focused strategies is believed to be more adaptive. Although there is support for this view in the general literature on stress and coping (e.g. Aldwin & Revenson, 1987), the effects of coping on stress incurred in occupational contexts are not clear. There is some evidence that a reliance on emotion-focused coping has a negative effect on well-being (Israel et al., 1989). However, the evidence linking problem-focused strategies to well-being is weaker (see Innes & Kitto, 1989; Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988). In the general stress literature, attention has been paid to the question of whether the effects of coping on well-being are interative rather than direct. These studies have found only weak support for the interactive/buffering model (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Finney et al., 1984). In the context of work stress, and more specifically the stress caused by organizational change, researchers have yet to fully investigate the utility of the buffering model.

There are only a handful of empirical studies concerned with how individuals cope with the stress caused by organizational change and merger. Despite this, it is estimated that at least ten percent of the U. S. workforce, for example, are directly affected by organizational change, merger, acquistions and related spin-offs, while many other people are affected through their close personal relationships with those experiencing the tensions and stress of change (see Buono & Bowditch, 1989). When applied to organizational contexts, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of the stress process suggests that an understanding of the determinants of individual adaptation to organizational change lies with knowledge about the employees' level of appraised stress, their personal and social resources, and their coping responses. The present study was designed to examine the utility of the major components of the model, rather than focusing only on isolated elements of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework, as has characterized much of the previous literature in the area. Also unlike most previous studies of the framework, the utility of the model was examined in a work rather than clinical context. It was anticipated that among employees experiencing organizational change, high levels of appraised stress would be associated with low levels of adaptation. In relation to the effects of coping resources and coping strategies, both direct effects and buffering models were tested. It was expected that personal resources, including self-esteem and self-confidence, and an internal locus of control, would have direct effects on employee adaptation. For social support, it was expected that the perceived quality of support from professional colleagues would buffer the

negative effects of stress on well-being. Although evidence is somewhat mixed concerning the nature of the effects of coping strategies on adaptation, problem and emotion-focused coping strategies were expected to have direct rather than buffering effects on levels of adaptation. However, due to the lack of research testing the effect of coping strategies in organizational settings, the possibility of evidence in support of buffering effects was not discounted.

Method

Respondents

Respondents were 100 (72 male, 28 female) lawyers currently practising law in city and country practices that were experiencing organizational change and restructuring. Very often these changes involved the merger of companies due to a trend in recent years towards larger legal practices. On average, lawyers were 36 years of age and had been in practice for 10 years. Forty-six percent were working in companies that specialized in general law, while other major legal interests include commercial law (17%), litigation (16%), criminal (10%) and family law (14%). On average, their practices employed 16 lawyers in their organization, and almost three-quarters of firms were based in the city and suburbs. As suggested by their ages, few lawyers were senior partners (9%), with most being employed lawyers in firms (32%), junior partners (23%) or lawyers in sole practice (20%).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was a highly structured, self-administered schedule consisting predominantly of Likert-type attitude scales. Lawyers were asked a variety of background questions that examined their age, gender, type of practice, legal position and experience. A global rating scale was used to measure levels of appraised stressfulness associated with any change that was occurring in their firms practices. Following the procedure used by Aldwin and Revenson (1987), respondents rated changes to their legal practice on a global scale, ranging from 1 `not stressful' to 4 `very stressful'. The major measures in the questionnaire included the personal resource measures of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), self-confidence (Holahan & Moos, 1987) and locus of control (Rotter, 1975), all of which are valid and reliable multi-item scales. The quality of social resources was an adapted measure of perceived professional social support (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989).

Respondents rated on 6-point scales (1, `not at all'; 6 `always') the extent to which professional colleagues provided unsolicited support and feedback, and support and feedback at their request.

The measure of coping strategies was the 32-item, Ways of Coping measure developed by Billings and Moos (1981). This measure examines the extent to which respondents use problem-focused and emotion-focused styles of coping. Problem-focused items include `tried to find out more about the situation', and `made a plan of action and followed it'. Emotion-focused coping includes statements like `took it out on other people when I felt angry or depressed' and `tried to reduce the tension by drinking more'. Respondents were asked to consider major changes or problems associated with organizational changes to their firms or practices over the last three months. They were then asked to rate how much (1 = `no', 4 = `yes, fairly often') they used each of the ways of coping listed to deal with such changes. Reliabilities for the various measures of personal and social supports, and coping strategies, are reported in the diagonal of Table 1. Scale reliabilities ranged from .69 to .90.

The measure of personal adjustment was provided by the scaled version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28, Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). Two sub-scales of the GHQ were used that investigate levels of anxiety and severity of depression. Each scale consists of 7 items, rated from 1 (e.g. `not at all') to 7 (e.g. `much more than usual'). Reliabilities for the two scales were .90 and .89, respectively.

Procedure

The State Law Society provided a sample of legal firms. A random sample of 250 firms were selected from this listing, and postage-paid return addressed questionnaires were either mailed or personally delivered to these firms. Each questionnaire to a firm was accompanied with a covering letter from the President of the Law Society and an explanatory letter from the researchers. A total of 100 useable questionnaires were returned, representing a 40 percent response rate.

Results

Overview

Table 1 presents correlations among the predictor variables. In no instance did the correlation between any two scales approach the mean scale alpha reliability. Thus, the scales were considered to be empirically distinct. Inspection of the correlations revealed that more confident lawyers had higher levels of self-esteem, a more internal locus of control and they were more likely to use problem-focused coping. There was also a significant positive relationship between internality and greater use of problem-focused coping.

Separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted on each of the two dependent variables - anxiety and depression. First, the analyses examined the main effects of appraised stress, coping resources, and coping strategies on well-being. The more enduring resource variables (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) were entered into the equations on the first step, followed by the measures of stress and coping (as situation-specific variables). The second series of analyses examined the buffering model. In these analyses, the significance of the interactions between appraised stress of the change and each of the other predictor variables was tested in the final step of the analyses (after entry of the main effect terms for stress, resources, and coping strategies). Regression analysis is an appropriate test for interaction effects for variables measured on continuous scales (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Multiplicative terms were calculated between stress and each of the resource and coping measures. These terms were based on standardized scores to ensure that any multicollinearity between the main effects and the corresponding interactive effects did not distort the analyses (see Finney et al., 1984). .

Predicting psychological adjustment

Table 2 presents results from the prediction of levels of psychological adaptation using the main effects model. Analyses revealed significant regression equations for the prediction of levels of anxiety and depression. Both coping strategies had a significant effect on levels of anxiety. Higher levels of anxiety were associated with low use of problem-focused coping strategies, and a reliance on emotion-focused strategies. Two measures of personal resources, and the index of appraised

stress, were directly related to levels of depression. More depressed individuals had lower levels of self-esteem and a more external locus of control. They also reported being more stressed by the nature of the organizational change.

There was no support for the buffering model. The addition of the product terms into the regression equations did not account for any significant increments in the amount of variance explained in either of the two measures of well-being.

Discussion

The present study was designed to examine the effects of levels of appraised stress, coping, and coping resources on employee adaptation to organizational stress. As predicted, there was some support for the proposal that high levels of appraised stress would have a negative effect on well-being. There was also some support for the proposed effects of resources and coping strategies. Evidence emerged linking both personal resources (self-esteem and internal locus of control) and coping to levels of anxiety, and to a lesser extent, levels of depression. These findings were in accord with the direct effects model. There was no evidence that the level of appraised stress moderated the effect of resources or coping strategies on levels of anxiety and depression.

As predicted, high levels of appraised stress associated with organizational change were linked with high levels of depression. As Folkman (1984) asserts, the judgement that an event is stressful is likely to influence well-being, for the reason that appraisals indicate the extent that an event taxes or exceeds a person's resources. Stress appraisals are typically characterized by anger, fear and threat (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), all of which are emotions described by people experiencing changes to their organizations. Indeed Buono and Bowditch (1989), who have specifically investigated the impact on employees of organizational change in the form of mergers, believe that appraisals of stress pose the greatest costs for both individuals and their organizations. Such results suggest that organizations should attempt to modify employees' perceptions of the level of threat associated with changes to the work environment in an effort to lessen the likelihood that levels of employee adaptation to change will be low.

Self-esteem and control beliefs both had significant main effects on the level of depression. Irrespective of the level of stress, low levels of depression were associated with high self-esteem and internal control beliefs. These results were in accord with expectations, and reflect the fact that, even at low levels of stress, access to personal resources is beneficial. It is possible that such resources not only help a person respond effectively to stress, but also lessen the extent to which the person appraises his or her life circumstances as stressful.

As a measure of qualitative social support, professional support and advice from colleagues was expected to have a buffering effect on levels of employee adaptation to organizational change. However, contrary to some evidence supporting the buffering model (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985), the measure of the perceived availability of professional support did not buffer the negative effects of stress upon individual well-being, nor did it have a direct effect on well-being (as found by other researchers, e.g., Ganster et al., 1986). The present results obviously need to be replicated; however, it can be tentatively suggested that the failure to observe any effects of social support on well-being may be a reflection of the nature of the population under consideration. It can be assumed that lawyers working in law firms are likely to have high levels of job autonomy (i.e., responsible for their own case load etc.), which may limit the extent to which support from professional colleagues can help buffer the negative effects of stress on well-being. It should also be noted that the present study did not focus specifically on support available from superiors. As found by Terry et al. (1992), this source of support was most likely to buffer the negative effects of work stress. It is possible that superiors such as senior partners in legal firms may be in a better position than other colleagues to change the situation or reduce its impact on the individual.

Strong support was found for the proposed direct effects of the two types of coping upon employee adaptation. A reliance on emotion-focused coping had a negative effect on well-being (see also Israel et al., 1989), and contrary to weaker evidence for the role of problem-focused coping in organizational contexts (e.g., Innes & Kitto, 1989; Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988), lawyers who used problem-focused strategies had lower levels of anxiety and depression. The fact that there was strong support for the proposed effects of problem-focused coping could be a function of the fact that

the present study employed a widely used measure of problem-focused coping. A limitation of previous studies on the effects of coping in the workplace is that they have tended to employ measures of coping developed specifically for use in a particular study. Often these measures comprise of only a few items (e.g., Kirmeyer & Doherty, 1988),.

The strength of findings linking problem-focused coping to well-being observed in the present study could also be a reflection of the type of change that was occurring and the population under consideration. As reported by Folkman and Lazarus (1980), problem-focused coping is more likely to predominate in situations that are appraised as changeable. Organizational change is typically a long process in which two to five years need to pass before a "refreezing" occurs in the organizational structure. There is often considerable fine-tuning of various changes over this time, and those who remain with the organization can have many opportunities to modify changes towards improving effeciency and profitability. There is also evidence (e.g., Callan & Dickson, in press) that professionally educated employees, like lawyers, seem to prefer to use problem-oriented approaches to cope with changes to their work environment. In addition, senior staff in organizations are expected to be able to manage their own affairs, being proactive, flexible and innovative in their approach to general work activities (Kotter, 1982; Kanter, 1983). Periods of organizational change tend to reinforce these role expectations, especially when there are clear and supportive messages from leaders about the value of empowerment, and the need for staff to contribute creatively to managing the change process (Burns, 1978).

Our findings highlight the value of specific personality traits and cognitive coping strategies upon helping individuals adjust to change to their organizations. In particular, people can be taught and encouraged to be more proactive and problem-focused in their efforts to deal with change events that threaten their well-being. There is no doubt that these coping strategies can not only be a feature of management training programs, but also principles like empowerment and delegation of authority can be used to change organizational cultures to be more risk taking, and so more tolerant of employee efforts to gain control of change. At the same time, there are obviously other variables that need to be further considered as key determinants of more successful efforts in coping with organizational change and merger. Buono and Dowditch (1989), for instance, raise the importance of employee

expectations about change, especially the perceived violation of understandings and psychological contacts that employees have about the nature and pace of change. Perceptions of equity and deprivation need to be further considered in conceptualisations of the coping process, as well as the role of the organization in helping employee adjustment through communication programs that provide accurate and current information about the change (see Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Further consideration of coping resources and strategies, as well as other situational variables like employee perceptions and organizational initiatives to support the change, are necessary towards establishing a more robust explanation of individual responses to organizational change.

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Table 1. Correlations between predictor variables and scale reliabilities

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Professional support	.75						
2.	Self-confidence	.07	.72					
3.	Self-esteem	.10	.25*	.85				
4.	Locus of control	-.05	.32**	.15	.68			
5.	Appraised stressfulness	.07	.03	-.12	.10	a		
6.	Emotion-focused coping	-.14	.05	-.19	-.03	-.00	.72	
7.	Problem-focused coping	.01	.21*	.10	.29**	.07	.42**	.64

a. Single item scale, alpha coefficient not calculated.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 2. **Multiple regression predicting measures of psychological adaptation: Main effects model**

	Anxiety			Depression		
Variable	beta	R^2	R^2 Change	beta	R^2	R^2 Change
Resources		.10	.10		.19**	.19**
Professional support	.03			-.12		
Self-confidence	-.14			-.01		
Self-esteem	-.06			-.23*		
Internality	-.11			-.29*		
Situational factors		.19*	.09*		.26**	.08
Stress of change	.02			.24*		
Emotion-focused coping	.30*			.10		
Problem-focused coping	-.30*			-.18*		

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$