CHAPTER 16

Women’s Coping: Communal Versus Individualistic Orientation

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16.1 STRESSORS IN THE WORKPLACE

Although women have been entering the workplace in steadily increasing numbers since the beginning of the twentieth century, even in this twenty-first century, the examination of how work affects people has continued to be conducted from a gender-segregated perspective. Studies of men at work have tended to focus on the influence of work itself on men. In contrast, studies of women at work have tended to focus on role strain that women experience from being torn between work and home (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Simon, 1992; Thoits, 1992). This segregation was more reasonable when most working men had women at home shoring up the non-work related aspects of their lives. Hence, their stress may have been more clearly based on work itself. However, when the vast majority of couples (at least in the USA) have both partners working in the paid workforce, this distinction is no longer valid.

More recent research has attempted to compare men’s and women’s work experiences (Barnett et al., 1993), and there is much to be said for this approach. By comparing men and women who perform similar jobs and who
have similar home lives, we might better understand the influence of work per se. In such tests, the limited number of studies conducted to date suggest that there are few differences in the stress experienced by men and women at work or in its influence on them (Barnett et al., 1993; Rodin & Ickovics, 1990; Wethington & Kessler, 1989).

Nevertheless, this picture is also unsatisfying because although the effects of work on men and women who are directly comparable is one key focus for research, it does not represent the current picture of men’s and women’s experiences with work. Men tend to be in more senior positions, have greater autonomy, spend fewer hours on household labour, receive more pay and hold more supervisory positions (Blumberg, 1991; Grossman & Chester, 1990; Powell, 1988). Even when they hold the same job, men tend to be given greater autonomy and are more likely to be given leadership roles, rather than maintenance tasks (Powell, 1988). Women are more likely to have to move to accommodate their partner’s career opportunities, be subjected to sexual harassment, and have to accommodate special demands when reproductive health issues appear to interfere with company policy (i.e., pregnancy considered a problem, whereas men’s greater incidence of alcoholism and heart disease is not considered a gender relevant concern). In addition, women are more likely to be expected to take time off work for care of an ill child or parent (even her spouse’s parent), and are more likely to be expected to take time away from their careers for child rearing.

Psychology has further blurred the study of how women are affected by work through applying individualistic models of stress and coping to the study of women’s workplace experiences. This chapter focuses on this theme and discusses the literature on women’s stress and coping by introducing a communal perspective to our evaluation. In particular, there has been an almost exclusive emphasis on the study of the individual’s perceived control in the workplace, to the point that few other psychological dimensions of either the work environment or people’s response to it have been studied (Karasek et al., 1981, 1987). This is not to say that the lack of control influences men, but not women. LaCroix and Haynes (1984) found that the situation of high demand and low control in the workplace increased women’s risk of coronary heart disease (CHD), compared to women in job situations of low demand and high control. Men’s CHD in these studies was not found to be differentially affected by levels of demand and control. Moreover, women employed in jobs with high demand, low control and low social support have been found to experience the largest deterioration in health status and health outcomes across the board, and these specific work environments contributed to declines in health functioning over time (Cheng et al., 2000). High-demand/low-control work environments have similarly
been associated with women’s reports of greater cigarette smoking and chest pain (Biener et al., 1986; Haynes et al., 1987). These studies, however, tend to focus on clerical workers, a category in which women are overrepresented and which may provide particularly low levels of autonomy and compensation. Hence, the studies may actually represent the risk of a given occupational category, and not of the general lack of control. Furthermore, studies have equated role ambiguity or clarity of supervisors as indicators of control, whereas many low-control situations are neither ambiguous nor unclear.

The primary question that we raise is whether control and individual action are the central variables to study in order to understand women’s experience of stress in the workplace.

Miller (1980) found that control was more a concern for men than for women. For men, job satisfaction was associated with positional authority, having decision-making power, and not having close supervision. For women, high job satisfaction was associated with the use of thought and independent judgement, and the opportunity to utilize skills and ability.

Another way to look at the influence of work experiences on men’s and women’s lives is to take a cultural perspective. The workplace is traditionally dominated by a male culture, which is based not on the team model that is marketed by personnel departments, but on an individualistic, dominance-based model. Power and authority are the main themes in this culture. Even when people work together, status and hierarchical relationships predominate. To the extent that there exists a distinguishable women’s culture, it does not seem to differ from the current workplace culture on the need for esteem or the value of success. Rather, women tend to both offer and receive support more often and more effectively than men (Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993; Kessler et al., 1985). They tend to be more willing to work with a team, rather than dominate the team (Powell, 1988; Radecki & Jennings, 1980), and they are more likely to consider others’ needs, as well as their own. This is not to say that there is not appreciable overlap between men’s and women’s cultures. Even when collectivistic and individualistic cultures that characterize Eastern versus Western cultures are compared, considerable overlap exists, at the same time that they are distinctive (Triandis et al., 1990).

In this chapter we examine how stress affects women and how coping may moderate the effects of that stress. We also explore the underlying assumptions of the individualistic model of stress and coping, and contrast them with a model that incorporates both individualism and communalism. Our own multiaxial model of coping is presented as an alternative structure that provides a different perspective on the experience of stress and how coping strategies may operate in response to stress.
16.2 EXAMINING THE MODEL OF RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM

Coping behaviours play an important role in people’s response to stress (Endler & Parker, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McCrae & Costa, 1986). However, the influence of coping is still not well understood, and research regarding its influence has tended to be atheoretical (Carver et al., 1989; Schwarzer & Schwarzer, 1996). In particular, we criticize current methods as being tuned to an individualistic perspective that sociologically has been termed ‘rugged individualism’. Rugged individualism pits man against the elements in his fight for survival. This perspective esteems control and action and ignores social and communal aspects of coping (Riger, 1993). Important gender and ethnic differences in coping are missed by adopting this Lone Ranger, ‘man against the elements’ perspective. Esteeming individualism asserts two underlying assumptions. As Riger (1993, p. 280) writes:

A great deal of research in psychology rests on the assumption that the healthy individual is one who is self-contained, independent and self-reliant, capable of asserting himself and influencing his environment.

Coping research, particularly that conducted on stress in the workplace, has promoted this perspective, with an emphasis on active, problem-focused coping. That problem-focused efforts may even be antisocial and affect others negatively or sabotage potential support has been ignored (Lane & Hobfoll, 1992). Some coping scales even categorize such behaviours as ‘Visit a friend’ and ‘Spend time with a special person’ as types of avoidant coping (Endler & Parker, 1990). It is instructive that avoidant coping, as measured by this scale, was related to negative outcomes for men, but unrelated to negative outcomes for women.

Secondly, individualism denies the influence of the environment. Sampson (1993, p. 12) writes:

Effort is expended in developing precise ways to measure and assess individual psychological states and perceptions and to evaluate individual behavior outcomes. The social context within which these individual perceptions and activities take place is put off to the side, occasionally alluded to, but rarely if ever systematically addressed.

Coping research suggests that when action is not chosen, the alternatives are either avoidance or ‘passive’ attempts to reduce discomforting emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These alternative strategies are the most strongly related to psychological outcomes, with more avoidance and emotion-focused coping producing greater psychological distress (Endler &
Parker, 1990; Freedy et al., 1992). Research has suggested that men are more likely to adopt actions designed to alter the problem, whereas women are more likely to cope by managing their emotional responses to stress or by using avoidance (Billings & Moos, 1984; Endler & Parker, 1990; Stone & Neale, 1984). Some have suggested that these gender differences result from the action demands that men experience versus the emotional demands that women encounter because of the different role settings they typically occupy (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Roth & Cohen, 1986). However, we argue that, because the underlying models are based on individualism, the positive things that women are more likely to do are never measured.

16.3 THE STRESS OF WORK AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WOMEN

With more women entering the labour force, women are being confronted with workplace stressors that are shared with men, as well as stressors unique to their gender. Although they may share particular work-related stressors, men and women may perceive and react to these stressors differently according to their social support resources and coping orientation.

Both male and female employees experience stressors related to such variables as: (i) role ambiguity, involving a lack of clarity about job roles, expectations or criteria in order to perform adequately; (ii) role conflict, where directives are incompatible and conflicting, or when available resources are insufficient to meet job demands; (iii) role overload, which involves having too many demands, and may include time pressure; and (iv) lack of autonomy, resulting from significant supervisor control combined with limited opportunity to participate in decision making (Billings & Moos, 1982).

Although the specific ways in which men and women react to and choose to cope with these shared stressors may differ, in general, all can contribute to a sense of job dissatisfaction, and may have a variety of additional implications. For example, chronic job-related stress can result in job tedium, burnout and reduced efficiency, motivation and productivity (Akabas, 1988; Maslach, 1982; Pines & Aronson, 1981). The working environment itself plays a role in creating demands and restraints that cause the depletion of resources (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, in press), and research has shown that high demands and a lack of resources at the workplace also are contributing factors to employee burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Physical health problems and somatic complaints, as well as various mental health problems (e.g. anxiety, depression, marital discord) also have been linked to workplace stressors (House & Wells, 1978; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; LaRocco & Jones, 1978; LaRocco et al., 1980; Repetti et al., 1989).
When studies began to address the impact of employment specifically for women, research focused less on the specific workplace stressors mentioned above, and more on the addition of the employee role to those of wife and mother. Conceptualizations of multiple roles for women included the scarcity hypothesis (Goode, 1960), where a greater number of roles is likely to deplete limited resources, with negative consequences for women's health and well-being, and the enhancement hypothesis (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974), where an increased number of roles provides greater potential to access resources (e.g., self-esteem, social status, financial gains), and the ability to delegate obligations required by the various roles. More roles, therefore, provide expanded opportunities that are likely to result in greater health benefits (Gove & Zeiss, 1987; Thoits, 1983; Verbrugge, 1982).

Gender differences in work–family conflict are related to both the nature of women’s unique gender roles and differences in perceptions of their roles. Unlike men, who report that their single most important responsibility is providing financially for their families, women report that caring for children and managing household responsibilities are equal in importance to contributing to the family’s financial resources (Perry-Jenkins, 1993; Perry-Jenkins & Crouter, 1990). When examining the health of women, the perceived quality of women’s social roles has been found to be more important than the number of roles per se (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Baruch et al., 1987). Barnett and Hyde (2001) suggest that quality of social roles may be influenced by many variables related to increased financial, social and personal opportunities for women, expanded worldview, increased sense of self-complexity and greater similarities between self and husband, and individual differences in gender-role ideology. Additionally, it is not only the woman’s appraisal of the quality of her social roles that is significant; the perception of others has an impact as well. Grandey, Cordeiro and Crouter (2005) explored the association between gender roles and job satisfaction through the use of spousal ratings wherein each couple reported the extent to which their spouse’s work interfered with family time and energy. A significant negative association was detected between wives’ job satisfaction and their husband’s ratings of how the wife’s work interfered with family. This finding suggests that assumptions regarding gender-prescribed roles such as taking care of the family can become problematic for a woman if her husband perceives that she is in violation of that role. The woman then may reason that the inability to fulfill that role is due to her job, which leads to low job satisfaction. On the other hand, wives also rated their husbands’ work as affecting family life, but this acknowledgment did not result in husbands experiencing lower job satisfaction. This type of attribution related to gender roles is an experience that primarily affects women; therefore, it is essential when addressing coping orientation to look
not only at the job-related stressors common among men and women, but also at the home and workplace stressors that are unique to working women. This provides information about how women assess the quality of their roles, and can give clues to the special support needs of employed women.

16.4 JOB-RELATED STRESSORS UNIQUE TO WOMEN

Management typically portrays the workplace as gender neutral, but there is ample evidence that gender bias exists on both overt and more subtle levels. This bias contributes to the special stressors facing working women. First, there is limited appreciable promotion of women to higher organizational ranks (Cowan, 1989; Grant, 1988; Kim, 1994). Hence, regardless of the fact that the opportunities for and acceptance of women in the workplace have improved, the glass ceiling effect remains, and women still are not well integrated in many organizational systems. Even where women work in traditional female professions, such as nursing, teaching, housekeeping and food service, the management is male dominated (Powell, 1988). In some instances, a ‘men’s club’ mentality has resulted in outright discrimination and sexual harassment. The tendency is for managers to underrate and underreward women compared to men with identical credentials (Bhatnagar, 1988; Lott, 1985; Rosenfield & Stephan, 1978). Even with the same job, in the same occupation, women’s earnings are typically lower than those of men (Kim, 1994; Kim, 1989; Powell, 1988). Indeed, this compensation gap increases as women ascend the corporate ladder into the executive ranks (Kim, 1994).

16.5 WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Research has shown that employees with strong social support are healthier and more resistant to workplace stress and its effects. Employment conditions should promote, rather than undermine, workplace support in order to preserve the resources and resiliency of the employees (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, in press). However, the existence of discrimination, sexual harassment and the glass ceiling are factors that indicate an underlying lack of institutional support for women. An absence of support for women is further evidenced by the paucity of family-friendly initiatives, ranging from childcare assistance and leave for the caretaking of sick family members, to job relocation for both members of dual-income families (Cowan, 1989). Provisions that have been developed such as flexi-time and flexi-place programmes are not widespread and do not appear to ease the burden of work–family conflict for women with major family responsibilities (Beutell & Greenhaus, 1986).
In terms of access to workplace support on an interpersonal level, women have an apparent disadvantage when compared to men. Several studies have demonstrated that workplace support has been more effective in limiting work-related stress for men than for women (Baruch et al., 1987; Etzion, 1984; House, 1981). Geller and Hobfoll (1994) examined gender differences in the amount and effectiveness of interpersonal work support. Despite the fact that the men and women in this study reported receiving similar amounts of support from their coworkers and supervisors, men benefited more from these support sources. It is possible that men benefit more from their work relationships because they may interact with their colleagues on a more informal level, which House (1981) suggests may be most effective in the prevention of work stress and its negative consequences. Because individualistic characteristics are so highly valued in the workplace, and because men are inclined toward this individualistic orientation, support may be provided more genuinely among men and may be more effective since it can involve mutual exchange and spontaneous acts, rather than role-required behaviour. Some of the negative sequelae of women’s limited access to effective, interpersonal work support include social isolation, difficulty finding mentors and decreased status in the workplace (Bhatnagar, 1988).

16.6 EMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUALISTIC ORIENTATION IN THE WORKPLACE

The emphasis on individualistic characteristics as opposed to communal qualities may present a key obstacle to women obtaining necessary institutional, as well as interpersonal, workplace social support. Gupta et al. (1983) have argued that social problems such as women’s social isolation and difficulty finding mentors may be tied to women’s inability to gain access to the ‘old boys’ network’ of advancement, which involves off-the-job social and extracurricular activities essential for recognition, acceptance and promotion in most organizations. In large part, this may stem from expectations for employees to act according to the individualistic-male model of managerial success, which includes agenic characteristics such as self-reliance and dominance. Simultaneously, there are covert messages punishing women for exhibiting these male gender role traits. At the same time, however, communal characteristics, such as nurturance and interdependence, are not coping traits that are valued in most organizations (Grant, 1988). Put another way, women are paradoxically excluded from the one communal element of work—the ‘old boys’ network’—because their behaviour is deemed too communal and not individualistic enough, but punished for exhibiting the esteemed traits more commonly exhibited by their male colleagues.
According to some authors, conflicting expectations at work place women in an irresolvable dilemma. If they want to retain people’s approval, they must demonstrate such qualities of female gender role as warmth and expressiveness. If they want to succeed professionally, however, they must act according to the individualistic, power-centred model by being assertive, competitive and firm (Bhatnagar, 1988; Grant, 1988).

Investigators assessing factors contributing to the provision of support found that assertive coping may attract support (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990). Individuals who cope more actively and are less passive are given greater support in response to their efforts. This might suggest that assertive women demonstrating characteristics of agency would be best able to access workplace support. However, both men and women have been socialized to expect the gentle and empathic, communal role in women (Martin et al., 1983). In addition, if women’s assertiveness is misread as aggressive, they may alienate and anger potential supporters.

Despite the fact that people prefer to interact with and support individuals whom they perceive to possess similar characteristics, women seem to be less positively evaluated by males, even when they exhibit traits of an individualistic orientation deemed necessary for business success (Eagly et al., 1992). Mathison (1986) found that women were actually more negative toward an assertive woman than were men. This phenomenon may be attributed to the different goals that people believe are achieved by association with men and women in the work domain. In the interpersonal domain, both men and women prefer supportive relationships with women (Reis et al., 1985). If women are perceived as compassionate and sensitive, they can best provide interpersonal support. If men are perceived as competent and powerful, they are best able to provide work support (Bhatnagar, 1988), so their assertive orientation may be evaluated more positively in work settings.

In one of the few experimental investigations of how assertive men and women are evaluated in the workplace, Geller and Hobfoll (1993) found evidence of a double bias, with each gender preferring to mentor and offer support to their own gender. They suggest that this may represent a historical change in women’s socialization. Due to increased awareness and sensitivity to problems such as the glass ceiling and lack of mentors, women may be recognizing a need for increased camaraderie. Women also may be developing increased understanding and acceptance of women adopting a more individualistic orientation. As men do not share women’s plight, they either may not be experiencing this change, or may be experiencing it more slowly. However, since males hold the majority of key supervisory positions at this time, these findings support the fact that women are at a disadvantage in terms of organizational advancement. More research in this area seems warranted.
The focus on stress in working women’s home lives has been on inadequate household assistance from their partners. Women with families often have additional home burden because: (i) women’s traditional core role has involved household responsibilities (Barnett & Baruch, 1987); and (ii) working men have been slow to pick up the slack at home. Typically, women take responsibility for much more of the family’s home labour even when both members of a dual-career couple have full-time jobs (Cowan, 1989; Pleck, 1985; Powell, 1988). The most striking finding is that women spend more than twice as much time on housework and childcare than men. Although the husbands of employed wives are increasing their proportion of total family labour, the increase is due to wives’ decreased participation, rather than to husbands’ greater time commitments. Also, although men are increasing their number of child contact hours, women still perform the vast majority of childcare and household tasks. This unequal division of household labour contributes an average of 10 additional work hours each week to the schedules of employed women.

In addition to the roles of spouse and parent, it is women who typically take on additional family-related roles and responsibilities. For example, women’s communal orientation makes them more likely than men (e.g., their husbands, partners or brothers) to become the primary caretaker for an elderly or sick family member, even when the family member is more closely related to the woman’s partner or spouse (e.g., mother-in-law). With the increasing number of ageing Americans, more women are becoming primary caretakers for their children and their ageing parents, in addition to holding a full-time job.

### 16.8 WORK–FAMILY ROLE CONFLICT

For both men and women, family life is usually the most important aspect (Barnett & Baruch, 1987), and, along with job satisfaction, is a significant predictor of general life satisfaction (Gutek et al., 1988). Yet, working women often feel conflicted about the combination of these roles. Kinnunen, Geurts and Mauno (2004) noted that a major source of conflict for women in terms of work–family balance was the combination of having a family and also a highly demanding job. This conflict emerged primarily with regard to women, as it was found that for men, issues with work–family balance are not as challenging. Because women have stronger personal, social and societal pressure to adhere to the roles focusing on family and household tasks, it is working women more so than working men who experience the
strains of competing work and family demands (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Beutell & Greenhaus, 1986).

Three different types of conflict that relate to the work–family role dilemma have been described (Beutell & Greenhaus, 1986; Gutek et al., 1988). The first, time-based conflict, involves the distribution of time, energy and opportunities between the occupational and family roles. Here, scheduling is difficult and time is restricted because the demands and the behaviours required to enact them are incompatible. Women often experience fatigue since the two roles compete for personal resources. The second conflict has been termed strain-based conflict, referring to the spillover of strain, or an emotional state that is generated in one role, into the performance of another role. Behaviour-based conflict, the third type of work–family conflict, refers to the incompatible sets of behaviours an individual has for work and for family. Because of these separate set of behaviours, women often find it difficult to shift gears from one role to another.

For some women, their career commitment has resulted in changed priorities, in which equal priority for home and work roles replaces the traditional preference for the home role (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Some less traditionally minded women resolve the dilemma by giving the career precedence over their family whenever the two conflict. Other women, and they are increasing in number, are choosing to deal with this work–family conflict by not having a family at all (Gutek et al., 1988; Powell, 1988).

Most common, however, are women who cope with their conflict at the work–family interface by over-adhering to gender-role stereotypes at home. Due to their communal orientation, many women do not view their jobs as justification for attending less to their families and household work. Therefore, they feel personal pressure that causes them to feel guilt and anxiety when they cannot fulfil all of their responsibilities. These women believe that in addition to being “super-professionals”, they have to be “super-mothers” and “superhomemakers” (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Because childcare is hard to find, expensive and often fails, working women who are single parents or have children with a disability are likely to experience greater stress resulting from the work–family conflict (Goldberg et al., 1992).

16.9 HOME-BASED SUPPORT

Researchers have concluded that employment is associated with improved mental health for women only if partner support is received, as reflected by a favourable attitude toward women working and as demonstrated by an equitable division of household labour (Kessler & McRae, 1982; Ross et al., 1983). In addition, several studies have demonstrated that family support has
been most effective in reducing work stress for women, while work-related sources of support have been most effective in the attenuation of these effects among men (Baruch et al., 1987; Etzion, 1984; House, 1981). Help-seeking coping used at home has been associated with less interference of family with work in a mixed-gender sample, though help-seeking coping is not associated with less interference of work with family (Rotondo, Carlson & Kincaid, 2003).

Geller and Hobfoll (1994) found that household assistance from partners was related to women reporting greater tedium and work-related stress – a counterintuitive finding that also has been noted in research by Baruch and Barnett (1986) and Hochschild and Machung (1989). There are several possibilities that may account for this finding. First, the support that is provided to women by their partners must correspond to their needs (Cohen & McKay, 1985; Cutrona, 1990). It may be that the household assistance women receive is too low to meet their needs, or that another aspect of support, such as emotional support, is needed and expected, but not provided. The stress experienced by many women may also be so great that the household support may come too late to be effective. When resources are overtaxed, social support reserves may be less effective. If partner assistance does not fit the needs of women adequately, this may actually result in greater strain. According to Parry (1986), employment can reduce the risk of psychological symptoms caused by stressful life events when support is sufficient, but results in increased symptoms when adequate support is unavailable. Another possibility is that women who report receiving the greatest amounts of household assistance may be receiving ‘high hassle support’ (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994). Although women may be receiving assistance, the positive aspects may be associated with stress, and may overshadow the perceived helpfulness of the support. For example, if a woman must consistently remind her partner to complete household chores, or if he does them inadequately, frustration may develop and the woman may need to redo the task. Additionally, women may have difficulty accepting household assistance from their partners due to their communal orientation. Receiving a great deal of assistance may be interpreted by working women to mean they are failing at their ‘real’ role as wife and mother. Feelings of guilt and failure may contribute to the experience of greater strain.

16.10 COMMUNAL ORIENTATION: DEVELOPING A COLLECTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

Despite the fact that the existing literature is filled with references to women being more communally oriented as opposed to men, who tend to be more
individualistic, few attempts have been made to study coping behaviour in a way that considers both perspectives. The existing literature has persisted in portraying individualistic coping as the most desirable and most effective approach. Furthermore, despite the fact that investigators have repeatedly found that men and women cope in similar ways and report equal use of problem-focused coping (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985; Folkman et al., 1986a,b; Forsythe & Compas, 1987), the literature has persisted in portraying men as effective, individualistic copers and women as ineffective, emotional copers.

Women’s active, direct coping has been ignored, as well as any results suggesting that men use ineffective means of coping. For instance, Parkes (1990) found that men reported more use of suppression coping than did women; in other words, men reported more use of withdrawal, restraint, compromise and ignoring the problem. Carver et al. (1989) found that men were more likely than women to use alcohol and drug disengagement, and Hobfoll et al. (1994) found that men reported more aggressive rather than assertive coping. Despite these findings, men have been consistently portrayed as being good copers.

This bias is seen even more clearly in the workplace coping literature. The majority of this research has focused on Caucasian, middle-class males to the almost total exclusion of women (Long, 1990; Long et al., 1992). Even studies investigating the impact of unemployment have centred on men, despite the fact that women are more likely to lose their jobs. The impact of this has not been investigated because women are assumed to be less affected (Leana & Feldman, 1991).

Hobfoll and colleagues have addressed this issue in a line of research presenting a new model of coping, and a companion coping instrument, developed to investigate coping from both individualistic and communal viewpoints, rather than emphasizing either approach. This work has allowed investigation of how well the traditional male-biased, individualistic assumptions regarding coping actually represent the realm of coping behaviour.

16.11 THE MULTIAXIAL MODEL OF COPING

To study coping in a context that allows for both individualistic and communal orientations, we developed the multiaxial model of coping and a companion test instrument, the Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS). We began with a dual-axis model (Hobfoll et al., 1994), with the two axes representing active–passive and prosocial–antisocial dimensions. A communal orientation would suggest that the active–prosocial orientation would be the most effective.
Active–antisocial action might be personally productive, but might also alienate others, be destructive to social networks, and eventually backfire on the individual. Passive–prosocial orientations could support others, but might not lead to goal-directed behaviour for the individual. Passive–antisocial behaviour could be the most destructive, both personally and socially, but might be adopted in a defensive strategy.

Expanding this model, we added another dimension, that of directness. The multiaxial model is depicted in Figure 16.1. A communal perspective suggests that, even when being active, behaviour may be either direct or indirect. For example, in Japanese culture it is socially inappropriate to embarrass your business opponent. Hence, it is common practice to manipulate the environment indirectly so that your company gains an advantage without the other company losing face (Weisz et al., 1984). Such environmental manipulations demand great activity and a goal-directed posture, but they are performed indirectly and behind the scenes. Similarly, in African-American culture, people’s actions may be aimed at altering settings to enhance others’ well-being, rather than directly aiming actions at the people themselves (Dressler, 1985).

As depicted in Figure 16.1, not all octants of the model are believed to fully occur. Prior research did not find appreciable evidence for people who are extremely passive to be either prosocial or antisocial, but relatively passive behaviour was at times linked to prosocial or passive–antisocial coping.
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(Hobfoll et al., 1994). This may be because when people become passive they become asocial, rather than prosocial or antisocial. By being passive, one simply does not act towards others. We had expected a passive–aggressive kind of coping to occur, but this may be depicted better in our current model by being indirect and antisocial, rather than by seeing someone as passive and antisocial. As people become more active, their demeanour with regard to the social environment becomes more relevant according to the model. Hence, people can be active and either prosocial or antisocial in carrying out those actions.

16.12 HOW THE MULTIAXIAL MODEL OF COPING CHANGES COMMON COPING ASSUMPTIONS

Applying the multiaxial model of coping challenges certain assumptions that have been inherent in the basis of coping research to date.

Assumption 1: Perhaps one of the more commonly held assumptions is that it is best to approach goals through active problem solving.

Particularly in Western cultures, attacking the problem is the valued approach to dealing with almost any situation. Any other approach would most likely be considered weak coping at best. This assumption is likely responsible for the existing literature’s focus on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) defined problem-focused coping as managing the stressor, while they defined emotion-focused coping as dealing with the emotional consequences of the stress. Although it was initially assumed that men were more likely to use problem-focused coping and women were more likely to use emotion-focused coping, subsequent research has failed to consistently support this (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman et al., 1986a; Vitaliano et al., 1987).

Despite these findings to the contrary, the perception that men cope in problem-focused manners and women cope in emotion-focused manners has persisted. This perception has often been interpreted as suggesting that men cope actively and directly with whatever stressors they meet, while women cope passively, through only worrying about their feelings and thereby failing to cope. Thus, this focus on an individualistic perspective has lent support to positive attitudes towards the ways in which men cope and negative attitudes towards the ways in which women cope.

Approaching the same issue, that of how actively people cope, from a less individualistic perspective results in a less pejorative view of coping for women, while continuing to present men’s coping in a positive way.
A more communal view of active coping would involve approaching goals through shared problem solving. Shared problem solving, as it implies, involves people addressing the stressor together, either through joint action or through joint planning. Turning to others for support, either primarily instrumental or primarily emotional, would be included in such efforts. In addition, offering support to others is part of shared problem solving.

Hobfoll (1988) found that perceived social support reinforces one’s own personal resources for dealing with stress. In addition, having the support of others provides the opportunity to benefit from their strengths and resources. Although social support has often been considered a strategy for coping only with problems outside the workplace, several investigators have found that it is an important component of dealing with workplace stress as well. For instance, Long et al. (1992) found that individuals who perceived high emotional support from coworkers reported lower levels of occupational stress, along with better physical and mental health. Social support in the workplace has also been found to be negatively associated with work–family conflict (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999). Lack of workplace social support, when coupled with high work demands, was found to be associated with high work-related stress (Parkes, 1990), while presence of workplace social support was found to enhance active coping strategies (Long, 1990). Similarly, Dunahoo et al. (1998) found that social joining acted as a buffer against depression in situations of high stress, thus leaving those who used social joining strategies to cope with high-stress situations less depressed than those who did not.

Research has supported the assertion that shared problem solving can be an effective means of coping. Stone and Neale (1984) found that seeking social support was positively correlated with direct action. Hobfoll (1988) reported that perception of social support reinforces personal resources. Sarason et al. (1983) found that use of social support as a means of coping was associated with positive self-concepts, low anxiety and higher perceived mastery. Thus, it is likely that social support allows those who utilize it to be better able to draw upon their own resources as well as relying on the assistance of others.

Further support for the effectiveness of shared problem solving is offered by other studies as well. Vitaliano and colleagues (1990) found that individuals with psychopathology tend to cope in maladaptive ways, which included less support seeking. McLaughlin et al. (1988) found that for women who hold dual roles (having both a career and a marriage), good marital adjustment was associated with more overall coping and less psychological distress. They suggested that one explanation for this finding may be that shared problem solving in a marriage leads to better outcomes. Additionally, Dunahoo et al. (1998) found that social joining as a means of coping was associated with less anxiety and depression.
Another alternative to the assumption that individualistic action aimed at problem solving is always best is the concept that it is better to be sensitive to the environmental constraints and choose one’s responses according to the situation. The assumption that problem-focused forms of coping are always effective and emotion-focused forms of coping are always ineffective has been shown to be inaccurate. Although direct, individualistic approaches to problem solving may often be valued in a business setting, such approaches would be considered inappropriate in dealing with the types of stressors that typically occur in childrearing, educational and interpersonal settings. If team play is actually valued in work settings, these same behaviours may be equally counterproductive in the work domain.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) suggest that some problems may not even be responsive to individualistic approaches and may in fact require communal approaches. Lazarus and Folkman have repeatedly asserted that stress and coping need to be considered with a transactional approach where the interaction between the person and the environment is recognized (e.g., Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1987; Lazarus, 1966). Researchers have found that, not only does coping differ by the situation in which the stressful event occurs (Folkman et al., 1986a; Hobfoll et al., 1994), but that the effectiveness of different means of coping differs by situation as well (Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). For example, problem-focused coping has been shown to be a particularly effective approach only in situations in which people have control or can change the situation (Compas et al., 1988; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Miller & Kirsch, 1987; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Thus, it appears to be more adaptive and effective for individuals to be flexible in the ways in which they cope (Parkes, 1990). Ginter et al. (1989) investigated this issue and found that resourceful individuals varied their coping efforts according, to some degree at least, to situational characteristics. These individuals also reported fewer behavioural, cognitive and physical symptoms of stress.

Assumption 2: An assumption that often goes along with the assumption that direct problem solving is always the best approach is that it is best to be aggressive.

We contend that it is better to be assertive. Assertiveness is defined as behaviour that shows confidence and firmness, without being unnecessarily forceful or belligerent. Aggressiveness, in contrast, is typified by behaviour that is both strong and hostile to others. Assertive responses to stressors allow effective coping while still considering the effects one’s behaviour has on others. Dunahoo et al. (1998) found that whereas use of assertive action was associated with lower levels of reported depression and anxiety, aggressive
and antisocial action were associated with greater anger. In another study, confrontive coping was positively associated with the existence of psychological symptoms (Folkman et al., 1986b). Lending additional support to the need to consider coping from a communal perspective, Long (1990) found that active coping in the workplace was enhanced when accompanied by assertive action and the perception of interpersonal support in the workplace.

Substituting assertive coping strategies for aggressive ones allows people to cope with their own stressors without harming others in the process. In fact, assertive responding allows one to cope and still be supportive of others. This leads to better interpersonal relations with coworkers, possibly resulting in more opportunities for shared problem solving in the future. In addition, better relations with coworkers are likely to result in more shared resources, both instrumental and emotional, being available to everyone in the future.

**Assumption 3:** Directness is another quality that is valued in individualistic, Western cultures, thus leading to the assumption that it is always best to be direct. Indirectness is often seen as synonymous with inaction.

However, as discussed earlier, in more communal cultures and subcultures, directness is often considered a negative quality. A more acceptable and valued approach to some problems would involve indirect approaches. Direct action is likely to dishonour or anger others. Indirectness would, on the other hand, allow others to 'save face' or maintain feelings of independence and self-sufficiency. The perception that indirectness is synonymous with inaction is inaccurate. Indirect approaches can, and often do, involve active coping. For instance, Dunahoo et al. (1998) found that indirectness was positively associated with active forms of coping.

In addition to approaching stressors indirectly because of differing social values, it is also important to recognize that, even in Western cultures, there are situations where direct action is either inappropriate or impossible. When subordinate employees disagree with their supervisors regarding the best approach for dealing with a workplace problem, it would be self-defeating for the employees to contradict their supervisors’ wishes directly. However, there are indirect approaches that could lead to more successful resolution of the problems while still recognizing the supervisors’ authority. In one study, coping with workplace stress through use of strategies such as withdrawal, restraint, compromise and ignoring the problem was found to be associated with lower levels of somatic and affective symptomatology (Parkes, 1990). The author interpreted this as suggesting that these suppression strategies were adaptive in low-control situations. Although withdrawal and ignoring the problem would be considered avoidant or passive types of coping, it is possible that restraint and compromise represent indirect means.
There are also situations in which a supervisor may accomplish a lot by approaching a problem indirectly. If the problem is approached in a way that reinforces or increases self-esteem and mastery in the subordinate, while also illustrating appropriate responses, the supervisor can accomplish his or her goals and improve the chances of future problems being solved appropriately by the subordinate.

Assumption 4: It is assumed that being bold and quick to respond is best. Cautious action is seen as weak.

However, a bold, quick response could also be considered impulsive. In a complicated social setting, cautious action is often the best course. Organizations often allude to sports teams as their model, and to the extent that the spontaneous, instinctive play that is necessary in football is carried to the workplace, this myth is perpetuated. Impulsive responses in situations for which all avenues of action have not been fully considered show poor judgement and may result in ineffective and possibly negative consequences.

On the other hand, cautiously considering one’s options and proceeding only after weighing the alternatives is likely to result in more control over subsequent events and more efficient coping. Planful problem solving has been found to be negatively correlated with psychological symptomatology (Folkman et al., 1986b). Similarly, while cautious coping was positively associated with social joining and support seeking, making it a prosocial active coping strategy, it was negatively associated with avoidance, illustrating that being cautious is not the same thing as failing to act (Dunahoo et al., 1998). Furthermore, the same authors found that use of instinctive action as a means of coping was associated with higher levels of depression, while use of cautious action guarded against depression and anxiety at higher stress levels.

Assumption 5: The final assumption that will be addressed here is that people should not be too emotional. An implied component of this assumption is that women are too emotional.

Emotionality is typically assumed to interfere with rational responses. Thus, it follows that, if women are assumed to be too emotional, women are also irrational. However, we would contend that emotions are not always a handicap. Being aware of and comfortable with one’s own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, may allow one to cope more effectively with one’s own problems. In addition, this awareness and comfort may permit one to better empathize and support others who are in distress, thus allowing everyone involved to participate more effectively in all types of interpersonal interactions, be they professional or social. In addition, consideration of the emotional side of an issue allows a broader conceptualization. Rather
than limiting attention to only the cognitive and behavioural aspects of the situation, all three dimensions of people’s lives receive consideration. This broader evaluation of stressful events may allow a more accurate assessment of the situational constraints, and thus result in more flexible, adaptive coping. Both of these issues have been addressed previously.

Although only a few assumptions regarding coping behaviour have been presented here, it is hoped that the process of presenting alternative concepts to each of these assumptions has been illustrative. The assumptions in our society are often mirrored in scientific research. These assumptions are often as Eurocentrically-biased as they are male-biased, thus leading to pejorative portrayals of Afrocentric, Hispanic and Asian cultures as well as women. Consideration of coping from both a communal as well as an individualistic perspective should allow the positive aspects of both perspectives to be valued, rather than valuing one perspective over the other.

16.13 IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

A more communal perspective has indeed already entered the workplace, albeit in ways that have not been obviously attributed to this approach. These workplace changes are communal in that they recognize that individuals are not isolated from families, but rather are integral members of their family. They also tie the workplace and family into a common set of goals, recognizing that satisfaction and well-being in one sphere spread to the other sphere. Specifically, if a job interferes with or threatens an individual’s other spheres and valued roles, the work is considered in a negative light because it affects the individual’s sense of self-identity (Grandey, Cordeiro & Crouter, 2005). Therefore, if individuals feel that their job is congruent with those roles that make up their self-identity, then they may be more satisfied and this is likely to impact all aspects of their lives.

Among the most important workplace changes that promote the concept of self-identity and employee well-being are flexi-time and flexi-place. Flexi-time allows workers to alter their schedules, usually ensuring that the maximum number of employees is available at central times of the day in order to aid communication and meetings. Employees can come to work later and stay later, or come to work earlier and leave earlier. Flexi-place has been afforded increased interest by employers with the significant advances in technology and use of computers and because many employees can work out of their homes or satellite offices. This reduces commuter time and workplace expenses for utilities (e.g., energy costs), square footage and furnishings. The press for these changes has increased as women enter the workplace, but is advantageous for both men and women, especially given...
the high percentage of dual-career families. A study by Winett et al. (1982) indicated that employees derived increased satisfaction from such changes, and this can easily translate to less burnout and greater loyalty to their employers. Given expected ongoing shortage of skilled workers, employers should take heed of these changes, as maintaining a satisfied workforce is critical if employers take the term human resources seriously.

Changes in laws in the USA allowing individuals to take leave time for care of an ill family member is another communally based policy. It allows employees to maintain their connections with the family and the workplace, rather than placing borders between them. It is instructive how aggressively businesses fought this change and lobbied against it. Increased attention to maternity leave, extending paternity leave options and protection of females who are pregnant from losing their positions are other policy changes that have been instituted successfully. This said, our experience with workers suggests that although such policies are allowed, employers often place those who take them (women or men) on a ‘mommy track’ in which they are less seriously regarded for promotion and opportunities or responsibilities that might increase the chances of promotion. It has been shown that policies and arrangements endorsing a balance between work and family are essential for employees; however, simply making the options available for individuals is not enough. It is critical to increase employees’ rights and entitlement to take advantage of those options without unspoken repercussions (Kinnunen et al., 2006).

What has not changed in the workplace is the individualistic attitude that accompanies the ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality. In this regard, there continues to be an emphasis placed on individualistic styles of coping related to aggressiveness and even antisocial action. Many Western companies, particularly in the USA, seem to subscribe to a policy of team play. However, it is unclear how they apply this. Rewards are almost uniformly given for individualistic effort and goal attainment, rather than goal attainment by the group. There appears to be very little ‘team play’ in the team concept.

In basketball terms, it is clear how points for making baskets are tallied, but not how ‘assists’ are recorded and rewarded. But it is assists that result in wins (Melnick, 2001).

In workshops, one of us (S.E.H.) often asks business executives to recall what caused the basketball team, the Chicago Bulls, to win. Respondents, believing themselves knowledgeable about sports, uniformly answer, ‘When Michael Jordan scored points’. The answer is incorrect, as the Bulls tended to lose when Jordan scored big. Rather, they won when he had a balance of points scored and assists made. Assists are when you set up another player to score. It is a critical statistic because it reflects not only points scored, but increasing team motivation. In discussions about how their business scores
assists, executives usually state that this is done informally, or not at all. They want to play as a team, but do not apply the metaphor to practice. Yet, it is clear that supportive work climates which emphasize teamwork produce a less stressed and more involved workforce (Shadur et al., 1999).

Communal intervention implies teaching the use of ‘cautious action’, where the feelings and honour of others is considered paramount. It implies the need to train workers in social joining. This form of coping encourages people to aid others and willingly seek aid of others.

To the extent that individualistic models prevail, this will be viewed as a sign of weakness, rather than strength. The change from one way of coping to the other is fundamental to the cultural milieu of the workplace, and is not easily achieved without directed, thoughtful intervention.

Readers will note that some of these differences are already characteristic of the workplace in some European countries. In that regard, the more socialist leanings of the workplace in Europe have been feared in the USA, with its tradition of rugged individualism. The legal protections afforded workers in such countries as the Netherlands and Sweden are much more communally oriented than what is afforded in the US workplace. Comparing to Japan, these protections may be more cultural, and do not even require laws to uphold them (Fukuyama, 1995).

16.14 CONCLUSIONS

Future research on stress and coping among women in the workplace will need to change along with the changing roles that women are adopting. Just as the workplace inevitably will be altered by the increased representation of women, so too will psychological investigation have to adopt new perspectives that change the basic assumptions of our approach to the study of workplace stress. Just as inevitably, this will also influence men’s workplace coping and the way we look at men, as they will also need to adjust and adapt to new cultural imperatives.

Our principal thesis is that work will become more communal, and the communal aspects of work that have always existed will become more evident. Instead of viewing successful coping with the challenges of work as dependent on individualistic problem solving, we must gain a perspective that includes both individual and collectivist effort. Masquerading as an action orientation, there has been an accompanying set of behaviours that include aggressive and antisocial action, instinctive ‘shoot from the hip’ responses and indirect, antisocial strategies. Whereas the action aspects of this orientation have been well regarded, the negative companion array of behaviours has been ignored. At the same time, communal action, sensitivity
to emotions of the self and others, cautious planning and reasoned action that takes the needs of others into consideration have been demeaned. Even where past research evidence has been available to challenge the ‘men’s club’ climate in our literature review, it is apparent that this evidence has hardly influenced the way in which researchers construe coping in the workplace.

It appears that psychology has adopted similar agenic, male models of seeing the world as has the field of business. This has influenced not only our results and our interpretations, but also the very questions that we ask. When conducting workshops on these topics in business settings, we found that participants uniformly saw team play as integral to work success and productivity. However, when asked how their companies scored ‘assists’ of others in meeting their objectives no one noted their company as evaluating this aspect of behaviour. Similarly, when asked if supervisees were allowed to rate and give feedback to their supervisors (translate to team captains) on their supportive behaviour (or lack thereof), a similar silence was experienced. Given this climate, it is no wonder that limited collectivist styles of coping are chanced by employees. Indeed, many participants reported that when they acted communally by covering for each other’s absences or faux pas, it was done covertly, because such behaviour was officially discouraged or even punished.

Finally, we raise an ethical, value-laden question. In studying the workplace, who is our client and what are our responsibilities? If we discover that communal aspects of coping are palliative for individuals and even lead to workplace productivity and satisfaction, are we bound to advocate these models and confront the male-dominated culture that is omnipresent? Is there a place for our role as social change agents? We cannot attempt to remain safely outside of the fray; failing to make a choice on this issue is not a value-free alternative, because it supports a certain set of values that exists in the status quo. Many psychological consultants have learned that to be invited back to the workplace we must please the purchaser of our services, i.e., senior management – most typically composed of males of a certain social class, ethnicity and culture. This potentially leads to our serving their value system. Because the senior echelons of our universities resemble the workplaces in which we study and consult in terms of their individualistic, male predominance, this is an especially sensitive issue. We must be introspective enough to realize that it has only been with the rise of women in academia that these questions have been posed.

REFERENCES


