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Hierarchical Coping: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Coping Within the Context of Chronic Illness and Disability

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A considerable amount of interest in the construct *coping* has occurred over the past several decades (Billings & Moos, 1981; Byrne, 1964; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Krohne, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mullen & Suls, 1982; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Emerging from the literature is a broad and complex conceptualization of coping, which generally refers to an array of dispositions, strategies, or efforts that people draw on or utilize, when faced with life stressors, in order to increase a sense of well-being and to avoid being harmed by stressful demands. Definitions of the construct encompass a range of personal dispositions, including stable and enduring traits, habitual styles or behavioral patterns, as well as situation-specific cognitive and behavioral efforts that are applied in a given circumstance. The most frequently-cited hypothesis is that coping – in any form – albeit a disposition, style, or effort, is a mediator or moderator of stress and well-being, which explains, in part, the persistent and theoretically-troubling, weak association between stress and well-being.

The taxonomic structure of coping is complex and multi-leveled. Krohne (1996) organized coping formulations into a hierarchical manner with broad, trans-situational coping dispositions comprising a higher level or *macroanalytic* category, and situation-specific, variable coping efforts comprising lower level or *microanalytic* categories. This hierarchical framework allows for the grouping of specific microanalytic coping efforts into broad macroanalytic coping categories. According to Krohne (1996), the macroanalytic approach “operates at a higher level of aggregation, or abstraction, thus concentrating on more fundamental constructs in coping research” (p. 384). In contrast, the microanalytic approach entails a large number of specific coping strategies (Krohne, 1996; Laux & Weber, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). See Figure 3.1 for Krohne’s (1993) hierarchical model of coping.
There is some debate regarding how these coping levels should be investigated. Although Krohne’s hierarchical model illustrates that different conceptual approaches lead to different behavioral strategies, rarely do coping formulations encompass all levels of the hierarchy. Most often, scholars define and investigate one level of coping. Some argue the emphasis should be on lower-level coping mechanisms, because higher-level coping is not situation-specific, and therefore does not adequately explain or predict the variability in coping behavior (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986a; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Indeed, coping at the microanalytic level involves a more complex analysis of the transactional and temporal sequence of the stress–coping process. Nonetheless, others argue that microanalytic coping conceptions lack a theoretical basis, and that to understand and change a person’s specific coping strategy, “a mere description of actual coping behavior with its antecedents and consequences is not satisfactory … Instead, it is crucial to identify the rules that the system follows in regulating itself, and this is only possible when the crucial effect mechanisms [macroanalytic concept] that this process is based on have been previously identified” (Krohne, 1996, pp. 382–383).

Krohne’s framework of hierarchical coping offers a comprehensive yet parsimonious way to organize this multifaceted construct. Therefore, the present chapter will review the history and theoretical background of various coping models that comprise components of this framework, including various macroanalytic and microanalytic coping models. In addition, this chapter will provide a review of the empirical findings regarding these models and conclude with a discussion of the application of these models within the context of CID.

Theoretical and Historical Background

**Macroanalytic Orientation**

The explication of coping from the macroanalytic perspective has a long theoretical and empirical history with roots in psychoanalytic and phenomenological