In recent years, a controversy has evolved concerning the usefulness of the trait concept for predicting a person's actual behavior (see e.g., Alston, 1975; Bem, 1983; Bem & Allen, 1974; Bem & Funder, 1978; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1980; Mischel, 1968, 1973, 1983, 1984; Mischel & Peake, 1982, 1983). This controversy has also influenced paradigms in stress and coping research. There is an increasing tendency to abandon trait concepts (like "repression-sensitization") and, instead, to adopt concepts like coping process or coping strategy to describe and predict stress-related behavior and behavior outcomes (see Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The present chapter includes an analysis of this controversy and deals especially with the question of how far the concept of trait (or, as I prefer to say, "disposition") contributes to the understanding of coping behavior. The chapter is organized around the following topics:

1. Definition of the terms coping and coping strategy.
2. The role of the situation in determining the efficiency of coping acts.
4. Assessment problems related to a dispositional approach.
5. Discussion of the question of whether or not coping strategy and coping disposition really represent mutually exclusive approaches to the measurement of coping.

Definition of Coping

If one tries to define coping, one first faces the problem of the very broad usage of the concept. In fact, many authors (e.g., Weisman & Worden, 1976; Welford, 1973) tend to call any form of goal-directed behavior coping. Such use of concepts (which has been criticized by Lazarus & Launier, 1978, and Schönpflug, 1983, among others), seems to be an indication of a still serious theoretical deficit in the areas of stress and coping research.

However, several definitions have been proposed that try to avoid the problems of excessive broadness, lack of clarity, and arbitrariness of the concept (see, e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Krohne & Rogner, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). They have the following characteristics in common:

1. Coping refers to a process, not to the goal (of "mastery" or "management") aimed at by an act (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
2. This process encompasses behavioral as well as cognitive (or "intrapsychic," Lazarus, 1966) acts. A majority of authors consider the so-called defense mechanisms, with their tendency to distort reality, to be a subgroup of intrapsychic acts. (I prefer to use the term "act" instead of "response" to emphasize the multiple-response character of coping as well as the active role of the person in coping with stress events. See also the concept of person–environment transaction elaborated by Lazarus & Launier, 1978.)
3. Coping acts focus on (internal as well as external) demands that are experienced by a person as taxing or even exceeding his or her capacities. Internal demands can arise by heightened emotional states, like anxiety, which may interfere with concurrent problem-related behavior. (Lazarus & Launier, 1978, have introduced the term palliative for emotion-focused coping.) External demands, like noise, can be coped with by instrumental acts. It is common to all types of demands that a person cannot respond to them by automatic behavior, but only, if at all, by the mobilization of effort.
4. The general aim of coping acts is the removal of an experienced imbalance between demands and capacities. The idea that a balanced