For the past several years, Wortman and her associates have been studying how people react to undesirable life events, such as permanent paralysis, chronic illness, criminal victimization and loss of a loved one (e.g. Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Wortmann & Dunkel-Schetter, 1979; Silver & Wortman, 1980). We have examined such variables as victims' emotional reactions to the crisis, their attributions of blame for what has happened, their ability to find meaning in the crisis, and the support they receive from others. Our research has focused on how these variables influence one another and change over time as the coping process unfolds. We have also studied the impact of these variables on the victim's long-term adaptation to the event. In this chapter, an attempt is made to broaden the focus of this past work. On the basis of the theory of action control that has been introduced recently by Kuhl (1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1984), we examine the interplay between people's reactions to an undesirable life event and the performance of behaviors or actions.

In the past, researchers have shown a great deal of interest in the process of how people cope with undesirable life events (see Silver & Wortman, 1980, for a review). Some of this work has focused primarily on peoples' emotional reactions to life crises. Investigators have attempted to determine what types of emotions are experienced by victims of life crises, and whether people go through particular stages or sequences of emotional reactions, such as shock, anger, depression, and acceptance, as they attempt to cope with the crisis (see Silver & Wortman, 1980, for a review and critique). More recently, investigators have become interested in the relationship between specific emotional reactions and successful long-term adjustment, and in whether those who express their emotions show better long-term adjustment than those who inhibit emotional expression (see Wortman, 1983, for a discussion).

Other researchers have focused primarily on the cognitions that are experien-
enced by victims of life crisis, especially their attributions of causality and blame for what has happened (see, e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Herrmann, 1981, 1984; Silver, Wortman, & Klos, 1982). This focus has been especially prominent in the discipline of social psychology. Investigators have attempted to explore why victims of seemingly uncontrollable events react with feelings of self-blame and whether feelings of blame are adaptive or maladaptive in coming to terms with the crisis (see, e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Miller & Porter, 1983; Wortman, 1976; Wortman, 1983). In recent years, investigators have begun to broaden this focus to include other cognitions such as attempts to find meaning in the victimizing experience (e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983), and attempts to minimize one's distress by making comparisons with less fortunate others (e.g., Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983).

Although considerable research has been conducted on victims' emotional reactions and cognitions, surprisingly little attention has been paid to their overt behavior. It has been noted that a victimizing experience, such as being raped or losing one's spouse, often interferes with peoples' performance of valued activities in work and family roles (see, e.g., Silver & Wortman, 1980; Wortman, 1983). It has also been suggested that victimization can shatter one's assumptions about the world, and thereby interfere with subsequent goal-directed behavior (Wortman, 1983). In general, however, investigators of the coping process have focused primarily on victims' reactions to the crisis rather than on goal-directed actions.

Some theoretical formulations dealing with the initiation and maintenance of goal-directed behavior have appeared in the literature (see, e.g., Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Hacker, 1973; Volpert, 1974, 1982; von Cranach, Kalbermatten, Indermühle, & Gugler, 1980). However, the issues raised by these theories have not been incorporated into psychological research on coping with undesirable life events.

In recent years, a theory of action control has been proposed by Kuhl (1981, 1983a, 1984) that may have important implications for the process of coping with undesirable life events. This theory discusses the conditions under which cognitions and emotional reactions may inhibit the performance of intended actions. This model has been applied to behavior in both laboratory (Kuhl, 1981; Heckhausen & Kuhl, in press) and field (Kuhl, in press) settings, and represents a promising theoretical approach for examining the process of coping with life crises.

Coping with Life Crises: The Gap Between Theory and Practice

The focus of this chapter is to bring two areas of research together by examining the process of coping with life crises and Kuhl's theory of action control (1981, 1983a, 1984) in relation to one another. First, we consider whether people who have experienced undesirable life events may have difficulties in carrying out goal-directed activities. We then review several theoretical explanations that may