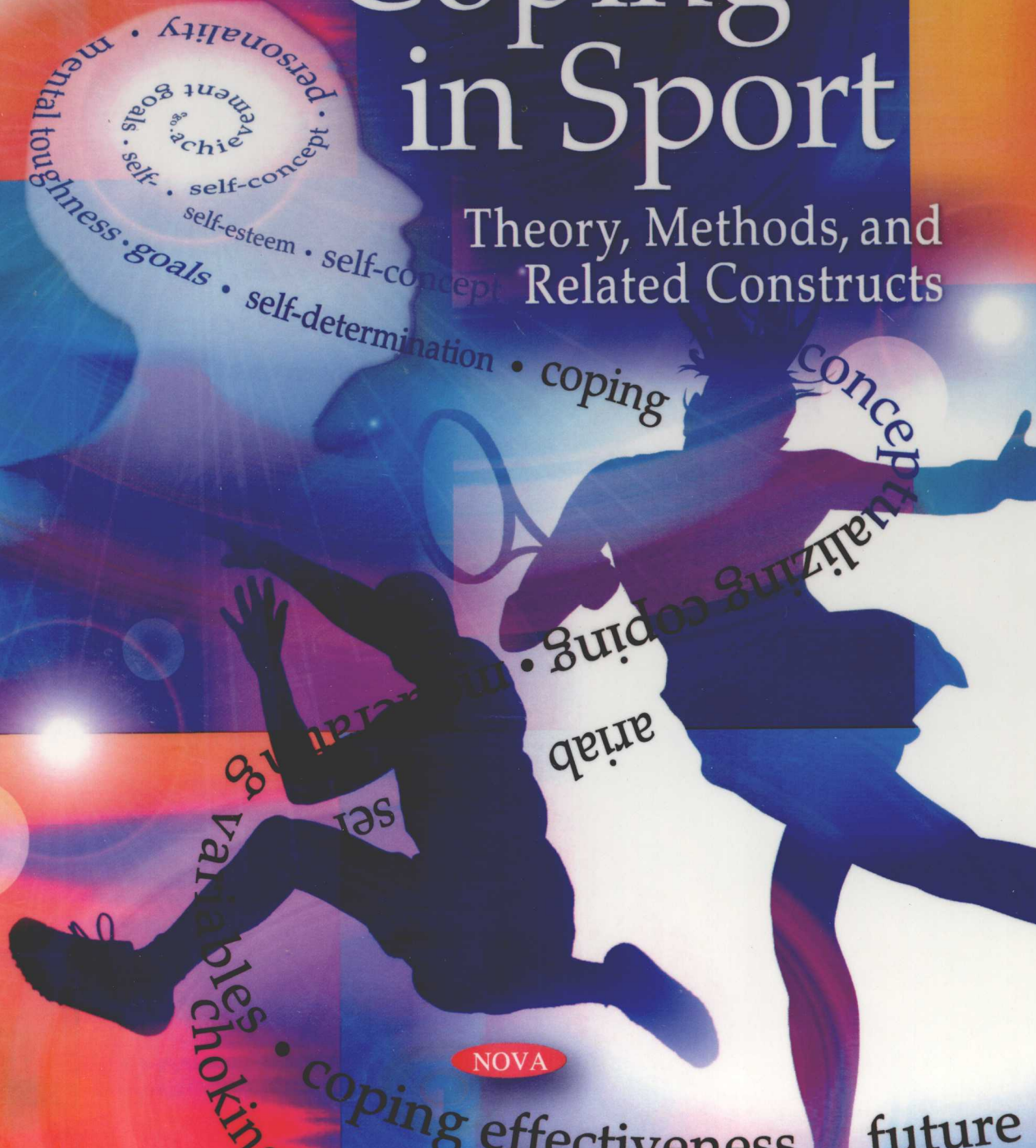


Adam R. Nicholls
Editor

Coping in Sport

Theory, Methods, and
Related Constructs



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COPING IN SPORT

THEORY, METHODS,
AND RELATED CONSTRUCTS

ADAM R. NICHOLLS

EDITOR



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COPING IN SPORT

**THEORY, METHODS,
AND RELATED CONSTRUCTS**

PREFACE

'Coping in Sport: Theory, Methods, and Related Constructs' is the first book dedicated exclusively to coping in sporting contexts. Edited by Adam R. Nicholls, a scholar whom has published extensively in the coping literatures, this book includes contributions from 26 leading international researchers including Yuri Hanin, Robert Grove, Peter Crocker, Deborah Feltz, and Patrick Gaudreau. This book covers information on a range of topics in relation to coping such as:

- Conceptualizing Coping
- Methodological Issues
- Coping and Moderating Variables such as Gender, Age, and Ethnicity
- Coping Effectiveness
- Future Orientated Aspects of Coping

Coping is related to a variety of other psychological constructs, which can be very diverse in nature. As such, a number of constructs that are related to coping are also discussed in this book:

- Personality and Mental Toughness
- Anxiety
- Self-Determination
- Achievement Goals
- Self-Concept and Self-Esteem
- Choking

Chapter 1 - The sport psychology coping literature is growing by the year, but there is still confusion regarding what coping is and the criterion required for a thought or behavior to be classified as a coping strategy. This is partly due to vast number of coping classifications and a general misunderstanding of coping. This chapter will attempt to clarify this problem and summarize the vast number of coping classifications that are used within in the coping literature in order to make these understandable for the reader. Finally, the chapter will conclude by evaluating the usefulness of categorizing coping strategies within dimensions.

Chapter 2 - Coping has been qualified as "constantly changing" and the process-oriented approach has been the dominant paradigm in the sport-related coping literature. Yet, the

constantly changing properties of the coping construct remain under-specified in current definition, theory, and research on coping, both in the sport domain and in general psychology. What does it mean to assume that coping constantly changes? This chapter formulates a useful distinction between stability and consistency in coping utilization. Also, it proposes that coping can be studied across four levels of analysis (i.e., time, situation, context, or life in general) using both a state-like and a trait-like scope of analysis. This chapter delineates some of the many meanings attached to the notion of variability and stability/consistency by drawing on recent advances in personality theory. Empirical evidence from the sport literature are reviewed to demonstrate the normative/absolute, differential/relative, idiographic, idiographic/nomothetic, and structural stability/consistency and variability of the coping construct. It is argued that coping can combine intricate characteristics of stability, consistency, and change. Not all athletes change their coping across time and even the "changers" vary in both the magnitude and direction of their change in coping utilization and psychological adjustment. Such multinomial patterns of change highlights the need of moving beyond the sole reliance on traditional analyses of change and the need to abandon the dogmatic and nomothetic debate about the trait-like versus state-like nature of coping. This chapter concludes by presenting sophisticated quantitative approaches with potential of shedding new lights regarding the antecedents and consequences of individual differences in longitudinal coping utilization.

Chapter 3 - Over recent years, a variety of different methods have been employed in sport to measure coping among athletes. A large volume of research has used traditional methods such as questionnaires and interviews. However, more recently researchers have adapted different techniques from the mainstream psychology literature such as concept maps, diaries, think aloud protocols. One method that has not been used in sport, but has potential is Ecological Momentary Assessment. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the various methods used to assess coping, illustrate how each method can be used, and discuss its strengths and limitations.

Chapter 4 - This chapter reviews the various quantitative and qualitative research questions and methods that have been asked and used within coping in sport literature to date. The authors also discuss quantitative and qualitative research methods that could be used, but are generally not used or underrepresented, to better understand coping in sport. To this end, the authors discuss quantitative research designs predominantly focusing on mediation, moderator models, and multilevel and multilevel longitudinal modeling of coping. The authors also discuss various issues relevant to qualitative research including the need for prolonged time in the field, consideration of the number of participants, bracketing, and methods of data collection, analysis, and representation.

Chapter 5 - The aim of this chapter was to systematically review the recent literature on gender and coping in sport. In particular the authors examined gender differences in coping, whether males and females differed in the appraisal of stressors (e.g., stress intensity and perceived control of stress), and examined evidence for the situational and dispositional hypothesis among athletes. A detailed literature search of SPORTdiscus, Medline, PSYCHinfo, PSYCHarticles, yielded 16 studies spanning 19 years. Thirteen of these studies found gender differences in coping among athletes. However, the findings of these studies are equivocal and questionable, because important constructs such as type of the stressors and stressor appraisals were not controlled for in these studies. It is suggested that poor

methodologies are preventing researchers from addressing the issue of whether male and female athletes cope differently and the underlying reasons for any such differences.

Chapter 6 - The past twenty-five years of sport psychology research has witnessed a burgeoning amount of attention to the study of coping. However, there have been few attempts to understand how athletes' coping changes across the lifespan. This chapter provides knowledge about the development of coping as it is studied in sport psychology. Specifically, three lines of research are reviewed: (a) the direct study of age-related differences in athletes' coping, (b) the indirect study of age-related differences in athletes' coping, and (c) maturation differences in athletes' coping. A developmental agenda for the study of coping in sport is offered. The authors conclude the chapter by addressing future directions for sport research.

Chapter 7 - This chapter addresses an area of coping with sport stress that has been relatively neglected; the influence of culture in the coping process. Culture reflects the customary practices and language associated with a particular racial or ethnic group, and influences a person's view of the world based on shared social beliefs and values. In competitive sport, culture reflects the athlete's values, psychological needs, expectations, habits, thought patterns, behavioral tendencies, and identity of a group that promote certain goal-directed actions that are accepted as "right" (i.e., appropriate) or "wrong" (i.e., inappropriate). Why should the authors be surprised when athletes from different cultures differ in their respective ways of coping with stress? Why, also, should we expect athletes of all cultures to experience and respond to stressful events in a similar manner? This chapter reviews selected studies on coping with sport stress. Far more studies have examined athletes from various countries, but relatively few studies in the sport coping literature have examined differences between cultures. It is concluded that culture serves as both a moderator and a mediator variable in various studies in attempting to improve the authors' understanding of the factors that affect the coping process in sport.

Chapter 8 - The role of personality on coping has received scant attention in the domain of sport. However, there are a number of ways how personality might influence coping either directly or indirectly among athletes. Evidence from other life domains is provided suggesting that personality can affect the type and frequency of stressors encountered, the appraisal of the stressor (including stress reactivity), coping, and coping effectiveness. These mechanisms are not independent from each other and suggest that certain personalities are more vulnerable or resistant to stress. In particular, individuals high in neuroticism might experience mood spill-overs and the so called neurotic cascade. Based on the general psychological literature, specific evidence is provided regarding how The Big Five personality dimensions extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experiences are related to stressor exposure, appraisal, and coping. The authors also discuss the role of the sport specific personality construct mental toughness in the stress-coping process. In particular, the different approaches to mental toughness are briefly discussed. A number of studies are discussed that support the notion that more mentally tough athletes are more likely to appraise stressful situations as less severe and more under control. Also, mentally tough athletes are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies to tackle the problem at hand rather than emotion-focused or avoidance coping strategies.

Chapter 9 - This chapter describes an individualized and evidence-based approach to coping with anxiety in high-achievement sport. The Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model as applied to pre-competition anxiety and performance-related emotions is

used as a framework to examine the relationship between *anxiety* and *emotion-focused* and *action-focused coping*. Anxiety is emotional experience (state-like, trait-like and meta-experience) and a component of *psychobiosocial* state which can be described along five basic dimensions: form, content, intensity, context and time. Individually optimal intensity of anxiety is used as criterion to evaluate if the current and anticipated anxiety should be reduced, increased, or maintained at a level that is optimal for the individual. Guidelines for *anxiety-centered* coping are proposed with the emphasis on emotion- and action-focused strategies that affect situational emotional experiences accompanying performance. The Identification-Control-Correction (ICC) program provides the step-wise procedures to optimize the process of task execution. Successful action-focused coping is reflected in emotion dynamics signaling a shift from the dysfunctional to functionally optimal person-environment (P-E) interactions. Both *reactive* and *anticipatory* coping strategies are relevant to achieve an optimal balance between current (or anticipated) task demands and personal resources. Future research should focus on coping with trait-like emotional experiences, meta-experiences, anticipatory coping, and the role of change and change management in coping.

Chapter 10 - Research on coping has traditionally focused on the situational, cognitive, and personality antecedents of coping utilization. However, Lazarus argued that coping is also influenced by motivational processes as goals and motives provide meaning to the person-situation transaction. This chapter explores the relationship between motivation and coping within the confines of self-determination theory. To this end, the underlying tenets of self-determination theory are presented to distinguish between self-determined and nonself-determined types of motivational orientations. Empirical evidences showing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral advantages of self-determined motivation are briefly reviewed before delineating the adaptive processes through which coping and self-determination are linked. Then, sport and social psychology studies that investigated the associations between self-determination and coping are described. Researchers have recently questioned the directionality of this association as motivation and coping could influence each other in a complex reciprocal manner. Longitudinal studies are reviewed to explore the possibility that motivation influences coping which, in turn, produces meaningful changes in one's level of self-determined motivation. The chapter concludes by presenting future research directions aimed at further investigating the associations between coping and self-determination.

Chapter 11 - The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the role that achievement motivation plays in the authors' understanding of coping responses and strategies in sport. First, the authors outline the tenets of achievement goal theory by focusing on the original approaches championed by Nicholls and Dweck, as well as the role of motivational climate as a key situational factor. The body of academic knowledge illustrating the potential relationships between task and ego goals and coping is then reviewed. As an antecedent of coping-related behavior, a high task goal has been consistently associated with adaptive forms of coping, whereas an ego goal has been related to less adaptive coping responses. However, the methodological sophistication of past studies, the lack of understanding of the combined effects of task/ego goals, and the scarcity of studies at a situational level leaves many questions unanswered. A number of relevant future directions for this research area are therefore presented.

Chapter 12 - Relationships among appraisal, coping responses, and identity-related constructs such as self-concept and self-esteem are examined. Emphasis is placed on the way

in which selected coping strategies may invoke affect regulation, self-protection, and self-enhancement mechanisms to help athletes maintain a positive sense of self in threatening circumstances. The specific threatening circumstances considered are impending competition, performance slumps, injury, and transitional experiences. A conceptual model of identity-maintenance coping at the individual level is presented, and a parallel model is proposed for identity-maintenance at the group-level.

Chapter 13 - This chapter discusses choking under pressure, which is presented as a case of self-destructive behavior that involves: ego threat, emotional distress, and self-regulation failure. When high levels of egotism are threatened, emotional distress often occurs. Athletes choke when they self-regulate to escape these unpleasant emotions (tradeoffs) or when they engage in mis-guided self-regulation strategies, which are also referred to as counterproductive strategies. The attempts to cope may backfire and cause performance failure (self-destruction). Empirical evidence, primarily from real-world research, is presented for each of these steps. Recommendations to prevent choking (reduce ego threat, normalize emotional distress, and optimize self-regulation) are based on this model and inspired by lessons learned from high-reliability organizations such as airlines and hospitals.

Chapter 14 - It is essential that athletes cope effectively with stress in order to maintain emotional well-being during competitive sports events. This chapter identifies which coping effectiveness model/theory/approach/explanation is the most appropriate for researchers and applied practitioners in sport settings. The outcome model, goodness-of-fit approach, the automaticity explanation of coping effectiveness, choice of coping strategy explanation of coping effectiveness, the path analysis of coping effectiveness model, and the research associated with these models is critically evaluated. Based on the current literature, it appears that the choice of coping strategy explanation is the most accurate and practical theory of coping effectiveness, as coping strategies appear to be predominantly effective or ineffective. Assessment issues, applied implications, and future research directions in the area of coping effectiveness are also considered.

Chapter 15 - An athlete's ability to cope with the environmental demands of stress in competition is important to successful performance. Coping self-efficacy (CSE), defined as the belief regarding one's ability to cope with diverse threats (e.g., stress, unwanted thoughts, difficult situations, or pain), is regarded as an important variable affecting an athlete's coping effectiveness. This chapter provides an overview of self-efficacy, the concept of CSE and its measurement, and a review of relevant research. The chapter ends with recommendations for researchers and practitioners on future directions in this area to prompt further research and inquiry.

Chapter 16 - Future-oriented coping describes how individuals respond to stressors as well as ways in which they may learn from these experiences and plan to deal with future stressors. Although some aspects of future-oriented coping have been reported in studies of competitive athletes, little research to date has adopted a future-oriented approach to studying coping. The authors suggest that future-oriented models of coping may offer a fresh perspective for thinking about the ways in which athletes cope with stressors in sport. Using models of coping which captures athletes' preparation, planning, and anticipation of stressors could reveal important insights into coping with stressors before their occurrence. In this chapter the authors describe two models of future-oriented coping which may be useful within a sport context. By considering coping from a future-oriented perspective, athletes may also learn how to cope more effectively with stressors and achieve better performances.

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PART I: CONCEPTUALIZING COPING

Chapter 1

COPING CONCEPTUALIZED AND UNRAVELED

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ABSTRACT

The sport psychology coping literature is growing by the year, but there is still confusion regarding what coping is and the criterion required for a thought or behavior to be classified as a coping strategy. This is partly due to vast number of coping classifications and a general misunderstanding of coping. This chapter will attempt to clarify this problem and summarize the vast number of coping classifications that are used within in the coping literature in order to make these understandable for the reader. Finally, the chapter will conclude by evaluating the usefulness of categorizing coping strategies within dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that participating in competitive sport can be a stressful experience. Stress has recently been defined as “the quality of experience, produced through a person-environment transaction, that, through either over arousal or under-arousal results in psychological or physiological distress.” The study of stress in sport has received considerable attention in recent years, due to the negative consequences that are associated with stress among athletes. For instance, failing to manage stress may result decreased performance (e.g., Haney and Long, 1995; Lazarus, 2000a), decreased satisfaction (e.g., Scanlan and Lewthwaite, 1984), increased risk of injury (e.g., Smith, Ptacek, and Smoll, 1992), decreased well-being (e.g., Nicholls, Backhouse, Polman, and McKenna, 2009), and the failure to pursue a career in professional sport (e.g., Holt and Hogg, 2004).

However, stress affects people differently (Aldwin, 2007). Not everybody suffers with problems in their performance when experiencing stress during sport, nor does every stressful experience result in performance decrements. Certain athletes seem to adapt or adjust to

stressful conditions better and are subsequently able to operate more effectively. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) adaptation refers to the capacity of a person to survive and flourish. In order to survive and flourish people must be able to deal with stress effectively. One such mechanism that allows people to manage stress effectively is coping. Coping refers to all thoughts and behaviors that an individual deploys to manage a problem and the negative emotions the problem causes (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980).

Aldwin (2007) suggested that the rationale for studying coping is because coping can reduce and even diminish the effects of stress, and that there will be individual differences in responses to stress. It is therefore unsurprising that coping has received considerable interest among academics over a number of years in the domain of sport, but there is still confusion regarding conceptualizing this construct.

Voluntary versus Involuntary Responses to Stress

A salient issue within the conceptualization of coping relates to the contrast between the responses to stress that involve conscious effort and responses to stress that are automaticized, which are not under conscious control (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Harding Thomsen, and Wadsworth, 2001). Some coping scholars from the mainstream literature (e.g., Coyne and Gottlieb, 1996; Skinner, 1995) have argued that coping should involve *all* responses to relieve stress, including both voluntary and involuntary responses. Alternatively, others have suggested that coping is limited to responses to stress that involve conscious effort (e.g., Compas et al., 2001; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Rudolph, Dennig, and Weisz, 1995). Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Harding Thomsen, and Saltzman (2000) suggested that voluntary responses to stress are directed towards regulating cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or physiological responses stress.

There are some similarities between voluntary and involuntary responses to stress. Both involuntary and voluntary reactions are aroused when there is psychological disequilibrium. Furthermore, both voluntary and involuntary responses to stress serve to decrease negative affect and allow the individual to return to a sense of emotional well-being as soon as possible (Cramer, 1998). Although there are commonalities between voluntary responses to stress, coping scholars have proposed a number of arguments of why both involuntary and voluntary responses to stress should not be conceptualized as coping.

Not including involuntary acts as coping permits a much more concise definition of coping. If involuntary responses are included within this construct, coping would involve everything that an individual does in response to stress, making it very hard to measure (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). For example, Aldwin (2007) suggested that involuntary emotional responses (e.g., crying) are not a coping response, but an emotional reaction. Conversely, expressing an emotion such as shouting at a team mate in response to stress has a purpose and could potentially be considered a coping strategy. However, if involuntary responses were conceptualized as coping, emotional reactions such as coping would have to be classified as coping. Secondly, people experience volitional and involuntary responses differently and are able to distinguish between behaviors and thoughts that are under control and those that are beyond their control (Skinner, 1995). It would therefore seem appropriate to distinguish volitional stress responses as coping, but not involitional responses. Involitional responses to stress include defense mechanisms. A defense mechanism refers to

cognitions that alter or change the truthful perception and individual has, in order to protect the person from experiencing too much anxiety (Cramer, 1998). However, both Cramer (2000) and Lazarus (2000b) stated that involitional responses to stress should be differentiated between volitional responses to stress. Finally, voluntary and involuntary processes may react differently to interventions that are designed to teach people to manage responses to stress. Such interventions can only indirectly influence involuntary processes (Compas et al., 2001). As such, we believe that only volitional acts that are directed towards managing stress should be considered as coping.

Management Skills

Aldwin (2007) suggested that it is important to differentiate coping with management skills, so that this psychological process is not mistakenly called coping. A management skill is a thought or behavior that has been established out of learning to cope with a problem, but is performed so often to the extent that it becomes a routine. Such behaviors or thoughts are often performed in the in the absence of stress and are therefore no longer coping strategies, but are indeed management skills (Aldwin and Brustrom, 1996). For instance, two athletes called Paul and Michael, who recently participated in a tennis competition, used visualization prior to hitting a serve. However, Paul was not experiencing any stress, but merely used this strategy because it was part of his routine and it was something his coach had encouraged him to do. Conversely, Michael was experiencing stress when he used visualization, just before hitting a serve. In this hypothetical example, visualization could be classified as coping strategy for Michael, but not Paul. Visualization for Paul was not an attempt to cope; rather it was what Aldwin (Aldwin, 2007; Aldwin and Brustrom) termed a management skill. The key differences between these examples relates to stress (stress vs. no stress) and the act of visualizing (non-routine vs. routine). Therefore, to determine whether an athlete was coping or not, researchers should ensure that athletes (a) have or are experiencing stress and (b) the purpose of the strategy was to reduce stress.

Classifying Coping

Although the literature within the coping domain has evolved rapidly in recent years, so has the divergence in terms of how it has been classified. In part, this has stemmed from researchers such as Pearlin and Schooler (1978) who stated that “coping needs more detailed specification...because of the bewildering richness of behaviour relevant to it.” With the above in mind, it is imperative for researchers and practitioners to gain a better understanding to how coping is currently classified across varying populations (i.e., childhood, adolescence, adulthood, or old age; see Chapter 6, by Hoar and Evans for more details) and attempt, where appropriate, to move towards a common set of coping classifications. The following will provide an insight to the varying classifications of coping, and where relevant, will include sport specific examples.

Prior to discussing the varying classifications of coping, it is important to consider that researchers have frequently debated whether to consider general coping dimensions (also referred to as macro-level approaches) or specific categories of coping (also referred to as

micro-level coping dimensions; Connor-Smith, 2000; Crocker, Kowalski, and Graham, 1998; Hoar, Kowalski, Gaudreau, and Crocker, 2006). This chapter will focus on the macro-level of coping with references to the micro levels being made within each classification. Further to this, Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood, (2003) reported three distinctions of coping: (1) functions of coping, (2) varying ways of coping, and (3) higher order categories. The following will work through each distinction and detail the coping categories.

FUNCTIONS OF COPING

Problem- and Emotion-Focused Coping

The most commonly reported functions of coping are those that relate to either problem- or emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is reported as that which is “aimed at managing or altering the problem causing the distress” while emotion-focused coping reflects efforts to “regulate emotional responses to the problem” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p.150). Within problem-focused coping, it is likely that individuals will attempt to seek information, plan strategies and set goals. For example, in their work examining coping strategies of golfers, Nicholls and Polman (2008) reported strategies such as shot planning the shot and conducting pre-shot routines as typical problem-focused strategies, whilst Reeves, Nicholls, and McKenna (2009) identified increases in effort and communicating to others as problem-focused approaches within a soccer context. Typical examples of emotion-focused strategies include those such as relaxation, meditation and seeking emotional support. Indeed Nicholls and Polman (2008) reported visualization to enhance relaxation and using positive appraisals as forms of emotion-focused coping. Social support and venting emotions have also been labeled amongst the vast array of emotion-focused approaches (see Reeves et al., 2009).

Appraisal-Focused Coping

Despite the preferences by researchers to refer to problem- and emotion-focused coping with regularity, a further category within the functions of coping has also emerged, namely appraisal coping (Cox and Ferguson, 1991). Here, Moos and Billings (1982) asserted that appraisal-focused coping referred to efforts made towards redefining the meaning of the situation. Consequently, athletes would be advised to reappraise situations from, for example, perceived ‘threatening’ situations towards more of a ‘challenge’ situation. A typical scenario could be a performer who has experienced difficulty in certain environmental conditions and rather than appraising the environment as a ‘failure-inducing environment’ they would be advised to employ a coping strategy that enables them to approach the environment in a challenging manner.

Despite the widespread employment of problem- and emotion-focused coping and to a lesser degree, appraisal coping, Skinner et al. (2003) suggest that such classifications should no longer be employed. The argument here being that researchers have treated the coping types as being mutually exclusive which in turn has led to an oversimplification of the way in which coping operates. Further to this Lazarus (1996) commented that ways of coping are