An examination of attributions and emotions in the transactional approach to the organizational stress process

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Summary
Although the transactional model of the stress process (Lazarus, 1966, 1993; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, 1987) continues to be utilized in a significant amount of stress research, much of the current literature on job stress focuses on pinpointing objective stressors. This paper examines Lazarus’ transactional appraisal approach and includes a specific discussion of the process by which employees’ attributions regarding stressors and the resulting emotions significantly influence their choices of coping mechanisms. Given that a single work event can be interpreted in a variety of ways, the role of individuals’ cognitive processing is being ignored by much of the current empirical stress research. This paper examines and highlights the importance of the cognitive and emotional components within the organizational stress process. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction
Research suggests that the existence of stress may be less important to an individual’s well-being than how the individual appraises and copes with stress (for review, see Aldwin and Revenson, 1987). These findings complement previous work by attribution theorists (e.g., Kelley and Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1979, 1985) who have argued that the causal attributions individuals assign to certain events in their lives affect the responses to those events. For several decades, these researchers have devoted a great deal of effort to investigating the dimensions of causal attributions and their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences. Using similar cognitive models, Lazarus and his colleagues have proposed a transactional analysis of the stress process (Lazarus, 1968; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) that includes a primary appraisal of the stressor and a secondary appraisal of the coping mechanisms available.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and highlight the importance of the cognitive and emotional components within the organizational stress process. Some of the recent research on job stress has focused on the importance of objective stressors (Bischoff and Terborg, 1995; Ganster and Duffy, 1995; Melin et al., 1999). Objective stressors have been conceptualized as not
being influenced by an individual’s cognitive or emotional processes (Frese and Zapf, 1988). Although the examination of objective work stressors may be useful to broadly predict employee strain, the focus is entirely too limiting. In order to truly understand the components of the stress process, the primary focus should be on how individuals interpret objective conditions rather than simply relating stressors to strains. Specifically, we advocate a research agenda for the study of the organizational stress process that focuses on the appraisal of objective stressors, attributions regarding the felt stress, and the subsequent affective emotions.

To support our position, we provide a brief discussion of both Lazarus’ transactional model and Weiner’s model of attributional processes that offers some clarity in the complementary dimensions of these two important domains of current organizational behavior research. Detailed consideration is given to the roles of emotions in both models. Recent work suggests that affective states in the form of emotions are important aspects of the work experience and influence critical job outcomes (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Research indicates emotions do have distinctive action tendencies (Roseman, Weist and Swartz, 1994) and, as such, another purpose of this paper is to examine how emotions and their action tendencies affect coping responses in an organizational context. This paper elaborates on Lazarus’ model by explicitly including the perceived causal attributions and resulting emotions as mediating variables between the primary appraisal of felt stress and the secondary appraisal of coping choices.

**Lazarus’ transactional model of stress**

A fundamental proposition of the transactional model (Lazarus, 1968; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) is that it is the interaction of the person and environment that creates a felt stress for the individual. ‘Stress is not a property of the person, or of the environment, but arises when there is conjunction between a particular kind of environment and a particular kind of person that leads to a threat appraisal’ (Lazarus, 1991c, p. 3). Two appraisals, primary and secondary, are central to Lazarus’ cognitive theory of stress. An individual’s ‘primary appraisal concerns whether or not there is any personal stake in the encounter’ (Lazarus, 1993, p. 6) and has been referred to as the motivational relevance of an encounter (Smith and Lazarus, 1990). This appraisal considers the encounter’s motivational congruence or incongruence—i.e., whether the transaction thwarts or facilitates an individual’s goals (Smith and Lazarus, 1990).

The primary appraisal process is an evaluation as to the significance of an encounter or transaction for a specific individual. Three types of evaluations have been suggested by Lazarus and his colleagues. First, an irrelevant encounter is one that has no personal significance for the individual and is ignored. Second, a benign-positive encounter is one that is considered beneficial and/or desirable. Third, a stressful encounter is one that is considered to be harmful, threatening, or challenging (Lazarus, 1994). In other words, is the person, event, or situation irrelevant, benign or stressful (Peacock, Wong and Reker, 1993)? A stake in an encounter generates the potential for emotion (Lazarus, 1991b), and stressful situations are appraised as involving harm/loss, threat, or challenge to the individual’s well-being (Lazarus, 1994).

If individuals determine that they have a stake in the encounter, the transactional model proposes that they will engage in a secondary appraisal in order to change conditions perceived to be undesirable. This appraisal focuses on the available coping options for altering the perceived harm, threat, or challenge so that a more positive environment is created. The transactional model depicts coping as a choice that is affected by the primary and secondary appraisals. Coping is expected to be consistent with a determination of whether anything can be done to change the situation (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). For example, problem-focused coping is expected to be
used in situations appraised as unchangeable (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Ultimately, the individual's choice of a coping mechanism is determined by his perceptions of personal control over the stressful situation. Personal control 'reflects an individuals' beliefs, at a given point in time, in his or her ability to effect change in a desired direction on the environment' (Greenberger and Strasser, 1986, p. 165). Coping outcomes at least partially depend on the goodness of fit between appraisal and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus (1993, 1994) includes a third cognitive appraisal which he labels 'reappraisal.' Reappraisal represents the feedback process wherein changes in both primary and secondary appraisals are brought about via individual reactions/coping and the environmental counter-reactions. These reactions and counter-reactions are appraised by the individual leading to reappraisals of the person–environment relationship.

A significant amount of research (e.g., Lazarus, 1966, 1968; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, 1987) has supported the transactional model by demonstrating that 'the way people evaluate what is happening with respect to their well-being, and the way they cope with it, influences whether psychological stress will result, and its intensity' (Lazarus, 1993, p. 6). Nevertheless, several issues remain unresolved. For example, although problem focused strategies are used most often with work-related stress (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980), why do some individuals consistently choose emotion-focused strategies? Is the choice simply a reflection of optimistic versus pessimistic styles (Strutton and Lumpkin, 1992), or have research designs failed to consider another mediating variable such as the specific emotional response to a causal attribution? Finally, some studies propose that coping is characterized by high levels of consistency (MacNair and Elliott, 1992; Stone and Neale, 1984), but other have found that coping strategies of an individual are characterized by more variability than consistency—i.e., the individual attempts to match the specific coping strategy to the situation (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985, 1980).

These dissimilar findings may be the result of failing to consider the distinct emotions arising from causal analyses. Evidence indicates disparate causal ascriptions give rise to qualitatively different (attribution-dependent) emotional experiences (Weiner, Russell and Lerman, 1979), and perceived causality will differ from person to person and even within an individual across situations (Weiner, 1985). None of the studies cited here adequately account for the impact of different emotions that arise during a stressful encounter and that are linked to different causal dimensions. This failure to consider specific emotions seems surprising since individuals, when asked about situations at work that cause stress, invariably find it necessary to go beyond the event and discuss the situation in terms of intensity, frequency, and meaning (Dewe, 1989). The following sections examine some of the relevant literature on emotions.

Attribution theory and emotions

Attribution theorists proposed more than 30 years ago that 'the result of an action is felt to depend on two sets of conditions, namely, factors within the person and factors within the environment' (Heider, 1958, p. 82). Weiner (1985) proposed a theory of motivation and emotion in which causal ascriptions play a key role. In Weiner's discussion, the perceived causes of success and failure are analyzed along three dimensions: locus (whether or not the cause of the outcome is perceived to be located within the individual such as ability or effort, or outside the individual such as the task or luck), stability (the individual's perception that the cause will continue over time), and controllability (whether a cause is under the volitional control of an individual (Weiner, 1979). The perceived stability of the causes affects the expectancies of the individual and the magnitude of emotions and thereby direct motivated behavior (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Graham, and Chandler, 1982).
Weiner (1986, 1985) and his colleagues have focused on the causal dimensions related to outcomes (successes and failures) in academic achievement situations. Because the workplace is clearly an achievement-oriented environment, it is reasonable to expect that many of the same cognitive processes found in academic achievement research—that is the search for causality of an event and its influence on subsequent motivation and action—will be present during the process of working toward the achievement of goals in an organization. It is often during the process of working toward valued goals (a factor within the person) that individuals encounter obstacles (a factor within the perceived environment) that result in experienced stress such as anxiety. Individuals engage in causal analysis when they experience an outcome that is unexpected or cognitively challenging (Martinko, 1995; Moss and Martinko, 1998; Wong and Weiner, 1981) as a means to regain some sense of control over their environments and thereby make it more predictable (Heider, 1958). Experienced stress can be viewed as one such outcome.

At this point it may be helpful to examine the model which incorporates Weiner’s attributional analysis into Lazarus’ model of the stress process. The model extends Lazarus’ transactional model by specifically considering the role of causal attributions and related emotions (see Figure 1). The model assumes the stability dimension is relevant to primary appraisals of harm, threat or challenge since stable causes influence the magnitude of the emotions (Weiner et al., 1982), and an individual is likely to be most concerned with coping with those stressors that cause a significant emotional response and appear to be ongoing.

In Lazarus’ cognitive, phenomenological paradigm, an emotion results from an appraisal of the significance of a specific event (Lazarus, 1991b). Lazarus argues that an emotion is always a response to some cognitive activity that generates meaning for an individual. Thus, to understand emotions, we must consider the ways meaning is generated.

**Attributional search**

The most commonly used heuristic in an attributional search has been found to centre on the locus of causality and controllability dimensions, and they have the highest priority in an attributional search (Wong and Weiner, 1981). These dimensions are included in the model as attributions regarding the sources of the stress. Consistent with Weiner’s model (1985), the internal causes in Figure 1 are effort and ability. However, Weiner (1983) suggests the dimensions should be adjusted to be appropriate for the domain being studied. Given an organizational context, examples used in the model as explanations for external causes are ‘unreasonable demands’ and ‘lack of resources’ rather than the broader terms of ‘task’ and ‘luck’ used by Weiner. Empirical support for the locus of causality dimension is strong (Weiner, 1985). Although less consistent support has been found for the controllability dimension, recent evidence indicates that the controllability dimension is distinct from the locus of causality dimension in some situations (McCrae, Duncan and Russell, 1992). Furthermore, the controllability dimension described by Weiner appears to be analogous to situational perceptions of control (Folkman, 1984) and has been found to be a significant influence on interpersonal emotions and behavior (Betancourt and Blair, 1992). To clarify the proposed process, the model is examined in detail.

**The conceptual model**

*Primary appraisals and causal attributions*

‘Because of different goals and beliefs, because there is often too much to attend to, and because the stimulus array is often ambiguous, people are selective both in what they pay attention to and
Figure 1. Transactional attributional model of the organizational stress process (Examples of probable emotions due in large part to the attributional sequence.)
in what their appraisals take into account’ (Lazarus, 1993, p. 9). Therefore, not all potential stressors actually cause stress for an individual, and what is appraised as a stressful situation by one individual may not be for another. For example, the assignment of additional tasks to an employee becomes a source of stress (e.g., role overload) for an employee only when he perceives that he has a stake in the outcome of his performance (motivational relevance) and the tasks are creating demands that exceed his capabilities (motivational incongruence). If either condition is absent, the additional tasks, which the organizational literature frequently treats as an objective stressor for all employees, are unlikely to create psychological stress, and the response is likely to be ‘indifference or passive tranquillity’ (Smith and Lazarus, 1990). Motivationally incongruent encounters that generate stress can be viewed as examples of the challenging or unexpected outcomes (with important consequences) that generate a causal search (Weiner, 1985). Based on Weiner’s (1985) findings, the model also proposes that following this primary appraisal that reveals the presence of stress, the employee will search for the causes of the felt stress as a means to better control the environment. It is important to clarify at this point that although some individuals in some demanding situations may perceive those situations to be opportunities for achievement and experience positive emotions such as pride or positive self-esteem (Weiner, 1985), this paper focuses only on reactions by individuals to demanding situations associated with negative feelings such as anxiety or tension—i.e., negative stress.

As previously stated, an examination of the possible sources of stress clearly indicates that those sources can be divided along Weiner’s locus of causality dimension—i.e., internal causes versus external causes. For example, employees may perceive their stress as an outcome arising from either a lack of effort or a lack of ability (both internal attributions). Students have been shown to use self-blame (“I realized I brought the problem on myself”) when they attributed their unsatisfactory exam performance to controllable internal factors such as effort, rather than external factors such as task difficulty (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). At the same time other employees may perceive the stressor as being imposed upon them by external sources: the manager, the organization, or the time frame. The causes of their stress, therefore, might be the unreasonable demands of others or the difficulty of the task. The different attributions made by different employees for falling behind will likely lead to different emotional responses (Weiner, 1985). Based on previous cognitive appraisal research (Smith and Ellsworth, 1987, 1985; Wiener, 1985, 1979), including the motivational relevance of an encounter, and Heider’s proposition that individuals engage in a causal search to regain control of their environment, we propose that employees experiencing anxiety or felt stress in their jobs will engage in a causal search that attempts to determine if the stress is arising from internal or external sources.

Causal dimensions and emotions

In the transactional attribution model, the employee’s determination of the source of his felt stress includes an assessment of the causal dimensions. Each dimension is specifically related to a set of emotions. These emotions arise from how an event is construed (Weiner, 1985). An emotion is aroused not just by an environmental demand, constraint, or resource but by their juxtaposition with an individual’s motives and beliefs (Lazarus, 1993) that summarizes a person’s relationship to the environment in terms of a particular type of harm or benefit (Smith and Lazarus, 1990). For example, an interaction of a person and his environment that creates ambiguous danger or threat produces anxiety (Smith and Lazarus, 1990), shown in the model as the outcome that generates the primary appraisal. Each emotion also serves a particular set of adaptive functions based on cognitive appraisals of circumstances (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985).
Emotions can be positive (e.g., happiness) when they result from perceived benefits (Lazarus, 1991b); however, because stress is assumed to generate negative emotions, we examine four possible negative emotions that may arise from an individual’s causal analysis. Anger, guilt, and shame are included because they have been previously examined by Lazarus and his colleagues (Lazarus, 1991a,b; Smith and Lazarus, 1990). Frustration was added because it has been reported as a frequent response of subjects (engineers) experiencing acute stress (Keenan and Newton, 1985) and because it has been linked to feelings and actions distinct from anger (Roseman et al., 1994). Although other emotions are possible these four are examined as important and plausible examples of emotions in the organizational stress process.

Controllability as a critical variable

Research has suggested that notions of accountability and responsibility are functions of perceived intentionality and controllability (Weiner, 1986), and it is this dimension of attributions, not the locus of causality, that is most directly relevant to emotion (Smith et al., 1993). In the model, the employee’s affective responses are generated from the different attributed causes of stress. Controllability is a critical aspect of these attributions. For example, the perception of organizational controllability (an external attribution) over the situation may significantly influence the employee’s reaction or the intensity of his reaction to the stressor. Research with college students has found that individuals’ perceptions that others’ actions were intentional and controllable were significant determinants of anger (Betancourt and Blair, 1992) rather than simply frustration.

Specific affective responses to causal dimensions

As an example, consider a situation in which an employee determines that the stress arising from his failure to keep up with the workload is due to his lack of ability (a stable, uncontrollable, internal attribution). We propose that the emotional response to such an attribution is likely to be shame, an emotion described as ‘feeling self-conscious’ (Roseman et al., 1994). Among students, perceptions of failure due to self-responsibility and low ability have been linked to shame (Weiner, 1985; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Shame is often thought of as the opposite of pride and occurs when failure is attributed to oneself (Pekrun and Frese, 1992). Based on this research, we propose that a determination by an employee that the felt stress is the result of an uncontrollable, internal attribution (e.g., lack of ability) will cause the employee to feel shame.

Alternatively, if the employee perceives that his falling behind or performing poorly is the result of a lack of effort (an internal, unstable, controllable attribution), we propose the likely response will be a sense of guilt for failure to fulfil an obligation. Research examining students’ appraisals of their emotions found ‘guilt’ to be strongly associated with attributions of self-responsibility and control in a situation (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). The students listed ‘failure to meet an obligation’ as an example of such a situation.

Similarly, attribution theorists have found that perceptions of failure arising from a lack of effort have been linked to guilt and regret that may instigate motivational behaviors (Brown and Weiner, 1984; Wicker, Payne and Morgan, 1983). Based on these findings, we propose that the affective response of an employee attributing the source of his stress to a controllable, internal attribution (e.g., lack of effort) will be guilt.
If an employee determines that he is already working as much and as quickly as possible, he is likely to attribute the source of his stress to the company’s unreasonable demands on him (an external attribution). Studies of the cognitive antecedents to various emotions have found a strong relationship between anger and an appraisal of both unfairness (e.g., Roseman et al., 1994) and ‘other agency,’ suggesting these dimensions of the appraisal may be vital components of the subjective experience of the anger emotion (Betancourt and Blair; 1992, Smith and Ellsworth, 1987). Similarly, attribution theorists have found that the attributional antecedent for anger is an ascription of a negative, self-related outcome or event to factors controllable by others (Weiner, 1985, 1980a,b; Weiner et al., 1982; Weiner et al., 1979). Because evidence indicates anger is influenced by causal ascriptions concerning why a social contract has not been fulfilled by another party (Weiner, 1987), employees experiencing stress related to role overload, for example, and who perceive the organization has willingly failed to provide adequate staffing (in order to keep payroll costs down) are likely to react with anger. Based on these findings, we propose that the affective response of an employee attributing his felt stress to controllable actions of the organization (e.g., unreasonable demands) will be anger.

Perceptions of how much control those imposing the additional demands possess influences the intensity of an affective response. For example, anger is reduced to the extent the encounter’s cause is viewed as uncontrollable or its outcome as unintentional or unforeseeable (Smith et al., 1993; Weiner, 1979). Among students, frustration is the emotional feeling arising from the experience of having one’s goals interrupted or blocked and is characterized by unlikely expectations for overcoming obstacles (Price, Barrell and Barrell, 1985; Roseman et al., 1994). In an organization, data indicates that most employee frustration arises from a perception of interference with an individual’s ability to carry out his day-to-day duties effectively (Keenan and Newton, 1984). Based on these findings, we propose that the affective response of an employee attributing the source of felt stress to the situation (impersonal and uncontrollable by either the organization or self) is frustration.

In summary, qualitative (Dewe, 1989) and empirical data (Thompson, 1981) suggests that the meaning individuals attribute to events intervenes between the stressor and the effects on the individual. It may be that the event causing the stress is less important in determining the reaction of the individual to the stressor than the meaning the individual assigns the stress (Dewe, 1989). It is reasonable to expect that the same stressor may evoke quite different affective responses from individuals attributing different meanings to the stressor.

Attributions, secondary appraisals, and coping behaviors

Secondary appraisals are evaluative processes in which the individual considers available coping options, the likelihood that a given coping activity will accomplish the desired outcome, whether one is capable of performing a particular coping response, and the consequences of using a particular coping strategy (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The coping process includes the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral attempts a person makes to manage specific internal and/or external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding his personal resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus (1991b) has also argued that there are three secondary appraisal decisions: assigning blame or credit (to oneself or another), assessing coping potential, and considering future expectations. Given the attributional notion of assigning blame or credit, coupled with the other
cognitive processes, perhaps the construct of secondary appraisal can be refined to specify the
process even further. Specifically, the search for the felt stress (e.g., assigning blame to oneself or
another) is proposed to affect emotions which, in turn, affect the secondary appraisal choices
which include assessing coping choices and considering future expectations.

Studies have found that coping efforts are strongly related to an individual’s cognitive
appraisal of a situation (e.g., Forsythe and Compas, 1987; Peacock, Wong and Reker, 1993). In
one of a very few intra-individual designed studies, subjects chose different forms of coping
depending on the specific stake and the options available (Folkman et al., 1986). In stress
research, coping, broadly speaking, has two widely recognized functions: regulating stressful
emotions (emotion-focused coping) and altering the troubled person–environment relationship
causing the distress (problem-solving coping) (Folkman et al., 1986).

Problem-solving coping
Problem-solving forms of coping have been shown to be used more often in situations where an
individual’s causal analysis suggests that something can be done to alter (change) a negative
situation (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980, 1985; Folkman et al., 1986)—i.e., one perceives some
control over the situation. Seeking information about what needs to be done and changing either
one’s own behavior (e.g., exhibiting greater effort to keep up with the workload) or taking action
on the environment are examples of problem-solving coping efforts (Folkman et al., 1986).
Students have reported using these types of coping behaviors in the time period just prior to an
exam (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985) when the outcome was still open to possibilities. Students
who reported they felt guilty also said they felt motivated to change the situation because they felt
responsible and in control (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Based on these findings, we propose that
employees who experience guilt (due to a perception of a lack of effort) will engage in problem-
solving efforts (work harder) as a means to alter a negative situation. Thus, guilt will mediate the
relationship between one’s perceived lack of effort and problem-solving coping.

Emotion-focused coping
When individuals determine that they have no means to change the situation (‘these demands are
unreasonable and there is nothing I can do about it’) or that they have insufficient resources (lack
of ability, equipment needed, etc.) and that the stressor must simply be accepted, emotion-
focused coping predominates (Folkman et al., 1986; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus,
1991c). Emotion-focused coping efforts include distancing and escape/avoidance of the stressor,
and emphasizing the positive (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Such efforts allow the person to
avoid focusing on the troubling situation (Folkman et al., 1986). While problem-solving efforts
attempt to alter the situation in a positive way, emotion-focused coping alters only the way the
individual interprets the situation.

If an individual can reappraise a threat or challenge as non-threatening (either through
distancing or withdrawal), the cognitive basis of the threat is removed (Lazarus, 1993). For
example, students experiencing shame reported they wanted to avoid thinking about the situation
(Smith and Ellsworth, 1985) and used emotion-focused coping when they perceived little control
over an exam and felt nothing could be done but wait (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Also,
students experiencing prolonged frustration expected failure and have reported they would use
escape/avoidance techniques such as dropping a course (Wong and Weiner, 1981). Other
attributional research (Weiner, 1985) has similarly found that perceptions of failure due to low
ability inhibit motivational feelings and lead to withdrawal. Although anger has been linked to
‘striking back,’ we propose that in an organization where an employee desires to keep his job (the primary appraisal determined that he did have a stake in the encounter), the response at least initially will be more passive and include psychological distancing and withdrawal from the stressful encounter and emphasizing other positive aspects of the job (e.g., a paycheque, friends at work). Based on these findings, we propose that employees who feel shame, anger, or frustration (e.g., attribute their stress to an external source or lack of ability) will utilize emotion-focused coping as a means of reappraising an uncontrollable situation. Thus, shame, anger, and frustration may all be mediating variables in the attribution–secondary appraisal coping relationship.

Organizational implications

The transactional model purports coping to be contextual and, thus, the utility of any coping pattern varies with the type of stressful encounter and the outcome studied. What works in one context may be counterproductive in another context (Lazarus, 1993). Problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies can occur together (Leana, Feldman and Tan, 1998), but one or the other usually predominates (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Moreover, because individuals may experience seemingly contradictory emotions during different stages of a stressful encounter (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985), they may use more than one coping technique for the same stressor over time (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985, 1980). The relative proportions of each form vary according to how the encounter is appraised at a certain time (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985, 1980). For example, students have been found to use problem-solving techniques in anticipation of taking an exam and emotion-focused coping while waiting to find out their performance outcome (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Employees may similarly exhibit a combination of techniques depending on the causal determination of the stressor and perceptions of personal control. Emotion-focused and problem-solving efforts can complement each other because they attempt to change different aspects of the ‘disturbed person–environment relationship that coping is meant to change’ (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985, p. 150). For example, employees may utilize emotion-focused coping (emphasizing other positive aspects of their job) in order to energize their problem solving efforts to accomplish their tasks (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In the model, the appraisal including specific causal analysis and resulting emotions influence coping efforts. These efforts change the person–environment relationship, which generates a reappraisal of the person–environment fit and emotions (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988).

Prior research has show that the selection of a coping mechanism is significantly influenced by the individual’s perception of the best option available (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). We propose that these perceptions depend at least partially on the employee’s determination of the dimensions of the source of his stress. Thus, causal attributions become very significant when one realizes that the goodness of fit between the appraisal of a stressor and the coping response determines the likelihood of a successful coping effort (Forsythe and Compas, 1987).

Conclusions and future research

The relational cognitive approaches used by both stress and attribution theories likely help contribute to an explanation of why two employees encountering the same potential stressor (as
measured objectively) may react very differently. As qualitative evidence suggests, if the more potent relationship that generates feelings of stress is between appraisal and outcome, the meaning or way events are appraised should become the measuring point rather than the events themselves (Dewe, 1991). One employee may feel the stressor; the other may not. Even if both employees sense a stressful situation, their behavioral responses may differ due to the mediating role of different emotions generated from different causal attributions made by each employee.

The fact that a work event can be appraised in a number of ways indicates a level of analysis and a state of cognitive processing that is being ignored by current measurement procedures in stress research which continue to relate the events themselves to different outcomes (Dewe, 1989). We propose a theoretical model that specifically accounts for an individual's cognitive processing of the causes of his work-related stress and how the resulting attributions affect both the emotional response and subsequent choice of coping mechanisms.

In their review of the state of stress theories, Sullivan and Bhagat (1992) state that most are characterized by an extremely passive view of people, and the research process is so structured that they often do not allow the respondents ample opportunities—even in real life organizational contexts—to select alternatives, to manage critical environmental contingencies, and generally to construe the situation so that coping and adaptation might be achieved over time (p. 367). To change this pattern, we see employees as having a 'vested interest' in performing well and actively attempting to minimize the negative aspects of their work environment including felt stress. Understanding the individual elements within the stress process is the beginning to helping employees help themselves. Because there continues to be a lack of organizational research focusing on attributional processes and emotions in regard to the stress and coping processes, we also offer suggestions regarding the relationship between causal dimensions and emotions and between emotions and coping choices for future testing in an organizational context. It is critical to understand how people interpret and react to objective conditions rather than simply linking stressors to strains. Such studies are especially needed to examine the antecedents to frustration, guilt and shame, which remain under-researched (Roseman et al., 1994).

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1988), emotions depend on cognitive appraisals of the significance of the person–environment relationship and available options for coping. Thus, the primary and secondary appraisal process generates emotion. The researchers emphasize the importance of how coping affects emotion rather than how emotions affect coping. Although a clinical process, the potential affects of emotion on coping choices and on actual coping should not be underestimated. When put into an attributional framework, there is a more clear understanding of how one's attributions of a stressful event can affect the perceived coping alternatives as well as the choice of how to cope via emotions. We suggest that following the recognition of anxiety (a more general emotion) during the primary appraisal, the specific causal dimensions arising from a causal search generate distinct emotions which affect the secondary appraisal. Given the importance of emotions in the organizational stress process as well as other organizational behavior processes, it is surprising that there is so little research that directly examines work issues and emotion (Pekrun and Frese, 1992; Cropanzano and Howes, 1994).

It is the contention of the authors that it is not simply important to examine the individual appraisals when studying organizational stress, it is essential in order to understand the stress process. Thoroughly examining organizational stress via individual variables such as appraisals, cognitions, attributions, and emotions, is the only way to begin to understand this complex process. This is not to say that researchers should abandon their use of objective stressors; however, stress researchers should be wary of limiting their focus too much. Frese and Zapf (1988), for example, advocate the use of objective stressors and state that if organizational '. . . stress were idiosyncratic and just related to an individual's perception or cognitive appraisals, it would
not make sense to redesign working conditions; the only sensible approach would be to change the individual” (p. 376). Perhaps another approach is to view the individual in more proactive terms. Employees are not simply passive entities waiting for their environment to affect them or for someone to change them. Not only do individuals have influence in choosing their environments, they are active manipulators of their environments (Pervin, 1989; Schneider, 1983).

References


