CHAPTER 5: RESULTS - A FRAMEWORK OF COPING STRATEGIES FOR LEADERS DURING AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I discuss focused coding. Focused coding assists a researcher to synthesize and explain larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006:58-60). I did this by using axial coding, followed by selective coding. First, I consider axial coding and the axial codes derived from open codes. Second, I indicate my selective codes, the conceptualisation of axial codes. Next, the selective codes are used as a basis for a conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn. Lastly, I attempt to link the literature to my conceptual framework, showing the relevance of my findings in relation to the existing body of knowledge (Henning, 2004:27).

5.2 AXIAL CODING

Axial coding is defined by Strauss and Corbin (2007:96, cited in Boeije, 2010:108) as 'a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories'. Stated differently, axial coding reassembles data that were fractured during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:124). It is a more abstract process, where coding is done around categories or axes, linking categories and moving from a descriptive to a conceptual level.

Table 6 (overleaf) displays axial codes in the form of categories relating the various open code concepts. Each category is also described.

Table 6:   Axial codes derived from the initial (open) coding

Open code	Category	Description of category
Being optimistic	Individual factors	All factors on an individual level[11] that create a predisposition in respect of how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn
Thriving on the challenge		
Being confident		
Focusing on the future		
Not depending on the organisation for identity		
Having experience		
Inter-team influencing	Team factors	All factors on an team level that create a predisposition in respect of how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn
Team maturity		
Organisational culture	Organisational factors	All factors on an organisational level that create a predisposition in respect of how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn
Organisational level		
Viewing the effect of the downturn as positive	Positive view of impact	The overall positive view of the economic downturn and its impact/effects on the organisation
Viewing the effect of the downturn as negative	Negative view of impact	The overall negative view of the economic downturn and its impact/effects on the organisation in a negative light
Doubting job security	Individual stressors	The specific aspects on an individual level that contribute to the stress that an individual experiences during an economic downturn
Worrying about financial security		
Feeling responsible for the team	Derived team stressors	The specific aspects on a team level that contribute to the stress that an individual experiences during an economic downturn
		Continue - overleaf

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[11] The individual, team and organisational levels in this chapter refer to the multiple levels of analysis in Organisational Behaviour. Refer to Chapter 1.

Company or shareholder expectations	Derived organisational stressors	The specific aspects on an organisational level that contribute to the stress that an individual experiences during an economic downturn
Feeling responsible and to blame		
Value dichotomy		
Survival		
Having a plan of action	Organisational plan	The plan that the organisation has to deal with the economic downturn
Basing plan of action on facts		
Focusing on the short term	Organisational goal	The goal that the organisation wants to achieve with its plan to deal with the economic downturn
Focusing on the long term		
Taking action	Organisational action	The actions that the organisation takes to deal with the economic downturn
Defining action in terms of retrenchment		
Taking fast action		
Religion/faith	Individual strategies	Coping methods that an individual uses to cope during the economic downturn that falls within the individual domain
Spousal support		
Emotional separation: depersonlizing actions		
Balancing work and home life		
Having a core team	Team strategies	Coping methods that an individual uses to cope during the economic downturn that falls within the team domain
Trusting the core team		
Dividing the pressure, aligning the vision		
Trusting the team under you		
Taking team action		
Having guidance	Organisational rationalization strategies	Coping methods that an individual uses to cope during the economic downturn by attempting to rationalize actions taken within the organisation
Doing the right thing		
Believing in the plan		
Feeling compelled to act		

5.3 SELECTIVE CODING

Selective coding, the final phase of focused coding and also of data analysis as a whole, is the process of integrating and refining categories as set out in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:143). I applied selective coding by identifying core categories that emerged from axial coding, grouping similar axial codes into these core categories. Once again, the various core categories are described in tabular form, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7:   Selective codes

Axial codes	Core category	Description of core category
Individual factors	Influencing factors	Factors that create a predisposition in respect of how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn
Team factors		
Organisational factors		
Positive view of impact	Overall view of the impact of the economic downturn	The overall view of the economic downturn and its effects/impact on the organisation
Negative view of impact		
Individual stressors	Stressors	Aspects that contribute to the stress that an individual experiences during an economic downturn
Derived team stressors		
Derived organisational stressors		
Organisational plan	Organisational response to economic downturn	How the organisation chooses to act in response to an economic downturn
Organisational goal		
Organisational action		
Individual strategies	Coping strategies	Coping methods that an individual uses to cope with stressors during the economic downturn
Team strategies		
Organisational rationalization strategies		

5.4 BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework is defined as a visual or written product, one that explains, either graphically or in narrative format, the key factors, concepts or variables under study and the relationship among them (Maxwell, 2005:33). Mouton and Marais (1988:136) distinguish between three types of conceptual frameworks: '...typologies that basically have a classification or categorization function, models that, apart from classification also suggest new relationships heuristically, and theories that, apart from the preceding functions (classification and heuristics), also fulfil an explanatory and interpretive function.'

Mouton and Marais (1988:137) warn that the borders between models and theories are often extremely vague. Figure 34 indicates the most important characteristics of typologies, models and theories, as well as the relationship between them.

Figure 34:   Summary of types of conceptual frameworks
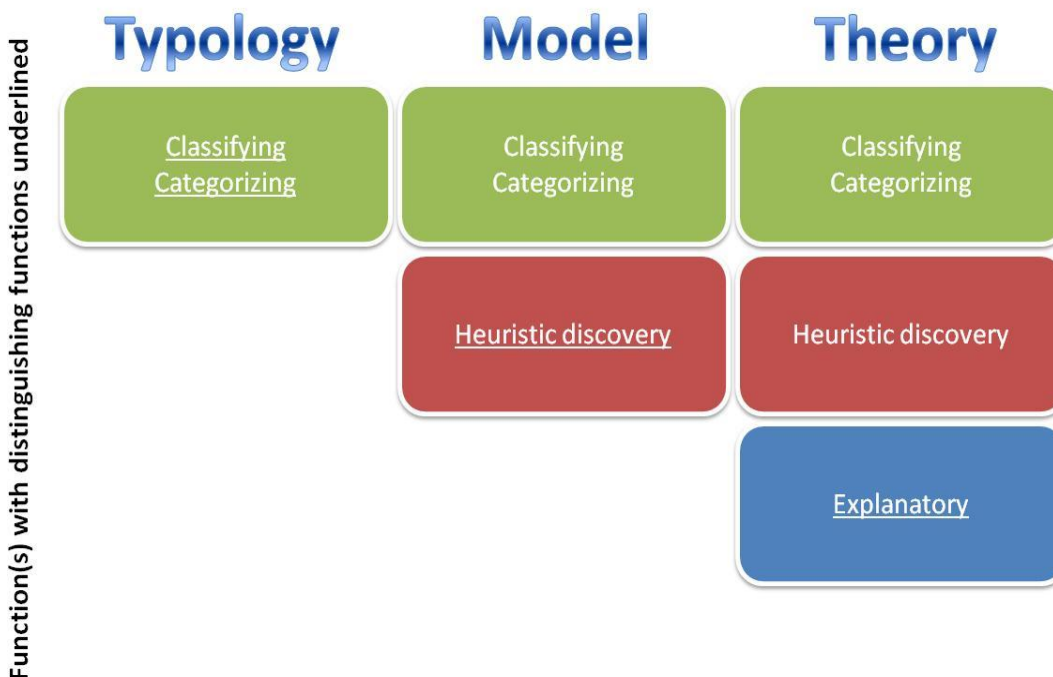

Source: Mouton and Marais (1988:134)

Based on this classification, I propose a conceptual framework that fulfils the function of a model, going beyond the mere classification and categorising of concepts. The functions of a model, according to Mouton and Marais (1988:141), are the following:

- 'Models identify central problems or questions concerning the phenomenon that could be investigated further.
- Models limit, isolate and systemize the domain that is investigated.
- Models provide a new language in which the phenomenon may be discussed.
- Models provide explanation sketches and the means for making predictions.'

Therefore, although the conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn is presented in the form of a model, it does fulfil an explanatory function by suggesting relationships between concepts, although not in such a comprehensive fashion as would be the case with a theory in terms of Mouton and Marais's (1988:134) classification. A theory, according to Kerlinger (1973:9, cited in Mouton & Marais, 1998:142), is 'a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations between variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena'.

Mouton and Marais (1988:137) argue that the borders between models and theories are often extremely vague, and are often merely a matter of degree. In fact, they point out that a model can also be referred to as a precursive theoretical model. Maxwell (2005:34) presents a similar argument, but is of the opinion that any conceptual framework *is* a theory, however tentative or incomplete it may be. To this end, it might be argued that my conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 35 (overleaf), may be regarded as a theory, but for the purposes of answering the research question, a conceptual framework in the form of a model would suffice.

Figure 35:   Conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn[12]

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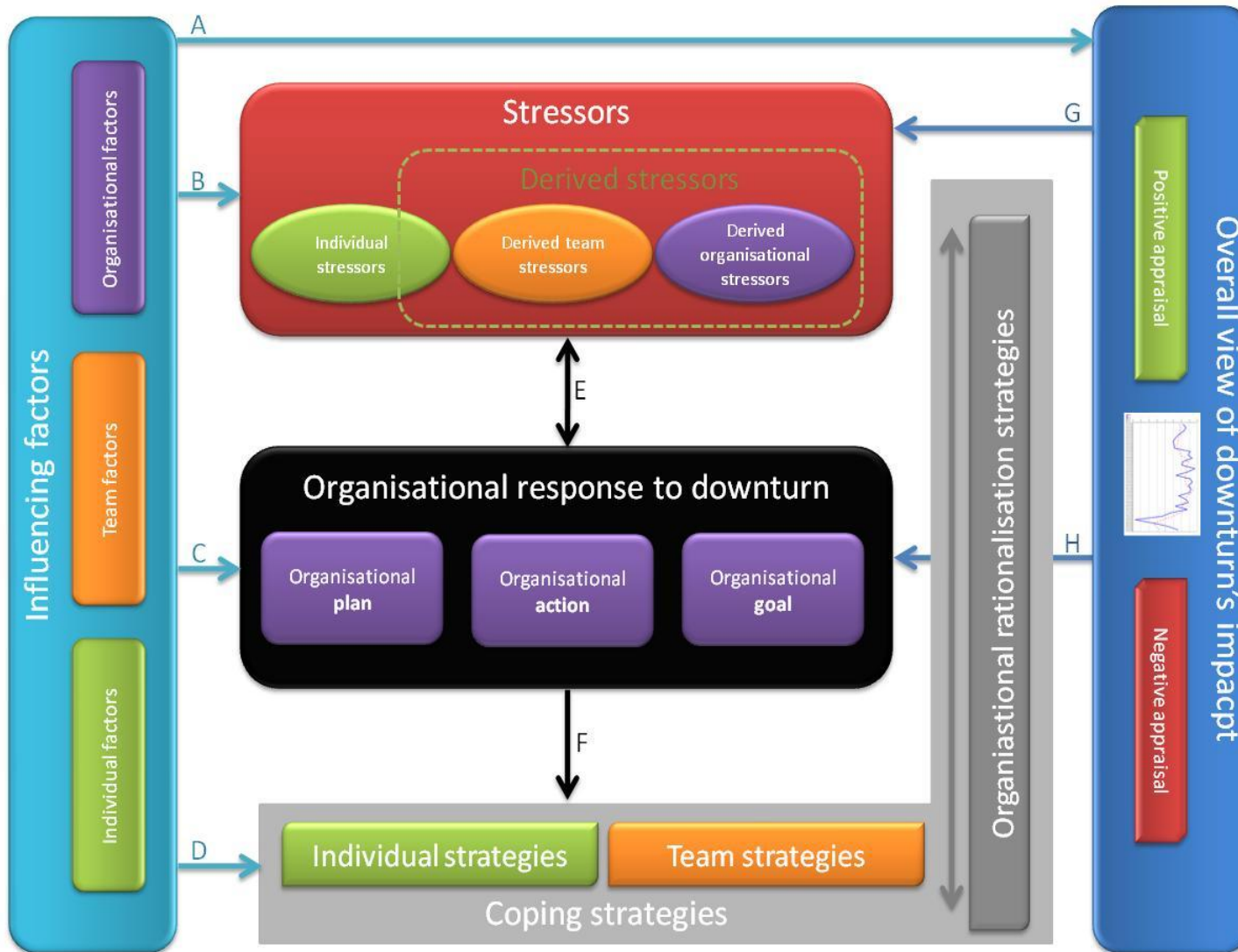
[12] Hereafter referred to as 'the conceptual framework'.

5.4.1   Influencing factors

There are several factors that could create a particular predisposition in respect of how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn. Firstly, there are **individual factors**, such as being optimistic and confident, thriving on the challenge of the economic downturn and focusing on the future. In addition, the experience that the individual has (in general, and in specific, with dealing with an economic downturn) and the extent to which the individual depends on (or in this case does *not* depend on) the organisation for identity also played a role in how leaders coped during the economic downturn.

Secondly, there are **team factors** that influence how leaders cope during an economic downturn. Team factors such as the maturity of the team and inter-team influencing may play a role. For example, where the core team[13] within which the leaders operated during the downturn was mature, the leaders tended to draw on support from the team. Where the team was more immature, the leader drew more on individual coping strategies. The dynamics within the core team (I termed it inter-team influencing) may influence the mood within the team, as well as the overall appraisal of the downturn (positive or negative). In addition, the extent to which leaders influence other team members, combined with the team's maturity, could determine to what extent leaders use team coping strategies in relation to individual coping strategies.

Thirdly, **organisational factors** such as the organisational culture and the organisational level on which the leader operates creates a predisposition with regard to how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn. Regarding the organisational level, although all respondents in this case were members of a mine or mining group's South African executive committee, they were technically at different levels of the organisation. In the case of a South African mining organisation, the executive committee members are the ultimate authority in the organisation responsible to the shareholders and on a higher organisational level relative to their counterparts in

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[13] The core team refers to the executive committee.

international mining organisations. South African executive committee members in the international organisations report to the mining organisation's international executive committee. Leaders on a relatively lower level of their organisation, such as South African executive members of an international mining organisation, tended to focus more on individual stressors, and less on derived stressors than their counterparts, South African executive members of a South African mining organisation, with whom the proverbial buck stops.

Organisational culture also played a role in this case; for example, one organisation where respondents emphasised the strength of the organisational culture[14] did not retrench any employees, based on its organisational culture[15] of 'looking after each other'. Not only may organisational culture affect the organisational response to the downturn, it also may influence the proportion of individual, team and organisational rationalization coping strategies that leaders use.

Individual, team and organisational factors, as shown in the conceptual framework, may therefore influence the overall way in which the effect of the downturn on the organisation is viewed (for example, an individual factor such as thriving on the challenge or a team factor such as inter-team influencing, indicated by Arrow A in the conceptual framework), which stressors feature more prominently (for example, individual stressors and derived stressors influenced by organisational level, (Arrow B), the organisation's response to the downturn (for example, affected by organisational culture, Arrow C) and which proportion of individual, team and organisational rationalization coping strategies leaders used (for example, organisational culture, or team maturity, where more individual strategies are likely to be used where the team is

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[14] Refer to Section 4.3.9.
> **Interviewee 5:**
> *I think it's ah, XXX is a fantastic culture. It's a really nice place to live. And to, to work rather. It is live here rather.*

[15] Refer to Section 4.3.9.
> **Interviewee 5:**
> *I mean nobody was, not even, not even the lowest levels… not one person were retrenched through this period. We were down in some plants for six months and, and that again is a management culture and a management decision in our company. We, we look very well after each other, and after our business.*

less mature, or where the culture is less supportive, Arrow D). This, however, does not suggest that all leaders experience the same specific influencing factors as indicated here, but merely that individual, team and organisational factors may play a role in how leaders cope during an economic downturn.

5.4.2 Overall view of the impact of the economic downturn

The overall view of the impact of the downturn refers to how the leaders view the economic downturn and its effect on the organisation. Leaders saw the effect on the organisation as **negative**, noting, for example, a loss of contracts, the negative impact on cash flow, a reduced ability to sustain capital projects, increased cost and decreased access to working capital as some of the negative effects. This list of negative impacts is not exhaustive, but reflects the views of the respondents.

However, leaders also saw the effect of the downturn on the organisation **positively**, seeing it as an opportunity, for example, to revisit strategy and structure, gain access to an increasing pool of human resources, optimize procurement and potentially engage in discounted acquisitions.

Assessing the effect of the economic downturn on the organisation as positive or negative should not be seen as mutually exclusive – although leaders were aware of the negative effects, they also highlighted the positive effects that the downturn had on the organisation. It is important to note that this refers to how the leaders saw the overall effect of the downturn on the organisation, and not on them as individuals. This overall assessment or view of the effects of the downturn on the organisation, however, had an impact on how the organisation responded to the downturn (for example, whether the organisation should retrench or not, hire from the extended resource pool, etc., Arrow H) and also which stressors (individual, team or organisational, Arrow G) feature more prominently for each individual.

5.4.3   Stressors

Stressors refer to aspects that contribute to the stress that a person experiences during an economic downturn. There are **individual stressors**, the specific aspects on an individual level that will contribute to the stress of the leader. Individual level stressors refer, for example, to doubting job security and, closely related, to worrying about financial security, aspects related specifically to each individual leader.

Secondly, leaders felt **derived stressors** that had an impact on a team and at the organisational level more acutely than individual stressors. Although the stressors (individual and derived) all refer to individual stress, individual stressors did not seem to be the biggest contributors to the individual leaders' stress during an economic downturn, but rather stressors that are derived from the distress of others. **Derived team stressors** create stress that a person experiences, not because of himself,[16] but rather because of a responsibility he felt towards the team. Leaders felt pressure to direct the team and the organisation. Leaders often 'pulled' trusted colleagues from their past companies into new positions which meant they had a trusted team, but it also created or at least amplified the responsibility that the respondents felt toward their team members during the downturn, contributing to their stress.

Derived organisational stressors include pressure from the company or the shareholders and their expectations of the leader, feeling responsible or to blame for what happens with the organisation and the individuals working there, and experiencing a dichotomy between values (personal and organisational values) and individual actions. A specific derived organisational stressor is evident in the fact that the respondents likened their individual experience and emotions to that of an executioner, an officer in a concentration camp during the Holocaust or a participant in a war. This is closely related to the stress of feeling responsible or to blame for what happens with the organisation and the people working there, but it expresses a deeper sense of emotional stress that the individual leaders experienced: likening their influence on the

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[16] I refer to leaders in the masculine because all the respondents in this study are male.

organisation and its people to that of someone controlling life and death. Once again, the leaders did not refer to it as an individual stressor, but rather individual stress (in other words, experienced by the person) derived from the distress of others that the leader perceives himself to be (at least partially) responsible for.

It was interesting to note that the derived stressors seemed to be more important and stressful to the leaders than individual stressors influencing only themselves. This is also what they mostly attempted to cope with during the downturn. Note that, although all stressors (individual and derived team and organisational stressors) are individually experienced stressors, they stem from different sources: the individual, team and organisational levels.

Again, I do not want to suggest that the specific individual stressors and derived team and organisational stressors are the same for all leaders as experienced by the respondents in this study, but merely that individual leaders may experience not only stress originating on an individual level, but also stress derived from team and organisational stressors.

5.4.4   Organisational response to economic downturn

The organisational response to the downturn consists of actions taken to achieve a specific goal, based on a plan on how to deal with the organisational downturn. Firstly, the short- and long-term **organisational goals** are considered. In the short term, organisations focused on surviving, focusing on the critical, immediate actions that would ensure that the organisation was able to withstand the downturn. In the long term, the organisation needs to position itself to be ready for the upswing; it needs to have a vision and ensure that the people in the organisation are prepared to be in business in the long run.

Secondly, an **organisational plan** is derived on how to achieve these short- and long-term goals. This plan of action should be based on facts: the state of the markets and

industries, the core of the problem, etc., focusing on specific problems in the organisation versus the generic threat of the economic downturn.

Thirdly, the plan should be implemented by taking specific **organisational actions**, whether it is to reduce capital spending, reduce costs (for example, by means of retrenchment) or other, more strategic actions (such as attempting to control the market). Organisational action in response to the economic downturn is often defined in terms of retrenchment, often *ex negativo*. Where organisations retrenched, respondents focused mostly on their coping with this organisational action. If organisations did not retrench, respondents were proud of this organisational 'non-action', but often also focused on coping with the threat of retrenchment in the organisation.

The organisational response to the downturn not only relates to stressors that have an impact on leaders, but because of this link with stressors, it also influences the coping strategies used. For example, if retrenchment is an organisational action during the downturn, the leader in the organisation concerned may experience different stressors (Arrow E) from those experienced by a leader in an organisation that does not retrench and this therefore influences the coping strategies that the leader might use to cope (Arrow F), as well as subsequent organisational responses (Arrow E).

5.4.5   Coping strategies

Coping strategies are methods that a person uses to cope with stressors, in this case, during an economic downturn. Different coping strategies were identified that leaders might use in combination with each other. Firstly, **individual coping strategies** refer to strategies that fall within the individual domain or level. This includes religion, balancing work and life, spousal support in the form of providing a sounding board or when, for example, a spouse takes over decision-making responsibilities at home, as well as emotional separation in an attempt to depersonalize actions.

Secondly, **team coping strategies** are methods where a person draws on the core team and/or the team reporting to him to cope better with stressors. This includes, first of all, the mere fact of having a core team and not facing all the challenges alone. Trusting this core team is an important element in team coping, particularly because being part of a core team allows for sharing the pressure. In addition, leaders also indicated the importance of trusting the team that reports to them, which enabled these leaders to focus on their own actions during the downturn.

Lastly**, organisational rationalization strategies** refer to strategies that leaders use to cope with the stressors during the economic downturn by attempting to rationalize their actions brought about by the organisation's response to the economic downturn. This may take several forms, for example, feeling compelled to act in the interest of organisational survival during the downturn, having to convince themselves that they are doing the right thing, seeking guidance, and believing in the organisational plan of action and then rationalizing their actions against this plan.

The specific coping strategies mentioned here are based on the experiences of the respondents in this study and the list may therefore not be exhaustive. However, the findings suggest that, in addition to individual coping strategies, leaders may also use team and organisational rationalization strategies in order to cope with the stressors during an economic downturn. In addition, a combination of coping strategies seemed to be used to cope with a combination of individual and/or derived team and organisational stressors and one should not incorrectly presume that, for example, individual coping strategies are merely used to cope with individual stressors.

5.5   LINKING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK WITH THE LITERATURE

In this section I first offer a broad overview of existing coping theories, after which I relate elements from the conceptual framework of coping strategies of leaders during an economic downturn with theoretical concepts found in the literature, using the conceptual framework as a guideline.

5.5.1 Overview of prominent existing coping models

Lazarus and Folkman, who are generally regarded as leaders in the field of coping research (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000:620) developed their model of stress and coping with their now-classic article on 'An analysis of coping in a middle-aged community sample' (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Their book *Stress, appraisal and coping* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), together with the late 1970s work of Moos, Pearlin and Schooler formed the basis for a proliferation of subsequent coping research (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000:620). A review of coping literature across disciplines reveals the central role that Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Theory of Stress and Coping played and continues to play in coping research, forming the theoretical base for a multitude of studies (for example, those of Amoit, Terry & Jimmieson, 2006; Armstrong-Strassen, 2006; George, Brief & Webster, 1991; Scheck & Kinicki, 2000; Torkelson & Muhonen, 2004). For this reason I start this section of linking the literature review with my conceptual framework with a brief overview of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping model as depicted in Figure 36 (overleaf).

Figure 36:   Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping model
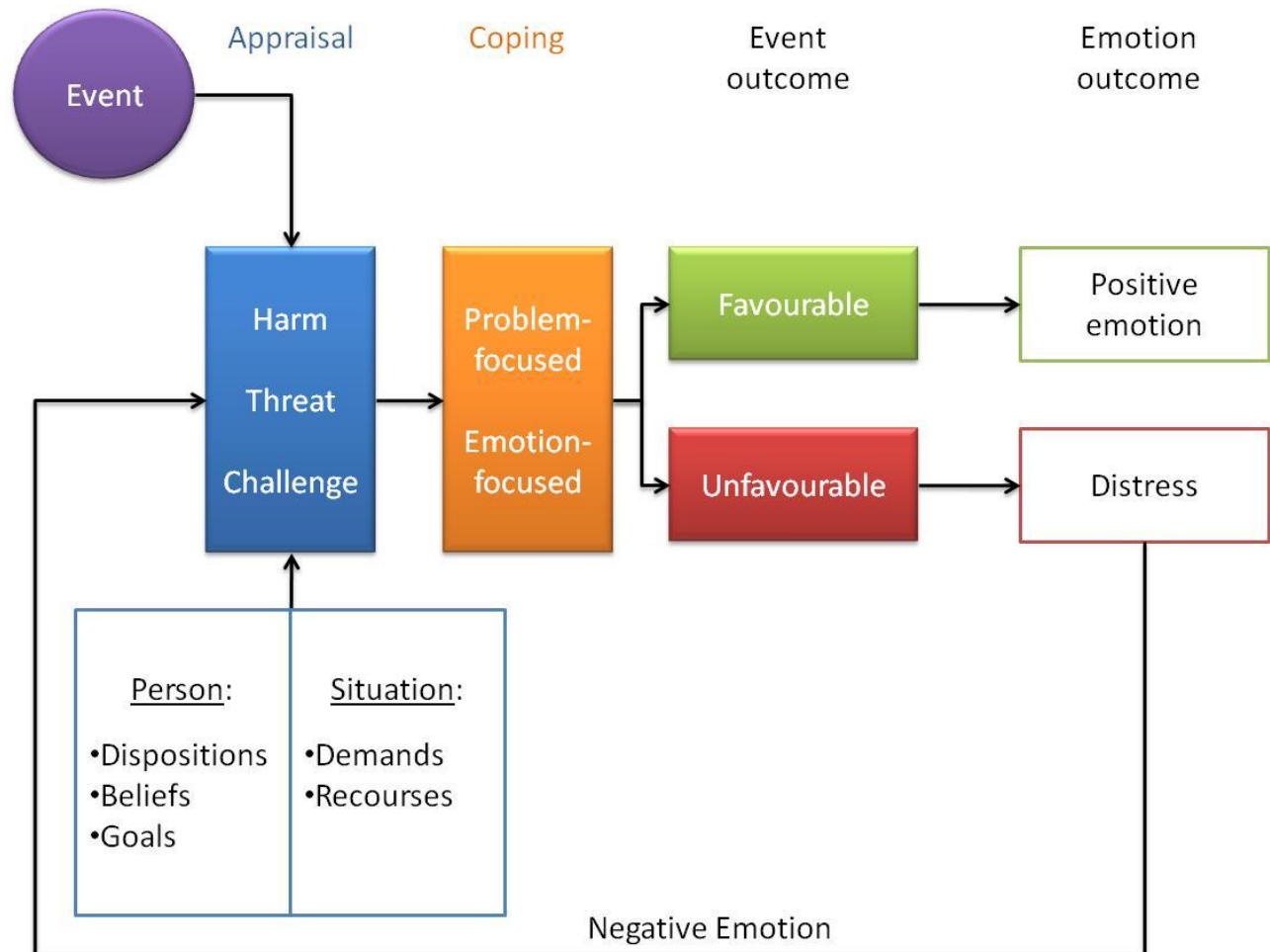
Source: Lazarus and Folkman (1984)

5.5.1.1.Appraisal

Appraisal as a concept is necessary to understanding coping as, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984:22), although environmental demands and pressures may produce stress in significant numbers of people, individuals and groups differ in their reactions towards this stress. Folkman (2008:5) states that their Cognitive Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) 'has always been and continues to be an appraisal based model'.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguish between two forms of appraisal: primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to an evaluation of an event's personal significance as irrelevant, benign-positive or stressful. Irrelevant events have no implication for a person's well-being, while benign-positive events preserve or enhance well-being (or promise to do so). A stress appraisal includes identifying

- harm: some damage or loss has already been sustained by the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:32);

- threat: some harm or loss is anticipated, but has not yet taken place (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:32); or

- challenge: which has much in common with a threat, but whereas a threat centres around potential harm and is characterised by negative emotions, a challenge centres around the potential for gain or growth and is typically characterised by pleasurable emotions. Threats and challenges are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:33).

When an event is appraised as stressful it calls for the mobilization of coping efforts.

Secondary appraisal refers to the evaluation of options for coping. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984:35), this refers to more than a mere intellectual exercise in 'spotting all the things that might be done'. It rather refers to a complex process of evaluating which options are available, the probability that an option will accomplish what it is supposed to, and the probability that an individual can apply a specific strategy or combination of strategies effectively.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) state that personal and situational factors may influence the appraisal of an event as stressful or not.

5.5.1.1.1.   Personal factors influencing appraisal

Personal factors influencing appraisal include commitments and beliefs. Firstly, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984:56): 'Commitments express what is important

to the person, what has meaning for him or her. They determine what is at stake in a specific stressful encounter.'

Commitments influence appraisal through guiding individuals into or away from situations that can threaten or challenge them. Commitments also shape cue-sensitivity, which refers to people's sensitivity to facets of a situation, and perhaps more importantly, commitments influence appraisal through their relationship with psychological vulnerability. The potential for an encounter to be harmful, threatening or challenging is directly related to the depth of a commitment. Therefore, the deeper the commitment, the greater the potential threat, harm or challenge, but also the greater the drive towards action to reduce threats and sustain coping efforts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:57-58)

Beliefs are 'personally formed or culturally shared cognitive configurations' or 'pre-existing notions about reality which serve as a perceptual lens'. They determine what a person sees as fact and the environment and they shape the understanding of meaning of these facts in appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:63). Beliefs about a person's personal control, both in general[17] and in specific situations,[18] plays a major role in determining the degree to which the person feels threatened or challenged in a stressful encounter. In addition, existential beliefs, such as faith in God or some natural order of the universe that enables people to 'create meaning out of life, even out of damaging experiences, and to maintain hope' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:77), also play a role in appraising events.

Although beliefs and commitments appear similar, they are quite different, as the following excerpt from Lazarus and Folkman (1984:77) indicates:

> Beliefs concern what one thinks is true, whether or not one likes or approves
> of it, whereas commitment reflects values, that is, what one prefers or

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[17] 'The extent to which people assume they can control events and outcomes of importance' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:66).
[18] 'The extent to which a person believes that he or she can shape or influence a particular stressful person-environment relationship' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:66).

considers desirable. Commitments have a motivational-emotional quality, but beliefs are affectively neutral. They do not necessarily contain an emotional component. This is not to say that beliefs have no relationship with emotion or commitment. Beliefs can give rise to stress emotions, as when they underlie threat appraisals (e.g. the world is hostile or dangerous), and they can be used to dampen or regulate an emotional response (e.g. belief that supportive others exist). In these instances, beliefs lead to or regulate emotions, but by themselves they are not emotional. They become emotional only when an encounter also involves a commitment to a value or an ideal, another person, or a goal, or when physical well-being is endangered.

5.5.1.1.2. Situational factors influencing appraisal

Lazarus and Folkman (1984:77) identified the following situational factors that might influence appraisal: the novelty of a situation, predictability, temporal factors, ambiguity and timing.

Firstly, the novelty of a situation refers to the extent to which a person has direct or indirect previous experience. A novel situation is only interpreted as stressful if it is previously associated with harm, danger or mastery. Novelty in itself might be experienced as a threat. General knowledge might assist a person to interpret a novel event and cope with the uncertainty of a novel event, but direct or vicarious experience with the encountered demands is necessary to develop the specific coping skills required to deal with the demand. If a person is aware of this lack of experience, it might increase the sense of threat.

Secondly, predictability, which is an important theme in stress research, implies that there are 'predictable environmental characteristics that can be discerned, discovered or learned' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:85), or provides a type of warning that something harmful is about to happen. Predictability has mostly been used in connection with animal research and therefore the term 'event uncertainty' is rather used in the case of

stress and coping in humans. Not knowing whether an event is going to occur or not may lead to a drawn out process of appraisal and reappraisal, creating feelings of helplessness and confusion.

A third situational factor that may influence appraisal is temporal factors such as imminence,[19] duration[20] and temporal uncertainty.[21] Imminence provides people with more or less time, for example, to think about, plan for, reflect about or attempt to avoid a specific stressful event, while the duration of a stressful event is important, because it either wears a person down or the person might get used to a situation. Temporal uncertainty is stressful when a threatening signal indicates that an event is imminent, which then again raises the question of *how* imminent?

Ambiguity is a fourth factor that may influence event appraisal. Ambiguity differs from uncertainty, as it refers to a lack of situational clarity, whereas uncertainty refers to a person's confusion about the meaning of the environmental configuration. Ambiguity may influence event appraisal in a dual fashion: it may be regarded as threatening and a person might attempt to counter it, for example, by seeking more information, or it might be seen as advantageous, where a person might, for example, maintain hope.

Lastly, the timing of stressful event in relation to the life cycle may influence appraisal – normal life events may become stressful when they occur 'off time' in relation to a person's life cycle or in relation to other events at a given time.

5.5.1.2. Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984:150) distinguish between coping 'that is directed at managing or altering the problem that causes the distress and coping that is directed at regulating emotional response to the problem'. In general, they posit that emotion-

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[19] 'Imminence refers to how much time there is before an event occurs' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:92).
[20] 'Duration refers to how long a stressful event persists' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:98).
[21] 'Temporal uncertainty refers to not knowing when an event is going to happen' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:101).

focused coping is more likely to be used when an event has been appraised as uncontrollable, where nothing can be done to modify the harmful, threatening or challenging environment. Problem-focused coping is more likely to be used when a situation is more open to change.

5.5.1.3. Coping resources

Coping resources refer to resources on which people may draw in order to cope, and include the resources that are primarily properties of the person, such as, health and energy, positive beliefs, problem-solving skills and social skills, as well as more environmental resources, such as social and material resources.

5.5.1.4. Outcome

Adaptational outcomes affected by coping and appraisal, and which are commonly regarded as important for researchers, are social functioning, morale and somatic health (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:223). Ultimately, coping is looked at in view of the outcome of coping in these three areas, although the relationships between social functioning, morale and somatic health are complex, and a positive outcome in one area does not necessarily suggest positive outcomes in all areas.

5.5.1.5. Other coping classifications

Although Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Theory of Stress and Coping was the most prominent theory in coping research, there are many other coping models. Skinner, Edge, Altman and Sherwood (2003) provide a comprehensive overview of various classifications of coping categories beyond the original emotion-focused coping vs. problem-focused coping identified by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). A summary is provided in Table 8 (overleaf):

Table 8:   Summary of coping category classifications

Distinction	Definition	Author
Emotion-focused coping vs. problem-focused coping	'Coping that is aimed at managing or altering the problem causing the distress' vs. 'coping that is directed at regulating emotional responses to the problem'	Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150
Problem-focused coping vs. emotion-focused coping vs. appraisal-focused coping	'Dealing with the reality of the situation seeks to modify or eliminate the source of the stress' vs. 'handling emotions aroused by a situation responses whose primary function is to manage the emotions aroused by stressors and thereby maintain affective equilibrium' vs. 'primary focus on appraising and reappraising a situation… involves attempts to define the meaning of a situation'	Moos & Billings, 1982, p. 218
Responses that modify the situation vs. responses that function to control the meaning of the problem vs. responses that function for the management of stress	'Responses that change the situation out of which the strainful experience arises' vs. 'responses that control the meaning of the strainful experience after it occurs but before the emergence of stress' vs. 'responses that function more for the control of the stress itself after it has emerged'	Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 6
Approach vs. Avoidance	'Cognitive and emotional activity that is oriented either toward or away from threat'	Roth & Cohen, 1986, p. 813
Engagement vs. Disengagement	'Responses that are oriented toward either the source of stress, or toward one's emotions and thoughts' vs. 'responses that are oriented away from the stressor or one's emotions/thoughts'	Compas et al., 2001, p. 92

Control vs. Escape	'Proactive take-charge approach' vs. 'staying clear of the person or situation or trying not to get concerned about it'	Latack & Havlovic, 1992, p. 493
Primary vs. secondary vs. relinquishment of control coping	'Efforts to influence objective events or conditions vs. efforts to maximize one's fit with the current situation vs. relinquishment of control'	Rudolph et al., 1995
Assimilation (vs. helplessness)	'Transforming developmental circumstances in accordance with personal preferences'	Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990, p. 58
Accommodation (vs. rigid perseverance)	'Adjusting personal preferences to situational constraints'	Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990, p. 58
Alloplastic vs. autoplastic coping	'Coping directed toward changing the environment' vs. 'directed toward changing the self'	Perrez & Reicherts, 1992
Volitional, effortful, controlled vs. involuntary, automatic coping	'Responses to stress that involve volition and conscious effort by the individual' vs. 'responses that are automatized and not under conscious control'	Compas et al., 1997
Behavioral vs. cognitive coping	'Taking action or doing something' vs. 'mental strategies and self-talk'	Latack & Havlovic, 1992, p. 492
Social vs. Solitary	'Utilize methods that involve other people or . . . be done alone'	Latack & Havlovic, 1992, p. 492
Proactive coping	'Efforts undertaken in advance of a potentially stressful event to prevent it or modify its form before it occurs'	Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417
Direct vs. indirect coping	'Coping in which an individual emits an overt motor behavior to deal with a stressful event' vs. coping in which 'the organism responds to the stressful event by enlisting the aid of a conspecific'	Barrett & Campos, 1991, p. 33

Source: Skinner *et al.* (2003:226)

The purpose of this study is therefore not to add to the multitude of coping classifications, but rather to understand coping in the context of the economic downturn, also drawing on established literature, as outlined in the next section.

5.5.2 Relating the conceptual framework with the literature

Due to a general lack of research on coping in the specific context of an economic downturn, and more specifically the coping of leaders during an economic downturn, I focus on coping research done in the workplace in general when linking the literature to my conceptual framework. In addition, most research done on coping and stress in the workplace does not have an organisational behaviour perspective. I therefore also draw on more general coping research, taking a broader, more multi-disciplinary view of coping in this section, while relating it back to the conceptual framework.

5.5.2.1.Influencing factors

As can be seen in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Theory of Stress and Coping, there are factors that influence the coping process, particularly individual and situational factors influencing the primary and secondary appraisal of an event as either harmful, a threat or a challenge. However, in my conceptual framework, influencing factors refer to more than factors influencing appraisal – the framework includes factors that may influence the process of coping as a whole. This includes influencing the appraisal of events, as in Lazarus and Folkman's theory, but also includes influencing how leaders see the effect of the downturn on the organisation (in addition to their appraisal of the downturn in respect to their own well-being), the response that the organisation might have to the downturn, and ultimately the coping strategies used to cope during a downturn.

In addition, from the axial and selective coding, it became clear that there were not only individual factors that influenced the process of coping, but also team and

organisational factors. These influencing factors are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

I would like to start by discussing **individual influencing factors**. There seems to be wide support in the literature for the argument that individual factors play a role in the coping process, particularly in the workplace. In fact, most studies focusing on predispositional factors, antecedents or determinants of coping focus only on individual factors. Judge, Thoresen, Pucik and Welbourne (1999), for example, examined how personality characteristics influenced managerial coping with change. They identified seven dispositional constructs that were, to varying degrees, related to successful coping to organisational change. These dispositional constructs are

- locus of control, a person's perception of control of his or her ability to exercise control over the environment (Rotter, 1966, cited in Judge *et al.*, 1999:108);
- generalized self-efficacy, 'the belief in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' (Bandura, 1997:3, cited in Judge *et al.*, 1999:108);
- self-esteem, 'the extent to which an individual believes himself [or herself] to be capable, significant, successful and worthy' (Coopersmith, 1967:4-5, cited in Judge *et al.*, 1999:109);
- positive affectivity, an underlying personality disposition generally associated with a positive world view (Judge *et al.*, 1999:108);
- openness to experience, 'generally associated with intelligence, perceptiveness, creativity, imagination, tolerance, culturedness, and inquisitiveness' (Goldberg, 1992, cited in Judge *et al.*, 1999:109);
- tolerance for ambiguity, 'the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable' (Budner, 1962, cited in Judge *et al.*, 1999:109); and
- risk aversion, 'the propensity of individuals to seek out or avoid risky scenarios' (Kahneman& Tversky, 1979, cited in Judge *et al.*, 1999:110).

Judge *et al.* (1999:118) group these seven constructs into two independent factors. The first was labelled 'Positive Self-Concept', combining locus of control, positive affect, self-

esteem and self-efficacy; and the second was labelled 'Risk Tolerance', composed of 'openness to experience, low risk aversion and tolerance for ambiguity'. Both factors were positively related to coping with change. The collective factor of Positive Self-Concept seems similar to the individual factors identified in this study, for example, being optimistic, confident and not depending on the organisation for one's identity.

O'Brien and Delongis (1996:801) found, in a study using a sample of undergraduate students, that personality is a significant predictor of coping responses. Even more relevant, they found that coping responses are a joint function of dispositional tendencies (such as personality) and situational demands (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996:801). Similarly, a meta-analysis by Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007), examining the relationship between personality and coping, found that personality[22] may directly facilitate or constrain coping, or indirectly affect coping by influencing stress exposure, stress reactivity or perceptions about coping resources (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007:1099). This is in line with the conceptual framework. Firstly, in the sense that more than individual factors may influence coping, such as team and organisational factors, which are in a sense the immediate situation in which the leader operates. Secondly, the importance of the context is also in line with both the conceptual framework (where the situation is represented by the economic downturn and its effect on the organisation) and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory's emphasis on event appraisal.

Although in general there seems to be support for the notion that individual factors influence coping, I provide a more in-depth discussion linking the literature with specific individual factors identified in this study that influence how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn.

Being optimistic was identified through axial and selective coding as an individual factor that influences how leaders cope during an economic downturn. Optimism, which

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[22] These researchers used the five-factor model of personality, namely neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

is seen as an adaptive personality trait to stress, can be defined as 'an explanatory style that attributes positive events to personal, permanent and pervasive causes and interprets negative events in terms of external, temporary and situation-specific factors' (Seligman, 1998). Nes and Segerstrom (2006:248) found that dispositional optimism has important implications for how individuals respond to stressful situations. Optimism was found to be positively associated with approach coping strategies and negatively associated with avoidance coping strategies. Approach coping strategies are coping strategies that aim to eliminate, reduce or manage stressors and their emotional consequences in some way, whereas avoidance coping strategies aim to avoid, ignore or withdraw from stressors and their emotional consequences. Table 9 below provides examples of these types of coping strategy, according to the approach/avoidance coping classification.

Table 9:   Examples of coping strategies

	Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-Focused Coping
Approach Coping	• Planning • Seeing instrumental support • Task-orientated coping • Active coping • Confrontive coping	• Cognitive restructuring • Seeking emotional support • Turning to religion • Acceptance • Positive reinterpretation
Avoidance Coping	• Problem avoidance • Behavioural disengagement	• Denial • Distancing • Mental disengagement • Wishful thinking • Social withdrawal

Source: Nes and Segerstrom (2006:236)

Iwanaga, Yokoyama and Seiwa (2004) found a similar relationship between optimism and coping, but also found that optimists showed lower stress than pessimists to begin with, in addition to optimists' being more prone to use approach coping strategies.

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However, they could not confirm that pessimists prefer to adopt avoidance coping strategies. The relationship between coping and optimism was also confirmed in an organisational setting where optimism was positively related to problem-focused coping strategies in sales organisations (Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993).

It seems that optimism as an influencing factor is confirmed to be important in copping. See Hatchett and Park (2004) and Nes and Segerstrom (2006) for a review of studies linking optimism and coping.

Being confident was another individual factor identified through axial and selective coding to be an individual influencing factor. The respondents in the current study indicated that they were confident that they would be able to survive the economic downturn (see Sections 4.3.4 and 4.3.19). Luthans, Youssef and Avolio (2007:28) claim that efficacy and confidence are, in essence, the same construct – they define efficacy as 'one's conviction (or confidence) about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context'. Efficacy has long been associated with stress and coping. Bandura, in his extensive theory and research on efficacy, early on already studied efficacy (or confidence) in relation with stress and coping, although he focused mostly on the physiological outcomes of stress – see, for example, Bandura, Taylor, Williams, Mefford and Barchas (1985), and Bandura, Cioffi, Taylor and Brouillard (1988). Coping self-efficacy, 'a person's self-appraisal of their ability to cope with environmental demands' (Pisanti, Lombardo, Lucidi, Lazzari & Bertini, 2008:239), became a regularly used term and research focus in coping research, although scant evidence was found of this in an organisational setting.

Having experience, another individual influencing factor that was included in my conceptual framework, may be connected to having confidence, as past mastering of a particular kind of event may lead to higher confidence in a person's ability to cope with such a situation again.

With regard to **focusing on the future**, respondents not only indicated that they focused on '*the gold at the end of the rainbow*' (Interviewee 7), but also said that they were hoping for a better future and overcoming obstacles to reach this future state, '*overcoming those obstacles and thriving and succeeding out of them*' (Interviewee 6). This notion seems similar to hope and resiliency, two constructs linked to coping in the literature. Snyder, the most widely accepted theory builder and researcher on hope in the positive psychology movement, defines **hope** as 'a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (1) agency (goal directed energy) and (2) pathways (planning to meet goals)' (Snyder, Irving & Anderson, 1991, cited in Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2005:258) or simply 'the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals' (Snyder, 1995:355).

Lazarus (1999:655), when discussing hope in the context of coping, defines hope more simply as 'to believe that something positive, which does not presently apply to one's life, could still materialise, and so we yearn for it'. He points out that there is very little research on hope and coping (Lazarus, 1999:655) but draws on personal and clinical experience to discuss hope as a vital coping resource.

Since then, hope has been researched in the context of coping, but mainly related to coping with physical illness – see Chu-Hui-Lin Chi (2007) and Dorsett (2010) for examples of recent research. The role of hope has received much attention in the workplace since the emergence of Positive Organisational Behaviour (POB).[23] Luthans, Van Wyk and Walumbwa (2004) recognise the importance of hope, specifically for South African organisational leaders, as well as its role in Human Resources Development (Luthans & Jensen 2002). Research on the influence of hope on how leaders cope in an organisational setting (during a downturn) is, however, lacking.

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[23] Positive organisational behaviour was first defined as 'the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance improvements in today's workplace' (Luthans 2002a:59).

Resiliency is defined by Masten and Reed (2002:75) as 'a class of phenomena characterized by patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk'. Luthans (2002b:702) claims that it also includes bouncing back from positive but potentially overwhelming events (for example, greatly increased responsibility), which also seems to be confirmed by the literature as a factor that influences coping. Specifically, research focuses on resilient people's use of positive emotions to cope with negative experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Strümpfer (2003:70) found that resilience advanced fortigenesis to assist people in coping in the work context and preventing burnout.

The fact that respondents indicated that they **thrived on the challenge** presented by the economic downturn may be related to the generally positive individual influencing factors discussed above. This can be linked to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) primary appraisal of an event as a threat, challenge or harm. The fact that it seems as if leaders in this study generally appraised the economic downturn and its effect as a challenge, would (drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Theory of Stress and Coping) therefore indeed influence the coping process, for example, the respondents' choice of coping strategies.

In contrast with the wide support and cover in literature for individual influencing factors, there seems to be a lack of research on the influence of other factors, such as **team and organisational factors,** on coping in the organisation during a stressful event. This is perhaps due to the fact that, according to Robinson and Griffiths (2005:206), there has been little research on the topic of coping with stress in an organisational setting: although there is ample research on stress and coping in the workplace, it seems to be focused on the individual, without viewing the individual in the context of the organisation. There are, however some studies that specifically recognise the influence of organisational factors. Länsisalmi, Peiró and Kivimäki (2000:549), for example, found that **organisational culture**[24] does not only seem to moderate the appraisal of stress,

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[24] Schein (1990:11, cited in Länsisalmi *et al.* 2000:529) defines organisational culture as 'a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its

but it also contains what they term collective coping responses to stressors. With regard to the influence of **organisational level**, Olson and Tetrick (1988:383) suggest that the coping strategies vary depending on the individual's level within the organisation, mainly due to the difference in control that is experienced on different levels. They posit that lower level employees have less control over a situation and therefore are more likely to distance themselves from the stressful event and its consequences. Managerial employees have more control over a situation and may typically respond by seeking more information. This seems similar to what is proposed in the conceptual framework, although in the current study all the respondents were high level, managerial employees, but on varying levels, relative to the organisation as a whole.

5.5.2.2. Stressors

'The literature is replete with stressors at the individual level' and most models of stress in the workplace focus on individual stressors, according to Koslowsky (1998:32). He provides a list of individual stressors, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10:   Individual stressors

| Subjective stressors	Objective employee characteristics	Job stressors
• Perceived stress • Pay adequacy • Perceived hostile environment	• Type • Occupational categories • Commuting time/distance • Business travel • Relocation and retirement	• Job demands • Role pressures • Responsibility for people • Relationship with supervisor • Overload, underload and monotony

Source: Koslowsky (1998:32)

problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, is to be taught to new members entering the organization as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems'.

In line with Koslowsky's remark, a review of the literature seems to confirm the focus on individual stressors. However, it does seem that stressors in the workplace are increasingly classified on various levels apparently similar to those of the conceptual framework. For example, Furnham (2005:365) distinguishes between internal-to-the-person and external-in-the-environment sources of stress. Internal-to-the-person causes of stress are listed as neuroticism, locus of control and Type A behaviour. External-in-the-environment sources are, for example, occupational demands intrinsic to the job, role conflict, role ambiguity, over- and underload, responsibility for others, a lack of social support and lack of decision-making participation.

Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll (2001:28) also distinguish between individual (within-person) sources, and environmental sources of stress (these include job-specific sources and organisational sources of stress). Individual sources of stress, in their classification, refer to dispositional states and traits such as Type A behaviour or neuroticism, similar to what Furnham (2005:369) suggests. They then concur with the classification of Cartwright and Cooper (1997:14) of work-related stressors as a representation of environmental sources of stress in the workplace. Cartwright and Cooper's (1997) dynamics of work stress is indicated in Figure 37 (overleaf).

Figure 37:   Dynamics of work stress
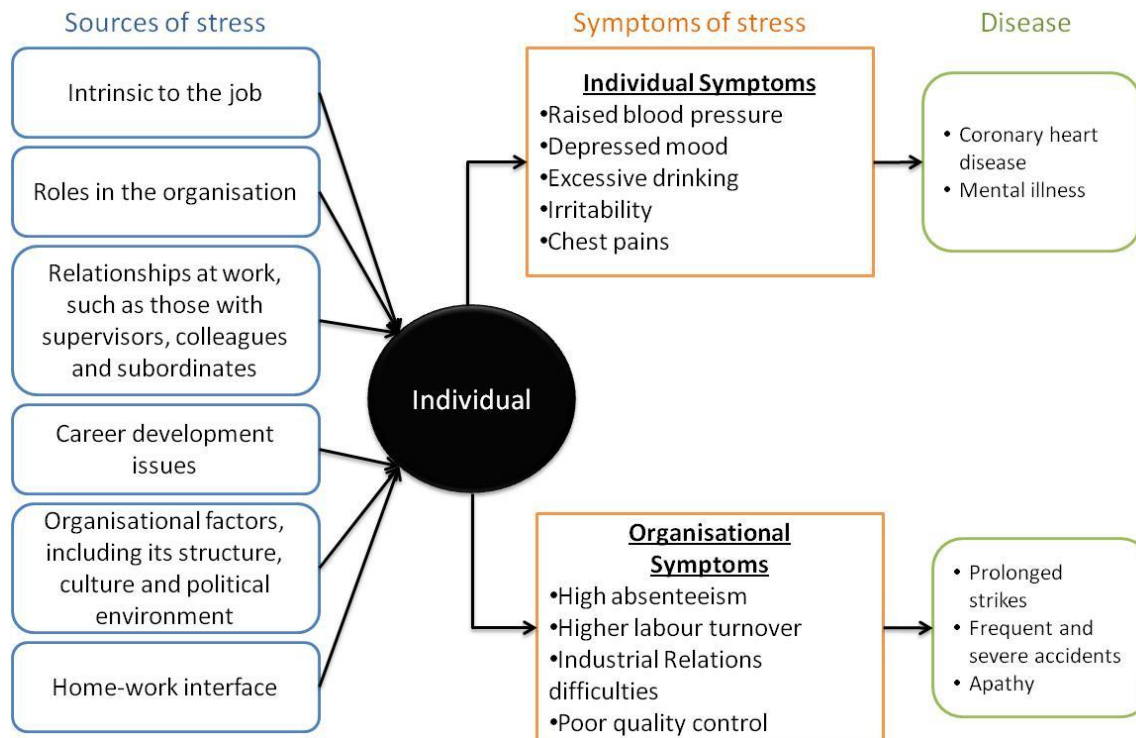
Source: Cartwright and Cooper (1997:14)

Cooper (1984) compared ten countries, including South Africa, and found that a lack of autonomy, work overload, interpersonal conflict, the work-home interface and work underload were among the causes of stress for executives.

It is clear that individual stressors feature prominently in the literature, but also that there is a tendency to classify stress on various levels, distinguishing between individual and environmental or organisational stressors. The conceptual framework, however, uses the multiple levels of Organisational Behaviour, but mainly distinguishes between individual stressors and derived stressors on a team and organisational level. Individual stressors in the conceptual framework do not refer to, for example, Type A behaviour, as in other classifications mentioned, but rather to specific aspects on an individual level that contribute to the stress that a person experiences. In general, individual stressors refer to sources of stress that affect only an individual. Specifically, in the context of stressors relevant to leaders during an economic downturn in this case, **doubting job**

security and the related **worrying about financial security** were identified as individual stressors. Although these leaders did not actually experience job loss or a loss of financial security themselves, they appraised the threat of the possibility of loss as stressful, in line with the appraisal-based model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

Latack, Kinicki and Prussia (1995:319) state that job loss leads to a loss of income and financial strain. In addition to economic effects, job loss is also associated with negative psychological and physiological effects such as depression, reduced self-esteem, emotional trauma, reduced subjective psychological well-being, and physiological manifestations of stress, such as high blood pressure, hypertension and physical illness. Job loss is also associated with lower levels of social connectedness and social experiences.

In contrast with individual stressors, **derived team and organisational stressors** refer to the individual stress experience brought on due to factors that do not necessarily relate to the individual, but rather relate to the team or the organisation, and an individual then experiences derived stress. Once again, the threat of retrenchment was an important cause of stress. Where the threat of job loss caused individual stress, the threat of retrenching, as well as the actual act of retrenching others in their team and the organisation, was the main cause of derived stressors for leaders during the economic downturn. These leaders felt responsible, particularly for their team, but also for the organisation, its people and their survival. They felt the pressure from shareholders who expect not only the survival of the organisation, but also growth. Lastly, they felt a dichotomy between their values and their actions, or perceived actions. Therefore, although the threat or reality of retrenchment was the main underlying cause of derived stress, it was the emotionally charged interpersonal experiences during the downturn, whether these related specifically to retrenchment or to the downturn in general, which caused derived stress for the individual leaders.

In a non-empirical study using a literature review, Molinsky and Margolis (2005) studied the psychological challenges that people encounter when they perform what they term

'necessary evils'. They define necessary evils as 'those work-related tasks in which an individual must, as part of his or her job, perform an act that causes emotional or physical harm to another human being in the service of achieving some perceived greater good or purpose' (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005:245). Actions and impending actions taken during the downturn meet the criteria for necessary evils as set out by Molinsky and Margolis (2005:247):

- **A valued objective requires that they be done, therefore making the action necessary.** In the case of the economic downturn, the organisational goals of short-term survival and thriving in the long term after the downturn are in line with this criterion.

- **They inflict ineradicable harm, therefore entailing evil.** Where organisations retrenched employees, this criterion was met. Where organisations did not retrench, more subtle harm was inflicted, for example, through forced leave and temporary plant closures. Even the threat of actual harm in itself could have caused harm.

- **They are integral to the role of the performer, making them mandatory.** As executive members in an organisation, the role of the leaders in this case entailed making the decision to perform necessary evils, and also to actually perform these necessary evils, even if only on a high level.

Molinsky and Margolis (2005) propose four psychological states that affect people and how they experience the performance of the necessary evil:

a) The extent to which people **feel personally responsible** for causing harm or discomfort influences the intensity of their experience of guilt: the greater people's subjective experience of responsibility, the more intense the experience of guilt (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005:251). Experienced responsibility is a factor of the causal role a person plays in creating the conditions for the harmful act, the extent of involvement in carrying out the act and the legitimacy of the act. This may explain why leaders felt specifically responsible for the fate of their team members: the leaders themselves were often the reason their team members joined the

organisation or the team (see Section 4.3.17)[25] and they therefore felt they played a significant role in creating the conditions where their team members could be harmed. Leaders also felt responsible for or to blame for what was happening in the organisation and its people, a derived organisational stressor in the conceptual framework (see Section 4.3.16).[26] In addition, it might also explain why leaders frequently turned to what I term 'organisational rationalization strategies' in the conceptual framework, to cope with stressors. They may be attempting to legitimize their acts by indicating they *had* to act in order to save the company[27] and also attributing the cause of the downturn and hence the resulting actions as out of their control[28] (see Section 4.3.39). This is an attempt to lessen their experienced responsibility and therefore their experienced guilt.

b) Molinsky and Margolis (2005:253) also propose that the less *justifiable* a person perceives the act to be, the more he or she will experience guilt, as well as sympathy. Once again this is a factor of the causal role played by an individual to bring about the circumstances that necessitate the harmful act, the legitimacy of the act and importantly, the harm-to-benefit ratio. As with experienced responsibility, perceived justifiability also may explain why leaders used organisational

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[25] *Interviewee 6:*

> But there were also the people that I brought on board…who on my word had come on board this...come on board the company, left other companies and careers and joined this company. **So their future was very much my responsibility to get them to understand where the risks were**. (my emphasis)

[26] *Interviewee 2:*

> …you are going to talk to XXX, for what it's worth, **we collectively were partly to blame for this whole thing** because we could just see we need something to happen, let's put it that way. (my emphasis)

[27] *Interviewee 5:*

> So, and, and knowing also that you often get into a position where **you often don't have a choice**, um (…) but you, a company often, um, has no choice but to do certain things under very, very, very stressful times. (my emphasis)

[28] *Interviewee 0:*

> Ek is nog baie dae kwaad en miskien nog steeds in ontkenning want wat ons gedoen het en hoe ons dit gedoen het, is nie as gevolg van die mense nie. **Dit was as gevolg van eksterne omstandighede.** [I am often still angry, and perhaps in denial about what we did and how we did it, but it was not because of the people. **It was because of external** circumstances.] (my emphasis)

rationalization strategies, convincing themselves that they were 'doing the right thing' (see Section 4.3.37)[29] in order for the organisation to survive.

c) **Experienced task difficulty**, according to Molinsky and Margolis (2005:253), affects people's experience of performance anxiety and cognitive load. How difficult an individual experiences the execution of the harmful act to be depends on the complexity of the task and the frequency with which the task occurs. Having experience, an influencing factor in the conceptual framework, seems to support this. Experience gained during a previous downturn, as well as other challenging business situations, was indicated as a factor influencing how leaders coped with this downturn. As one respondent explained, it is a '*capacity that builds in you as a leader*'.

d) **Experienced palpability** influences guilt, sympathy, cognitive load and performance anxiety (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005:254). People can experience palpability on various levels, for example, cognitively, through a rational understanding of the harm being caused, or emotionally, through experiencing others' suffering. Palpability is a factor of the frequency with which the necessary evil occurs, the magnitude of harm and benefit, the saliency of harm and benefit and the identity of the target of harm or benefit. The last factor seems relevant in this case. When a person who performs a necessary evil act has strong identity relations with the target of the act, either through personal relationships or role identification, the harm caused is more vivid and intense for the performer of the act than if a target is unknown or unrelated. This may explain why leaders used an individual coping strategy such as emotional separation (dehumanizing actions) to cope with the stress during the downturn. Leaders attempted to separate their emotions from their actions by being rational, hiding their own emotions and cognitively separating themselves from other people in the organisation (see Section 4.3.29).[30]

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[29] *Interviewee 1:*

The way I interpret that **was what's right and what's wrong?** Do – do and that's linked to values and all those kind of things. To make decisions in this difficult time, and still, or to use the values of the business and your personal values to – to **form the backbone of all your decisions**, helped me a lot. (my emphases)

[30] *Interviewee 0:*

Een ding wat dit aan my gedoen het is dat ek onbetrokke geraak het by mense as gevolg hiervan. Ek wil nie meer hoor van X, Y en Z en hoe dit met sy kat of hond gaan nie. As gevolg daarvan het

Wright and Barling (1998), in their grounded theory study of the post downsizing effects on downsizers, also found guilt to be an important theme, as Molinsky and Margolis (2005) did, and derived stressors in the conceptual framework. People who retrenched ('retrenchers') in their study reported that, together with an increase in work load, feeling guilty was the immediate outcome of the retrenchment effort. This in turn led to emotional exhaustion, decreased well-being, also spilling over to their home, causing work-family conflict. This ultimately led to loneliness or organisational and social isolation. According to Wright and Barling (1998:346), in this conceptual model, loneliness is the result of guilt, and alternatively role overload, resulting in less time for interaction with people within the organisation. Their conceptual model is depicted in Figure 38.

Figure 38:   Conceptual model of post-retrenching effects on retrenchers
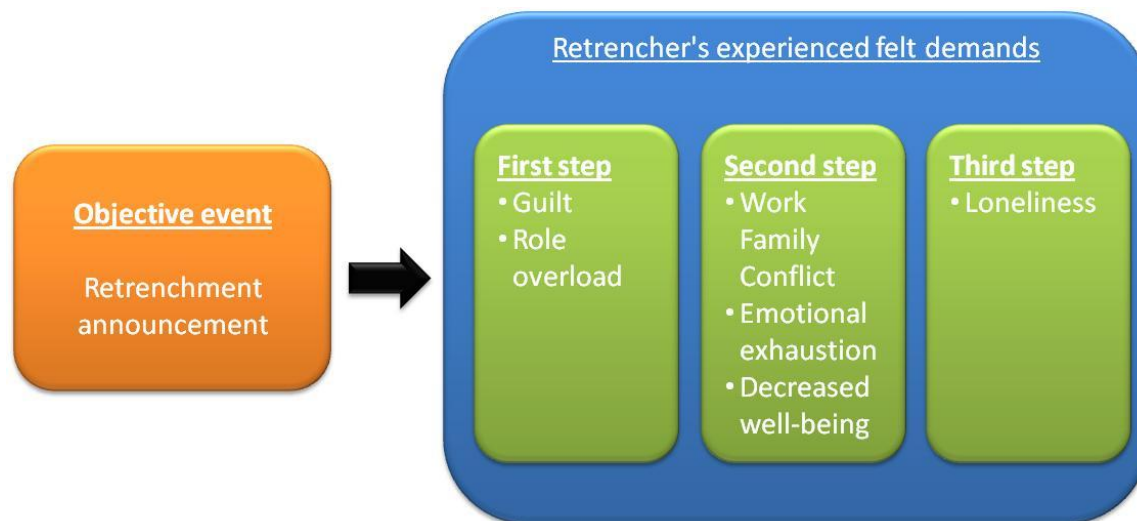
Source: Wright and Barling (1998:349)

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ek miskien in my onderbewusyn net besef dat ek nie meer betrokke kan wees by ZZZ se besigheid wat nie 'n sukses is nie en hom raad gee nie, want hy is dalk die volgende persoon wat moet gaan. [One thing that it did to me is that I became detached from people because of this. I do not want to hear about X, Y or Z and how his cat or dog is. Because of this I perhaps unconsciously realised that I cannot be involved any more with ZZZ's business that's not a success, giving advice, because he may be the next person that must go.]

Molinsky and Margoli (2005) point out the need for future research on how individuals can construct the tasks of performing necessary evils to minimize their negative effects, as well as the coping strategies professionals use to deal with guilt, sympathy and performance anxiety, so that they stay at tolerable levels of intensity. The conceptual framework, in my opinion, answers this in part, as many derived stressors, often due to factors mentioned above, had to be dealt with during the economic downturn. Individual, team and organisational rationalization strategies are aimed at doing just that: coping with the stress derived from others, often caused by leaders' having to decide on and perform necessary evils.

5.5.2.3. Organisational response to downturn

Raghavan (2009), in a study of how *organisations* survived during the economic downturn, focused specifically on organisational actions taken during the downturn. He found that firstly, almost all organisations in his study (in the Information Technology and manufacturing sectors in India) started with drastic **cost reductions**, going beyond typical cost saving activities such as reducing travel cost. This is in line with the reactions of the organisations in the current study whose plants were 'mothballed' and people were retrenched. Secondly, organisations focused on using the opportunity to focus on **operational excellence**. During relatively quiet periods, especially manufacturing organisations focused on reducing waste, for example. As was indicated in my study, virtually all the companies in Raghavan's (2009) study also cancelled or put on hold all capital expenditure. Thirdly, companies cut salaries, **reduced headcount** in an effort to save cost, once again in line with the organisational response to the downturn in my study. Lastly, organisations **revised their strategy**, particularly with regard to their customers, in an attempt to gain a broader customer base.

5.5.2.4. Coping strategies

Coping strategies in the conceptual framework refer to methods that individuals use to cope with the stressors during the economic downturn. As with stressors, the focus of

coping strategies has historically been looked at from an individualistic perspective, although there has been increased criticism against this preoccupation (Muhonen & Torkelson, 2008:451). I firstly discuss **individual coping strategies**, already touching on a more collective approach to coping strategies through spousal support, and then move on to team coping strategies and lastly to organisational rationalization coping strategies.

The leaders in this study used various coping strategies during the downturn that fall within the individual domain, including religion, emotional separation and balancing work and life, as well as spousal support, as has already been mentioned.

A review of the literature reveals that there is a growing body of research on **religious coping** (Ano & Vasconcelles 2005:461; Bänziger, Van Uden & Janssen, 2008:101; Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998:710; Pargament, Zinnbauer, Scott, Butter, Zerowin & Stanik, 1998:1336; Ross, Handal, Clark & Vander Wal, 2008:454) and, according to Graham, Furr, Flowers and Burke (2001:3), prayer and faith in God have been indicated as two of the most common coping resources.

Religion, according to Pargament, Koenig and Perez (2000:521) has five main functions in coping:
- Meaning: In the face of negative or perplexing experiences, religion offers frameworks to understand and interpret these experiences.
- Control: When a person experiences events that go beyond his or her control and resources, religion offers an avenue to achieve a sense of control.
- Comfort/spirituality: Religion provides a person with comfort, linked with the desire to connect with a force beyond the individual (spirituality).
- Intimacy/spirituality: Religion is often a mechanism to foster social identity. Intimacy with others is often gained through spiritual means.
- Life transformation: Religion may also assist people in making important life transformations, changing values and finding new sources of significance.

In addition to being an individual coping strategy, as religion is depicted in the conceptual framework, it has a more complex relationship with coping than is reflected in the framework. According to Pargament *et al.* (1998:1336), religion can be part of every element of coping (for example, appraisal, coping strategies or outcomes); it can shape the coping process and in turn be shaped by the coping process.

Religion is used in various ways to cope. The first is self-directing, which refers to a person's responsibility to resolve problems, where God has given people the freedom and the means to direct their lives. The second, in contrast with self-directing, involves that individuals may transfer the problem-solving responsibility to God. The third style of religious coping, collaboration, is the style indicated by respondents in this case (see Section 4.3.27),[31] where the problem-solving responsibility is shared by both the leader and God.

Although several authors illustrate the importance of workplace spirituality (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Dent, Higgins & Wharff, 2005; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Fry, 2003; Harrington, Preziosi & Gooden, 2001; Sheep, 2004), a review of religious coping literature reveals that religion is not often studied in the context of the workplace.

Spirituality and religion, although related, do not mean the same thing (PinaeCunha, Rego & D'Oliveira, 2006:214). While religion often looks outward, depending on rites and rituals, spirituality looks inward (Marques, Dhiman & King, 2005:82), having more to do with life's deeper motivations and emotional connections (McCormick, 1994:5).

In the workplace, the promotion of formal religion is often opposed, whereas spirituality as a workplace practice is accepted (Duchon & Plowman, 2005:810; Garcia-Zamor, 2003:356). Mitroff and Denton (1999:89) support the view that religion is inappropriate in the workplace. However, Hicks (2002:384) argues that a rejection of religion in the

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[31] *Interviewee 1:*
And I ask for help and guidance and what I must do and what's the decisions I must make and all those kind of things. That it must be the right one and not for my personal interest but for the business. Or for the people, and that's the way, I'm, I'm – that's my life and I, I think that's, that's helping me to be a strong person.

workplace is in contradiction with an important element of workplace spirituality: bringing the 'whole self' to work. This view is reflected in the fact that respondents in this case were hesitant to mention religion as a coping strategy, as if it was not acceptable in the workplace.[32] However, this does not mean that religion is not an important coping strategy, but rather that it may be an under-reported strategy in the work context.

While the **work-life balance** is often indicated as a *source* of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Wright & Barling, 1998), respondents included it as a *strategy* to cope with stress during the downturn. Respondents indicated that they balanced work with their life outside of work, playing a sport for example. The concept of leisure acting as a means of coping is not new and even sport spectatorship has been shown to be a means of coping with stress, particularly among male managers (Iwasaki, Mackay & Mactavish, 2005:21).

Spousal support is another individual coping strategy leaders employ during an economic downturn. It was classified as an individual coping strategy, even though it involves others (the spouse), because the leaders used this strategy outside of the organisation. Spousal support could be regarded as a type of social support specifically provided by the leaders' wives. Schaefer, Coyne and Lazarus (1982, cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:250) distinguish between three types of function of social support: emotional support (for example, reassurance, being able to rely on another person and confide in that person), tangible support (instrumental or direct aid, for example, doing a job, providing money) and informational support (providing information, advice or giving feedback). Respondents indicated tangible support,[33] emotional support,[34] as well as

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[32] *Interviewee 1:*

> *That's maybe what they do not want to hear, but my religion is quite important. You need something that you can fall back on.*

[33] *Interviewee 5:*

> *I've got...my wife doesn't work, we're very lucky. So she looks after the home. So when I get home I don't need to make decisions. So you can go and do your sport or whatever and the rest of the time she...runs the house. So it's actually a bit of...a cop out in having to make decisions. It's actually quite nice to get somebody else to just do that for you. And, ah, but she enjoys that as well. So it's, it's …*

[34] *Interviewee 1:*

> *…you still need to talk to somebody. Somebody to get – just moral support from or – from the*

informational support.[35] Although social support is generally viewed as a coping resource, it is classified as a coping strategy in the conceptual framework.

Coping, and more specifically coping strategies, has been almost exclusively studied from an individualist perspective. Individuals, according to Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan and Coyne (1998:581), 'have been portrayed as functioning rather independently in the appraisal of the stressor as well as in the mobilizing of resources necessary to overcome, manage, or eliminate the stressor'. Monnier, Hobfoll, Danahoo, Hulsizer and Johnson (1998:248) support this view and argue that most traditional coping theories and empirical work, including that of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), explores and 'even idealize[s]' individual, problem-solving coping strategies. More recently, Marin, Holtzman, DeLongis and Robinson (2007:953) have mentioned that, although there is a growing interest in the social dimension of coping, individual coping styles remain the primary function of research, often focusing on couples and families. Coping as a more social phenomenon has mainly been discussed in the context of social support as a coping resource (Lawrence & Schigelone, 2002:686), as seen in the preceding paragraph. However, Lyons *et al.* (1998:582) are of the opinion that the social dynamics of coping go far beyond the simple notion of social support. I concur with this statement, as it is clear from the axial and selective coding of the data and ultimately the conceptual framework that team coping strategies played an important role in how leaders coped during the economic downturn.

Team coping strategies go beyond the individual, moving into the team domain, where the individual forms part of a group/team. In this study, having a core team that these leaders could trust and taking team action, for example, were identified as means of coping. *Relationship-focused coping,* referring to 'modes of coping aimed at managing, preserving, or maintaining relationships during stressful periods' (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997, cited in Marin *et al.,* 2007:953) is one example of a more socially oriented view of

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outside and my case, I use my wife for that. Not that she's got a clue what's going on in the business, but just somebody to listen. And she was willing, listening.

[35] ***Interviewee 1:***
And when I mention it to her she will tell me something and then I think about it and say: but maybe she's got a point and then I test it in a different way within the team.

coping. However, it does not reflect team coping strategies as used in the conceptual framework, as team coping strategies used the fact that a person was part of a team as a coping strategy as opposed to attempting to manage team relationships. Similarly, the dual-axis (Hobfoll & Dunahoo, 1994:52) and later the multi-axis model (Dunahoo, Hobfoll, Monnier, Hulsizer & Johnson, 1998:142) of coping, with pro-social-antisocial, active-passive and direct-indirect dimensions do not seem to be in line with the team coping strategies of the conceptual framework. Monnier *et al.* (1998:249) describe the dimensions of the multi-axial model of coping as follows:

> The active-passive dimension depicts the degree to which individuals are active in seeking their goals or passive-avoidant. The social dimension depicts the degree to which individuals act in terms of their social interactions while seeking their goals with pro- and antisocial behavior defining the two ends of the continuum. (…) The direct-indirect dimension of coping may not so much predict coping outcomes as it does describe cultural and gender differences in coping style and circumstantial constraints versus allowances for direct action.

The multi-axial model of coping is depicted in Figure 39 (overleaf).

**Figure 39:   Multi-axial model of coping**
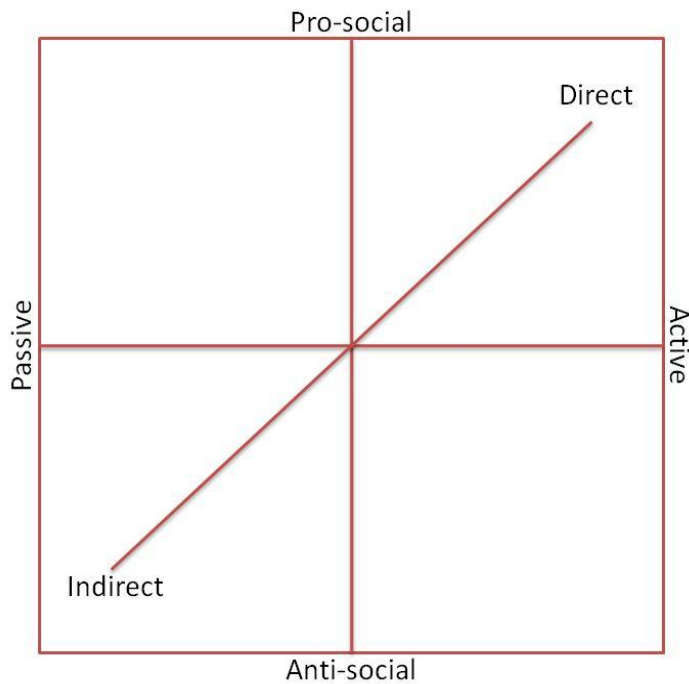
Source: Dunahoo *et al.* (1998:142)

Although the pro- and anti-social dimensions of this model capture a social dimension, moving away from a completely individual-focused perspective, the model fails to cover the complex social nature of the team coping strategies found in the current study.

However, Lyons *et al.*'s (1998) concept of *communal coping* seems to be more aligned with team coping strategies, although it was not developed or used in the work context, but rather for couples, families or communities. Communal coping 'is a process in which a stressful event is substantively appraised and acted upon in the context of close relationships' where 'one or more individual perceive a stressor as "our" problem (a social appraisal) vs. "my" or "your" problem (an individualistic appraisal), and activate a process of share or collective coping' (Lyons *et al.*, 1998:583)*.* Individual and social coping processes are depicted in Figure 40.

Figure 40: Individual and social coping processes
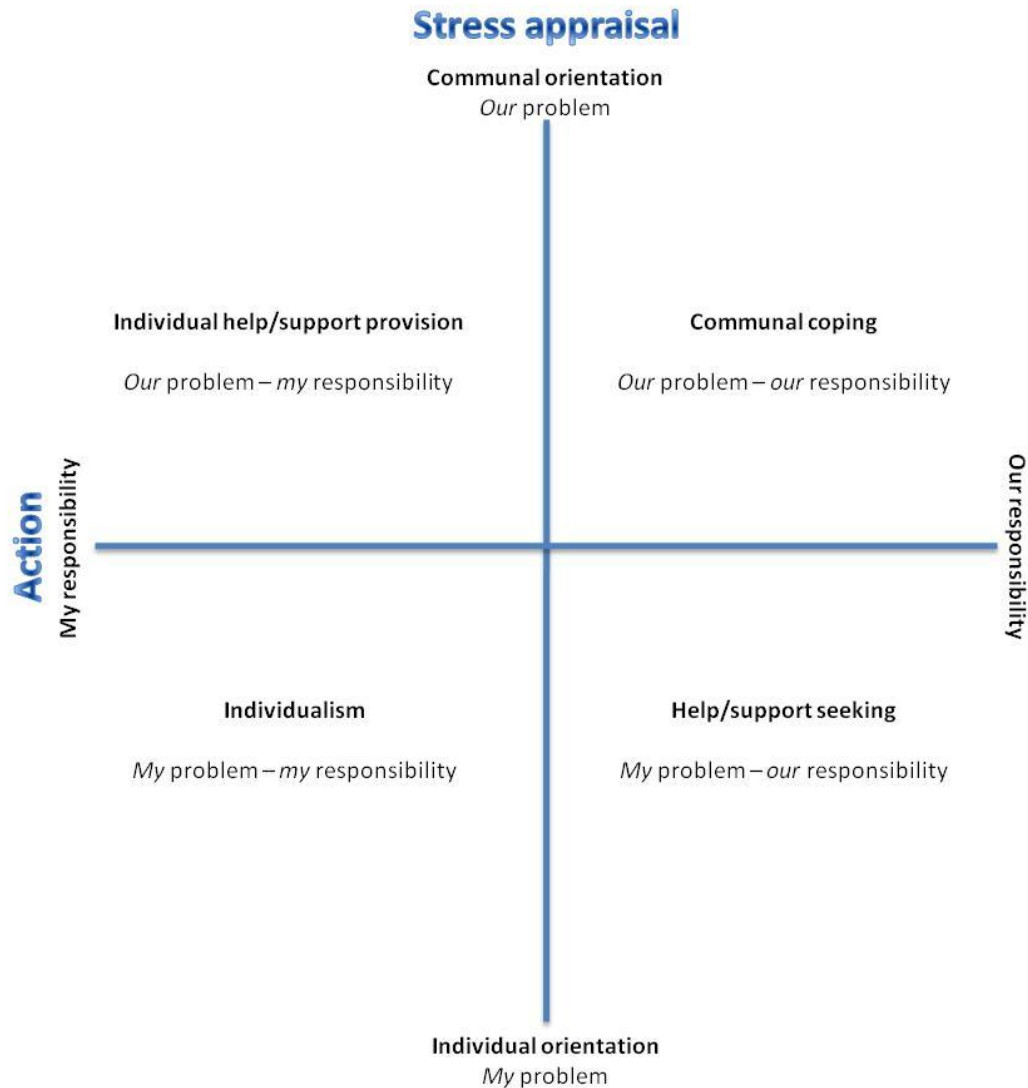
Source: Lyons *et al.* (1998:586)

Communal coping has three components. Firstly, there is a communal coping orientation where at least one person in the social unit believes that joining together to deal with a problem is beneficial, necessary or expected. Secondly, there is some form of communication about the details and circumstances of the situation. Lastly, there is cooperative action where individuals collaborate to reduce the negative impact of the stressor.

Being part of a core team that they could trust was important, acting as a team to address a team problem.[36]

It is interesting to note that, although several studies indicate that men are more prone to use individualistic coping strategies and women tend to use more social coping strategies (Hobfoll & Dunahoo, 1994; Muhonen & Torkelson, 2008), this study seems to contradict this argument, as the men in this case strongly indicated their dependence on their team in coping in the downturn.

It must be noted that a team coping strategy, such as dividing the pressure among team members during the downturn, in addition to collective action to solve a problem, may also be regarded as instrumental social support in a more individualist view of coping.

Organisational rationalization strategies have already been discussed to some extent when explaining why leaders experienced derived team and organisational stressors, where leaders attempt to justify their actions in a 'the end justify the means' argument and lessen their experienced responsibility by attributing their actions to events beyond their control. However, I would like to make a few additional comments, particularly on the relationship between organisational rationalization strategies and other elements of the conceptual framework. Leaders attempted to convince themselves that they were 'doing the right thing'. Folkman (2008) revised the original stress and coping model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to include what she terms 'meaning-focused coping'. Meaning-focused coping is 'appraisal based coping in which the person draws on his or her beliefs (e.g. religious, spiritual, or beliefs about justice), values (e.g. "mattering") and existential goals (e.g. purpose in life or guiding principles) to motivate and sustain coping and wellbeing during a difficult time' (Folkman, 2008:7). The revised model of stress and coping is shown in Figure 41 (overleaf):

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[36] *Interviewee 7:*
   None of us can operate independently to achieve what we want to achieve. We definitely all have to rely on each other for each of our contributions to make sure that the sum of our contributions feed to the whole.

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Figure 41:   Folkman's revised stress and coping model
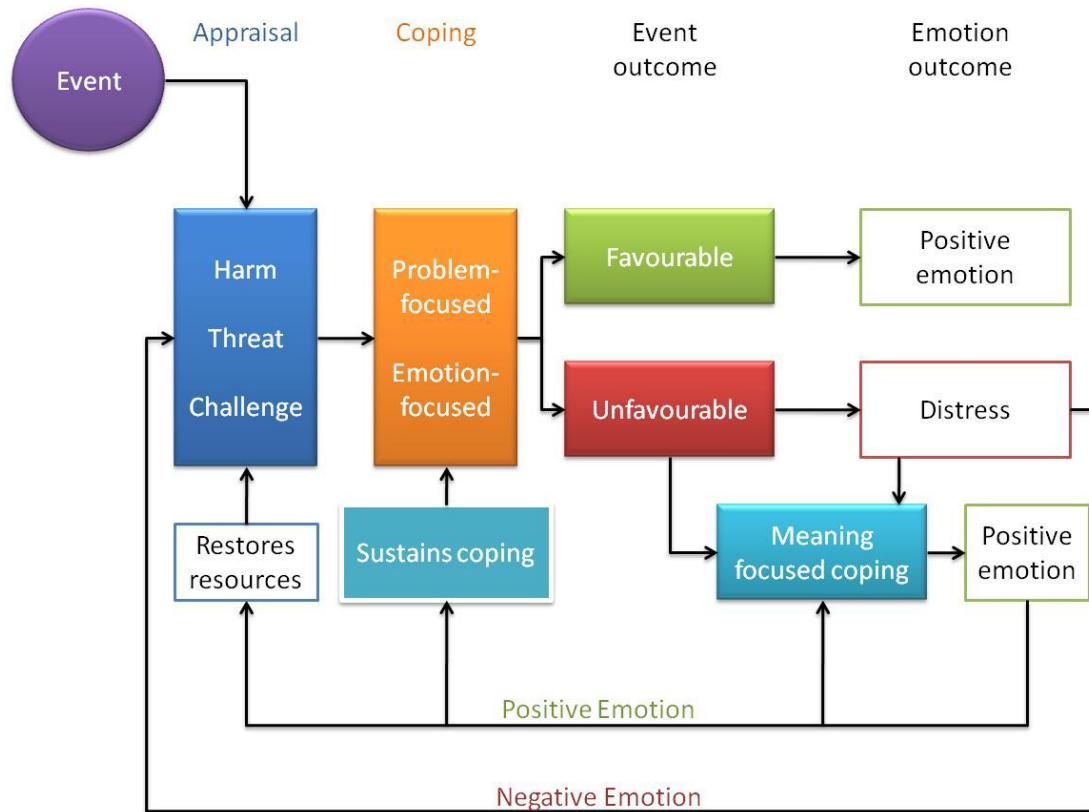
Source: Folkman (2008:6)

According to this revised model, meaning-focused coping generates positive emotions and their underlying appraisals. These emotions and appraisals in turn influence the stress process by firstly restoring coping resources and secondly providing the motion needed to sustain problem-focused coping over time. Although the model has not been tested in the work context, meaning-focused coping seems relevant in respect of organisational rationalization coping strategies. Five types of meaning-focused coping are identified:

- **Benefit finding** defined as 'the positive effects that result from a traumatic event' (Helgeson, Reynolds & Tomich, 2006:797, cited in Folkman, 2008:7). This may be why leaders viewed the effect of the downturn as positive, seeing it as an opportunity, for example, to revisit strategy and structure and better access to

resources[37] and also why they put in an effort to convince themselves that they were doing the right thing, that the benefit outweighed the cost.

- **Benefit reminding** is distinguished from benefit finding as 'effortful cognitions in which the individual reminds himself/herself of the possible benefits stemming from the stressful experience' (Tennen & Affleck, 2002, cited in Folkman, 2008:8).

- **Adaptive goal processes** are relevant, because the mere fact that one has a goal creates a sense of mastery and control and provides a sense of meaning and control (Folkman, 2008:9). It was important for leaders to believe in their agreed plan of action and they rationalized their actions against this plan with a specific goal[38] (indicated in the conceptual framework as the organisation's response to the downturn).

- **Reordering priorities** is, according to Folkman (2008:10), a common response to stressful events. This may be why the short-term goal of survival became the primary goal of actions, and thriving after the downturn became a secondary goal.

- **Infusing ordinary events with positive meaning,** perhaps less relevant in the current study, refers to people enjoying ordinary events and attempting to feel good in stressful times by doing so.

One could say that the leaders in this study attempted to rationalize their actions during the downturn through an attempt to find meaning in their actions: by believing that their actions were necessary for the greater good – the goal of the survival of the company, that it was in fact the right thing to do and that they were compelled to act due to circumstances beyond their control.

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[37] *Interviewee 6:*
   The downturn presented more of an opportunity rather than a threat to us. Because with the collapse in global economy, mining projects went on the back burner so our mining projects became one of the few that was looking at some very serious projects so we were able to attract very serious resources into it. Engineering resources.

[38] *Interviewee 0:*
   Aan die einde van die dag moet 'n mens aan die strategie wat daar is glo. Ongeag, of ten spyte van, die afleggings was daar altyd 'n groeistrategie. [At the end of the day one must believe in the strategy that was set. In spite of the layoffs there was always a growth strategy.]

5.5.2.5.Overall view of the downturn's impact

The reason leaders may have regarded the effect of the economic downturn as positive and its impact on the rest of the coping process can be discussed in relation to meaning-focused coping. Folkman (2008:8) claims that benefit finding could be a maladaptive coping strategy if it hinders important problem-focused coping, such as information finding and decision-making. However, this does not seem to be the case with the leaders in this study, who apart from viewing the effects of the downturn in a positive light, also clearly acknowledged the negative effects that the downturn had on the organisation, for example, in the form of a loss of contracts, its negative effect on cash flow and reduced access to capital. The fact that the leaders based their plan and therefore their subsequent actions on facts[39] illustrates this.

5.6   CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how, though axial and selective coding, I arrived at a conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn. In addition, I described my conceptual framework, based on empirical research, and linked the literature to my conceptual framework, both to enrich the conceptual framework, and to show the relevance of my findings in the context of the existing literature.

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[39]*Interviewee 6:*

> *…the ability to analyse it, break it down, understand the drivers, will allow you to cope better. If you can't see it, if it's just a black cloud, it's very hard to cope with it and if you can unpack it… it generally [is] people that can unpack it, identify the real threat and the real drivers and then focus on those, as opposed to those who see the cloud of threat.*