CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE RESEARCH MANUAL

Before presenting the theory, I will briefly explain the understanding of the notions of stress and coping used in the manual, since these concepts are used in very different ways both inside and outside the research literature.

THE CONCEPT OF STRESS

Many disciplines use the concept of stress in many different ways, because the theoretical and methodological contexts in which it is used diverge.[3] Typically, one of three distinctive positions is taken when attempting to understand stress:

1. *The perspective from inside and out*: Stress is connected with the ability of the person to endure strain; interpretations of inner life and social relationships are not relevant. Only personality traits are pertinent. The typical concept used here is 'resilience'.[4]
2. *The perspective from outside and in*: Stress is an influence related to certain life events, and as such also independent of interpretations of the person affected by the event. These situations are most often culturally prescribed as critical to the individual and consequently normative.[5]
3. *The relational perspective*: Stress occurs in a dynamic relationship between person and environment, as it is perceived and appraised by the person, but without neglecting the objective character of the situation.[6]

The last position is the foundation of this manual. It is concordant with contemporary psychology, which is moving away from dualistic models because they are insufficient in investigating the interpretive relationship of the subject to the environment. An ongoing transactional relationship between person and environment (or, posed in a more philosophical way, *between subject and object*) is a foundation of modern psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1958; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Sameroff, 2009).[7] Historically there has been a tendency in the science of psychology either to consider individuals from a purely environmental perspective, free of the interpreting person, or to adopt a purely intra-psychic perspective, examining the individual independently of the influences of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This division refers to a classic conflict in psychology between different scientific ideals, which in turn stem from different understandings of what a human being is like. But it also refers to a – perhaps much deeper – theoretical problem in philosophy and psychology about how to bridge the gap between the mental and the surrounding world, and to what extent the individual is influenced by their social and cultural context. This is a fundamental philosophical conflict in psychology.[8] The problem of how to find out what is going on in the inner world of the subject is another classical problem of psychology and other sciences of which the human being is the object. The first and second positions listed above represent the either–or dichotomy that neglects Thomas & Thomas' classic theorem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 23):

> If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

The third position, the relational perspective, builds implicitly on this theorem, which recognises the transactional relationship between person and environment and the (deep) influence of perception and interpretation of the environment on cognition, emotions and behaviour. This is the mainstream position in

modern psychology. It does not mean that the environment of the subject should be ignored in its objective sense (which is what happens when you only take a first-person perspective). The environment cannot be made to disappear through interpretations. The consequence is that every research project that studies a coping process should follow a double track: firstly, *the perspective of the subject on the environment – or the first-person perspective* on the environment, and secondly *the same environment* described as objectively as possible – independent of the subject under study. This perspective could also be called the 'life circumstances' of the person studied. This objectively described analysis is an *analysis of conditions*.[9]

The term 'stress', however, will be used very sparsely in the manual, precisely because the concept has obtained so many different meanings. Apart from the three mentioned positions, stress can also be 'positive' or 'negative', where 'positive' stress is related to constructive activity, and 'negative' stress is related to problems or burdens that do not disappear and are perceived as harmful by the person in question. Here, the terms 'burden' and 'negative emotions' will primarily be used. When the term 'stress' is used, it signifies only negative stress.

THE CONCEPT OF COPING

The term 'coping' has been used as an expression of a positive outcome in some theoretical traditions, but also in the language of daily life: 'He coped well with the situation?'; 'Can you cope?'. The psychodynamic tradition of 'coping with it' is generally opposed to pathology: 'coping' means solving problems, while non-coping or use of defences is considered a sign of pathology. Here, 'defence' is a concept from psychoanalysis, defined as an unconscious and pathological protection against anxiety. Lazarus does not use the concept in this way, however. The danger in using the term in the psychodynamic way is that judgement of a person's way of acting and reacting to a burden very easily

becomes normative. The *personal meaning* of a situation is very easily overlooked, and it is personal meaning that decides whether a coping process is initiated. A dualistic and very categorical 'verdict' of 'normal'/'pathological' or 'right'/'wrong' could be the result. The transactional analysis in this book is not concerned with the categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal'. Rather, the objective is to investigate the particular perspective of the individual person in their struggle to regain control over important life issues. This does not mean, however, that we cannot analyse whether the person is acting appropriately in order to reach their goals. Are they really acting in accordance with their own interests?

In the psychodynamic understanding of the concept of coping we also find an underlying concept of control standing in for the 'normal', which is a debateable matter because the outset of a burden process is a loss of control and rarely does the person succeed in regaining control of the situation. This is seen, for example, in situations of irreversible losses. Situations of loss of control as part of the human condition could not by definition be called pathological. Sometimes – and very often – it is the social surroundings that intervene and solve the problems; sometimes they resolve themselves, as in the case of some diseases. In other words, we need a broader understanding of what is happening during the coping process when a person is struggling to regain control by attempting to mobilise resources that are not currently available to them. In the words of Lazarus, 'coping' is understood in the following way in this manual:

> Constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 141).

Lastly, a warning about the way coping processes are labelled in English: be aware of the terminology. Sometimes coping processes are called coping *strategies* or coping *mechanisms*. This

last term must be considered a 'contradiction in terms', because coping processes, according to the understanding of Lazarus, are an expression of the person's *active and innovative* attempt to handle a difficult situation – in contradiction to the already learned and instinctive reactions built into the word 'mechanisms'.[10] Coping processes are never independent of the reflections of the person. On the contrary, a coping situation is – as mentioned earlier – by definition a new situation to the individual, which excludes a ready made answer to the situation. Therefore, the word *mechanisms* should not be used in connection with this understanding of coping.

A THEORY-DRIVEN RESEARCH METHOD

Coping microanalysis is a theory-driven method. This means that the theory constitutes a systematic frame for the investigation of coping processes, giving the researcher the opportunity to capture all kinds of variations connected with burdens and their expansion without falling into the normative trap about what is normal or pathological. In addition, it is often a problem in stress research that life events or situations are said to be 'traumatic or stressful' without analysing how these are interpreted by the person in question. Sometimes normatively stressful situations are not experienced as stressful.[11] The method presented here should give the researcher the opportunity to detect a complex and sometimes contradictory picture of how a person is interpreting their situation. A life event can develop in many different and unexpected ways, and the frame of analysis should be able to capture this.

The theory-driven method does not mean that you must know everything about an informant beforehand, or that you must split up the developing event into minor categories; on the contrary, it allows you to analyse a coping process fully, detecting new and unexpected complexities.

The method is both the theoretical framework of the analysis and a recipe of how it may be carried out in practice. Only the high-level concepts and definitions are offered, which point to the primary variations in meanings, emotions, actions and interventions, and finally suggest relevant parameters for evaluating the results of a coping process.

The following sections will treat the fundamental elements in the theory of Lazarus, taking a high-level view to introduce the key perspectives and concepts of the method. There is, by necessity, some repetition as the new concepts will be mentioned in different contexts: first when the concept of goal hierarchy is presented and second in the overview of the whole spectrum of coping acts of which the microanalysis is composed.

Lazarus attempted to solve a number of fundamental problems in psychology, regarding not only the person–environment relationship, but also the association between cognition and emotion: what comes first? Or: which is the cause of the other? As a consequence, Lazarus' work was relevant not just to stress research, but for psychology in general. It is important to understand, however, that his theory is *not* a general theory of action; it is a theory of stress that focuses on burdensome life events and the defensive positions subjects adopt in response to them. Normally when we talk about coping we are dealing with reactive more than proactive actions. People do also, however, develop proactive activities in order to prevent unwanted things happening when this is possible.

One of the strengths of Lazarus' theory is that he avoids the classical constraints that tend to prevent researchers from identifying what is really going on. These constraints are related to the aforementioned fundamental problems in psychology. They are:

- very simple explanations of personality traits, e.g. 'hardiness' or 'resilience';
- idealistic phenomenology which neglects the environment;

- behaviouristic approaches which neglect the subject;
- normative standards for coping processes and results (seen in psychoanalysis-inspired stress theories); and
- simple causal explanations of the relationship between emotion and cognition.

Ingeniously, Lazarus transcends the borders between different psychological traditions in a reflective and undogmatic attempt to solve some of these classical problems. There is good reason that Lazarus has become one of the world's most influential researchers of stress. At the same time, it is important to understand that he developed his theory over many years, and that new elements were always being added. These new elements primarily concerned emotions and their significance.

In Lazarus' theory, the human being is an active learning agent in their changing life circumstances. This fundamental unity of analysis was in place very early (Lazarus & Launier, 1978), but it does not mean – as pointed out earlier – that we are dealing with a general theory of action. Rather, the focus is that human beings struggle with burdens of many kinds, and these are always considered as relational problems. Stress is not isolated in either the subject or the environment, but precisely in the relationship between them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Munk, 1999). A reaction of stress can only appear due to a combination of an event of some kind (in the environment, in the body or in the mind) *and* an interpreting subject with something that is emotionally at stake in the situation.[12] This vulnerable emotional engagement or attachment is fundamental; it is only these attachments that are the objects of coping processes. That is why it is crucial to the microanalysis to detect which attachments are under pressure or lost. The succeeding events will be directed by the type of event (its objective character) and the interpretation the subject makes of it. Detecting the personal meaning of a troubling situation is key to the method, and it is thus connected to a hermeneutic or interpretative tradition of science.

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Originally Lazarus called his theory 'cognitive-phenomenological'. Later on, he gave up this name in favour of 'cognitive-motivational-relational' (Lazarus, 1991). With this new name is underscored the active appraising and action-oriented perspective on the subject, as well as the contextual perspective – in contrast with 'cognitive-phenomenological', which could be misinterpreted as an understanding of the subject free of any context outside any dynamic relationship with their environments. The 'cognitive-motivational-relational' theory understands the subject in a narrow relationship to its environment, reads 'meaning' as relational meaning and views the relationship from a perspective of adaptation.[13]

The perspective of adaptation should not, however, be read as a traditional functionalistic perspective in which the individual is a passive, defensive, reacting creature giving in to the aims of other people and the contingencies of life, in spite of the fact that coping very often should be seen as exactly that. Instead, the adaptive perspective is a differentiated understanding of the human being and its life circumstances. Sometimes the subject is active and full of initiative, controlling and improving their circumstances, but sometimes and indeed often they have to resign themselves to adapting to conditions that cannot be changed. A typical example is a fatal disease for which there is no cure. Of course, people have different attitudes to the uncontrollable; however, death as a human condition is unavoidable. Another example could be politically determined life circumstances; political work can be seen as a kind of 'collective' coping, where a group of subjects strive together in order to change their shared life circumstances. Lazarus did not use the term 'collective' himself, but there is nothing in his theory that obstructs the use of this kind of coping perspective. In fact, it chimes well with a theory that takes a differentiated perspective on human beings and their life circumstances.