

Adolescent coping

Theoretical and research perspectives

Erica Frydenberg

1997, Routledge, London & New York, 233 pages

Erica Frydenberg is a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne and with Ramon Lewis developed the Adolescent Coping Scale in 1993. This book builds on that work and draws together a wide range of research and literature on adolescent coping. As such it will be of use to practitioners and students in disciplines concerned with adolescents. However, its form and readable style also make it a very useful book for parents and adolescents themselves. The concept of coping appears to be a useful handle to come to grips with many issues faced by young people and their families through the adolescent years. As Sanford Dornbusch of Stanford University says in the foreword, 'If life is just one damn thing after another, then coping (perceiving and reacting to those damn things) is the active aspect of living'.

In addition to drawing out of the research key findings which help to identify what is known and the many areas where the unknown calls for more research, each chapter is liberally sprinkled with observations in the words of adolescents which add much to the authenticity of the text. The work gains significance also as today's world appears to strain the coping capacities of many young people. In Australia we have concerns about evidence of pressures and uncertainties facing youth, the more extreme of which are manifested in rates of depression and youth suicide. Beside these there are other concerns mentioned in the introduction including underachievement, despair about the future, eating disorders, alcoholism, drug abuse, bullying, vandalism and other forms of anti-social behaviour, all of which may be symptomatic of failure in constructive coping strategies in the face of particular stresses and situations. Also in the introduction the author points to some theoretical underpinnings in her work drawn from the prior work of Richard Lazarus and his associates conceptualising stress and coping (as adaptive functioning) in the dynamic interaction between the person and their environment. Lazarus in turn is informed by Lewin's approach to person environment interaction and a group of theorists following an approach termed *cognitive phenomenological* or *cognitive transactional* theory. Coping is seen as a process rather than a static entity (pp. 3-5).

The first chapter goes on to identify adolescence as a life stage and the concerns of adolescents and the stresses they may experience at home, school and in the community. A useful list of indicators of stress are given (table 1.1, p. 22). The next three chapters explore the notion of coping, looking respectively at how to describe the construct, how to measure it and correlates of coping drawn from research around temperament, age and self concept. The useful observation is made that 'what one does, and how it is received, in turn effects how one feels about oneself and how an individual responds on future occasions. Opportunities to reflect on coping enable individuals to take charge of their actions rather than be passive respondents' (p. 80). A discussion follows on gender differences (boys may be less inclined to admit problems and draw on support) and another on coping in the context of family which leaves no doubt about the significance of family. However, as well as being a significant source of social support, it may often be 'the setting where stresses and strains are the heaviest' (p. 124). The next chapter continues the discussion into the upside and downside of social support from family friends and critical others.

A chapter of contemporary importance explores the relationship between stress, depression and suicide and goes on to consider resilience. The observations of researchers such as Rutter and Seligman are noted in concluding that resilience is promoted in encounters with stress which 'allow self confidence to build up and competence to increase through a sense of mastery' (p. 151). Coping with illness provides a concluding note before the study moves to a chapter on gifted young people and how they cope. The development of talent and social and emotional adjustment are significant in the well-being of young people with outstanding aptitudes and abilities. The need to respond to individual needs and provide conditions in which talented young people can understand more about themselves and learn from each other is important to deal with the tendency for them to suffer as a consequence of high expectations of themselves, segregation by peers, feeling different, being

perfectionist, experiencing confusion over abilities, work overload and excessive competition.

The book ends with a substantial chapter on learning to cope and some directions for the future. The use of optimism, humour and the construction of metaphors emerge as significant contributors to learning to cope with stress. Learning can occur in informal settings and formal programs. Reference is made to two recent major reports, one from each side of the Atlantic, which point collectively to the importance of a wide ranging community response in the light of the 'gradient rise in disorder' evident in the social and economic conditions of the last fifty years, to address needs

and engender opportunities for healthy adolescent development. Opportunities to develop coping skills are part of that responsibility (p. 203). Much is known which can aid the process, notwithstanding a clear need for a great deal more research.

Reviewer
Lloyd Owen
Editor, *Children Australia*

Making social policy in Australia

An introduction

Tony Dalton, Mary Draper, Wendy Weeks and John Wiseman

1996, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 252 pages

The pace of change in Australia within the global context accentuates the need for both politicians and practitioners in child and family welfare to develop a better understanding of social policy. This book provides a means to rapidly gain an appreciation of the way ideas and the forces which gather around them translate through the policy process into structures and events which impact on everyday life in a major way. The authors draw on a rich pool of experiences and academic work to present a very readable book which is a must for students in disciplines concerned with human services. It will help others with an interest in the role of governments, the market and the community in human affairs.

In common with most courses on social policy the reader is introduced to a selection of the many attempts made to define social policy. Included is the seminal definition of David Gil 1970 which speaks of systems and courses of action which shape quality of life or well being and determine the nature of relationships within society through governing resources and services, the allocation of status, the distribution of rights, rewards and constraints and the relationships between these things. To this is added a variety of political and theoretical perspectives including some distinctively Australian ones. Considine's 1994 view points to the variety of policy actors who use available public institutions to articulate and express the things they value and to achieve their ends.

The first part of the book develops a framework for understanding and participating in social policy making. One special contribution made by this book is the way it registers two major areas of contest in policy. These are firstly, debates and contest over social goals and, secondly, debates and disputes over policy process. Contest over social goals and purposes follows an historical account of the rise and demise

of the essentially Australian form of welfare, the 'wage earner's welfare state', under challenge from economic conditions and the socio-political challenges of feminism, post-colonialism and multiculturalism. Rights and freedoms, self interest and sustainable society are considered against the backgrounds of the libertarian, social liberal, egalitarian and communitarian traditions and schools of thought. Against the backdrop of the rise of economic rationalism through the eighties, the globalisation of the economy, nostalgia, post-modernism and technocracy, the reader is drawn toward the contemporary institutions and organisations in public, non-government and private sectors which contribute to the making of social policy.

Two chapters explore these organisations and some issues attached to working in them. A useful typology of public sector organisations is presented in table form (pp. 60-61) and useful information is presented about the detail of the other sectors. Structural issues are brought to the fore with discussion of bureaucracy, professionals, gender and ethnicity before the next chapter turns to the second major contest, disputes about policy process: governments, citizens and markets. In the short history of the past two and half decades we have seen the ascendancy of prevailing philosophies of government administration give way in turn from democratic participation to managerial administration, rationality and control, then contract administration and an emphasis on market solutions. The point is made however that this is not a simple sequential process and that these elements are not mutually exclusive. The greatest danger perhaps comes from simplistic conceptions. the notion of 'steering not rowing' (p. 103) may not go far enough. The ideas of Offe 1985 attempt to convey some of the tensions and dynamic complexity.

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