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The coping model: what is it and what might be its implications for social work practice?

Rita Elisabeth Eriksen

First

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The coping model: what is it and what might be its implications for social work practice?

Mestringsmodellen: hva er modellen og hvordan kan den anvendes i praktisk sosialt arbeid?

Rita Elisabeth Eriksen

This article examines whether a coping model developed as a framework for analysis of research interviews is useful in social work practice. The coping model emerged from a study involving qualitative interviews with social service clients in Norway, designed to explore how they coped with challenges in everyday lives, both on an individual level and in interacting with their environment. The model emerged from preliminary analysis and was then used in further analysis of the interview data. The study showed that the informants experienced two major challenges: (1) Unemployment and (2) living with a shortage of money over time, even though their life situations were heterogeneous. Some informants experienced potent coping strategies in finding employment and became independent of social services. Other informants experienced shortages in their capacities for work and continued to be dependent on allowances. They used their coping resources to achieve more meaningful life situations without employment. The coping model represents how coping is understood theoretically in the study and the present paper considers the model's relevance and implications for social work practice itself.

Keyword: Coping; Constructed Model; Social Work Practice; Social Service Clients

Correspondence to: Rita Elisabeth Eriksen, Department of Social Work and Family Therapy, Diakonhjemmet University College, P.O Box 184 Vinderen Oslo 0319, Norway. Tel: +4722451945; Email: r.eriksen@diakonhjemmet.no

Denne artikkelen omhandler hvorvidt en mestringsmodell, som er utviklet som et rammeverk for analyse av forskningsintervjuer, kan være nyttig for sosialt arbeids praksis. Mestringsmodellen er basert på en studie med kvalitative intervjuer av sosialklienter i Norge, utviklet for å utforske hvordan de mestret hverdagens utfordringer—både som individer og i samspill med sine omgivelser. Modellen ble utviklet i de innledende analyser og ble deretter brukt i de videre analysene av intervjudataene. Studien viste at informantene opplevde to utfordringer som de viktigste: (1) arbeidsledighet og (2) å leve med lite penger over tid, selv om livssituasjonene deres var heterogene. Noen informanter opplevde formålstjenlige mestringsstrategier med å finne arbeid og ble uavhengige av økonomisk sosial hjelp. Andre informanter opplevde seg mindre arbeidsføre og var fortsatt avhengige av økonomisk sosial hjelp. De brukte mestringsressursene sine til å skape mer meningsfulle livssituasjoner utenfor arbeidslivet. Mestringsmodellen representerer hvordan mestring blir forstått teoretisk i studien og denne artikkelen overveier modellens mulige relevans og bruk i utøvelsen av sosialt arbeid.

Nøkkelord: mestring; konstruert modell; sosialt arbeids praksis; sosialklienter

Background and purpose

Today 80 million Europeans live under the poverty line, and the financial crisis has enforced social differences among the European population (North Norway European Office, 2009). According to Socialstyrelsen (2010), poverty in some countries has diminished, but relative poverty rates are rising. The life situations of social service clients vary from one dimension of marginalisation (often economic) to multidimensional marginalisation (Gallie & Paugam, 2000; Gallie *et al.*, 2003; Boehnke, 2008). This influences their welfare and ability to cope. Clients who are dependent on allowances, feel inferior and disempowered (Underlid, 2005).

The Norwegian Government considers empowerment to be clients' right when developing social policy. One particular government welfare policy aim is to have social service clients become employed or actively engaged as soon as possible (St.meld.nr. 9 (2006–2007). This aim is challenging since social service clients have difficult life situations and poor living conditions (Halvorsen, 2004; Harsloef & Seim, 2008). In one study, despite systematic efforts to assist clients only half of them were employed (van der Wel *et al.*, 2006).

The welfare allowances of the welfare state provide social service clients with basic financial security for everyday living expenses, but being dependent on these allowances also makes them vulnerable. They are obliged to apply for work or participate in various obligatory activities such as training courses and employment workshops, and they risk losing allowances if they do not attend.[1] This context implies an asymmetrical distribution of power, which influences the relations between clients and professionals and might lead to hidden power struggles. The agencies that deliver social services are bureaucratic institutions that give preference

to the implementation of laws even while giving considerable weight to the rights of their clients. Professionals work at the best of their judgement. Clients feel powerless and insecure, when their applications for allowances are not approved (Lipsky, 1980; Järvinen *et al.,* 2005).

According to Gjaerum *et al.* (1998), all human beings have latent and manifest resources. These talents can be activated if recognised with the added benefit of emerging coping possibilities and unused abilities being discovered. Hoeilund and Juul (2005) had pointed out that clients who experience poverty in a society with a generally high standard of living, as in Norway, might experience this as rather challenging. In such life situations, it is important to have high self-esteem and feel appreciated by the social environment. An assumption is that social service clients have to have a lot of resources to cope with life situations with the most difficult challenges—often for several years (Saleebey, 2006). From a strength perspective, the social worker emphasises 'the client's resources, capabilities, support system and motivations to meet challenges and overcome adversity' (Barker, 2004, p. 420). When the clients use their strengths and thus experience less adversity, the possibility for experiencing coping is increased.

The study on which this article draws (Eriksen, 2007) is based upon Antonovsky's (1979, 1987, 1996, 2000) coping theories—especially his concept of *Sense of Coherence* (SOC). A weak or strong SOC is crucial in determining one's ability to cope. SOC has three elements, which consist of an individual's (1) understanding the situation, (2) belief in potent solutions and (3) means of carrying them through.

Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model (1984, p. 53) involved valuable ideas. They characterised different kinds of individual *cognitive appraisals* of experienced stressors. In their evaluation of stressors, environmental factors and the individual were emphasised, as well as *the integration* of factors from both parts in a given transaction. A transaction was defined as the creation of a new level of abstraction. Factors from both the individual and the environment were integrated to create a new relational meaning in the current context (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 294). The researchers emphasised individual coping (intrapersonal processes) and inter-actional coping between the individual and the environment (interpersonal processes). Literature regarding coping demonstrates a broad application of the coping concept (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Ekeland & Heggen, 2007, pp. 64–82). In this study, *coping* was understood as a movement towards a desired outcome. Movements are conscious thinking or actions. *The environment* consists of persons in the individuals' informal or formal networks and might be experienced as resources or as challenges. *Social support* is environmental resources provided by others like respect, confirmation of meanings, direct assistance and interdependence in a group (Eriksen, 2007). Many relieve their life situations by social support from their informal networks (Fyrand, 2005; Espvall, 2008).

A purpose in social work practice is to contribute to clients' coping abilities. Social service clients are often described as being in deprivation. Knowledge about their coping tools is scarce (Underlid, 2005). The aim of Eriksen's (2007) study was to

understand how social service clients experience their coping with their everyday lives. The theories consist of cognitive appraisals, SOC and social support from informal and formal networks. The informants were dependent on allowances. Although welfare systems differ from country to country, results from this study might be relevant. Dependency on welfare allowances is generally paired with feelings of inferiority (Underlid, 2005).

The research question was how social service clients cope with challenges in everyday life, both on an individual level and in interacting with their environment. Questions that are central to the analysis include what elements are essential for coping that takes place: the person(s), the environment, the incident or the situation? To what extent does the informant understand how a phenomenon (e.g. loneliness) contributes to coping or to more experienced stress? What factors in different situations strengthen the informants' experienced meaning? In the preliminary analysis, a coping model was constructed (see Figure 1) and applied in the subsequent analysis. *The researcher's coping-orientated analytical perspectives are*: (1) *an individual perspective* (the figure's internal circle), (2) *an environmental perspective* (the figure's external circle) and (3) *an interactional perspective* (interactions between the two circles) (Shulman, 2008). These perspectives, on which the coping model is based, form the framework of the study's analysis (Eriksen, 2007).

The aim of this article is to present the coping model for analysis of the research interviews and to elucidate whether this model might be useful in social work practice. First, the study's method is described followed by the results. A coping model and some quotations from the interviews are presented as illustrations of how
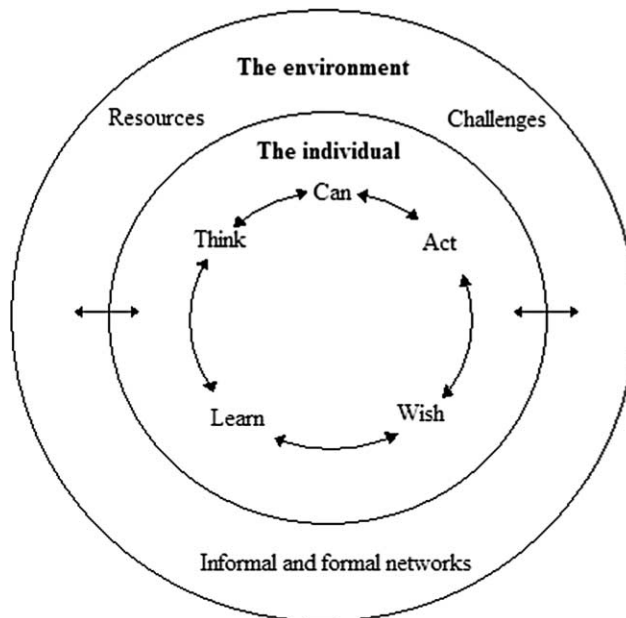

Figure 1 The coping model.

the model was used in the analysis. The model represents how coping is understood and analysed in the study. What implications the coping model might have for social work practice is then discussed.

Method

The study comprised data obtained in 2004 from 21 qualitative interviews with social service clients (ranging in age 18–60) from South-Eastern Norway. According to the state's welfare policy, social service agencies are directed to guide clients into jobs or activities. All users who approached social services during the period of recruitment were invited to participate. This was a way to utilise self-selection and convenience sampling based on availability and willingness to participate (Padgett, 1998). To ensure voluntary participation, recruitment was conducted by a third party (a clerk in the reception area), rather than directly by the researcher. Inclusion criteria were unemployment and dependency on allowances. Sixteen informants were single adults and five were living in partnership/married. They were 9 women and 12 men. The interviews were conducted in the social services' agency. The informants were anonymous. They were perceived as meaning-creating active participants who contributed in constructing their experienced everyday world (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interview guide was semi-structured and consisted of 10 themes concerning the informants' experience of coping in their life situations. For example, an interview question connected to the theme 'coping' was: 'Will you please talk about what makes your life worth living?' The contents of the in-depth interviews were strongly influenced by the informants' experienced stories. The questions posed depended on how the interviews evolved. The duration of the interviews was 1–1.5 hours.

The software programme NVivo (QSR, 2002) was used to identify and categorise themes from the data. A node in NVivo is an object that represents an idea, theory, dimension or characteristic of data. Text in documents can be coded at a node. Nodes can be linked to other nodes and to documents (Gibbs, 2002). For example, a node was: 'Social support in family-relations'. The first coding dealt with finding the main themes with analytic questions such as: 'what was the text about?' The next phase in the coding was to search for the meaning units (Kvale *et al.*, 2009), which meant finding details in the data concerning experienced coping and challenges.

Data analysis required the integration of data reduction, relevant theory and preliminary conclusions. Data collection was a dynamic process, and allowed for the evolution of new displays and increasingly nuanced conclusions. These cumulative processes had iterative effects on each other and were crucial to the evolving analysis. An analytical model was constructed: the coping model. This was no unitary theoretical model, but the data strongly influenced the theoretical concepts that were interpreted as relevant.

Preliminary results: the coping model

The data from Eriksen's study laid the foundation for the coping model, which was constructed of the informants' experienced coping abilities 'can', 'think', 'wish', 'act' and 'learn' (the figure's *internal* circle). These five concepts were identified as verbs in the present tense. The verbs represented ongoing coping movements, which might be thinking and/or action(s), i.e. 'knowing', 'thinking', 'wishing', 'ongoing actions' and 'learning'. The environment consists of experienced resources and challenges in the individual's social networks (the figure's *external* circle). The model must be dynamically understood. Coping movements might take place in the informants as individuals and/or in interactions between informants and their environment. When coping was understood as subjective experience, this implied that coping also could be in the periphery or on the outside of what was legally or ethically acceptable in society.

The model's coping abilities 'can', 'think' and 'wish' were constructed early in the analysis. The study's findings were mainly in accordance with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) and Lazarus's (1991, 1999) understanding of human thinking and Antonovsky's (2000) SOC-concept. To accomplish goals, it might be necessary to carry through the planned actions categorised as 'act'. The last coping ability 'learn' was understood as experience-based knowledge. The strength in the informants' coping orientations varied. Informants with a stronger coping orientation asked questions like 'What do I want to learn?' rather than 'Is it possible to learn this?'. They think they will succeed and do not worry about possible mistakes (Covington & Beery, 1976). They consider their mistakes to be learning opportunities, and expect to cope better in the future. Interpretive analysis is utilised here, as opposed to simply providing condensation of meaning (Kvale, 2009). The researcher interfaced between theory and data as the model was constructed and completed. In the passages below the content of the five individual coping abilities and the ongoing coping movements between the individual and her environment are illustrated by using informant Liv's quotation:

> I realized that I could no longer be married to him. We drank too much. I could drink for a week, hardly eat, but smoked a lot. My neighborhood-friends said that I had to contact the clinic. I hadn't heard of it before. I got there and managed to stay sober! They asked me to make contact with AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). The reason why I stopped my drinking, was that I found people like myself there. I did not feel so alone about this anymore. I got a sense of belonging in a group. We had to tell things as they were. . . . .

- In this quotation, Liv's friends informed her that the clinic could help her. Their information was coping-*knowing* that Liv used in coping with her bad health. She practiced her coping ability 'can'.

- Liv thought that she could manage to end the relationship with her husband and get control over the alcohol abuse. She used her coping-*thinking* and the coping ability 'think'.
- Liv experienced meaning, when she contributed to improving her health by reducing her consumption of alcohol. She used her coping-*wishing*.
- Liv contacted the clinic. She performed a coping-*action* and used her coping ability 'act'.
- Liv used her experiences, that is feeling alone with getting control over her consumption of alcohol, being satisfied with her sobriety and feeling social support from her friends, the clinic and AA to plan, how she would cope better with her everyday world. She learned that she had to stay sober to cope and used her coping-*learning* and the coping ability 'learn'.

The model must be understood as circular. The coping movements might take place in smaller or bigger circles, or they might move forward or backwards between the five coping abilities. The study also showed that the order of the coping movements was by chance. A model was constructed so that coping-*thinking* consisted of 'can', 'think' and 'wish', ongoing coping-*action* of 'act' and coping-*learning* of 'learn'. The informants' coping could consist of one or several coping abilities. The researcher focused on the informants contributing experiences, which meant that all coping in the model was conscious. Occasionally, the informants' coping was improvised and not based on coping strategies and planning. The informants might, for example, have to act rather quickly or they might be in an environment where wanted social support was not available. The ideal was that the informants had competence, resources and skills in all abilities in the model. This could be considered to reduce the negative effects of challenges they had to face. Social support from the environment might also be experienced as helpful. According to Klefbeck and Ogden (2003), experiences of access to and possibilities to mobilise coping, resources are vital to obtain the strength to cope with challenges in the everyday world. Liv exhibited this, as she experienced social support from her friends, the clinic and AA.

Incidents, situations or coping strategies were not good on their own. The individual's experiences were decisive. Experiences of coping could be understood as reactions to challenges (stressors). In stressful situations, coping was a conscious mental or action-orientated process that took place in the individual or as interactions between the individual and the environment. The individual attempted, either individually or in tandem with others in their networks, to contribute to change stressing environments and negative feelings (stressors). Based on the interviews a coping model with five abilities, which could be understood as three coping elements, was developed. The study showed that the informants used one or several of them individually or in interaction with their environment when coping with experienced life situations.

Coping elements	The individual's activity	Coping abilities
1. Coping-*strategy*	Make coping analysis/plans	Can, think, wish
2. Coping-*behaviour*	Carry out the plans	Act
3. Coping-*learning*	Reflect own experiences	Learn

Brief account of the constructed coping model

Dependant on their development of knowledge (Can), self-esteem and coping trust (Think), motivation (Wish), behaviour (Act) and learning (Learn), the informants had different coping-*strategies* (plans for how to resolve or adjust to unwanted challenges) and coping-*behaviour* (coping skills to make strategies, make decisions and carry them out). The individual developed his/her coping abilities by learning from experiences (coping-*learning*). The informant's individual and environmental coping resources influenced how they experienced the challenges they met. Coping resources might be experienced as *protective* and promote coping. Lack of coping resources might be experienced as *challenging* and prohibit coping.

The figure of the model shows the individual's experiences of coping interactions on two levels:

1. Interactions in the individual:

   Interactions between the contributing individual's five coping abilities (can, think, wish, act and learn).

2. Interactions between the individual and her/his environment:

   The environment includes persons in the individual's informal and formal networks and is experienced as consisting of resources (e.g. social support) and challenges (e.g. lack of available jobs).

Further results

The model, developed on the basis of the interviews, can be utilised in understanding the informants' everyday world. To illustrate the analytical use of the model, two cases from the study are presented and some coping resources are mentioned in parenthesis. The two cases (Ulf and Rolf) are fully presented here, while responses from other informants will be presented as grouped results.

The informants expressed that (1) 'unemployment' and (2):*living with a shortage of money over time* were their most important challenges. They were the focal point of their coping. Concerning *unemployment* their life situations were characterised by

active coping to find employment or to gain a sense of meaning in their everyday world without employment. Some experienced themselves as capable of work and were seeking employment (Ulf). Others experienced themselves as not having working abilities (to varying extents) and were not looking for jobs (Rolf). Whether they were searching for employment or not, they had to cope with explaining their unemployment to themselves and their environment. The greatest challenge in regards *to living with a shortage of money over time,* was deciding which activities to take part in, when, where and with whom. They wanted to participate more, but were hindered in doing so by their financial situations. Some expressed that their working skills declined because of this. How the informants understood their challenges influenced their coping — how they thought, experienced, created meaning, acted and learnt. Everyday coping was facilitated by close family members, like Ulf's former wife and Rolf's dog, because they did not have fixed opening hours. Access to social support seemed to be vital to cope with their challenges when in need.

Ulf and Rolf — two case studies

This study was based upon the informants' *conscious* coping. To comprehend their coping, it was vital to understand how they thought about their life situations. The data indicated that the informants' prior competence was a conduit to the helping processes. Thus, the coping model might function as a relevant tool in social work practice. Parallels in the helping and research processes analysis may be found. Social worker and researchers try to understand the life experiences of their clients/ informants, that is the coping of social service clients.

   Ulf was 37 years old, divorced and had two daughters. He periodically led a troubled life with crime and drugs, but the last three years he had coped to avoid returning to this behaviour. He rented a house in the forest, which was an arena where he experienced coping:

> To work in the forest is to feel free, instead of working on a conveyor belt. It's nice to cut timber. I make coffee on an open fire. . . . . . I want to work at my own speed.

Ulf used his work experiences to command a great amount of influence to shape his employment plans (*can, think, wish, learn*). It seemed as if he was satisfied with his life and might consider any change as having little meaning (*little wish*). He had had allowances for the last three years. He was worried, because his social worker was trying to persuade him to attend a course:

> Are there any possibilities to start on my own? I need money for a car and a power saw. If he forces me to attend a course, I'll break my hand – over and over again! He works against me!

Ulf wanted to provide for his own living, but felt threatened by experiencing little influence or not understanding what his social worker might decide to do to him

(can, wish). This seemed to be about power and confronting that power. The social worker might reduce or discontinue his allowances if Ulf was not willing to cooperate. Ulf could break his hand *(can, think, wish)*. Yet, they could improve their working relationship if they understood each other better. Did Ulf understand the information the social worker had sent him? They did not have a *common* plan to reach Ulf's goals. Ulf did not experience that the offer was individually worked out for his needs in wood production, but that he was going 'to be put in a free hole' *(challenge, vacant place in a course)*. Ulf had not made concrete plans for his project, because he was unaware of where to find relevant information *(little can, little think, much wish)*.

Ulf thought positively of his own coping behaviour *(can, think, wish, act)*. He did not consciously make a coping strategy for how he was going to end his criminal conduct, but he made choices due to his experiences and knowledge *(learn, influence)*. Turning of the individual's horizons of understanding might happen consciously or unconsciously (Thornquist, 2003). His everyday world became very meaningful when he was going to be a father *(wish)*. He chose not to engage in narcotic use at parties *(influence)*. He was afraid of the side effects it might have *(can, think, wish, act, learn)*. He had taken control over where, with whom and how often he enjoyed narcotics. The forest became his 'friend' *(resources)*.

Having close relations are important to gain confidence and be understood (Halvorsen, 2002). Fortunately, Ulf experienced a variety of social support in his environment. He and his former wife had developed an exchange system. He contributed with 'baby sitter', supplying wood and doing repair work. She gave him food, money and lent him her car to drive the children. An acquaintance informed Ulf about the vacant house in the forest, in which he currently lives. A former colleague supplied Ulf with information regarding garbage 'tipping' that is finding valuable items on the curbside.

Rolf was 45 years old, single and had a dog, which he loved. He lived in a community apartment. Rolf was ambivalent over his ability to work due to an addiction problem and his zealous need for leisure. However, it might be preventive that Rolf had positive experiences while working.

> I felt useful and was proud of having a job. It's nicer to tell others that you have a job . . . There are limits to how long you can say that you'll soon get a job.

Rolf's working experiences supported his coping analysis and could motivate him to find work *(can, learn, think, ambivalent wish)*. His coping behaviour was to express that he soon would get a job with the acknowledgement of an unspecified limited duration. Several years of unemployment could pose a challenge to Rolf's motivation in finding a job, which could then lead him into creating a SOC that finding employment is less meaningful. He may rather mingle with the unemployed. In fact, Antonovsky (2000) pointed out that SOC could be understood as an attitude such as Rolf has described above. An alternate coping for Rolf could be to create SOC by finding employment less

meaningful and rather mingle with unemployed people. For example, Rolf felt less discomfort when his values and coping behaviour were consistent with each other.

> At my age you get more of the same opinions as your parents. They understood having a job as the basis for everything . . . .

Rolf had the same value as both his parents and of society, i.e. it is 'best' to be employed. It was not easy to practise this value when he was uncertain of his working abilities and whether he would get a job *(ambivalent can, think and wish)*. Rolf developed a bad conscience from his family *(challenge)*, while realising the chances of obtaining employment *(resources)*. Several times in his interview Rolf said: 'there are a lot of people that do not have work and they still manage OK'. Rolf displaced his horizon of understanding to remove inner discomfort *(stress)* according to his unemployment. He made a meaning modification. Instead of making himself special, he coped with this by making his understanding common and to generalise unemployment *(think, learn)*. This might function as protection.

Discussion

The coping model might be used on different levels. The informants told stories about how their coping could be individually addressed. However, several themes and types of incidents that took place in their life situations were common. The coping model is firstly discussed in connection with the informants' coping experiences, followed by general remarks about social work practice.

The informants did not understand themselves as resourceful and coping

Social workers are often accused of being focused on the problems of their clients. If they were to focus on the clients' individual and environmental strengths, however, the clients might feel more empowered and independent. Such interventions would likely raise the clients' self-esteem and increase their own appreciation. Saleebey (2006) emphasised motivational signification by focusing on strengths of the clients. Antonovsky (1987) stressed that a lack of meaning will lead to limited motivation to comprehend and manage challenges.

Use of the coping model might strengthen the informants' consciousness about their coping resources. The informants' coping skills were 'tailor-made' in accordance with their everyday world knowledge. Despite being considered experts, informants think of their coping as self-evident and simply utilise what they believe is useful.

Some clients had situations that were considerably problematic, such that everyday survival was their primary goal of coping. A particular challenge for social workers could be having a client elicit their coping skills to strengthen them. During the interviews, the informants seemed to enjoy focusing on how they coped. They became more aware of their resources and, thereby, their possibilities.

A confident helping working relationship was significant

Clients like Ulf experienced the social workers' abilities to establish trustworthy relationships as basic for their cooperation. This is an essential trait in social work especially when sessions deal with using the coping model. When power needs to be exerted over a client, it is vital to attain helping working relationships, especially since the social services are bureaucratic organisations. Underlid (2005, p. 227) found that if social workers did not emphasise working relationships, clients risked staying in submissive positions that increased their dependence on helping systems. Poverty led to weakened autonomy, social devaluation and a threatened self-esteem. During the last three years, Ulf had had seven different social workers. He was not informed in advance that he was going to get a new one and felt that he was treated like an insignificant object. His patience was minimal after having told his life story 'a thousand times'. If the social workers used the same tool (the coping model), Ulf's experience with coping under stress might be easier to convey between the social workers. However, Ulf's coping strategy was to avoid contact with his social worker. Although he was dependent on allowances, Ulf felt a need to defend himself from rehabilitation plans in which he had little influence. His social worker did not agree with his plans for establishing a wood producing firm. Ulf's coping strategy was a 'counter-attack'. For instance, when the social worker jeopardised his allowances, Ulf threatened to start with criminal activity again. Obviously, the margins between helping working relationships or lack there of, can be small and fragile.

Welfare policy for social services creates limit in fostering a helping working relationship. Social workers have to balance between competing functions, strengthening and supporting the clients' coping, while working within structural constraints. According to Järvinenand and Mik-Meyer (2003), a major disempowering of clients is taking place, which maintains client status quo. They emphasise a need to lessen *institutional* characteristics of the social services that oppress the clients.

Displacements of the horizons of understanding

The coping model can be used to assess clients' situations at different points of time. These assessments can then be compared to evaluate the clients' progress. The coping model is based on an individual's subjective experiences. The social worker might challenge clients' understanding by supplementing questions from theories on which the model is based. This might disclose coping possibilities for the future. The informants' coping goals often changed over time. When Rolf started as a client, he wanted to be employed. After several efforts without success, his horizon of understanding gradually changed. Every individual's experienced world is a true reality. The horizon of understanding defines the limits for what is visible in the position the individual has (Thorquist, 2003).

The first challenges encountered by social workers were to *explore and continuously be sensitive* in regards to displacements in the clients' goals to cope. Rolf gradually turned his goal into enjoying life with unemployed friends, who had a lot of leisure.

He became more ambivalent in his evaluations of his working abilities, but did not dare to discuss this openly with his social worker. The second type of social worker challenges were aimed at a *fusion* of the client's and the social worker's constantly changing horizons of understanding. A partnership based on different horizons of understanding could easily break down. The informants often experienced that their working abilities weakened over time. Others have found the same tendency (Rosdahl & Petersen, 2006). The social worker's horizon of understanding might be that she had a good offer, while the client with his horizon of understanding was experiencing this differently. By means of the coping model and reciprocal dialogues, the client might change his point of view and agree with the social worker — or it could be that they worked out an alternative plan. If the social worker used power (e.g. discontinued the allowances), the client might feel threatened and avoid her.

Informal networks are essential coping resources

The model can teach social workers to be more focused on the clients' environmental resources. Persons in the informal networks of some of the informants were experienced as life rescuing. These informants were sure that they would have died in several desperate situations if they had not received informal social support. They needed medical care, food, housing or someone to talk with. However, none of the informants could remember whether their social workers had asked about their informal networks with the intention of including them in their collaborations.

The most vulnerable informants no longer had any contacts with their families or friends. They experienced *mutuality* in exchange of social support in close relations too hard to fulfil and instead chose loneliness. Their life situations with drug challenges were so demanding that they did never know for sure when they were where. Loneliness might impair health (Bentzen, 2003). When they felt lonely or in need, shelters had been a great comfort. They also looked for chance acquaintances (a postman, a hairdresser) when they needed support. Granovetter (1982) emphasised the strengths in weak ties and pointed out that periphery persons might function as 'social bridge-builders'. Social workers generally find resourceful options in informal networks, if their clients want to include them. Furthermore, the informal networks could then lead to an enforcement of clients' experienced autonomies and moderate the need for social services. However, social workers might experience the inclusion of the clients' informal networks as challenging. They have a professional education in helping people and are traditionally considered 'the experts'. With different perspectives of the coping model, participants can determine whether they have additional knowledge that could supplement and refine the helping processes.

The coping model as a tool in social work practice

Use of the model could strengthen clients' consciousness about their coping resources. The model can be used as a framework for reflection in sessions between clients, their environment and social workers in different phases of the working processes. Depending on what the clients experience as relevant, parts of the model may systematically be discussed with its three basic perspectives (individual, environmental and interactional perspectives). The social worker may also use the model as a framework for her/his own reflections. Coping elements may be transformed into verbal questions depending on the content of the conversation, which, in turn, could help in obtaining knowledge about what coping resources and challenges the clients' experience at that particular time.

The aim for the construction of the coping model was to analyse data about how informants experienced their individual and environmental coping. The theoretical perspectives and findings can be further developed in different settings and on different levels. Model approaches by social workers can be individually adjusted to clients' experienced challenges and coping resources. Additionally, resources of clients' might be included in a joint effort and with an agreement of this inclusion between the client and the social worker. Lastly, the model may also be used to understanding how groups of individuals or communities experience their everyday lives. In this way, the model might function as a tool for planning on different levels.

The model has both advantages and disadvantages in promoting social work practice. It can be used as a tool to detect the clients' strengths systematically by focusing at only one of the three coping elements at the time. At a later stage, they can be analysed as a whole in the actual social context. By exerting themselves to understand the clients in strength perspectives (Saleebay, 2006), the social workers' attitudes towards the clients' coping resources might be fortified. The manner in which they approach clients could then be more varied and be experienced more in accordance with the clients' everyday world. The informants referred to earlier wanted to have more influence in their situations. Subsequently, it would seem important for social workers to join the coping that already was going on in the informants' everyday lives.

The client's world is subjective and often irrational compared to the logically constructed model, consequently it may be prudent to amend the use of the model. In fact, the model could have a 'strait jacket' effect instead of stimulating the participants; creative thinking and coping behaviour if applied rigidly. The coping processes are not static, but constantly moving.

For some clients, the model might be difficult to understand, because it demands abstract thinking on a relatively high level. The social worker needs skills in putting theoretical concepts into words, in ways that make communication meaningful to clients. She/he also needs capacity in transforming verbal communication into theoretical concepts to refine the model's theory.

The figure of the model itself might be used as a map, where the client and the social worker draw challenges and coping resources by using different common symbols. Informants' life situations were experienced as unstable, because of ambivalence or unforeseen incidents that took place. It might be helpful to make a visual overview of their life situations. Maps drawn at different times can be compared. Fyrand (2005) described how to draw maps of the clients' social networks, which parallels the above.

Theory building and the development of tools are continuing processes. The coping model might be used as a supplement in assessing interventions in social work approaches. For example, a central focus in crisis interventions (Parad and Parad, 1990) is knowledge about coping strategies. The clients' usual challenges (stressors) can be considered as crisis. In task-centred approaches (Epstein, 1992; Fortune *et al.,* 2010), the coping model can be used to make target goals, agreements, 'reflection-tasks' and 'action-tasks' to improve different life situations. In solution-focused approaches (Shazer, 1991), the coping model can be used to assess the clients' coping resources to make strategies for strengthened individual or environmental solutions. In the interaction model (Shulman, 2008), the three perspectives (individual, environmental and interactional perspectives) are similar to the ones that the coping model is based upon. Coping is a concept in this model's theory basis. Empowerment approaches (Gutierrez *et al.,* 1998) as well as the coping model are based on an ideology in which clients take more control over their situations. By enhancing their coping resources, clients increase their experienced power to make decisions and carry out actions that could improve their situations. These steps can be executed individually or collectively.

Conclusion

In qualitative analyses, it is challenging to make fruitful analyses because of a lack of applicable theory. The use of theory as an analytical tool could also be applied to analyse social work practice. It is important to find ways in which useful knowledge for practice can be developed. The construction of the coping model might be a contribution. The model was not 'forced upon' (Glaser, 1992) the data, but emerged after the data and theory were studied repeatedly. Such an approach seems appropriate to social work practice in staying open to the data and trying to understand it in different ways by analysing and reanalysing it.

The informants' everyday worlds were experienced very differently. Consequently *individual* data collection and analysis of their life situations seem to be rather essential for social work practice. The informants had a lot of coping resources, but were not used to thinking of themselves as coping individuals. The coping model can contribute by putting into words how clients cope, which social workers could then use to enhance the consciousness of their clients' strengths. The study reveals that each informant's horizons of understanding and creative coping are constantly moving. The social worker can take advantage of this

knowledge and include it in the foundation of their partnership. Informants might experience losing the social support they need if the social worker is unable to utilise the strengths of these individuals. Future studies may supplement the coping model of this study in different contexts and cultures.

Note

[1]   Sosialtjenesteloven 2009-12-18-131.

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