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With a little coping from my friends

a case study of voice, manager response and collective coping in an organisational context

Kirkegaard, Tanja; Waldstrøm, Christian

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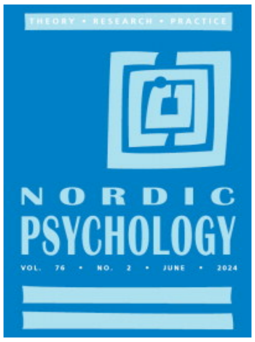

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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With a little coping from my friends: a case study of voice, manager response and collective coping in an organisational context

TANJA KIRKEGAARD[1] & CHRISTIAN WALDSTRØM[2]

Correspondence address: Tanja Kirkegaard, Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg Universitet, Aalborg, Denmark. Email: tanjak@ikp.aau.dk

Abstract

Although research has established the importance of employee voice on job performance, turnover, and job satisfaction, little is known about the impact of voice, particularly group voice, on collective coping. Thus, this study examines the interplay between group voice, managerial responses, and collective coping practices among groups of employees over time. This case study was conducted at two units of a large Danish company, involving worksite observations as well as individual and group interviews over five months. The findings demonstrate that managerial response to voice combined with the prevailing group voice/silence climate impacts collective coping practices. Specifically, a group voice climate combined with managerial openness to voice leads to collective action. In contrast, a lack of managerial openness results in collective resignation, and a group silence climate with managerial unresponsiveness leads to collective adjustment to workplace challenges. Implications to theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Collective coping, group voice, silence, group voice climate, management

Introduction

Stress is a problem with extensive societal implications and with high human and economic costs. The estimated annual costs worldwide of work-related stress are upwards of $187 billion (Hassard et al., 2017). Extensive research has been conducted to grasp the dynamics of stress (Dewe et al., 2010; Hobfoll, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), particularly how individuals cope with stress (Carver, 1997; Carver et al., 1989; Dewe et al., 2010; Monnier et al., 1998; Peiro, 2008). Also, organisational approaches to stress prevention and management are receiving increased attention (Daniels et al., 2021; Kompier et al., 2008; Roodbari et al., 2022; Yarker et al., 2022).

Coping has traditionally been conceptualised as an individual phenomenon, but research has accentuated the need to complement this with a focus on coping as a collective phenomenon (Lansisalmi et al., 2000; Loriol, 2016; Peiro, 2008; Rodríguez et al., 2018). One of the reasons is that studies show that coping strategies involving groups of workers or entire organisations are particularly effective regarding stress prevention (Rodríguez et al., 2018;

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[1] Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg Universitet, Aalborg, Denmark;
[2] Department of Management, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

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Shinn et al., 1984). This calls for more research into how groups within an organisation cope with challenges at work.

Collective coping

The concept of collective coping has been applied within many research disciplines, such as catastrophe psychology (Kaniasty & Norris, 1993; Pennebaker & Harber, 1993; Rimé et al., 2009), cross-cultural studies (Constantine et al., 2005; Kuo, 2013; Kuo et al., 2018), work and organisational psychology (Lansisalmi et al., 2000; Loriol, 2016; Muhonen & Torkelson, 2008; Rodríguez et al., 2018), and family and couples psychology (Hobfoll et al., 2002; Monnier et al., 1998).

However, as Kuo (2013) states, this research area diverges in the nomenclature and definitions, which is also reflected in the variety of definitions of collective coping within and across research disciplines. Collective-oriented forms of coping have been labelled collectivistic coping (Kuo, 2013), relationship-focused coping (O'Brien et al., 2009), cultural coping (Kuo, 2013), communities of coping (Korczynsky, 2003), communal coping (Afifi et al., 2020), co-active coping (Peiro, 2008) and collective coping (Peiro, 2008; Rodríguez et al., 2018). Common to all these concepts is the underlying assumption that coping is not merely an individual phenomenon but is shaped by interactions with others. As reflected in the variety of definitions, interest in collectively oriented forms of coping continues across various research disciplines.

In this paper, we are interested in collective coping at the workplace, and we will apply the definition proposed by Peiro (2008): "*When a group, faced with a common perceived threat or noxious situation, collectively initiates actions to prevent the stressful situation*" (pp. 303). The literature on collective coping has not yet systematically explored the content of these collectively initiated coping efforts.

The literature on collective coping has primarily looked into the cultural antecedents to collective coping and how employees interpret and negotiate coping strategies through cultural narratives within groups of employees, such as professional cultures (Astvik & Melin, 2013; Buch & Andersen, 2013; Kirkegaard & Brinkmann, 2016; McNamara et al., 1995) or departmental cultures (Lansisalmi et al., 2000). The focus here is on how organisational cultures inform coping strategies. For instance, Lansisalmi et al. (2000) elucidate how departmental subcultures employ similar coping mechanisms through cultural narratives that guide their responses. However, within an organisational context, coping frequently pertains to organisational challenges, and managers bear responsibility for and exert influence over various demands and resources in the workplace (Harms et al., 2017), managers can either obstruct or facilitate the adoption of specific modes of collective and individual coping. To our knowledge, no studies have investigated how communication between employees and managers concerning problematic work issues influences employees' collective coping practices, even though this dynamic is crucial for developing employee stress (Harms et al., 2017). This article examines the communication concerning work environment issues between groups of employees and the manager. It explores how this process is associated with the collective coping practices of the employees.

However, looking into former organisational studies, it is possible to extract different types of collaborative coping strategies such as collective information sharing, which was used to cope with an excessive workload (Lansisalmi et al., 2000); sharing the workload (Kirkegaard & Brinkmann, 2015, 2016; Lansisalmi et al., 2000); reversal of challenges, which refers to collectively changing the interpretation of the work environmental challenges (Lansisalmi et al., 2000; Loriol, 2016; McNamara et al., 1995); collective calming, where employees agreed on calming each other when facing stressors (Kirkegaard & Brinkmann, 2015). Knowledge about the content of collective coping strategies is highly relevant for understanding collective action within an organisational context. It will broaden our perspective on how groups cope and the effectiveness of various collective coping efforts.

Group voice and manager response

As research is sparse within the collective coping research regarding this issue, we draw on voice literature to address the communication between managers and employees and its impact on employees. Voice has been defined as the "*discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns or opinions intended to improve organizational or unit functioning*" (Morrison, 2011).

The central part of the voice literature has largely ignored the impact on collective-level perceptions and beliefs about the social context (Morrison et al., 2010). Owing to this gap in the literature, Morrison et al. (2010) introduced the concept of *group voice climate* (Morrison et al., 2010). This group-level construct develops through a bottom-up process and embodies the aggregated contributions of group members' input on work-related issues (Lam & Mayer, 2014). Group voice climate is a concept that highlights the safety and efficacy of voicing opinions within a group and encompasses two dimensions. The first involves a shared belief regarding the safety versus the risk of speaking up, aligning with Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety. The second dimension centres on a shared belief about the effectiveness of group members' contributions, specifically whether their input is taken seriously and acted upon, which relates to group efficacy (the group's belief in its ability to perform effectively) (Morrison et al., 2010). The same dimensions are present in the *climate of silence*, which Morrison and Milliken describe as the shared belief that speaking up about organisational problems is futile and that expressing onés opinions and concerns is perilous. According to Morrison and Milliken (2000) model of organisational silence, employees develop shared beliefs about the risk and pointlessness of voicing concerns. While group voice climate relates to shared beliefs, group voice refers to the attempts to voice concerns, which constitute part of collective coping strategies. However, as previously described, collective coping strategies encompass various strategies. The voice literature critically distinguishes between group prohibitive and group promotive voice (Liang et al., 2012). Group promotive voice refers to group members expressing ideas and suggestions about opportunities to improve work practices and procedures (Li et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2012). Group prohibitive voice, on the other hand, refers to speaking up about concerns about work practices and procedures that are harmful to the group or organisation. Chamberlin et al. (2017) argue that while group promotive voice typically is future-oriented, group prohibitive voice focuses on past problems that should be corrected.

The managerial response and its effect on the group voice climate

The distinction between promotive and prohibitive voice is crucial because the two types differ in content and can influence managerial responses.

For example, a recent study demonstrated that managers' evaluations of group voice varied depending on whether employees employed promotive or prohibitive voice (Sessions et al., 2020). They found that managers generally viewed employees who utilised promotive voice as presenting a challenging work condition. In contrast, employees using prohibitive voice were seen as creating a hindering work condition, which correlated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion among managers. Previous studies have also indicated that managers are more likely to interpret group prohibitive voice as complaining (Liang et al., 2012). The managerial response to voice is significant as it appears to influence the group voice climate among employees. Research has indicated that the experience of being encouraged to speak up can enhance group members' likelihood of doing so, whereas groups that experience higher levels of managerial undermining exhibit lower levels of voice climate (Frazier & Bowler, 2015).

This pattern is also evident in how the manager affects individual voice, which likely extends, to some extent, to groups as well. Research has shown that positive perceptions of the direct supervisor enhance employees' willingness to voice concerns and appear to impact their engagement in voice activities directly (Detert & Burris, 2007). The engagement in voice was particularly affected by the managerial openness to voice which is defined as "*subordinates' perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised*" (p. 871).

Thus, managers appear to influence employees' willingness to voice concerns, affecting group efficacy in speaking up. However, the impact of managerial responses to speaking up on collective coping practices remains unclear.

The relationship between the managerial response and collective coping

To our knowledge, no studies have explored the relationship between group voice/silence climate, the managerial response, and collective coping. A study by Kwan et al. (2016) demonstrates that the organisational context influences the utilisation and effectiveness of various coping strategies related to workplace bullying. More specifically, it is found that when employees feel valued and anticipate being heard, and when managers take action to address the situation, employees are likely to engage in more active coping. Conversely, in the absence of such conditions, employees may resort to more passive coping strategies, such as avoidance coping. Hence, there appears to be a relationship between a voice climate and active coping strategies and a silence climate and passive coping strategies.

However, we need more knowledge about the relationship between group voice climate/group voice, managerial responses, and subsequent collective coping practices.

The aim of this study is thus to examine the interplay between group voice, managerial responses, and subsequent collective coping practices among groups of employees over time.

Method

The study is a convergent mixed methods case study (Castro et al., 2010) of two units in a multinational company in Denmark, consisting of field data, qualitative interviews, and survey data. This paper presents only the data from the qualitative part of the study.

Table 1. Demographic data.

	Research unit	Production unit
Employees	Researchers: 22 Lab technicians: 16 Technicians: 8 Managers: 3 Secretary: 1 **In total: 50**	Lab technicians: 18 Technicians: 6 Managers: 3 **In total: 27**
Age	Mean: 42.5 years. Range: 23–63	Mean: 46.7 years. Range: 35–60
Gender	Male: 52% Female: 48%	Male: 40.7% Female: 59.3%
Seniority	Mean: 13.44 years. Range: <1–42	Mean: 14.07 years. Range: 1–39

Case description

The participating company is a multinational biotech company with 6,000 employees working in research, production, and sales worldwide, 2,500 in Denmark. The two selected units comprise a research unit and a production unit. The management structure in the research unit consists of a unit manager and two immediate supervisors. The immediate supervisors have personnel responsibility for their respective groups, and each personnel group consists of both lab technicians and researchers, the same counts for the production unit. An information-oriented selection with maximum variation guided the selection of units (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this case, it was only on one parameter, the level of stress in the unit, and the HR unit provided the data on this issue before the study initiation based on their latest employee survey. The research unit displayed a high stress level, whereas the production unit displayed a low stress level. Looking at the work environment where the employees had different stress levels could provide a rich description of different aspects of the environment that could mediate specific ways of perceiving and acting under those working conditions. Furthermore, it could also provide opportunities to identify differences in dialogues between managers and employees, thereby identifying prohibitive or promotive voice.

Participants and procedure

The study participants were employees from the research and production units. The subsequent table presents the demographic data (Table 1).

Qualitative measures

Descriptive data were also collected at two intervals during the quantitative data collection phase to comprehend the collective coping mechanisms and the dynamics between employees and managers. This was accomplished through individual and group semi-structured interviews, in-situ interviews, and observations at the worksite.

Observations at the worksite

To gain insights into the daily work life among the various groups, we explored their practices and relationships *via* ethnographic descriptions and participant observations (O’Reilly, 2009). Data collection occurred over five months at the research unit, with observations conducted two days per week, and over four months at the production unit, with observations conducted one day per week. These observations were made at the work site, during lunch and coffee breaks, at professional and unit meetings, and included participation in a two-day seminar with the research unit.

The strength of these methods lies in their capacity to capture the concrete organisational context, such as the physical and spatial arrangements of the worksite and specific managerial and work-related actions. Additionally, these methods provided insights into the relationships and interactions among employees, between employees and management, and their group communications regarding the work environment. This approach also enhanced our understanding of how organisational contexts and social processes interact, offering a deeper comprehension of the dynamics at play.

Additionally, this approach enabled us to acquire a foundational understanding of individuals and their practices, facilitating the interpretation of meanings expressed during the individual and group interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As significant themes emerged from the observational data, we inquired about them in subsequent interviews, facilitating the delineation of their interrelated patterns and subthemes.

Interviews

After a month-long observation period, twelve employees were interviewed individually. The interviewees were drawn from both units and included subdivisions within the units, representing various professional categories (five researchers, five lab technicians, one technician, and one secretary), both genders, a range of age groups (ranging from 22–60 years), and varying levels of stress (high/low).

Information regarding their stress level was obtained from the questionnaire results. The themes guiding the interviews were 1) the participant's own work and daily routines, 2) social network, 3) manager-employee interaction and communication, 4) individual experiences with stress and their appraisal and coping strategies, 5) interpersonal appraisal and coping, 6) group appraisal and coping, 7) cultural characteristics of the groups, 8) group voice climate, 9) stress discourses, and 10) changes over time in their perception of stress and ways of coping. Additionally, two in-situ interviews were conducted: one with the manager of the research unit and one with the production unit manager.

In the final month of the fieldwork, eight group interviews were conducted. Six of those took place at the research unit, comprising three group interviews with researchers, two with lab technicians, and one with technicians. Two group interviews were performed at the production unit, including one with lab technicians and one with a combination of lab technicians and technicians. Group interviews were selected as the method of choice due to our interest in the distinct cultural practices within each group, which are more readily observable in a group setting. Furthermore, these interviews provided an opportunity to observe group dynamics while discussing themes generated during the fieldwork. The specific themes guiding the interviews were 1) their understanding of stress, 2) descriptions of situations that cause distress, 3) descriptions of their way of coping with distress, 4) descriptions of their voice climate, 5) descriptions of legitimate and illegitimate ways of thinking and acting in the group, and 6) their interaction and communication with their manager.

We chose a semi-structured interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Spradley, 1979) as we would be free to follow interesting subjects discussed in the interview and build upon information from previous interviews, thus not necessarily keeping to precisely the same questions each time. The individual interviews lasted about one hour and took place at the worksite; the group interviews lasted about 1½ hours.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and subjected to a template analysis, together with the observation notes (King, 1998). A template analysis is characterised by developing a series of codes derived from a priori and inductive analysis.

Initially, we conducted an inductive analysis of the data following the basic principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The data was read and categorised into concepts using *open coding* and subsequently organised by themes, laying the ground for developing stable categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The coding relied on the constant comparative method in which newly coded text was compared with previously coded text to understand patterns, properties, and data dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Subsequently, the data was read with a point of departure in the research question and the literature within the field and subsequently categorised. The coding categories derived from the deductive and inductive analysis were compared and validated by the triangulation of methods, which was an iterative process, where we shifted our attention back and forth between what the interviewees said and what the reading of the *thick descriptions* (Geertz, 1973) provided by the participant observations showed.

After the data were coded, we analysed them to better understand the relationship between group voice, group voice climate, managerial responses, and collective coping practices. Specifically, we examined descriptions of the cultural practices, group voice climate, managerial responses, and a deeper understanding of the collective coping process, including the phases and strategies integral to such practices. From this analysis, we formulated an analytical description of the collective coping practices and their antecedents. To ensure the validity of this analytical conceptualisation and its associated claims, the interview data were corroborated with field notes and observations and in-situ interviews with management. The findings were validated and discussed with the units' personnel during a public feedback session.

Empirical findings

The results identified three distinct collective coping practices. The production unit employees and the research unit's lab technicians adopted a solution-oriented collective coping practice. In contrast, the researchers in the research unit employed an adjustment-oriented collective coping practice. Notably, while the solution-oriented collective coping practice in the production unit transitioned into collective actions, the same practice among the lab technicians in the research unit led to collective resignation.

Furthermore, the results indicated that these collective coping practices evolved. There was a mix of group voice and silence climates within the different groups, accompanied by varied managerial responses to their prohibited group voice. These dynamics are detailed in Table 2, which will be further elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

Table 2. Voice and collective coping processes of the two participating units.

	Research unit Researchers	Research unit Lab technicians	Production unit
Content of voice	Busyness	Busyness	Busyness
Group voice climate	Climate of silence	From a climate of voice to a climate of silence	Climate of voice and cooperation
Manager response	Employee-adjustment response	Employee-adjustment response	Cooperative and protective response
Collective coping practice	Problem orientation Adjustment-orientation	Solution orientation Frustration escalation Resignation	Solution-orientation Frustration-downscaling Collective action

Work environmental issues experienced by employees in the research unit and production unit

In both units, the predominant work environmental issue encountered was an excessive workload, which intensified shortly after the start of the fieldwork. In the research unit, the lab technicians faced an escalating workload due to the unit's commitment to a new, highly prioritised research project. This project resulted in the addition of five researchers but no extra lab technicians, leading to an increased workload among the lab technicians. Similarly, the researchers also experienced a growing workload due to various smaller projects that had to be distributed without additional resources and in the production unit, periods of extraordinarily high workload occurred during peak times, when a large volume of orders was assigned to the unit without the provision of extra resources to handle them.

Differences between units in manager response to the experienced problems of the employees

Employees in both units primarily engaged in prohibitive voice, expressing their concerns about work environmental issues. In the research unit, employees repeatedly voiced their concerns to the unit manager and the immediate supervisor; however, they felt that management did not adequately address them. Both researchers and lab technicians characterised the managerial response as lacking openness to their concerns, not valuing their input, and showing insufficient initiative to address the issues. Instead, the unit manager and immediate supervisors emphasised how employees should adapt to the demands of the work environment, urging them to cope more effectively, perform at 80% capacity, or increase their work pace.

An in-situ interview with the unit manager provided a specific perspective on the employees' situation. The unit manager engaged in *positive reframing* regarding the issue of busyness, asserting: "*Well, you need to remember that busyness is a positive thing as it makes the employees do their utmost*". Furthermore, he demonstrated *displacement of responsibility* concerning the cause of the employees' distress and the responsibility for taking action. During the interview, when confronted with the employees' concerns, he remarked, "*It is quite characteristic for the lab technicians to complain, and it could be relevant if you could examine the contagiousness of stress in groups*". Here, the unit manager sidestepped the actual issues raised by the employees and shifted the responsibility onto them. When queried about possible actions in response to the employees' concerns, he emphasised that not all employees had developed stress, thus suggesting that it would not justify any action in response to their concerns. This approach and understanding of the employees' concerns likely contribute to their perception of the unit manager's lack of openness, failure to recognise the validity of their concerns, and the absence of managerial initiative as experienced by the employees.

In the production unit, there was a joint understanding that their unit manager accommodated their concerns, demonstrating managerial openness toward their concerns, valuing their input, and actively responding to problems. In an interview, one of the lab technicians said, *"Every time our work assignments pile up and we get busy, our managers do what they can. Sometimes they bring in student assistants. They really take it seriously."*

This observation was consistent with the observations and interactions with the production unit's unit manager. During an in-situ interview with the unit manager, she highlighted the importance of shielding her employees from excessive work pressure, often appealing to her superiors to mitigate the workload for her team.

When anticipating periods of excessive workload, the unit manager proactively communicated her concerns to top management, being transparent about what she was and was not authorised to do to relieve the pressure. She also shared her strategies for easing the workload within the unit. She engaged employees in discussions about how the unit could collectively navigate periods of high pressure, encouraging them to propose new ways of organising work. This approach of fostering high levels of participation and open communication with employees was characteristic of her management style.

Group voice and silence climate

Within the research unit, distinct differences emerged between researchers and lab technicians regarding their group voice climates, influencing their shared beliefs about voicing concerns.

The researchers seemed to experience a climate of collective silence, characterised by their reluctance to discuss workload issues among themselves or to seek mutual support. This hesitation extended to their interactions with managers, with their reluctance to voice concerns intensifying during the phases of the first author's fieldwork. Conversations with the researchers revealed that speaking up about work environment issues within the group was rare among them. One of the researchers stated:

> The researchers are not very good at talking about it (work-related issues) generally. Therefore, those who are talking about our working conditions and upcoming changes are lab techs and assistants. (…) Lab techs and assistants can easily go to our boss or our boss' boss and get things straightened out, always. […] They're way better than us at dealing with these things collectively.

One of the reasons they refrained from speaking up seemed to be related to a shared belief that it was psychologically unsafe to do so. One of the researchers said:

> It is rare that people come to me; then it is maybe David. He perhaps comes and says that he is busy, when he is busy, but I do not experience that others come and whine.

This quote highlights a pattern observed and identified in interviews indicating that speaking up within the group was perceived as psychologically unsafe, as it was often equated with whining. Simultaneously, the researchers discussed the futility of voicing concerns to their immediate supervisors. A common perception among the employees was that the immediate supervisors were more concerned with maintaining good relations with the unit manager rather than addressing the employees' concerns. One of the researchers expressed it this way:

> So, it seems that they [the immediate supervisors] please upwards and never say 'no' if there are tasks. They just take them out of fear of looking bad to their manager.

Within the group of researchers, the climate of silence appeared to be linked to shared beliefs that speaking up was psychologically unsafe and futile, as managers seemed to prioritise upward communication over addressing employee concerns.

Despite this perceived futility, the researchers initially continued to approach their immediate supervisors individually as a strategy during the early phases of the first author's fieldwork. However, their efforts lacked the clarity and consistency seen in the voicing behaviours of the lab technicians. In contrast, the group voice climate among the lab technicians in the research unit and the employees in the production unit was initially characterised by a shared belief that it was safe to speak up, both within the group and to unit managers and immediate supervisors, and that their concerns would be effectively heard. This shared belief about the safety of speaking up within the group is captured in the following statement by one of the lab technicians in the research unit:

> We have talked about it in the lab tech group that it is permitted to express that now we should not add more assignments because we are busy. And we accept that we say that to each other. I think that if it were a researcher who dared say that, then I think he or she would feel left out in the group of researchers because everyone else performs their job. So, I do not think it is permitted to the same extent to say within the group of researchers.

The lab technician group in the research unit recognised the importance and relevance of collectively addressing the immediate supervisors and the unit manager, viewing speaking up as a valuable and effective practice. They exhibited a high degree of collective efficacy in communicating with the managers. The lab technicians primarily voiced their concerns as a group, articulating their requests with clarity and consistently maintaining their stance during interactions, as observed by the first author at department meetings and meetings with immediate managers. Their collective approach to voicing concerns seemed to bolster their sense of efficacy.

In the production unit, the employees also exhibited a sense of psychological safety, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> It has been easy to enter this group as a new employee. It is like a small family. It demands that you be open about yourself and your privacy, but they are accommodating toward each other, and you kind of help each other all the time.

Therefore, the groups exhibited distinct group voice climates. The researchers were characterised by a group silence climate, tending to refrain from voicing concerns within the group and hesitating to speak up to the unit manager and the immediate supervisors. In contrast, the lab technicians in the research unit and the employees in the production unit maintained a group voice climate where they felt psychologically safe expressing their concerns within the group and approached the unit manager collectively to voice their concerns.

The researchers and the lab technicians in the research unit, as well as the employees in the production unit, engaged in voicing their concerns in different ways, participated in

Table 3. The voice and coping practice among the researchers within the research unit.

Collective coping	Content of employee voice	Managerial response to employee voice
Problem-orientation	• Problematization of busyness due to too many assignments	• *Adjustment focus*: Emphasizing the need for the employees to perform their job 80 %
Adjustment-orientation • Intensification of work effort • Isolation		

different dialogues with the unit manager and immediate supervisors, and consequently adopted different coping practices.

Manager response and the collective coping practice among the researchers

The researchers in the research unit experienced various phases in their response to the increasing workload. Initially, they adopted a problem-oriented approach, which later shifted to an adjustment-oriented response accompanied by social isolation. This progression reflects their changing strategies in coping with the escalating demands.

The interactions with the unit manager and immediate supervisors were marked by a perceived lack of responsiveness to their concerns. Table 3 below outlines the dynamics between the content of the researchers' voices, the managerial responses they received, and the collective coping efforts undertaken by the researchers.

Problem-orientation

Despite feeling that voicing their concerns was futile, the researchers sometimes felt compelled to individually express their concerns to both the unit manager and immediate supervisors as they grappled with the high workload. They typically articulated their concerns regarding the excessive number of projects and insufficient time to execute them effectively. During group and individual interviews, the researchers shared negative experiences concerning voicing their concerns in these one-on-one dialogues with the managers. They reported that both the immediate supervisors and the unit manager demonstrated a lack of openness to their concerns, failed to acknowledge the importance of their issues, and did not take proactive steps to address the problems. One of the researchers described the situation as follows:

> I've experienced this a few times now: I've already said no, but I still get extra projects. […] I just get projects tossed onto my desk, and it's not a choice, so you just do it on top of everything else. […] So, I'm unsure if it's because I'm not telling the management clearly enough, or if they just don't react to what we say.

Another researcher mentioned that every time they express their concerns individually, the response from the managers implies that they needed to lower their expectations for their own performance. The researcher explained, "*We always get told: 'You have to learn to perform at 80%. We need to get going.'*" Concurrently, there was also a degree of hesitation among the researchers about speaking up. When asked in an individual interview if they still use the strategy of voicing concerns over the number of tasks, one researcher shared insights into the reluctance they sometimes feel about speaking up, stating:

> Yes, I still use that strategy, but Ím not so good at it. There is something not quite right in my head, I think. I really like these tasks I have, and I don't like to hand them off. It's difficult.

This ambivalence was a defining characteristic among the researchers, who expressed similar difficulties in group and individual interviews. Two primary reasons for their hesitation to speak up emerged across the interviews: pride and the fear of being outperformed by colleagues on the assignments. Consequently, a focus on performance intertwined with the perceived futility of voicing concerns. This ambiguity surrounding voicing concerns could blur the clarity of their requests, impacting their dialogues with management.

The timeframe during which the researchers individually attempted to address the managers about the escalating workload extended approximately two months. Following this period, there was a noticeable decline in efforts to engage with the management. This led to an adjustment orientation among the researchers, characterised by efforts to adapt to the work environment rather than seeking to change it.

Adjustment-orientation

The researchers' adjustment orientation involved intensifying their work effort and social isolation. They employed various strategies to manage the increased workload, including increasing the time spent on work, accelerating their work pace, and enhancing their resources through relaxation techniques, mindfulness exercises, and various forms of physical activity. When asked about their methods for coping with busyness, one of the researchers responded:

> Well, my focus would be on getting things done, and then it would not help if you came and listened to my frustrations. Maybe it is characteristic for the researchers that getting things done is in focus. You fight to keep up as well as you can.

"Getting things done" emerged as the primary coping mechanism, while seeking social support was not viewed as a legitimate or effective strategy. This perspective was detailed in both individual and group interviews, where it was noted that researchers tended to be socially isolated in their offices for most of their work time. This isolation was highlighted by one of the lab technicians, who explained:

> You can say that the balance now is that the researchers sit 100% in the offices.

The results thus suggest that the researchers intensified their practice of adapting to the working conditions by increasing the time they worked alone in their offices

Manager response and the collective coping practice among the lab technicians in the research unit

The lab technicians experienced various phases in their collective response to interactions with the immediate supervisor and the unit manager, including solution orientation, frustration escalation, and, ultimately, collective resignation. This progression reflects a shift from an initial group voice climate, where speaking up was encouraged and considered safe, to

Table 4. The voice and collective coping practice among the lab technicians within the research unit.

Collective coping	Content of employee voice	Managerial response to employee voice
Solution-orientation • Alteration-orientation • Problem-orientation	• Problematization of work environmental issues • Suggestions of how to handle these issues	• *Refusal*: Refuse to provide additional resources • *Adjustment focus*: Emphasizing the need for the employees to perform their job 80 %
Frustration escalation • Intensification • Generalization • Circularity • Selectivity • Emotion sharing	• Accentuating the frustrations among the employees • Accentuating the health consequences • Repeating previous stated work environmental issues	• *Adjustment focus*: Emphasizing the need to cope more efficiently • *Refusal*: Refuse to provide additional resources
Resignation • Feelings of hopelessness • Giving up attempts to cope	• The dialogue stops	

a group silence climate, influenced by the perception that the immediate supervisor and unit manager were not adequately addressing their concerns.

Table 4 below illustrates the interaction between the content of the lab technicians' voice, the managerial response, and the collective coping efforts made by the lab technicians.

Solution-orientation

The initial phase of the lab technicians' response to work pressure lasted about one and a half months. It was marked by efforts to address the issue of work pressure by identifying problems in the working environment and finding suitable solutions. Initially, these efforts involved proposing solutions directly to their immediate supervisors and later to the unit manager. These solution-oriented strategies phase included, providing supervisors and the unit manager with a detailed overview of work assignments, thereby transferring the responsibility of prioritising tasks; organising meetings with colleagues to brainstorm solutions; addressing management both individually and as a group, including sending a formal letter once, appointing a representative to speak on behalf of the group twice, and holding full group meetings with the unit manager twice.

Despite these proactive strategies, the response from the immediate supervisors and the unit manager was consistent: no additional resources could be allocated, and the lab technicians were advised to learn to manage the workload more efficiently. In response, the lab technicians developed a support system that consisted of the collective strategy of *sharing the workload*, such as helping each other with assignments. They also employed the *collective calming strategy*, providing emotional support to alleviate stress. This mutual support included reassurances such as: "We are in this together" or "We will help each other through this", fostering a sense of collective calm and solidarity amidst the challenges.

The *problem-identifying strategies* employed by the lab technicians were centred around openly discussing heavy workloads and identifying additional stressors within the work environment. As the group members became more engaged in this process, their focus broadened beyond mere work pressure to encompass various other problematic aspects of the work environment. They started to detect and debate new issues, such as role conflicts, management style, a critical tone prevalent in the unit, a perceived lack of social support, and feelings of injustice. A strategy, we label: *enhanced problem focus*.

Escalation of frustrations

The subsequent phase, lasting about one month, was marked by an escalation of frustrations within the group. During this period, the lab technicians adopted several collective coping strategies such as *intensification, generalisation, circularity*, and *emotion sharing* to manage their growing discontent.

Intensification involved a noticeable increase in discussions about the workload and other problems at the workplace, as evidenced by observations at the worksite. A collective sentiment of urgency developed, encapsulated by statements in a group interview like, "*We have to hold on and not give up*," and "*It is a battle, and we have to take it. We have to have something to fight back with. We're getting stressed because of it*." The communication of their experiences with problematic work conditions became more frequent and intense. This strategy, we term *collective empowerment*.

Generalisation was another strategy where the lab technicians began to extend their grievances about specific issues within their unit to the broader organisational context, which we term *organisational contextualization*. They attributed the unit manager's critical stance not only to individual attitudes but also to the perspectives and practices upheld by top management and the overall visions of the company. This was highlighted during one of the group interviews, where a lab technician stated:

> As we hear it, then the company does not invest in machines or people, but we just have to perform better. Over the past year, growth has increased by 10%, but it is the same people. Our top management thinks we can easily perform our jobs like this, but we can't keep on going on like this. If they continue pushing us so hard, then I will retire.

As frustrations escalated, *circularity* emerged in the lab technicians' discussions, reflecting a looping pattern where negative narratives about the workplace and the unit manager were continuously reinforced. Observations indicated that these discussions frequently revolved around critical workplace perspectives, constantly supplemented with new and reinforcing anecdotes. These narratives often revisited past and present experiences concerning the unit manager's lack of action in addressing employee concerns, rumours about the manager, and aspects of the manager's personality. This ongoing discourse seemed to perpetuate and increase their level of frustration and diminish their trust in the likelihood of positive changes. This coping strategy we term *collective amplification of distress*.

This strategy reinforced collective dissatisfaction and mistrust, as the group repetitively focused on negative experiences and perceived injustices. During one of the group interviews, this sentiment was encapsulated by a statement from one of the lab technicians:

> For instance, this survey you have made: It also contains issues that have been debated previously. We've had these discussions before, and nothing's been changed. It's the same signals we send to management, and they don't react upon them.

The lab technicians also deepened their *emotion sharing* during this phase. Observations at the worksite demonstrated that they frequently shared their anger, frustration, disappointment, and sadness. This emotional exchange extended beyond mere communication, as they were seen providing comfort to one another in tangible ways. The emotional state of their colleagues visibly impacted them, contributing to a shared sense of sadness and frustration. Moments were observed where lab technicians found each other crying and spent time offering mutual support and comfort.

Resignation

This phase, lasting about two months, was marked by the sharing of hopelessness and a growing sense of resignation regarding the effectiveness of voicing concerns. Over time, the lab technicians increasingly refrained from attempting to voice their issues or change the situation, leading to the emergence of a silence climate within the group. They debated their possible courses of action and concluded that their options were limited. The resignation was characterised by a cessation of efforts to cope with the situation actively, as hopelessness became a prevailing sentiment among the group members. In a group interview, this shift was illustrated in a discussion sequence where the lab technicians openly shared their feelings of being powerless and trapped by the circumstances, reflecting a collective acceptance that their situation was unlikely to improve:

> How on earth do we move on? We can’t talk our way out of it. It shows us that something has to be done. When you look at the picture here, then you think—something must be done? Can you see your way out of it?

Another adds:

> What does it take for the management to listen? I don’t think our immediate supervisor is provided more resources. I don’t think he can do much.

The intensified sense of hopelessness and the futility of speaking up was characteristic of this phase. The perceived futility of speaking up became characteristic features of the lab technicians’ discussions. The conversations increasingly revolved around giving up attempts to cope with or change the situation. A strategy, we term *collective resignation*. This process starkly contrasted with the dynamics observed in the production unit, which demonstrated a different trajectory in response to similar pressures.

Manager response and collective coping practices in the production unit

In the production unit, the employees experienced a dynamic response to the work pressure, characterised by several distinct but overlapping phases. Initially, there was a solution orientation followed by frustration downscaling and collective action, which is illustrated in Table 5 below. When addressing the unit manager and their immediate supervisors, they experienced an accommodation of their concerns. Each phase lasted approximately two weeks, showing rapid progression through different collective coping strategies.

Solution-orientation

When voicing their concerns, the employees in the production unit demonstrated a solution-oriented approach, actively identifying work environment issues and proposing strategies to manage the workload. These employees typically engaged in dialogues, discussing

Table 5. The voice and collective coping practice within the production unit.

Collective coping	Content of employee voice	Managerial response to employee voice
Solution-orientation • Alteration orientation	• Identifying work environmental issues • Suggestions of how to handle them	• Recognition of the experienced problems • Communication about the possibilities of action • Discussion of the suggestions from the employees
Frustration downscaling • Calming each other • Stopping negative narratives		
Collective action • Ongoing dialogue and cooperation with the manager about possible solutions		

their concerns and collaboratively brainstorming solutions. Observations at the work site and information gathered from interviews revealed that both the unit manager as well as the immediate supervisors exerted a cooperation-oriented approach, where they took the employee concerns at face value as well as found solutions to the problem in dialogue with the employees.

Frustration downscaling

The employees in the production unit also developed a strategy of collective calming as part of their communication during busy or stressful periods. This approach involved using reassuring phrases to help reduce anxiety and maintain a sense of perspective among the team members. Observations at the work site captured various calming sentences such as: "*It is just work—not a question of life or death*", "*What is done is done*", "*We'll find out along the way*" or "*We will just address Charlot then she will help*".

During at group interview, one of the technicians reflected on these observations, providing insight into how these calming strategies played a critical role in managing workplace stress. The technician explained:

> If someone says that he cannot see through things, there is always one of the others who tries to calm him down and says, 'We take one thing at a time and help each other'.

Besides employing calming strategies, the employees also actively worked to downplay negativity within the work environment. They had previously witnessed how negativity could proliferate throughout the unit and were determined to avoid a repeat of such a scenario. This resolve led to the establishment of specific behavioral guidelines aimed at fostering a more positive atmosphere. A strategy we term *frustration downscaling*. In a group interview, one of the employees elaborated on this proactive approach, stating:

> We have learned from a period where we experienced stress and where we aggravated the situation in the group. Now we have rules: keep it on an acceptable

> level and not aggravate the situation and not pass it on to other divisions. There is no need to do that.

Another employee added:

> We focus on facing the conflicts right away, speak openly and honestly about things, speak positively about each other, and help each other.

Additionally, the employees frequently endeavored to prevent each other from viewing the situation as a threat to their well-being, thus employing a collective coping strategy known as the *reversal of challenges*. In this approach, they actively encouraged one another to focus on the positive aspects of the work environment, fostering a more optimistic group mindset.

Collective action

When facing work pressure, the employees in the production unit commonly engaged in various forms of collective action to manage the workload effectively. This involved helping each other with tasks and thereby *sharing the workload*. They also frequently held discussion both within the group and with their managers on strategies to efficiently handle the workload. A key characteristic of how they supported each other involved entering into and sustaining each other's workflow until a task was completed.

One of the employees explained this work process:

> When you finish your part of the work process, you automatically start to help some of the others. You don't ask anymore but just begin helping. Before, you walked around alone with an order and performed all the work processes by yourself.

In this case, more social forms of coping, such as seeking help from each other, had become an integral part of their action repertoire and a habituated mode of behavior among the employees. The collective coping strategy was embedded in their interactions, becoming a normative practice through regular engagement and habituation.

Another facet of their collective action involved discussions within the group or with immediate supervisors about strategies to manage the workload. They employed a structured approach to voicing concerns, which we term *collective alteration focus*, which was described by one of the technicians in the following quote:

> Sometimes, we talk just one-to-one, and if the other one feels the same way, we bring it up in the group and address Charlot (the immediate supervisor) together. Usually, she helps us. Other times we bring it up in the group right away.

When discussing issues with the immediate supervisor, the employees frequently focused on finding solutions to their challenges and identifying ways to optimise work processes. For instance, they adopted practical elements from LEAN management techniques that resonated with the employees' needs and helped improve workflow efficiency. These adaptations aimed to alleviate work pressure and enhance productivity by streamlining tasks and reducing unnecessary steps in their processes.

Discussion

The study's objective was to explore the interactions between group voice, managerial responses, and the evolving collective coping practices among groups of employees over time. The study highlights the critical influence of managerial responses on the utilisation and effectiveness of various collective coping strategies and specific sequences of collective coping.

Our research suggests that combining managerial responses to the group's expression of concerns and the prevailing group voice/silence climate significantly affects collective coping practices. When a group with a positive voice climate is met with managerial openness, it can lead to solution-oriented actions, reduced frustration, and collective action in collaboration with the manager. Conversely, when groups characterised by a voice climate encounter managerial resistance or lack of openness, they may experience coping sequences that evolve from solution-seeking to frustration escalation and ultimately to collective resignation. Furthermore, when a group operates within a silence climate and faces managerial indifference or unresponsiveness, it may adopt an adjustment strategy characterised by increased work intensity and social isolation. These dynamics are illustrated in Figure 1.

Theoretical implications

This study enhances the existing body of knowledge in both the realms of employee voice and collective coping. It aligns with numerous studies that underscore the pivotal role of managers in influencing both voice and silence among employees (Burris et al., 2013; Detert & Burris, 2007; Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). However, by analysing the dynamics of voice and managerial responses over time, we address the shortcomings of previous cross-sectional research by illustrating how interactions between managers and employees shape various employee reactions over time, such as the sequencing of collective coping.

Most studies that examine the outcomes of voice primarily focus on measuring employee performance, involuntary and voluntary employee turnover, and job satisfaction (Burris et al., 2013). However, this study adds to this research by looking at collective coping as an outcome.

While our findings corroborate the critical role of managerial openness to voice as identified by studies by Detert and Burris (2007), our study additionally reveals how performance-oriented and competition-oriented cultures within an organisation, and specific professional groups may act as antecedents to silence when combined with distinct managerial responses. Intriguingly, our study identified both voice and silence climates within the same organisational unit, aligning with findings from previous studies (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). These varied climates were found under the same unit manager

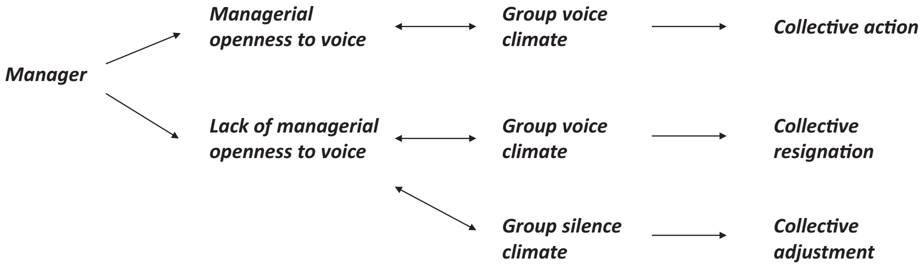

Figure 1. Relation between managerial openness to voice, group climate and collective coping.

and immediate supervisors, emphasising the significance of professional cultures as precursors to both voice and silence. Consequently, our study suggests the need to further explore the complex interplay between managerial behaviours and professional cultures in shaping voice/silence climates and understanding diverse collective coping practices.

Our study also reveals that in this case, immediate supervisors and unit managers do not differ in their openness towards employee voice. Employees perceive them to exhibit similar behaviours regarding encouraging employee voice. This finding aligns with a study by Detert and Treviño (2010), which found that skip-level leaders and immediate supervisors engage in similar behaviours that subordinates perceive as either fostering favourable or unfavourable conditions for voicing concerns.

Our study also indicates that the managerial response is a barrier to changing stressors and has become one of many stressors. Hence, the managerial response involves a complex interaction with other stressors in the work environment.

Collective coping and collective stress

The study informs the research on collective coping in different ways. First and foremost, it links the manager-employee communication about work environmental issues to collective coping. It extends previous research from primarily looking at culture when understanding collective coping to also looking at the managerial response.

Furthermore, in traditional coping research, it has been criticised that most studies do not grasp coping as an ever-changing response to evolving situations, which is highly needed in the literature on coping (Charles S Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). This counts for the research within collective coping as well. This study, however, identifies different collective coping sequences, where employees went through different coping phases. In the research unit, these coping phases led to a collective experience of stress for the lab technicians.

In this study, we observed previously identified collective coping strategies such as sharing the workload, reversal of challenges and collective calming. Additionally, novel collective strategies emerged, including collective empowerment, enhanced problem focus, organizational contextualization, collective amplification of distress, collective resignation, frustration downscaling and collective alteration focus.

This also adds to the literature by describing the content of collective coping strategies and showing that collective coping strategies are not always efficient, as previous studies have argued (Rodríguez et al., 2018; Shinn et al., 1984).

The results also supplement the much-debated dispositional-situation coping dichotomy inherent in the coping research (Moos & Holahan, 2003). The results contrast the dispositional perspective on coping as a strategy, which is stable over time and across situations (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010) and simultaneously challenges the view that coping varies primarily according to the type of stressor experienced. Our findings indicate that the stressor, i.e. the experience of busyness, was negotiated differently depending on cultural practices and interaction with the unit manager and the immediate supervisors. However, it is worth questioning whether the experience of busyness was consistent across groups, which could influence the coping strategies employed. Initially, the production unit displayed a lower stress level than the research unit.

Nevertheless, both units experienced an escalation of workload during the study period, though the intensity of the busyness appeared to differ between the units. Notably, in the production unit, managerial practices involved consolidating tasks among team members, which mitigated the perceived intensity of busyness. The deliberate allocation of tasks by the unit manager contributes to a sense of shared responsibility and reduced individual burden, thereby shaping a more moderate perception of busyness among employees. Furthermore, the proactive engagement of management in addressing concerns related to workplace environment and workload demonstrated a tangible responsiveness to employee apprehensions, influencing the subjective intensity of the experienced busyness.

Hence, a more cooperation-oriented leadership style, which was the case of the unit manager in the production unit, impacts the perception of busyness and subsequent collective coping strategies.

Limitations of the study and future research

This study contributes to the voice and collective coping literature by shedding light on the complex interplay between the managerial response to voice, group voice/silence climate, and collective coping. However, there are limitations of this study:

First, our study's exploratory character called for an in-depth examination of a small sample size, which makes it difficult to make conclusive inferences and generalise our findings (Lee, 1999). Even though we performed the observations and interviews in two units, the study was still performed in only one company. Therefore, we urge other researchers to explore the generalizability of our findings in settings other than research and production units.

Second, we collected data from Danish employees, and our results may reflect a sample-specific dynamic. Scandinavian employees—particularly Danish and Swedish employees—appear to have better participation opportunities than their Western counterparts (Gallie, 2003). Thus, a cultural participation practice and potential subsequent anticipation of being heard when voicing concerns might have influenced the present sample more strongly than Western samples. We therefore recommend future studies to examine the generalizability of our findings in non-Scandinavian contexts.

Thirdly, the primary emphasis of our study has centred on groups of employees, with limited attention given to individual differences. Integrating measures of individual differences in coping preferences could enrich the exploration of the intricate interplay between contextual factors and individual variances.

Fourthly, another constraint arises from the reliance of this study's data, primarily on employee and researcher observations as the primary sources of information. The managers' perspective has only been included in two in-situ interviews with the unit managers. A more thorough data collection, including manager interviews, could have provided valuable insights. Regarding future research opportunities, the overall contribution of our study offers a basis for establishing further investigation of the relationship between the managerial response to group voice, group voice/silence climate, and collective coping, particularly in cases of different professional cultures. Given the tentativeness of our findings, future studies may benefit from including both qualitative and quantitative methods. This could be done using a mixed-methods research design or a sequential design (Frederiksen et al., 2013), where qualitative methods are used to expand our knowledge of the variety of managerial responses to employee voice and collective coping practices. The quantitative methods would be used to measure the combination of the managerial response to voice, group climate and collective coping depicted in Figure 1.

Furthermore, future studies could enhance our understanding of collective coping by identifying additional types of collective coping strategies and exploring their implications for employee well-being.

Implications for practitioners

The manager's role seems particularly important in this study as the managerial response to employee voice has implications for group and collective coping. Furthermore, our findings reinforce the trend toward exploring stress as a collective process rather than solely an individual issue. For managers, this means a need to understand the employees' reaction to stress and their coping strategies in the context of the social dynamics present in the organisation and their managerial response.

Conclusion

The overall aim was to explore the impact on collective coping when groups of employees exert protective voice to the manager. We found that the manager-employee interaction impacted collective coping practices and that the managerial response to employee voice and the group voice/silence climate shaped different collective coping practices over time.

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