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apl@urosario.edu.co

Universidad del Rosario

Colombia

Silva, André Luis; Sachuk, Maria Iolanda

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The Human Coping Process in the Context of Organizational Change

El proceso de afrontamiento en el contexto de cambio organizacional
O processo de enfrentamento em um contexto organizacional que muda

André Luis Silva*
Maria Iolanda Sachuk**

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Abstract

This article systematizes an innovative empirical framework that shows how the transformative process of human coping strategies offers an alternative way to understand the contemporary relations established between individuals and contexts of organizational change. Based on the positive psychology movement, this empirical-qualitative study uses in-depth interviews to professionals, who worked for companies acquired by an international financial institution, for which they worked in the Brazilian market. Through a content analysis, researchers interpreted all data. As a result of this research, the article shows how individual employees transform their protection factors (coping and buffer) through defense mechanisms in managing organizational change imposed in the workplace. This study contributes to the fields of organizational psychology and health psychology, as it delves into the processes through which individual and contextual elements can

protect workers under organizationally adverse conditions that can affect them negatively.

Keywords: Coping strategies, defense mechanisms, organizational change, qualitative research, positive psychology.

Resumen

Este artículo sistematiza un marco empírico que muestra cómo el proceso de transformación de las estrategias de afrontamiento ofrece una forma alternativa para comprender la relación contemporánea que se establece entre las personas y los contextos de cambio organizacional. Basado en el movimiento de la psicología positiva, esta es una investigación cualitativa descriptiva que utiliza un corte temporal de sección con una perspectiva longitudinal. Los datos empíricos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas en profundidad con profesionales que experimentaron la adquisición de la institución financiera internacional en la que trabajaban

* PhD in Business Administration and Professor of Business at EAESP/FGV – São Paulo Business School at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (São Paulo – SP / Brazil). E-mail: andre.fgvsp@gmail.com

** Professor of Business of UEM – Maringá State University (Maringá – PR / Brazil). PhD in Business Administration at EAESP/FGV – São Paulo Business School of São Paulo at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (São Paulo – SP / Brazil). E-mail: mariaiolanda.sachuk@gmail.com

en el mercado brasileño. Todos los datos fueron interpretados por la técnica de análisis de contenido. El estudio muestra cómo los empleados transforman sus factores de protección (*coping* y *buffers*) en los mecanismos de defensa para hacer frente al cambio organizacional impuesto a su lugar de trabajo. El estudio aporta al campo de la psicología organizacional y de la psicología de la salud porque profundiza en los mecanismos a través de los cuales los elementos individuales y contextuales pueden proteger al trabajador de situaciones adversas que lo pueden afectar negativamente.

Palabras clave: estrategias de afrontamiento, mecanismos de defensa, cambio organizacional, investigación cualitativa, psicología positiva.

Resumo

Este artigo sistematiza um marco empírico que mostra como o processo de transformação das estratégias de enfrentamento pode oferecer formas alternativas para avançar em nossa compreensão da relação contemporânea que se estabelece entre as pessoas e as organizações. Baseada no movimento da psicologia positiva, esta é uma pesquisa qualitativa descritiva que utiliza um corte temporal de seção com uma perspectiva longitudinal. Os dados empíricos foram recolhidos através de entrevistas em profundidade com profissionais que experimentaram a aquisição da instituição financeira internacional no que trabalhavam no mercado brasileiro. Todos os dados foram interpretados pela técnica de análise de conteúdo. O estudo mostra como os empregados transformam seus fatores de proteção (*coping* e *buffers*) nos mecanismos de defesa para enfrentar a mudança de organização imposta a seu lugar de trabalho. O estudo aporta ao campo da psicologia organizacional e da psicologia da saúde porque aprofunda nos mecanismos através dos quais os elementos individuais e contextuais podem proteger ao trabalhador de situações adversas que o podem afetar negativamente.

Palavras-chave: estratégias de enfrentamento, mecanismos de defesa, mudança organizacional, pesquisa qualitativa, psicologia positiva.

The organizational change process has created space in the academic literature to discuss their effects on individual employees (Ramlall, 2009; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015; Murray & Ali, 2017), drawing attention to the fact that professionals face difficult circumstances in their workplaces and sometimes resort to protection factors (coping and buffer strategies) to combat the effects of organizational change on their lives (Cicchetti, 2010). The positive psychology movement classifies this behavior as human resilience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Garnezy, 1985; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015).

While it is a process (Barlach & Malvezzi, 2010; Reppold, Mayer, Almeida & Hutz, 2012; Rutter, 2012), the literature on this issue does not clarify how this process occurs. In seeking to address this theoretical gap and advance in the understanding of this issue, the purpose of this work is to answer the following question: How do individual employees transform their protective factors (coping and buffer strategies) into real defense mechanisms in managing organizational changes imposed on them in the workplace?

For this reason, researchers collected empirical data from professionals, who worked at companies acquired by international financial institutions, in the Brazilian market. First, we made these choices given that over the last ten years, most organizational changes applied were the result of alternative strategic acquisitions between institutions, among which we highlight those occurring between banks (DeYoung, Evanoff & Molyneux, 2009; Barth, John-Jr., Phumiwasana & Yost, 2012). Second, our focus on an empirical case from Brazil allows us to learn from the experiences of a major emerging economy (Oliveira, Cavazotte & Dunzer, 2017).

The article organization is as follows. We begin by presenting a theoretical background. Then, we describe the methodological approach used and provide an interpretation of the experiential data. Finally, we supply a discussion and some

conclusions and present an innovative empirical framework (as a result of our empirical research) for understanding the human coping process involved in contexts of organizational change.

Human resilience, risk and vulnerability

Individuals facing adverse situations, including those experienced in contexts of organizational change, sometimes exhibit a capacity to manage their own subjective biases to understand the given situation and defend themselves (Masten, 2007; Cicchetti, 2010). The positive psychology movement refers to this capacity as human resilience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Paludo & Koller, 2007). It involves protective factors (coping and buffer strategies) used by an individual to deal with risk factors (Garmezy, 1985; Barlach & Malvezzi, 2010; Reppold, Mayer, Almeida & Hutz, 2012; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015; Zheng, Kashi, Fan, Molineux & Ee, 2015; Murray & Ali, 2017).

In organizational contexts, human resilience emerges to combat adversities arising with changes in the workplace and in labor relations (Lengnick-Hall, Beck & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). The point is that every human resilience process starts with exposure to a risk factor (Bhamra, Dani & Burnard, 2011; Huang, Xing & Gamble, 2016). In general, they are “all sorts of negative life events, and that, when present, increase the probability of the individual presenting physical problems, social or emotional” (Yunes & Szymanski, 2001, p. 24). The moment of truth is that a risk factor may result in a condition of deep vulnerability for individuals (Jeolás, 2010).

Research tends to investigate this vulnerability examining the relationship between psychological stress and a human adaptation observed while facing the effects of risk factors that render the individuals susceptible to anxiety (Henning, 2011). However, such studies focus only on understanding the vulnerability in terms of resources (Masten &

Tellegen, 2012) as strategies, attitudes, and actions that an individual uses to combat conditions inducing psychological stress (Dhar & Dhar, 2010).

The central point is that individuals who experience the effects of risk factors generally face psychologically vulnerable situations with emotional imbalance, negatively affecting their lives. However, they can resist the ramifications of such conditions by mobilizing protective mechanisms (coping and buffer strategies). Such forces relate to the process of human resilience, which can modify or change an individual's response to hostile situations that predispose the manifestation of maladaptive behaviors (Rutter, 2012). We present the theoretical aspects of the concept of protective factors below.

Protective factors

Internal (coping) and external protective factors (buffers) act to assist an individual in responding to a feeling of risk (Rutter, 2012). Protective factors perform the following main functions: (1) reduce the effect of risks or limit an individual's exposure to an adverse situation; (2) mitigate negative reactions resulting from an individual's exposure to risk; (3) establish and maintain self-esteem and self-efficacy through the successful establishment of secure attachment relationships and through the fulfillment of tasks, and (4) create opportunities to reverse the effects of stress (Rutter, 2012). Some examples of internal and external protective factors include the following: individual autonomy, self-esteem, self-determination, respect, recognition, family involvement, friends, hope, the delimitation of will to live, the preservation of identity, individual beliefs, self-assertion, and faith (Tavares, Yunes, Szymanski, Pereira, Ralha-Simões & Castro, 2001; Daniels, Beesley, Cheyne & Wimalasiri, 2008; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015).

When individuals face an adverse event and can make use of coping strategies to manage a

risky situation, they mobilize internal (coping strategies) and external forces (buffer strategies) to apply effective defense mechanisms to combat the risk factor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To better understand how transformative coping occurs, below we present theoretical approaches to internal (coping) and external protection factors (buffers).

Coping - internal protection factor

A coping factor emerges from an individual's cognitive assessment (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007; Rutter, 2012). Coping strategies attenuate stress ratios experienced by individuals in adverse situations, which arise as a result of the ways that they cope with managing adversity (Cash & Gardner, 2011). One approach centers on emotions. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), an individual employs the emotion-focused coping when his/her coping strategies are undertaken to limit his/her discomfort associated with adversity, and thus, this approach only prevents or denies the actual circumstances that he/she experiences. Protocols involving the avoidance/denial of reality include cognitive or behavioral attempts made to keep an individual protected from a stressor. Some of such efforts may concern avoiding a problem, escaping a situation or allowing time to pass (Dell'Aglío & Hutz, 2002; Rutter, 2012).

The second manner of managing a risk factor involves focusing on the problem. In this way, the individual facing an adverse situation neutralizes the risk factor that generates feelings of experiencing adversity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this case, the individual does not deny the existence of the risk factor. Instead, the individual understands it as a real risk factor and faces it objectively. This rational means of facing an adverse situation helps the individual find ways to overcome the adversity experienced (Antoniuzzi, 1999; Reppold, Mayer, Almeida, & Hutz, 2012; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle, & Ferreira, 2015).

However, coping processes take different styles (Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009). A situational process occurs when an individual develops specific strategies to address certain adverse situations. This coping style involves applying techniques grounded in an individual's set of thoughts and behaviors that manifest in response to a hostile situation (Antoniuzzi, 1999; Rutter, 2012). The second coping style is dispositional, in which the individual mobilizes coping strategies previously used to manage other adverse conditions (Antoniuzzi, 1999; Reppold, Mayer, Almeida & Hutz, 2012; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015; Khan, Rao-Nicholson, Akhtar, Tarba, Ahammad & Vorley, 2017). On the other hand, coping can also include using external resources (buffers) to face adverse situations.

Buffers – external protection factor

Buffer factors represent external influences that modify or improve an individual's response to a risk factor (Pesce, Assis, Santos & Oliveira, 2004; Rutter, 2012). Examples of buffers include money, tools, individuals, and other relevant skills. However, it would be impossible to "catalogue all resources that individuals have to face the infinite demands of life" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 159). As a result, more studies must identify the main types of coping resources used by individuals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which is the purpose of the present empirical work.

Considering the theoretical assumptions related to the ability of recovery, risk, vulnerability, and protective factors, we understand that human resilience involves a process that begins with the existence of a risk factor for an individual. In facing the hostility of a risk factor, the individual tends to develop psychological vulnerability. To manage such adversity, the individual mobilizes internal (coping) and external (buffers) protection factors to confront the adverse situation. In this way, when the individual transforms protection factors into

real defense mechanisms, it is possible to reframe the meaning of such estate. However, the literature on transformative outcomes of protection factors on real defense mechanisms remains unclear and in need of additional study. This article focuses on an empirical study to address this research gap. Nevertheless, as this article focuses on transformative processes observed in situations of organizational change, below we present psychosocial risk factors inherent to workplaces.

Psychosocial risk factors in the workplace

Organizational change processes are relevant to employees' lives (Simmer, 2003). Transformative workplaces can be a source of considerable work-related stress for employees. The interface between organizational change processes and its effects on employees' has called the attention of many relevant works conducted in the psychosocial arena (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Cox, Griffiths & Rail-Gonzalez, 2000; Simmer, 2003; Landsbergis, Schnall, Belkic, Baker, Schwartz & Pickering, 2011, among others). At the same time, there is a need to further study the impact of stress psychosocial risk factors in changing workplaces on employees (Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015; Murray & Ali, 2017; Oliveira, Cavazotte & Dunzer, 2017).

Changing workplaces can place employees in situations in which they face strong physical, psychosocial and health effects on their lives (Skinner, 2007). Adversity in organizational contexts contributes to work-related stress and becomes a reality for individuals (Krohne, 2001). To interpret work-stress phenomena observed in organizational contexts interactions between workers and their workplaces is essential. The psychological approach to the study of human stress is the name given to this method (Cox, Griffiths & Rail-Gonzalez, 2000; Levant, 2014; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015).

Regarding the contexts of organizational change, psychological risk factors related to various life adverse events are the base premise of the studies on psychological approaches to research human stress (Yunes & Szymanski, 2001). Once a risk factor is present in the workplace, it increases the likelihood of individuals presenting physical, social or emotional problems (Cox, Griffiths & Rail-Gonzalez, 2000; Landsbergis, Schnall, Belkic, Baker, Schwartz & Pickering, 2011).

Researchers have long studied the concept of psychosocial and stress risk in the context of social change. Such risks concern the adverse events of life that individuals experience when confronted with social changes shaped by modern society (Simmer, 2003). In this case, modern society has become one of the risks to individuals, as it increasingly involves debating, preventing, and managing psychosocial risks related to feelings of stress (Beck, 2007), which reflects the presence of a contemporary paradox.

Scholars use the term society of risk (Beck, 2007) in debates on current social changes. This expression reflects the need to recognize the uncertainty and unpredictability that are a part of our individual and collective lives, which require more reflexivity in the construction of the individual and collective biographies of our collective destinies (Alves, 2009).

Uncertainty, insecurity, and fear are risk elements present in contexts of organizational change. These elements result from contexts of environments of change because individuals cannot control future outcomes. Insecurity begins to dominate the psychosocial health of workers in changing workplaces (Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015), and risk elements spur an emotional imbalance within workers, as risks become feared, as given situation may negatively affect their lives (Bhamra, Dani & Burnard, 2011). For this reason, risk factors and psychosocial stress related to the workplace affect not only an organization's outcomes but also all individuals

within such contexts (Landsbergis, Schnall, Belkic, Baker, Schwartz & Pickering, 2011; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015; Zheng, Kashi, Fan, Molineux & Ee, 2015; Murray & Ali, 2017).

Workplaces subjected to psychosocial stress feature elements that compromise workers and thus the working conditions that organizations provide for them (Cox, Griffiths & Rail-Gonzalez, 2000; Landsbergis, Schnall, Belkic, Baker, Schwartz & Pickering, 2011). Some examples of psychosocial stress elements include the following: pressures to generate results; high levels of responsibility and decision-making power; an inability to accept one's own failures; a lack of time for family/friends; a lack of support from peers and/or superiors, and a lack of recognition and frustration with one's career (Job, 2003). These elements can affect workers and expose them to emotional imbalances that can influence their personal and professional lives.

The effects of psychosocial risks on workers can change according to the different moments of individuals' lives, as they interpret such risks as part of a process (Simmer, 2003). When faced with a risk factor in the workplace, workers act and behave in different ways during different times of their lives. Occasionally, a potential stress factor in the workplace can initiate a reinterpretation of personal and professional dimensions of life (Skinner, 2007), which depends on the worker's life stage. It also means that individuals can interpret risks as part of a process involving them and their contexts (Yunes & Szymanski, 2001; Skinner, 2007; Khan, Rao-Nicholson, Akhtar, Tarba, Ahammad & Vorley, 2017; Murray & Ali, 2017).

Once in a situation involving psychosocial risk, workers can experience vulnerability. This situation can cause them to mobilize their coping and buffer strategies to face stress in a context of organizational change. In facilitating this process, protective factors involved in situations of psychosocial stress emerge as an effective means to manage the

changing workplace (Krohne, 2001; Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Carlotto, Nussle & Ferreira, 2015; Oliveira, Cavazotte & Dunzer, 2017).

Given that psychosocial work stress originates from organizations, it is essential to refer to certain mental consequences on the workers' health and to the individual elements' intermediary role accomplished in this theoretical part. From this background in interpreting our empirical data, below we describe the methodological approach used for this study.

Methodological approach

We conducted a qualitative-descriptive research study with a sectional and longitudinal perspective (Cunliffe, 2011). In-depth interviews to professionals, who worked in companies acquired by international financial institutions from the Brazilian market, provided the empirical data. We interpreted all data via content analysis. During data transcription, participants were identified with aliases to maintain their confidentiality.

The sample of participants was selected intentionally and not by random criteria. The following saturation criteria were used to determine the number of participants: (1) employees who worked with an acquired international financial institution (denoted by bank I); (2) jobholders who worked in corporations attained by international financial institution; and (3) those who continued to work for the acquired bank (denoted by N). From these criteria, we selected a total of six participants. The following section presents the results obtained from the empirical study.

Interpretation of empirical data

All participants were asked the following questions to understand transformative coping processes occurring in contexts of organizational change: 'How did you react to the situation in your work-

place? Did you take any action?’ These are some of the statements given:

Marcia [woman - 42 years old - 15 years of work experience with bank I]: When you need a job, a job... you... (referring to herself) are separated, living with your sister until you stabilize, have children and the children depend on you, you adapt to anything! (pause) You know? ... You learn new skills ... change roles ... do anything to keep the job! [...] My children are my support because they are my joy ... They (the children) help with stress because you play with the kids. Then you relax ... distracted.

Marcia noted using the coping factors: self-termination by judging her capacity to perform any activity to keep her job, self-confidence to adapt to any circumstance and a sense of responsibility towards her children. Hence, when faced with organizational changes, to remain employed Marcia learned new skills and assumed functional mobility by being able to perform new job roles. She described using the following buffer factors: her family and her sister who supported her; her children as a source of joy (recreation/leisure), and her job at the institution, with it she fulfilled her financial responsibilities.

Daniel [male - 27 years old - 4 years of work experience with bank I]: I first learned that bank N did not offer the position that bank I did. [...] I kept doing my (work activities)... went to graduate school and took the ANBID¹ to become a certified CPA-10 for the financial market. I wanted to achieve a few more things (personal goals) with... (N bank of the banking profession). In working, I achieve what I want, you know! [...] I was going to have

to do something, you know?! I work for myself ... and from my initiative... Do I want it? Do I not want it? Let's go.

Coping factors identified by Daniel include self-regard of him being capable of facing changing situations, the ambition to be recognized from his work, and the initiative that left him in a position to respond to adverse situations emerging in his work environment. The following are the buffer factors mentioned: expertise gained through ANBID certification and how employment had allowed Daniel to realize his personal goals.

Sidmar [male - 34 years old - 11 years of work experience with bank I]: Oh, I faced (the situation of selling bank I) I've been researching what bank N wanted... and continued working because independently of the bank, they (the banks) will always want results and... a bank wants this and wants you to work [...] It was more like... a matter of learning systems (database management systems N) and operating things like this. I have not stopped studying. Actually, I have kept studying... I already have a college degree... and right now, I am studying law (undergraduate course) [...] My family life is also very simple, so everything is good about this situation (new workplace).

The following are the coping factors identified by Sidmar: self-confidence to face an acquisition, the capacity to learn that allowed him to manage new management systems used in bank N, the accomplishment of professional activities under constant pressure, and the continuation of work activities to generate desired results for bank N. These are the buffers mentioned: his decision to complete another educational program and his family. Maintaining a calm demeanor has helped him cope with adverse workplace conditions.

Rafael [male - 33 years old - 8 years of work experience with bank I]: With the sale of the bank,

¹ ANBID - National Association of Investment Banks. In Brazil, CPA-10 certification is intended to ensure the professionalism of participating institutions that perform marketing activities and the direct distribution of investment products from the public, including banks or platform services.

I was presented with more opportunities! I continued my work because I saw that I could experience professional growth, receive a promotion [...] I just experienced no improvement in wages. Our salary cap has not changed; it has remained the same ... However, it offers many opportunities (bank N). They are already popping up because I always keep learning (procedures/areas of bank N) and I am informed of what has been going on in the (financial) market... I keep working hard and accepting opportunities.

These are the coping factors identified by Rafael: learning capacity, continuing to work, self-determination to pursue other professional opportunities within bank N, and the confidence to be considered able to take on new professional assignments with bank N. As a buffer factor, Rafael refers to his search for external information on the financial market. This activity expanded his knowledge of processes of change and of opportunities that can manifest in the market in which he operates professionally.

Regina [woman - 53 years old - 28 years of work experience with bank I]: At bank N, nobody said anything about the job. Then, I kept doing the same things I did for bank I (work activities). Since no training was given on their operational system (bank N), I decided to learn about it on my own. I pushed myself and learned! I also thought about going back to school, but then I changed my mind... it was a fleeting idea. But of course, my family always supported me in my choices in those moments... I am also religious, which has given me strength!

Regina identifies the following coping factors: learning ability, being able to work under pressure, responsibility and initiative in seeking to learn the procedures of bank N—despite occupying a

pre-retirement stage, and the capacity to balance adverse conditions experienced in the workplace. These are the buffers identified: family support in managing adverse working conditions and a sense of religiosity that provides support in facing life stages.

David [male - 36 years old - nine years of work experience with bank I]: My family offers full support – always 100%! It is ... (thoughtful) my academic career that I do not worry about because I have a bachelor's degree of business administration and I also have a specialization. (Summary). In the middle of this whole situation from the sale of bank I, we (in this case himself) found that not all colleagues (working) had a specialization... let me put it this way. So I kept calm and completed my academic degree.

David mentions the following coping factors: self-knowledge and self-confidence due to his lack of concern for his workplace situation. The buffers identified are his academic degree, ensuring his professional differentiation potential, his supportive family, and information on his co-workers' academic history. With this information, David does not consider himself in danger of losing his job.

For all of the respondents, coping and buffers factors emerged (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Antoniazzi, 1999; Reppold, Mayer, Almeida & Hutz, 2012). This evidence reinforces the notion that individuals use protective factors to manage transitions and life changes that result in adversity (Yunes & Szymanski, 2001; Masten, 2007; Borges & Menegon, 2012). Table 1 summarizes and presents the elaboration of these results.

The discussion below presents the main results obtained through the empirical research, and conclusions are drawn to illustrate the main theoretical and practical contributions of this empirical study.

Table 1
Synthesis of protective factors and defense mechanisms

	Protection factors	Defense mechanism	Employee(s)
Psychological Resources	Ambition	Cultivate the prospect of achieving	B2
	Self-confidence	Establish a criterion of positive conviction against the adverse situation	B1; B2; B3; B4; B6
	Self-knowledge	Recognizing the condition of his/her stay at work	B6
	Self-determination	Recognize a criterion of motivation	B1; B4
	Responsibility	To reaffirm the commitment as a professional	B1; B5
	Religiousness	Get strength / spiritual support	B5
Environmental / Social Resources	Leisure activities with their children	Mitigate the impacts of the work environment	B1
	Certification ANBID	Qualify for aggregate a professional differential	B2
	Attend another graduation	Qualify for aggregate a professional differential	B3
	Be employed	Sign a safety criterion	B1; B2
	Family / Sister	Mobilize external support and encouragement	B1; B3; B5; B6
	Education	Demonstrate differential in professional qualification	B3; B6
	Children	Evidence the family responsibility (provider)	B1
Resources of Competences	Keeping their jobs	Continue execution of work activities	B3; B4; B6
	Learning ability	Qualify to mitigate the impacts of the work environment	B1; B2; B3; B4; B5; B6
	Ability to balance	Recognize carefully the conditions of the adverse situation	B5
	Initiative	Express a reaction to deal directly with the risk factor	B2

	Protection factors	Defense mechanism	Employee(s)
Resources of Competences	Functional mobility	Exercising the ability to readjust the work activities	B1
	Staying performing work activities	Demonstrate the ability to continue to work	B2; B3; B4
	Education less than co-workers	Consider a criterion of professional differentiation	B6
	Keep yourself informed	Meet professional opportunities and prepare to deal with situations of change	B4
	Work under pressure	Demonstrate competence to work in a dynamic and demanding environment	B3; B5

Source: Research (by the authors).

Discussion and conclusions

All of the interviewees had managed adverse effects of their workplace, which were the result of the acquisition of the corporation they worked for in the Brazilian market by international financial institutions. In managing such challenges, they drew on protection factors. However, this did not prove sufficient in eliminating vulnerabilities experienced in times of organizational change. This result points to our first theoretical contribution: protective factors (coping and buffer strategies) do not ensure that workers can mitigate the adverse effects of the acquisition of the company, which employed them. Instead what alleviated the adverse effects on the interviewees were the defense mechanisms, manifested on how they had used protective factors to manage the outcomes of organizational change in the workplace.

This theoretical contribution furthers knowledge on human resilience. The available literature on it concludes based on protective factors used by individuals to mitigate negative effects in adverse

situations; nonetheless, our empirical study reveals other dimensions of this process. While researchers have typically define protection factors as synonymous to defense mechanisms, this work shows that these terms are not interchangeable. Human resilience emerges when an individual attributes personnel functions to his/her protection factors and then transforms them into real defense mechanisms. In this way, defense mechanisms emerge depending on how an individual uses his/her own resources to manage risk factors and not only when an individual mobilizes personal protection factors for managing risks.

From this conclusion, we highlight our second theoretical contribution: the understanding that a protective factor can be used by an individual in several ways and processed into various personal defense mechanisms. This process begins when an

individual combines his/her protective factors from psychological and environmental/social resources but does so through the use of his/her competence resources. We found that all interviewees had made efforts to mobilize protective factors (coping and buffer strategies) and had converted these into defense mechanisms. These behaviors manifested through derivations, individual employees used protective factors to transform them into defense mechanisms through a situational or dispositional approach, and through a focus on a given problem or emotion.

From the results obtained we noted the third and main theoretical contribution of this work. Figure 1 systematizes how the transformation of coping processes into defense mechanisms occurs in contexts of organizational change.

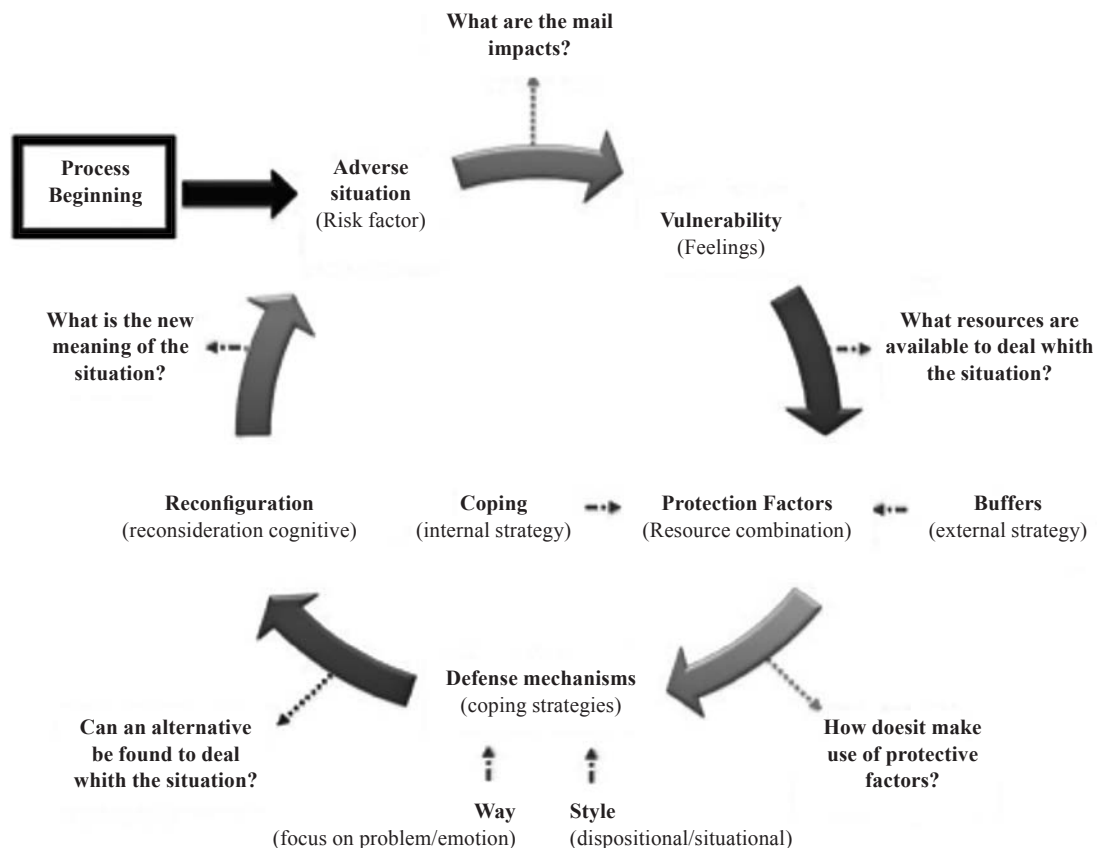


Figure 1. The transformative coping process in organizational change context

Source: elaborated by the authors from the research results.

From these results, we conclude that the transformative process occurs as follows: when presented with organizational change (acquisition) as a risk factor to be combated, individual employees experience a sense of vulnerability. In such circumstances, employees mobilized their protective factors (coping and buffer strategies) and combined them via resource competence. In this way, they converted protective factors into specific utilizations or real defense mechanisms, enabling them to use alternative means to manage organizational change. In doing so, they ascribed a new meaning to the adverse situation and understood it with a new perspective.

Contributions to research practice

In terms of practical dimensions of research, we believe that this study has one main implication: it draws attention to the many factors involved in the construction of defense mechanisms by individuals in combating organizational change. The interviewees described such situations as involving complex processes with varying origins and levels of complexity. For this reason, we believe that our research results offer alternative ways to advance our understanding of contemporary relations established between individuals and organizations.

From the conclusions drawn from this work, this study contributes to the fields of organizational psychology and health psychology, as it delves into the mechanisms through which individual and contextual elements can protect workers in adverse situations. As this was a pioneering research effort to understand transformative processes of coping strategies observed in settings of organizational change, below we propose avenues for future studies. They must offer new perspectives on theories of human resilience as this article attempted to do.

Agenda for future studies

Future studies may explore whether there is a hierarchy of risks that determine effects felt by individuals, and as a result, processes through which individuals transform protective factors into defense mechanisms undertaken. We recommend such studies since we found risks of an individual nature affected the research participants more than risks related to environmental or social dimensions. Second, we call for more detailed studies of the transformative coping processes experienced by professionals who work with organizations of different sizes and sectors.

Finally, we hope that future works will recognize that in addressing coping strategy transformation in contexts of organizational change, it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how individual employees' workplace experiences are related to how employees mobilize internal and external forces and of how they use such forces to persevere through daily organizational changes in the building of their professional lives.

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