

Chapter 2

Understandings of Coping: A Critical Review of Coping Theories for Disaster Contexts

Manfred Zaumseil and Silke Schwarz

2.1 Introductory Review of Dominant Approaches

This chapter addresses the behavior, thoughts, experiences, and feelings of individuals who have been exposed to strain or stress. While Chap. 1 covered approaches to understanding and handling “natural” disasters, this chapter addresses the psychological and broader social science-based approaches to handling stress and strain. We then analyze these approaches to determine the extent to which they can be applied in a disaster-related context.

Historically, the subject of coping took root in the mainstream psychologies in the 1960s as a means to mitigate the negative consequences of stress (Folkman 2011). For a long time, the primary psychosocial consequences of disasters were viewed to be the harm and damage suffered by the individual. Generally speaking, an individual’s stressful life circumstances were considered only in terms of their potential to negatively affect that individual’s ability to function mentally, physically, and socially. It was only later that the positive aspects were recognized as well. Bonanno et al. (2010) and Masten and Narayan (2012) demonstrate the many different ways in which adaptive functioning can occur following a disaster. Under normal circumstances, disasters do not result in psychological and social collapse. In fact, they tend to yield a wide variety of trajectories, most of which are positive in nature. As a result, concepts such as resilience and competence became increasingly important, not only in the macrosocial field of disaster management (see Chap. 1) but also in the area of psychological functioning.

The mainstream psychological coping models can be seen as one specific way of looking at the process of handling strain. These models are similar to the goal-based models of human nature (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010), in which the basic

M. Zaumseil (✉) · S. Schwarz

International Academy for Innovative Pedagogy, Psychology and Economics gGmbH
at Freie Universität Berlin, Malteserstr. 74-100, 12249 Berlin, Germany
e-mail: zaumseil@zedat.fu-berlin.de

S. Schwarz

e-mail: silke.schwarz@fu-berlin.de; silgnschwarz@yahoo.de

motivation of human beings is to move toward (that is, approach) goals while avoiding threats.

From the very beginning, one of the strengths of the psychological coping models was the fact that they were conceived to yield both positive and negative results. These models address both successful and unsuccessful attempts to manage challenges or threats. Another strength of these models is that they attempt to draw a connection between internal and external elements: with coping models, challenges and threats (internal and external, for example, sickness or an earthquake) and personal resources (internal and external, for example, a high perceived self-efficacy and a resource-rich social environment) are viewed as interrelated factors.

In the first part of this chapter, we examine psychological person-centered coping models (PCCMs; Sect. 2.2). We then explore models that emphasize a broader context (Sects. 2.3 and 2.4) which focus on social and material resources. The former represent the dominant models for stress research in the mainstream psychologies (Folkman 2011). Depending on the model in question, the main focus lies either in the cognitive processes of appraisal and emotion regulation (Sect. 2.2.1), attribution of meaning (Sect. 2.2.2), religious forms of coping (Sect. 2.2.3), future-oriented forms of coping (Sect. 2.2.4.), or on the conceptualization as a mental health problem (Sect. 2.2.5).

In contrast, the resource-oriented coping theory addressed in Sect. 2.3 places more emphasis on the social and material contextual features of stress processes. In these theories, stress is generally viewed as a loss of resources (Hobfoll 1998). In the field of community psychology and in research on social support, the social context and social interactions are more central components in considering an individual's ability to combat strain. Social support is examined both as a part of the PCCM approaches (as an individual mobilizable resource) (Sect. 2.2) as well as in approaches that adopt a more context-specific understanding of coping (Sect. 2.3).

Sociology and related social science specializations also feature models in which coping and the resilience of the community in question are studied as social or collective processes. This approach shows strong similarities with the perceptions of disaster management discussed in Chap. 1. When considering community resilience or the application of social capital, the coping capabilities of large social units (for example, villages and neighborhoods) are of primary importance (Sect. 2.4).

The diagram in Fig. 2.1 provides an overview of the numerous perspectives and dimensions covered by the approaches to coping developed in both psychological and social science contexts. The units of analysis vary in size and their interaction with stressful events can be examined over longer or shorter periods of time, as needed. The diagram displays the past or prior history of stressful and overwhelming experiences. A coping episode can also be selected as a unit of analysis for a particular individual. This episodic approach forms the basis for the most influential psychological model, the appraisal-oriented psychological approach (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In newer approaches in developmental psychology, coping is viewed as an adaptive process associated with a potentially long-term series of interactions with a potentially challenging environment. These approaches take into account the fact that a series of stressful episodes can lead to changes both in the individual and in the

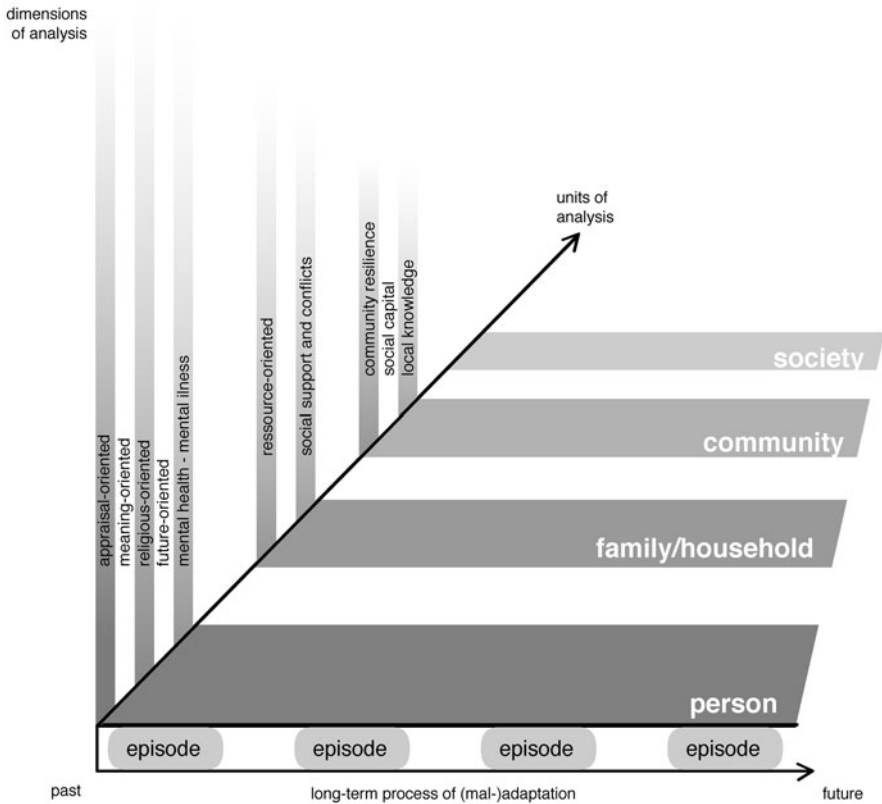


Fig. 2.1 Dimensions and Units of Analysis for Psychological and Sociological Approaches to Coping (DUPS)

environment itself (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007; Leipold and Greve 2009). In addition, future-oriented coping is beginning to play an important role (Aspinwall and Taylor 1997; Schwarzer and Taubert 2002). Coping models that take the larger context into account include conceptualizations based on dyadic relationships as well as coping at the level of the household (as shown in the access model proposed by Wisner et al. 2004). Models of adaptation for larger social units in hazardous environments were introduced in Chap. 1. We draw upon these models at the end of this chapter.

2.2 Coping as an Individual Process

One of the most prominent individual approaches to understanding stress is the basic psychological model of coping (Lazarus 1966; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Sect. 2.2.1). The development of this model led to a major boom in coping research as well as to extensive additions to the model. These revisions are briefly noted in

Fig. 2.1. In certain subfields of psychology (particularly those that concentrated on cognitive processes, health and illness, emotions, development, and personality), the coping approach continued to develop as it was applied to new issues. Following our introduction of the basic model, we address these developments. It was as a result of these changes, for example, that the understanding of “meaning” for the different cognitive appraisals in the context of coping gradually expanded (Schwarzer and Taubert 2002; Folkman and Moskowitz 2004 and Folkman 2011; Sect. 2.2.2).

In the 1990s, Folkman (2011) observed a reorientation toward resilience and well-being in research on stress. This new focus on resilience corresponded to the emergence of the branch of positive psychology. In addition, interest began to grow about the extent to which the search for sense and meaning (meaning-making) and religious orientations (Sect. 2.2.3) help the coping process. This new approach focused on the positive striving of human beings and the processes of growth and accumulation of resources in the face of challenges.

Another new point of interest was to investigate the ways in which individuals employ proactive coping in striving to achieve universal higher-order goals in life (Schwarzer and Taubert 2002; Sect. 2.2.4). The concept of adaptation used in developmental psychology is universalistic and the understanding of coping embedded in this concept utilizes a broader time scale than single episodes. Moreover, adaptation describes the (mutual) interactions between individuals and their environment, while coping refers exclusively to a single interaction with a specific event. Viewed in this way, coping represents a special type of adaptation that is applied to the broader context of human development by developmental psychologists such as Leipold and Greve (2009).

In the final part of Sect. 2.2, we take a comprehensive look at the pathways of coping associated with health and illness or, more specifically, with psychopathological categories and the need for therapeutic support. The process of coping with extreme suffering takes on a special status. Normally, this process is not addressed within the framework of general psychological coping literature and is instead treated as “trauma” in the branch of clinical psychology (Sect. 2.2.5).

2.2.1 Appraisal-Oriented Approaches

This aspect of the coping literature was developed in the 1960s in response to findings on the harmful effects of stress on health and well-being. The primary goal was to identify the factors that could potentially reduce these harmful effects. At first, these factors were purely person-centered; they were viewed as psychoanalytically inspired defense mechanisms and as stable properties of the personality like optimism or extraversion (see Carver and Connor-Smith 2010). This remained the dominant view until Lazarus (1966) proposed a model of coping based on the interactions between the individual and the situation, an approach that ultimately developed into the transactional cognitivist appraisal-oriented model of coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Person-centered approaches in this tradition claim universal generalizability and explain behavior from the perspective of the individual person. These approaches establish a connection between the external situation and the resources of the person in question. The coping process begins when the internal resources (for example, specific skills or abilities) and external mobilizable resources (for example, social support) no longer correspond to a demanding situation. This is then defined as a stress-inducing situation. One important turning point in what was previously an objective, behaviorist psychology was the assertion that this lack of correspondence was not determined *objectively*, but *subjectively*, by means of the cognitive appraisal of the individual exposed to the situation. This appraisal comprises the individual's subjective evaluation of both the demanding situation as well as the personal (internal) and external (social and material) resources (Schwarzer and Taubert 2002).

Coping is defined as the person's constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources. (Folkman et al. 1986, p. 993)

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), in primary (or demand) appraisal, a person evaluates whether or not there is any challenge, threat, harm, or loss with respect to commitments, values, or goals in his or her interaction with the environment. In secondary (or resource) appraisal, the person evaluates what can be done to overcome or prevent harm or to improve his or her prospects for a beneficial outcome. With regard to personal resources, the individual's subjectively perceived competence (perceived self-efficacy) is considered to be crucial (Schwarzer and Taubert 2002).

A cognitive appraisal is an individual's evaluation of the significance of what is happening in the world for his or her personal well-being (Lazarus 1991). Coping comprises two distinct functions: the internal emotion-focused coping, which serves to regulate emotions, and the problem-focused (or instrumental) coping, which serves to change the problematic person–environment situation. Problem-focused coping changes the relationship between the person and his or her environment, while emotion-focused coping induces internal changes in a person's attention or personal meanings (Folkman and Lazarus 1988). Beginning with the appraisals, emotions accompany the entire coping process. Emotions are analyzed as cognitive systems with an orientation function and tied psychobiologically to an appraisal pattern (for example, sadness to the relational theme of irrevocable loss). Lazarus (1999) emphasizes that emotions are relatively quick reactions in that they flow from the way in which we appraise events as they occur and as more information becomes available:

These appraisals are characterized by negative emotions that are often intense. [...] Emotions continue to be integral to the coping process throughout a stressful encounter as an outcome of coping, as a response to new information, and as a result of reappraisals of the status of the encounter. (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004, p. 747)

Subsequently, Lazarus (1991) incorporated coping into a complex cognitive–emotional system. According to Lazarus, the process of evaluating environmental situations triggers certain specific emotions that have evolved to benefit adaptation

processes. In a debate with Shweder (1993) regarding the universality of emotions, Lazarus (1993) argued that while certain core themes remain constant in any culture, different cultures define specific criteria for identifying these themes (for example, the necessary criteria for defining a personal insult).

Since the introduction of the coping model, a multitude of types of coping strategies were studied which appeared to be similar in empirical studies despite being derived from very different theoretical frameworks. For example, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) distinguished problem-focused coping (active change of the situation) from emotion-focused coping (control of the negative feelings if the situation cannot be changed), but in practice the coping strategies that people use are often mixtures of these strategies that cannot be separated. Skinner et al. (2003) suggested viewing different forms of coping as action types and proposed that these coping forms are adaptive in relation to the environment, the social resources, and the individual's own preferences and orientations. Within this typology, they defined five core categories: "problem solving, support seeking, avoidance, distraction, and positive cognitive restructuring" (p. 239).

The deciding factor in the expansion of coping research was the fact that the newly developed measuring techniques opened up the coping construct to quantification and empirical testing. However, the elaborate coping theory proposed by Lazarus (1991) was difficult to operationalize and presented problems with regard to the stability, generality, and dimensionality of coping (Schwarzer and Schwarzer 1996). In addition, a quantitative, measurement-based approach is limited in its ability to investigate special properties, for example, cultural distinctiveness, and places far more emphasis on universally applicable systems of coping. Subjectivity and subjective meanings are reduced to highly simplified elements (see Shweder 1993). Constructions are understood as part of a private, idiosyncratic process which has its universal roots in the core relational themes of the accompanying emotions. Both are anchored in a biological evolutionary adaptation model. According to Lazarus (1991, 1999), while meaning does not emerge from the sociocultural sphere, it is certainly modified by variables within this area.

2.2.2 *Meaning-Oriented Approaches*

Lazarus (1991, 1999) abandoned the behavioral model in which mind and behavior were seen solely as a response to environmental stimuli. He suggested examining the relationship between person and environment and introduced a relational perspective. Threat is viewed as a relational meaning that "a person constructs from the confluence of personality and environmental variables" (Lazarus 1999, p. 12) and "appraisal refers to the evaluative process by which the relational meaning is constructed" (p. 13).

Park (2010) further expounded upon the conception of meaning defined in the appraisal-based coping approach: *meaning-making* refers to the processes people utilize in order to reduce the discrepancy between their appraised situational meaning

and global beliefs and goals. It also refers to the development of explanations for varied reactions to adversity and a key distinction is between global and situational meanings. Another construct, *benefit-finding*, relates to the process of identifying benefits in adversity. It refers to perceptions of change as measured by self-report instruments (Pakenham 2011).

Global meaning refers to the individual's general system of orientation. Global meanings form the core schemas through which people interpret their experience of the world. They comprise beliefs, global goals, and a subjective sense of meaning and purpose. *Situational meaning* is appraised in the context of a particular environmental encounter. Situational meanings focus on the question of whether a particular event is threatening or controllable as well as on the causes of the event, and any implications it might have for the future (Park 2010). According to Park (2010), a discrepancy between appraised situational meaning and global meaning will create distress and result in an intense motivation to reduce this discrepancy through meaning-making. This process makes it possible for an individual to recover from a stressful event. Meaning-making is therefore both an automatic, unconscious process as well as an active coping activity. Automatic processes include, for example, intrusive thoughts about the stressful event and avoidance of reminders, among other things. Active coping may include identity-related appraisals. In some cases, these appraisals may lead to feelings of shame, guilt, or pride (Tracy and Robins 2004).¹

If the situational appraised meaning is changed as a result, this phenomenon is referred to as assimilation; if global beliefs and goals are changed, this is known as accommodation. The process of meaning-making implies a cognitive component (integrating experience with preexisting schemas) as well as an emotional processing component (experiencing and exploring emotions). The foundation for viewing changes in the external situation versus internal changes to the individual was already established in the distinction between problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). However, in the recent conceptualization, meaning—along with emotion—assumes a more important role. Brandtstädter (2006), Leipold and Greve (2009), and Brandtstädter (2011), for example, expanded the relationship between accommodation and assimilation into a dual-process model of developmental regulation. Given the dramatic changes to the environment, accommodative processes are critical, meaning that individuals' life goals are modified to correspond with the actual situation.

Park (2010) points out that the mere search for meaning in the face of a catastrophic experience may not necessarily be beneficial to the health of the individual. Rumination may involve repetitive thoughts that introduce negative emotions without identifying a solution. The deciding factors are the products of the meaning-making process (*meanings made*). These meanings result in the subjective sense of having *made sense*. This may include a feeling of acceptance, a perception of growth and

¹ For example, a man may be proud that he has coped successfully by fulfilling the social expectations of a man or as the head of a household. Another man may feel a sense of shame with respect to his male identity because of ongoing fear or difficulty managing extreme emotions (Tracy and Robins 2004).

positive life changes, as well as the integration of the event into the identity of the individual. Park (2010) states that while there are complex constructs of meaning in theory, the operationalization of meaning-making efforts and *meanings made* tend to be rather simplistic. Although one of the central assumptions is that highly stressful events cause a *shattering* (Janoff-Bulman 1992) of the general orienting system and global meaning, there is little evidence to indicate that this shattering actually takes place. However, “it is clear that meaning-making attempts and meanings made are reported by most individuals facing highly stressful events” (Park 2010, p. 290).

Examples of Meaning-Making in the Context of Disasters Garrison and Sasser (2009) conducted a qualitative investigation of benefit-finding and meaning-making in families who recovered from the impact of Hurricane Katrina and were able to return to their houses. In their study, a number of different factors were included under the heading of benefit-finding: improved relationships within the family, insight into the importance of building relationships with people rather than objects, and pride about successful coping. The study found that sense-making resulted in the insights that “everything has a reason” (p. 118) and that the “storm taught us to see the important things” (p. 118). Attribution to a higher power could mean that “God had his reason” (p. 118; reference to God by 37% of respondents) or that respondents “interfered with mother Nature” (p. 118). Less than half of the interviewees expressed a “general acceptance” (p. 118) of the storms. Additionally, most of the respondents expressed optimism with regard to their futures and the authors found that humor played an important role in meaning-making.

One interesting question inquires as to whether such challenges can be accepted as mixed experiences. The Western model is one in which the aim is to reduce negative emotions and increase positive emotions. In contrast, Eastern or Asian approaches to emotions often allow for mixed emotional experiences, which combine both positive and negative aspects, to be accepted without attempting to unify these aspects or reduce negative emotions. This acceptance may make it easier to cope with the range of personal and social experiences inherent to the most difficult of circumstances. It is still unclear whether research on stress and disasters supports this view on mixed emotions (what Miyamoto et al. 2010 and Miyamoto and Ryff 2011 call *dialectical emotions*).

In a similar study on the subject of faith, crisis, coping, and meaning-making conducted by Marks et al. (2009), four different age groups were compared in order to draw conclusions about the relationship between disaster and psychological development. Respondents in the younger age groups (average age 37–54) viewed the storm Katrina that occurred 3–6 months and 6–14 months prior to the study primarily as a crisis (in the sense of a developmental challenge or turning point), while respondents from the older age groups (average age 74–91) tended to view the storm as an additional life experience. Respondents attributed the storm to God and “Mother Nature.” One prevalent idea was that hurricanes served as a lesson in humility from

which people had to learn to accept a lack of control. However, it is striking that both religious and nonreligious respondents shared the view that it is important to do their best in the face of their struggles and, ultimately, to make the best of the situation.

2.2.3 *Religious-Oriented Approaches*

Religious coping has two contrasting dimensions: It not only can be seen as a specialized type of meaning-oriented approach to coping, but also represents far more than a search for meaning in situations of stress. Religious coping is often associated with special types of social integration; it is also related to the idea of social support. Orientations, beliefs, and practices associated with spiritual or religious life exert a significant influence upon the appraisal processes and coping strategies.

Spirituality is generally defined as an introspective, individual experience while *religiosity* describes a community experience. These two ideas are related, rather than being independent constructs. Through a combination of both constructs, individuals are able to seek support from a divine being as well as from other members of a religious community, make meaning in the face of distressing events, and ultimately promote resilience, healing, and well-being (Bryant-Davis et al. 2012).

According to Pargament (2011), religion adds a distinctive dimension to the coping process. In his view, religion is the search for significance in the sacred (Pargament 2011) and “religious coping is a search for significance in times of stress” (Pargament 1997, p. 90). The sacred is the common denominator in both religious and spiritual life. It represents the most important objective sought by religious-spiritual individuals, and, as such, is tightly interwoven in the course of their lives (Hill and Pargament 2008). *Sacred* refers not only to God and higher powers, but indeed to any element that is tied to God and therefore “imbued with spiritual qualities like transcendence, boundlessness and ultimacy” (Pargament 2011, p. 272).

The idea of a universalist conception of religiosity, which is independent of contextual and cultural associations and serves as a universal property of humanity, blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s in line with the development of a number of instruments for measuring religiosity (see Hill and Hood 1999). Pargament (1997, 2011) and Pargament et al. (2000) postulated that, during stressful life events, common religious beliefs can be translated into specific methods of coping. They not only showed how different religions opt for different systems of coping, they also demonstrated how the same religion, applied to different cultural contexts, might stimulate completely different methods of coping with painful and difficult life events. Pargament (1997), like Park (2010; see earlier discussion), states that people bring their own personal *orientation systems* to bear on stressful situations. This orientation system is the special way in which a particular individual perceives and interacts with the world: “It consists of habits, values, relationships, generalized beliefs and personality” (Pargament 1997, 99 f.). Religious orientation makes up a part of this

comprehensive orientation system. The culture helps to shape the coping mechanism and is itself reshaped by these forms of coping. However, Pargament's universalist, person-centered approach makes only minor concessions toward relativizing the culture-specific differences between the world religions.

According to Pargament (2011), every religious coping effort has a common end, that is, to enhance significance. This can be done by conserving or transforming significance. With conservation, the emphasis is on protecting or maintaining that which is of significance. With transformation, significance is maximized by attempts to change the nature of significance itself (Pargament 1997). This concept is very similar to the ideas of assimilation and accommodation used in the meaning-making approach (see Park 2010) as well as to the developmental approaches to coping (see Leipold and Greve 2009). According to Pargament, transformations take place only on an individual basis within the religious belief systems. Believers first seek to interpret the events they encounter in ways that allow them to conserve and confirm their existing meanings. It is only in extreme situations that they then seek to modify or transform the beliefs that make sense to them (for example, in the case of conversion or disavowal of previous beliefs).

The search for meaning filters and influences the interpretation of the situation. The system of religious beliefs, which is in turn a part of the general person-specific belief system, mediates between the situation at hand and the solution to the problem. Pargament portrays this accepted religious belief system (insofar as it is related to coping) as an array of opinions that are shared to variable and measurable degrees by the adherents of that system.

Difficulties arise in the religious coping approaches when it comes to gaining mastery and control because one subcategory of religious coping is relinquishment of control. Cole and Pargament (1999) discuss the paradox of the phenomenon of *spiritual surrender* in which people do their best while still relinquishing control to the higher being. They see this phenomenon as a universal response offered by many religions as an answer to human limitations. As part of this practice, person-centered control itself is surrendered in order to attain emotional and spiritual objectives (Cole and Pargament 1999). We believe that the authors transcend the cognitivist coping model (see Sect. 2.2.1) when they write, "spiritual surrender is much more than a cognitive shift. It is an experiential shift as well, one that involves changes in motivation, affect, values, perception, thought, and behavior" (p. 185).

According to Pargament (1997), the most helpful varieties of religious coping are those associated with a perception of God as supportive and feelings that God is loving and should be trusted to care for one's burdens. Perceptions of God as benevolent are particularly beneficial for coping. For some people, perceptions of a partnership with God are advantageous, and many derive strength from their religious communities. The social support they receive can ease the burden of coping. Overall, those aspects of religious coping were the only ones Pargament considered to be generally advantageous. Other forms of religious coping such as pleading—that is seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or a divine intervention—appear to have either mixed or predominantly negative effects (similar to the view of God as punisher).

Cultural Psychology of Coping with Disasters

The Case of an Earthquake in Java, Indonesia

Zaumseil, M.; Schwarz, S.; von Vacano, M.; Sullivan,

G.B.; Prawitasari-Hadiyono, J.E. (Eds.)

2014, XXIII, 356 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-9353-2