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Beyond individual survival: ECA's Collective/Collaborative Coping Strategies in the Face of Rising Research Expectations

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This study aims to understand how early career academics (ECAs) deal with the increased demands placed on them in their research activities. Two research gaps have been identified in the relevant literature: the emphasis on individual coping without challenging individual responsibility, and the fact that ECAs are merely supported, ignoring the opportunity to develop reciprocal collegial relationships actively. This study filled these gaps by (1) identifying different group-level collective coping strategies that, by definition, contradict individual responsibility as a uniquely academic trait, and (2) characterising ECAs as proactive participants and recipients of collective coping, thereby actively facilitating and maintaining reciprocal collegial relationships. Participation and initiation of communal coping can be understood as a strategy for ECAs to cope with and transform the academy without explicitly seeking to revolutionise it, thereby reducing the heightened stress experienced due to individual-level vulnerability and its negative consequences. (Van Den Bossche, T. et al., 2025.)

Full paper

Introduction and Literature Review

The excessive publication pressure characteristic of recent years has significantly transformed the expectations experienced by young academic researchers in the world of academia in Hungary as well. Our study investigates how early career academics (ECAs) manage the increasing expectations of research productivity in the ever-more-performative academic landscape. Traditionally, research focus has been given to individual coping strategies, implicitly reinforcing that ECAs bear individual responsibility for their performance and well-being (Kalfa et al., 2018; Yin & Mu, 2022). This current research

challenges this narrative by exploring the underexplored phenomenon of collective coping, in which ECAs actively participate in or initiate group-based strategies to manage shared stressors.

The study sought to understand *how ECAs engage in collective coping strategies to manage increased research demands.* It addressed two main research gaps: (1) the overemphasis on individual coping mechanisms without questioning the structural causes of stress (Jackman et al., 2022), and (2) the depiction of ECAs as passive recipients of support, ignoring their role as active agents (Forbrig & Kuper, 2021; Dwyer et al., 2012).

Methods

The research was conducted at a Hungarian business university. A total of 23 semi-structured interviews were carried out with ECAs and academic experts. The data were examined using Mayring's (2014) qualitative content analysis and iterative coding procedures (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019) to identify the scene of collective coping practices.

Findings

This study identifies three arenas of collective coping:

Departmental-level collective coping – ECAs participated in research workshops, camps, and peer learning groups. These were often initiated informally by senior staff with a collective coping orientation. Department heads played a crucial role: where leadership was supportive, multiple coping strategies coexisted, fostering a collaborative research culture (Rodriguez et al., 2018).

Supervisor–ECA dyads – Supervisors who embraced collective coping acted as facilitators and expected ECAs to join departmental or even international research groups. In cases where both parties had a collective orientation, triadic collaborations emerged. When the supervisor lacked this perspective, ECAs formed alternate dyads with other mentors, showing initiative and adaptability (Jackman et al., 2022).

ECA peer groups – Informal peer-led collaborations were key coping spaces. These included joint writing sessions, method-sharing groups, and co-authored projects. Senior PhD students often mentored newer ones, passing down knowledge and normalising challenges. This helped reduce emotional and informational uncertainty and fostered identity development (Lyons et al., 1998; Vekkaila et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The study redefines collective coping not merely as social support but as proactive, strategic behaviour. Instead of confronting institutions directly, ECAs reshape their academic environments through cooperation and solidarity and resist isolation (Kuo, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2018). This offers a form of quiet resilience against the instrumental and individualised logic of performative universities (Kjærgaard et al., 2023).

The research expands Lazarus and Folkman's coping model by integrating a social, organisational layer that highlights the embeddedness of coping within an academic context. It also deepens Lyons et al.'s (1998) concept of *communal coping* by showing how ECAs redistribute cognitive and emotional burdens through coordinated action.

The findings show that ECAs are not just surviving, but co-producing more sustainable academic environments. This undermines the dominant view of academia as a purely individualistic enterprise and calls for institutions to support and recognise group-level coping mechanisms.

Though the study is context-specific and based on a single institution, it offers a foundation for further exploration across different national and disciplinary contexts. It suggests that when ECAs participate in collective coping, they not only reduce stress but also contribute to cultural transformation within academia, aligning their actions with reciprocity, inclusion, and shared goals.