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**Abstract:** Given their role as both recipients and implementors of change, middle managers play a central role during organisational restructuring. This often entails managing conflicting demands and dealing with their own stress and uncertainty. Inadequate coping practices among middle managers can adversely affect their well-being, productivity, and performance, thereby influencing the overall organisational restructuring process. Through a case study, we explored the coping practices of 13 middle managers during organisational restructuring. Findings revealed that middle managers confront the realities of restructuring by either coping or copping out. Middle manager sensemaking literature revealed that success in restructuring hinges on positive reframing, where middle managers embrace change and adopt the role of change agents. This study contributes to understanding how middle managers navigate the uncertainties of organisational restructuring, and describes the coping practices within a major bank in South Africa. Findings offer insights on how to support middle managers during organisational restructuring.

**Keywords:** middle managers; coping practices; reframing; copping out; organisational restructuring; banking industry; qualitative.

**Biographical notes:** Pravitha Jogie is an alumna of the University of South Africa, where she earned an MCom in Business Management (Cum Laude). With over 20 years of experience in the financial services industry, she currently holds a middle management position within her organisation. Her research qualitatively explored the coping practices of middle managers during organisational restructuring, utilising a strategy-as-practice perspective. By drawing on practice theory, her work delves into everyday micro-activities, contributing to a deeper understanding of organisational efficiency and success.

Annemarie Davis is an Associate Professor of Strategic Management at the University of South Africa. She has a strong background in qualitative research. Her doctoral research, conducted from a strategy-as-practice perspective, delved into the role of middle managers. Her expertise centres on micro-strategising practices, particularly within the contexts of organisational

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Catherine Le Roux is a Senior Lecturer in Strategic Management at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. She has utilised qualitative methods to explore the embeddedness of sustainability within organisations, approached through the lenses of organisational change, sensemaking and strategy-as-practice. Her scholarly contributions offer insights into the intricate practices of strategising and sustainability that underpin strategic initiatives and organisational transformation.

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# 1    Introduction

No matter how one looks at organisational change, it is always disruptive and omnipresent. Navigating the interplay between the challenging macro environment, the complex operating conditions, and the dynamic internal organisational environment requires deliberate strategising to survive change, grow businesses, and achieve success. The need for deliberate strategising is underscored by the deep impacts of globalisation, economic fluctuations, internationalisation, and rapid technological advancements that continue to reshape various sectors and economies (Alnahedh and Alrashdan, 2021).

The financial services sector is among those significantly impacted by these forces. Current challenges confronting financial organisations include heightened competition, increased regulatory compliance, shifting customer expectations, digital transformation, global market volatility, and overall slowdown in growth. These disruptions often lead to new business models and organisational restructuring.

Irrespective of how organisations and their managers respond to these disruptions, the development and implementation of strategies often coincide with further disruption, most often within the operating environment of the organisation. As managers strive to create greater organisational agility in response to the turbulence in their environments [Balogun and Johnson, (2004), p.523], it is often the middle manager cohort that undergoes substantial restructuring [Pullen, (2006), p.14]. This article delves into the pivotal role of middle managers during such disruptive organisational change, and explores the coping practices they employ in their transition to becoming change agents.

This article presents insights into the micro-level practices adopted by middle managers during organisational restructuring. Like Xaba et al. (2023), we also trace middle manager realities during organisational change and distinguish between those who effectively cope and those who disengage and withdraw, referred to as 'copping out'. Importantly, we show how the deliberate process of reframing empowers middle managers to become change agents.

The important role of middle managers, as critical mediators between the organisational levels, is well-documented (Atterwall and Engqvist, 2016; Brüggemann and Santos, 2016). Within the context of organisational restructuring, there are ample

accounts confirming that middle managers experience additional stress as they are tasked with interpreting, communicating, and implementing the change (Chen et al., 2018; Neumann et al., 2019). For middle managers to manage their stress, emotions, and the pressure associated with organisational restructuring, they must have effective coping strategies (Walinga and Rowe, 2013; Steigenberger, 2015; Brüggemann and Santos, 2016).

Yet, there appears to be scant research on the coping practices of middle managers during organisational restructuring, particularly within emerging economies (Ozawa, 2020; Dixon, 2021; Kroon and Reif, 2021). This apparent gap in knowledge has resulted in a surge of recent studies and special issue calls for further research on the topic. Practice orientated scholars such as Whittington (2019), Wenzel et al. (2022) and D'Cruz et al. (2022) have called for research that explores how individual practitioners cope with, experience, and contribute to changes within their organisational contexts. Similarly, van Niekerk and van Rensburg (2022) called for research that focuses on the managers tasked with enacting change, to gain insights into their experiences and the competencies necessary to effectively steer organisations and employees through the change initiatives. There is a need for research that unveils the 'mechanisms, practices, tactics and strategies' (Wenzel et al., 2022) employed by stakeholders, especially middle managers, to facilitate shifts in mindsets and behavioural change (Ozawa, 2020).

This article responds to these calls for research by presenting the findings of a study that asked how middle managers cope with organisational restructuring within a selected case company in the financial services sector. As practice-oriented scholars who are interested in the messy realities of doing strategy in practice, we adopted a qualitative case study research design to gather rich data on the lived experiences of middle managers to answer our central research question: how do middle managers cope during organisational restructuring?

Following this introduction is a review of the literature, after which we present the methodology and the findings. The article then provides insights into potential areas for future research, and offers recommendations for further research. Finally, this article concludes on the coping practices of middle managers during organisational restructuring.

## 2   Literature

The literature review that follows, offers a review of previous research on organisational restructuring. We present the literature in the context of change that takes the form of restructuring and present middle managers as recipients and implementors of organisational change. The literature review herein concludes on the confirmation that change, and organisational restructuring as a form of change, impact on middle managers who play important roles in the change process, and thereby influence the success, or failure of the change initiative. Moreover, the literature review concludes that an understanding of middle manager coping practices during organisational restructuring could serve as valuable input in organisational change endeavours.

## 2.1   Restructuring

Even though restructuring is one of the most common means for an organisation to align its organisational structure with its strategy and adapt to its changing environment, it is much more significant and stressful than other organisational changes (Smollan, 2017a; Harney et al., 2018). Organisational restructuring refers to a series of decisions, policies, and practices planned at reducing the workforce in response to internal and external pressures and challenges (Belschak et al., 2020; Alnahedh and Alrashdan, 2021). Restructuring efforts are usually associated with improving operational efficiencies, often coupled with the flattening of organisational structures to make the internal structure less hierarchical (Belschak et al., 2020; Hermkens, 2021).

Organisational restructuring offers benefits, but poses risks and entails significant trade-offs too. Brauer and Zimmermann (2019) and Alnahedh and Alrashdan (2021) cite negative market reactions, reputational damage, innovation decline and the loss of tacit knowledge as some of these trade-offs. Sitlington and Marshall (2011) confirm that restructuring increased stress, pressure, and burnout experienced by staff, eroding trust and causing communication breakdowns. Uncertainty experienced during organisational restructuring impacts individuals' knowledge and results in demotivation, reduced job satisfaction, and high staff turnover. Other studies have found that employee exposure to downsizing and the resulting job insecurity adversely affected the occupational health and safety outcomes of the restructure (Quinlan and Bohle, 2009; Rafferty, 2021). De Jong et al. (2016) concur and emphasise the adverse impact of restructuring on employee well-being (Rafferty, 2021).

## 2.2   Middle managers and organisational change

In the context of organisational change and restructuring, middle managers often take on the role of change agent and change intermediary during the implementation (Currie and Procter, 2005; Conway and Monks, 2011). In this journal, Symons (2007), Alvinius et al. (2014), Jayashree and Lindsay (2016), Smollan (2017a) and De Molli and De Paoli (2020) have investigated middle managers. A middle manager is a manager who is 'sandwiched' between a subordinate and a superior (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Their position between the strategic and operational levels means that middle managers play a critical role in contributing to strategic thinking and ensuring the implementation of strategies, thereby making them indispensable (van Rensburg et al., 2014; Buick et al., 2017).

Yet, their unique position in the organisational hierarchy exposes middle managers to role conflicts, and during change they often find themselves as both recipients and purveyors of change (De Molli and De Paoli, 2020; Ozawa, 2020). Most often, middle managers are required to serve as intermediaries, interpreting and making sense of the change intent from top management while simultaneously translating it at an operational level. Additionally, they need to discern what information is essential, for both them and their employees (Buick et al., 2017; Kieran et al., 2020). Middle managers could facilitate strategic success by leading and executing change in ways that positively influence employees' attitudes towards the change. On the other hand, middle managers could also hinder the implementation of change (Huy, 2011; Buick et al., 2017).

Despite growing interest in middle managers, a significant gap exists in our understanding of how middle managers navigate the uncertainties of organisational

restructuring (Dixon, 2021; Harney et al., 2018; Smollan, 2015). While Smollan (2017a) contributed to this journal, a research gap remains regarding middle manager coping strategies in the context of restructuring. Recognising this gap, Samson et al. (2022) and Xaba et al. (2023) underscore the need for more research that investigates middle managers during organisational change. Consequently, there is a need for further understanding of their coping practices during restructuring, highlighting the motivation for our research.

## 2.3 Coping during restructuring

Without doubt, stress is present in all organisational settings and especially during organisational restructuring (Smollan, 2017b). As noted by Dixon (2021), middle managers deal with substantial pressures, stressors, and role ambiguity linked to restructuring, which significantly affect their overall well-being. Organisational stress has the potential to profoundly disrupt the psychological or physiological equilibrium of middle managers (Samson et al., 2022), compelling them to deviate from their normal functioning in order to cope effectively. The level of stress experienced by middle managers in their organisational context depends on the utilisation of coping strategies to navigate stressful organisational situations such as restructuring (Bhattacharya and Gupta, 2015).

During organisational restructuring, the sensemaking processes of middle managers are disrupted (Xaba et al., 2023), compelling them to embark on a journey to reorient themselves by confronting their stress and well-being (Samson et al., 2022). In turn, middle managers assist employees to make sense of the change. They help employees to construct a new, positive cognitive lens, enabling them to accept the change (Buick et al., 2017). This affirms the crucial role of middle managers as change agents.

As indicated earlier, restructuring events often leave middle managers feeling uncertain, exacerbated by insufficient consultation, inadequate communication and an increased workload. These challenges are further compounded by limited resources, intensified work demands, and extended working hours both during and after the change (Buick et al., 2017). The often-reduced workforce during restructuring translates into middle managers taking on additional tasks and responsibilities (Atterwall and Engqvist, 2016; Chen et al., 2018). The uncertainty and ambiguity experienced by middle managers primarily revolve around job retention, potential changes to their roles, and changes to the organisational structure (Harding et al., 2014). In addition, they may experience confusion about the new reporting relationship following the restructure (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008). The lived reality of middle managers often evokes a spectrum of emotions that include loneliness, anxiety, instability, and insecurity as a result of the tensions associated with their position and roles (Azambuja and Islam, 2019; De Molli and De Paoli, 2020).

As we will discuss later, middle managers grapple with the realities of restructuring in one of two ways: through coping or 'copping out'. Middle manager coping is described as the constantly changing proactive cognitive and behavioural practices intentionally employed to solve, endure, eliminate, or minimise specific internal or external challenges and demands that surpass their available resources. Coping serves as an umbrella term for the range of approaches employed by middle managers for managing the difficulties and

stresses arising from the changes in their environment, both for themselves and their teams (Brüggemann and Santos, 2016).

On the other hand, 'copping out' is associated with avoidance, evading responsibility, failing to confront difficult issues, or a lack of commitment. This withdrawal can manifest in various forms, including a permanent exit from the organisation, a continuous state of disengagement, or a transformative shift where the middle manager embraces the change and chooses to become a change agent. This transformative shift is a form of sensemaking and we refer to it as 'positive reframing'. Samson et al. (2022, p.317) describe reframing as a purposive attempt to make sense of organisational reality.

Positive reframing is a valuable coping practice employed by middle managers to confront the stressful organisational reality by interpreting it within positive terms. Research has shown that positive coping practices have been associated with improved job performance and job satisfaction that influences organisational commitment and outcomes (Overall, 2016). In contrast, maladaptive practices (such as 'copping out') occur reactively when the restructuring situation is considered negatively by middle managers who lack hope of future career success (Smollan, 2017a). When middle managers struggle to cope effectively, they often exhibit complacency and disengage from their roles.

This study contributes by shedding light on specific coping practices and their outcomes within a leading financial organisation, offering a contrast with negative practices that exemplify ineffective coping. Next, we present the methodology adopted to uncover middle manager coping.

## 3   Methodology

Previously, research on coping and work-related stress during organisational change has predominantly been investigated using quantitative approaches (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006; Bhattacharya and Gupta, 2015; Alnahedh and Alrashdan, 2021). While this approach has yielded valuable insights, it falls short in illuminating the many nuances of individual-level responses to stressful organisational restructuring and change (van Zyl and du Plessis, 2012; Smollan, 2017a). A qualitative approach was adopted to explore the sensemaking and coping practices amidst managerial dissonance and disruption (Belschak et al., 2020; van Niekerk and van Rensburg, 2022; Xaba et al., 2023). We responded to calls for qualitative approaches that delve into the richness of lived experiences of middle managers and change agents during organisational change (Kieran et al., 2020; Hay et al., 2020; van Niekerk and van Rensburg, 2022; Nel and van Niekerk, 2023).

We adopted a single case study design to explore middle managers within the boundaries of a major bank in South Africa. The restructuring emerged from a strategic response by the bank to the external operating context. The bank (case company) was confronted with heightened competition, regulatory shifts, changes in consumer expectations and concerns about customer retention. These challenges required adaptation, necessitating a new business model. As part of the strategic change decision, which took the form of organisational restructuring, employees within the Africa Regions Technology division were informed about retrenchments. Subsequently, a restructuring of the existing departmental structure took place in 2019. Furthermore, while the restructuring was underway, the unforeseen emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in

2020 resulted in a national lockdown in South Africa. This amplified the emotional distress of those involved and resulted in further job losses as organisations sought to curb losses and costs. Before commencing with the research, we obtained ethical clearance from the academic institution as well as permission from the case organisation.

Over a four-month period in late 2020, we gathered data, insights, and narratives from the real-life experiences of 13 purposefully selected middle managers within the selected case organisation. Our inclusion and exclusion criteria guided our selection of eligible middle managers. Specifically, we selected permanently employed middle managers from the affected division of the bank. We identified them using the following definition of a middle manager: "a manager who reports to a manager and has managers reporting to them" [van Rensburg et al., (2014), p.173]. The middle managers were required to have at least two years of experience in strategic planning, design, or implementation. Out of 95 staff members, 16 middle managers met the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria and were awarded numbers as part of our commitment to confidentiality. Of the 16 middle managers, 13 agreed to participate and provided substantially rich data sufficient to answer the research questions. Similar to De Molli and De Paoli (2020), we employed online semi-structured interviews, which allowed the participating middle managers to share their thoughts and experiences openly and without constraints.

Each interview session, lasting approximately one hour, involved asking middle managers a series of questions aimed at eliciting detailed insights. Some of the key interview questions included: how did you experience this restructure and downsizing? What has changed for you since the announcement of the restructure? How did the restructuring affect you from personal perspective? How did you deal with the impact of the restructuring? How did you make sense of what was going on during restructuring? How did you cope with the associated change and uncertainty?

To ensure thoroughness in our data gathering, we conducted virtual interviews and recorded them for transcription. Our data gathering process was an emergent, continuous, and iterative process that was intertwined with data analysis and interpretation. To strengthen the trustworthiness of our coding process, we engaged a co-coder. Our analysis followed an inductive approach, involving a thorough examination of the interview transcripts to identify emerging trends and patterns. Additionally, one of our team's researchers, with 20 years of active middle manager experience in the selected case organisation, provided an insider's perspective. The insider perspective offered familiarity with the context, and the existing rapport facilitated the research process and protocols, making data gathering quicker and easier (Saidin, 2017). Potential insider biases were limited and the perspective was not used to interpret the findings.

Aligned with the theme of our article's title, our findings revealed instances where middle managers either coped, or copped out. While our primary focus was on identifying coping practices to inform future change initiatives, we acknowledge the emotional realities associated with not coping or copping out. We encountered vivid accounts of genuine stressful experiences and emotions entailed in organisational restructuring, affirming the importance of considering these copping out scenarios in advance of restructuring decisions.

## 4    Findings

We begin by offering the rich descriptions of the restructuring process as described by the managers. Details on how the restructuring process unfolded present the unique context within which to consider the middle manager practices.

### 4.1    The restructure

There was consensus amongst middle managers (MMs), who described the restructuring announcement as initially delayed, and when it arrived, it did so with a 'big bang' (MM15), with some noting that "the formal aspects in doing all of these things were missing" (MM13). The process by which the restructure was handled was considered 'inexcusable' (MM5), a 'complete disaster' (MM1) and "not the way to do it" (MM15). The handling of the restructuring process caused emotions such as uncertainty, distress, and confusion. MM16 shared how the absence of communication meant 'you encountered the problem' and MM2 recollected how there was "a lot of uncertainty amongst the people and people were worried". Other descriptors that were used included, "very negative… and worrying", "very stressful … it was very uncertain", and "everyone was quite nervous".

**Figure 1**    Middle managers' practices during organisational restructuring: coping or copping out (see online version for colours)
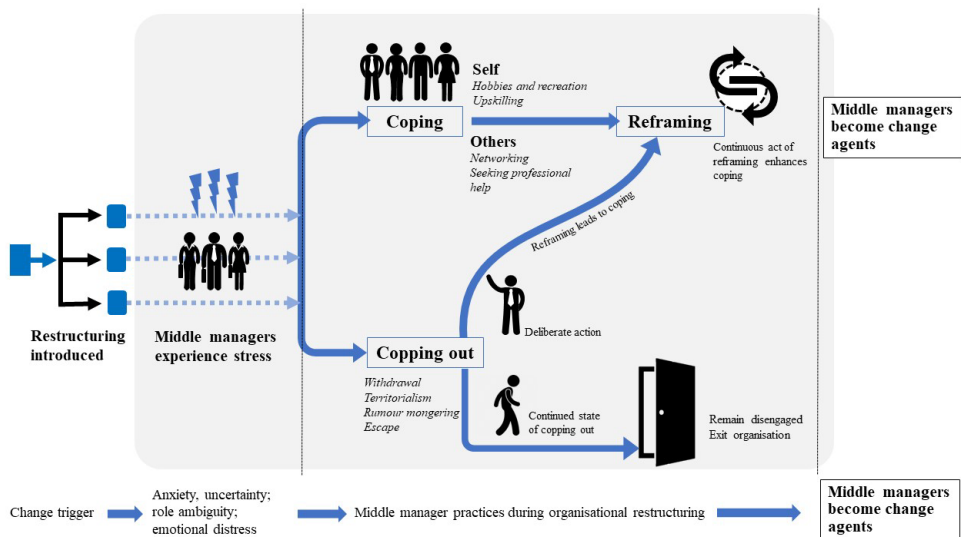


From the descriptions, some of the middle managers found that colleagues were asking them for information that they themselves had not made sense of. MM9 recalls:

> "One word comes to mind, conflicting. It's very conflicting for me… You're seen as a leader… they will come to you and ask you questions about these things and sometimes you may not be able to give them all the information they need to make them feel comfortable." (MM9)

As previously mentioned, participating middle managers grappled with confusion stemming from inadequate formal communication, forcing them to navigate the situation independently before aiding their subordinates. These circumstances amplified emotional distress, fostering increased anxiety, stress, and widespread uncertainty. Figure 1 depicts the lived experiences as described by the middle managers and interpreted by us.

Our data analysis revealed that middle managers tend to adopt one of two positions when confronted with organisational restructuring: coping or copping out. Coping practices can be categorised as either self-initiated (internal) or involving external parties. It is worth noting that these coping practices originate within the middle managers themselves before extending to external parties. Positive or effective coping practices are associated with enhanced well-being, job performance, and job satisfaction, and influences organisational commitment and outcomes (Overall, 2016).

On the other hand, copping out practices manifest in behaviours such withdrawal, territorialism, rumour mongering, and escapism - in some cases escaping through substance abuse. Importantly, our findings indicate that there can be a transition from copping out to coping, facilitated by deliberate acts of positive reframing. Through this intentional reframing process, middle managers can effectively cope and become change agents, as depicted in the top right corner of Figure 1.

## 4.2 Coping practices

As indicated above, coping practices can be enhanced, either through the middle managers themselves, or with the help of others. The following section illuminates the numerous coping practices used to handle various difficulties and stressors in the middle managers' environment and their effect on organisational level outcomes. We present coping practices in two groups: self-initiated practices and practices involving others.

### 4.2.1 Self-initiated practices: hobbies and recreation

Middle managers described coping methods like reading, listening to music, gardening, and hobbies such as golf, gym, and hiking. For instance, MM1 found solace in family hikes, while MM7 highlighted the importance of family in dealing with the restructuring:

> "And that's when you realise you've got strong family support. And you cherish it. It's taken for granted at times, because it's always there. Until, when s**t hits the fan, it really comes through for you."

From the rich descriptions, we deduced that the outcome of this positive coping practice was a reduction in stress and improved well-being. Middle managers were able to cope with the difficulties of the restructure by rejuvenating with recreational and relaxation activities.

### 4.2.2 Self-initiated practices: upskilling

Several managers shared how they used the restructuring period to enhance their skills. They described how additional training helped them prepare for potential retention, advancement in their roles, or employment elsewhere in case of retrenchment. MM8 noted: "[the restructuring] helped me to mobilise myself, to upskill myself so I stay relevant for today's jobs".

Upskilling as a coping practice, assisted middle managers to "stay relevant in terms of what is happening right now" (MM9) and to be less restricted as specialists. Upskilling also positioned them proactively in response to change. MM10 shared:

> "Personally, it's [the restructure] made me more alert. Don't be too comfortable in a position. What I'm actually doing differently. I'm actually going to start picking up the books again."

Data showed that as the initial shock of the restructuring subsided, middle managers grew more focused and realised that they could not afford complacency. This clarity allowed them to assess the situation objectively and respond by embracing upskilling as a coping practice.

### 4.2.3   Practices involving others: networking

During the restructuring, middle managers coped by creating new networks to adapt to uncertainty and facilitate their work amid the changes. MM16 explained:

> "Well as I say it was trial and error. If you had to do something you, you discovered that person isn't there or that whole department is gone, all the processes have changed. You then just find out how does it work now and you adapt… Now that the actual change is forced on you [have to] just make another plan or find another route."

Building new networks involved "speak[ing] to many people in….and outside the bank" (MM5) and establishing trust in new relationships through new lines of communication. This coping practice yielded increased collaboration and MM9 referred to engaging executives and having conversations to connect the dots. MM16 explained the value of good networks and recognised that there are "people that I know have my back and I have their back and that's how we do it".

The organisational restructure fostered new networks, aiding middle managers to cope with the change through information exchange and promoting collaboration.

### 4.2.4   Practices involving others: professional support

Another coping practice involved seeking professional support, such as counselling with a priest or a therapist. For example, MM10 received counselling within her church's women's book club. MM2 also endorsed this beneficial coping practice:

> "When you're deep, deep in that situation it's difficult to see clearly … when you've got somebody experienced to talk to, they help you to see past the immediate issues that might be clouding your vision…"

Seeking professional help aided middle managers to reduce feelings of isolation and enhanced their understanding of the restructuring situation. This practice resulted in reduced stress, and improved their mental state.

Next, we discuss what occurred when middle managers 'copped out'.

### 4.3   Copping out practices

Negative and maladaptive coping practices (copping out) emerged when middle managers, feeling hopeless about their work realities and the organisational restructure, resorted to avoidance, disengagement, and territorialism.

### 4.3.1 Copping out – withdrawal

Amid the restructuring, participating middle managers described how they withdrew, avoided meetings and interactions with others, and became disinterested in work and conversations. This distancing extended to colleagues within the organisation as well as family members. Some of the managers indicate they preferred solitude. For example:

> "I feel angry and frustrated. I want to pack my bags and walk out and I wonder if it will ever go away. When I feel like this I must just be left alone." (MM5)

> "I'm expected to be positive in this whole thing while my staff are negative, and my staff are down and depressed. … People are not being part of meetings because they would withdraw from the system a bit more, and they want to share less." (MM9)

A middle manager confessed to occasional outbursts and to scolding her children. She also admitted to being abrupt with family members who were trying to help her during her withdrawal (MM6). The withdrawal practice elevated psychological distress and increased work-family conflict. Another manager explained how he noticed colleagues' strained tones, and, in virtual meetings, detected disinterest through attendees' body language and demeanour (MM12). Other descriptions included: 'lots of negative energy', and "there is a lot of fear… people are afraid about their jobs" (MM9).

Our data revealed that withdrawal manifested as job apathy and indifference towards the organisation and the rationale behind the restructuring. This behaviour was illuminated by the following middle managers:

> So, when the restructure happened, it was almost as if I didn't care. My attitude was, tell me what to do and I'll do it … (MM16)

> … here we go again. It's the same thing over and over. Can you just make up your mind about what you want? ...I'm fed up (MM5)

Withdrawal, as a form of copping out, had intense personal and professional consequences for those middle managers who engaged it. The negative and dismissive emotions associated with copping out affected their levels of involvement and commitment towards the organisation. Middle managers reported that it was difficult to manage staff members who were disengaged, which led to organisational repercussions such as reduced productivity, reliability, collaboration, and diminished overall well-being of middle managers.

### 4.3.2 Copping out – territorialism

Our data revealed a practice where middle managers copped out of active engagement and instead resorted to territorial behaviour. They decidedly refrained from sharing their existing tasks, resisted involving others, and sometimes took on additional work voluntarily, thereby excluding others. Rather than adapting to the evolving roles in the restructure, some clung to their existing roles and refrained from collaborating. Ultimately, this led to difficult working conditions and exhaustion. The following excerpt by MM4 illustrates this copping out practice:

> "I think everyone is anxious about themselves … no one is completely safe or is completely untouchable. So, I would assume that everyone is thinking, what's in it for me, what is not in it for me. … everyone is quite nervous as where they already stand."

We also heard accounts from middle managers where they explained that they faced significant stress as they juggled their prior responsibilities alongside new ones within the restructure. For instance, MM8 took on additional work previously performed by others. With staff in their line of work facing potential retrenchment, some middle managers absorbed even more tasks, leading to higher workloads and extended working hours. MM5 expressed that "my team and I work every weekend". The strain of taking on additional work and longer hours adversely affected their well-being and work life balance as is evident by the comment from MM13:

> "You kind of just get the sense that there's always more being expected from you whether documented or undocumented… I'm not sure the expectations of the extent to which it's supposed to have extended."

Middle managers became territorial and handled both their original duties and new responsibilities, and some may argue that the quality of their output suffered as a result.

### 4.3.3   Copping out – rumour mongering

As alluded to earlier, the restructuring process suffered from perceived insufficient formal communication. This led to a breakdown in communication and reporting channels, and eventually, mistrust. In an effort to enact sensemaking and social exchange pertaining to the restructuring, MM1 and MM9 noted the emergence of informal communication channels.

> "…I wish [name of executive] can be more involved with us because I think he depends on his management structure to filter down communications, but that never happens. It never happens." (MM1)

> "Also, [there was a] lack of communication from the leadership because they were not engaging the staff and you know, we had to find our own sounding boards where we had to deal with it on our own and talk to our peers and whatever it may be…" (MM9)

In an attempt to facilitate their understanding of poorly understood issues pertaining to the restructure, middle managers began gossiping and speculating. The following excerpts from MM8 and MM4 further illuminate this rumour mongering copping out practice:

> "I think the rumours and suspicions were even worse. You know, people didn't know [the details] but were speculating that all contractors will be let go. This was very worrying for me." (MM8)

> "… you could actually see that people were talking in small groups around the corners. Everyone was feeling very anxious … that level of trust was no longer there. Everyone was suspicious of everyone … you could actually see that level of trust was diminishing … … and the level of suspicion was starting to creep in…" (MM4)

The corridor messages interfered with management's limited, formal communication around the restructure. The informal communication also instilled fear and worry, hindering the organisation's strategy execution for the change initiative.

### 4.3.4 Copping out – escaping

From our engagements, there was little doubt that the stress of the restructure affected middle managers intensely. When discussing their coping practices, they described resorting to escapism on mental, emotional, and physical levels. This included a sense of resignation, indifference, and most participating managers exhibited signs of change fatigue. MM5 referred to confusion towards the restructuring and being 'fed up'. Some middle managers reported a shift in perspective during the restructuring, leading them to escape by frequenting bars, consuming alcohol, or resorting to medication to alleviate anxiety symptoms caused by work-related stress. MM9 and MM7 shared how their perceptions changed and they experienced a sense of disillusionment:

> "Previously you've got an idea…the bank is a great place to work... And this [restructure] happens and you see it differently. There is no two ways about that. You will definitely see it differently." (MM7)

> "People deal with it differently. I know some of my peers deal with it with alcohol … and you can understand where they are coming from because it's a very stressful situation to be in right now…Even though they say human resources are there for you emotionally, nobody uses human resources to deal with these things. They would rather use painkillers, alcohol and their colleagues to share this with." (MM9)

Several middle managers knew about the coping practice of seeking professional help, yet chose to use medication as treatment. The stress had physical health implications on middle managers, including headaches, depression, ulcers, heart palpitations, high blood pressure, and anxiety, reportedly caused by stress of the restructure. MM8 and MM9 relayed:

> "What I found helped me a lot was also medication. This helped me to stay calm and to focus on what is best for me at the time." (MM8)

> "The way to deal with it …. for me I take medication, because of the headaches … Unfortunately, sometimes you may find that the medication is not helping you to cope… I can't sleep so it also becomes a problem. I now have to take painkillers and I have to take pills to sleep and that combined with the alcohol can be a deadly concoction." (MM9)

Escaping emerged as a maladaptive copping out practice which could lead to health risks for employees and decreased productivity at an organisational level.

Referring to Figure 1, and our earlier reference to reframing, the following section describes how positive reframing transformed middle managers into change agents, including some who initially copped out.

### 4.4 Reframing

Reframing, as described by Samson et al. (2022), is the deliberate action to make sense of a situation for practical coping and enables managers to rise above the organisational complexity. Reframing encapsulates the experience, tacit knowledge, and perspective of the middle managers when approaching restructuring. We observed that reframing is an enabler or lens through which the participating middle managers processed the restructuring and it was heavily influenced by their previous experiences and personal attitudes towards change. Their perceptions of change were shaped by past experiences,

either positive or negative, which in turn influenced their new framing of the organisational restructure. While restructuring typically carries a negative connotation linked to job losses, prior experiences allowed some of the middle managers to recognise the stressors associated with it and enabled them to more readily employ their coping practices.

We discovered that middle managers coped by undergoing internal shifts in their thought patterns and mindset. They reframed the situation by viewing it as an opportunity for personal and business growth. This positive mindset involved thinking holistically about the change and strengthening the connection between their positions in relation to organisational outcomes. MM2 and MM6 explained this coping practice as one of internally moving forward and making a mental turn towards growth and success for themselves and the organisation.

> "…it comes down to an attitude change… Obviously in the beginning it is negative but you need to work through that negativity and change your perspective to look forward rather than backwards…" (MM2)

> "I think of the positive also, it's an opportunity for myself to show my worth, whether I get there or don't get there, it's an opportunity for me to make a case for myself that I add value if you give me the opportunity, I will embrace it and I will deliver on it." (MM6)

Several of the participating middle managers formed part of a previous organisational restructure, which assisted them to reframe the situation. MM15 experienced many restructures in his career and took a mature, positive, and calm approach towards the latest restructure:

> "I've been around the block for a while. So, I've been through many of these restructuring and take-overs and stuff. I'll first sit back, assess it... Let things evolve a bit…before just rushing out and reacting… And you become sort of immune to it, you know. It's one of those, what happen will happen and if one door closes another door will open."

One of the middle managers (MM5) who had previous negative experiences with organisational restructuring explained:

> "We are still doing the same type of work, that has not changed throughout all the restructures. Management just finds a different justification for it each time. I must admit though that this last one [restructure] was not what I expected. The way they treated the people was horrendous. Staff were just like something that can be used and discarded. How do they take the permanent people who were there for so long and replace them with contractors, yet tell us this is a downsizing?"

The middle managers who experienced the restructure negatively struggled to cope and to rise above the organisational complexity. They expressed shock about the way the restructure was handled, and experienced stress from seeing colleagues retrenched. Middle managers with a negative experience tended to adopt copping out practices before reaching a place where they either reframed the restructuring and became change agents, or remained in a state of copping out. The middle managers confirmed that previous positive or negative experiences with organisational restructuring influenced their utilisation of either positive (coping) or negative (copping out) responses towards the restructure they were faced with.

## 5   Discussion and conclusions

In the contemporary fast-paced business environment, organisational survival, and middle manager well-being, hinge on adaptability and change. There is a clear moral imperative to address employee well-being and coping practices when change is implemented (Rafferty, 2021; Nel and van Niekerk, 2023). The restructuring was found to have significantly affected the well-being of middle managers, highlighting that any organisational change efforts should be approached carefully (Nel and van Niekerk, 2023). Our research delved into the lived experiences of middle managers during organisational restructuring by offering insights into how middle managers cope with organisational restructuring within a selected case company in the financial services sector.

From our analysis of the data, the practices middle managers employed were described from a strategy as practice perspective, thereby contributing to this body of research as called for by Whittington (2019), van Niekerk and van Rensburg (2022) and Wenzel et al. (2022). The interviews allowed middle managers to re-live and reflect on their experiences that shaped their working and personal lives, and to recall how they navigated and negotiated the change during organisational restructuring.

This study offers insight into the middle manager coping practices and the 'copping out' practices in response to organisational complexity. Our research addresses the gap in the literature by shedding light on how middle managers navigate the uncertainties of organisational restructuring. An understanding of these coping and copping out practices will allow organisations to better develop and support middle managers during restructuring, thus highlighting the fundamental contribution of our study.

We distinguished between those who effectively cope, and those who disengage and withdraw by 'copping out', noting that restructuring left no person unscathed (Nel and van Niekerk, 2023). Coping practices included hobbies and recreation, upskilling, networking, and professional support. Coping practices were used when middle managers believed they can mitigate a stressor, whereas copping out practices were employed when middle managers experienced limited power during restructuring. Copping out practices include withdrawal, territorialism, rumour mongering, and escaping. Even though the copping-out practices interfered with the restructuring progress (Lee and Barnes, 2021), they were also found to serve as a means of releasing anger (Bashir et al., 2020) and enabled middle managers to vent their negative emotions in an effort to restore their psychological well-being (Cruz et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2023).

Importantly, our findings also show how the deliberate process of reframing empowered middle managers to transition to change agents and how middle managers learnt to cope (as opposed to copping out) by gaining new insights and skills during the uncertainty accompanying restructuring (Smollan, 2017a). When middle managers are able to effectively cope with change, and reframe the situation, it strengthens the overall organisational change initiative.

The positive reframing of middle managers in our study shares similarities with the third station of 'consensus' (Xaba et al., 2023). At this stage, middle managers developed a shared understanding and influenced the sensemaking of others, effectively serving as change agents for implementing the organisation's changes. Positive reframing, in our research, is also similar to the practical coping of middle managers described by Samson et al. (2022).

As practice orientated scholars, our study reinforces the important role of middle managers during times of change by highlighting the micro level actions of employees at other levels of the organisation. Middle managers employed strategic practices for coping during restructuring, making them indispensable for an organisation's strategising and strategic success.

Our findings provide a foundation for recommendations in future restructuring events. We advocate for improved formal communication during restructuring as well as initiatives that guide middle managers towards positive reframing. We emphasise the importance of involving middle managers in the change process at an earlier stage. Research has shown that this inclusion positively impacts their attitude towards the change, which in turn, has a direct impact on the success of the change (Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015). We agree with Huy (2011), Buick et al. (2017) and Dixon (2021), that additional support for managers during restructuring is needed. Encouraging hobbies and family time, as well as providing opportunities for training and upskilling during working hours, could foster more positive mindsets among those most affected by restructuring.

We also recommend offering professional support for middle managers. Organisations should offer authentic, timely, confidential, and accessible assistance in advance, during, and after restructuring. Professional assistance and timely formal communication will assist in the uptake of the restructuring by middle managers (Ruggeri et al., 2020; Nel and van Niekerk, 2023). When support is not timely and the duration of restructuring is delayed, employees' beliefs and well-being about the change are negatively affected, leading to a decline in engagement and increases in turnover intentions (Belschak et al., 2020).

Middle managers who receive such support are more likely to employ effective coping practices, facilitating their experience of the change with greater success. It is noteworthy that in this study, middle managers sought external support rather than relying on the human resources department. Therefore, it is crucial to promote and ensure improved access to emotional support and stress management within the organisation during all restructuring situations.

A limitation in the study was the exclusion of the role of personality and social identity in coping, specifically in terms of support resources, as studies have shown that these factors affect how middle managers cope with stress during change (Smollan, 2017a; Hay et al., 2020). Our study's method contributed to literature by offering a scarcely utilised qualitative exploration of middle manager coping during organisational restructuring (Smollan, 2017a). However, whilst we offer potential transferability of the findings, we cannot offer generalisability. We therefore recommend that the findings be tested quantitatively through future research. The study was also limited to a cross sectional analysis. Therefore, future studies could seek to better understand how middle managers cope with restructuring over the long term, especially since employee perceptions during change are known to change over time (Belschak et al., 2020; Hay et al., 2020).

Future research could also explore the different stages of the restructuring change to determine when the practices were used and whether or not coping and copping out practices are used in conjunction with each other, exclusively, or as a result of past experience. It is also recommended that future research compare the coping practices of middle managers who have experienced previous restructures to those who are undergoing their first restructuring. Even though it was not the purpose of our study, we

observed that middle managers with prior restructuring experience appeared to take a mature, positive, and calm approach.

Even though we did not set out to explore when the practices were applied, we observed that in some cases middle managers began with copping out practices, and later drew on coping practices. Another observation was that middle managers did not exclusively draw on either coping or copping out practices, and in most cases practiced both throughout the restructure. Our observations resonate with Belschak et al. (2020) and advocate for future studies to explore how individuals pass through different phases during restructuring. Even though their reactions may be negative (copping out), sensemaking and adaptation can occur, leading to reactions becoming more positive again (coping).

Little is known about how middle managers' past experiences influenced how quickly and effectively they navigated and responded to the shock of the restructure or how they transitioned from copping out to coping. Further studies could investigate how experienced middle managers harnessed their fears and channelled their energy into utilising coping practices during restructuring.

The selected case organisation, from which the findings in this study emerged, did not announce and execute the restructure with clear communication, and middle managers experienced the way in which it was handled as severely lacking. It is advised that management include middle managers early in the process to increase perceptions of control, thereby mitigating stress (Smollan, 2017a; Sun et al., 2023). Had better change management techniques and change readiness strategies been utilised, findings may have demonstrated enhanced or exclusive use of the coping practices. Instead, possibly due to the climate and context of the restructure, middle managers clearly engaged in copping out practices which hampered progress, perceptions, and adoption of the restructure..

Future research could explore the frequency with which coping and copping out practices emerge in a scenario where middle managers received advance communication and were better prepared for the restructure. Hay et al. (2020) found that setting transparent expectations about the change process before it unfolded benefited change agents and recipients in terms of their perceptions and experiences about the re-structuring. Future research could also explore the role of mentorship and professional support on middle manager coping and well-being during organisational restructuring.

While living through restructuring may seem to be a matter of surviving instead of thriving (Nel and van Niekerk, 2023), our improved understanding of the many mixed emotions, experiences, and practices of middle managers when navigating restructuring are likely transferable to other contexts. Future research could explore the coping and copping out practices in other sectors and cases.

Finally, this study's central contribution to organisational change research is a better understanding of how banks can support their managers to cope with organisational restructuring when the directive comes from top management. To cope with organisational restructuring is to engage in positive reframing and coping practices by acting as change agents. Such understanding aims to advance the body of knowledge on how this pivotal group of employees navigate such disruptions which affect the outcome and success of organisational restructuring. Knowing how middle managers cope during organisational change can be beneficial to other organisations contemplating restructuring, especially if the coping practices can be used to minimise burnout, build resilience, and facilitate a successful restructure.

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