

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Coping with international politics: A case study of Hong Kong

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## Abstract

The way that leaders and citizens cope with stress is under-theorised in the study of International Relations (IR). This article anchors psychological studies on coping to the literature theorising emotions in IR to clarify two unaddressed questions: (1) how do political actors – individuals and collectives – cope with both sudden crises and long-term change?; and (2) in the context of international politics, whose coping matters, and under what conditions? Our coping framework demonstrates that intersubjective appraisal of urgency from everyday stressors triggers a process that elevates individual coping to the collective level. Circulation of coping responses, a key but neglected process of scaling up, binds individuals to affective communities. Our theoretical contribution is an innovative coping framework to explore how individual pursuit of well-being is transformed into collective agency. The methodological novelty is the triangulation of emotional representation with survey data and in-depth interviews to capture the circulation of coping responses. We illustrate our conceptual framework with the overlooked case of Hong Kong. Our findings suggest coping constitutes conditions of political possibilities, in that individual Hong Kongers' efforts to sustain emotional well-being are aggregated to create momentum for a state-building project unexpected by the former British colonisers or the Chinese Communist Party.

**Keywords:** affective communities; China; coping; emotions in IR; Hong Kong; localism

## Introduction

The inevitability and omnipresence of stress requires *coping* to ensure individual health and social functioning.<sup>1</sup> National leaders must cope with stress and deal with the negative emotions triggered by uncertainty of conflict, economic crises, natural disasters, or pandemics in the process of policymaking. The public tends to be on the receiving end of both the stressful situations generated by international politics and its leaders' attempts to cope.

The discipline of International Relations (IR) recognises the centrality of stress. However, how people cope with the exigencies of international politics is under-theorised. *How* do political actors, individual decision-makers, and collectives cope with both sudden crisis and long-term change? Furthermore, considering political decisions or collective reactions to stress in international politics, *whose* coping matters, and under what circumstances?

This article provides an innovative theoretical framework of coping to answer these important and unaddressed questions by anchoring psychological studies on coping mechanisms to the

<sup>1</sup>Richard S. Lazarus, 'Emotions and interpersonal relationships: Toward a person-centered conceptualization of emotions and coping', *Journal of Personality*, 74:1 (2006), pp. 9–46 (p. 20).

literature on theorisation of emotions in IR. We argue that intersubjective appraisal of urgency from everyday stressors induced by powerful political forces triggers a process that requires individual coping. How individuals deal with stress follows the logic of emotional balancing. This matters under conditions in which emotional well-being orders us to challenge established political arrangements. Through circulation of coping responses, individual coping is scaled up to collective coping, resulting in the formation of affective communities and transforming individual stress responses into collective agency.

The main literature to which this article contributes is the theorisation of emotions in IR. First, it teases out a *therapeutic* approach within the emotional turn of IR to establish the relevance of emotional well-being for international politics. Secondly, by answering whose coping matters in IR, the authors posit that coping processes constitute conditions for political possibilities, and that individuals' coping with stress is imbued with collective dynamics and implications. Lastly and relatedly, the coping framework this article proposes contributes to the discussion of levelling up emotional experiences. Primarily, this work adds *circulation of coping responses* to the existing scaling-up pathways and further conceptualises the emergent collective, what Hutchison called 'affective communities',<sup>2</sup> in which individuals are bound by emotional understandings of the stressor and the need to cope together.

In addition to the theoretical contribution, this paper presents an empirical contribution through its choice of an overlooked case study: Hong Kong's state-building process. The possibility of independence for Hong Kong was erased in 1972 by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the General Assembly of the United Nations,<sup>3</sup> when the PRC and the United Kingdom (UK) determined Hong Kong's future as a Chinese Special Administrative Region in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. The political compromise between the former British coloniser and the current sovereign master residing in Beijing interweaves the bilateral agreement with the need to cope by Hong Kong residents. This is epitomised in the words of Deng Xiaoping, who said that the Sino-British negotiations in the 1980s would 'put hearts at ease'.<sup>4</sup> The founding of the Hong Kong National Party and the fact that 40 per cent of surveyed Hong Kongers did not rule out the idea of independence shows the failure of the British and Chinese governments to put Hong Kongers' hearts at ease.<sup>5</sup> On the collective level, Hong Kong illuminates the sub-national level's discontent and disagreement with the imposition of national identity by a powerful sovereign.

Using primary data from surveys and 80 interviews collected in the span of eight years, our findings provide a rare documentation of Hong Kongers' efforts to sustain emotional well-being through a state-building project in defiance of an international treaty. The story of Hong Kong is not only intrinsically international, but also emotional, because it shows how 'seemingly small-scale emotional interactions can become amplified into globally visible assemblages'.<sup>6</sup>

### Theorising coping in IR

The theory section first charts IR's existing interest in coping, namely political psychology and ontological security. There is consensus in these two literatures that coping constitutes conditions of political possibilities, but they diverge on the unit of analysis: political psychology is primarily concerned with individual coping, while ontological security accentuates collective coping. This divergence points towards two unaddressed yet critical questions: how do individuals and collectives cope with stressful situations, and whose coping matters under what circumstances.

<sup>2</sup>Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Patricia Dagati, 'Hong Kong's lost right to self-determination: A denial of due process in the United Nations', *NYLS Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 13:1 (1992), pp. 153–80 (p. 155).

<sup>4</sup>Lucian W. Pye, 'The international position of Hong Kong', *The China Quarterly*, 95 (1983), pp. 456–68.

<sup>5</sup>Chinese University of Hong Kong, 'Public opinion and political development in Hong Kong: Survey results' (24 July 2016), available at: {[http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/images/news/TaskForce\\_PressRelease\\_160722c\\_English.pdf](http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/images/news/TaskForce_PressRelease_160722c_English.pdf)}.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew A. G. Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 158.

This article's engagement with the main literature, theorising emotions in IR, sheds light on the therapeutic approach, which notices the relevance of individuals' emotional well-being to the configuration of global politics. Pinpointing the scaling-up process from individual to collective coping, the authors add the circulation of coping responses as an additional pathway for collective affective experience. The consequence of collective coping is the formation of Hutchison's affective communities, which bind individuals with emotional representations and understandings. Affective community's relevance to the coping framework resides in its ability to capture the transformation of individuals' emotional well-being into collective agency, recognising and appreciating the transnational dimension of local experiences.

### *The constitutive relationship between coping and international politics*

The existing IR literature acknowledges the omnipresence of coping in various units of analysis. Focusing on the individual decision-making process, foreign-policy makers need to 'cope' with perceived threats.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to state identities, states cope with negative treatment, such as stigmatisation.<sup>8</sup> The international community is also expected to 'cope' with rising powers such as China.<sup>9</sup> The act of coping is political, yet coping is largely treated as an empty verb that requires no further theorisation. For instance, the statement that foreign-policy makers 'cope' with perceived threats is more concerned with the perception of threat rather than how the process of dealing with threats can generate those perceptions.

A rare exception that examines coping in IR is the stress-coping-choice model in political psychology. Brecher locates coping mechanisms in a causal chain to explain individual and/or group decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Coping is considered as an intervening variable that mediates the causal relations between the perception of stress and political decisions. The political consequence of coping is to identify and invent 'alternative options' that inform the final policy outcome.<sup>11</sup>

Not only is coping relevant for the decision-making process, but the research community on ontological security also recognises the constitutive relationship between coping and state identities and behaviours. Coping mechanisms such as routine, avoidance, and resort to humour are extracted as key to ontological security-seeking behaviours.<sup>12</sup> Situating anxiety and uncertainty management at the heart of security studies,<sup>13</sup> Mitzen highlights that different modes of anxiety management generate varying outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

These two distinctive research communities converge in the acknowledgement that the coping process constitutes conditions of political possibilities in the form of alternative narratives about state identities and policies pursued by national leaders. However, the literature on the psychology of coping, introduced by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, is missed by political psychology's

<sup>7</sup>Robert Jervis, 'Perceiving and coping with threat', in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein (eds), *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 13–33.

<sup>8</sup>Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in international relations: Transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization*, 68:1 (2014), pp. 143–76.

<sup>9</sup>David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 308.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Brecher, 'State behavior in international crisis: A model', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 23:3 (1979), pp. 446–80.

<sup>11</sup>Brecher, 'State behavior', p. 461.

<sup>12</sup>Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–40; Ayşe Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23; Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alexei Tsinovoi, 'International misrecognition: The politics of humour and national identity in Israel's public diplomacy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:1 (2019), pp. 3–29.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxious community: EU as (in)security community', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 393–413; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

<sup>14</sup>Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

focus on the psychology of *emotions* and ontological security's primary preference of the *sociology* of emotional management.<sup>15</sup>

A re-routing of coping in IR to the psychological research on coping helps clarify two unaddressed questions: first, *how* do individuals and collectives cope with stressful situations, be it sudden crisis or slow-burning political change? This is an important question because individuals cope for their psychological and physiological well-being,<sup>16</sup> so the extrapolation of coping to the state level could be problematic, as states do not have a 'body' to experience stress and do not feel the need to cope. Relatedly, the second question concerns whose coping matters in international politics, and under what circumstances individual coping generates collective dynamics.

### *Problem- and emotion-focused coping*

This paper consults Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's groundbreaking works on coping in psychology to clarify the constitutive relationship between individual coping and conditions of political possibilities in IR. Lazarus and Folkman define coping as 'constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.'<sup>17</sup> The function of coping is more than the seeking and evaluation of information, as compellingly outlined by Brecher in the above-mentioned stress-coping-choice model. More importantly, it is about the restoration and maintenance of equilibrium under stress,<sup>18</sup> which broadens the scope of coping as understood in ontological security from repression of negative emotions to *balancing* affective experiences.

Folkman categorises two types of coping based on its function: problem-focused and emotion-focused.<sup>19</sup> Problem-focused coping refers to the management and alteration of the problem. In Brecher's model, this involves information search and absorption, consultation, discussion forums, and the consideration of alternatives in times of crisis.<sup>20</sup> Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, is 'directed at managing or reducing emotional distress.'<sup>21</sup> Mitzen's conceptualisation of anxiety avoidance by the European Union in confronting its colonial past and war memories epitomises the emotion-focused coping process.<sup>22</sup> Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi's compelling analysis of humour as a coping mechanism is another example of emotion-focused coping to handle international misrecognition.<sup>23</sup> The definitional differentiation does not suggest incompatibility of problem- and emotion-focused coping. Rituals, for instance, both calm emotional distress<sup>24</sup> and reframe 'past suffering' to solve problems.<sup>25</sup>

The differentiation of problem- and emotion-focused coping in psychology bears direct relevance to IR for three reasons. First, it offers a framework to trace the constitutive relationship

<sup>15</sup>Regarding the preference of sociology in ontological security literature, see Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security', p. 6.

<sup>16</sup>James J. Gross, 'The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review', *Review of General Psychology*, 2:3 (1998), pp. 271–99; James J. Gross, 'Emotion regulation: Affective, cognitive, and social consequences', *Psychophysiology*, 39:3 (2002), pp. 281–91.

<sup>17</sup>Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1984), p. 141.

<sup>18</sup>Frances Cohen and Richard S. Lazarus, 'Coping with the stresses of illness', in George C. Stone, Frances Cohen, and Nancy E. Adler (eds), *Health Psychology: A Handbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979), pp. 217–54; Karl Menninger, *The Vital Balance* (New York: Viking, 1963).

<sup>19</sup>Susan Folkman, 'An approach to the measurement of coping', *Journal of Occupational Behaviour*, 3:1 (1982), pp. 95–107.

<sup>20</sup>Brecher, 'State behavior in crisis', p. 452.

<sup>21</sup>Folkman, 'Measurement of coping', p. 99.

<sup>22</sup>Mitzen, 'Anxious community'.

<sup>23</sup>Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 'International misrecognition'.

<sup>24</sup>Mabel Berezin, 'Secure states: Towards a political sociology of emotion', *The Sociological Review*, 50:2 (2002), pp. 33–52 (p. 45).

<sup>25</sup>Anna Gasparre, Serena Bosco and Guglielmo Belleli, 'Cognitive and social consequences of participation in social rites: Collective coping, social support, and post-traumatic growth in the victims of Guatemala genocide', *Revista de Psicología Social*, 25:1 (2010), pp. 35–46 (p. 44).

between coping and conditions of political possibilities. Second, emotion-focused coping pinpoints the missing micro-level actorhood of anxiety management in the ontological security literature. Third, emotion-focused coping foregrounds the overlooked logic of emotional equilibrium in shaping individual decisions and collective agency. The underpinning logic of coping is achieving an emotional equilibrium.<sup>26</sup> Stress disrupts individual emotional balance and requires readjustment.<sup>27</sup> Failure to balance emotions is a matter of mental health and generates physiological repercussions.<sup>28</sup> Psychological defence mechanisms amend an individual's experience of emotions through 'internal control structures,' which alter the perceived reality.<sup>29</sup> This means the logic of emotional equilibrium may override the choices motivated by strategic calculations.

Our working definition of coping in the IR context is a cognitive and behavioural adaptation, automatic or conscious, to manage objectively stressful or subjectively unbearable situations. Mapping political psychology and ontological security to the psychological typology of coping creates a false one-to-one relationship that aligns individual coping with the problem-focused and collective coping with the emotion-focused. Our engagement with psychology is not to parachute 'the psychology of emotions' into IR that applies 'emotional categories' to world politics.<sup>30</sup> Instead, we are interested in how we think about coping in International Relations.

### *The therapeutic approach in theorising emotions in IR*

We anchor our theory of coping to the literature on emotions in IR, originating with Crawford's seminal article, which ushered an 'emotional turn' into the discipline. Yet her legacy in pointing out the significance of individuals' emotional well-being to international politics has so far been less appreciated. With the 'emotional turn' of IR comes a 'therapeutic' approach that appreciates an individual's emotional well-being in the grand process of international politics. This body of literature is sensitive to the two questions mentioned above.

The question of *how* subjects cope with stress echoes the debate on the role of the body in emotions IR literature, between 'bodily based micro approaches' and macro approaches that foreground social, cultural, spiritual, and normative dimensions of emotion.<sup>31</sup> McDermott's somatic account grounds emotional experiences in the physicality of bodies, recognising 'the primacy of the physical body in both experiencing and conveying emotions.'<sup>32</sup> Whereas it is contestable whether the primacy of bodies should be reflected in the definition of *emotions*, the somatic approach aligns with the psychology of *coping* and pays more attention on the physiological aspect of individuals' emotional well-being. Individuals need to cope, and the body is where coping as a psychological process begins.

The centrality of individual emotional well-being in our coping framework does not turn a blind eye to the social and cultural characters of emotions. Individual coping is inherently a social and cultural process in which individuals become interdependent through common goals.<sup>33</sup> 'Structural

<sup>26</sup>Folkman, 'Measurement of coping,' p. 98.

<sup>27</sup>Leonard I. Pearlin and Carmi Schooler, 'The structure of coping,' *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 19:1 (1978), pp. 2–21; Peggy A. Thoits, 'Stressors and problem-solving: The individual as psychological activist,' *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 35:2 (1994), pp. 143–60.

<sup>28</sup>See, for example, James C. Coyne and Geraldine Downey, 'Social factors and psychopathology: Stress, social support, and coping processes,' *Annual Review of Psychology*, 42:1 (1991), pp. 401–25; Jeremy P. Jamieson, Matthew K. Nock, and Wendy B. Mendes, 'Mind over matter: Reappraising arousal improves cardiovascular and cognitive responses to stress,' *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 141:3 (2012), pp. 417–22.

<sup>29</sup>Robbie Case, Sonia Hayward, Marc Lewis, and Paul Hurst, 'Toward a Neo-Piagetian theory of cognitive and emotional development,' *Developmental Review*, 8:1 (1988), pp. 1–51 (pp. 14–15).

<sup>30</sup>Ross, *Mixed Emotions*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup>Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics,' *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 503–5.

<sup>32</sup>Rose McDermott, 'The body doesn't lie: A somatic approach to the study of emotions in world politics,' *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 557–62 (p. 558).

<sup>33</sup>Renee F. Lyons, Kristin D. Mickelson, Michael J.L. Sullivan, and James C. Coyne, 'Coping as a communal process,' *Journal of Social and Personal Relationship*, 15:5 (1998), pp. 579–605 (p. 582).

discrimination ... and collective disadvantages' are also 'important contextual demands with which people cope'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, individual coping matters to international politics under conditions in which our emotional well-being orders us to challenge established political arrangements that require conformity to rules and norms. How we feel in reaction to political events may be subject to culturally and socially specific scripts.<sup>35</sup> However, how we *deal with* emotions follows a different script, one of emotional balancing and equilibrium. Evidence from affective neuroscience shows a 'pre-social, pre-discursive' dimensions of affect.<sup>36</sup> The counter-entropic neural disposition generates a 'defensive understanding of selfhood' that prioritises the attainment of 'emotional quiescence' over seeking perfect knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

On the premise that 'individuals are activists on behalf of their own well-being',<sup>38</sup> our emotional well-being may order us to confront rules and norms and withdraw us from emotional labour<sup>39</sup> when emotions are *managed*, not necessarily *balanced*. The difference between managing and balancing emotions lies in the relationship between the self and external environment. When we manage emotions, we regulate ourselves to fit in specific circumstances – for example, we force a smile and create narratives to keep our job and maintain sanity.<sup>40</sup> Yet when we balance emotions, we negotiate with the wider environment, and radical changes are possible. Those moments are 'emotional ruptures' that set up alternative political options.<sup>41</sup>

This brings us to the 'therapeutic' approach within the theorisation of emotions in IR. Emotional responses, according to Crawford, are partly based on individuals' appraisal of 'an event's significance for their well-being'.<sup>42</sup> The political consequence is political elites' tendency to distort past events and decisions to 'feel good about' their choices.<sup>43</sup> This is an important intervention to revisit the instrumentalist take that treats leaders as deliberate and strategic players 'inherently capable of rising above the emotions of the masses'<sup>44</sup> – not to mention that unintentionally transmitted affective information may undermine orchestrated strategic communication in high politics.<sup>45</sup>

Individuals' neural dynamics of emotions and regulation also have collective implications, particularly when it comes to emotional attachments.<sup>46</sup> In the context of trauma, collective narratives that help individuals 'heal the wounds of the past' are vital for societies and groups to build peaceful relationships with others. Hutchison speaks of the concept of 'working through' to conceptualise how communities make cognitive and emotional sense of communal trauma.<sup>47</sup> Different from 'moving on', 'working through' trauma is simultaneously therapeutic and an 'active political process' in which communities engage with suffering and memories 'in a way that prompts a questioning of

<sup>34</sup> Martijn van Zomeren, Colin Wayne Leach, and Russell Spears, 'Protesters as "passionate economists": A dynamic dual pathway model of approach coping with collective disadvantage', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16:2 (2012), pp. 180–99.

<sup>35</sup> On feeling rules and emotion cultures, see Simon Koschut, 'The structure of feeling: Emotion culture and national self-sacrifice in world politics', *Millennium*, 45:2 (2017), pp. 174–92.

<sup>36</sup> Earl Gammon, 'Affective neuroscience, emotional regulation, and international relations', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 189–219 (p. 198).

<sup>37</sup> Gammon, 'Affective neuroscience', p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> Peggy A. Thoits, 'Stress, coping, and social support processes: Where are we? What next?', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 35 (1995), pp. 53–79 (p. 58).

<sup>39</sup> On emotional labour, see Deepak Nair, 'Emotional labor and the power of international bureaucrats', *International Studies Quarterly*, 64:3 (2020), pp. 573–87.

<sup>40</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> Neta C. Crawford, 'The passion of world politics: Propositions on emotion and emotional relationships', *International Security*, 24:4 (2000), pp. 116–56 (p. 128).

<sup>43</sup> Crawford, 'Passion of world politics', p. 142.

<sup>44</sup> Ross, *Mixed Emotions*.

<sup>45</sup> Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'The personal touch: Leaders' impressions, costly signaling, and assessments of sincerity in international affairs', *International Studies Quarterly*, 56:3 (2012), pp. 560–73.

<sup>46</sup> Gammon, 'Affective neuroscience', p. 213.

<sup>47</sup> Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*, pp. 244–7.

the very mindsets and structures (of power).<sup>48</sup> This position poses a direct question to ontological security's state-centric inclination by probing whose anxiety deserves narratives of the sense of self, which leads to the next section.

### *Distributive politics of individual coping*

The question of whose coping matters to IR concerns the distributive aspect of individual coping. We intuitively understand that individual coping by leaders in eminent positions has major consequences for international politics, yet the emotional well-being of ordinary citizens also has the potential for global ramifications. This is illustrated by the Fridays for Future movement, which originated from the individual coping responses to depression and climate anxiety by a Swedish teenager.<sup>49</sup> Yet even when the urgency is obvious and when facing a similar stressor such as a terrorist attack, coping responses can vary significantly. In 2001, George W. Bush produced visibly different enemy narratives and security measures from the Spanish public's emotional response to the train bombings in 2004, which resulted in demonstrations and 'absence of public hostility toward ... the Muslim minority'.<sup>50</sup> These examples showcase our position that the both leaders' and the citizenry's coping matters and may generate different political outcomes.

The examples also illustrate that, both the exigency of a stressor and its relevance which prompt coping responses, are negotiated. Our coping framework covers the overlooked situation of a slow-burning crisis in which urgency is intersubjectively agreed, instead of objectively imposed. An example of intersubjective urgency can be observed in the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021. Then-President Trump manufactured a stressor – electoral fraud and claims that the 2020 election had been stolen – evoking negative emotions such as anger and fear among his supporters. Trump subsequently offered emotional balancing through problem-focused coping by calling them to attend a protest in Washington. The scaling up from individual to collective coping has the potential to encourage 'strategic political behaviours'<sup>51</sup> in which leaders capitalise on the need to cope. How leaders cope with stress is nevertheless not automatically translated into collective coping. In fact, collective coping requires individuals to 'enlist the assistance of ingroup others in a way that maintains sensitivity towards the wellbeing of those others'.<sup>52</sup>

### *From individual to collective coping*

Scaling up from individual coping to the collective level takes place via *representation* to 'establish the emotional fabric that binds people together'.<sup>53</sup> The levelling up of emotions can be unintentional, as in the case of 'emotional contagion', which is an automatic process.<sup>54</sup> It can also be intentional and strategic by matching political strategies with others' affective states (calibration), eliciting emotive responses for political gains (manipulation), modifying the 'underlying structure of affective dispositions and concerns' (cultivation), and performing an emotional display to influence the audience (display).<sup>55</sup>

Our approach aims in the direction of representation and interpretative methods but takes a slightly different route by exploring the possibility of self-representation. A quick detour to Lazarus's differentiation between primary and secondary appraisal helps us to illuminate what is

<sup>48</sup>Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*, p. 245.

<sup>49</sup>Charlotte Alter, Suyin Haynes, and Justin Worland, 'The Conscience', *TIME Magazine*, 194:27/28 (23–30 December 2019), pp. 50–65 (pp. 58–9).

<sup>50</sup>Ross, *Mixed Emotions*, p. 89.

<sup>51</sup>Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Affective politics after 9/11', *International Organization*, 69:4 (2015), pp. 847–79 (p. 860).

<sup>52</sup>Ben C. H. Kuo, 'Collectivism and coping: Current theories, evidence, and measurements of collective coping', *International Journal of Psychology*, 48:3 (2014), pp. 374–88 (p. 383).

<sup>53</sup>Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', p. 506.

<sup>54</sup>Ross, *Mixed Emotions*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup>Hall and Ross, 'Affective politics', pp. 860–2.

represented, shared, and circulated when coping is projected from the individual to the collective level. Primary appraisal concerns individuals' interpretation of the relevance of given circumstances. Secondary appraisal refers to individuals' 'options and prospects for coping'.<sup>56</sup> Interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups are conducted to collect individuals' interpretations.<sup>57</sup> Reflections from individuals and self-reported narratives, utilised in psychology research, may help literature on emotions in IR narrow the existing 'gap between a representation and what is represented therewith'.<sup>58</sup>

Individual coping is levelled up through circulation of coping responses, rather than emotional states. Three pathways, outlined by Hall and Ross, clarify directions of scaling up. It can be a top-down process driven by political elites, such as Donald Trump's Capitol Hill storming. The bottom-up process is also relevant when individuals enlist social assistance as coping resources, as in the case of Greta Thunberg. Horizontal circulation of a sense of urgency and the need to cope provide moments to transform an individual's effort to maintain emotional well-being into collective action, such as the Spanish public's response to the Madrid train bombings. Coping responses circulate (but are not always copied directly) and offer additional resources for individuals that later form their coping repertoires. This intervention therefore adds coping responses and narratives to Hall and Ross's checklist of what is shared and circulated. Circulation of coping responses imbues individuals' emotional balancing with collective dynamics. Scaling up occurs as coping responses are circulated and shared to address a common stressor, elevating individual coping to collective coping. Alongside the cognitive and behavioural adaptations emerges what Hutchison theorises as 'affective communities'.<sup>59</sup> Through representation, individuals are not only bound 'by shared emotional understanding'<sup>60</sup> of the stressor, but also the need for collective coping. Affective communities as a concept is emancipatory because it provides sites to appreciate the weaving of emotional meaning for communities beyond nation-states. In this sense, affective communities are the outcome of collective coping and a manifestation of collective agency, as individuals' dealing with stress is reappraised as part of a bigger political reconfiguration.

This article proposes a coping framework in which intersubjective appraisal of urgency from everyday stressors triggers the levelling up from individual coping to the collective level. Circulation of coping responses, problem-focused and/or emotion-focused, binds individuals to affective communities. Our theoretical contribution identifies a therapeutic approach within the 'emotional turn' of IR, and we use the innovative coping framework to explore how individual well-being is transformed into collective agency. Our conceptual framework of coping contributes to the therapeutic turn by providing a much-needed vocabulary and pinpoints mechanisms of 'working through' and 'moving through' stressful situations. By doing this, we demonstrate that not only are emotions constitutive of global politics, but also that *dealing with* emotions engenders conditions for creativity in IR.

## Methodological note

Coping research relies on self-reported information to capture and measure coping strategies and their effectiveness through interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups.<sup>61</sup> The introduction

<sup>56</sup>Richard S. Lazarus, 'Progress on a cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion', *American Psychologist*, 46:8 (1991), pp. 819–34 (p. 827).

<sup>57</sup>James L. Moore and Madonna G. Constantine, 'Development and initial validation of the collectivistic coping styles measure with African, Asian, and Latin American international students', *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 27:4 (2005), pp. 329–47.

<sup>58</sup>Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions', p. 506.

<sup>59</sup>See, for example, Emma Hutchison, 'Affective communities as security communities', *Critical Studies on Security*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 127–9; Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*.

<sup>60</sup>Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>61</sup>See, for example, Charles S. Carver, Michael F. Scheier, and Jagdish K. Weintraub, 'Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56:2 (1989), pp. 267–83; Jordan A. Litman,



of coping to International Relations therefore offers important methodological challenges and opportunities. The main question lies in the ontological compatibility of self-reported affective experiences, as emotions are intrinsically social.<sup>62</sup> Instead, emotions are examined via representation and communication and through discourse.<sup>63</sup> The communicative process is highlighted, as emotional expression is mediated and regulated.<sup>64</sup>

Yet treating self-reported information from individuals as narratives<sup>65</sup> offers a methodological opportunity to link affective IR and psychology approaches. Although an individual's narrative does not allow researchers to 'get inside the[ir] head',<sup>66</sup> their stories provide valuable indirect insights into how they 'make sense of emotional experience and imbue it with meaning'.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, it may contribute to the debate about agency in the study of political emotions by carving out an interpretive space for local agents.<sup>68</sup>

Our research design echoes Holmes's advocacy of a 'triangulation of methods' to study emotions.<sup>69</sup> The motivation of our research design is the recognition of the power dynamics between researchers and the agents we study. The triangulation allows us to identify affective experiences, trace how they are coped with, and understand how and why certain emotions are communicated. As coping processes entail both individual and collective levels, this study may provide new ideas to address the challenge of capturing the 'scaling-up' process at the intersection between individual emotions and affective dynamics.

We adhere to the established practice in the field of using a case study.<sup>70</sup> Our case study is the mainstreaming of the Hong Kong independence issue, which showcases the political consequence of coping. Our empirical investigation involves self-reported information via surveys and open-ended interviews to invite our respondents to reconstruct their emotional landscape and examine the coping process on the individual level. Respondents' accounts of the everyday are essential to understanding how stress is experienced and subsequently dealt with. We distributed a survey to 60 localist<sup>71</sup> leaders in Hong Kong and received 32 valid responses (response rate = 53.3%). Questions in the survey were open-ended and invited respondents to offer their own narrative of their affective experiences. The survey was limited to studying patterns rather than explaining the emergence and evolution of emotions.<sup>72</sup> Findings from our survey were closely monitored and followed up by interviews. We contacted all groups that fit a broad definition of localism. Between 2012 and 2020, we conducted 80 in-depth interviews, in English, Mandarin, or Cantonese, with 60 localist leaders (response rate = 97%). In the interviews, we initially let localist leaders freely share the process of their political awakening before steering them towards their

<sup>62</sup>'The COPE inventory: Dimensionality and relationships with approach- and avoidance-motives and positive and negative traits', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 41:2 (2006), pp. 273–84; Moore and Constantine, 'Development and initial validation'.

<sup>63</sup>See, for example, Janice Bially Mattern, 'A practice theory of emotion for International Relations', in Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 63–86; Karin M. Fierke, 'Emotion and intentionality', *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 563–67; Jonathan Mercer, 'Feeling like a state: Social emotion and identity', *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 515–35.

<sup>64</sup>See, for example, Simon Koschut, 'Emotional (security) communities: The significance of emotion norms in inter-allied conflict management', *Review of International Studies*, 40:3 (2014), pp. 533–58.

<sup>65</sup>Simon Koschut, 'Emotions, discourse, and power in world politics', in Simon Koschut (ed.), *The Power of Emotions in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 3–22.

<sup>66</sup>Lazarus, 'Emotions and interpersonal relationships'.

<sup>67</sup>Fierke, 'Emotion and intentionality', p. 565.

<sup>68</sup>Koschut, 'Emotions, discourse, and power', p. 9.

<sup>69</sup>L. H. M. Ling, 'Decolonizing the international: Towards multiple emotional worlds', *International Theory*, 6 (2014), pp. 579–89.

<sup>70</sup>Marcus Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy: Mirror neurons and the problem of intentions', *International Organization*, 67:4 (2013), pp. 829–61 (p. 853).

<sup>71</sup>See, for examples, Hall and Ross, 'Affective politics after 9/11'; Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*.

<sup>72</sup>Localists are the only group that openly advocated for Hong Kong independence.

<sup>73</sup>Bleiker and Hutchison, 'Emotions and world politics', p. 122.

understanding of the impact of major events on their emotional situation. The interviews sought to establish a nuanced analysis of how leaders have coped with disruptions to their emotional equilibrium and how they communicated coping strategies to their followers. We re-interviewed several leaders over the years. Our longitudinal study allowed us to gain trust and access to leaders' reflections of their affective experiences and explanation of their coping process. Due to the political sensitivities of the topic of Hong Kong independence, we decided to anonymise all interviewees.

Our methodological contribution, in this sense, is to return agency to research subjects. The final methodological element focuses on emotion representation: a content analysis of all social media posts by 47 localist leaders shared during the first 48 hours of the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. Data was collected from public and private (friends/supporters) Facebook posts of leaders. Our interviews confirmed that all localist leaders use the social media platform Facebook as their primary and often only tool to disseminate information, communicate with the public, and mobilise supporters. Content analysis examined the symbolic qualities of texts through 'qualitative interpretation' in which the researchers' voice participates in the dialogue with research subjects.<sup>73</sup> We triangulated the self-reflected emotions of political leaders with those communicated and represented through their words and images.

## Findings

The idea of Hong Kong independence is not a cognitive novelty, but for decades, it was confined to sporadic op-eds and demands by isolated local elites.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, independence was not even the aim of Hong Kong's student movement in the early 1970s, unlike other anti-colonial movements in Asia.<sup>75</sup> After the transfer of sovereignty from the British to the Chinese, independence was treated as political taboo: intellectually available, but normatively unacceptable because of its challenge to PRC sovereignty over Hong Kong. Anyone openly advocating for Hong Kong independence was seen as 'secessionist' by the Chinese government and as a 'radical' by the political establishment in Hong Kong.<sup>76</sup>

After 1997, Hong Kong retained its own political and economic system under the 'One Country, Two Systems' framework. The pro-democracy movement focused on safeguarding Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy as guaranteed in the mini-constitution. For decades, the main political cleavage in the territory between the pan-democratic camp and the pro-establishment (or pro-Beijing) camp was the speed of democratisation and realisation of universal suffrage.<sup>77</sup> The most daring challenge to the regime in Beijing was a year-long civil disobedience campaign to pressure the Chinese government for democratic changes to the Hong Kong electoral system.<sup>78</sup> Neither the pan-democrats nor the pro-Beijing camp ever questioned that Hong Kong was a part of China, rendering the option of independence a non-issue.

It was not until the localist movement in the 2010s that the issue of Hong Kong independence was openly advanced.<sup>79</sup> The challenge to the status quo and critique of existing political camps

<sup>73</sup>Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (London: Sage, 1980), p. 21; Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage, 2016), p. 60.

<sup>74</sup>For a more systematic examination of the Hong Kong independence movement, see Kevin Carrico, *Two Systems, Two Countries: A Nationalist Guide to Hong Kong* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Suzanne Pepper, *Keeping Democracy at Bay: Hong Kong and the Challenge of Chinese Political Reform* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>75</sup>Stephan Ortmann, 'Hong Kong: Problems of identity and independence', in Meredith Leigh Weiss and Edward Aspinall (eds), *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. 79–100 (p. 84).

<sup>76</sup>Francis L. F. Lee, 'Internet alternative media, movement experience, and radicalism: The case of post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong', *Social Movement Studies*, 17:2 (2018), pp. 219–33.

<sup>77</sup>Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 'The basic law of the Hong Kong special administrative region of the People's Republic of China', available at <https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclaw/basiclaw.html>.

<sup>78</sup>The campaign was initiated by a group of academics who envisioned a radical but rational and peaceful movement, 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace', with escalating actions of civil disobedience.

<sup>79</sup>See, for example, Sebastian Veg, 'The rise of "localism" and civic identity in post-handover Hong Kong: Questioning the Chinese nation-state', *The China Quarterly*, 230 (2017), pp. 323–47; Malte Philipp Kaeding, 'The rise of "localism" in Hong

defined localism as the ‘third force’ in Hong Kong’s political landscape. Initial theory building on localism envisioned Hong Kong as a city-state, undermining the sovereignty claimed by the PRC over Hong Kong.<sup>80</sup> A further step was taken with the creation of the Hong Kong National Party in 2016, which organised the first ever independence rally that attracted 10,000 people.<sup>81</sup> Expressions of ‘independence’ and the ‘Hong Kong nation’ subsequently entered the political establishment when localists referenced them during their oath-taking ceremony in the city’s legislature.<sup>82</sup> Within a very short time, the idea of Hong Kong independence was mainstreamed. Here, mainstreaming is defined as a discourse quickly shifting from marginal circles ‘to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts.’<sup>83</sup> Hong Kong independence was extensively debated in the media. The term ‘Hong Kong independence’ in Hong Kong’s seven best-selling newspapers increased by 1,380 per cent between 2011 and 2016 (from 90 mentions in 2011 to 1,332 in 2016).<sup>84</sup> Up to one-fifth of the population now supports Hong Kong independence, testifying to considerable public support.<sup>85</sup> Political groups advocating independence performed so well in elections<sup>86</sup> that they pushed individuals and groups across the localist spectrum to take a clearer position on Hong Kong’s future and to support self-determination.<sup>87</sup> The sudden popularisation of independence was a remarkable achievement in comparative perspective,<sup>88</sup> given the historical legacies, as well as political and geo-strategic realities, making it an unexpected political choice to the ruling elites both in Beijing and Hong Kong.

### *Intersubjectivity of urgency: Interpreting mainlandisation as an essential threat*

Mainlandisation refers to the accelerated socio-economic integration with the mainland.<sup>89</sup> In particular, Hong Kongers felt overtaken by the mass tourism and immigration from China. The new Chinese arrivals were perceived to be instruments in a strategic plan of the Chinese government to change Hong Kong into a mainland city.<sup>90</sup>

Kong, *Journal of Democracy*, 28:1 (2017), pp. 157–71; Samson Yuen and Sanho Chung, ‘Explaining localism in post-handover Hong Kong: An eventful approach’, *China Perspectives*, 3 (2018), pp. 19–29.

<sup>80</sup> Chin Wan, 香港城邦論 [*On Hong Kong As A City State*] (Hong Kong: Enrich Publishing, 2011).

<sup>81</sup> Kaeding, ‘Rise of localism in Hong Kong’, p. 166.

<sup>82</sup> Kaeding, ‘Rise of localism in Hong Kong’, p. 166.

<sup>83</sup> Katy Brown, Aurelien Mondon, and Aaron Winter, ‘The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: Towards a heuristic framework’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (2021), pp. 1–18 (p. 9).

<sup>84</sup> WiseNews, 2023. Wisers Information Limited, available at: {[www.wisers.com](http://www.wisers.com)}.

<sup>85</sup> Ting-Yiu Robert Chung, Ka-Lai Karie Pang, Wing-Yi Winnie Lee, and Chit-Fai Edward Tai, ‘Survey on Hong Kong people’s views regarding the anti-extradition bill movement’, *Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute*, available at: {[https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/reuters\\_anti\\_elab\\_round4\\_ENG\\_v1\\_pori.pdf](https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/reuters_anti_elab_round4_ENG_v1_pori.pdf)}, released 31 October 2020; at the height of the debate, ‘40% of Hong Kongers would not rule out the idea of independence’ (CUHK, ‘Public opinion and political development in Hong Kong’); independence was supported by close to 40 per cent of people aged 15–24. Radio Free Asia, ‘Nearly 40 percent of young people favor Hong Kong independence: Survey’ (26 July 2016), available at: {<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/favor-07262016131744.html>}.

<sup>86</sup> Groups that openly advocated independence received 66,524 votes (15.38%) in the 2016 New Territories East by-election (Elector Affairs Commission, ‘Report on the 2016 Legislative Council New Territories East geographical constituency by-election’ (27 May 2016), available at: {[https://www.eac.hk/en/legco/2016lcbe\\_nte\\_detailreport.htm](https://www.eac.hk/en/legco/2016lcbe_nte_detailreport.htm)}). The localist camp, which included groups that embraced nation-building or self-determination for Hong Kong, received a total of 411,893 votes (19%) and six seats at the 2016 Legislative Council Elections (Elector Affairs Commission, ‘Report on the 2016 Legislative Council general election’ (2 December 2016), available at: {[https://www.eac.hk/en/legco/2016lce\\_report.htm](https://www.eac.hk/en/legco/2016lce_report.htm)}).

<sup>87</sup> Interview with left-wing localist lawmaker and activist, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>88</sup> It is worth noting that it took the Scottish National Party several decades to get similar support rates for Scottish independence. Lindsay Paterson, ‘Education and support for Scottish independence, 1979–2016’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 38:3 (2023), pp. 1–22.

<sup>89</sup> Lo Sonny Shiu-hing, *The Dynamics of Beijing–Hong Kong Relations: A Model for Taiwan?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

<sup>90</sup> Interview with localist theorist, 2017, Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong government admitted that the ‘actual impact on the livelihood of the community’, particularly in densely populated neighbourhoods<sup>91</sup> and the stretched transport facilities ‘exceeded the public’s psychological acceptability’<sup>92</sup>

The stressor of mainlandisation generated negative emotions such as anger, fear, contempt, and despair. Our interview data shows that a series of low-intensity emotional encounters accumulated into a widely recognised stressful situation in which Hong Kong was perceived to face an existential threat.<sup>93</sup> The Hong Kong government’s inaction fuelled the feeling that China was a new ‘coloniser’ in Hong Kong.<sup>94</sup> The combination of everyday stress and the lack of response from the authorities induced a high level of frustration and fear.<sup>95</sup> Mainlandisation was experienced as a question of ‘life and death’.<sup>96</sup>

Fear amplifies the intensity of everyday stress through the associated sense of lacking control.<sup>97</sup> Thus, despite its weak action tendency, fear disrupts individuals’ emotional equilibrium, triggering the coping process as a way of self-protection.<sup>98</sup> While localists coped with fear and looked for effective coping responses, a dramatic political event across the Taiwan Strait gained significant attention in Hong Kong: the so-called Sunflower Movement. This demonstration included a 23-day-long occupation of the legislature that successfully halted the enforcement of a controversial trade agreement between China and Taiwan. Taiwanese resistance to increasing Chinese influence was of direct relevance to the stressful situation experienced by localists in Hong Kong.

### *Circulation of coping responses*

The Sunflower Movement in Taiwan possesses cognitive and emotional significance to localists because it inspires the secondary appraisal in individual coping that concerns options and prospects of coping. Taiwanese storming into the legislature vindicated localist advocacy for direct action, as localist leaders sought moral support to justify their own resistance. Direct action to confront authority is problem-focused coping. The Sunflower Movement also facilitated emotion-focused coping with the realisation that Taiwanese and Hong Kongers have a common stressor: the China factor.<sup>99</sup> The fear of China felt in Taiwan echoed the feelings of Hong Kongers, and the thrill of the successful occupation provided hope. A left-wing localist lawmaker reflected: ‘It [the Sunflower Movement] brings me hope. I wonder, why can’t it happen in Hong Kong? No one here has been that brave.’<sup>100</sup> Through the balancing of fear, Hong Kong activists also experienced disappointment and anger towards the lack of determination of Hong Kongers.

Witnessing the images and texts of the Sunflower Movement, Taiwanese coping responses circulated in Hong Kong and provided new coping narratives and repertoires. Localist leaders also reflected on the meaning of anger and reinterpreted its relationship with action through emotion-focused coping. Anger was recognised as an emotion that could embolden, for it urges people ‘to do some of the things that remove or harm its agent’.<sup>101</sup> Bowlby argues that two types of anger exist:

<sup>91</sup> Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat, ‘Individual visit scheme’, Research Brief, Hong Kong Legislative Council (2014), available at <https://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1314rb06-individual-visit-scheme-20140507-e.pdf>.

<sup>92</sup> Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, ‘Assessment report on Hong Kong’s capacity to receive tourists’, Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (2013), p. 43, available at: [https://www.tourism.gov.hk/resources/english/paperreport\\_doc/misc/2014-01-17/Assessment\\_Report\\_eng.pdf](https://www.tourism.gov.hk/resources/english/paperreport_doc/misc/2014-01-17/Assessment_Report_eng.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> Interview with localist district councillor, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with localist key opinion leader (KOL) and commentator, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with localist KOL, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Hong Kong Autonomy Movement localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.

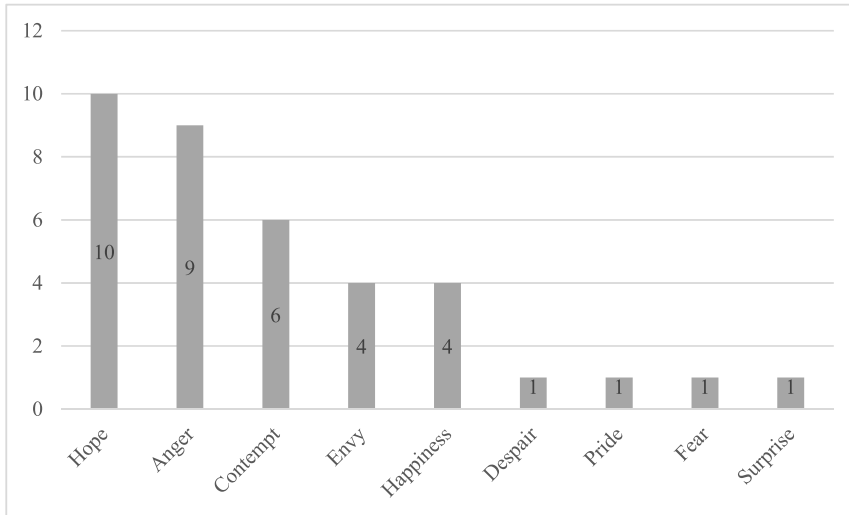
<sup>97</sup> Nico H. Frijda, *The Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>98</sup> Nico H. Frijda, ‘The laws of emotion’, *American Psychologist*, 43:5 (1988), pp. 349–58.

<sup>99</sup> Wu Jieh-Min, ‘The China factor in Taiwan’, in Gunter Schubert (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 426–46.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with left-wing localist legislator, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>101</sup> Frijda, ‘The laws of emotion’, p. 351.



**Figure 1.** An overview of communicated emotions during the Sunflower Movement by localist leaders on Facebook. Source: Authors' own survey.

a dysfunctional 'anger of despair', close to the inflexible state of rage, and a functional 'anger of hope', which contains a constructive element in its action tendency.<sup>102</sup> The Sunflower Movement inspired angry localists in Hong Kong to channel their anger into meaningful action, sowing the seeds of an anger of hope. The liberation of Hong Kong's localist leaders from the anger of despair took place during Taiwan's Sunflower Movement.<sup>103</sup>

The accentuation of a positive reinterpretation of anger set the scene for the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong's own resistance against Chinese influence. In late August 2014, the Beijing government rejected genuine democratic change for Hong Kong. Angry university and secondary-school students immediately launched a comprehensive class boycott. Their anger and despair intensified and led to actions that ushered in the large-scale occupation and civil-disobedience movement. Participation in the Umbrella Movement qualifies as problem-focused coping, which aims to address the cause of negative emotions by taking direct action. A pro-independence localist leader explained that 'the reason for people to join is simply because ... they can *feel* the problem.'<sup>104</sup> A localist commentator pointed out the quasi-therapeutic qualities of the Umbrella Movement, which temporarily helped with his chronic depression.<sup>105</sup>

Various coping responses enable individuals to reappraise a stressful situation and provide ways to alter it. Taiwan's social movements and political developments became increasingly relevant to people in Hong Kong through the recognition of a common stressor – influence from China. Moreover, the reappraisal process resulted in Hong Kongers shifting their attention away from Beijing towards Taiwan, as this reorientation contributed to their psychological well-being. Reappraisal is primarily a consequence of emotion-focused coping. The Taiwanese achievements countering Chinese influence demonstrated that the fate of Hong Kong could also be decided by its people.

Following reappraisal, localist leaders communicated emotions (shown in Figure 1) together with their coping responses to the public via social media. Dominated by emotion-focused coping, Hong Kong activists steered their attention away from Beijing, as this reorientation contributed

<sup>102</sup>John Bowlby, *Separation: Attachment and Loss. Anxiety and Anger* (London: Hogarth Press, Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1973), p. 274.

<sup>103</sup>Interview with localist theorist and student leader, 2016, Nuremberg.

<sup>104</sup>Pro-independence localist leader, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>105</sup>Interview with localist commentator and critic, 2019, Hong Kong.

to their psychological well-being. The emotion-focused coping responses were represented and shared by localist leaders through social media and direct communication with followers. Negative emotions targeted China and passive Hong Kongers, while Taiwanese students' occupation of their parliament elicited positively valenced emotions such as 'happiness' and 'pride'. A localist commentator posted on Facebook that his 'politics-induced depression disappeared as politics exploded into everyday life.'<sup>106</sup> In his interview he elaborates: 'In everyday life I feel my survival is meaningless. During the Umbrella Movement, I felt pumped because I found my life meaningful, and I felt hope.'<sup>107</sup> Through the open communication of coping responses and negative emotions, individual coping is elevated to the collective level. It underlines coping as a communal process, which involves shared emotional understanding of the situation and collective efforts.

Despite Hong Kong localists employing various coping responses, the stressor of mainlandisation remained and continued to generate negative emotions. Negative emotions rose again after the end of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. When police cleared the occupation sites after 79 days, the government refused to make any concessions on questions of democracy and universal suffrage. The failure of the Umbrella Movement amplified the severity of external stress (i.e. mainlandisation) and dealt a serious blow to the psychological well-being of participants. Localist leaders recalled intensified anger, fear, and despair.<sup>108</sup> The link between individuals' psychological well-being and the city's fate foregrounds the emergence of affective communities.

### *Emergent and adaptive affective communities*

Intensified negative emotions could no longer be addressed through previously employed coping responses and thus required different approaches. A localist leader and radio host observed that 'the entire society is angry, restless and these emotions have no outlet.'<sup>109</sup> Localist activists imbued Hong Kong society with affective qualities, as individually felt stress became situated in a communal context, and Hong Kong as a political community became populated with emotional meanings. Emotion-focused coping therefore became an important coping response for localists, which shaped the boundaries of the emerging affective community.

Individual venting of anger and contempt fuelled anti-China sentiments, and localists were accused of racism and xenophobia.<sup>110</sup> Localists' anger towards the pro-democracy camp over a perceived weakness vis-à-vis China became expressed in harsh attacks that intensified tensions between the groups<sup>111</sup> and demarcated community boundaries. 'Despair [was] so widespread in Hong Kong'<sup>112</sup> that localist leaders deployed emotion-focused coping, which prioritises balancing negative emotions over changing the stressful situation. Classified as a dispiriting emotion, despair initially does not bode well for engendering changes to the status quo.<sup>113</sup> However, the future-orientation of both hope and despair allows room for the reinterpretation of the negative emotion: 'we can hope even when we are helpless to affect the outcome.'<sup>114</sup> Localists realised that emotion-focused coping may unleash destructive energy. An anonymous leader of the radical localist organisation Valiant Frontier worried about the fate of the groups' pre-teenage members.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with localist commentator and critic, 2019, Hong Kong.

<sup>107</sup> Localist commentator and critic, 2019, Hong Kong.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with localist leader, 2017, Hong Kong; interview with localist leader and radio host, 2018, Hong Kong; interview with localist commentator and critic, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with localist leader and radio host, 2018, Hong Kong.

<sup>110</sup> Kwong Ying-ho, 'State-society conflict radicalization in Hong Kong: The rise of "anti-China" sentiment and radical localism', *Asian Affairs*, 47:3 (2016), pp. 428–42.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with localist leader, 2017, Hong Kong; interview with pan-democratic politician, 2018, Hong Kong.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with localist commentator and critic, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>113</sup> Wendy Pearlman, 'Emotions and the microfoundations of the Arab uprisings', *Perspectives on Politics*, 11:2 (2014), pp. 387–409 (p. 321).

<sup>114</sup> Richard S. Lazarus, 'Hope: An emotion and a vital coping resource against despair', *Social Research*, 66:2 (1999), pp. 653–78 (p. 674).

He reflected that ‘if you are filled with emotions and let emotions drive your action, then (our action) would just be a riot, not a revolution.’<sup>115</sup>

Consequently, localist leaders deployed problem-focused coping to counter potentially problematic socio-political consequences of emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping helps individuals create a hierarchy of priorities. Several localist leaders used meditation as an individual coping response,<sup>116</sup> which was communicated to supporters as a ‘way of pacifying the mind, cooling them down’, combined with an ‘interpretation of ... China–Hong Kong relations.’<sup>117</sup> Here, the coping response offered the first radical departure from the status quo thinking on how to achieve democracy in Hong Kong. A pro-independence localist leader disagreed with the pan-democrats’ objective to ‘build a democratic China’<sup>118</sup> to guarantee democracy in Hong Kong. This cognitive re-sequencing of democratisation was also proposed by a grassroots localist activist.<sup>119</sup> He argued that it is necessary to ‘de-colonise’ Hong Kong from Chinese rule first and only afterwards explore democratisation. His reorientation towards the issue of independence suppresses competing activities (i.e. the mission of building a democratic China).

Different coping responses also yielded a divergent sense of belonging within Hong Kong. For decades, thousands of Hong Kongers commemorated the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre with an annual candlelight vigil on 4 June. Localists challenged the form of these commemorations organised by pan-democratic groups.<sup>120</sup> The discussions about 4 June illustrate localists’ interactions and the formation of a community shaped by different emotional understandings of the vigil. For left-wing localists, 4 June is an important emotional connection to the fight for the democratisation of China.<sup>121</sup> Pro-independence localists ‘disagree with the patriotic sentiment’ of the vigil.<sup>122</sup> The lack of ‘emotional ties to China’ means a ‘focus on Hong Kong democracy first.’<sup>123</sup> Solidifying the borders of an affective community that is radical in its contempt towards China and pan-democrats restricted even key localist figures: ‘I couldn’t really talk about my sympathies towards China, and I avoid talking about it.’<sup>124</sup> The result is a reworking of the compassion towards mainland compatriots by ‘remembering [4 June] in a humanitarian manner.’<sup>125</sup> The debate over the commemoration exemplifies how our emotional well-being may order us to disobey well-established ritual and political habit.

Problem-focused coping allowed localist leaders to reappraise the significance of the Chinese government in Hong Kong’s democratisation process: it became ‘unrealistic to expect Beijing to give universal suffrage or democracy to us.’<sup>126</sup> The deadlock could only be broken by selective ignoring of the threat from China.<sup>127</sup> Fixating on the reaction from the Chinese government would only fuel ‘hopelessness and hatred.’<sup>128</sup> Thus, localists’ abandonment of the ‘democratic China’ future was followed by an alternative imagination of Hong Kong’s future. Ignoring reactions from China, localists embraced Hong Kong independence as the alternative that brought hope,<sup>129</sup> as the ‘only way out’ for Hong Kong.<sup>130</sup> In other words, Hong Kong independence became not only a

<sup>115</sup> Interview with anonymous Valiant Frontier leader, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with localist leader, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with localist theorist, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with pro-independence localist leader, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with grassroots localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>120</sup> Edmund W. Cheng and Samson Yuen, ‘Memory in movement: Collective identity and memory contestation in Hong Kong’s Tiananmen vigils’, *Mobilization*, 24:4 (2019), pp. 419–37.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with left-wing localist grassroots activist, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with localist leader and LegCo candidate, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with district-level localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with localist leader and LegCo candidate, 2017, London.

<sup>125</sup> Localist leader and LegCo candidate, 2017.

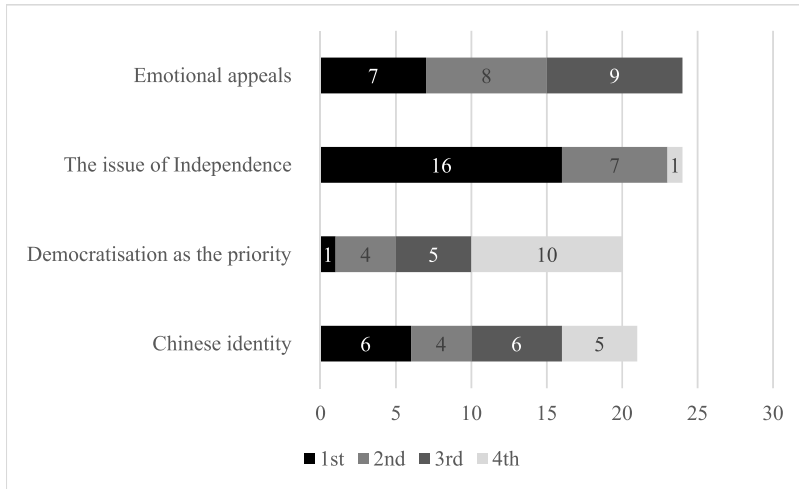
<sup>126</sup> Localist lawmaker 1, 2018, Hong Kong.

<sup>127</sup> Localist KOL, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>128</sup> Localist pan-democrat, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>129</sup> Pro-independence localist leader, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>130</sup> District-level localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.



**Figure 2.** Localists' perceptions of their difference from pan-democrats.

Source: Authors' own survey.

preferred future, but also a symbol of hope to localist leaders. The disregard for Beijing was complemented by localists' rising interests in the democratisation of Taiwan and shared emotional attachment to the issue of independence. The newly weighted significance of Taiwan vis-à-vis China during localists' coping processes enabled the articulation and reasoning of the choice of Hong Kong independence. Localist leaders aimed to 'inspire followers with a vision of state-building'.<sup>131</sup> A localist lawmaker elaborated links between the pursuit of Hong Kong independence and empowerment on a personal level, via steering away from the 'tragedy and loss' of not achieving democracy towards a new objective, 'an optimist picture' that 'the Hong Kong public *feels* we can win'.<sup>132</sup> The importance of the independence issue therefore lies in its function more as a consensus on how to cope rather than as a detailed political plan. The emotional significance of independence to this community is captured by localist leaders: 'we have no other choice ... independence is *the* solution for decolonisation'.<sup>133</sup> Preaching that '[Hong Kong independence] is the salvation',<sup>134</sup> collective coping within the affective communities defined a new objective and prescribed a desired future that is repressed by geopolitical reality. Hong Kong independence is thus empowered with emotional legitimacy within the localist affective community, which draws the boundary of the affective community and consolidates the affective bond among its members.

Localist leaders removed pan-democrats from their affective community. This is the result of various coping responses reflected in a survey of localist leaders on their differences with the pan-democrats, shown in Figure 2. The consequences of two coping responses are ranked highest: emotional appeals as a result of emotion-focused coping, and the issue of independence as a result of problem-focused coping.

Pan-democrats detest the idea of independence because it 'poke[s] the tiger in the eye'.<sup>135</sup> Instead, their leaders cope with the stressful situation in Hong Kong by fixating on 'democratisation' as a priority embedded in a fight for a democratic China.<sup>136</sup> Localists' rejection of China, in conjunction with emotional appeals such as anger and hope, enabled the rise of independence as the prime

<sup>131</sup> Interview with anonymous Valiant Frontier leader, 2017, Hong Kong.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with localist lawmaker 2, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>133</sup> Localist lawmaker 2, 2015.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Civic Passion strategist, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with pan-democratic politician, 2018, Hong Kong.

<sup>136</sup> This means different coping processes could create multiple, co-existing, or even competing affective communities.



difference from the pan-democrats. This means that localists' problem-focused coping responses led them to assign gravitas to the issue of independence.

With localism as a broad concept resonating with various political groups in Hong Kong, a localist lawmaker warned that 'pan-democrats are stealing the term (localism)' and suggested moving on 'to an issue that they dare not to steal. We are using nation-building, which is too radical for them.'<sup>137</sup> Hence, independence becomes the litmus test for members within the affective community, because it symbolises the emotional bond that unites them. The pursuit of independence interweaves individual coping with a collective effort to search for Hong Kong's future. This continuous collective and individual coping with prevailing negative emotions guarantees sufficient emotional energy to sustain the affective community.

### *The durability of coping and affective community*

Our interview data reveals that, in some cases, everyday stresses experienced by localist leaders accumulated to traumatising levels. During the scaling-up from individual coping to the collective, Hong Kong independence emerged as an embodiment of hope, a key coping resource.<sup>138</sup> The durability of the independence issue does not lie in its practicality. Instead, the strength of the affective community and the rising political significance of independence resides in the stressor, i.e. pressure from the Chinese government: 'the more the Chinese government pushes us, the more determined the future generation will become.'<sup>139</sup>

In June 2019, Hong Kong was rocked by mass demonstrations against proposed amendments to the extradition law. Affective patterns and the coping process recurred. Triggering the protests was the fear that the legal amendments would allow extraditions of Hong Kong residents to the PRC. Anger resurfaced as the Hong Kong government ignored public demands and deployed heavy-handed police tactics against peaceful protestors.<sup>140</sup> The escalating police brutality was met with an increasing radicalisation of protests, escalating the stressor of mainlandisation into trauma. More than 1 in 10 adults (11.2%) in Hong Kong suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome,<sup>141</sup> which is closely linked to the political climate.<sup>142</sup>

Problem-focused coping such as direct action is visible and mainstreamed in the form of broad support from society.<sup>143</sup> Survey data shows that at the height of the movement, 98.4% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I think we are in the same boat' when asked about the appropriateness of 'radical and confrontational actions to express their demands'.<sup>144</sup> In addition, the solidarity between Taiwan and Hong Kong grew stronger as a result of emotion-focused coping,<sup>145</sup> to the extent that the anti-extradition movement in Hong Kong impacted the early campaign phase of the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Interview with localist lawmaker 2, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>138</sup> Lazarus, 'Hope'.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with localist lawmaker 3, 2016, Hong Kong.

<sup>140</sup> Edmund W. Cheng, Francis L. F. Lee, Samson Yuen, and Gary Tang, 'Total mobilization from below: Hong Kong's freedom summer', *The China Quarterly*, 28 (2022), pp. 1–31.

<sup>141</sup> In 2014, after the Umbrella Movement, 6.5% of adults suffered from PTSD, while before the movement it was only 1.9%. See Michael Y. Ni, Xiaoxin I. Yao, Kathy S. M. Leung et al. 'Depression and post-traumatic stress during major social unrest in Hong Kong: A 10-year prospective cohort study', *The Lancet*, 395:10220 (2020), pp. 273–84.

<sup>142</sup> Yang Xue and Winnie W. S. Mak, 'Addressing sociopolitical determinants of mental health: An emerging challenge in Hong Kong', *The Lancet*, 395:10220 (2020), pp. 249–50.

<sup>143</sup> James Pomfret and Clare Jim, 'Exclusive: Hong Kongers support protester demands; minority wants independence from China – Poll', *Reuters*, (31 December 2019), available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-hongkong-protests-poll-exclusive-idUKKBN1Y20VJ>}.  
<sup>144</sup> CUHK, 'Research report on public opinion during the anti-extradition bill (Fugitive Offenders Bill) movement in Hong Kong', available at: <http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/en/pdf/202005PublicOpinionSurveyReport-ENG.pdf>}.  
<sup>145</sup> Chen Chih-Jou Jay and Victor Zheng, 'Changing attitudes toward China in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Xi Jinping era', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31:134 (2021), pp. 250–66.

<sup>146</sup> David G. Brown and Kyle Churchman, 'Hong Kong impacts Taiwan elections', *Comparative Connections*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 65–72.

Even though the anti-extradition movement is not about Hong Kong independence, there was a small uptick in support for independence: 19.5% of respondents supported Hong Kong independence even after the passage of the national security law.<sup>147</sup> Alongside support reflected in opinion polls, emotional attachments to Hong Kong independence became more visible during the protests in the form of slogans, banners, and artwork.<sup>148</sup> These signified the increasing emotional attachment to an alternative vision for Hong Kong's future. Developments since the introduction of the national security law in 2020 indicate that the emergent affective community has adapted to the political challenges in Hong Kong. The exodus of Hong Kongers does not prevent them from organising global rallies, which extend the territorial borders of the affective community and verify its adaptive nature.<sup>149</sup>

## Conclusion

The theorisation of coping in this paper is a renewed effort to appreciate the coping process in IR. Continuing the articulation that emotions matter in the discipline, our intervention suggests that the process of *dealing with* emotions is also a constitutive feature of global politics, shaping the conditions of political possibilities.

While the main literature this paper speaks to is emotions in IR, our theoretical framework of coping enhances the engagement with coping in political psychology and ontological security literatures. The foregrounding of emotion-focused coping in individual decision-making incorporates leaders' emotional well-being into the calculation. In addition, the theory of coping provides a new lens with a sharper focus on how leaders process emotional states. This will allow new ways of examining the existing evidence of *dealing with* stressors in autobiographies, official speeches, and archival materials. This paper's encounter with the ontological security literature suggests the significance of individuals' emotional well-being. The non-state nature of our illustrative case testifies to the relevance of ontological security to sub-national discontent and disagreement, highlighting the distributive politics of anxiety management.

Our contribution to the established theorisation of emotions in IR is to fine-tune the levelling-up process by offering two amendments. Conceptually, the coping framework adds the circulation of coping responses to the scaling-up pathways for collective affective experience. Self-representation and representation in the communication of coping responses allows individuals to stock up coping resources, which is vital because structure-induced stress exceeds the resources of a single person. Relatedly, the methodological contribution of this paper is to shed light on self-representation that connects individuals' emotional well-being to collective agency.

The illustrative case of Hong Kong is a sharper instance of more general phenomena, such as social movements, revolutions, civil disobedience, global action in response to the climate crisis, and nationalist protests. When protest is experienced as quasi-therapy, the official narratives of intimidation and repression feed the loop of coping and collective action. In the case of Hong Kong, the sovereign's strategy to impose legislation to criminalise separatist ideas created an exodus of Hong Kongers. Ironically, it was Beijing that made an otherwise small-scale, local, and sub-national level of suffering globally visible. Findings from this paper have policy implications. They rectify the official diagnosis that Hong Kongers' problems are merely socio-economic. This research shows these are questions of emotional well-being, and failure to recognise this drives Hong Kongers to seek more creative political options.

<sup>147</sup>Robert Ting-Yiu Chung, Karie Ka-lai Pang, Winnie Wing-yi Lee, and Edward Chit-fai Tai, 'Survey on Hong Kong people's views regarding the Anti-Extradition Bill movement (Round 4)', available at: [https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/reuters\\_anti\\_elab\\_round4\\_ENG\\_v1\\_pori.pdf](https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/reuters_anti_elab_round4_ENG_v1_pori.pdf).

<sup>148</sup>Emma Graham-Harrison, 'Hope and desperation inspired Hong Kong's "National Anthem", says incognito composer', *The Observer* (13 October 2019), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/hope-and-desperation-inspired-hong-kong-anthem-says-composer>.

<sup>149</sup>Tommy Walker, 'Demonstrations mark second anniversary of Hong Kong uprising', *Voice of America* (12 June 2021), available at: <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/demonstrations-mark-second-anniversary-hong-kong-uprising>.

The limitations of this paper arise from the richness of the empirical data. An example is the discussion of 4 June among localists, which prompts questions about whether coping leads to division in society per se or if it is a case-specific development.<sup>150</sup> Future research could address this outstanding question through a deeper dive into the psychology of coping with reference to ontological security literature. This could potentially clarify the linkage between anxiety and creativity, as it might be that the positive potential of anxiety is realised during the coping process.<sup>151</sup> International politics induce stressful situations, and how we cope with stress in turn may sow the seeds for change and creativity.

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<sup>150</sup>We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this point to our attention.

<sup>151</sup>See Bahar Rumelili, ‘Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties: A framework for conflict resolution’, in Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 10–29; Karl Gustafsson, ‘Why is anxiety’s positive potential so rarely realised? Creativity and change in international politics’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1044–9.