

HIERARCHICAL, JOB CONTENT, AND DOUBLE PLATEAUS: AN EXAMINATION OF  
STRESS, APPRAISAL, COPING, AND DEPRESSION

by

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(Under the direction of Lillian T. Eby)

ABSTRACT

Hierarchical, job content, and double plateaued employees from a variety of industries were surveyed regarding their experiences. The stress associated with experiencing a hierarchical or job content plateau was higher than overall stress reported by comparable samples in previous research. Neither hierarchically nor job content plateaued employees reported feeling there was much at stake in experiencing a plateau (primary appraisal) or that they were unable to change their situations (secondary appraisal). Employees reported 27 distinct coping themes organized into 7 meta-themes, with the most common being “Discuss Problem,” “Job Withdrawal,” and “Mental Coping.” Differences in coping strategies depending on the type of plateau experienced were also observed. Plateaued employees reported higher depression than non-plateaued employees but those who used “Discuss Problem” to cope were less depressed than those who did not, whereas those who used “Job Involvement” were more depressed. Implications for theory and suggestions for practice are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Hierarchical plateau, Job content plateau, Double plateau, Stress, Appraisal, Coping, Depression

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the Study

As organizations continue to restructure, outsource jobs, and lay off workers, the impact of such actions on surviving employee functioning remains an important issue. Recent Bureau of Labor Statistics show 117,684 employees were laid off in February of this year (www.bls.gov). The reality also exists that in most organizations as an employee moves up the hierarchy, the number of available positions narrows. Given the number of jobs lost as a result of organizational workforce reduction strategies and flat organizational structures, pursuing opportunities for advancement is becoming increasingly difficult for employees. Therefore, research on how employees can cope with one resulting outcome, experiencing a plateau, is a timely and important area of study.

While most research has focused on hierarchical plateaus, or the point where likelihood of promotions are low (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977), more recent literature reveals that employees may also experience a job content plateau, characterized by a lack of challenge in job tasks or responsibilities (e.g., Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998). Allen et al. found that employees reported experiencing both kinds of plateaus (hierarchical and job content) and some employees even reported being double plateaued (simultaneously experiencing a hierarchical and job content plateau). Experiencing a plateau has been associated with numerous negative outcomes, including absenteeism (e.g., Near, 1985), reduced job satisfaction (e.g., Chao, 1990), health problems (e.g., Near, 1985), lower organizational commitment (e.g., Allen et al., 1998), voluntary turnover (e.g., Veiga, 1981), and lower self-reported performance (e.g., Allen et al.,

1998). The existing research on the outcomes associated with being plateaued tends to focus on organization-specific attitudes and outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment). While this information is important, it is also necessary to explore additional psychological ramifications of experiencing a plateau. For example, depression is an outcome that has been overlooked in the plateauing literature, but can impact important organizational outcomes such as job performance (e.g., Greener & Guest, 2005).

What is also missing from the current literature is an examination of more proximal outcomes associated with a plateau. This includes the extent to which, and reasons why, the experience is perceived to be stressful as well as subsequent coping strategies that individuals deploy in response to plateaus. The existing literature on coping with career plateaus has made the assumption that experiencing a plateau is always perceived as stressful enough to lead to a coping response. However, this assumption has not been examined to date and it may be that there is variability in how stressful plateaus are perceived to be by individuals experiencing them.

A key factor in understanding stress is one's appraisal of the situation (in terms of what is at stake and what can be done) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Folkman and Lazarus (1980) consider appraisal of the situation as the most useful determinant of coping responses and have further argued that coping efforts may prove dysfunctional if one's appraisal of a situation does not match its reality (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Previous research has shown that certain types of plateaus are associated with more negative outcomes than other types of plateaus (Allen et al., 1998) and also has revealed differences in antecedents based on the kind of plateau experienced (Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999). Although not examined to date, appraisal of the situation also may differ as a function of the kind of plateau experienced (hierarchical, job

content, or double). Highlighting the characteristics that contribute to stressful appraisals might allow for a better understanding of how some employees are able to remain effective throughout a plateau (Feldman & Weitz, 1988), whereas others are not.

The literature on plateaus also has begun to offer recommendations about how to avoid plateaus based on attempts to highlight the factors that differentiate plateaued from nonplateaued employees. While these studies are important, Bardwick (1980) suggests that at some point in their careers everyone will encounter a plateau. Recent findings reported by Allen et al (1998) support this; at any given point in time there may be as few as 30% of employees in an organization who are not experiencing some type of plateau. Since plateauing is often unavoidable, it is useful to understand how plateaued employees cope with this experience when it does occur, rather than focusing only on how to avoid it. Few studies have addressed this issue and the coping recommendations that have been made tend to lack empirical support. Moreover, the full range of coping strategies may not be fully understood, as previous measures of coping have limited responses to closed-ended questions and checklists. Also missing from the literature is an examination of potential differences in coping strategies among employees experiencing different kinds of plateaus.

Certain coping strategies may be more effective in reducing emotional distress than others (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, it is also important examine the utility of coping strategies in order to determine which strategies are more effective in reducing emotional distress. This information could have implications for plateaued employees when deciding among their available coping options. Career counselors and managers also could benefit from knowing which coping strategies are more effective, as they would be better informed when advising plateaued employees in their coping attempts.

The present study attempts to address these gaps in the literature by: (a) examining plateaued employees' appraisals of the situation and the factors that influence their perceptions of stress; (b) identifying the coping strategies employed by individuals in response to facing a plateau; (c) revealing differences between employees who are plateaued hierarchically, in terms of job content, or both; and (d) exploring depression both as an outcome of being plateaued and as a measure of the effectiveness of coping strategies employed.

Given the current lack of literature addressing the coping process of plateaued employees, an exploratory approach is appropriate in order to guide subsequent theoretical and empirical work on the topic. Because the primary purpose of this study is to describe the coping strategies of plateaued employees, a qualitative approach is best suited since doing description is the "fundamental act" of qualitative data collection (Van Maanen, 1979). Moreover, researchers have called for such descriptive approaches to understanding coping responses since the use of inventories and coping checklists may artificially constrain the coping responses reported by participants (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Upon determining this taxonomy of coping strategies, subsequent research can then examine the utility of specific coping responses in terms of their impact on work attitudes and other important organizational outcomes.

### Plateau

A plateau was originally described as a point in one's career at which the likelihood of promotion is low (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977), although this concept of a career plateau may be too restrictive. Specifically, Bardwick (1986) distinguished between structural or hierarchical plateaus, which occur as the number of positions and opportunities for upward mobility in organizations decrease, and content plateaus, which occur as employees master their current positions and become bored. More recently, Allen et al. (1998) found that some

employees even report experiencing a “double plateau,” meaning they simultaneously feel plateaued both hierarchically as well as in terms of job content.

Allen et al. (1999) provided empirical support for the distinction between job content and hierarchical plateaus by highlighting differences in the predictors of each. For example, job and organizational tenure were positively related to hierarchical but not job content plateaus, education level was negatively related to job content but positively related to hierarchical plateaus, and lack of career exploration was more predictive of hierarchical plateaus. On the other hand, top management and supervisor support for developmental activities were related to both types of plateaus, suggesting that individuals who seek out such support may be more likely to avoid plateaus in general.

### Appraisal

In order to more fully understand the implications of experiencing a plateau, some consideration should be given to employee perceptions of the extent to which the experience is stressful. Of additional interest is whether any remedies exist for reducing the stress associated with a plateau. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define cognitive appraisal as a process used for determining why and to what extent a particular situation is stressful. Primary appraisal is used to determine what is at stake for the individual in a potentially stressful situation. Secondary appraisal is used to evaluate the appropriateness of existing responses. These authors distinguish three forms of primary appraisal used to determine the implications of the situation: irrelevant, benign-positive, and stressful. Irrelevant appraisals occur when the situation has no implications for one’s well-being and benign-positive appraisals occur if the situation is expected to result in positive outcomes. Stressful appraisals are more relevant to the present study and are described in terms of harm/loss (damage has occurred), threat (damage is anticipated), and challenge (gain

or growth is anticipated). Appraisal is an important and widely accepted component of the coping process (Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000), but a factor that has been largely overlooked in existing organizational research on coping with plateaus. Appraisal warrants attention in research on coping with plateaus in order to determine the extent to which employees are experiencing stress as a result of being plateaued. In the present study, primary appraisal will be examined in an attempt to answer the first research question:

Research Question 1: To what extent is experiencing a plateau perceived to be stressful?

Secondary appraisal serves an additional function in the cognitive appraisal process. It is used to draw conclusions about whether anything can be done to remedy the situation and is used when evaluating the utility of potential coping responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Perceptions of changeability are the fundamental aspect (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the most commonly studied dimension (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) of secondary appraisal.

Leana and Feldman (1992) describe perceptions of reversibility and causality as serving functions similar to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) idea of secondary appraisal and consider such appraisal factors important for determining coping responses in their model of coping with job loss. Leana and Feldman (1992) did not find differences in coping as a function of perceptions of causality; however, they note that this could be due to a lack of variability in responses. Most respondents in their sample of laid off employees attributed the layoffs to external causes, which the authors believe was due to the fact that the layoffs were widespread and affected a large number of employees within the organization. Plateaued employees, on the other hand may be more likely to vary in perceptions of whether the experience is internally or externally caused. For example, Feldman and Weitz (1988) provided a taxonomy of sources of career plateaus that include both internal (i.e., lack of individual skills and abilities) and external (i.e.,

slow organizational growth) factors. Plateaued employees who attribute the situation to external causes and see little opportunity to change the situation may not experience stress at all and therefore, see no reason to cope. Given the scarcity of research examining secondary appraisal in studies of coping with plateaus, a second research question asks:

Research Question 2: What factors contribute to the perceptions of stress associated with experiencing a plateau?

One's appraisal of the experience may vary as a function of the kind of plateau experienced. Allen et al.'s (1999) findings of distinct antecedents of hierarchical and job content plateaus provide some indirect support for this idea. Similarly, Allen et al. (1998) found that job content plateaued employees had more negative work attitudes than hierarchically plateaued employees, while double plateaued employees reported the most negative outcomes of all. Since previous research has revealed differences in several antecedents and outcomes of these distinct kinds of plateaus, it seems likely that appraisal factors associated with the plateau may differ as well. Further support for this idea is given by the very nature of what it means to be experiencing a hierarchical plateau (i.e., lack of promotions) versus what it means to be experiencing a job content plateau (i.e., lack of job challenge). Receiving promotions may be something perceived as less under one's control than increasing the challenge of one's job. Therefore, a hierarchical plateau might be considered less changeable than a job content plateau. This leads to a third research question, which asks:

Research Question 3: Do primary or secondary appraisals of the situation differ depending on whether employees are experiencing a hierarchical, job content, or double plateau?

## Coping

Lazarus, Folkman, and colleagues (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985; Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987) define coping as the thoughts and actions used to manage stressful encounters. Although several attempts to categorize the many instances of coping responses have been proposed, the most widely reported classification of such responses is based on Folkman and Lazarus's (1980) notion that coping serves two major functions: to directly address the problem itself (problem-focused coping) and to regulate emotions (emotion-focused coping) (Skinner, Edge, & Altman, 2003). Both forms of coping are often used in concert to deal with stressful situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). However, the effectiveness of a response may depend on the stressful event itself (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980); problem-focused coping strategies are often considered a more effective coping strategy than emotion-focused strategies (e.g., Leana & Feldman, 1994; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). This is encouraging given that people may engage in more problem-focused forms of coping at work than in other areas of life (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). However, evidence also exists to the contrary; Pearlin and Schooler (1978) found that manipulation of goals and values (an emotion-focused strategy) was the most effective strategy for dealing with occupational stress. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) address these conflicting findings and suggest that the domain of work-related problems may not have been adequately tapped in Pearlin and Schooler's study. They further note that the work-related situations in Pearlin and Schooler's study were described as chronic impersonal problems (e.g., noise), which may be more resistant to problem-focused efforts, whereas 59% of the work-related situations in Folkman and Lazarus's (1980) study were interpersonal in nature.

Despite attempts to examine coping in the workplace as part of a larger focus on coping in everyday life, research examining coping strategies in the context of one important work experience, a plateau, is sparse. Judge et al. (1999) developed a coping scale, which was a sum of scores on several questions addressing employees' ability to cope with organizational change. Consequently, specific examples of coping were not provided. It should also be noted that in the Judge et al. study organizations were intentionally targeted to allow for a sample of managers who were experiencing a "high degree of change" (p. 111). Many employees experiencing a career plateau are likely in the opposite situation – experiencing little change. Additionally, the Judge et al. study examined coping with organizational change as a predictor of experiencing a career plateau, which reflects the tendency of most previous research on plateaus to concentrate on strategies for avoiding the experience rather than examination of how people cope with these experiences.

#### Coping Strategies of Plateaued Employees

Tan and Salomone (1994) provided a list of recommendations for employers and career counselors to assist employees in adjusting to a plateau. These authors suggest that organizations should provide education and candor about the prevalence and implications of plateaus, alternative work forms and reward systems, opportunities to prepare for a second career, and encouragement of further education. Suggestions for career counselors include career goal reassessment and refocused learning goals. Loss and transition counseling also is recommended to help employees deal with the loss of their "idealized careers," anger, and/or apprehension about future opportunities. However, these suggestions are lacking in empirical support and the extent to which these suggestions are utilized in practice was not examined.

Elsass and Ralston (1989) provided a more complete theoretical framework including proposed responses for individuals experiencing such plateaus. The authors describe examples of potentially positive (e.g., lateral transfers, mentoring) and negative responses (e.g., withdrawal, alcohol/drug use), categorized in terms of being either “transition” (problem-focused), “reappraisal” (emotion-focused), or “defense” (emotion-focused) responses. While this theoretical framework is a useful starting point, a next step is to identify the actual coping strategies of plateaued employees in order for researchers to determine the utility of the various coping responses.

More recent research (Rotondo, 1999; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000) has provided empirical support for some of the strategies included in Elsass and Ralston’s (1989) proposed taxonomy. In an attempt to examine individual difference variables that predict such strategies, Rotondo (1999) included a list of six positive (e.g., working on special projects) and seven negative (e.g., blaming supervisor) coping responses. Need for achievement was associated with the use of more positive and fewer negative strategies, while negative affectivity was associated with less use of positive and greater use of negative strategies. In another study, Rotondo and Perrewé (2000) reduced Rotondo’s (1999) list to five positive and seven negative coping responses. Responses were subjected to a principal components analysis, resulting in three factors: positive, negative denial, and negative behavior. Positive responses (e.g., mentoring) were associated with more favorable job attitudes. Negative denial responses (e.g., alcohol or drug use) were associated with increased career-related strain and negative behavior responses (e.g., decreasing the quality of one’s work) were associated with lower perceptions of performance. In both studies, respondents were provided with a list of coping strategies and asked to indicate those in which they had engaged, although, the wording of most of these questions was not specific to the

experience of a plateau. For example, employees who agreed with the statement, “I have tried to become a mentor to younger employees” (Rotondo & Perrewe, 2000; p. 2646) could have engaged in such an activity at any point throughout their careers. Consequently, results may not reflect the actual coping strategies employed by individuals in *response* to being plateaued. More importantly, certain coping strategies may have been overlooked since employees were not able to indicate any coping strategies they might have engaged in that were not included on the list provided. Therefore, the fourth research question to be answered is:

Research Question 4: What coping strategies do employees select in response to experiencing a plateau?

#### Coping Strategies in Relation to Type of Plateau

The existing literature on coping with plateaus (Elsass & Ralston, 1998; Rotondo, 1999; Rotondo & Perrewe, 2000; Tan & Salomone, 1994) has failed to identify employees who were experiencing a job content plateau. This oversight is troubling given that employees may be able to master their jobs within three years (Bardwick, 1980) and are therefore susceptible to the experience of a job content plateau. Moreover, failure to identify employees experiencing this kind of plateau prevents a comparison between employees experiencing different kinds of plateaus. If differences do exist in appraisal depending on the type of plateau experienced, then differences in coping strategies also may exist. A coping strategy that might be perceived as useful for employees who are hierarchically plateaued may not be selected by someone experiencing a job content plateau. For example, Allen et al. (1999) found that lack of career exploration was more predictive of a hierarchical plateau than a job content plateau. Therefore, someone experiencing a hierarchical plateau might attempt to explore alternative career options as a coping strategy, whereas someone experiencing a job content plateau might consider other

options to improve the level of challenge provided in his or her job (i.e., becoming involved in more projects). Further support of this idea is given by Rotondo and Perrewé (2000). Given their unexpected finding of lateral transfers as a negative coping strategy, Rotondo and Perrewé (2000) note that, “there should be a mutual understanding between management and the plateaued employee taking a lateral transfer that any personal gain for the employee is in the opportunity to learn new skills and to face new challenges, not in promotion” (p. 2639). Although not examined in their study, this suggests that whereas lateral transfers may be a negative strategy for hierarchically plateaued employees, it could be a positive strategy for someone experiencing a job content plateau. Alternatively, there may exist additional coping strategies for employees experiencing a job content plateau or a double plateau that have not been identified due to the tendency in previous research to focus on hierarchical plateaus. By identifying the full range of coping strategies selected in response to each kind of plateau, researchers can then begin to determine the utility of responses, which will ensure that coping recommendations are consistent with the kind of plateau experienced. The fifth research question to be answered, then, is:

Research Question 5: Do employees engage in different coping strategies depending on whether they are experiencing a hierarchical, job content, or double plateau?

### Depression

While a number of organizational outcomes have been identified as a result of being plateaued, less attention has been given to individual psychological outcomes. As previously noted, stress has been largely overlooked in the plateauing literature, with studies tending to focus on organization-related attitudes and outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, etc. Also missing from the literature are studies examining depression among

plateaued employees. Major components of depressive symptomatology include depressed mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, psychomotor retardation, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance (Radloff, 1977). The job loss literature (e.g., Leana & Feldman, 1992) suggests that employees facing layoffs may become depressed, although some employees may be emotionally aroused or become motivated as a result of layoffs. In a discriminant analysis of plateaued versus non-plateaued managers, Near (1985) found no differences in overall life satisfaction, but non-plateaued employees did report being in better physical health than those who were plateaued. However, differences in depression were not examined. Depression is often examined in research on responses to stressful life experiences (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1986), and will be examined in the present study, in part, as an attempt to further explore the potential range of outcomes associated with being plateaued.

Research Question 6: Are plateaued employees more depressed than non-plateaued employees?

Depression is also important to examine in studies of coping in order to determine the adaptiveness of coping responses. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress, appraisal, and coping suggests that the selection of coping strategies can affect one's emotional reactions to the stressful experience. Williamson and Schulz (1993) examined the relationship between coping and depression using a sample of Alzheimer's disease caregivers, and found that while some coping strategies were associated with lower depression (e.g., relaxation), others were associated with greater depressive symptomatology (e.g., wishfulness). However, the relationships between coping strategies and depression varied depending on the type of stressor (memory deficits, loss of communication, or decline of a loved one). Although the impact of coping on depression has

been overlooked in the plateauing literature, it has received some attention in studies of coping with job loss. Using a sample of employees who had been affected by layoffs, Gowan et al. (1999) examined differences in distress (depression, anxiety, and irritation) as they related to the use of specific coping strategies. Distancing (an emotion-focused strategy aimed at psychologically removing oneself from the situation) and involvement in non-work activities reduced distress. If plateaued employees are depressed, certain coping responses may be more useful in alleviating depression than others. Therefore, we also examine depression in order to determine the utility, or adaptiveness, of coping.

Research Question 7: Is depression lower among plateaued employees who select certain types of coping strategies?

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

#### Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted prior to survey administration in order to ensure that the measures used in this study were eliciting the appropriate information and that the wording of questions was clear and unambiguous. A sample of 5 participants who met the study requirements and were comparable to the final target sample were asked to visit the survey website and complete the survey. The survey was augmented with additional questions to be used only during the pilot study. These open-ended questions asked participants to comment on the clarity of the survey questions and website ease of use. Participants were asked to offer any suggestions for improving either the wording of questions or navigation through the survey website.

After completing the survey, 2 participants from the pilot study noted that there appeared to be a repeated page of questions. This appeared to be due to the fact that the same stress, appraisal, and coping items were asked separately after each set of plateau measures. Therefore, in an attempt to remedy this problem, the survey was adapted in the following ways. First, in the instructions to participants, wording was added explaining that they would be asked questions about 2 career situations, followed by a similar set of questions for each career situation. Participants were also encouraged to respond to all questions, even though they may sound similar. Finally, in the instructions for each set of stress, appraisal, and coping questions following the plateau measures, rather than asking participants to “keep in mind their responses

ation. However, after beginning data collection, it was observed that participants were not responding to the second coping question. The researcher also received 2 emails asking for clarification regarding exactly what the “two career situations” were. It was unclear whether the lack of response to the second coping question was due to this lack of clarity (e.g., participants still believed this was a repeat question) or whether participants had no additional coping strategies to report after answering the first coping question. In order to address these issues, the following changes were made. First, headers were included on each page of the survey (e.g., “Career Situation One”). Survey instructions were also modified to clarify that there were two distinct career situations and to remind participants what each career situation was. For example, a description of the career situation was placed in parentheses within each set of instructions that asked participants to keep in mind their responses to that career situation. In order to prevent participants from skipping the coping questions if they had no coping strategies to report, instructions were added asking participants to type “nothing,” if they had done nothing to cope with that career situation. Finally, in an attempt to avoid any order effects, an additional survey was created, in which the order of the appearance of the items related to job content plateaus and hierarchical plateaus were reversed (however, no differences in responses were noted between the counterbalanced surveys, and results are reported below for the combined sample). A third pilot test using an additional sample of 5 participants indicated no concerns with survey clarity.

### Participants

Participants were identified using a snowball sampling technique (Ruane, 2005). This method of data collection is particularly useful for studying sensitive topics or hard to reach populations (Faugier & Sergeant, 1997) and is ideal for the current study since experiencing a plateau may not be something that employees discuss openly at work. Additionally, plateaued

employees may be more difficult to target than employees experiencing other negative career situations (e.g., layoffs), for whom documentation would more likely exist for identification. An initial list of 18 contacts was selected by the researcher in an attempt to target a final sample diverse in terms of age, gender, educational background, and occupation (see Table 1). Additional contacts were found by contacting 125 current Psychology graduate students at a large southeastern university. The graduate students were asked not to complete the survey themselves but to forward the message to any contacts they knew who were full-time employees. Via email, all those initially targeted for participation in the study were encouraged to respond to the survey, if applicable, and forward the survey on to other contacts they knew who were employed and therefore could potentially be experiencing a plateau. Participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and would be used for research purposes only. Participants were encouraged to participate by offering the incentive of a \$100 gift card, which was awarded following a drawing that included the names of all those who chose to participate in the drawing.

Seventy-seven surveys were completed and 44 employees (57%) reported experiencing some type of plateau. Participants' ages ranged from 24-60 ( $M=36.00$ ,  $SD=10.22$ ). Fifty-five percent of the plateaued employees were female, 43% were married, and the majority of the sample had obtained a college degree (7%=high school degree, 9%=some college, 43%=college degree, 9%=master's, 16%=Ph.D., 16%=did not respond). Forty-six percent reported working in organizations that employed more than 1,000 employees.

### Materials

An email (see Appendix A) provided recipients with a description of a plateau. If recipients of the email found the description relevant to their current career situations, they were

asked to visit a secure survey website, provided as a link in the email they received. Recipients were also instructed to forward this email to 5-10 contacts who they thought might fit the study criteria. The survey website contained the measures listed below (see Appendix B for complete list of questions). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with the exception of those noted below.

Hierarchical plateau. The presence of a hierarchical plateau was assessed with a modified (the wording of two items was reversed) version of Milliman's (1992) 6-item scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ) designed to measure the likelihood of future upward advancement (e.g., "I am unlikely to obtain a much higher job title in my organization").

Job content plateau. The presence of a job content plateau was measured using a modified (the wording of one item was reversed) version of Milliman's (1992) 6-item scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ), which asks about employees' perceptions of the probability of future challenges and responsibilities in their jobs (e.g., "I will not be challenged in my current job").

Stress. Stress was measured with a modified version of Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein's (1983) 4-item Perceived Stress Scale ( $\alpha = .67$  for hierarchical stress items and  $.70$  for job content). To ensure that reports of stress are associated specifically with a plateau, rather than general stress, participants were instructed to think about their responses to the previous questions (which asked about the presence of a plateau) when answering the stress items. Wording of the items also was slightly modified. For example, the question, "In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life," was modified to elicit information regarding the stress associated with being plateaued ("In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the situation"). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often).

Primary appraisal. Primary appraisal was measured with a modified version of Folkman and Lazarus's (1985) 4-item measure (alpha = .76 for hierarchical primary appraisal items and .56 for job content), designed to assess the level of stakes, or stress, associated with an event. Two items were modified to be more consistent with the purpose of the study. For example, the word "grade" was replaced with "career outcome" in one item and the word "student" was replaced with "worker" in another item. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with items stating reasons why the situation is stressful (e.g., "appearing incompetent to others").

Secondary appraisal. Secondary appraisal was measured with a modified version of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) 4-item measure (alpha = .70 for hierarchical secondary appraisal items and .53 for job content), designed to assess participants' perceptions of the extent to which they are able to take action in response to a stressful situation. All items were changed from past to present tense and the word "you" was replaced with "I" for each item. Participants rated the extent to which each item applied to their situation (e.g., "I have to accept it").

Depression. Depression was measured with Radloff's (1977) 20-item CES-D scale (alpha = .93), which asked participants to indicate how often they had felt a certain way in the past week (e.g., "I was bothered by things that don't usually bother me"). Items were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 0 (none of the time) to 3 (most or all of the time).

Coping strategies. Coping strategies were measured with one question asking participants to describe in narrative form any attempts they had made to alleviate the stress associated with experiencing a plateau.

Demographic and background information. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information, including age, gender, marital status, and level of education.

Participants were also asked to provide other relevant background information, including job type, job tenure, organizational tenure, organization size, and the number of hours worked per week.

Contact information. Participants were asked to provide contact information in order to be included in the drawing for a \$100 gift card at the conclusion of the study.

### Design and Procedure

Recipients who chose to participate visited the survey website, where in one version of the survey, the first set of questions measured the presence of a hierarchical plateau (in the other version of the survey, questions measuring the presence of a job content plateau were listed first). Those who indicated the presence of a hierarchical plateau answered questions relating to their appraisal of the situation and any coping responses they had employed in response to being plateaued. If responses did not indicate the presence of a hierarchical plateau, participants proceeded to questions addressing the presence of a job content plateau. Those who indicated the presence of a job content plateau answered questions about their appraisal of the situation and coping strategies in which they had engaged in response to being plateaued. Those who did not indicate the presence of a job content plateau immediately proceeded to the end of the survey, where they answered depression, demographic and background information questions and were asked to provide contact information if they wished to be considered in the drawing.

### Content Analysis

Narrative responses to the coping strategy questions were downloaded from the survey website to a spreadsheet. The unit of analysis was any meaningful unique thought, which could be reflected by a single word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Content analysis was used to reveal any themes and categories that emerged. The researcher and

two graduate students participated in the content analysis after being trained in content analysis techniques as outlined by Krippendorff (1980), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Weber (1990).

Coding taxonomy. The two graduate students, who were blind to the purpose of the study, reviewed all responses to the questions regarding coping strategies in order to create an exhaustive list of any themes that emerged from responses. After coders independently generated their lists, they met to share lists and reach consensus on a final list of themes. After agreeing on the coding taxonomy, the coders clustered this taxonomy into higher order categories, where appropriate, to reflect any similarities in the taxonomy (e.g., Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997).

Coding coping strategies. In the next step, the author and one of the graduate students who participated in creating the coding taxonomy independently coded the coping strategy responses, using the previously developed taxonomies. The researchers then coded the coping strategy responses, compared results with one another, and reached consensus on a classification. Interrater agreement, calculated as an overall hit rate or percent agreement among rater judgments (e.g., Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000), was 90%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Table 1

## Initial Contact List

Organization type	Gender	Age	Educational background
1. Consulting	Female	35-40	Ph.D.
2. University	Male	25-30	Masters
4. Casino	Male	25-30	Bachelors
5. Public School	Female	30-35	Bachelors
6. Counseling	Male	30-35	Ph.D.
7. Hospital	Female	45-50	High School
8. Law Enforcement	Male	25-30	Bachelors
9. Retirement Planning	Female	35-40	High School
10. Financial Advising	Male	25-30	Bachelors
11. Computers	Female	45-50	Ph.D.
12. Package Delivery	Male	30-35	Ph.D.
13. Manufacturing	Male	35-40	Ph.D.
14. University	Female	35-40	Ph.D.
15. University	Female	30-35	Bachelors
16. Law Enforcement	Female	35-40	Ph.D.
17. Consulting	Male	40-45	Ph.D.
18. University	Female	30-35	Masters

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

In order to answer Research Question 1, respondents were first coded according to the type of plateau experienced. Those with scale averages of 4 or above on the job content plateau measure were coded as being job content plateaued and those with scale averages of 4 or above on the hierarchical plateau measure were coded as hierarchically plateaued. Among the 57% of respondents who reported experiencing a plateau, hierarchical plateaus were the most common type experienced (91%), followed by job content plateaus (50%) and double plateaus (those coded as being both hierarchically and job content plateaued) (41%). Hierarchical and job content stress means appear in Table 2. The composite mean of responses to the hierarchical stress measure for those coded as being hierarchically plateaued was 5.87 ( $SD = 2.47$ ). The composite mean of responses to the job content stress measure for those coded as being job content plateaued was 7.00 ( $SD = 2.58$ ). Composite means for both measures were compared to the scale norms for the *Perceived Stress Scale* (Cohen et al., 1983) reported by Cohen and Williamson (1988) for both the entire sample ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 2.96$ ) and a subset of full-time employees ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ) using separate independent t-tests. The hierarchical stress composite mean was not significantly different from the Cohen and Williamson sample composite mean,  $t(2343) = -1.77$ ,  $ns$  but was significantly higher than the Cohen and Williamson full-time employee composite mean,  $t(1236) = -2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ . The hierarchical stress composite mean was significantly higher than both the Cohen and Williamson sample composite mean,  $t(2335) = -2.28$ ,  $p < .05$  and full-time employee composite mean,  $t(1228) = -2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Research Question 2 asked what factors contribute to the perceptions of stress associated with the experience of a plateau. Means on the measures of primary and secondary appraisal are also reported in Table 2. Hierarchically plateaued respondents had a primary appraisal mean of 2.86 ( $SD = 0.87$ ) and secondary appraisal mean of 3.00 ( $SD = 0.77$ ). Job content plateaued respondents had a primary appraisal mean of 3.01 ( $SD = 0.75$ ) and secondary appraisal mean of 2.94 ( $SD = 0.64$ ). These findings suggest that, in general, hierarchically and job content plateaued employees did not associate high stakes with their career situations (primary appraisal) or feel as though there was nothing they could do to change their situation (secondary appraisal).

Research Question 3 asked if appraisal differed depending on the type of plateau experienced. Two paired samples t-tests were conducted. Hierarchically plateaued respondents' primary appraisal responses did not significantly differ from job content plateaued respondents' primary appraisal responses,  $t(30) = 0.89, ns$ . Likewise, hierarchically plateaued respondents' secondary appraisal responses were not significantly different from those of job content plateaued respondents,  $t(30) = -0.73, ns$ .

Research Question 4 asked what coping strategies employees select in response to being plateaued. Each coping strategy reported, its frequency of occurrence, and the percentage of all coping responses represented by each strategy is reported in Table 3. Tables 4, 5, and 6 provide the coping strategies reported by hierarchically plateaued, job content plateaued, and double plateaued employees, respectively. Sample comments for each coping strategy are listed in Table 7. Responses resulted in 26 major themes, which were categorized into 7 meta-themes (Discuss Problem, Non-Work Activities, Job Withdrawal, Job Involvement, Mental Coping, Side Work, and Nothing). Overall, the most frequently reported coping strategy meta-themes were

Discuss Problem (18.0%) and Job Withdrawal (18.0%), while Nothing (12.4%) and Side Work (5.6%) were the least frequently reported (see Table 3).

Research Question 5 asked if respondents engage in different coping strategies depending on whether they are experiencing a hierarchical, job content, or double plateau. Several notable differences were identified when comparing the coping strategies of hierarchically plateaued respondents to those reported by job content and double plateaued respondents (see Tables 4, 5, and 6, respectively). For example, those who were hierarchically plateaued tended to report fewer Job Withdrawal coping strategies (18.8%) than those who were job content (22.6%) or double (23.0%) plateaued. Hierarchically plateaued respondents tended to report less use of Non-Work Activities (15.3%) than job content (17.7%) and double (18.0%) plateaued respondents. On the other hand, hierarchically plateaued respondents tended to report greater use of Mental Coping strategies (15.3%) than either job content (6.5%) or double (6.6%) plateaued respondents. No notable differences were observed when comparing the coping strategies of job content plateaued respondents to those of double plateaued respondents. Similarities were noted in hierarchical, job content, and double plateaued respondents' tendencies to report Discuss Problem (19.8%, 19.4%, and 19.7%, respectively), Job Involvement (16.5%, 16.1%, and 16.1%, respectively), Nothing (11.8%, 12.9%, and 11.5%, respectively), and Side Work (5.9%, 4.8%, and 4.9%, respectively).

Research Question 6 asked if plateaued respondents are more depressed than non-plateaued respondents. To answer this question, an independent t-test was performed comparing average depression scores of respondents who were coded as experiencing any kind of plateau (hierarchical, job content, or double) to average depression scores of those who did not meet the

cutoff on the plateau measures. Plateaued respondents ( $M = 1.82, SD = 0.53$ ) were significantly more depressed than non-plateaued respondents ( $M = 1.36, SD = 0.36$ ),  $t(56) = 3.70, p < .01$ .

Research Question 7 asked if coping is adaptive. In order to answer this question, 8 independent samples t-tests were performed comparing average depression scores of plateaued respondents who reported using each coping strategy meta-theme to average depression scores of plateaued respondents who did not report using the coping strategy meta-theme. There were no significant effects for Discuss Problem,  $t(32) = 1.58, ns$ , Non-Work Activities,  $t(32) = 1.06, ns$ , Job Withdrawal,  $t(32) = 1.22, ns$ , Side Work,  $t(32) = -.58, ns$ , or Nothing  $t(32) = .04, ns$ . There was a significant effect for Job Involvement,  $t(32) = 2.39, p < .05$ , with plateaued respondents who used this coping meta-theme reporting higher levels of depression ( $M = 2.09, SD = 0.50$ ) than plateaued respondents who did not ( $M = 1.67, SD = 0.59$ ). There was also a significant effect for Mental Coping, with plateaued respondents who used this coping meta-theme reporting lower levels depression ( $M = 1.58, SD = 0.15$ ) than plateaued respondents who did not ( $M = 1.89, SD = 0.58$ )  $t(32) = 2.39, p < .05$ .

Table 2

Stress and Appraisal Means	
Variable	Mean
Hierarchical Stress	5.87
Job Content Stress	7.00
Hierarchical Primary Appraisal	2.86
Hierarchical Secondary Appraisal	3.00
Job Content Primary Appraisal	3.01
Job Content Secondary Appraisal	2.94

Table 3

## Overall Theme Frequencies

Theme	Frequency/Percentage
Discuss Problem	16 (18.0%)
Management	09 (10.1%)
Colleagues	05 (05.6%)
Friends/Family	02 (02.2%)
Job Withdrawal	16 (18.0%)
Turnover Intentions	13 (14.6%)
Change/Reduce Hours	02 (02.2%)
Avoid More Responsibility	01 (01.1%)
Job Involvement	14 (15.7%)
Education	04 (04.5%)
Lateral Movement	03 (03.4%)
Increase Workload	03 (03.4%)
Change Focus at Work	03 (03.4%)
Increase Job Knowledge	01 (01.1%)
Non-Work Activities	13 (14.6%)
Exercise	03 (03.4%)
Friends & Family Time	03 (03.4%)
Leisure Activities	03 (03.4%)
Relax	01 (01.1%)
Stress Management Classes	01 (01.1%)
Take Medication	01 (01.1%)
Mentor	01 (01.1%)
Mental Coping	13 (14.6%)
Make Less Personal	04 (04.5%)
Acceptance	03 (03.4%)
Positive Thinking	02 (02.2%)
Waiting	02 (02.2%)
Control Emotions	01 (01.1%)
Ignore Problem	01 (01.1%)
Nothing	11 (12.4%)
Side Work	05 (05.6%)
Total	89 (100%)

Note. Based on N=44 hierarchically, job content, or double plateaued

Table 4

## Theme Frequencies for Hierarchically Plateaued

Theme	Frequency/Percentage
Discuss Problem	16 (18.8%)
Management	09 (10.6%)
Colleagues	05 (05.9%)
Friends/Family	02 (02.4%)
Job Withdrawal	16 (18.8%)
Turnover Intentions	13 (14.6%)
Change/Reduce Hours	02 (02.4%)
Avoid More Responsibility	01 (01.2%)
Job Involvement	14 (16.5%)
Education	04 (04.7%)
Change Focus at Work	03 (03.5%)
Lateral Movement	03 (03.5%)
Increase Workload	03 (03.5%)
Increase Job Knowledge	01 (01.2%)
Non-Work Activities	13 (15.3%)
Exercise	03 (03.5%)
Friends & Family Time	03 (03.5%)
Leisure Activities	03 (03.5%)
Relax	01 (01.2%)
Stress Management Classes	01 (01.2%)
Take Medication	01 (01.2%)
Mentor	01 (01.2%)
Mental Coping	13 (15.3%)
Make Less Personal	04 (04.7%)
Acceptance	03 (03.5%)
Positive Thinking	02 (02.4%)
Waiting	02 (02.4%)
Control Emotions	01 (01.2%)
Ignore Problem	01 (01.2%)
Nothing	10 (11.8%)
Side Work	05 (05.9%)
Total	85 (100%)

Note. Based on N=40 hierarchically plateaued

Table 5

## Theme Frequencies for Job Content Plateaued

Theme	Frequency/Percentage
Job Withdrawal	14 (22.6%)
Turnover Intentions	11 (17.7%)
Change/Reduce Hours	02 (03.2%)
Avoid More Responsibility	01 (01.6%)
Discuss Problem	12 (19.4%)
Management	07 (11.3%)
Colleagues	04 (06.5%)
Friends/Family	01 (01.6%)
Non-Work Activities	11 (17.7%)
Stress Management Classes	03 (04.8%)
Exercise	02 (03.2%)
Friends & Family Time	02 (03.2%)
Relax	01 (01.6%)
Leisure Activities	01 (01.6%)
Take Medication	01 (01.6%)
Mentor	01 (01.6%)
Job Involvement	10 (16.1%)
Education	04 (06.5%)
Lateral Movement	02 (03.2%)
Increase Workload	02 (03.2%)
Change Focus at Work	02 (03.2%)
Increase Job Knowledge	00 (00.0%)
Nothing	08 (12.9%)
Mental Coping	04 (06.5%)
Control Emotions	01 (01.6%)
Ignore Problem	01 (01.6%)
Acceptance	01 (01.6%)
Waiting	01 (01.6%)
Make Less Personal	00 (00.0%)
Positive Thinking	00 (00.0%)
Side Work	03 (04.8%)
Total	62 (100%)

Note. Based on N=22 job content plateaued

Table 6

## Theme Frequencies for Double Plateaued

Theme	Frequency/Percentage
Job Withdrawal	14 (23.0%)
Turnover Intentions	11 (18.0%)
Change/Reduce Hours	02 (03.3%)
Avoid More Responsibility	01 (01.6%)
Discuss Problem	12 (19.7%)
Management	07 (11.5%)
Colleagues	04 (06.6%)
Friends/Family	01 (01.6%)
Non-Work Activities	11 (18.0%)
Leisure Activities	03 (04.9%)
Exercise	02 (03.3%)
Friends & Family Time	02 (03.3%)
Stress Management Classes	01 (01.6%)
Take Medication	01 (01.6%)
Mentor	01 (01.6%)
Relax	01 (01.6%)
Job Involvement	10 (16.1%)
Education	04 (06.6%)
Change Focus at Work	02 (03.3%)
Lateral Movement	02 (03.3%)
Increase Workload	02 (03.3%)
Increase Job Knowledge	00 (00.0%)
Nothing	07 (11.5%)
Mental Coping	04 (06.6%)
Control Emotions	01 (01.6%)
Ignore Problem	01 (01.6%)
Acceptance	01 (01.6%)
Waiting	01 (01.6%)
Positive Thinking	00 (00.0%)
Make Less Personal	00 (00.0%)
Side Work	03 (04.9%)
Total	61 (100%)

Note. Based on N=18 double plateaued

Table 7

## Sample Comments

Theme	Sample comment
Discuss Problem	
Management	“Meet with managers to discuss my achievements and concerns.”
Colleagues	“Discussed the situation with trusted coworkers.”
Friends/Family	“Complain to my spouse all the time.”
Job Withdrawal	
Turnover Intentions	“Looked for other employment.”
Change/Reduce Hours	“Cutting back on hours.”
Avoid More Responsibility	“No reason to take on more responsibility when I know I won’t be rewarded for it.”
Job Involvement	
Education	“Obtained an advanced degree (Ph.D.).”
Lateral Movement	“Made lateral move. Changed divisions.”
Increase Workload	“Requested to be involved in more projects.”
Change Focus at Work	“Keep my mind on work and not the office politics.”
Increase Job Knowledge	“I am taking Computer Based Training through the HR Department to enhance my job skills.”
Non-Work Activities	
Exercise	“Started working out.”
Friends & Family Time	“I involve myself with friends and family more.”
Leisure Activities	“Getting involved in gardening and landscaping.”
Relax	“Try to relax and not let situations get to me.”
Stress Management Classes	“Took stress management class.”
Take Medication	“Taking medication for stress.”
Mentor	“Taking things fully into my hands about defining my future and being creative in mentoring activities, etc.”
Mental Coping	
Make Less Personal	“I have learned that blind loyalty and time on the job take precedence over qualifications and competence.”
Acceptance	“Understand that’s the way things are and accepting they can’t be changed.”
Positive Thinking	“Try to see the benefits of my current situation.”
Waiting	“I just need to give everything time to fall into place.”
Control Emotions	“Keep my mouth shut when people aggravate me.”
Ignore Problem	“Try not to think about the situation.”
Nothing	“Nothing.”
Side Work	“I got a second job to earn more money.”

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

#### Overview

The purpose of the present study was to examine coping and perceptions of stress, appraisal, and depression among hierarchically, job content, and double plateaued employees. Five general conclusions can be reached from this study. Plateau-specific stress was higher than the overall stress experienced by the average employee. Second, neither hierarchically nor job content plateaued employees reported particularly unfavorable appraisals of their career situations. Third, a wide range of distinct coping strategies used by plateaued employees was identified, and some differences were observed depending on the type of plateau experienced. Fourth, plateaued employees reported higher levels of depression than non-plateaued employees. Finally, differences in depression were revealed among plateaued employees who reported using certain categories of coping strategies compared to plateaued employees who did not use those coping strategies. Each of these findings and their implications are discussed in greater detail below.

#### Stress and Appraisal

The results of this study reveal several important findings as they relate to the stress and appraisal associated with experiencing a plateau. First, plateaued employees reported significantly higher stress than the overall stress experienced by full-time employees. In fact, the mean composite scores for both hierarchical and job content plateau stress in this study were higher than the overall stress means for all population subgroups reported in Cohen and Williamson's study with the exceptions of those earning less than 5,000 dollars per year and the

disabled or too ill to work. Allen et al. (1998) found that hierarchically plateaued employees reported higher stress than non-plateaued employees, but those experiencing a job content plateau did not. However, in order to make such comparisons, their study measured general job induced stress, rather than asking plateaued employees to think specifically about the stress experienced as a result of being plateaued.

Regarding primary appraisal, neither hierarchical nor job content plateaued employees tended to report perceptions of having much at stake in their career situations. This finding may be reflecting the changing nature of careers and career expectations as a result of downsizings, layoffs, and job loss. These trends have contributed to decreased feelings of job security and changed expectations related to the psychological contract between employees and their organizations (e.g., Rousseau, 1990). Recent research on today's boundaryless careers (characterized by a variety of career experiences spanning different jobs, levels, functions, and organizations) highlights the importance of psychological success factors (e.g., Mirvis & Hall, 1994), as opposed to external measures of career success. For example, Mirvis and Hall suggest that employees today may be more concerned with achieving goals that are personally meaningful, rather than being concerned about how parents, peers, organizations, or society would measure career success. Accordingly, employees might be less concerned about some of the external indicators of stakes being tapped by the primary appraisal items as they relate to their careers (e.g., appearing incompetent to others, losing the approval or respect of someone important). Moreover, plateaued employees today may recognize the boundaryless nature of careers and therefore are not terribly concerned when facing a plateau.

Hierarchical and job content plateaued employees also did not report feeling a lack of control over being plateaued (secondary appraisal). Similar to the notion of a boundaryless

career is that of the boundaryless organization. Jobs descriptions in boundaryless organizations are designed to be more flexible so that rapid changes can be made in response to environmental demands. Because such demands (and subsequent organizational needs) are unpredictable, employees in boundaryless organizations are expected to be in complete control of their own career development (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). If employees now realize that the responsibility for career development is entirely theirs, they may be less affected by the experience of a plateau in any one organization. Rather, they should be expected to believe they have the ability to change an unfavorable career situation (whether by making a lateral move, leaving the organization, or even changing careers) if they so choose.

Comparisons between hierarchical and job content plateaued employees' perceptions of primary and secondary appraisals also failed to reveal any differences. It would be interesting to see how managers appraise plateaued employees' situations and also whether their appraisals are in line with those of their employees. For example, someone experiencing a hierarchical plateau might believe they are able to control or change the situation (secondary appraisal), whereas a manager might realize that no matter what the employee does, his or her likelihood of receiving a promotion will not improve. Lazarus and Folkman (1987) argue that coping efforts can be dysfunctional when appraisals of a situation do not match the reality. Therefore, it seems coping efforts might be more effective when both employees and managers have congruent appraisals of the situations. Such a finding would highlight the need for ongoing communication and career feedback. It would also be interesting to see if plateaued employees' appraisals change over time, and after attempting to cope, as Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest. For example, if employees who are not stressed because they feel they can change their situations attempt to cope and continue to remain plateaued for some time, they might eventually re-appraise the

situation as being less under their control than their initial perceptions, and experience more stress as a result. Longitudinal research and/or studies designed to model growth or change in appraisals over time would be useful in exploring this idea.

### Coping Strategies

Plateaued employees in this study reported the use of 26 distinct coping strategies, which were organized into 7 meta-themes. While some of these coping responses can be found on existing coping inventories (e.g., Discuss Problem, Mental Coping), several coping responses were revealed that may be specific to career-related stressors such as experiencing a plateau. For example, Job Withdrawal, Job Involvement, and Side Work included several specific coping themes not included in popular coping inventories. Specifically, the coping meta-theme, Job Withdrawal included coping responses such as turnover intentions and avoiding responsibility, Job Involvement included things such as taking a lateral transfer and increasing job knowledge, and Side Work included employee attempts to cope by taking on additional employment outside one's full-time job. Identifying coping options such as these that may be overlooked on general coping inventories is imperative for theory-building. Measures of coping with plateaus must be designed to tap the entire content domain, and general coping inventories that overlook plateau-specific strategies are insufficient. This issue is particularly important given that Job Withdrawal (tied with Discuss Problem) was the most frequently reported coping strategy meta-theme, with 18% of all coping strategies falling under this category. It is not surprising that Job Withdrawal coping strategies were so frequently reported, as this confirms findings from a number of studies revealing turnover and turnover intentions as outcomes of experiencing a plateau (e.g., Allen et al., 1998; Veiga, 1981). Managers, however, may not be aware of the extent to which plateaued employees engage in Job Withdrawal coping strategies. This is troubling, given the potential

implications for organizational performance that might result from employees deliberately avoiding responsibility or reducing the number of hours spent at work.

Categorizing coping responses using content analysis allowed for a better understanding of what plateaued employees are actually doing to cope, rather than categorizing responses under the more general headings of being problem-focused or emotion-focused coping. An examination of the sample comments provided in Table 7 provides a rich description of the coping strategies plateaued employees are using. Moreover, the narrative accounts often provided some insight as to *why* a particular coping strategy was selected as well. For example, under the coping meta-theme, Job Involvement, one respondent reported, “I am taking Computer Based Training through the HR department to enhance my job skills” (coded as “increase job knowledge”). Another employee noted, “No reason to take on more responsibility when I know I won’t be rewarded for it,” which was coded as “avoid more responsibility” and fell under the coping meta-theme, Job Withdrawal. Although determining the reasons why employees selected each coping strategy was beyond the scope of this study, future research should attempt to identify the contextual factors involved in coping decisions. Such work could be helpful not only in determining why certain coping strategies are selected but also why others are not selected. For example, some of the coping strategies reported under the meta-theme, Job Involvement, might not be available options for all employees. Specifically, while some employees may have the option to pursue lateral movement or engage in training to increase job knowledge, such options might not be available to employees in other organizations.

While participants were not specifically asked to identify whether their coping strategies were problem-focused or emotion-focused, an examination of the coping taxonomy reveals a range of strategies that appear to fall under one or the other category. For example, most of the

coping strategies under the meta-theme, Job Involvement (e.g., lateral movement, increase job knowledge, increase workload) would likely be considered problem-focused coping strategies, as they appear to be aimed at addressing the actual problem. On the other hand, most of the strategies in Mental Coping (e.g., control emotions, ignore problem, positive thinking) appear to be aimed at dealing with the negative emotions associated with the problem, and therefore would most likely be considered emotion-focused forms of coping. Most of the coping responses reported by plateaued employees in this study tend to fall under what would be considered problem-focused coping, which is consistent with previous research indicating that individuals tend to use more problem-focused forms of coping at work (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The use of more problem-focused coping strategies might also help explain the primary and secondary appraisal findings, as problem-focused coping strategies are considered more effective forms of coping overall (e.g., Leana & Feldman, 1994; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

#### Differences in Coping Strategies

Several differences in coping strategies were also observed, depending on the type of plateau experienced. For example, hierarchically plateaued employees tended to report fewer Job Withdrawal and Non-Work coping strategies and more Mental Coping strategies than either job content or double plateaued employees. Since hierarchical plateaus are caused by a lack of opportunity for advancement, whereas job content plateaus are caused by a lack of challenge or responsibility in one's job, it is not surprising that differences were observed in the coping strategies used to deal with the two situations. For example, job content plateaued employees may be engaging in more Non-Work Activities (e.g., exercise, leisure activities, friends and family time) in order to meet some need outside of work that is not being met at work due to the lack of challenge or responsibility in their jobs. Hierarchically plateaued employees are not

lacking challenge or responsibility in their jobs, and might be using Mental Coping (e.g., acceptance, waiting, and ignoring the problem) instead due to a lack of constructive options to increase their chances of advancing. Managers should be aware of the reasons why employees are feeling plateaued in their careers in order to provide opportunities and advice that is appropriate for the kind of plateau being experienced.

The differences in coping strategies might also be reflecting differences in career stages or aspirations among plateaued employees as well. For example, it has been suggested that depending on their current career stage, hierarchically plateaued employees may sometimes be content with their plateau, and not desire promotions (e.g., Carnazza, Korman, Ference, & Stoner, 1981; Feldman & Weitz, 1988). If that is the case, it makes sense that those employees would be more likely to report such Mental Coping strategies as making the situation less personal, acceptance, positive thinking, and waiting. Likewise, for hierarchically plateaued employees who are content with their plateaued status, it makes sense that they would be less likely to take stress management classes or medication (Non-Work Activities) or avoid responsibility and look for another job (Job Withdrawal). Employees have a variety of coping options available, and managers should continually communicate with employees to assess their current career situations and desires, in order to provide appropriate coping advice.

### Depression

Results of this study are also important for highlighting one important outcome variable associated with being plateaued – depression, as well as the role coping may play in reducing reports of depression. Not surprisingly, plateaued employees reported being more depressed than non-plateaued employees. This information is consistent with findings from a large number of studies revealing negative consequences of being plateaued (e.g., Chao, 1990; Near, 1985),

and adds to our understanding of the potential range of outcomes associated with being plateaued. This information may also have important financial implications for organizations. For example, depression can be costly for organizations not only in terms of health care costs, but also lowered productivity and absenteeism (Greener & Guest, 2005). However, it is interesting that plateaued employees were more depressed than non-plateaued employees but did not report being highly stressed. It could be the case that depression is an antecedent, rather than a consequence, of being plateaued. For example, it is possible that depressed employees do not perform as well or seek out developmental opportunities, which leads to their plateauing.

#### Adaptiveness of Coping

An examination of the differences in depression based on the type of coping strategy used by employees revealed that those who used Mental Coping were less depressed than those who did not, whereas those who reported Job Involvement as a coping strategy were more depressed than those who did not. This suggests that plateaued employees may find it useful to attempt coping strategies such as controlling their emotions and making the situation less personal, as opposed to taking a lateral transfer or increasing their workload. Since the Mental Coping strategies identified here would likely be characterized as emotion-focused coping, whereas Job Involvement would be considered problem-focused coping, these findings are consistent with previous research indicating that emotion-focused coping is more effective when dealing with occupational stress (Pearlin & Schooler 1978). On the other hand, Rotondo and Perrewé (2000) found that working on special projects and taking on new job assignments were associated with more positive outcomes, whereas taking a lateral transfer was unexpectedly associated with more negative outcomes. The authors noted that many employees who were taking lateral transfers were doing so in hopes that it would result in a promotion. The majority of the employees in our

sample were experiencing a hierarchical plateau and, based on the primary appraisal findings, believed they had some control over their situations. If those employees are going to the trouble of attempting lateral transfers, increasing their job knowledge, or obtaining advanced degrees thinking that their actions will result in a promotion, they may be more frustrated than others who simply ignore the problem, try to make it less personal, or wait for something to change. This may be additional evidence of the importance communication plays in ensuring employees do not have unrealistic expectations regarding their coping strategies. Overall, identifying coping strategies that may be more effective than others is important for employees as well as managers and career counselors attempting to assist their employees by encouraging adaptive coping.

#### Implications for Theory

The findings of this study have a number of theoretical implications for plateauing research. First, by identifying a wide range of coping strategies employees are using to cope with plateau, future researchers can more appropriately measure coping, and the coping taxonomy provided here should serve as a useful guide to extend theoretical work in this area. Second, revealing tendencies to use different coping strategies depending on the type of plateau experienced provides additional support for the distinctiveness of hierarchical and job content plateaus, and future research should continue to include both in theoretical models of plateauing. Third, this study extends research related to the antecedents and consequences of plateaus by identifying plateau-specific stress and also by revealing that plateaued employees are more depressed than non-plateaued employees. Additionally, the finding that some coping strategies may be more effective in reducing depression highlights the need to consider coping effectiveness in terms of other important organizational outcomes as well.

Regarding career theory in general, as noted, the findings related to appraisal may be a result of changing expectations due to the nature of today's boundaryless careers. If employees no longer feel threatened when thinking about experiencing a plateau because expectations of pursuing a traditional linear career path are unrealistic, attitudes related to other career-related activities may be changing as well. As just one example, attitudes toward relocation may be becoming more favorable as employees begin to accept the fact that employers can no longer promise lifetime employment serving one job function in the same department at the same location. What once may have been a highly stressful career decision may now be accepted as necessary and inevitable in pursuing any career. This could suggest a need to re-examine attitudes related to a variety of career-related issues in light of the changing nature of work.

#### Implications for Practice

This study revealed a wide range of coping strategies that are being used by plateaued employees. One of the most commonly reported coping meta-themes was Discuss the Problem, suggesting that managers, coworkers, and family members of plateaued employees all are likely to be involved to some extent in plateaued employees' coping efforts. Since some of the coping meta-themes might also have implications for organizations as a whole (e.g., Job Withdrawal and Job Involvement), managers in particular should be aware of employees' coping options and intentions. As previously mentioned, managers may find it useful to engage in continuous communication and feedback with their employees, not only so that employees are aware of all available coping options, but also so that managers understand their employees' individual career needs and desires. This is particularly important given the finding that certain coping strategies are used more often depending on the type of plateau experienced.

The finding that plateaus are not appraised as being highly negative is encouraging. However, it should be noted that employees are still making efforts to cope with their career situations, with Job Withdrawal being one of the most frequently reported coping meta-themes. Therefore, managers and organizations may be wise to provide employees with coping options that will benefit all parties, in order to prevent problems and costs associated with turnover or lowered performance. As noted, it may be the case that employees are selecting certain coping strategies because other options are not available in their organizations. Although organizations may not be able to promise advancement or challenging assignments, it may be beneficial to inquire about employees' interests and needs for other opportunities to cope in order to retain productive talent. However, it also should be noted that plateaued employees were more depressed than non-plateaued employees, which could mean additional costs for organizations if the employee does remain with the company.

#### Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While this study is important as a primarily exploratory attempt to understand the coping process among plateaued employees, several limitations should be noted as a result of the study's design. For example, although plateaued employees did not tend to report negative appraisals of their situations, it may be that since many employees reported having attempted coping, appraisals of the situation have improved. We are also unable to draw any conclusions about whether depression is a cause or a consequence of being plateaued. Similarly, our findings regarding lower reports of depression as a function of coping response should be interpreted with caution, as it may be that depressed employees are more inclined to select certain coping strategies. Future longitudinal research would be useful in further exploring the coping process

and causal relationships between appraisal, stress, coping, and depression among plateaued employees.

It also should be noted that although internal consistency estimates were within acceptable limits (Nunnally, 1978) for the stress, primary appraisal, and secondary appraisal measures as they related to one type of plateau (either hierarchical or job content), the estimates were slightly lower for the items when asked in relation to the other type of plateau. This is likely a function of sample size, as these scales have demonstrated acceptable reliability in previous research (e.g., Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); however the findings regarding stress, primary appraisal, and secondary appraisal should be interpreted with caution.

Comparisons of hierarchical and job content plateau stress with the overall stress reported by Cohen and Williamson (1988) should also be interpreted with caution. It could be argued that the items used in this study are not directly comparable with the original items of the *Perceived Stress Scale*, as items were slightly modified and preceded by instructions to think about responses as they relate to the experience of a plateau. However, the purpose of including stress in this study was to identify the stress experienced as a result of a plateau, and it would not be feasible to make direct comparisons for such items with non-plateaued employees, as questions about the stress experienced as a result of being plateaued would not apply to participants who are not experiencing a plateau.

The diversity of this sample allowed for the examination of coping among employees from a wide range of organizations representing a variety of positions. However, future research also should attempt to identify any additional coping strategies that may have been overlooked in this study. Future research also should explore the impact of combinations of coping approaches

on depression. We were unable to control for the use of multiple coping strategies, and those employees who used Job Involvement or Mental Coping may have engaged in more than one coping response. Therefore, the impact of coping on depression could be the result of a combination of approaches. Sample size constraints also prevented us from separately examining any differences in depression between hierarchically and job content plateaued employees based on the coping strategy used, and it may be that certain strategies are also more effective depending on the type of plateau experienced. Future research should explore this idea.

Despite these limitations, this study provides an important first step in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the coping process among plateaued employees. The variables explored in this study, particularly the coping taxonomy identified, will serve as a useful starting point for future empirical research on the coping process among plateaued employees. Future research also should continue to examine the effectiveness of coping in terms of its impact on other important organizational outcomes, including job performance and attitudes.

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## APPENDIX A

Email

Hello,

We are writing to request your help in an important study on individuals' experiences at work. You received this email for one of two reasons: you were either selected by us as an initial contact, or someone who was contacted by us forwarded this message to you per our request.

The work experience we are interested in is called a "plateau." A plateau is a common experience that can occur when employees feel there is little opportunity for advancement in their organizations or believe their jobs lack challenge and/or responsibility. At this point, it is unclear exactly how people deal with these career situations. However, learning more about plateaus may help individuals manage their careers more effectively and help organizations figure out how to reduce plateauing among employees. If you work full-time, are not self-employed, and the description of a plateau provided above sounds like something you could be experiencing, your participation in this survey would be extremely useful. We ask that you take 20 minutes to complete our survey at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=501501249896>.

Upon completing the survey, you will have the opportunity to register for a \$100 Visa Gift Card drawing. By completing this survey you are making this important project possible.

Additionally, regardless of whether you are experiencing a plateau yourself, you can assist with our efforts in researching this important topic by forwarding this message to 5-10 contacts you know who might meet the qualifications for the study.

We appreciate your taking the time to assist with this study. If you prefer to receive a paper version of the survey or if you have any questions or comments now or in the future, please feel free to contact the project supervisor, Dr. Lillian Eby, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, at 706-542-2174 or [leby@uga.edu](mailto:leby@uga.edu). Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, GA 30602-7411. Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu).

Sincerely,

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## APPENDIX B

Survey

## Hierarchical, Job Content, and Double Plateaus: An Examination of Stress, Appraisal, Coping, and Depression

*Consent:*

Thank you for taking the time to assist with this research. Upon completing the survey, you will have the opportunity to register for a \$100 Visa Gift Card drawing. Please be assured that responses to survey questions will remain confidential and be reported by us only in summary form for research purposes. Study results may be published. Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the completed survey is received by the investigator, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. For example, any identifying information will be stored in a database separate from survey responses. However, if you wish to receive a paper version of the study, please contact: Carrie McCleese, Graduate Student, University of Georgia. Phone: 706-369-0265 Email: mccleese@uga.edu.

Your participation is voluntary and by completing the survey you are indicating your informed consent to participate in this research. No discomfort or risks are foreseen in participating in this study. You may skip any questions you are uncomfortable answering, and closing the survey window at any time will discard all responses to survey questions. Please complete this survey within two weeks in order to ensure that your response is included in the study.

Please begin the survey now by clicking on the “Next” button below.

*Career Situation One: Hierarchical Plateau*

This survey asks questions about TWO different kinds of career situations, followed by a set of similar questions related to each type of career situation. The FIRST career situation occurs when people feel they are unlikely to receive promotions in the future. The SECOND career situation occurs when people feel their jobs lack challenge or responsibility. After the questions asking about these two career situations, you will be asked a similar set of questions related to each type of career situation.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, which describe the FIRST career situation (lack of promotions) (responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

1. I am unlikely to obtain a much higher job title in my organization.
2. I do not expect to advance to a higher level in my company in the near future.
3. My opportunities for upward movement are limited in my present organization.
4. I do not expect to be promoted frequently in my company in the future.
5. I have reached a point where I do not expect to move much higher in my company.
6. The likelihood that I will get ahead in my organization is limited.
7. Did you agree or strongly agree with any of the above statements? Yes or No (If no, skips to question 21).

### *Stress and Coping*

Since you answered yes to the previous question, you could be in a situation that sometimes leads to stress. The questions in this scale ask about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way. Keeping in mind your responses to CAREER SITUATION ONE (lack of promotions) described on the previous page, please answer the following questions about stress. (responses range from never to very often).

8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the situation?
9. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle the situation?
10. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
11. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

### *Appraisal*

Below is a list of reasons why CAREER SITUATION ONE (lack of promotions) may be stressful. Please indicate how much each item applies to you (responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

This situation is stressful because I am:

12. Not achieving the career outcome I want.
13. Appearing incompetent to others.
14. Jeopardizing my view of myself as a capable worker.
15. Losing the approval or respect of someone important to me.

Keeping in mind CAREER SITUATION ONE (lack of promotions) described on the previous page, please rate the extent to which the following statements apply (responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

16. I cannot change or do anything about it.
17. I have to accept it.
18. I need to know more before I can act.
19. I have to hold myself back from doing what I want to do.

### *Coping*

20. Please list all ways you have tried or are currently trying to cope or deal with CAREER SITUATION ONE (lack of promotions). This can include things done at work as well as off the job to cope. Please be specific and provide as much detail as possible. If you have not attempted to cope with this career situation, rather than leaving a blank response, please type "nothing."

### *Career Situation Two: Job Content Plateau*

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, which describe the SECOND career situation (lack of challenge or responsibility) (responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

21. I do not expect to be constantly challenged in my job in the future.
  22. I will not continue to learn and grow in my current job.
  23. My current job tasks and activities will become routine for me in the future.
  24. My current job responsibilities will not increase significantly in the future.
  25. My current job will not continually require me to develop my abilities and knowledge.
  26. I will not be challenged in my current job.
27. Did you agree or strongly agree with any of the above statements? Yes or No (If no, skips to question 41)

### *Stress and Coping*

Since you answered yes to the previous question, you could be in a situation that sometimes leads to stress. The questions in this scale ask about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way. Keeping in mind your responses to CAREER SITUATION TWO (lack of challenge or responsibility) please answer the following questions about stress. (responses range from never to very often).

28. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the situation?
29. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle the situation?
30. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
31. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

### *Appraisal*

Below is a list of reasons why CAREER SITUATION TWO (lack of challenge or responsibility) may be stressful. Please indicate how much each item applies to you (responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

This situation is stressful because I am:

32. Not achieving the career outcome I want.
33. Appearing incompetent to others.
34. Jeopardizing my view of myself as a capable worker.
35. Losing the approval or respect of someone important to me.

Keeping in mind CAREER SITUATION TWO (lack of challenge or responsibility) described on the previous page, please rate the extent to which the following statements apply (responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

36. I cannot change or do anything about it.

37. I have to accept it.
38. I need to know more before I can act.
39. I have to hold myself back from doing what I want to do.

### *Coping*

40. Please list all ways you have tried or are currently trying to cope or deal with CAREER SITUATION TWO (lack of challenge or responsibility). This can include things done at work as well as off the job to cope. Please be specific and provide as much detail as possible. If you have not attempted to cope with this career situation, rather than leaving a blank response, please type, "nothing."

### *Depression*

Below is a list of the ways you might have felt or behaved. Please indicate how often you have felt this way during the past week (responses range from rarely or none of the time to most or all of the time)

41. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.
42. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.
43. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.
44. I felt that I was just as good as other people.
45. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.
46. I felt depressed.
47. I felt that everything I did was an effort.
48. I felt hopeful about the future.
49. I thought my life had been a failure.
50. I felt fearful.
51. My sleep was restless.
52. I was happy.
53. I talked less than usual.
54. I felt lonely.
55. People were unfriendly.
56. I enjoyed life.
57. I had crying spells.
58. I felt sad.
59. I felt that people dislike me.
60. I could not get "going."

### *Demographic and Background Information*

61. Age \_\_\_\_\_
62. Gender:  Male  Female
63. Marital Status:  Single  Married  Divorced  Widowed
64. Please indicate your highest level of education:  
 High School Degree  Some College  College Degree  Masters  Ph.D.
65. Approximately how many people are employed by your organization?  
 <100  101-500  501-1000  >1000
66. What is your current position in your organization? \_\_\_\_\_

67. How long have you worked in your current job? \_\_\_\_\_ years
68. How long have you worked for your present employer? \_\_\_\_\_ years
69. How many hours per week do you work? \_\_\_\_\_hours

*Contact Information*

70. Thank you for your participation in this survey. Please provide your name and street address below if you are interested in being included in a drawing for a \$100 gift card at the conclusion of the study.