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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The multilevel well-being paradox: Towards an integrative process theory of coping in teams

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Summary

Contemporary work teams are increasingly faced with external pressures and changing demands that thrust them into stressful conditions that require coping to maintain not only performance but also well-being. In this paper, we treat the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme case of multilevel stressors and coping in teams to investigate how teams and their members simultaneously cope with stressors at both individual and team levels and the impacts this has on their well-being. We conducted a longitudinal qualitative multi-case study involving 12 teams, utilizing data from 69 members collected through diaries, interviews, and surveys over a period of 6 months. Our findings illustrate how the needs and coping efforts of teams and individuals can sometimes conflict, resulting in opposing states of well-being at different levels. We frame this phenomenon as the *multilevel well-being paradox*. Our emergent process model of multilevel coping in teams suggests that teams thrive when they establish a shared appraisal of stressors and coping options through active team reflection, and when they adopt coping approaches that align with the specific stressors experienced at both levels. This study advances our understanding of coping in teams by illuminating the intricate interplay between team and individual well-being and highlighting the paradoxical nature of this relationship.

KEYWORDS

coping, multilevel theorization, qualitative study, reflection, team well-being

1 | INTRODUCTION

Contemporary work teams are frequently confronted with rapidly changing environments and high pressure, which can place them in stressful situations demanding effective coping strategies to uphold both their performance and well-being. Most notably, the COVID-19 pandemic thrust teams of knowledge workers into remote work in which they needed to redefine their team norms to stay viable as

teams (Waizenegger et al., 2020). In addition to stressors placed on the team, stressors extending from people's life domains into their work domains and vice versa posed severe threats to employee's well-being (Bliese et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2023). As such, an exogenous shock brought about by a crisis can introduce myriad stressors to both individuals and teams, and therein represent a unique opportunity to understand how well-being and coping within teams operate on two levels in parallel. In this study, we treat the COVID-19

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pandemic as an extreme case to examine the multilevel¹ stress-coping process in teams and seek answers to the following question: How do teams and their members cope with stressors at multiple levels in parallel to sustain both individual and team well-being?

The literature is bifurcated into two streams that provide disparate answers to this question. On the one hand, research focused on individual-level coping (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) offers insight into coping approaches that stem from each person's unique circumstances, perceptions of stressors, and available resources (e.g., Eisenbeck et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2023; Shockley et al., 2021). While this research offers valuable insights into individual coping and well-being, it does not address how coping unfolds in a context where individuals are part of teams dealing with stressors at both team and individual levels. On the other hand, a separate body of literature has examined group-level coping, focusing on how teams collectively cope with shared stressors to maintain team performance (Drach-Zahavy & Freund, 2007; Maruping et al., 2015; Razinskas & Hoegl, 2020) or preserve members' well-being (e.g., Kamphuis et al., 2021). While these two streams of literature offer important insights into how coping may function as an intra-individual or higher-level construct, they do not explore how coping processes unfold across the different levels or how teams co-construct stressful situations and make decisions regarding necessary coping actions to maintain both individual and team well-being in parallel. What is missing is an integrative perspective that views coping as a multilevel phenomenon, which can more accurately explain organizational settings where individuals and their teams simultaneously encounter stressors at multiple levels.

Due to the nascent state of theory around multilevel coping in teams and our aim to understand the underlying reasoning process behind selected coping behaviors, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative multi-case study involving 69 employees from 12 office-based teams that were forced to shift to remote work at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study contributes to the team coping and well-being literature by providing an integrative model that illuminates the dynamic interplay between individual-level and team-level coping processes. Based on our qualitative data, we inductively develop a multilevel coping process model that conceptually elucidates how teams and their members engage in reflection on their situations, appraise stressors, and invest resources in coping with prioritized stressors in order to preserve well-being at individual and/or team levels. Our integrative perspective reveals different well-being patterns depending on whether there is a match or mismatch between stressors and coping actions, and helps to tease out differences between team and individual well-being, which have not been demonstrated in prior research focused on either level in isolation. Our analysis reveals that adoption of team- and/or individual-focused approaches in coping can sometimes produce paradoxical outcomes, wherein well-being is enhanced at one level while undermined at the other. We term this the *multilevel well-being paradox*.

¹We use the term multilevel in a conceptual manner, examining processes taking place at both the individual and team levels in parallel. This acknowledges that individual experiences, appraisals, and behaviors may be influenced by and contribute to team processes.

2 | INDIVIDUAL COPING AND WELL-BEING

Coping, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141), refers to the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” Such demands are perceived as stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An external demand, such as an abrupt shift to remote work, could become a stressor if people view it as a threat to their performance or beyond their ability to adapt or cope, leading to a negative impact on well-being. However, if individuals assess that sufficient resources are available to handle the demand, it will not be considered a stressor but instead an opportunity to foster growth or improvement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Consequently, cognitive appraisal plays a central role in the coping process.

According to transactional coping theory (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), an appraisal of a stressor consists of primary and secondary components, both representing individual perceptions rather than objective conditions. *Primary appraisal* involves an individual's evaluation of the stressor's relevance to their personal goals, and *secondary appraisal* focuses on evaluating available resources, options, and one's ability to deal with it, as well as the future expectations for the success of coping. Consequently, the appraisal process determines one's coping decision, or how an individual chooses to respond to the stressor (Dewe, 1991; Lazarus, 1993). Individuals may opt for problem-focused coping strategies to resolve the stressors or emotion-focused strategies to regulate the emotional strain arising from the stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Ample empirical evidence suggests that problem-focused coping is particularly effective in supporting employee well-being in general (e.g., Bliese et al., 2017; Kato, 2015), and specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Eisenbeck et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021). During the pandemic, some workers with families adopted flexible work arrangements (Shockley et al., 2021) established clear boundaries and routines (Berkowsky, 2020), and detached from work during non-work time (Knight et al., 2023) to manage stress related to multiple responsibilities. Others engaged in meaning-centered coping (Eisenbeck et al., 2021), physical exercise, mindfulness practices (Jacob et al., 2021), sought social support from friends, family members, colleagues, and leaders (Jo et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2023; Mariani et al., 2020) to maintain mental and emotional well-being.

Conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) explains that stress may also occur when an individual experiences a loss or threat of loss of resources, or when there is a lack of resource gain following the investment of resources. Therefore, individuals' primary aim is to prevent or minimize resource loss, as losing resources can lead to a downward spiral of further resource depletion and increased stress (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2011). According to COR, resource investment represents a coping decision in which individuals may choose to accumulate and protect resources to buffer against future stressors or to recover from a resource loss (e.g., Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015). The coping process is considered effective when it succeeds in eliminating or

reducing stressful demands, alleviating stress, and generating resources (Hobfoll, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In contrast, inefficient coping may lead to burnout through a negative spiral of resource depletion and thus constitutes a risk to well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001, 2004). By deciding to invest in resources, individuals can increase their ability to manage stress, reduce the likelihood of resource depletion, and increase their resilience in dealing with stressors, promoting their well-being (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Individual work-related well-being is commonly understood as a holistic state encompassing the overall quality of employee experiences and functioning at work, rather than merely the absence of illness or difficulties (e.g., Diener et al., 1999; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Sonnentag, 2015; Warr, 1990). Research has focused on several conceptualizations and aspects of work-related well-being, including its positive aspects, such as work engagement (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), negative aspects, such as strain (Karasek, 1979) and burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Shirom & Melamed, 2006), and attitudinal aspects, such as job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2001). The widely recognized Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001), explains how high levels of job resources (e.g., autonomy and social support) may lead to work engagement and high job demands (e.g., workload and emotional stressors) alone or combined with low job resources lead to burnout. While JD-R has mainly been used to explain work-related well-being at the individual level, Urien et al. (2021, p. 181) recently extended it by proposing a team-level burnout emergence model, acknowledging that “team members shall cope simultaneously with individual and team sources of job demands (and resources) to effectively fulfil team goals”. Their model does not, however, explain how teams and their members cope with job demands to avoid burnout and maintain well-being as a team.

3 | TEAM COPING AND WELL-BEING

Although coping has traditionally been studied as an individual-level phenomenon, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that individuals who work in group settings and are exposed to the same stressful demands may also engage in collective coping actions to sustain in-group members' well-being (Kuo, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2019). Similar to the individual coping process, collective coping also encompasses two key components: appraisal and action. In collective coping, individuals appraise a stressful situation as “our” problem, rather than “my” or “your” problem (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 583), and initiate shared or uniform actions to resolve it (Włodarczyk et al., 2016).

Collective coping has been studied in different contexts, including crisis situations involving shared stressors. Examples include group debriefings in a military context to address traumatic incidents or acute stress levels among soldiers (Rosebush, 1998), community recovery from natural disasters (e.g., Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017), and responses to security threats like the 9/11 attacks on the United States (Yeh et al., 2006). In each of these contexts, groups faced highly stressful demands, leading to collective coping at the

group or community level. Similarly, work teams confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced multiple (shared) stressors, including forced remote work, social distancing, and health-related anxieties. These stressors are, similar to other crisis situations, likely to generate coping efforts at both the individual and group levels. Despite growing interest in team-level stressors (see Razinskas & Hoegl, 2020 for a review), most research has focused on team performance or individual well-being, leaving the exploration of how teams cope with stressors to maintain team well-being largely unknown territory. This is an unfortunate omission since contemporary work teams increasingly face external stressors that may jeopardize the viability and relational quality of the team, and there is thus a need to understand how teams may cope to retain their well-being.

While previous research on collective coping has identified numerous actions taken by groups to address shared stressors, it has largely neglected the exploration of how individuals with varying appraisals of the same stressful situation come together to form a unified understanding of the situation and determine the necessary coping actions. Developing a *shared appraisal* seems crucial for effective collective coping, as it ensures that all team members are on the same page regarding the stressor(s), potential coping actions, and their implications. The challenge of forming a shared appraisal in a group context arises from the fact that individuals may perceive the same stressor in vastly different ways: for example, some may appraise it as a challenge (i.e., an opportunity for growth, learning, and achievement) while others may appraise it as a hindrance (i.e., a barrier that prevents personal growth or goal attainment) depending on personal resources and capabilities (LePine et al., 2005). This variation in perception can complicate the process of reaching consensus on the stressor's nature and relevance to the team or its members. Moreover, problems may arise in developing an agreement on coping options, as individuals tend to respond to challenges with problem-solving coping and to hindrances with avoidant coping. For example, in their study of 83 teams, Pearsall et al. (2009) found that teams whose members had different perceptions of challenge stressors and hindrance stressors demonstrated the lowest levels of team performance and highest levels of psychological withdrawal, in comparison to teams whose members appraised only hindrance or challenge stressors. The complexity of combining different stressor appraisals in teams highlights the need to better understand the factors that facilitate or hinder the formation of shared appraisals within teams, which may ultimately enhance coping effectiveness for sustained team well-being.

Team well-being is defined as “a shared state of positive psychological and interpersonal functioning within teams” (Wildman et al., 2022, p. 5), combining affective, behavioral, and social components (e.g., González-Romá et al., 2022; Peterson et al., 2008). While prior research has predominantly measured team well-being using aggregate metrics of intra-individual well-being states, such as work engagement and burnout (e.g., Bakker et al., 2006; Consiglio et al., 2013), we suggest that team well-being is a distinct construct representing a shared unit property that emerges from the collective team experience and interactions (Carter et al., 2018; Urien et al., 2021). This understanding is supported by another line of

research that connects team well-being with shared experiences of team satisfaction, team viability, and high-quality interpersonal relationships (e.g., Lefebvre et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2018; Wildman et al., 2022). Each of these components plays a unique role in fostering team well-being. By viewing team well-being as a shared team property similar to other team-level constructs such as climate or cohesion (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), we emphasize the importance of understanding the collective aspects and emergent properties that contribute to the overall well-being of the team. While individual and team well-being share common elements, such as satisfaction and functioning, these concepts differ due to the focus on collective rather than individual experiences in the concept of team well-being (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999). Therein, the measurement of team well-being originates from lower (i.e., individual) levels of analysis but characterizes the team as a whole through compositional aggregation processes (Carter et al., 2018; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

Team satisfaction, the affective component of team well-being, refers to the extent to which team members feel content with their experiences within the team, including the achievement of team goals, the quality of communication, and the support they receive from fellow members (Hackman, 1991). High levels of team satisfaction indicate a positive work environment where members enjoy working together and are motivated to perform well. Team satisfaction is a shared team property that originates from team members' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. It is an important affective aspect of team well-being, as it reflects team members' collective sense of fulfillment and contentment in relation to the team's work and team environment. *Team viability*, the behavioral aspect of team well-being, reflects the team's ability to function and grow as an energetic unit, without signs of falling apart (Hackman, 1991). It involves the capacity of a team to sustain itself, adapt, perform, and maintain positive team dynamics (Bell & Marentette, 2011). Team viability often involves learning and development, as the team adapts and grows in response to challenges and changing circumstances (Ellis et al., 2003). Therefore, during periods when a team faces challenging events (such as stressful external demands), if its members can collectively sustain team viability, it could potentially minimize losses in team effectiveness and reduce turnover intentions (Costa et al., 2015). Finally, the social component of team well-being, *high-quality relationships*, captures the nature of interpersonal interactions and strong social bonds among team members (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Stephens et al., 2013). High-quality interpersonal relationships within a team are characterized by trust, support, understanding, and empathy among members, allowing them to depend on each other and have confidence in their colleagues' capabilities, intentions, and dependability (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). These relationships cultivate a positive team environment characterized by high-quality connection and interaction among team members (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). By reducing conflict, encouraging collaboration, and fostering a setting where team members can freely express their thoughts and concerns without fear of judgment or dismissal, high-quality interpersonal relationships contribute to overall team well-being (West et al., 2009; Wildman et al., 2022).

In this sense, team well-being differs from individual-level well-being in that it is interpersonal in nature, involving interaction between two or more individuals, and should be assessed as a shared team property rather than an aggregate of individual psychological well-being states, which are intrinsically intra-individual (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). However, there is an interplay between individual and team-level well-being. For instance, individual well-being and emotions may be shaped by interpersonal interactions and relations (Bakker et al., 2006), and team relations may be shaped by individual members' affective states (Walter & Bruch, 2008). Among other insights, prior research offers explanations as to why individual-level well-being may carry over to other members through affective entrainment (mimicry and emotional contagion) (Bakker et al., 2006; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Meredith et al., 2020). As such, members' attitudes and behaviors constitute multilevel phenomena, including reciprocal influences between the individual and team levels (Chen & Kanfer, 2006). Despite this natural connection between team and individual levels, prior research on emotional contagion has primarily focused on how individual affect or well-being carries over from one member to another. This neglects the potential crossover effect on team well-being.

Although existing research provides valuable insights into coping and well-being on individual and team levels, an integrative perspective that considers coping as a multilevel phenomenon is still lacking. This gap in understanding calls for further research that can more accurately explain organizational settings where individuals and their teams simultaneously face stressors at both levels, and how they collectively and/or individually cope to preserve individual and team well-being. In this study, we treat the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme case of multilevel stressors and coping in teams to elucidate the multilevel nature of coping and well-being in teams faced with stressors at both individual and team levels. More specifically, we address the following research questions: RQ1: How do individuals and teams cope with stressors that arise concurrently at both the individual and team levels? and RQ2: How does coping at different levels influence well-being dynamics of teams and individuals?

4 | METHODS

To gain a deeper understanding of the coping and the well-being dynamics in teams, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative multi-case study of 12 office-based teams faced with the demand to go virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the lack of integration between research on individual and team level coping and well-being, and our wish to understand the underlying reasoning process that goes into the multilevel coping process, a qualitative approach enabled us to inductively explore how teams and their members coped with various stressors over time. More specifically, to capture evolving stress-coping processes, we followed these teams using a longitudinal diary study from the beginning of their office lockdowns (mid-March 2020 to August 2020). The 12 participating teams comprised knowledge workers ($N = 69$) working interdependently towards common goals (see the team demographics in Table 1). The

TABLE 1 Characteristics of study participants.

Team	Industry	Team tenure (in months)	Age (average per team)	Gender (F-female, M-male)	Current location	Number of members: no partner w child under age of 12	Number of members: partner w child under age of 12	Number of members: partner but no child under age of 12	Number of members: living alone	Days per week teleworking before COVID-19 (average per team)
1	Education	24	49.3	7 F	2 cities in Fi	0	1	6	0	0.4
2	Nonprofit	13	29.6	4 F/1 M	1 city in Be	0	1	1	2	0.56
3	Manufacturing	10	49.75	4 F	2 cities in Fi	0	2	1	1	0.875
4	Education	27	35.8	5 F/1 M	2 cities in Fi	0	3	2	1	0.67
5	Education	21	45	3 F/1 M	1 city in Se	0	1	3	0	1.75
6	Education	33	44.1	9 F/2 M	2 cities in Fi	1	4	5	0	0.57
7	Nonprofit	17	46.1	6 F/1 M	1 city in Fi	0	2	3	1	0.57
8	Nonprofit	10	49	2 F/2 M	1 city in Fi	0	1	3	0	0.87
9	Technology	15	24.5	2 F/3 M	1 city in Ro	0	0	2	3	0.29
10	Technology	23	38.6	1 F/3 M	1 city in Fi	0	3	1	0	1
11	Technology	13	30.3	2 F/3 M	1 city in USA	2	0	2	0	1.1
12	Manufacturing	17	45	3 F/1 M	Se, Dk, Pol, Fi	0	2	0	2	1.25

Note: F = Female, M = Male; Au = Austria/Austrian, Be = Belgium/Belgian, Dk = Denmark/Danish, Do = Dominican Republic, Fi = Finland/Finn, Fr = French, Iri = Irish, No = Norwegian, Pol = Poland/Polish, Ro = Romania/Romanian, Se = Sweden/Swede.

teams studied were all ongoing but differed in team tenure and the nature of tasks performed. While they all delivered services or products to customers and other external stakeholders, the teams operated in different sectors (education, nonprofit, manufacturing, and technology). In accordance with the principles of purposive sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), we selected teams that were primarily co-located prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and thus likely to have experienced stressors at the team level as a result of an abrupt shift to “forced remote work”. All the teams were forced to work entirely remotely (each member in a separate location, out of the office) during the whole data collection period. The teams were recruited through the authors' networks and the majority (69/76) of those contacted agreed to participate.

4.1 | Data collection

Our primary data source was team members' weekly-to-monthly semi-structured diaries during the time period March to August 2020. Most members of the focal teams provided diary entries regularly

(resulting in a total of 428 entries, averaging 473 words each), while three team leaders and two members sharing only one diary participated through interviews at the end. The diary format consisted of an email exchange between the participant and one of the authors, where each participant responded to open-ended prompts on relevant themes that evolved based on the ongoing analysis. Everyone received the same prompts that included recurring themes such as “thoughts and feelings around being in remote work quarantine,” “thoughts around your team's dynamics at the moment?,” as well as more refined questions in subsequent prompts such as “In your last diary, you reported that you experienced demands in relation to X, can you tell me about how you have dealt with this demand?” and “How do you balance between your own needs and the needs of your team?” (Additional example prompts added in online Appendix S1). The diaries were highly personal and reported on the participants' experiences of working during the pandemic, their personal well-being, and the relational dynamics and energy in their team, in situ and over time.

As our initial analysis began to reveal differences between individual- and team-level well-being, we decided to measure their

individual- and team-level well-being more systematically with self-rated survey questions, at the beginning of June 2020 (response rate 60/69) to triangulate numerical data with our qualitative interpretations. *Individual well-being* was measured as a composite of burnout (including physical fatigue and cognitive weariness; Shirom & Melamed, 2006) and work engagement (complete construct by Schaufeli et al., 2006). Burnout scores were reversed, so that a high number indicated a high level of well-being. *Team well-being* was measured as a composite variable combining three questions on team satisfaction, three measuring team viability from Hackman's (1988) scale, and three questions on the quality of relationships among team members from the social connectivity scale of Collins and Kolb (2011).

4.2 | Data analysis

We began our analysis by inductively analyzing diary entries during the data collection process. In line with the principles of cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989), we first analyzed the coping processes of each case team and its members in context. We then conducted a thematic analysis using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to code for themes across the data corpus. All the authors participated in the iterative coding process, the discussions, and the memo writing, generating a nuanced understanding of the studied teams. First, we applied *open coding* by identifying initial first-order codes (Gioia et al., 2013) and grouping them into categories to uncover the dominant themes. This conceptual *in vivo* coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) comprised terms, concepts, and categories originating from the participants' language. At this initial stage, we paid particular attention to how team members appraised stressors, how they applied coping, and how they described their own and their team's well-being. During our coding process, we systematically analyzed participants' expressions in the present diary alongside their entries in previous diaries. This approach allowed us to track changes and effects over time. We list examples of the first-order codes in online Appendix S2, in which we provide our codebook as supporting information. Furthermore, at the team level, we developed first-order codes in relation to the teams' experienced stressors and applied coping behaviors by cross checking responses from multiple members in the same team.

We then began developing second-order codes for stressors and their corresponding coping strategies at different levels systematically. We grouped first-order codes of stressors into second-order themes based on the Integrated Work Design Framework by Morgeson et al. (2012) in which work characteristics are categorized into task, knowledge, social, and work context factors. We added non-work characteristics as a fifth category to cover first-order codes related to COVID-19 such as "risk of infection." Similarly, we grouped coping behaviors related to each stressor category.

In these further rounds of coding, we made an unexpected observation that individuals and teams did not always employ coping strategies specific to the type of stressor they were experiencing. Instead, they sometimes attempted to manage stress in ways that

unintentionally ended up adding additional strain. For example, we noticed instances where an individual coped with a stressor categorized as a "social demand" by utilizing a coping strategy better suited for addressing "task demands." Therefore, we began engaging in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to look for relationships among our codes, specifically investigating if the coping behaviors adopted addressed the specific type of stressor experienced or not (coded as match or mismatch, see Table 3). For each individual and team, we coded the level at which their coping actions were targeted and assessed whether they managed to match coping efforts with experienced stressors at those respective levels. In addition to coding within-level coping actions (coded as individual-to-individual or team-to-team), we also coded coping actions as "team-to-individual" when the team as a collective entity (or the majority of its members) deployed coping mechanisms to assist individual members. Conversely, we coded coping actions as "individual-to-team" when individual team members employed coping strategies to support the team as a whole. Table 2 lists each individual's and team's coping approaches based on their behaviors during the majority of the study period, and Table 3 lists example quotations of stressors and (mis) matching coping behaviors.

It became further evident that tensions existed between team and individual stressors and coping needs, and that individuals did not automatically cope with both the team's and their own stressors. Rather, they made prioritizations about which level(s) to invest in coping. We engaged in selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to explore what influenced individuals' coping focus (individual level and/or team level) and what coping actions they decided to carry out. At this point, two pivotal mechanisms stood out among the studied teams. The first was the extent to which individuals and teams reflected upon their experienced stressors varied among the studied teams. Second, only some teams seemed to reach a shared appraisal and shared prioritization of stressors and approaches to cope with them. Following these insights, we began a systematic coding process that focused on aspects related to (team and self-) reflection, (shared and individual) appraisal, and (shared and individual) prioritization (see online Appendix S2 for codebook).

After analyzing each team's and their members' coping process, we turned to cross-case analysis to look for similarities and difference across teams (Eisenhardt, 1989). Here, we followed a configurational approach (Crawford & Lepine, 2013; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) to identify patterns or variability within teams. We found four different team configurations or "team coping paths" of distinct multilevel coping processes, which differed in relation to the extent to which the teams and their members engaged in self- and team reflection, and the extent to which they formed a shared appraisal and shared prioritization of coping strategies focusing on either or both levels. We call these team coping paths "Balanced", "Team-focused", "Individual-focused", and "Fragmented" depending on which level(s) they commonly targeted their coping efforts (listed in Table 2 and illustrated Section 5), and whether they reflected on and appraised stressors as a team or not.

Next, we analyzed whether and how these different coping processes were linked to different well-being outcomes. To distinguish

TABLE 2 Team coping paths.

Balanced coping path							
T	M	Individual-to-individual	Individual-to-team	Team-to-individual	Team-to-team	Team well-being	Individual well-being
1	1A	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch	Match	4.22	2.67
1	1B	Match	Match	Match		6.67	6
1	1D	Match	Match	Match		6.78	5.25
1	1E	Mismatch	Match	Match		6.89	3.89
1	1F	Match	Match	Match		5.56	4.83
1	Team					M = 6.02 SD = 1.02	M = 4.53 SD = 1.23
2	2A	Match	Match	Match	Match	6.75	5.56
2	2B	Match	Match	Match		5.11	4.06
2	2C	Mismatch	Match	Match		6.11	3.17
2	2D	Match	Match	Match		6.80	3.92
2	Team					M = 6.19 SD = 0.68	M = 4.18 SD = 1.00
6	6A	Match	Match	Match	Match	6.89	4.25
6	6B	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		5.22	4.78
6	6C	Match	Match	Match		5.50	5.17
6	6D	Match	Match	Match		6.67	4.28
6	6E	Mismatch	Match	Match		6.11	3.83
6	6F	Match	Match	Match		6.78	6
6	6G	Mismatch	Mismatch	Match		5.50	2
6	6H	Match	Match	Match		6.78	5.83
6	6I	Match	Match	Match		6.78	5.61
6	6J	Match	Mismatch	Match		5.67	5.22
6	Team					M = 6.19 SD = 0.63	M = 4.70 SD = 1.19
11	11A	Match	Match	Match	Match	6.67	5.67
11	11B	Match	Match	Match		5.78	3.61
11	11C	Match	Match	Mismatch		5.67	4.92
11	11D	Mismatch	Match	Match		5.44	4.28
11	Team					M = 5.89 SD = 0.46	M = 4.62 SD = 0.88
Fragmented coping path							
T	M	Individual-to-individual	Individual-to-team	Team-to-individual	Team-to-team	Team well-being	Individual well-being
4	4A	Match	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch	6.00	5.11
4	4B	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		4.00	3.28
4	4C	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		5.22	1.92
4	4D	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		5.78	5.5
4	4E	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		5.56	2.39
4	4F	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		4.00	4.31
4	Team					M = 5.09 SD = 0.81	M = 3.76 SD = 1.46
7	7A	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch	3.11	4.72
7	7B	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		4.67	3.44
7	7C	Match	Mismatch	Match		6.11	5.36
7	7D	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		5.33	3.94

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Fragmented coping path							
T	M	Individual-to-individual	Individual-to-team	Team-to-individual	Team-to-team	Team well-being	Individual well-being
7	7E	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		4.56	5.11
7	7F	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		6.33	3.06
7	Team					M = 5.02 SD = 1.08	M = 3.76 SD = 1.01
8	8A	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch	3.56	3.33
8	8B	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		5.56	4.78
8	8C	Match	Match	Mismatch		3.67	4.69
8	8D	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		5.33	4.39
8	Team					M = 4.53 SD = 0.92	M = 4.30 SD = 0.67
Team-focused coping path							
T	M	Individual-to-individual	Individual-to-team	Team-to-individual	Team-to-team	Team well-being	Individual well-being
9	9A	Match	Match	Mismatch	Match	5.67	3.14
9	9B	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		6.89	3.97
9	9C	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		6.44	3.97
9	9D	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		5.56	3.47
9	9E	Match	Match	Match		6.89	5.5
9	Team					M = 6.49 SD = 0.45	M = 4.01 SD = 0.90
10	10A	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch	Match	5.67	3.5
10	10B	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		6.44	5.03
10	10C	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		5.22	5.31
10	10D	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		5.50	3.47
10	Team					M = 5.71 SD = 0.45	M = 4.33 SD = 0.98
12	12A	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch	Match	5.50	4.11
12	12B	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		4.89	3.81
12	12C	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		5.78	3.61
12	12D	Mismatch	Match	Mismatch		6.78	4.25
12	Team					M = 5.74 SD = 0.68	M = 3.95 SD = 0.29
Individual-focused coping path							
T	M	Individual-to-individual	Individual-to-team	Team-to-individual	Team-to-team	Team well-being	Individual well-being
3	3A	Match	Mismatch	Match	Mis-match	4.22	4.33
3	3B	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		3.78	4.64
3	3C	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		4.78	5.92
3	3D	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		3.89	3.58
3	Team					M = 4.17 SD = 0.39	M = 4.62 SD = 0.96
5	5A	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mis-match	5.00	4.72
5	5B	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		3.78	4.22
5	5C	Mismatch	Mismatch	Mismatch		3.56	3.67
5	5D	Match	Mismatch	Mismatch		4.56	5.11
5	Team					M = 4.22 SD = 0.58	M = 4.43 SD = 0.62

TABLE 3 Stressors and coping behaviors.

	Stressor	Coping behavior
Team-to-team	Social distancing (team-level stressor): "The change to forced remote work created a lot of panic in our team initially, since we are a really tight team who normally spend a lot of time socializing both at work and outside work. I think we all are afraid of losing that connection."	Matching team coping to team-level stressor: "We are sharing the need to have informal breaks and to talk about feelings in our team. Therefore we have kept coffee breaks free from talk about work. We talk about more and less serious stuff and are we laugh together. Today we watched a funny video together. I constantly hear from others how vital these breaks are for our team's belongingness".
	Lack of team socializing (team-level stressor): "As a new team, we should really work on building stronger connections among each other to grow into a strong team. But our calendars are just filled with one meeting after the other so there is never a chance to do that."	Mismatching team coping to team-level stressor: "We have good work-related discussions during the meetings, but I feel less involved in other peoples' work. We are less energized as a team now and its almost boring. We keep saying that when the pandemic is over, its time for team-building activities."
Individual-to-individual	Lack of routines (individual-level stressor): "I am stressing a lot since I have just lost all my routines. I dislike chaos and now I have to manage my own mess but also my family's mess at home. Having them around during my workday is new to me. We really need to develop a system for this to work."	Matching individual-level coping to individual-level stressor: "I have established morning routines, starting with showering, breakfast and so on. I eat lunch with my family mid-day to get a routine with them. I put my computer in my computer bag at the end of the day. These things provide me with boundaries."
	Work intensification (individual-level stressor): "I am quite tired in the evenings and on weekends. I assume it is because of virtual fatigue ... sitting in one meeting after the other. In addition, my work days are two hours longer on average since I work during the time I normally used for my commute."	Mismatching individual coping to individual-level stressor: "I am definitively prioritizing work over taking breaks. It is not logical at all, but I feel like a villain if I sit down on my couch during work time."
Individual-to-team	Low resource availability to complete team tasks (team-level stressor): "My team is facing challenges due to different family situations. I know some members cannot work 100% as they care for small children during the workday, and this has created additional stress to the team as we anyway need to manage all our work tasks."	Matching individual coping to team-level stressor: "I have felt that I have been very involved in my team, taking up the more "responsible role". I am working more than before the pandemic because I know that others have more difficult family situations."
	Low social support (team-level stressor): "We lack interaction and have lost connection to many team members, only few are still there to help each other."	Mismatching individual coping to team-level stressor: "I have begun skipping the team coffee breaks and connect more with two team members than with the whole team. We message and call more, and talk more confidentially about our feelings and experiences. Of course, this is driving the whole team further apart."
Team-to-individual	Social isolation (individual-level stressor): "I live in a small apartment alone. I have pretty much isolated myself since that was what we were told to do. It is stressful and its taking a toll on my mental health."	Matching team coping to individual-level stressor: "We are a few members who have begun taking walks in the park with [team member] to help him feel less alone. One member also does one-to-one calls with him regularly."
	Uncertainty (individual-level stressor): "It's hard to concentrate when my mind is occupied by concerns about how long this [pandemic] situation is going to continue, while returning to 'normal' seems scary."	Mismatching team coping to individual-level stressor: "For some reason, the depressed mood of other members is contagious. I attend online coffee breaks thinking it will be reassuring to share my feelings with my colleagues, but I leave these meetings feeling even worse."

between different levels of well-being, we used the survey data to categorize each member as high in individual well-being (measured as a composite of work engagement and burnout) if they scored above the average of all individuals ($M = 4.32$), and low in well-being if they scored below the average (see Table 2, members colored in gray scored lower than the mean). All but one team's (Team 2) survey data confirmed our qualitative interpretations. While most members in Team 2 scored low on individual well-being ($M = 4.18$), slightly below the average of all the teams ($M = 4.32$), we still categorized two of these members (2B and 2D) as high on individual well-being, based on

the qualitative data showing a momentary stressful month around the time of the survey. In addition, we categorized each individual's response to their team's well-being (measured as a composite of team satisfaction, team viability, and high-quality interpersonal relationships), as high well-being if their score was higher than the average of all teams ($M = 5.50$), and low well-being if the score was lower than the average of all teams (see Table 2, members colored in gray scored lower than the mean).

As a final step of our analysis, we constructed an emergent theoretical model by identifying the relationships between the

second-order codes and aggregate dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), that is, the different steps of team and individual coping process. These relationships are illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts the identified steps of a multilevel coping process, including appraisal, reflection, prioritization, and actions, that influence well-being at both individual and team levels. To improve the credibility of our findings, we tested our interpretations through member checks by presenting the results to our informants, enabling them to review the analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). These reviews confirmed our interpretations.

5 | FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed that coping in teams is a complex and multilevel process that goes beyond the mere alignment of individuals' stressor appraisals and the subsequent application of appropriate coping strategies to mitigate stress. Rather, when stressors exist at individual and team levels in parallel, team members make selective choices on stressors to cope with, sometimes prioritizing one level over the other. At the team level, *team reflection* emerged as a pivotal team-level mechanism that facilitates the development of *shared appraisal* of stressors and available coping options for teams. Team reflection encompasses the collective process of reviewing, exploring, and analyzing team members' perceptions of tasks, demands, resources, and efforts with self-awareness (West, 2000), ultimately culminating in the development of a shared appraisal, which encompasses a shared understanding and agreement of these elements in the team. Such team reflection and shared appraisal furthermore helped individuals and teams to jointly prioritize coping actions by determining which

level(s) to focus their coping efforts on and deciding how to cope as a team. This *shared prioritization*, as we term it, emerged as a second pivotal mechanism that helps teams to cope with stressors at concurrent levels. Moreover, at the individual level, we found that individuals engaged in self-reflection to various degrees, that is the introspective examination and evaluation of one's own thoughts, behaviors, and emotions (Grant et al., 2002). Such self-reflection influenced the appraisal process at the individual level, in particular, and also contributed to improved team level reflection.

While teams varied on the level of engagement in (team) reflection, (shared) appraisal, and (shared) prioritization, all teams furthermore took action to cope with experienced stressors. We found that teams and their members who effectively matched coping strategies with stressors at both levels were able to sustain high levels of well-being. However, misaligned or selective prioritization led to decreased well-being at the neglected level. For example, in some teams, frequent team connectivity including virtual coffee breaks helped sustain team well-being but resulted in overload and strain for individual team members. Consequently, individuals began opting out of virtual coffee breaks (intended to help manage stress) over time to reduce connectivity overload and protect their own well-being. However, this reduction in connectivity hurt the team bonding as a result. These dynamics highlight the paradoxical effects on well-being that arise from multilevel coping processes within and across team and individual levels. We term this phenomenon the *multilevel well-being paradox*, a situation where individual- and team-level well-being are at odds.

Building on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) individual-level coping theory and our multilevel findings, we introduce an emergent theoretical model of multilevel coping processes (Figure 1) that helps

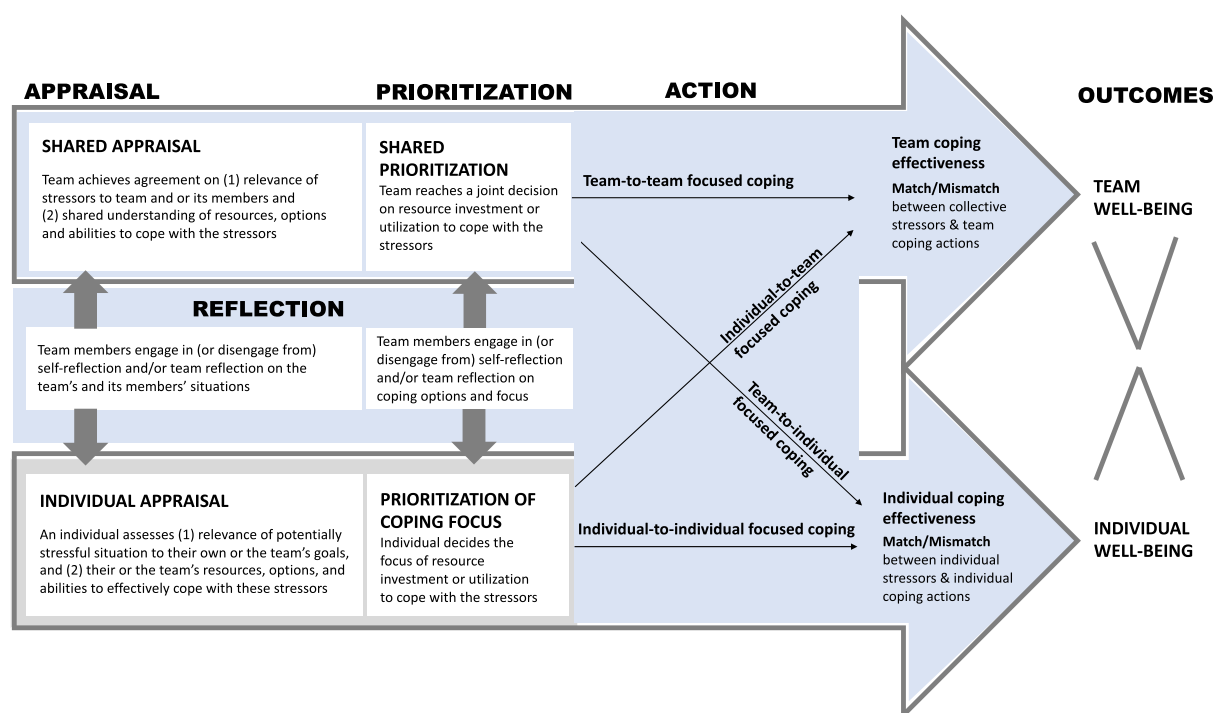


FIGURE 1 Multilevel coping process model in teams. Note: (1) primary appraisal; (2) secondary appraisal.

explaining this paradox. Figure 1 previews our findings related to the concurrent coping processes at both the individual and team levels and illustrates how certain coping approaches that help sustain well-being at one level may have unintended negative consequences at another level. More specifically, our model lists four key steps—reflection, appraisal, prioritization, and action—in which teams and their members can actively engage, or choose not to engage, to preserve well-being at both (or either) individual and team levels.

5.1 | Team coping paths

In our cross-case analysis of the 12 teams under study, it became evident that not all teams advanced through our process model's steps in a linear fashion, nor did they dedicate the same effort to each step. In the following, we present descriptions of the different team paths observed to illustrate distinct patterns of multilevel coping in teams: *Balanced*, *Team-focused*, *Individual-focused*, and *Fragmented* coping paths.

5.1.1 | Balanced coping path

Our data uncovered that out of the 12 teams, four teams (1, 2, 6, 11) demonstrated more balanced coping and well-being dynamics compared to the other teams, at both the individual and team levels throughout the period of forced remote work. Notably, these balanced teams demonstrated high engagement not only in *self-reflection* but also in *team reflection*, in the form of active participation in open discussions focused on establishing a *shared appraisal* of both the team's and its members' stressors at the current moment. They also formed a *shared prioritization* in the form of joint decisions on how to invest resources to cope with the stressors. These three concepts (team reflection, shared appraisal, and shared prioritization) emerged from our analysis and were particularly visible in “balanced” teams that fared well on both team and individual level well-being.

Team 2, for instance, initially spent 15 min every morning on team reflection in the form of an online call:

“We check in with each other every morning to see how everyone is feeling. We encourage each other to go for walks (and hold each other accountable to that) and to stand up and walk around during meetings, if possible. I find it a great way to start the day and very motivating ... We joke a lot, and I feel like it's bringing us much closer together”

(2A, 20 March)

Frequent but short team reflection kept members informed about each other's stressors, and also about the needs of the team. In other words, the team used team reflection as a mechanism to reach a shared appraisal and mutual understanding of the stressors being most prevalent in the team at a given moment in time, and of the

availability of resources to cope with them. All members in Team 2 wrote in their diaries that the biggest stressor for their team was the removed office norms including lack of socializing at the office. As a result of team reflection and a shared appraisal of the team's stressor, the team jointly decided to cope with the stressor by infusing structured time for social interaction online (matching team-to-team focused coping). One member reflected upon how the structured time for social interaction helped her team to grow stronger over time:

“I feel all of us are learning a lot more about each other than we normally would in a conventional office setting. I think the main difference is that in the office we would also chat about personal stuff, but not in an intentional matter. Now every social activity online needs to be facilitated and is therefore a lot more thorough and efficient. I think this is kind of an interesting dynamic and I think we are all becoming a better team because of it.”

(2D, 24 April)

As members of the balanced teams continuously reflected upon each other's well-being through team reflection, they were able to adapt their coping actions and introduce new mutual support strategies to respond to each others' changing needs over time. For example, when one member of Team 2 told others that he was suffering from social isolation, the team jointly decided to invest resources in this member's well-being (shared prioritization), by organizing walks with him outdoors a few times a week to help him cope with his personal stress. But they did not add more team-level socializing, since several team members felt that their connectivity at that moment was overloading them (matching team-to-individual focused coping).

In addition to team reflection, members of balanced teams invested effort in reflecting on their own on how they could sustain their personal well-being and also that of their team. Such individual level appraisal and prioritization efforts commonly resulted in enriching crossover effects between individual- and team-focused coping and well-being at both levels in the balanced teams (see crossed arrows in Figure 1). For example, the members of balanced teams successfully coped with connectivity overload and virtual meeting fatigue (individual-level stressors) by taking brief walks during the day (individual-to-individual focused coping), creating connectivity rules, and reducing the length of meetings (team-focused and individual-focused coping), thereby simultaneously coping with team- and individual-level stressors. For example, participant 2A described her individual- and team-focused coping that helped her reduce communication overload and stress for herself, and reduce workflow uncertainty for the team:

What has worked for me [in coping with forced remote work] is [...] 3) establishing one channel where people can reach me for urgent things during the day; 4) being mindful about messaging others—considering that they, too, are receiving a lot of messages and emails, and that not everything is urgent; 5) reducing default

meeting times to 30 or 45 minutes [to prevent virtual meeting fatigue].

(2A, May 7)

In sum, balanced teams reached shared appraisal of the team of individual- and team-level stressors through frequent team reflection and were thus able to prioritize and adapt coping efforts effectively at both levels to maintain positive well-being dynamics over time. Team reflection enabled them to continuously monitor the emergent state of well-being in the team and among members and adjust their coping strategies when resources began to deplete at either level. In doing so, balanced teams were able to productively manage any rising tensions within and between the individual and team levels and ensure that the applied coping strategies were matched (i.e., aligned) with the stressors they and other team members faced.

5.1.2 | Team-focused coping path

Teams characterized as *Team-focused* (Teams 9, 10, 12) primarily consisted of members who continuously evaluated their team well-being as high but their own individual well-being as low. They actively participated in team reflection, mainly focusing on the team's needs, constructing a shared appraisal of team stressors, and prioritizing both individual and team-level coping actions for improving the team's well-being. However, the members of these teams reflected less about their personal stressors. Consequently, they were less successful in recognizing and addressing their individual-level stressors, neither on their own nor as a team.

Team 10, for instance, dedicated part of their weekly meetings to team reflection, concentrating on addressing team needs (not individual needs) during this discussion. In April, Team 10 collectively appraised uncertainty in their workflow as a primary team level stressor and jointly decided to cope with it by implementing a dedicated window for availability and establishing new team routines for more frequent status reporting (matching team-to-team focused coping strategies). Participant 10A described these strategies in late April:

[To reduce uncertainty of workflow], we jointly decided that we should all be available for the team between 12 and 2 pm every day and have a few work-related meetings and one coffee break over video every day. Later, we also decided to have a daily work-related status meeting every day.

(10A)

This quote exemplifies how the team reached a shared prioritization in terms of how to cope with the identified team-level stressor. On May 6, participant 10B from the same team described how a daily check-in meeting over video helped the team maintain team well-being: *"Daily coffee meetings are nice and fun, and we actually sometimes socialize even more than we did at the office. Our team is still in good shape and everyone is happy working with each other."* Investing

in coping efforts to care for the team was a high priority for members of the teams with a team-focused coping path.

While the "team-focused" teams effectively reached shared appraisal and prioritization of team-level stressors through team reflection, and adapted coping strategies to maintain high team well-being, these mechanisms did not help sustain the well-being of individual team members. Because their team reflection was solely focused on team-level stressors, these teams lacked a shared appraisal of individual-level stressors and well-being, as the following quote brings up: *"Despite shared coffee breaks, what's missing from the communication is how everyone are doing. We do not get that deep in online discussions"* (10C, 29 April). Without a shared appraisal of individual stressors, team-to-individual focused coping did not emerge in team-focused teams. Moreover, individual team members did not reflect much on their own either. Member 10A explained this: *"I have tried to avoid reflecting too much around my own well-being. I'm suffering a lot from sleep deprivation. There are not enough hours during the day and I replace sleep time with 'me-time' or time with my wife"*. While some other members did reflect upon their individual situations, most members failed to employ matching individual-focused strategies to cope with their individual-level stressors, which led to increased burnout symptoms over time. Participant 10C, for example, wrote that team well-being was more important to him than self-care: *"I have prioritized my team's well-being [over my own well-being]. I consider the team's well-being extremely important because it's much more difficult to repair. I can more easily fix my own well-being later."* Unfortunately, this participant failed to align coping efforts effectively with his individual stressor, social isolation, and as a result, ended up suffering from low individual well-being (high burnout). Instead of spending more time with co-workers or friends, he tried to cope with stress stemming from social isolation by moving to his summer cottage and by exercising outside in nature during the day, which only increased his experiences of social isolation (mismatch in individual-to-individual focused coping). Similar mismatches were visible for other team members, too, including dealing with childcare responsibilities by working late at night (rather than getting support with childcare) or coping with virtual meeting fatigue by working late to make up for lost energy during the day (rather than infusing breaks or meetings away from the computer). They did not manage to alleviate their true stressors with such mismatched coping efforts, and neither did they get the right kind of support from their team (mismatch in team-to-individual focused coping).

In sum, teams with a team-focused coping path primarily focused on reflecting upon team-level stressors, which resulted in a shared appraisal around team-level stressors and shared prioritization on how to cope with them as a team. Although such team-level coping practices were successful in maintaining team well-being, they inadvertently compromised individual well-being because the individual needs of team members were overlooked. Additionally, team members often neglected self-reflection and adopted coping strategies that failed to address their personal stressors. Consequently, while "team-focused" teams generated resources that benefitted the team, they simultaneously depleted the personal resources of individual members.

5.1.3 | Individual-focused coping path

Two teams (3 and 5) exhibited coping paths categorized as *Individual-focused*. These teams rarely engaged in team reflection upon how they were doing as a team. Instead, members primarily focused on individual self-reflection and prioritizing their personal needs, often at the expense of the team's needs. As a result, most members experienced high personal well-being, while rating the team's well-being as low. The exceptions were individuals who failed to align their individual-focused coping efforts with their personal stressors (i.e., mismatch in individual-to-individual focused coping).

Our qualitative analysis also indicated decreasing levels of team well-being throughout the study period for the individual-focused teams. Team 5, for instance, was a fairly mature team with strong team norms but lost those norms when forced to shift to remote work. Without engaging in team reflection, the team continued working like “business as usual” without establishing new norms that would have helped maintain team well-being when working virtually. Three months after the lockdown began, the members of Team 5 had grown increasingly apart, largely because the team had not engaged in team reflection and therefore had not established a shared appraisal of its team-level stressors, nor a shared prioritization of which stressors to cope with. In August, participant 5C wrote:

We have just continued like ‘business as usual’, which obviously does not work so well. We were also told in the beginning to not use videos in meetings or coffee breaks due to bandwidth issues. This made it hard to connect and keep the spirit up in my team.

(5C)

Top-down decisions related to norms and technology use hindered these teams from reaching a shared appraisal on the actual stressors of the team and its members. For other members, feeling ignored by their team made them withdraw from collective reflection altogether:

I generally like to bounce ideas with my colleagues at the office, and often just go and knock on their doors. But during this virtual quarantine, when I happened to call up some of these colleagues who sit next to me in the office, I got the impression that I was only disturbing them. So, I try to not call them now unless absolutely necessary. It feels like I have lost the connection with these colleagues.

(5A, April 27)

When the members of individual-focused teams started to turn away from their team and cope on their own, their team well-being suffered. This trend was evident in both individual-oriented teams (3 and 5), where members gradually felt less energized by their team and increasingly became more self-concerned over time. For instance, while all team members initially used virtual coffee breaks as means of

socially connecting with their team, over time, these sessions changed. Some individuals started to utilize these gatherings as opportunities to vent their own negative experiences and seek affirmation from others. The increasingly self-centric attitude of certain individuals in these teams had a contagious effect on others:

I'm not sure if it's about getting into a bad mood or what, but I notice that my thoughts drift when only a few people “take over” and speak only about themselves during these [virtual coffee] breaks. In the beginning I was very keen on prioritizing these breaks, but over time due to my perceived disengagement, and the fact that I noticed that some others don't prioritize these breaks and don't attend, I have also started to prioritize my own things. Like now sitting here writing this journal to you instead of attending my team's coffee break.

(5B, May 18)

As social connectivity within their team became an additional stressor—due to the poor interaction quality, increased anxiety from discussions, or feelings of being rejected or ignored—team members gradually began to downplay the importance of being sociable for collective well-being, focusing instead on preserving their own well-being. This shift occurred because of the lack of team reflection, leading individuals to pursue their coping efforts independently, without developing a shared appraisal of the team stressors and without developing any team-level coping approaches. While these individual-focused coping strategies helped sustaining well-being at the individual level, they inadvertently had negative spillover effects on the team, leading to a depletion of team resources (mismatch in individual-to-team-focused coping). Ultimately, teams on the individual-focused coping path engaged in self-reflection but overlooked the importance of team reflection, which often lead them to prioritize coping strategies that sustained their own well-being at the expense of their team's well-being.

5.1.4 | Fragmented coping path

Finally, teams characterized by *Fragmented coping paths* (Teams 4, 7, 8) did not engage in team reflection on stressors or coping strategies. Instead, they went straight into the action phase of coping with members independently applying coping strategies they deemed appropriate. While some team members viewed the demands of forced virtual work as hindrances to their goal achievement, others perceived them as positive challenges or opportunities for achieving better autonomy and work-life balance. The wide variation in members' stressor appraisals resulted in conflicting priorities in coping strategies among members, contributing to a fragmented team approach rather than a shared team approach. Due to the lack of collective reflection on the team's and its members' experienced stressors and resources, they never reached a shared appraisal of these stressors and resources

within the team. Consequently, they did not reach a shared prioritization on coping strategies for the stressors at both the team and individual levels. As team members disengaged from team reflection, it hindered their ability to collectively address and cope with the wide variety of stressors, ultimately impairing the well-being of both individuals and the team (see Table 2).

Interestingly, all fragmented teams had similar well-being trajectories: they started out with a short “honeymoon” period of heightened well-being (due to excitement about the new work mode and bonding over a shared enemy, that is the pandemic), which soon shifted on a downward path towards low well-being at both the team and individual levels for most team members. This shift can be explained by the lack of team reflection, shared appraisal and shared prioritization of coping responses, with the coping actions over time creating additional stressors rather than alleviating them. While some members initially prioritized team-focused coping to maintain team well-being, others were self-oriented from the outset. This led to dissatisfaction and damaged team morale down the line, as members became aware of the differing priorities among their peers. While one member tried to engage in team reflection in an attempt to care for team well-being, she got rejected by her team which made her change her coping prioritization:

It feels like we don't have any team dynamic at the moment [and our team is starting to be in bad shape]. ... We've been working remotely for four weeks now and my boss hasn't phoned me once to ask how I'm doing. I'm missing the team spirit that we usually have. I tried to take the initiative and suggest internal coffee breaks to the team, but very few supported the idea, and my boss told me she doesn't have time. So, I got the feeling of being the “slacker” in the team ... who doesn't have enough real work to do, someone who's easy to kick out of the team if needed.

(4B, April 1)

While team well-being decreased, participants 4B and 4C started showing their commitment by trying to take on more work for other team members who were occupied with childcare during their workdays. Member 4B talked about how, over time, this felt unfair and consumed her well-being:

My feelings are ambivalent in that I do feel for my colleagues who've got a lot going on (with family), but I still want the division of work to be fair and manageable for all parties. I've felt that I have a LOT on my plate. I'm not sure how others relate to my situation but sometimes I feel I should put in more effort just because I don't have kids or a more “challenging situation” due to the corona crisis. At the same time, I don't have an infinite store of energy and I also need to think about my own well-being. But in the projects I'm involved in, no one else is taking the initiative and I've

had to take the responsible role, even though on paper it's not my job.

(4B)

Meanwhile, members 4A and 4F, with children, reasoned that by lowering their own performance standards and allowing themselves to be less productive, they would be able to cope with the stress originating from their caregiving responsibilities. As they matched their coping to their personal stressors, they were able to sustain their own well-being, but simultaneously contributed to more stressors for their team (in the form of an unfair workload for other members). Members 4B and 4C, whose biggest stressors at the time were work overload and social inequality, did not manage to match their coping with these stressors. Initially adopting a team-focused approach, their coping methods inadvertently increased their personal stressors, leading to symptoms of burnout. To preserve their well-being, they started to turn away from their team, trying to cope by seeking support from a few subgroup members—during daily coffee breaks—who shared similar feelings and frustrations towards the team and its leader. Ruminating on the problems in small subgroups did not, however, generate more resources. Instead, it made the members feel even worse through negative emotional contagion. At the same time, their subgroup bonding fragmented the team, and the team began to crumble (mismatch in individual-to-team focused coping).

Similar team dynamics were visible in both Team 7 and Team 8. While Team 7 began splintering into subgroups in the same way as Team 4, Team 8 ultimately faced a state where members vacillated between continuing as a team and disbanding. In sum, fragmented teams largely lacked team reflection, resulting in little alignment between coping strategies in the team, and the teams thus failed to reach a shared appraisal and shared prioritization to cope as unified entities. As such, fragmented teams were trapped in a negative spiral of rumination and resource depletion at both levels as well as across levels. Because of little reflection, both as a team and as individuals, individual level coping strategies often drained the well-being of both the team and its individual members. Similarly, team coping strategies tended to negatively impact individual members as well as the team as a whole.

5.2 | Towards a process theory of multilevel coping in teams

Taken together, our four different team coping paths represent diverse approaches teams may adopt within a multilevel coping process, as they cope with stressors at multiple levels in parallel. “Balanced” teams actively engaged in both personal self-reflection and team reflection, which allowed them to reach shared appraisal and shared prioritization of stressors and effectively cope with both team and individual stressors in parallel. “Team-focused” teams heavily invested in team reflection focused on solely team needs, which resulted in a shared appraisal around team level stressors. Consequently, these teams prioritized team-focused coping strategies that

helped maintain team well-being. However, they often overlooked individual-level needs, and engaged minimally in personal reflection, which led to ineffective individual coping efforts. In contrast, “*Individual-focused*” teams predominantly bypassed team reflection, failing to reach a shared appraisal and shared prioritization on how to cope as a team, with sapped team well-being as a result. Most of their members, however, actively engaged in self-reflection, enabling them to maintain their personal well-being, even as they withdrew from team coping efforts. Lastly, the “*Fragmented*” teams, typically skipped reflection on both levels, jumping right into coping actions. This approach gave rise to a wide range of individual perceptions regarding stressors and coping strategies. The absence of shared appraisal and unified coping approach marked their journey and led to low well-being at both individual and team levels.

Our emergent process model of multilevel coping in teams (Figure 1) consists of four key steps, operating on both individual and team levels as well as across levels. In the first step (*appraisal*), team members assess the relevance of specific stressors to the goals of both the team and themselves (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Our findings furthermore suggest that teams can achieve a *shared appraisal* of these stressors and the corresponding coping resources through collective reflection on the diverse appraisals articulated by individual members. *Reflection* thus emerged as a second pivotal step in our model, which largely influenced the effectiveness of the coping process in the team. Reflection can be enacted both at the individual (self-reflection, Grant et al., 2002) and team levels (team reflection, West, 2000). Particularly team reflection, encompassing discussions among team members about their unique appraisals of the team's and its members' situations, was found to be of utmost importance for successful coping in teams. By engaging in collective reflection, teams can establish a shared appraisal of the stressors impacting both individual members and the entire team. This shared appraisal enables them to jointly decide how to prioritize and invest resources to balance between the needs of both team and individual levels in parallel. In this third step (*prioritization*), individuals and teams prioritize among stressors and various coping options and choose responses that draw on their available resources to best address the most relevant stressors.

The fourth step (*action*) involves execution of coping strategies that can be individual and/or team focused. These strategies may match or occasionally mismatch with the appraised stressors. Our model proposes that individuals who prioritize personal needs are more likely to adopt individual-to-individual focused coping strategies. Conversely, those who appraise and prioritize team needs are inclined to adopt individual-to-team focused coping strategies. Active self-reflection enables individuals to match coping strategies effectively with the appraised stressors at the individual level, while inadequate self-reflection might lead to misidentification of the root stressors, resulting in ineffective coping strategies that could exacerbate the situation. Furthermore, our model emphasizes the importance of team reflection as an important mechanism that links the concurrent processes of team level and individual level coping, by increasing awareness of the necessity to balance between the needs of both individual

and team levels, and by facilitating a joint decision-making process on prioritizing and investing resources to meet these various needs. Teams engaging actively in team reflection are able to develop shared appraisals of both the team's and its members' stressors, enabling them to employ coping strategies that are focused on managing stressors at the team level (team-to-team focused coping) and those aimed at addressing the specific needs of individual members (team-to-individual focused coping). However, teams that skip the reflection jumping directly into action, may engage in hasty form, misjudged coping actions that often overlook the needs of both the individual and team levels. Additionally, reflection focused exclusively on one level, such as self-reflection without team reflection or vice versa, is suggested to result in selective coping strategies that prioritize well-being of one level at the expense of the other, potentially leading to what is described as the “multilevel well-being paradox,” where opposing well-being states are experienced at different levels within the team.

Finally, it is important to note that the multilevel coping process model is recursive in nature. This means that as teams progress through various stages of coping and observe the effects of their strategies on well-being outcomes, they may return to the initial stages for further reflection and reappraisal. This continuous cycle of reflection and reappraisal allows teams to adjust and refine their responses to challenges, ensuring more adaptive and effective coping over time.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study explores how teams and their members cope with situations involving stressors at both individual and team levels, and how this multilevel coping process influences their overall well-being. Using the shift to forced remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme case of multilevel stressors and coping in teams, our findings reveal that both teams and individuals employ a combination of individual- and team-focused coping strategies. These strategies can, however, sometimes be at odds with each other if members prioritize one level over the other, leading to a situation where well-being is enhanced at one level but undermined at the other. We term this phenomenon the *multilevel well-being paradox*.

Building on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory at the individual level (including individual appraisal and coping process) and our multilevel findings, we propose an emergent theoretical model (Figure 1) that helps explain this paradox. More specifically, our process model lists four key steps (appraisal, reflection, prioritization, and action) that teams and their members engage in (or not) in order to preserve well-being at both (or either) individual and team levels. Our multilevel model illuminates the complexities of coping within teams and highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual and team-level reflection and coping actions to promote overall well-being. Given that knowledge workers usually operate as part of teams, working interdependently towards common goals (Ilgen et al., 2005), the applicability of this model

extends beyond the crisis context of this study. In such social settings, coping with personal stressors alone is insufficient due to the presence of additional stressors at the team level. Our emergent model makes several noteworthy contributions to theory, research, and practice, by offering an integrative process theory of coping and well-being dynamics in teams.

6.1 | Theoretical contributions

Our study extends the transactional coping theory (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) by incorporating the team level and introducing new mechanisms—team reflection, shared appraisal, and prioritization—in our multilevel theoretical model. This advancement is crucial as it recognizes the potential emergence of the well-being paradox as a result of unshared stressor appraisals and ineffective coping efforts at either level. While individual-level appraisal (i.e., an individual's assessment of a potentially stressful situation's relevance to their own goals and their ability to effectively cope with it) plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals manage stress and has been extensively studied in coping research (e.g., Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), individual-level conceptualization of appraisal limits organizational scholars' ability to effectively study team-level coping and well-being. Furthermore, prior research on group level or collective coping (e.g., Kamphuis et al., 2021; Kuo, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2019) has not adequately addressed how teams develop shared appraisal of individual- and team-level stressors nor how they cope to preserve team-level well-being. We argue that the usage of aggregate or compositional measures of individual stressor appraisals in measuring team appraisal can limit the investigation of team-level coping, overlooking the diversity of team members' different appraisals of individual level stressors (e.g., some may appraise remote work as a hindrance stressor for and others as a positive challenge for goal achievement). By solely relying on compositional measures, the variability and nuances of individual appraisals are disregarded (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), hindering a comprehensive understanding of team-level coping dynamics. Consequently, our multilevel coping model contributes to prior coping theory by conceptualizing *shared appraisal* (i.e., the extent of agreement among team members concerning the nature and significance of stressors for the team and its members, and the shared understanding of available resources and options to cope with these stressors) as a team-level construct that influences coping decisions and actions. This extends earlier studies on collective coping, such as Lyons et al. (1998), where shared appraisal was introduced as a shift in perception of stressors from individual (“my” or “your” problem) to a collective perspective (“our” problem) by emphasizing the need for team consensus on stressor perceptions, their impacts on the team and individuals, and identifying coping strategies to address these stressors.

In addition, our model introduces two pivotal mechanisms that influence the multilevel coping process by linking the concurrent processes of team level and individual level coping: team reflection and

prioritization of coping focus. *Team reflection*, a collective process of reviewing, exploring, and analyzing team members' perceptions of tasks, demands, resources, and efforts with self-awareness (West, 2000), acts as a mechanism that fosters the emergence of shared appraisal of stressors and coping options. It emphasizes the importance of open and honest discussion of the team's and its members' needs and the subsequent formation of shared understanding of the need to balance between stressors and coping actions at both levels. In contrast, teams in which the majority of members disengage from collective reflection are likely to experience a lack of shared appraisal and fragmented or selective team coping as a result. The concept of *prioritization* of coping focus is the second introduced mechanism. Prioritization steers coping actions strategically in response to appraised stressors at both team and individual levels. This concept represents decision-making regarding the investment or utilization of resources to manage stressors, considering their relative importance or urgency to the team or individual members. At the team level, shared prioritization includes joint decision on how to prioritize and invest resources to meet the diverse needs in the team. It draws on team reflection and the shared appraisal of stressors to shape the most effective coping strategies that address specific stressors at both the team and individual levels as well as across levels. On the other hand, the individual level prioritization of coping focus involves personal decision-making about allocation of resources to handle appraised individual and/or team stressors.

By expanding the scope of the transactional stress-coping theory to include two new mechanisms into the multilevel coping processes, our model provides a more comprehensive understanding of how teams and their members navigate and manage stressors to promote well-being at both individual and team levels. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine coping at different levels (individual-to-individual, team-to-team) and cross-levels (individual-to-team, team-to-individual) in parallel. As such, our multilevel coping model extends prior research by integrating concurrent coping processes at the team and individual levels into the same model. Therein, our findings provide valuable insights into the research on self- and team-regulatory processes in teams (DeShon et al., 2004) that has so far overlooked the role of shared appraisal in directing individuals' and teams' behavioral choices. Our findings indicate that when a team achieves a shared appraisal of issues at both team and individual levels through team reflection, the team's and its members' behavioral choices are commonly driven by a combination of self- and team-regulatory processes (as observed in our balanced teams), effectively balancing between addressing team and individual situations. In cases where a shared appraisal is established primarily around team-level issues, members are primarily driven by team-regulatory processes (as evident in our team-focused teams). However, when a shared appraisal is lacking, team members tend to appraise and prioritize either the team or individual level and direct their coping behaviors accordingly. Such scenarios often lead to self-regulated processes, resulting in highly individualistic or fragmented teams.

Furthermore, applying a qualitative multilevel approach to the study of well-being in teams enabled us to discover and explain the

multilevel well-being paradox wherein coping efforts to improve team well-being might inadvertently undermine individual well-being, and vice versa. This challenges the methodological approach of assessing team well-being through aggregated intra-individual metrics, such as work engagement and burnout (Bakker et al., 2006; Consiglio et al., 2013; Oades & Dulagil, 2016), which fails to account for the nuanced relationships and complex interplay between different well-being levels. Our findings suggest that team well-being is an interpersonal construct, distinct from intra-individual psychological well-being. Thus, we suggest measuring team well-being not by aggregating each members' intra-individual well-being state but by aggregating their perceptions of team well-being dimensions—team satisfaction, team viability, and high-quality relationships among team members—which may have different antecedents and consequences (Ketokivi, 2019). This distinction highlights that a well-being state at one level (e.g., individual) does not automatically cross or spill over to another (e.g., team), although emotional contagion may occur between individuals who interact regularly, as suggested by previous literature on well-being in teams (e.g., Bakker et al., 2006).

Our findings also emphasize the importance of aligning coping strategies with the specific stressors individuals or teams face. Matching coping efforts with specific stressors was found to promote well-being at both levels, while discrepancies or mismatches between coping strategies and stressors were associated with decreased well-being. Our study suggests that teams attuned to the changing work-life demands at both team and individual levels, particularly through team reflection, are able to adapt their coping strategies effectively to address these changing needs. This finding contributes to the research agenda on “care in connecting” (Gibson, 2020), showing that care in connectivity includes updating and modifying the nature of team connectivity to fit the changing demands and stressors among individuals and teams, and not to generate additional stressors across levels. At the same time, however, we found that when team members employed coping efforts that did not correspond with their stressors (such as attempting to cope with social isolation by spending more time alone, which only adds to the level of social isolation), there was little the team could do to preserve the member's well-being—or the other way around—when the team failed to cope as a team with team-level stressors; a few members coping for the sake of the team would not protect the team's well-being. These findings extend previous research on matching job demands and job resources (de Jonge & Dormann, 2006; van den Tooren et al., 2012), which has studied coping purely as an individual process, by demonstrating the importance of matching coping efforts with stressors at each level.

6.2 | Practical implications

This study carries important practical implications. The findings suggest the need for mechanisms that enable teams to monitor stress and coping on individual and team levels. Managers should carefully attend to individual employee stressors and coping behaviors, as well

as team-level stressors and coping behaviors, while also considering how team choices affect the individuals within, as well as vice versa. This can be achieved by periodically polling team members through “pulse surveys” to gather data on stressors and coping at different levels (team and individual) and integrating the results at the team level through team reflection, focusing on team processes and stressors in addition to task-based check-ins. Technological tools (such as diagnostic tools) can be useful in detecting matches and mismatches between stressors and applied coping behaviors, particularly for identifying patterns at the team level. If needed, an external coach can be brought in to facilitate discussions around appraised stressors and coping behaviors.

Rather than designing team practices with only certain general stressors in mind (such as work–life balance), managers need to remain attentive to fluctuating stressors over time and engage all team members in a collaborative process where they reflect and design their team-level practices together. Our study showed that even well-intentioned practices, like online coffee breaks, can become individual-level stressors over time. While recurring team reflective meetings are already integral to (software) teams working according to Scrum (called sprint review meetings; Beedle, 2001), they often mainly focus on evaluating past performances and planning future sprints. Considering that stressors may be a more sensitive topic for open reflection in teams, managers should strive to establish a psychologically safe and supportive team climate (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006) where members feel comfortable openly discussing their stressors with their team.

It is important to constantly monitor well-being levels to prevent individual and team burnout. If team well-being is allowed to significantly decline, its morale will deteriorate, putting the team's viability at risk. In such circumstances, team members are more likely to prioritize coping strategies that serve their individual well-being, potentially neglecting the collective needs of the team. This can lead to further challenges in team cohesion, collaboration, and overall effectiveness. Therefore, it is crucial for managers to proactively address declining team well-being to prevent negative repercussions on team dynamics and performance.

Finally, our findings suggest that coping does not always follow cognitive appraisal processes rationally. If team reflection and/or individual self-reflection are low, coping may be ineffective or inconsistent, thereby potentially compromising well-being. Therefore, it is important for managers or coaches, or even technology, to support individuals in developing awareness of their own stressors, as well as facilitating the construction of shared appraisal within the team. This increased awareness should lead to better decision-making on coping behaviors, ensuring that individual and team coping efforts align effectively with their actual stressors encountered. To facilitate this process, individuals and teams could be provided with guidance tools, such as compasses that categorize stressors into different categories, including task, knowledge, social, work context, and non-work demands. These tools can also offer examples of coping strategies that can be used to match specific stressors for fostering overall well-being in teams.

6.3 | Limitations and future directions

Our study is not without limitations. The sample is limited in terms of socioeconomic and other types of diversity, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to validate the proposed multilevel coping process model and well-being paradox among using larger and more diverse samples, as well as different settings including diverse individual and team level stressors. As the suggested multilevel well-being paradox is not solely limited to the specific context of forced remote work and the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis, the implications and insights derived from our findings are expected to extend beyond this particular context. Another limitation is the absence of pre-COVID-19 baseline measures of well-being for the individuals and teams studied. Without such measures, we are unable to determine the extent of changes in well-being before and during the crisis situation. Nevertheless, our methodological approach, which involved triangulating longitudinal, multi-source qualitative and quantitative data, enabled us to identify unanticipated differences in individual and team well-being over time, as well as variations in applied coping mechanisms.

Additionally, this study has not thoroughly investigated underlying reasons behind individual and team coping choices beyond team and individual reflection. Moreover, we cannot explain why some teams and members engaged more in (team and self-) reflection than others. For instance, it is possible that factors such as personality, mental models, team size, access to technology, organizational or team culture, type of work, and work-family balance may have influenced both individual and team reflection and choices of coping strategies. These would be useful to explore in future research. While we did not observe any differences in coping process and well-being outcomes pertinent to team/individual demographics or prior teleworking experience, we found initial evidence of emotional contagion and mimicry (Barsade, 2002), such as (lack of) extra-role behavior (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) in individual coping behaviors being mimicked by team members in some teams. Studying these crossover impacts in more detail may offer fruitful avenues for future research.

7 | CONCLUSION

This study invites further investigation of multilevel coping in teams and its impact on team- and individual-level well-being. It demonstrates that focusing solely on team well-being can have downsides, as individuals may deplete their own resources and risk burnout when overly focused on meeting the team's needs at the expense of their own need fulfillment. Conversely, coping strategies that prioritize individual well-being may inadvertently compromise team well-being if they undermine the team's needs and fail to align with stressors at both levels. While our empirical data were collected from teams experiencing forced remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, the tensions identified between team- and individual-level coping with stressors are likely applicable to various types of teamwork, including co-located, remote, or hybrid arrangements in the future of work. By

studying remote work in the context of the pandemic lockdown, we provide valuable insights into multilevel coping processes in teams in a uniquely illuminating way. It is our hope that this study will assist teams in better balancing individual and team needs, given that teams are more than the sum of their individual parts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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