Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
DISPOSITIONAL COPING STYLES AND ADULT LITERACY: EXPLORING STRESS AND COPING IN ADULT VOCATIONAL TRAINING ENVIRONMENTS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
at Massey University, New Zealand

Nicola Sheree Murray
2009
ABSTRACT

Since the publication of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) findings in 1996, governments internationally have been cognisant of the need for functional literacy skill training for large segments of the New Zealand working-age population (Culligan\textsuperscript{1}, Arnold, Noble, & Sligo, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2001; OECD, 2000). Individuals with low literacy levels generally report negative prior experiences of formal learning environments that are due to and have contributed to their current functional literacy capability (for example, see Neubauer & Dusewicz, 1988; Ross, 1987, 1988; Tilley et al., 2006).

The present study aimed to systematically investigate and measure the dispositional coping styles and strategies associated with differing prose literacy capabilities. The purpose of this project was to provide an understanding of the coping-literacy relationship as a first step toward the development of coping strategy training interventions specifically targeted at improving the educational experience (current and future) of low literacy individuals. Secondary aims of the current study included exploring the relationship between persistence and coping style, adaptability, and prose literacy; determining whether and how coping styles, adaptability, and prose literacy changed over time; and, assessing the relationship between prose literacy, coping style, adaptability, and post-course goal achievement.

Fifty-six students in adult vocational programmes were interviewed pre- and post-course. At each time point assessments of dispositional coping style and strategies via use of the COPE tool (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) were gathered, as were measures of emotional intelligence (including adaptability), and prose literacy score. Participants also took part in a semi-structured qualitative interview which gathered information on their educational and

\textsuperscript{1} ‘Culligan’ is the maiden name of the thesis author.
employment history, and goals post-course. Situational assessments of coping behaviours outside of the course were also gathered as part of a larger study for future analysis purposes and are outside the scope of this thesis. Respondents were also interviewed at three and six months post-course to determine achievement or non-achievement of post-course goals.

Low prose literacy scores were significantly associated with more frequent use of emotion-focused coping strategies (particularly avoidance). Higher prose literacy scores were significantly associated with more frequent use of problem-focused coping strategies. Indicative data showed that non-persisting participants showed higher emotion-focused coping strategy use than their persisting counterparts alongside lower prose literacy scores. Further, emotion-focused coping, adaptability, and prose literacy score were found to change significantly over time. However, post-course goal achievement was not significantly associated with any of the variables of interest except bivariately with prose literacy.

The model of transactional stress and coping (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the control theory of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 2000) provided a framework for the discussion of the dispositional coping styles and strategies used by individuals of differing prose literacy ability. It was argued that a negative self-schema of the individual as a learner is developed through prior negative experiences of formal education. It was hypothesised that this negative self-schema, built from a low self-confidence and fear of educational failure and rejection, predisposed the individual to a heightened negative self-focus. This in turn was proposed to direct attention to the self and the associated emotional aspects of a response to a stressor, leading to a bias towards habitual coping strategies of avoidance and less frequent use of problem-focused strategies by this group.

These findings and the associated interpretations have implications for the future development of coping strategy training interventions for individuals with low functional literacy competencies who wish to re-engage with formal education.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my Chief Supervisor, Associate Professor Fiona Alpass, for her reviews of my work, thoughtful comments, and encouragement over the past four years. I am also very grateful to my co-supervisors, Associate Professor John Podd, and Associate Professor Frank Sligo, who have reviewed my work, offered their support and, in the case of the latter, allowed time away from work duties to conduct this research. Thanks are also due to Dr Jocelyn Handy and Dr Elspeth Tilley who discussed alternative research approaches with me.

I owe immense gratitude to the Department of Communication, Journalism, and Marketing, specifically Associate Professor Margie Comrie and Dr Bronwyn Watson, who offered constant support, encouragement, and much-needed tea breaks to keep me going.

As this thesis was aligned with the FRST-funded Adult Literacy and Employment project, I would also like to specifically acknowledge Ms Sharon Benson who assisted me with several organisational aspects of my thesis, making the process of conducting this research just that much easier. The present study was also supported through a scholarship from the Whakatane Historical Society, and I remain very grateful for their support.

To my family, Mum, Dad, Neil, Lisa, Tony, Joy, Ian, Nick, and Stacey, I thank you for the continual encouragement and support you have always shown me. And, to my husband Rob, to whom I dedicate this thesis, your love, support, and patience, while I completed this study, has made this thesis possible.

Finally, to all the adult training providers, and especially, the individuals who took part in this study, thank you for sharing your time and stories with me.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................................... I

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................................. III

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................................................ V

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................ XI

LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................................................... XII

CHAPTER ONE- INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................1

1.1 AIMS OF THE STUDY ............................................................................................................................ 3

1.2 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS ...................................................................................................... 5

CHAPTER TWO – STRESS AND COPING: A REVIEW .............................................................................. 6

2.1 THEORETICAL MODELS OF COPING ................................................................................................. 6

   2.1.1 TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF STRESS AND COPING ............................................................... 6

   2.1.2 STAGES OF COPING ............................................................................................................... 54

   2.1.3 THE HIERARCHICAL MODEL ................................................................................................... 55

   2.1.4 SCALE APPROACHES .............................................................................................................. 56

   2.1.5 ONE-DIMENSIONAL AND TWO-DIMENSIONAL CONSTRUCTS .............................................. 57

   2.1.6 DRIVE REINFORCEMENT MODEL ......................................................................................... 59

2.2 RELATED THEORY ............................................................................................................................... 59

   2.2.1 SCHEMA THEORY ................................................................................................................... 60

   2.2.2 ATTENTIONAL PROCESSES ................................................................................................. 61

   2.2.3 SELF-REGULATION .............................................................................................................. 62

   2.2.4 COGNITIVE-EXPERIENTIAL SELF THEORY (CEST) ............................................................ 69

   2.2.5 CRITICISMS OF COPING MEASUREMENT .......................................................................... 71

   2.2.6 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ................................................................................................. 75

   2.2.7 MULTIPLE STRESSORS ......................................................................................................... 76
5.5.3 HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION OF TIME ONE DATA .............................................................. 175

5.5.4 SUMMARY .......................................................................................................................... 178

5.5.5 SPECIFIC COPING STRATEGIES ....................................................................................... 179

5.6 CHANGES OVER TIME ............................................................................................................. 182

5.6.1 DATA SCREENING .............................................................................................................. 182

5.6.2 T-TESTS ............................................................................................................................... 182

5.6.3 SUMMARY .......................................................................................................................... 183

5.7 GOAL ACHIEVEMENT SIX MONTHS POST-COURSE ............................................................ 183

5.7.1 VARIABLES ....................................................................................................................... 185

5.7.2 LOGISTIC REGRESSION ....................................................................................................... 187

5.7.3 SUMMARY .......................................................................................................................... 189

CHAPTER SIX - DISCUSSION ...................................................................................................... 191

6.1 COPING STYLES AND PROSE LITERACY SCORE .................................................................. 192

6.1.1 SUMMARY ......................................................................................................................... 192

6.1.2 DISCUSSION......................................................................................................................... 195

6.1.3 EFFICACY OF COPING STYLES AND STRATEGIES........................................................... 195

6.1.4 AVOIDANCE AND LOW LITERACY .................................................................................... 198

6.1.5 NEGATIVE SELF-SCHEMA ............................................................................................... 201

6.1.6 THREAT AND CHALLENGE ............................................................................................... 202

6.1.7 AFFECT AND COPING RESPONSE .................................................................................... 205

6.1.8 SELF-FOCUS ...................................................................................................................... 206

6.2 PERSISTENCE ......................................................................................................................... 210

6.2.1 SUMMARY ......................................................................................................................... 210

6.3 CHANGES OVER TIME ............................................................................................................. 213

6.3.1 SUMMARY ......................................................................................................................... 213

6.4 GOAL ACHIEVEMENT ............................................................................................................. 216

6.4.1 SUMMARY ......................................................................................................................... 216
APPENDIX J......................................................................................................................................................... 309

COPE SUBSCALE CORRELATIONS AT TIME TWO................................................................................................. 309

APPENDIX K ...................................................................................................................................................... 315

BIVARIATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROSE LITERACY LEVEL............................................................................. 315
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. CRONBACH ALPHA COEFFICIENTS FOR THE COPE SUBSCALES AT TIME ONE AND TIME TWO ...... 152

TABLE 2. INTER-SCALE CORRELATION MATRIX FOR THE COPE SUBSCALES AT TIME ONE ......................... 155

TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION (N = 55) .......................................... 162

TABLE 4. LENGTH OF COURSE BY TYPE OF COURSE .................................................................................... 163

TABLE 5. SUMMARY OF DEMOGRAPHIC AND COURSE INFORMATION FOR PERSISTING AND NON-PERSISTING
INTERVIEWEES ........................................................................................................................................... 166

TABLE 6. MEAN AND RANGE STATISTICS OF POTENTIAL TIME FACTORS SUGGESTED TO INFLUENCE
PERSISTENCE BY PERSISTENCE TYPE ........................................................................................................ 167

TABLE 7. MEAN PROSE LITERACY SCORE BY LEVEL OF PERSISTENCE (N = 55) ........................................ 170

TABLE 8. BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS FOR POTENTIAL INFLUENCING VARIABLES ON PROSE LITERACY SCORE
.................................................................................................................................................................. 174

TABLE 9. BIVARIATE STATISTICS BETWEEN ORIGINALLY PROPOSED IVS AND PROSE LITERACY LEVEL .... 175

TABLE 10. MULTIPLE REGRESSION STATISTICS FOR THE TIME ONE VARIABLES .................................. 176

TABLE 11. MULTIPLE REGRESSION STATISTICS FOR THE STEP ONE MODEL AT TIME TWO ..................... 177

TABLE 12. CHANGE IN COPING STYLE, ADAPTABILITY, AND PROSE LITERACY FROM TIME ONE TO TIME TWO
.................................................................................................................................................................. 183

TABLE 13. PHI COEFFICIENTS OF TIME, COURSE TYPE, AND EDUCATION VARIABLES BY GOAL ACHIEVEMENT
.................................................................................................................................................................. 186

TABLE 14. BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TIME TWO IVS AND GOAL ACHIEVEMENT ..................... 187

TABLE 15. LOGISTIC REGRESSION STATISTICS FOR OVERALL GOAL ACHIEVEMENT GROUP MEMBERSHIP... 188

TABLE 16. INTER-SCALE CORRELATION MATRIX FOR THE COPE SUBSCALES AT TIME TWO ................. 313
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. A SIMPLISTIC DIAGRAM OF THE TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF STRESS AND COPING. .......................8

FIGURE 2. PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES BY FREQUENCY OF USE AND LITERACY LEVEL AT TIME
ONE. .................................................................................................................................................179

FIGURE 3. PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES BY FREQUENCY OF USE AND LITERACY LEVEL AT TIME
TWO. ..................................................................................................................................................180

FIGURE 4. EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES BY FREQUENCY OF USE AND LITERACY LEVEL AT TIME
ONE. ..................................................................................................................................................181

FIGURE 5. EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES BY FREQUENCY OF USE AND LITERACY LEVEL AT TIME
TWO. ..................................................................................................................................................181