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TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL RISK MODEL OF DISTRESS DISORDER AETIOLOGY FOR CHILDREN OF MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN PSYCHOLOGY

NANCY ELEANOR STUART
Massey University
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ABSTRACT

Recent theoretical developments both within and outside the clinical literature have stressed the complex interactions between biological and environmental risk in relation to psychopathology development. They have also highlighted the importance of cognitive dimensions, especially those related to control perceptions, in the developmental path towards anxiety and mood disorders in children. Few studies have investigated these cognitive dimensions in relation to risk and protective factors. In light of these considerations, the present study evaluated structural models investigating the relationship of perceived control and competence to child temperamental risk, parent personal risk, family environmental risk and anxious and depressed feelings. It was hypothesised that temperamental, and psychological risk in relationship to family environment would be mediated by the cognitive dimensions of perceived control and competence. It was further hypothesised that family environment, would mediate the relationship between child temperamental risk and anxious and depressed feelings. A school sample of 293 New Zealand children aged between 8 and 11 and their parents was assessed using a cross-sectional design. Overall results indicated that in the face of temperamental and family adversity, feeling in control of emotions and social interactions and feeling socially competent afforded children protection from anxious or depressed feelings. In addition, a sensitive, accepting family environment was seen to protect a temperamentally vulnerable child from distressed feelings. In contrast, distress was more likely to occur when a temperamentally vulnerable child lived in a family characterised by parental psychological control and conflict than one characterised by less cohesion and parental rejection. Results also indicated that, in terms of cognitive features, perceptions of social competence were particularly important in protecting a child from having anxious or depressed feelings. These findings are discussed in relationship to Barlow’s and other recent integrated aetiological theories of distress disorder. Findings are also considered in relation to implications for identification, intervention and prevention strategies for distressed children in both clinical and school populations. Further results, limitations and proposals for future research are also discussed.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of three special people who passed away during its writing:

my Father  
*Harry L. Wilson* who believed in me and taught me that anything is possible.

my dear Friend  
*Ruth Parry* whose respect for and way with children and gift as a family therapist have been a model to me in my work and my research.

my Friend and Colleague  
*Trudy MacKay* whose energy and passion for family and the rights of all children to be safe, secure and to belong has inspired me.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iii  
Dedication ............................................................................................................................ iv  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... vii  
List of Tables .................................................................................................................... xii  
List of Figures ..................................................................................................................... xii  

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW ................................................................ 1  
1.1. Chapter Overview ....................................................................................................... 1  
1.2. Identifying the Climate where a Model of Distress Disorder Aetiology Fits ............. 1  
1.3. Overview of the Research to be undertaken .................................................................. 4  
1.4. Outline of Chapters to Follow ..................................................................................... 6  

Chapter 2. DEFINING ANXIETY IN CHILDREN ............................................................... 9  
2.1. Chapter Overview ....................................................................................................... 9  
2.2. Fear and Anxiety ........................................................................................................ 9  
2.2.1. Adaptive Anxiety .................................................................................................... 10  
2.2.1.1. Adaptive Fears, Development, Gender, Social Status and Culture ................. 11  
2.2.2. Maladaptive Anxiety .............................................................................................. 12  
2.2.2.1. Presentation of Maladaptive Fear and Anxiety .................................................. 14  
2.2.2.2. Diagnosis and Classification of Childhood Anxiety .......................................... 15  
2.2.2.3. Prevalence, Comorbidity, Age and Sex Differences .......................................... 17  
2.3. Problems with Identification of Distress-Prone children ............................................ 20  
2.3.1. Consequences of Not Identifying the Anxious Child ............................................ 20  
2.4. Prognosis and Remittance ........................................................................................... 21  
2.5. Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................... 22  

Chapter 3. THE CONSTRUCT OF NEGATIVE AFFECTIVITY: CONNECTING ANXIETY WITH DEPRESSION ............................................................. 25  
3.1. Chapter Overview ....................................................................................................... 25  
3.2. How Anxiety and Depression are Linked .................................................................... 25  
3.2.1. Genetic Links between Anxiety and Depression ..................................................... 26  
3.2.2. The Sequential relationship between Anxiety and Depression ............................ 27  
3.2.3. Structural Models Connecting Anxiety with Depression ...................................... 28  
3.2.3.1. Two Factor Model .............................................................................................. 29  
3.2.3.2. Tripartite Model .................................................................................................. 30  
3.2.3.3. Three Factor Model ........................................................................................... 31  
3.2.3.4. Hierarchical Integrated Model .......................................................................... 32  
3.3. Differentiating between Anxiety and Depression ....................................................... 34  
3.3.1. Self-Report Measures ............................................................................................. 34  
3.3.2. Cognitive Features ................................................................................................. 35  
3.4. Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................... 39  

Chapter 4. THE STUDY OF RISK AND PROTECTION FOR DISTRESS DISORDER DEVELOPMENT .................................. 41  
4.1. Chapter Overview ....................................................................................................... 41  
4.2. Rationale for the Study of Risk and Protection with Distressed Children ............... 41  
4.3. Profile of an Anxious Child: What Constitutes Risk .................................................. 42  
4.4. Conceptual Framework for Assessing Antecedents of Childhood Distress ............. 43  
4.5. Study of Risk and Protection for Distress ................................................................. 44  
4.5.1. Acceptable Methods for Risk Factor Research ....................................................... 48  
4.6. Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................... 48
Chapter 5. BIOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY AS A RISK FOR CHILDHOOD DISTRESS .....................51
5.1. Chapter Overview ...............................................................................................51
5.2. The General Biological Vulnerability Component of Barlow's Model of Anxiety and
the Process of Anxious Apprehension ......................................................................51
5.3. Evidence of a General Biological or Temperamental Vulnerability to Anxiety ..........52
5.4. Continuity of Anxious Temperamental Disposition ..............................................54
5.5. Theories of Temperament related to Anxiety Vulnerability ..................................56
5.5.1. Rothbart's Theory of Reactivity ......................................................................58
5.5.2. Buss and Plomin's EAS Theory of Temperament ..........................................59
5.5.3. Kagan's Construct of Behavioural Inhibition ..................................................61
5.6. Child Temperament, Parent Personal vulnerability and Parenting Styles ..............64
5.7. Chapter Summary ...............................................................................................68

Chapter 6. INTRODUCTION TO EARLY ENVIRONMENTAL VULNERABILITY/ PROTECTION ....69
6.1. Chapter Overview ...............................................................................................69
6.2. The Effect of the Environment on the Developing Nonhuman Brain .......................69
6.3. The Capacity of the Human Brain to be influenced by the Environment ..................70
6.4. Environmental Influences on the Development of Childhood Distress ...................71
6.5. The Early Environmental Vulnerability Component of Barlow's Model ...................72
6.6. Environmental Adversity: Related Models and Research ......................................74
6.7. Chapter Summary ...............................................................................................75

Chapter 7. THE ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIP: THE FIRST CONTINUOUS ENVIRONMENTAL
INFLUENCE ..............................................................................................................77
7.1. Chapter Overview ...............................................................................................77
7.2. Bowlby's Theory and Definitions of Attachment ....................................................78
7.3. Ainsworth's Operationalisation of Bowlby's Theory ..............................................78
7.4. Bowlby's Working Model .....................................................................................82
7.4.1. Working Model Phases: The Beginning of a Sense of Control .........................83
7.4.2. Bowlby's Working Model Specific to Middle Childhood and Onwards ..............84
7.4.3. Bowlby's Working Model and Adult Models of Attachment ...............................86
7.4.3.1. Research Generated from the Self/Other Paradigm .....................................89
7.5. Intergenerational Concordance of Attachment Security .......................................92
7.6. Attachment and the Development of Distress Disorders .......................................92
7.7. Attachment and Child Temperament ....................................................................94
7.8. Attachment and Parent Vulnerabilities, Parenting Styles and Support ....................96
7.9. Chapter Summary ...............................................................................................97

Chapter 8. MATERNAL CAREGIVING AND PARENTING STYLES THAT PROVIDE RISK AND
PROTECTION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDHOOD DISTRESS .....................99
8.1. Chapter Overview ...............................................................................................99
8.2. Barlow's View of Parenting Styles related to Psychological Risk for Distress ..........99
8.3. Parent Caregiving: The Role of the Maternal Caregiving System .........................101
8.4. Development and Manifestation of the Caregiving System ....................................102
8.5. Cognitive and Emotional Components of the Caregiving System ..........................103
8.6. Maternal Sensitivity as a Construct Related to Protection .....................................104
8.7. Defining the Parenting Styles related to Distress .................................................107
8.7.1. Research related to Psychological Control, Rejection and Distress ....................109
8.7.1.1. Early Retrospective Offspring Studies .........................................................109
8.7.1.2. Cross-sectional Research ..........................................................................110
8.7.1.3. Longitudinal Research ..............................................................................111
8.7.1.4. Direct Observation .....................................................................................113
8.8. Parenting in Middle Childhood ..........................................................................116
8.9. Parenting Styles and Perceptions of Control ......................................................117
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>Parenting Styles, Perceptions of Control and Distress</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>Parental Psychological Control and Rejection: Risk for Healthy Development</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.12</td>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>FAMILY FACTORS RELATED TO VULNERABILITY FOR DISTRESS</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Transmission of Distress within Families</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Family Models and their History</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>The Nature of the Family</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>Middle Childhood Children as being more Affected by Family Dynamics</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>Measuring Perceptions of General Family Functions</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>Research Using this Measure and Related Constructs</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>Individual Family Constructs and Adaptability or Psychopathology</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8.1</td>
<td>Family Cohesion alone and in combination with Conflict as Risk</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8.2</td>
<td>Family Enmeshment as a Risk Factor</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8.3</td>
<td>Family Conflict as a Risk Factor</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8.4</td>
<td>Family Sociability as Risk</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>Family Systems and Cultural Interpretation</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>Chapter Summary and Conclusion</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
<td>PERCEIVED CONTROL AS A CENTRAL COGNITIVE CONSTRUCT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTRESS DISORDERS</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Control Perceptions and Biological and Environmental Vulnerabilities</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>The Role of Perceived Control in Barlow's Aetiological Model of Distress</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Control in the Literature</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Perceived Control vs. Actual Control: What does it Matter</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Theories of Perceived Control and Related Conceptualisations</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.1</td>
<td>Perceived Competence as related to Distress and Self-Esteem</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.1.1</td>
<td>Developmental Changes in Competence Beliefs</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.1.2</td>
<td>Domains of Competence</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>Framework for Multidimensional Integrated Models of Perceived Control</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7.1</td>
<td>Multidimensional Conceptualisations of Perceived Control</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7.2</td>
<td>Weisz's Control, Competence and Contingency Model of Perceived Control</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>Antecedents of Perceived Control in Relation to Distress</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.1</td>
<td>Animal Models Relating Antecedents of Perceived Control to Distress</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.2</td>
<td>Family Antecedents of Perceived Control and Distress in Humans</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.3</td>
<td>The Development of Control-related Cognitions</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>Control Cognitions as Mediators or Moderators of Distress Development</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>Perceived Control and Competence as Foundations for Resilience to Stress</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.11</td>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
<td>DEVELOPING A BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL AETIOLOGICAL MODEL OF DISTRESS DISORDERS IN CHILDREN</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Primary Goals of the Study</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1.1</td>
<td>Assessment of an Interactive Biopsychosocial Model of Distress in Children</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1.2</td>
<td>Issues in Need of Examination</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Tools to Examine the Model</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.1</td>
<td>Baron and Kenny's Test for a Mediator Factor or Variable</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.2</td>
<td>Structural Equation Modelling to Construct and Assess Models</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Model Building</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.1</td>
<td>Model 1: Replicating Chorpita, Brown and Barlow's Model</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.2</td>
<td>Model 2: Expanded Replication to include General Biological Vulnerability</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.3</td>
<td>Consolidation of the Predictor Variables</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.4</td>
<td>Model 3: Hypothetical Model including Other Related Theories</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 12.1 Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants ..................................................204
Table 13.1 Correlation Matrix of Observed Variables .................................................................231
Table 13.2 Rotated Factor Matrix of Predictor Variables ............................................................234
Table 13.3 Measurement (Confirmatory) Model Analysis: Standardised and Unstandardised
Path Coefficients with Critical Ratio Values ........................................................................237
Table 13.4 Measurement (Confirmatory) Model Analysis: Latent Factor Intercorrelations ..........237
Table 13.5 Fit Statistics for the Models ......................................................................................276

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Hypothesised Theoretical Relationships between Biological, Psychological and
Cognitive Factors in Distress Development ........................................................................6
Figure 7.1. Model of Adult Attachment ..................................................................................88
Figure 11.1. Hypothesised Replicated Mediation Model ........................................................190
Figure 11.2. Two Vulnerabilities of Barlow’s Theoretical Model ...........................................191
Figure 11.3. Hypothesised Theoretical model of Anxiety and Depression Development with
All Possible Variables ........................................................................................................196
Figure 13.1. Path Diagram of the Replicated Mediation model using More Precise Measures ......239
Figure 13.2. Path Diagram of the Replicated Model Adding Child Temperamental Emotionality
and Shyness ......................................................................................................................243
Figure 13.3. Path Diagram of the Complex Model of Distress Development Adding a Parent
Vulnerabilities Factor, Two Family factors and Perceived Control as
Cognitive Factor ...........................................................................................................247
Figure 13.4. Path Diagram of the Complex Model of Distress Development With Perceived
Competence as Cognitive Factor ..................................................................................251
Figure 13.5. Path Diagram of the Complex Model of Distress Development with Lack of
Support as Family Factor and Perceived Control and Perceived
Competence as Cognitive Factors ................................................................................254
Figure 13.6. Path Diagram of the Complex Model of Distress Development with Family
Control as Family Factor and Perceived Control and Perceived
Competence as Cognitive Factors ................................................................................256
Figure 13.7. Path Diagram of the Complex model of Distress Development with Lack
of Support as Family Factor and Perceived Control as Cognitive Factor ..................259
Figure 13.8. Path Diagram of the Complex model of Distress Development with Lack of
Support as Family Factor and Perceived Competence as Cognitive Factor ........261
Figure 13.9. Path Diagram of the Complex Model of Distress Development with Family
Control as Family Factor and Perceived Control as Cognitive Factor ....................263
Figure 13.10. Path Diagram of the Complex model of Distress Development with Family
Control as Family Factor and Perceived Competence as Cognitive Factor .................266
Figure 13.11. Path Diagram of the Final Complex model of Distress Development with
Perceived Control and Perceived Competence as Cognitive Factors .........................270
Figure 13.12. Theoretical alternative to the Final Complex Model of Distress Development ......274