Low Back Pain:
A Personal Projects Analysis

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

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2004

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b) that the text, excluding appendices/annexes, does not exceed 100,000 words;

c) all the ethical requirements applicable to this study have been complied with as required by Massey University, other organizations and/or committees, University of New England and Maine Medical System which had particular association with this study, and relevant legislation.

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Abstract

Low back pain is characterised by loss of ability to carry out everyday tasks, the disruption of life plans, and psychological distress as well as pain. This study examined the adaptation of individuals with low back pain. In a departure from established models used to study and understand illness representation and adjustment, this study used a personal projects approach to examine the relationship between individuals' appraisals of projects and their functional adaptation to low back pain in the context of their day-to-day goal-directed activities.

A functional personal project system was proposed; specifically, those individuals whose project dispositions were highly concordant and socially oriented would have better function and health. For people dealing with low back pain, it was expected that these dispositions, and personal competency, would enhance adaptation. Conversely, poor adaptive abilities, such as difficulties with physical function, social function, and poorer health, would be associated condition-specific perceptions of pain and negative appraisals of project stress

The results showed there was a relationship between personal project dispositions and functional ability, well-being, and perceived general health of individuals with low back pain. The results did not confirm that a functional project system possessed adaptive benefits. However, the appraisal of pain as salient to the progress and success of projects and stressfulness of personal projects were predictive of limited function and poorer health. Notably, all aspects of function, both social and physical, were associated with pain-salience cognition. Furthermore, pain salience cognition was still predictive of

function after traditional predictors of low back pain disability, pain severity or pain-related fear, were included in the analysis. The significance of the relationship of pain and negative appraisals of the effect of pain on performance supports functional self-efficacy and pain-related fears models used to explain disability level in individuals with low back pain. Since this personal projects analysis was an integrated assessment of individuals' dispositions in the context of participants' everyday lives, it was concluded that pain salience and stressfulness of projects outweighed any advantages offered by their other dispositions in negotiating the participant's personal projects.

Acknowledgements

The successful completion of this thesis was possible because of the generosity, the time, and the knowledge of many people. For their professional guidance, support, and expertise I acknowledge and sincerely thank my advisors, Kerry Chamberlain and John Spicer of Massey University and Rebecca Warner of the University of New Hampshire. John Spicer helped navigate the initial development and provided thoughtful direction to this project. Kerry Chamberlain, who has been with this thesis since its inception, ensured I completed this "personal project", theoretically grounded, and become more critical and structured in my thinking and writing. Rebecca Warner not only provided her expertise, but as my U.S. advisor, she was willing to assume the role of listener. In Becky, I have acquired a colleague and friend as well as an advisor. I also would like to thank two other academics, Brian Little and Ed O'Brien, whose passion for teaching and learning made a difference.

Some people deserve a special thank-you. Foremost Neil, for without his love and daily support, his fine cooking and domestic skills, encouragement, patience, humour, and so much more, I could not have undertaken or completed this project. It is kismet.

I am incredibly fortunate that my life is full of people, who care and support my many endeavours, and I thank them all. For their role in this thesis, some earn special acknowledgement: first my dad, Neil Griffith, then, the group of friends collectively known as the "wine group". For the last 20 years, they have taught me the strength, joy, and privilege of friendship, and supported me in life's trials, as well as rescuing an overgrowing garden, while I was otherwise preoccupied. Lastly, for their support, encouragement, contributions to analysis, but especially for listening, laughing, and occasionally chiding, Bridget, Margo, Liz, and Antonia deserve a thank-you. I also thank the study's participants, who gladly and passionately shared their experiences, and the clinicians who recruited them.

Sadly, there are family and special friends who will not celebrate with me, but I know the pleasure they would have expressed at seeing this thesis finished, and to know there are new projects and experiences ahead of me: good wines, trips to new places, and ...

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