A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO GRADUATE STUDENT STRESS
AND RELIGIOUS COPING

By

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Abstract

The journey of obtaining a graduate degree from commencement to completion is often a significantly stressful undertaking, and in order to be successful, graduate students are regularly compelled to access methods of coping, which may include religious forms of coping, to mediate and alleviate their stress. This research is about the integration of religious coping into the coping practices of religious graduate students. Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews with four participants to explore a variety of their identified stressors both within and outside of their graduate programs while fulfilling their degree requirements, and the methods of religious coping they called upon most frequently to alleviate some of these stressors. A thematic analysis qualitative research method was used to interpret and present the data, and this resulted in the identification of two main themes and four subthemes. The first main theme is "Why I Involved God"; its two subthemes are the situations leading to religious coping and the results of involving religion in coping. The second main theme is "How I Use My Religion to Cope," with its two subthemes, coping individually and communally.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Stress is regularly experienced by all individuals regardless of age, culture, or geographic location. Although the effects of stress on an individual are not always detrimental, daily hassles and major life events can significantly impede a person's optimal functioning (Kaufman, 2007). In order to buffer the psychological and physiological effects of stress, an individual compiles a roster of coping techniques to be accessed at times when stress becomes threatening to his or her well-being. The origins of these coping methods are vast and abundant, and often pertain to the way an individual was nurtured. As a significant number of people are religious, religious practices are used as one of the many coping strategies people turn to in times of crisis both large and small. Religion is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is shown to improve the quality of life for many of those who rely on its tenets and practices. These components are integrated into an individual's daily life and are used to guide and influence behaviour. Religious coping activities are numerous and are effective means employed to buffer the effects of stress as experienced by an individual (Pargament, 1997). Why is it that individuals turn to religion in times of stress? It seems as though establishing, maintaining, and strengthening a connection with the sacred works, in part, to centre the individual by a sense that there is something at work in the universe that has some degree of wisdom and ability beyond oneself (Pargament, 1997).

Until now, the research on religious coping has been predominantly based on the frequency of church attendance and prayer (Conway, 1985–1986; Courtenay, Poon, Martin, Clayton, & Johnson, 1992; Ellison & Taylor, 1996). These two means have provided a simplistic understanding of a concept that is both multidimensional and complex. Religious coping methods can be active, passive, and interactive. They include interpersonal, behavioural, cognitive, and spiritual domains and can be approached from both problem-focused and emotion-focused perspectives (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000).

Active coping is revealed in the literature as an effective form of coping across a variety of situations. One common form of active coping takes shape through religious coping (Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler, 2001). Religious coping is the transformation of general religious beliefs and practices into specific coping methods (Pargament, 1997). Because religious individuals often turn to religious coping to help curb the impact of stress (Pargament & Park, 1997), this study's hypothesis is that religious graduate students will access religious coping techniques to buffer the effects of the inevitable stress generated by graduate school.

Throughout the journey toward completing a graduate degree individuals are likely to experience several life changes. Some of these changes include increased financial commitments, changes in daily routine, changes in social relationships, and changes in time management (Mallinckrodt, Leong, & Kralj,

1989). These increased demands and expectations are often accompanied by a significant increase in stress. The likelihood that an individual will successfully navigate through stress-inducing life changes is largely dependent on how the individual adapts to these changes and learns to cope with the associated stress (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). How people choose to cope with stress appears to be linked with both positive and negative outcomes; therefore, gathering a supply of effective and useful coping techniques is not only beneficial, it is essential to the triumphant acquisition of a graduate degree.

Statement of the Problem

Graduate studies are often gruelling and extremely taxing. Not only is the intensity and frequency of this stress emotionally draining, it has been linked with an increased risk in the development of physical and psychological health problems (Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Nelson et al., 2001). As more research is conducted to investigate the particular perpetrators of graduate student stress, more effective means of coping with this stress may also be explored and discovered. This research project is expected to make a valuable contribution to this underexplored phenomenon by gathering a deeper understanding about the religiously based coping methods that graduate students access to help curb the impact of the stress associated with graduate school.

Statement of Purpose

A review of the literature generated few studies that focused specifically on the stress experienced by the graduate student, even fewer shedding light on the general coping methods employed to buffer this stress, and next to none on religious students' specific methods of religious coping. Currently, American Psychological Association (APA) leaders both recognize the paucity of research regarding the intricacies of a person's integration of a religious worldview, which includes how it is integrated into the worldview of graduate students, and suggest that more research needs to be conducted and more information produced in our attempt to better understand the human condition (McMinn, Hathaway, Woods, & Snow, 2009). A majority of people across the world are connected in some way with their religious beliefs and the significant and important role religion plays in the lives of countless individuals has been severely underestimated by the psychology community (Pargament, 1997). Because religion and spirituality are becoming more commonly understood as essential forms of human diversity (McMinn et al., 2009), non-religious counsellors have an obligation to be more astute in their understanding of this indivisible aspect of the human condition if they are to develop a meaningful connection with their religious clients.

The purpose of this study was to gather first-hand experiences from religious graduate students about the religious coping techniques they employed to buffer the effects of stress associated with their graduate studies. As greater

attention is given to understanding the stress experienced by graduate students

and effective coping techniques are explored and identified, individuals accessing

this information will likely experience increased school satisfaction, less burnout,

improved academic performance, and enhanced personal well-being (McKinzie,

Burgoon, Altamura, & Bishop, 2006). The qualitative research method used in

this study to analyze and present the information is thematic analysis. Thematic

analysis is a research method utilized to identify, analyse, and report themes

within data, and describe them in rich detail. It can also be used by the researcher

as a method both to reflect reality and permit exploration beyond the surface of

reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Assumptions

It is assumed that counselling psychology graduate students whose

religious beliefs are central to their lives access forms of religious coping to

buffer the effects of the stress associated with graduate studies. Because little

research has been acquired on this topic, it is difficult to confirm that all or most

religious students do so. However, research has indicated that it is common for

religious individuals to access their religion in times of considerable stress to

mediate its impact (Pargament, 1997), and because the experience of graduate

school is rarely devoid of significant stress (Aherne, 2001), one may hypothesize

that graduate students with a religiously based orientation will turn to their

religion when they are stressed.

Furthermore, research has indicated that religious coping is more commonly associated with significant and intensely stressful experiences (Pargament, 1997), and of the few studies on graduate student stress, the majority of them have identified the stress associated with graduate school as being both immense and intense (Aherne, 2001; Hudd et al., 2000; Hudson & O'Regan, 1994; Mallinckrodt et al., 1998). Therefore the assumption that this type of stress is significant enough to motivate religious individuals to turn to their religion to cope is not far reaching.

Another assumption is that those individuals who identify themselves as Evangelical Christians whose faith is a central component in their lives share a relatively common understanding and execution of their beliefs. Although the label of Christian may encompass a population with tremendously varied theological interpretations and beliefs, narrowing down the participant inclusion criteria to such a specifically defined group of believers generated a participant population who perceived and approached their faith in a relatively similar manner. Evangelical Christians are understood as those individuals who are part of a Protestant Christian movement whose defining characteristics are a belief in the need for a personal conversion, putting forth effort to express the gospel, a belief in Biblical authority, and an essential belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Bebbington, 1989).

Chapter II: Literature Review

The intersection of stress, coping, and religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon that plays a significant role in the lives of many individuals. Although these three constructs may work together and create a whole larger than the sum of their parts, each one must be understood separately to ensure a thorough and comprehensive understanding of how they interact within the individual. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a background of research to lay the foundation for how the stress associated with graduate studies may be mediated through religious coping methods accessed by graduate students for whom religion is a major component of their lives.

Stress

The concept of stress is all too familiar for people all over the globe. Stress can be viewed as necessary to human thriving; however, there is potential for problematic and detrimental functioning to arise when many significant stressors are presented repeatedly or simultaneously without resolve. As a result, an individual's stress response in a perceived stressful environment may produce chronic stress (Kaufman, 2007).

Stress is a biological term and was defined by Selye (1978) as the bodily failure to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats to the individual, and includes either imagined or actual threats. Lazarus (1966) ascertained that in order for a situation to be stressful, it must be appraised as such. In essence,

stressors are generally subjective and the impact on the individual depends on how one interprets the stressful event and to what extent he or she feels capable of handling it. Although a specific type of stress, *eustress*, is understood as that which enhances an individual's physical or mental functioning (Selye, 1978), the term stress will be understood in this study as having a negative impact on the individual, unless otherwise specified.

Both acute and chronic stress responses are fundamentally mediated by the sympathetic nervous system, whose primary function is to arouse the individual to action. Although this response is highly adaptive in the short-term, long-term arousal has many negative effects on both the mind and body. Therefore, efforts to treat stress by reducing sympathetic activity are employed to help return individuals to healthier states of functioning (Kaufman, 2007).

Stress is related to negative affect, depressed mood, feelings of irritability, emotional instability, nervousness, impulsiveness (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), and feelings of low self-worth (Hudd et al., 2000). Psychological stress also suppresses various aspects of innate and adaptive immune function, which may ultimately lead to disease onset and/or its progression (Glaser & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2005).

People are likely to experience psychological stress when they are faced with an unexpected or atypical circumstance (e.g., a natural disaster, death of a loved one, job loss, and other less traumatic events). Individuals will become

increasingly stressed when significantly stressful situations or events occur simultaneously and will have varied perceptions and responses to those events. The individual does exhibit certain risk and protective factors when faced with a stressful event; the risk factors concern one's general vulnerability and the protective factors, one's resilience (Sarason & Sarason, 2005).

An individual's vulnerability refers to the maladaptive response given in a situation and the inability to make decisions calmly or in a rational frame of mind. Vulnerability is also influenced by temperament, resilience, coping skills, and available social support. Occurrence of a maladaptive response may also be varied, depending on the situation and whether there are other concurrent stressful events taking place (Sarason & Sarason, 2005).

Resilience refers to the individual's ability to function effectively in the face of adversity and recover quickly after a significantly stressful event. Resilient people are able to respond adaptively despite undesirable living conditions or personally threatening experiences (Werner, 1993). These people generally have protective factors that may compensate for high-risk elements in their lives, which contribute to their resiliency. Individuals who are engaging with others; have close, trusting relationships; have good communication and problem-solving skills; and who have faith that their own actions can make a positive difference in their lives tend to be more resilient. Resilient people are often successful at accessing effective coping skills when attempting to face and overcome

difficulties. Coping skills shown to be effective in handling stressful situations include thinking constructively, behaving flexibly, dealing with problems as they arise, and discerning which tactics worked in a given situation and which did not. An effective repertoire of coping skills functions to strengthen an individual's sense of self-direction and self-control (Sarason & Sarason, 2005).

In summary, for a person to experience stress he or she must evaluate a situation as stressful (Lazarus, 1966). Although stress is inevitable and often necessary for human survival, degrees and forms of appraised stress may have negative repercussions. The extent to which stress affects the individual is mediated by his or her vulnerability and resiliency; both of which contain innate and environmentally mediated components. People who are more resilient tend to handle stress more productively and experience less personal distress when faced with difficult circumstances (Sarason & Sarason, 2005).

Coping

Evidence indicates that pharmacological interventions have high rates of success on ameliorating stress-induced immunological changes; however, non-pharmacological approaches, namely active coping techniques employed by the individual, are also effective at curtailing the negative effects of stress (Connor, 2008).

Coping techniques as defined by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) are the cognitive and behavioural efforts used to mediate external and internal demands

that are evaluated as taxing or as exceeding an individual's resources. These cognitions and behaviours can be directed toward the problem by attempting to directly change, resolve, or minimize the troubling situation by way of problem-focused coping, or can be used to temper uncomfortable emotions by employing emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is more often employed when the circumstance is evaluated as being changeable, and emotion-focused methods are employed more often when it is perceived as unchangeable. Individuals often use a combination of the two when they feel challenged (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987). Coping styles and situational stress perception vary among individuals even when they are faced with a similar stressful circumstance (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Although coping is a reaction to situations appraised as stressful, coping is more than reactive; it is goal directed. "Coping reaches out to preserve, maintain, or transform values of importance in the face of negative life experience" (Pargament, Van Haitsma, & Ensing, 1995, p. 48). It involves both a reaction and an action in a search for significance during stressful times.

Diverse coping styles may influence the person's ability to eliminate or reduce the source of stress and its emotional impact. Active coping is a constructive coping method that appears to be linked to positive outcomes across a range of situations (Nelson et al., 2001). According to Stowell, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser (2001), active coping is understood as involving either an active

cognitive component (the positive reinterpretation of the stressful situation), or an active behavioural component (an action taken to eliminate or reduce the initial source of stress). Furthermore, in their 2001 study, active coping was generally related to a more favourable outcome than avoidance coping methods, which are understood as the activities or mental states preventing the individual from directly addressing a stressful event. Stowell et al. also found that active coping is associated with lowered levels of depression, fewer physiological illnesses, improved quality of life, better immune function, and general mental wellness. Examples of active coping strategies include seeking social and emotional support from trusted individuals, planning, positive reinterpretation, restraint coping, suppression of competing activities, deliberate acceptance, humour, and religious coping (Nelson et al., 2001).

When an individual is faced with a stressful situation, the chosen method of coping is often prescribed by the nature of the stressful circumstance and the available coping options; however, not all individuals share the same roster of coping mechanisms. Viable coping resources are determined by how the individual orients him- or herself to the world, previous success or failure with employed coping techniques, and by internal or external constraints (Pargament, 1997).

The effects of stressful life events and circumstances on an individual's well-being are mediated by his or her appraisal of the stressor, available coping

resources, and efficacy of the coping methods employed. Religion and spirituality are identified as examples of active coping (Nelson et al., 2001); therefore, to better understand religious and spiritual coping, a working explanation of both will be presented.

Religion & Spirituality

Religion. According to Statistics Canada's 2001 census, 84% of Canadians identify themselves as religious. Of these, 77% consider themselves part of the Christian faith (Statistics Canada, 2001). Given these facts, familiarizing oneself with religion and how it interacts with the individual is of utmost importance for counsellors striving to establish a deep multifaceted understanding of their clients.

Religion has been positively correlated with subjective well-being (Byrd, Hageman, & Isle, 2007), physical health (Park, 2007), and positive psychological adjustment (Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1991). Other recent empirical studies have confirmed a positive link between religious devotion and happiness (Ferriss, 2002; Francis, Hills, Schludermann, & Schludermann, 2008; Paquette, 2006; Robinson & Martin, 2008). These connections have been identified partially due to the role religion plays in offering individuals meaning, purpose, and hope throughout their life-spans (Pargament & Park, 1997).

Because of its complexities and abundant diversities, religion is not easily defined. Religion is substantively described as the subscription and adherence to a

set of institutional beliefs or doctrines generally agreed upon by a number of

persons (Vaughan, 1991). Religiosity may also include the practice of these

beliefs through ritualistic and devout observance of faith (Religion, 2009). Being

religious involves a belief in a superhuman or divine power to which forms of

worship and other ritualistic practices are directed (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi,

1975). Pargament (1997) has compiled a list of three functional definitions of

religion: (a) "Whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the

questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are

alive and that we will die" (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993, as cited in

Pargament, 1997, p. 27); (b) "A set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to

the ultimate conditions of his existence" (Bellah, 1970, as cited in Pargament,

1997, p. 27); and (c) "A system of beliefs and practices by means of which a

group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life" (Yinger,

1970, as cited in Pargament, 1997, p. 27).

Where a substantive definition of religion focuses on the rituals and

beliefs directed toward a sacred power, a functional approach to defining religion

provides an understanding that religion is more than a set of concepts and

practices: at its essence, religion is how the individual attempts to understand

life's most profound issues (Pargament, 1997). Religion provides a quest for

order, beauty, and meaning within a person's orientation to the universe. Religion

involves a connection with the sacred, with others who share similar beliefs, and

with a mystic realm beyond the physical world (Pargament, 1997). Because of the

hope, optimism, meaning, and purpose religion provides, religious individuals are

often likely to experience an enhanced sense of psychological wellness (Byrd et

al., 2007).

     Spirituality. The concept of spirituality is also difficult to define

succinctly. Although some individuals express their spirituality through their

religious faith, others do not. Spirituality is generally understood as the meaning

gained from life experiences, which may or may not be implicit within the context

of religion (Richards & Bergin, 1997). An alternate definition describes

spirituality as one's subjective experience with the sacred and the personal

subjective expression of one's religious experience (Vaughan, 1991).

     These definitions are only a couple of seemingly countless theoretical

explanations of spirituality. Although an abundance of diverse ideas regarding a

concept as complex as spirituality may function to enrich and deepen one's

understanding, the inconsistency and lack of contained, agreed-upon definition in

the academic community will likely include some negative implications. Without

clear parameters it becomes difficult to ascertain precisely how researchers and

their participants understand this concept, which may result in weakening the

validity of a study. This lack of a working definition may also cause difficulties

when attempting to compile conclusions from several studies (Zinnbauer et al.,

1997).

Because spirituality is rarely absent from an individual's religious experience (Graham, Furr, Flowers, & Burke, 2001) one might argue that religion may not be understood separately from spirituality. For this reason religion will be understood throughout this text as coexisting with spirituality whether or not explicitly stated.

Functions of religion for the individual. Religion serves a variety of purposes for each individual and the applied purposes may vary substantially from person to person. Pargament et al. (2000) have identified five key functions of religion: (a) religion provides an answer to the individual's search for meaning and significance; (b) when faced with situations beyond one's control, religion offers the individual several options to achieve a sense of mastery over the circumstance; (c) because the world is unpredictable and often threatening to the individual, religion provides a type of comfort and safe haven facilitated by a connection with the spiritual: something beyond the individual and his or her material world; (d) religion often provides a sense of intimacy and connection with others who share the same understanding, which provides a sense of social cohesiveness and a social identity; and (e) religion may function as a catalyst for major life transformations. This transformation may include the rejection of something superficial or detrimental followed by the replacement with a new, often deeper, source of significance.

Religion and health. Several studies have correlated religiously derived life meaning and physical health. One explanation proposes that because religions often place an emphasis on the importance of the body as a sacred vessel, the individual may be deterred from harming his or her body with unhealthy practices (Mahoney et al., 2005). Religious and spiritual individuals tend to possess higher levels of compassion, gratitude, optimism, and hope, which may also be contributing factors to their higher levels of physical health and psychological well-being (Park, 2007).

Religious coping. Within the general population many people include some aspect of religion to help them deal with their most stressful circumstances (Bulman & Wortman, 1997) and assist them in their attempts to preserve the things of greatest significance. In some situations pertaining to loss, preservation may not be possible. In these circumstances, transforming what has been lost into new significant sources of value and meaning is achievable through a number of religious coping methods (Pargament & Park, 1997).

Religion may be used to buffer the negative impact stress can have on the individual. Religious and spiritual individuals are more inclined to access religious coping techniques when faced with difficult situations, especially if religion plays a significant role in the individual's life (Park & Cohen, 1992). The more integrated religion is within a person's orientation, the more easily it may be

accessed for coping, resulting in a higher likelihood that he or she will access religious coping means to deal with a stressful situation (Pargament, 1997).

Although religion may be involved in the coping process, it must be emphasized that religion is not merely a form of coping. "[Religion] can provide an overarching framework for living, applicable to the widest range of human experience" (Pargament, 1997, p. 132). In the coping process, religion may both influence the particular coping method and as a result shape the coping outcomes. Individuals look to religion in times of difficulty, pain, and distress for comfort as well as to fulfill such needs as intimacy, spiritual connection, meaning, and self-actualization. As with their secular methods of coping, religious coping methods also employ a problem-focused approach, an emotion-focused approach, or a combination of the two (Pargament & Park, 1997).

Although stereotypes of religious coping were traditionally conceptualized as avoidance techniques, it is important not to dismiss its value. "[Religion] provides many ways to appraise and respond to situations that challenge individuals' understanding of the world; some are passive and avoidant, but many are not" (Pargament & Park, 1997, p. 46).

The religious coping methods used to alleviate stress when faced with difficult circumstances are rooted in general religious beliefs and practices that have been transformed into specific coping behaviours (Pargament, 1997). Pargament et al. (1988) identified three styles of religious coping based on the

individual's understanding of his or her relationship with God. The *collaborative* approach is an active partnership with God where both parties navigate through the problem together. The *self-directing* approach focuses on the resources God gives the individual to make his or her own choices and thereby solve the problem. The *deferring* approach is a passive approach whereby the individual awaits God's solution to the problem and defers the majority of the responsibility to God.

Although all three religious coping styles have been associated with positive outcomes, the collaborative coping style is often more successful at producing beneficial results (Pargament et al., 1988). Religious forms of coping that are positive in nature are founded on the experience of a secure relationship with God, believing that there is meaning in life, reflecting on and believing in God's unconditional love, seeing God as being collaboratively involved in one's life, seeking spiritual support from God, and seeking spiritual support from one's religious community (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1999). Positive religious coping styles have been constructively related to stress-reduction, spiritual and personal growth, and greater life satisfaction (Pargament, 1997).

On the other hand, there are also maladaptive patterns of religious coping. These patterns are often a result of a tenuous relationship with God, an insecure or threatening view of the world, and a struggle with one's religion in the search for significance (Pargament et al., 1999). Negative religious coping is often

associated with individuals who access the deferring approach to religious coping

(Pargament et al., 1988). When this approach is employed the individual sees God

as having all of the control over the situation and the responsibility for resolution

is placed on God alone, resulting in blame and anger directed toward God for any

undesirable outcomes. However, the deferring approach is associated with some

beneficial outcomes. This approach may produce positive results in certain

situations; for example, an individual faced with tragedy may understand it as the

will of God: this can provide understanding and a certain degree of comfort and

meaning in an incomprehensible circumstance. When faced with the limitations of

one's human capacity for control, regaining some form of control by choosing to

relinquish control to God may be an adaptive and beneficial form of coping

(Pargament & Park, 1997).

Although several religiously based coping methods are positive in nature

and are associated with beneficial outcomes, the negative forms of religious

coping are generally linked, not surprisingly, to more detrimental outcomes (Ano

& Vasconcelles, 2005). However, in their 2005 review, Ano and Vasconcelles

also highlighted a number of studies whose results indicated that both neutral and

positive outcomes are also related to typically negative religious coping

techniques. An explanation for positive outcomes resultant of typically negative

forms of religious coping is that this type of coping may involve a spiritual battle

resulting in some form of personal or spiritual growth. This is consistent with the

belief in both religious and non-religious tradition that says growth is often the result of some form of personal struggle.

In their development and validation of the RCOPE (a questionnaire used to measure religious coping strategies) Pargament et al. (2000) identified and defined a gamut of negative and positive forms of religious coping. The negative strategies include the following:

a) Punishing God reappraisal (redefining the stressor as a punishment from God for the individual's sins); b) demonic reappraisal (redefining the stressor as an act of the Devil); c) reappraisal of God's powers (redefining God's power to influence the stressful situation); d) passive religious deferral (passive waiting for God to control the situation); e) pleading for direct intercession (seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or divine intercession); f) spiritual discontent (expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with God's relationship to the individual in the stressful situation); and g) interpersonal religious discontent (expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with the relationship of clergy or members to the individual in the stressful situation). (Pargament, et al., 2000, pp. 522–524)

Positive religious coping styles function to mediate the effects of stress on the individual by intervening and replacing negative emotions with positive and hopeful thoughts and emotions (Pargament, 1997). By connecting with the sacred,

an individual may experience divine spiritual support and comfort in times of distress. The positive religious coping strategies outlined in the RCOPE include the following:

a) Benevolent religious reappraisal (redefining the stressor through religion as benevolent and potentially beneficial), collaborative religious coping (seeking control through a partnership with God in problem solving), active religious surrender (an active giving up of control to God in coping), self-directing religious coping (seeking control directly through individual initiative rather than help from God); b) seeking spiritual support (searching for comfort and reassurance though God's love and care); c) religious focus (engaging in religious activities to shift focus from the stressor); d) religious purification (searching for spiritual cleansing through religious actions); e) spiritual connection (experiencing a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the individual); f) marking religious boundaries (clearly demarcating acceptable from unacceptable religious behavior and remaining within religious boundaries); g) seeking support from clergy or members (searching for comfort and reassurance through the love and care of congregation members and clergy); h) religious helping (attempting to provide spiritual support and comfort to others); i) seeking religious direction (looking to religion for assistance in finding a new direction for living when the old

one may no longer be viable); j) religious conversion (looking to religion for a radical change in life); k) religious forgiving (looking to religion for help in shifting from anger, hurt, and fear associated with an offense to peace). (Pargament et al., 2000, pp. 522–524)

Current research confirms that positive religious coping techniques are most often associated with a variety of favourable outcomes including higher self-esteem, better mental health status, lower rates of depression (Koenig et al., 1992), positive health outcomes, lower mortality (Oxman, Freeman, & Manheimer, 1995), higher life satisfaction, better quality of life (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001), and stress-related personal and spiritual growth (Jenkins & Pargament, 1988).

In their 1999 study of religious coping with major life stressors, Pargament et al. found that the majority of their sample, comprised of three different groups of people confronted with diverse stressful situations, employed positive religious approaches to their significantly stressful circumstances. These constructive approaches reflected a positive relationship with God, a trustworthy worldview, and a connection with spirituality. The positive religious coping patterns were tied to beneficial outcomes including statements pertaining to psychological and spiritual growth and a reduction in psychological distress. Some of these beneficial outcomes have also been shown to be experienced by individuals facing a major life event; that is, those situations requiring significant

readjustment and adaptation by the individual. They are generally referred to as traumatic or extremely distressing events (Cinelli & Ziegler, 1990).

In their chapter entitled "Religious Beliefs and Practices and the Coping Process," Park and Cohen (1992) deduced from their research review that religiously based coping methods seem to be most frequently employed by individuals faced with events appraised as highly stressful and uncontrollable. This may be in part because of the belief that ultimate control is still available through a higher power even when the circumstances of one's life seem to be out of one's immediate control. Religion offers the ability to decipher meaning and comprehend the incomprehensible when faced with one's human limitations and insufficiencies. Religion provides the opportunity to glean solutions and understanding when the limits of human mastery, control, and comprehension fall short (Pargament & Park, 1997). Although criticisms of religious coping may embrace the argument that religious coping is merely an aspect of non-religious coping (i.e., religious meditation as simply choosing God as the point of focus for the meditation), studies have found that religious coping methods are superior in their ability to predict the outcomes of difficult life circumstances compared to other established non-religious forms of coping (Pargament et al., 1990).

Daily Hassles and Major Life Events

The term *daily hassle* refers to the minor events in an individual's everyday life causing relatively minor disruptions or disturbances (Kanner,

Coyne, Schafer, & Lazarus, 1981). These can be characterized as isolated events such as losing one's keys, or on-going cognitive themes within a person's self-appraisal system, such as feeling awkward in social situations. The extent to which positive religious coping buffers the effects of stress related to daily hassles may depend on the degree of distress the daily hassle places on the individual (Zombory, 2004). This is quite possibly a contributing factor to the variability of research results on this topic.

In his 2004 doctoral dissertation, Zombory found no relationship between the experience of daily hassles and the use of religious coping in his sample of undergraduate students attending a religiously affiliated university. These results were thought to occur because individuals tend to turn to religion when their emotional limitations are being threatened or challenged, and daily hassles tend not to produce these types of crises (Zombory, 2004), in contrast with major life events, which are positively related to religious forms of coping (Pargament, 1997). Furthermore, religiously committed individuals may not consider accessing components of their belief system to cope with the minor disruptions they encounter on a daily basis because of their perceived irrelevance to general psychological and spiritual well-being (Zombory, 2004). However, because recurring minute stress is still taxing to the individual, more research is needed to ascertain the possible long-term detrimental effects an accumulation of frequent minor stressors may have.

Because graduate school is often highly stressful and tends to include situations requiring significant readjustment and adaptation (Cinelli & Ziegler, 1990), participation in graduate school may be categorized as a type of major life event as opposed to the less severe type of stress associated with daily hassles.

Graduate Student Stress and Coping

Within many academic disciplines stress and graduate program studies are inseparable terms. There is often another exam to prepare for, another paper to write, another impending deadline to meet, and a fear of failing to meet program expectations (Rocha-Singh, 1994). It appears as though there is rarely a moment in the graduate student's life free from even a minute tinge of anxiety or fear of consequence if he or she chooses to engage in any activity unrelated to the graduate studies (McKinzie et al., 2006).

Added to the academic demands of the graduate student are financial strain, familial responsibilities, social commitments, and attempts to include some form of self-care into one's weekly routine (McKinzie et al., 2006). In her 2001 qualitative study of understanding undergraduate student stress, Aherne found that the majority of her participants reported the most significant sources of student stress were experienced from a combination of academic demands, social obligations, and familial responsibilities.

Some of the stressors experienced by the undergraduate student are similar to those of the graduate student; however, there are some noteworthy differences.

For example, graduate students often have more financial responsibilities than their undergraduate counterparts (McKinzie et al., 2006; Solway, 1985). The stress associated with the financial concerns of the graduate student has been quantified as one of the most significant sources of distress in this population (Solway, 1985). Graduate students are also required to produce a major research paper or project, a thesis, or a dissertation. Added to this overwhelming and often tenuous balance, students in the faculties of Psychology and Counselling Psychology (as well as some other professional programs) are also obligated to complete internship or clinical practicum requirements (Nelson et al., 2001). Furthermore, graduate students are frequently older than undergraduate students and tend to be in a phase in life where they must also meet the demands of marital and, in some cases, parental responsibilities as well (Rocha-Singh, 1994). In order to survive the gruelling demands graduate studies place on the individual, developing a new or accessing an old roster of coping mechanisms and self-preservation techniques is essential if one is to acquire the sought academic designation (Nelson et al., 2001).

In their 2001 study examining the connection between particular coping methods and aspects of graduate student stress, Nelson et al. found the students with higher grade point averages tended to employ coping styles characterized by focusing on and venting emotions, using less denial, seeking extra social support, and employing more religious coping. The factors most helpful in moderating the

effects of stress associated with their graduate studies were personal spirituality; close, supportive friendships; positive regard by peers; and positive relationships with mentors, professors, and supervisors.

The process of obtaining a graduate degree is both arduous and demanding. Graduate students are expected to balance academic, social, familial, and financial demands, all of which frequently require much time, energy, and effort (Aherne, 2001). Often these demands place such a great amount of stress on the individual that if he or she hopes to complete a degree with as little assault to his or her personal well-being as possible, an array of effective coping techniques and methods of self-preservation are essential.

There is a scarce amount of research about the particular stress related to graduate student studies apart from dissertation research. As greater attention is given to exploring the stress experienced by the graduate student and effective coping techniques are studied and identified, students accessing this information will likely experience less burn out, improved academic performance, enhanced school satisfaction, and increased personal well-being. By educating graduate students about effective coping techniques while training and preparing them to enter or re-enter the workforce, they will be well versed in dealing effectively with stress and strain, and well equipped to handle the demands of professional practice: this will also likely contribute to a progression in the quality of psychotherapeutic practice (McKinzie et al., 2006).

Religion and the Psychology Community

Religion and spirituality are less significant in the lives of psychologists than the general population (Bergin, 1991). This has led to a severe underestimation by the psychology community about the prominent role one's faith plays in both coping with stress and the everyday aspects of an individual's life (Pargament, 1997). Most recently, however, McMinn et al. (2009) conducted a study regarding what the APA leaders have to say about the psychology of religion and spirituality. The APA leaders who participated in the study affirmed the importance of gathering and conducting more research about the role religion and spirituality has within the individual. This is likely due to the current view that religion and spirituality are essential forms of human diversity (McMinn et al., 2009). The identification of specific religious and spiritually based methods individuals use to cope with difficulties in life has also been identified as an area requiring more research (Graham et al., 2001). If religion plays a significant role in the life of an individual, it may arguably be impossible to understand the person fully apart from his or her religious beliefs because these beliefs are inseparably integrated into the perspective through which he or she views the world. As of yet, there appears to be no research conducted on identifying the specific religious coping methods an individual may access when faced with the often immense and intense stress inextricable from the graduate student experience.

The intent of this research project is to contribute to current and future research regarding some of the specific religiously based coping methods that religious and spiritual individuals regularly access, why they choose certain methods over others, whether or not they regularly apply the same coping methods to specific stressful events, and the particular stressful situations associated with graduate student life leading the individual most often toward a form of religious coping. The results gathered from this research study are intended to contribute to the growing research regarding the effectiveness, stability, and frequency of religious coping methods across diverse situations.

Chapter III: Method

Qualitative research is an established method of academic inquiry in the social sciences. The goal of qualitative research is to gather an in-depth understanding of some facet of human behaviour and experience. Data are often gathered through interviews, participant observations, or content analysis of existing data. Compiled data tend to be analysed based on the researcher's impression through coding systems used to investigate a phenomenon with the intent to generate meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thematic analysis was the qualitative research method used in this study to explore the religious coping techniques employed by Evangelical Christian graduate students to buffer the effects of stress associated with graduate school.

Introduction to Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a research method utilized to identify, analyse, and report themes within data, and describe them in rich detail. It also identifies the researcher as an active participant in the process of the analysis and interpretation of theme identification. Themes may be identified within one datum item and across data sets. It can also be used as a method both to reflect reality and permit exploration beyond the surface of reality. Because thematic analysis is not rigidly bound by theory and epistemology, it may be used as a flexible and useful research instrument to present a rich, detailed, and complex description of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

When applying thematic analysis, the researcher plays an active role in identifying themes and/or patterns in the data. The particular themes and/or patterns identified by the researcher are often those of interest and those supporting or refuting his or her proposed research hypothesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis also addresses the more traditional claim of giving a voice to the participants made by several research methods. In essence, throughout most research analysis, the researcher chooses which components of the collected data he or she is going to highlight and acknowledge in the report to readers, thereby choosing the particular components of the participants' voices to bring to the foreground (Fine, 2002). The researcher chooses the voice rather than gives the voice.

Potential Sources of Bias

Because, as the researcher, I identify myself as an Evangelical Protestant Christian whose faith is integral to both my identity and my worldview, I put forth all effort to remain as objective as possible throughout this project. The process I used to decrease subjectivity was to discuss both the research data and potential themes within the data with my thesis supervisor and colleagues. I also reflected on my role in the research process, exposed any potential biases, and made this clear in my analysis (Fine, 2002). Furthermore, because I am deeply connected with my faith and believe that a positive religious orientation significantly

contributes to a person's general well-being, I am aware that not all individuals have had positive experiences with religion and remained cognisant of this during the research interviews. I am also a Counselling Psychology graduate student who has experienced a significant amount of stress throughout my academic studies, and I thus remained mindful and aware of the diversity of human experience even amidst common circumstances.

Data Collection

The data collected in this research study were acquired from four individuals who each participated in one interview, which varied from 25 to 40 minutes in length. Each participant was asked a series of closed and open-ended questions. When participants had difficulty formulating an answer to an open-ended question, I offered clarification. I also used probes and follow-up questions when I perceived a response as either too brief or too broad (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I made use of summary statements to make sure I understood what the participants were saying, and I gave them the opportunity to clarify if my summaries were inaccurate. I asked participants questions to gather information about their experiences regarding the specific religiously based coping methods they employed, as Evangelical Christian counselling psychology graduate students, to buffer the effects of stress related to their academic pursuits. I recruited participants, conducted the interviews for data collection, and analysed the data using a thematic analysis qualitative research method.

The nature of qualitative research is the contextually grounded, socially constructed, and experience-based nature of scientific knowledge (Mishler, 1990). The intent of this qualitative study was to examine a component of the graduate student experience and inspire further investigation. This study provides an in-depth understanding about the experiences of a small, focused sample group. Throughout the interview and data analysis process I took into account the fact that each individual has a socio-cultural framework of language and meaning that is likely to vary to some degree from my own (Mishler, 1986). I used this knowledge as I attempted to remain as objective as possible throughout the research process. Threats to research credibility are possible if I misunderstood/misinterpreted the experiences reported by the research subjects or if their responses were fabricated.

Participant Inclusion Criteria

Participants included were four individuals who identified themselves as Evangelical Christians and who reported that their faith and spirituality were integral components of both their identities and worldviews. The participants were also graduate students in Counselling Psychology programs in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. Because many Counselling Psychology master's level students are required to perform their own research thesis projects, the participants were somewhat familiar with the process of both conducting and participating in psychology research. Furthermore, Counselling Psychology

graduate programs tend to be demanding and quite stressful; therefore, the

participants had had ample experience with program-related stress and had had

several opportunities to employ a variety of coping methods to curtail their stress.

This student sample was quite self-aware and introspective, which contributed to

the depth and thoroughness of their responses throughout the research interview.

Because graduate student stress may not be predictable from any single

variable (e.g., year in program, income, age, relationship status, number of

children, or number of working hours per week) (Hudson & O'Regan, 1994), the

inclusion criteria in the current study were relatively broad. The participant

criteria included any students who were enrolled either part-time or full-time in

the identified graduate program, who could speak to their experience of stress

associated with their graduate studies, and who recognized themselves as

Evangelical Protestant Christians whose faith was central to their lives. Data were

gathered in both written and interview format, and therefore participants were also

required to speak and listen fluently in English. No communication

accommodations were required for this recruited participant pool.

Recruitment Strategies

Participants meeting the inclusion criteria for this study were recruited

from three recognized Counselling Psychology graduate programs in the Lower

Mainland of British Columbia. I sent an introductory email to the department

head or program director of the targeted institutions (i.e., Trinity Western

University, The Adler School of Professional Psychology, and The University of British Columbia), including a request for permission to recruit students, an outline of the purpose of the research study, inclusion criteria for participants sought, and the details of participant commitment (see Appendix A). Of the institutions who granted me permission to recruit students, I requested permission to post an advertisement in the department asking for voluntary student participation in the study (see Appendix B). The administrative assistant of one of the institutions offered to send my poster out to all students currently enrolled in its counselling psychology graduate program via email. One of the targeted institutions denied my request to post an advertisement in their department and the third institution granted my request.

Prospective participants had access to my contact email address and phone number. During the initial contact with each prospective participant I shared a general overview of my study, outlined the participant expectations, and clarified inclusion criteria (Appendix C). When a prospective participant confirmed agreeing to and meeting these criteria, the participant and I established a meeting time and place to conduct the interview. Meeting places included a private meeting room at the participant's university and other mutually agreed upon locations. I emailed a copy of the consent form to the participants 24 hours in advance for their review. When I met with each participant I followed a step-by-step interview guide (see Appendix D). Before the commencement of the

interviews, two copies of the original consent form were provided to each participant for them to sign (one copy for them to keep and one copy for myself to keep) (see Appendix E). The voluntary nature of participation was again emphasized.

After signing the consent form, I asked each participant to fill out a demographic information form (Appendix F). These data were collected for descriptive and context purposes. Once this form had been completed I took a few moments to again explain the nature of my study, why I was conducting this study, and asked the participant if he or she had any questions before we began. I did this in part to offer him or her background information on my study and to make some small talk in an attempt to establish rapport before beginning the formal interview.

I then turned on my recording device and began to conduct the research interview by asking the predetermined series of closed and open-ended questions (Appendix G). The first set of questions explored how being a graduate student had affected their personal life. The intent of this series of questions was to prompt the participant to think about how his or her role as a graduate student may have been impacting several areas of his or her life. The next series of questions asked the participant to talk about which general aspects of the program requirements in his or her graduate studies he or she had found most stressful, followed by a request for a description of the specific events or experiences

causing the greatest amount of stress. The intent of these questions was to set the

stage for the following questions, intended to retrieve information about the

religious methods students use to cope with these particular stressors. During the

inquiry into religious coping I asked the participants more specific, detailed, and

exploratory questions regarding their religious coping.

Ethical Considerations

Some participants may have been leery about disclosing personal

information regarding their private experiences or perceptions; therefore, I

emphasized my adherence to strict confidentiality by excluding any identifiable

information in my thesis composition. I also informed each participant that all

recorded data, transcribed data, email correspondence, demographic information

forms, and consent forms would be securely locked in a cabinet in my home at all

times when I was not using the materials for my research. Materials will be kept

for five years, at which time all materials will be removed and destroyed.

Participants were also informed that a third party transcriptionist may have access

to the recorded interview data and my thesis supervisor would have access to the

transcribed interview data; however, participants were informed that neither the

transcriptionist nor my supervisor would have access to any of their identifying

information. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions both

before and after the interview. Participants were told they could leave the study

and withdraw their participation at any time with no consequence. None of the

participants reported experiencing any significant distress following the interview;

therefore, I did not suggest a counselling referral to a low-cost counselling service

(e.g., the University of British Columbia Life and Career Centre). I also did not

supply a list of prospective counsellors to participants before the interview

because this would contradict the minimal risk associated with human

participation in this research project.

Individuals with disabilities were included in the selection criteria for this

study if they were able to communicate verbally in English. I did not have any

interest from students with disabilities; therefore, I was not required to ensure that

interview locations were accessible to these individuals (e.g., a wheelchair

accessible location). One individual who contacted me with expressed interest to

participate in the study did not meet the selection criteria for inclusion; therefore I

kindly informed her that unfortunately she did not meet all of the necessary

inclusion criteria for the execution of this study. I then sincerely thanked her for

her willingness to participate.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis permits me, as the researcher, to extract themes from

one data set (i.e., themes within an individual interview) and/or recurrent themes

across several data sets (i.e., identified themes across several interviews given by

either the same or a variety of individuals). Thematic analysis can be used as a

realist method to discover and report the reality, meaning, and experience of the participant (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A chosen theme extracted from the data highlights something important in relation to the research question and encapsulates a degree of meaningful patterns within the data set. Because there are no absolute criteria for that which is considered a theme within data, I was responsible for using my own judgement in identifying particular themes. As a thematic analysis researcher, I was cautioned against setting up rigid rules for thematic inclusion criteria; however, I was expected to justify the incorporation of each chosen theme. All themes were also expected to capture something important related to the research question, and I was as consistent as possible in the manner in which I determined the themes included in my analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The current study employs a theoretical thematic analysis. This type of thematic analysis tends to be researcher driven with the intent of providing a detailed analysis of certain aspects of the data gathered to help answer the proposed research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were identified using a semantic approach whereby theme identification is based on explicit or surface meaning within the data. This was followed by my interpretation of pattern significance and any broader implications or meanings related to relevant existing literature (Patton, 1990).

The data in this research project were examined using thematic analysis. The first step in analysis involves the transcription of the audio interviews into written text. The data were all transcribed by me, the researcher. During transcription I began to familiarize myself with the data. Once transcribed, I re-read the interviews while listening to the audio recordings to ensure the accuracy of my transcription and to begin looking for and noticing potentially interesting patterns of meaning. Here I wrote down any possible coding themes I identified throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The second step involved the actual coding of relevant extracted data. These codes were used to organize the data into meaningful groups based on the specific research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which, in this study, pertains to the religious coping methods employed by graduate students to buffer the effects of stress associated with graduate studies.

During step three, I used the coded groups independently or in combination with other coded groups to identify potential themes across or within interview transcripts. Step four entailed refining the identified themes of step three. This included amalgamating similar themes into one theme, breaking one theme down into several themes, and setting aside any themes not having enough data to support them. This step also included discerning the credibility of identified and refined themes based on whether or not they fit in with and were related to the coded groups identified in step three. The end result of this step was

an acquired understanding of what the two different themes and four subthemes were, how they were connected with one another, and their overall meaning from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Throughout step five, I identified the essence of what each theme and subtheme entailed, including what made each theme and subtheme interesting and why. I also attempted to recognize what each theme and subtheme was and what it was not (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During step six I completed the final analysis and write-up of the report. The report tells the story of the data and portrays the information and message of intent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The report also includes support for the argument related to the main research question: What are the religious coping techniques employed by graduate students to buffer the effects of the stress associated with graduate studies? The supplemental questions covered the components of being a graduate student, both personally and academically, that one finds most stressful, why individuals choose certain religious coping methods over others, whether or not individuals regularly apply the same coping methods to specific stressful events, and the particular stressful situations associated with graduate student life leading the individual most often toward a form of religious coping.

I accounted for the trustworthiness of the analysis findings by working to ensure that the analysis and data matched one another: the extracted themes matched the analytic claims. Also, in accordance with the process of thematic

analysis, I worked to ensure all extracted themes were coherent, consistent, and distinctive and checked them against one another and against the original data set. In the final analysis I worked to illustrate a well-organized, well-thought-out, and convincing story about both the data and the religious coping methods employed by graduate students to buffer the effects of stress associated with graduate studies. All implications, meanings, conclusions, or summaries were verified by support from existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Introduction to the Participants

Four students who were enrolled in Counselling Psychology master's level graduate programs at the time of the interviews participated in this study. The participants came from two different secular institutions in the West Coast region of Canada. All participants lived in either a large urban city or in a nearby suburb.

The participants identified themselves as Evangelical Protestant Christians whose faith and spirituality were integral components of both their identity and worldview. Although all of the participants came from a variety of walks of life and various journeys which led them to pursue graduate degrees in counselling psychology, they were all connected by their deep and meaningful relationships with God through their faith and belief system, and in their struggle to maintain their well-being amidst the plentiful struggles of graduate school. The participants reported that they had experienced a significant increase in stress since beginning their graduate studies, and they shared about their personal, intimate relationships

with God and how they understood, experienced, and involved Him and other aspects of religion in their coping process. Pseudonyms have been given to each participant to protect his or her identity and fulfill my commitment to maintain confidentiality.

The participants were three female and one male ranging from 26 to 42 years old. Two of the participants were working full-time, one was working part-time, and one was not working at the time of the interview. Three of the participants were in long-term committed relationships and one of the participants was single. Participants also ranged from being in their first semester to their last semester of graduate school. Three of the participants were not affiliated with any specific evangelical denomination and one was affiliated with the Pentecostal Evangelical denomination. At the time of their interviews, all of the participants stated that their faith was very important to them.

Chapter IV: Results

I identified two main themes and four subthemes after conducting a thematic analysis of the participant's transcribed interviews. These themes and subthemes described the religious forms of coping employed by these graduate students to buffer the effects of stress associated with graduate school. The first main theme is "Why I Involve God," and it includes two subthemes: the situations leading to religious coping and the results of involving religion in coping. The second main theme is "How I Use My Religion to Cope." Its two subthemes are coping individually and communally. Raw data gathered from the interviews will be presented to further illustrate each theme.

I begin this chapter by describing the various sources of stress perpetuated by graduate school recounted by the participants along with excerpts from the interviews. The Stressors of Graduate School section and its four categories (program demands, pressure, sacrifice, and conflict) are not formal thematic analysis themes in this research project. Rather, this section of the Results chapter is simply presented to offer a deep contextual understanding as a foundation for the formal main themes describing the various religious coping methods employed to curb the effects of these stressors. Following this section I present the formal thematic analysis main themes with a brief description, followed by each subtheme with a brief description and excerpts from the interviews.

The Stressors of Graduate School

The purpose of this study was to explore the types of religious coping methods employed by graduate students to buffer the effects of the stress associated with being a graduate student. The first step in the research was to gather background information by having the participants identify the particular components of graduate school they found most stressful and were thus most likely to lead them to some form of religious coping to mediate the effects of this stress. I began each interview by asking the participants to speak about how their involvement in graduate school had affected their personal life and what this impact had been on them. I followed these questions with more specific questions asking them what stress meant to them and what general components of and specific experiences within graduate school they found most stressful and why.

Regardless of what stage they were at in their advancement through graduate school, all participants cited graduate school as being stressful to greater and lesser degrees at different times in both their progression through the program as a whole and within their progression through each semester. These stressors were identified in each transcript and were then analysed to look for similarities before they were grouped into four different categories containing similar content. These categories are (a) program demands, (b) pressure, (c) sacrifice, and (d) conflict. The specific categories will be further elaborated upon using quotes from the interview transcripts.

Program demands. Graduate school was discussed as being demanding due to several factors. In addition to keeping up with coursework, papers, projects, presentations, and assigned reading described by all four participants as being quite stressful, two of the participants found having their counselling sessions taped very nerve-wracking and distressing. For example, Brian said:

> And for me some of the first times that I was in there trying to practice the active listening skills and empathy skills and things, I found that to be stressful just because I had this sense of perfection. . . . I just didn't want to make a mistake, and I found that I was being too analytical of all the things I was saying. . . . I would say a sentence and then I would second guess what I just said, and I was like, "Oh I should have said it this way, because that would have been better."

The participants who were at a later stage of the program found that their stress was further compounded when they began their clinical practicum. Beginning a clinical practicum was very stressful for some of these students because in most cases they had spent several months learning psychology and counselling theory, but had not yet put this theory into practice. Additionally, there is not generally one set formula for proper or correct therapy, which some participants described as being quite unnerving: there is no structure or specific formula for the neophyte counsellor to fall back on. For example, as Carly stated,

> I feel now that I'm going into practicum that I don't know as much as I could know going in. If I had done more of the readings [I might feel better], [but] I just felt like there just wasn't time since I have to work as well as go to school. . . . I just didn't have the time to do it.

Conducting a master's thesis was also discussed as being both experientially stressful, and for those who had not yet begun their thesis, they were feeling stressed about the expected added workload and time involvement implicit within this process. For example, as Carly said,

> I think it's getting worse as . . . my thesis stuff has come up, because it's like so much more work. . . . Near the end of the program here it's gotten harder to maintain relationships, and I've gotten into patterns, so it's not my priority to call up friends anymore.

Pressure. All of the participants expressed feeling pressure from several sources while in graduate school. There was talk about the pressure one places on oneself to succeed or even excel in graduate school by achieving a high academic standing. A couple of the participants spoke about the pressure to please their professors with their assignments and subsequently obtain high marks; however, they found not knowing how each individual professor subjectively evaluated assignments quite stressful.

Brian was working full-time while in graduate school and felt the added pressure he put on himself to do well both in graduate school and in his role as a teacher:

I'm not used to writing academic papers: it's been like ten years that I [haven't been] in school. And so I've had a lot of stress around [writing] a good paper and [wondering] can I still do this and things like that. That's . . . probably been the hardest for me.

He also spoke of excelling in both roles as practically impossible, which often left him feeling disappointed in himself:

I teach full time . . . and so holding all of my teaching obligations down and still being organized enough to run out of the building at 3:15 to make it to [stated University] to go to classes, or whatever, um, has been an added pressure. I kind of feel at work as though I don't do the job organizationally that I would normally do: I cope, I make it work, and I . . . don't know that my students really recognize that I'm not working as hard or I'm not organizing as many activities as I normally would, but I'm aware that I'm not. I'm stretched thinner at my job.

Additionally, some of the participants spoke of the pressure to nurture close relationships when time to do so was scarce. However, because all of the participants spoke about how essential social support was in coping with the stress of graduate school, they felt required to find time to invest in these relationships

in order for the support to be there when they needed it most. Two participants spoke of feeling pressure because of the added tension on their romantic relationships. Carly discussed how her relationship with her husband had felt more strained since beginning graduate school and she equated this in large part to her sense of his lack of understanding regarding the intense amount of pressure she faces as a graduate student:

> I think it's difficult for people who are not in a graduate program to understand like the amount of work that we have to do. So I think that's where it's affecting me most. So if I'm feeling stressed out or overwhelmed . . . my husband has no idea why, like he just doesn't understand. Like, "Oh, she's sitting at home so she has time to do all this other stuff, like help with all this housework," or whatever. But really I have like five papers to write, so I can't.

Leslie was closer to the end of the program and spoke of the pressure to start thinking about and begin preliminary searches for employment after graduation. She described feeling quite worried about where she would find work and whether she would be compensated adequately: "I worry about the future, right? Worry about being able to take care of myself and get a job that's going to pay and stuff like that. That's stressful."

Sacrifice. The participants spoke of the sacrifices they found themselves required to make while in graduate school. Some spoke of having to sacrifice

peripheral friendships because they had time only to focus on and invest in a few

close relationships. However, in some situations, even the quality of those key

relationships had been sacrificed. Carly spoke about how being in graduate school

often left her feeling lonely and isolated:

> Uh, just I think I'm more lonely. . . . There's more pressure and stress, and
>
> I get frustrated when people don't understand, like how much I have to do.
>
> Um, I think mostly . . . feeling disconnected from other people.

There was a general consensus among all of the participants that their self-

care had been significantly sacrificed since becoming a student, and even when

they could justify taking a little time off for leisure, its quality was sacrificed

because of the guilt associated with taking any time off in the first place.

Finances were also discussed as being significantly sacrificed in order to

attend graduate school. Not only are the tuition costs and other associated fees

financially demanding, but when one is a student, one has less time to work,

which means one's income is also reduced. For example, Allison said: "Well, I

have to work less so I'm more broke. [It] impacts on like being able to go on

mini-vacations and hikes and stuff."

Two of the participants spoke of attending church less frequently since

being in graduate school because of the increase in responsibilities, and also

because some of their classes were scheduled on Sundays during the day. These

participants discussed how they had felt the impact of not being able to attend

church as often. For example, Allison stated: "I'm not attending church because I'm too busy. . . . I definitely feel like a fellowship and connectedness when I do go to church, so I probably am missing that."

Carly lamented the fact that she had to sacrifice being involved in her church's children's ministry—something of great importance to her—because she was scheduled to be in class most Sundays: "Well, because I can't go to worship services and I can't, you know, volunteer like I usually do, or like work in the children's ministry and stuff like that, . . . that was really impacting."

Conflict. There were several occurrences of conflict addressed by the participants. Both Leslie and Carly alluded to the fact that conflicts they had had with faculty were likely their most stressful isolated experiences of graduate school. Both of these participants spoke of their disdain, anger, and frustration with the faculty members with whom they had had the conflict. Both perceived the particular faculty members as being unsupportive and unclear, and Leslie explicitly spoke about her perception of a lack of professionalism and sensitivity:

> And I can't remember why I was so triggered, but I was triggered, and I wanted to go last and she'd said that, "Well we'll take a break after you," and I asked can we take the break before me, and I go after the break, and she wouldn't let me. She said, "No, we'll do you first." . . . Anyways, I started crying and I kept talking through it, I was like, "Sorry I'm triggered by this," and I just kept talking and she said, "You know, this

isn't a counselling session." And I was really upset by that. I was like,

"Yeah, I know it's not a counselling session! Here I am triggered and I

have to work through this. And here's me working through this

professionally!" . . . She could have used it as a teaching point; instead she

made me feel stupid. And I pointed that out to her, so I'm sure she'll never

do it again, but I was really pissed. That was a big stress for me.

Two participants also stated that since beginning graduate school they had

noticed having more conflict with their partners. This conflict often intensified

other stress they were experiencing, because when there was a riff in the

relationship they were unable to rely on the support from their partners as one of

their main coping methods.

All of the participants also spoke of both direct and indirect conflict with

their classmates. In the interviews, three of the participants specifically spoke of

the conflict pertaining to feeling ostracised, discriminated against, and

antagonized when contributing to class discussions through a Christian

worldview. As Allison pointed out: "Um, sometimes I've noticed I keep my

mouth shut on certain issues. . . . Sometimes I just don't say anything because I

don't want the adversity." Carly also shared her thoughts on the topic:

You know, people will just feel free to talk against Christianity, and

everybody's in agreement. . . . But if anyone said that about another faith

then it wouldn't be really [acceptable]. . . . [It's as if with] Christianity, it

is okay [to be] prejudiced against it, but prejudice against any of the minority groups isn't.

Brian said,

I did my very best to view the, the argument from . . . as neutral of a position as I could, [an] unbiased position. But I did find myself wanting to offer a voice that, that was maybe counter-cultural in my, in the classroom. Um, and I noticed the attitude right, sort of right away. . . . I did definitely feel a sense of . . . antagonism [against Christianity], you know?

Discussing these four categories containing explanations for why graduate school is significantly stressful for a variety of reasons provides context for the following four main themes pertaining to the religious forms of coping discussed by each of the participants to moderate their stress.

The Two Main Themes

Participants described involving religious coping methods to help them get though the stress-inducing circumstances they experienced as graduate students. These data were grouped into two main themes and four subthemes (two subthemes within each main theme). Theme one, "Why I Involve God," and its two subthemes, the situations leading to religious coping and the results of involving religion in coping, are presented below. This is followed by the second main theme, "How I Use My Religion to Cope," with its two subthemes, coping

individually and communally. Brief explanations and direct quotes from the participants are presented to further illustrate each subtheme. In the coding process, I found that some of the participants' quotes generated information overlapping into other themes and subthemes. For clarity, where there was significant overlap, I present the most appropriate and most illustrative sections of these particular quotes.

Why I involve God. This first main theme speaks to those types of challenging situations which led participants to involve religion in the coping process and the reasons for which they repeatedly turned to religion to cope. Participants spoke of being motivated to involve religion in coping for a variety of circumstances because of a variety of experienced and expected positive outcomes. Two subthemes, the situations leading to religious coping and the results of involving religion in coping, were used to delineate these motivating factors by addressing those situations in which participants were more likely to involve religion and why they chose to involve religion in the coping process time and time again.

The situations leading to religious coping. All of the participants reported turning to religion to cope with many life situations they perceived as stressful. A number of these situations generated relatively minor stress and several generated relatively significant stress. Many of the most commonly discussed situations which were likely to lead the participants to some form of religious coping were

described as those circumstances or affective states that were perceived as being out of their immediate control. They explained that when they felt as though they were unable to influence either the source of stress directly or their emotional reactions to the stressor with their own non-religious resources, either in the moment or in the near future, they were likely to ask God to help ease their worries, and at times they asked God to take control of the situation. Doing so helped them cope with their stress and worry regarding that which seemed out of their direct control, because they were able to trust God and His ability to take care of both their personal well-being and their stress-inducing circumstance. For example, Brian said:

> I found in one specific instance when I was really like, viewing my graduate studies through the lens of my faith, was my application to the graduate school program. I just wanted in so bad, and I was under a lot of pressure cause I'd heard how competitive it was, and I found that that was something that came up for me a lot in my faith practices.

And Carly said,

> So if I get really anxious I'll just go and I'll sit down and I'll just be like, "God this sucks!" And then I'll just, you know, wait, and let Him kind of calm me down, and I feel like I've been going more to him as like a father, as like a daddy, as like a friend . . . a security blanket.

And Leslie said,

Yeah, for sure, [I turn to God] like especially in regards to the worry. . . . I worry about am I going to be good at this job? Am I going to be able to find employment? Am I gonna be able to get into my PhD, that kind of stuff. . . . One of the things that I do at my practicum is that I really worry about my clients, right? So if I . . . find myself worrying again, I'll just ask God to intervene with that person, right? Give me the skills to help that person.

Relationship conflict was discussed by Carly and Leslie as circumstances where they felt they were not always able to immediately curb their negative emotions and therefore went to God for strength, guidance, and comfort. As Carly stated, "So relational issues, um, I'm more likely to turn to God." And Leslie said, "I'll pray for, you know, if I'm mad at somebody I'll try to pray for them rather than sit there and stew about them or something like that, you know?" Some participants reported that they were more likely to involve religion in the coping process for those circumstances they evaluated as more highly stressful. For example, Brian said, "The bigger stressors for me, definitely there's a more tangible connection to my faith." Carly stated:

Um, and major things in school, like, I had like a big practicum problem and like it really stressed me out, like beyond anything I've ever experienced, and um because of that . . . I was turning to God all the time.

. . . It was my main coping strategy, so, yeah . . . generally my natural

reaction is mostly [to turn to God for] the major stuff.

The results of involving religion in coping. All of the participants

reported that when they involved religion in coping with their stress, they noticed

significant positive, desirable, and often immediate results. This led them to

continue to turn to religion often when faced with stressful circumstances—most

notably those they felt they needed help coping with because of the perception

that these situations were out of their direct or immediate control. In essence, they

felt they regularly employed religious forms of coping because they work.

A common result which was discussed often, and by all participants, was a

shift in their perspectives. When turning to God through religious coping methods

they noticed a shift in how they prioritized and evaluated life situations,

themselves, and their stressful circumstances. For example, in Leslie's case,

> It comes to me and I, it's funny, cause some days I'll think I don't have
>
> time to go to church, but I always say, "Okay God!" God never denies me
>
> the time I spend in church.
>
> . . . I come home with more mental clarity in how to work on whatever I
>
> need to do, right?

And in Brian's case:

I attend church very regularly, and I find that to be, not only a great

expression for . . . my faith and my love for God, but also a great way for

me to, to just maintain a healthy perspective on the stressful issues of my

life as well. And a great way for me to sort of bring my faith lens to an

everyday aspect of my life.

Carly stated that when she involved her religious perspective on the stress-

inducing circumstance, she began to see her immediate problems as relatively

minute and insignificant compared to the big picture of her purpose on earth and

her eternity in heaven:

Just like, trusting in that everything will be okay. And, and it kind of puts

your perspective, like it changes your perspective to like see the bigger

picture, and you're like, "Well, really if I did my best and I do really badly

on that, how is that going to impact me eternally?" Cause it's really not . .

. it's just right now, and it's a very small period of your existence.

This shift in perspective was also revealed through feeling grateful to God

for the blessings in one's life as opposed to focusing on one's challenges. For

example, Allison stated:

My biggest thing is like having gratitude when I, when I'm in a stressful

situation, I just, I try to be thankful for it, and [this leads to] learning

lessons or whatever the reason for the situation. If I feel like if I'm, if I go

in with gratitude [to shift my focus], it's my main coping mechanism, I'd say.

Additionally, turning to their belief system led some participants to feel inspired as they garnered new insights into the relevant stress-inducing circumstance, and they all agreed that turning to religion offered an increase in calm, comfort, peace, personal well-being, and relief from stress and worry. For example, Brian said:

> Like anyone, I've got my less healthy ways of coping as well sometimes, and the knowledge . . . that religious coping methods tend, tend to be healthy ones for me and like I don't, I don't feel like they're harmful for my physical health or anything like that. Like drinking alcohol, or like whatever, right? Like there's other ways of coping that . . . seem more about like forgetting or ignoring problems, rather than trying to work through the stressor. . . . So it provides me with what I see as like a healthy way [of coping]. . . . I'm not avoiding, yeah, that's exactly it. I guess, like it feels like [I'm] active and I'm participating . . . [and] trying to work towards a healthier spot.

Carly stated: "[When I go to God] I feel the stress in my body kind of dissipate, and . . . my mind stops like cycling over that issue." Allison expressed that "it works for me, so I continue to do it. . . . It minimizes the stress, or gives me peace." And Leslie said:

If I'm upset or something or I'll just be like really down on myself . . . I've asked God to help me be nicer to myself and stuff like that and He does. . . . I've asked God, "I'm feeling really upset right now, just surround me with your love," you know, and He does!

How I use my religion to cope. This second main theme identifies and explains the different religious coping methods participants accessed in times of stress and struggle. All of the participants spoke of various means through which they involve religion in the coping process either independently or by involving others in the Christian community. The two subthemes are coping individually and communally.

Coping individually. This subtheme illustrates the religious coping practices participants engaged in independently. In general, when using these coping practice participants went directly to God through various means to cope with their stress. Engaging in these coping practices was not dependent on anyone or anything other than themselves and God (except for requiring a Bible for the practice of independent Bible reading). The participants spoke about how when they felt the drive to involve religion autonomously in the coping process they could do so at any time and in any place, which was seen as a benefit. There were a few effective independent coping practices discussed, and the following is a compilation of those addressed in the interviews.

Some participants spoke of reciting Bible verses and worshiping God by singing Christian songs to alleviate their stress. For example, Allison said:

Reciting Bible verses that I learned when I was a kid or singing like songs, actually when I can't sleep, or um, [in some situations that are] really, really intense and near the end I'm pulling out every Bible verse and everything I, I have. Every tool I have just to get to the end.

And Carly stated:

I find that when I do use praise and when I sing songs and stuff like that, like on my own, like not in church, like just all of a sudden I start singing to God, that it, it works, like everything just seems to melt away and I feel so good.

Some also spoke of talking to God, listening to God, and experiencing His spiritual presence through prayer and meditation. For example, as Carly said,

I've started . . . sitting back and just like, like saying a few things to God in prayer, but like, also just like waiting and like listening and just experiencing, and having like things come into my mind and just feeling really, you know, feeling His presence and just feeling really secure. . . . [In some situations] like all I can really say is like, "Jesus help me," or something like that, and then I feel like I totally meditate in His presence and I just feel Him with me.

And Leslie stated: "Well, I pray like at least twice a day. Yeah, if I'm feeling stressed I try to remember to turn to God [through prayer] rather than you know, just sit there."

Three of the participants identified Bible reading as a method of coping and as something they thought they should be doing more regularly, but shared that they had not made it a priority and thus did not find the time to do so. Carly explained that she had been working at making regular Bible reading more of a priority because she believed doing so would build her strength and resilience, and by making it a regular practice she would be able to handle stressful situations better because her spirit would be well prepared:

> But I'm also trying to read the Word [God's Word in the Bible] every day.
> . . . I think it's like, cause in the Bible it talks about how the Word should
> be our bread, like it's our food. And I think how I see it is like [this]: when
> you are not feeding your spirit, it shrinks up. And so then if you get
> stressed, your spirit can't handle it as much, cause it's not strong, but then
> if you feed it and you exercise it and you strengthen it, it grows and then
> it's strong, it can handle that.

Coping communally. There were certain types of religious coping methods that were discussed as being primarily employed with others and through others both within the participants' immediate Christian community and within the larger context of fellow believers. All of the participants cited church

attendance as being a central component of their faith, and as providing several means through which they were able to access religious forms of coping. Outside of the church service itself, belonging to a church community served as a medium through which they were able to have the time and opportunity to build and maintain Christian relationships, and as a time to be surrounded with others who share similar beliefs and a similar worldview. Being actively involved communally was cited several times within each interview and often in great detail by each participant as a central means through which they understood, built, and expressed their relationship with God.

Participants also spoke specifically about how powerful and meaningful it was to connect with God while in the presence of other Christians. For example, Brian expressed that

gathering with a group of people, a large group of people, that's really meaningful for me, that this isn't something that I do on my own, but there's a larger context of people that it's in. The singing, the worship is very important for me.

Support by way of guidance, inspiration, accountability, being challenged, and learning from others who share a similar Christian perspective were discussed as important avenues through which the participants felt connected to their faith and thus better able to cope with their trying situations. They spoke of accessing

this support as a coping method from people in their immediate Christian

community. For example, Leslie said:

> It always seems that no matter what is bothering me that week, like
>
> outside of school or whatever, whatever is bothering me always seems to
>
> be addressed by the pastor on Sunday, always. It's like, ah, now I know
>
> how to deal with that situation.
>
> And Carly stated:
>
> Sometimes having conversations, like with my husband about issues—
>
> cause sometimes issues bother me that I learn about in grad school, like
>
> when they're highly contradictory to what the Bible says—I find, you
>
> know, having talks with him about that, cause he's just really
>
> knowledgeable, it's really helpful.

Participants also spoke of feeling supported and influenced by people in

the larger context of the global Christian community; for example, as Leslie said:

> Every day I get this daily devotional online, it's a calendar reminder every
>
> day, so I try to read that every day. . . . And sometimes I'll listen to 100
>
> Huntley Street if I'm still home. Stories are great, and you know . . . I've
>
> learned to really listen and be open minded.

And Brian stated, "Sometimes I read, uh, web logs of other young

Christians, um, on the Internet as well. Like just to like gain a fresh perspective

again or a new perspective: a different perspective. I like to do that sometimes."

Additionally, the support provided in close relationships with other Christians was discussed as a means through which they chose to involve religion when coping with difficulties. They spoke of how they felt some of these relationships seemed deeper, more meaningful, and more supportive because of a common existential understanding that did not necessitate explanation or justification. For example, from Brian's perspective:

The big specific [religious coping method] for me would be actively seeking out relationship, and within the context of my faith: people who can understand my world, my worldview, and like speak into that. . . . I've found it to be one of the most important things for me is knowing that the person that I'm talking to can understand my, my faith: that they, that it's not just something that they're like, "Oh that's weird, like interesting," but that they can get it, and they maybe understand where the stress comes from or where the frustration [is coming from], or they can enter in beside and attend to grief, if I might be grieving something. . . . Um, just talking to people about, about the journey, and having them sort of reflect back to me. And also pray with me or walk beside me: not only in my faith, but also in my stressors and for me to be able to do that for them too. . . . So, those one-on-one [Christian] relationships have really been probably the most um, influential part of my spiritual practice in looking at the stressful events that I've faced.

In addition to the support provided in these relationships, some spoke of specific Christians they would pray with as a method of coping. They spoke of these individuals as those with whom they felt comfortable sharing their most personal struggles. For example, Carly said:

I've been calling the pastor's wife every once in a while . . . and just kind of laying everything out and telling her how I'm feeling, and then we will pray together after, and I usually feel really good after that. Like more hopeful that everything will be okay.

And Brian stated:

I've got a, a friend who's about my age: he's in a similar stage of life as me, very similar experiences as far as faith, and we meet one on one, um, quite regularly, sometimes like twice a month, every two weeks or so . . . [and] we pray together.

Two of the participants also spoke of their active involvement in their church's ministry by volunteering in church programs. Being connected to the church in this way contributed to the well-being of these individuals because there was a sense that they were helping others and were actively a part of something larger than themselves and thus felt more connected to the church family, their beliefs, and to God. Brian said:

Not only attending church, but I guess being involved in church life in a more active role. Like, I've done a lot of singing and singing in choir and

being involved in the community. Actually forming relationships and serving in some capacity, in my church community, has been a hugely beneficial thing for me.

Summary

In summary, after analysing the participant interviews, I identified the common sources of stress associated with being a graduate student both within and perpetuated by graduate school. Two main themes and each of their two subthemes were identified and used to tell the story about the involvement of religion in coping with stress rooted in each of the participants' graduate school experiences.

Chapter V: Discussion

This research study investigated the religious coping methods employed by Evangelical Christian graduate students to mediate the effects of the stress they have been experiencing while in graduate school. The participants spoke of their religious worldview and how they formally made use of components of their belief system to cope with this stress. The stressors identified as those experienced while in graduate school were many. The titles used to categorize these stressors were program demands, pressure, sacrifice, and conflict.

From the recorded and transcribed interviews I employed a thematic analysis qualitative research method to identify and extract themes from the data. All participants described a noticeable increase in stress since beginning their graduate program and all shared about how they accessed facets of their religion to buffer the impact of this stress. Perspectives elucidated from the data are unique to the individuals who shared their experiences. Although no two experiences are ever identical, something that adds to the richness of the human condition is found in our similarities which, for the purpose of this research study, were generated by searching for and identifying common themes throughout and across data sets.

People turn to God within a religious framework for comfort and to meet needs of intimacy, meaning, and spiritual fulfillment (Pargament & Park, 1997), but quantifying how often an individual attends church or prays is insufficient

when attempting to understand the depth and breadth of one's religious experience and, in effect, how and why one approaches one's belief system in the coping process. Frequency of prayer and church attendance have been used most often in the literature to measure religious coping (Conway, 1985–1986; Courtney et al., 1992; Ellison & Taylor, 1996); however, little has been said about other specific religious coping activities individuals access and the deep and significant purposes they serve. Understanding how people make use of their religious beliefs to cope offers a much more comprehensive explanation regarding the often overlooked complexities of that which makes us human.

The first portion of the participant interviews was dedicated to asking background information questions regarding graduate student stress and how these stressors also compounded the intensity of other distressing events that occurred outside of school. This study is about religion and coping, and in order to understand the subjective experience of religious coping we must first understand the context of this coping by exploring what leads one to initiate the coping process. The main sources of stress the participants had been experiencing while in graduate school included the academic demands of a graduate program, the pressure to succeed, finding work after graduation, maintaining balance, nurturing close relationships, financial struggles, self-care and relational sacrifices, and conflict with others within and outside of the graduate program.

The Perpetrators of Graduate Student Stress

According to research, in general the most stressful components of graduate school are time management and insufficient support from friends and family members (Cahir & Morris, 1991), uncertainties and pressures regarding program expectations (Cushway, 1992; Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Nelson et al., 2001; Rocha-Singh, 1994), and financial constraints and departmental difficulties (Cahir & Morris, 1991; Cushway, 1992; Nelson et al., 2001; Rocha-Singh, 1994). Many of the results from this study fall in line with current research findings.

Regarding time management, the two participants who were working full-time while enrolled full-time in their graduate studies found managing their time a significant source of stress. Neither felt they had enough time to keep on top of some of their program requirements, including completing all assigned reading and writing well written papers. They also spoke of the stress of having their attention split between performing well in their student roles as well as in their work roles. Both of these participants also mentioned several times throughout their interviews how they felt frustrated because of their strong desire to excel in graduate school while feeling as though they lacked the necessary time to do so.

Within the domain of program expectations, two of the participants emphatically stated how stressful it was to be mandatorily video recorded while practicing their clinical skills. The idea of having someone else critique their clinical abilities was quite a distressing experience.

Furthermore, support, specifically spiritual support, was mentioned several times across all interviews as an essential component in their stress management and in maintaining a sense of personal well-being. Additionally, one participant spoke about having more marital conflict since beginning graduate school and when in conflict, the key support provided by her husband was withheld and her coping abilities were thus compromised.

Financial constraints were discussed by only two of the participants. This is perhaps because these two participants were attending a private institution where the tuition is quite high. Of the two participants who did not cite current financial constraints as significantly stressful, one was attending a public university where tuition fees are relatively low, and he had also received a pay increase at work because he was enrolled in a master's program. The other participant, although not working, was still receiving an income from another source.

Departmental difficulties were addressed by two of the participants as causing significant stress. It is interesting to note that both of the participants who spoke of the stress they experienced pertaining to departmental difficulties seemed clearly to be the most upsetting and distressing isolated events they had experienced while in graduate school. Even when recounting these past events in their interviews, both participants seemed to become noticeably agitated.

In addition to the stressors that appear in the pre-existing literature mentioned previously, three of the participants also stated that they struggled with the adversity they received from their classmates when expressing their views from a more conservative, or Christian, perspective. Because of this antagonism they spoke of often feeling unable to share their opinions or questions freely if they came from their Christian worldview. They also spoke of feeling discriminated against because they were unable to use the classroom setting to learn, grow, and grapple with issues from this perspective.

Religion and Coping

After exploring their sources of stress I asked the participants questions regarding their relationship with religious forms of coping. The majority of the current research on the topic of religion and coping indicates that individuals are likely to turn to religion to cope with major life events including bereavement (Anderson, Marwit, Vandenberg, & Chibnall, 2005; Park & Cohen, 1993), living with a life-threatening disease (Jenkins, 1995; Johnson & Spilka, 1991; Thompson, Sobolew-Shubin, Galbraith, Schwankovsky, & Cruzen, 1993), long-term or major illness (Harris et al., 1995; Koenig et al., 1992), natural disasters (Bjorck & Cohen, 1993; Newton & McIntosh, 2009), and threats to personal safety (Berman, 1974; Pargament et al., 1994). However, the participants in this study all spoke of how they involved religion in coping with the stress associated with graduate school, which would arguably not be considered a major life event

as defined here. That being said, Pargament (1997) suggested that individuals are likely to turn to religion to cope with events they appraise as particularly difficult and that threatening the limits of their personal resources. As demonstrated in this study, many of the stressors of graduate school would fall under this category.

From the transcribed interview data I identified two main themes and four subthemes, which spoke to the participants' experiences of involving religion in the coping process. These themes were "Why I Involve God," with the two subthemes of the situations leading to religious coping and the results of involving religion in coping, and "How I Use My Religion to Cope," with the two subthemes of coping individually and communally. These themes were confirmed by current research regarding the intersection of religion and coping.

This research is about the religious dimensions of coping; specifically, understanding how religious coping is integrated into the coping practices of graduate students. The particular religious coping methods identified in this research were prayer, both individual and communal; religious meditation; worship through song, both individual and communal; Bible reading; scripture recitation; support from close and peripheral relationships with other Christians; and helping others in the Christian community. The participants spoke of the frequent simultaneous involvement of several of these methods of religious coping for a single stress-inducing circumstance.

The findings of this research study suggest that individuals may be unlikely to use specific religious coping methods for specific situations. On the contrary, the participants in this study described using various religious coping methods for a variety of situations. They all had their own particular roster of religious coping practices they found useful. Each participant spoke of the specific coping methods he or she used regularly, and although some of the coping practices were similar to those of the others, no two participants had the same collection of religious coping practices. For example, one participant spoke of using prayer, scripture recitation, worship, and Christian support, while another spoke of using prayer and support from others in the Christian community. The two things all of the participants had in common were that the coping practices they spoke of were positive in nature and that they worked.

The Five Key Functions of Religion in the Coping Process

Although there was no direct relationship between a particular religious coping method and a particular stress-inducing circumstance, religion was involved in the coping process to achieve a desired outcome. I continue this discussion by exploring the five key functions of religion in the coping process (Pargament et al., 2000) and the religious coping methods the participants in this study made use of to address their struggles within this framework. I then further discuss my findings, explore the limitations of this study, and conclude with implications and areas for future research.

Religion to gain control. Religion offers opportunities for control when the individual is confronted with circumstances that push beyond the limits of his or her personal resources. Connecting with a force that one perceives as having control and influence when one is faced with uncertainty and the limits of one's humanness offers comfort and security (Pargament, 1997). This form of religious coping appeared to be one of the most commonly utilised by the participants. They were most likely to turn explicitly to God through religious coping when they felt as though they did not have immediate control over their stressful situation. There was a general consensus that an effective way to deal with the stress of feeling out of control was either to work with God to resolve the problem (collaborative religious coping) (Pargament et al., 1988), or aim to do what one could to resolve the problem and then actively turn the rest over to God (active religious surrender) (Pargament et al., 2000). Participants described turning the problem over to God as meaning that they trusted that He would either take care of the problem or take care of them in the midst of the problem. They spoke of a variety of methods employed in their attempt to achieve this outcome including prayer, meditation, and guidance and direction from other Christians. There was also talk about gaining control over a stress-inducing situation by changing one's focus from the detriments to the blessings amidst a challenging circumstance.

This finding seems adaptive because for problems that seem relatively simple to solve, one might decide that actively solving the problem with one's

own resources would be most effective. One participant spoke about not feeling as though it would be effective to ask God to write her term papers when she was feeling stressed about a looming deadline—instead she simply employed problem-focused, active coping by sitting down and getting to work.

Religious coping to gain comfort and closeness to God. Religious coping methods also fulfill the need to gain comfort and closeness to God. Seeking God's love and care and trusting that He will be by one's side during times of stress and turmoil offers reassurance that one is not alone, that there is a caring force out there greater than oneself who is looking out for one's personal well-being (Pargament, 1997). As their stress levels increased, participants spoke of removing their focus from the stressor by engaging in religious activities in order to achieve a stronger connection with God. There was also talk about gaining closeness to God in the midst of stress by refocusing on the meaning of one's life and re-evaluating the relative minuteness of a particular stressor when compared to the big picture of God's purpose for them. Participants spoke of gaining comfort and closeness to God by looking for a stronger connection to Him through various types of religious coping including prayer, scripture recitation, songs of worship, and spiritual meditation, as well as seeking stronger spiritual connection with and learning from those in their faith communities.

Religious coping to gain an interrelated intimacy with God and others. Religion also functions to provide spiritual intimacy with God through

others sharing the same belief system and spiritual intimacy with others through a mutual closeness to God (Pargament et al., 2000). Within this function of religious coping, intimacy with God and others is intertwined. It is difficult to separate many of these methods that contribute to intimacy with others from the methods of cultivating intimacy with God (Buber, 1970). The participants discussed looking for spiritual support and guidance from both church clergy and from others within their church community as a method of religious coping within this framework. Some also spoke of praying with others in their Christian community. Strong emotional support from other close individuals is often stated as the most import means through which people cope with trying circumstances. Research has found that emotional support from others decreases the impact of the stressor, making it less likely for the individual to become significantly distressed (Turner, Frankel, & Levin, 1983). When it is coupled with the simultaneous feelings of spiritual connection to both another individual and to God, communal prayer is likely a very powerful and meaningful practice.

In addition, being involved in a religious community provides ample access to spiritually-based relationships. There is an association between the increased social support that is typically provided by the friendships generated and nurtured within one's religious community and personal well-being (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Spiritual and congregational supports are often associated with more favourable outcomes to stressful experiences (Pargament & Park, 1997).

One of the participants specifically spoke about the importance of receiving support from others, as well as providing it to others, in order to cope. Religious communities also provide other opportunities to facilitate greater intimacy with others and with God. For example, they provide a specific and deliberate forum to connect with God during formal worship services.

Religious communities also provide the opportunity to be involved through volunteering and making an active contribution to the church and extended social community (i.e., *religious helping*) (Pargament et al., 2000), which offers a sense of mastery, belonging, and personal worth in the eyes of God, themselves, and others in the community (Pargament & Maton, 2000). One participant spoke about how she makes use of religious helping (Pargament et al., 2000) to gain intimacy with others and closeness to God by praying for those clients for whom she feels most concerned. Approaching God in this manner helps her feel more connected to her clients and brings her a sense of calm and comfort when she finds herself worrying about them.

With all the church has to offer, there is no wonder why most of the participants in this study often spoke at length about their church community and all of the various resources they had access to when encountering trials and tribulations.

Religion in the search for meaning. Religion plays a central role in the search for meaning and provides explanations and interpretations when the

individual is faced with incomprehensible and uncontrollable life circumstances (Pargament, 1997). Religious forms of coping tend to be more helpful and accessed more consistently as challenging circumstances push people to the limits of their personal resources (Pargament, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2005). Benevolent religious reappraisal is a type of positive religious coping used to find meaning and transpires when the individual redefines the stressor through religion as benevolent and potentially beneficial (Pargament et al., 2000). Research has suggested an association between those who use benevolent religious reappraisals as a form of positive religious coping and positive affect, stress-related growth, spiritual growth, and self-esteem (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Although there was little mention of the stress experienced while in graduate school as pushing any of the participants to the limits of their personal resources, there was some talk about searching for meaning in situations that felt out of the individual's immediate control.

Religious coping to achieve a life transformation. The final key function of religious coping is to employ religious coping methods to achieve a major life transformation (Pargament et al., 2000). Religion has the ability to assist people in relinquishing old objects of value and replacing them with new sources of meaning (Pargament, 1997). This function of religious coping seemed to be the least relevant in the present study. However, one participant did speak about a more recent traumatic experience in her workplace shortly after

commencing her graduate studies that led her to God, which resulted in a life transformation. Prior to this traumatic experience she had not been in a close relationship with God. However, when she was faced with one of the most challenging situations of her life, she turned to God for answers and felt she received the comfort, care, and support she was looking for from Him.

      Debriefing the five key functions. From the sample used in this study all five of the key functions of religious coping were employed. Turning to God as a form of coping to (a) gain control, (b) to gain comfort and closeness to God, and (c) to gain an interrelated intimacy with God and others were the three functions described by the participants as being the most actively and consistently sought to curb the effects of graduate student stress. Religious coping (a) in the search for meaning and (b) to achieve a life transformation were rarely addressed in the participant interviews.

      This finding is perhaps unsurprising for several reasons. First, graduate school caused an increase in stress to greater and lesser degrees for different individuals at different stages throughout their progression through their academic program. At times, graduate school can be quite gruelling and even significantly taxing; however, it has yet to be identified in the research as a life experience that is traumatic or even that which pushes the individual to his or her absolute limits and makes a major life transformation seem necessary. Second, turning to religion to achieve a life transformation is more likely to transpire when the individual is

facing a major life event that calls for a type of radical intervention (e.g., looking for a new purpose in life, looking for a reason to live, or looking for a total spiritual reawakening) (Pargament et al., 2000). Third, turning to God in times of stress to find meaning is generally reserved for those more extreme circumstances likely to motivate the individual to ask the deep existential questions and then look to religion for answers (Pargament, 1997).

One unexpected finding from this study was the paucity of religious forms of coping when faced with the stress of completing course assignments. Perhaps because getting through papers and assigned readings could not be accomplished through prayer, Bible reading, or scripture recitation, these types of stressors demand an active, problem-focused coping method: actually making the time to sit down and get the work done. Prayer would do little when one is stressed about filling pages with text. That being said, keeping up with coursework is a significant source of stress in graduate school (Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Rocha-Singh, 1994), and thus contributes to the general feelings of stress that are likely to impact other areas of the individual's life that are more conducive to religious forms of coping. Higher life-stressors are associated with higher academic stress (Misra, Melanee, & Burant, 2003). The same may also be said about the reverse: When one is experiencing significant academic stress, one is likely also to experience a greater amount of life stress; the one is prone to compound the perception, experience, and intensity of the other. Another explanation for the

lack of religious coping in this particular domain is that some religiously committed individuals may not think to make use of potentially relevant components of their belief systems to cope with the stressors they feel they can handle on their own relatively easily, even though religious coping might prove to be quite helpful.

Research has suggested that religious individuals tend to make use of religious approaches to coping that reflect a secure relationship with God and those which offer a deep connection with the sacred (Pargament et al., 1999). The participants of this study confirmed this finding. Some of their coping methods were active, others were passive. Some were emotion-focused and others were problem-focused, and still others were a combination of the two. The two things they all had in common were that they were described as positive in nature and were reflected within the context of a close connection to God.

Not only can religion operate effectively as a means to achieve tension reduction (Pargament & Park, 1995) and a psychological adjustment to stress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005), but religious coping activities are also associated with more effective results than those achieved from nonreligious forms of coping (Pargament et al., 1990). Furthermore, the more central religion is within the individual's worldview and life orientation, the more likely he or she is to engage religious beliefs and practices in the coping process (Pargament & Park, 1995). Religious coping methods are not merely a matter of convenience nor are they

naively assessed as the only available option. They are accessed because they are

compelling, they make sense, they feel good (Pargament & Park, 1997), and they

work.

      Conclusion. The results of this study suggest that individuals need not be

required to use a specific religious practice in the coping process for specific

situations: religious coping is much more flexible than this. Individuals may want

to try out several strategies to decipher which work for them and which do not.

Doing so will likely result in creating a compilation of viable religious coping

methods to draw upon in times when one needs them most.

Limitations

      The data collected in this study were from a small group of individuals

using a qualitative research method. Qualitative inquiry is often a superior method

of gathering an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the motivations

perpetuating that behaviour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). However, as with any

research, the results are not always an accurate reflection of the subject being

explored by the researcher, but a reflection of how the questions posed to the

research participants are subjectively understood. Although common

interpretations of meaning are likely, they are not guaranteed. The qualitative

research method I used was thematic analysis. Because the researcher plays an

active role in identifying themes and/or patterns in the data, this research method

is limited in its objectivity. Those themes and/or patterns identified by the

researcher are often those of interest and those supporting or refuting his or her proposed research hypothesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Generalizability is not the intent of qualitative research; rather, its purpose is exploratory. As is generally expected in qualitative research, the sample size was small and the selection criteria outlined for participation included a specific and narrow categorization of Christianity. Even within the community of Evangelical Protestant Christians there is a wide range of particular theological beliefs, Biblical interpretations, and religious rituals and practices. Some Evangelicals are more conservative in their beliefs, practices, and worldviews while others may be more liberal. The participants in this study seemed to fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Therefore, this subgroup may not accurately represent all those who consider themselves Evangelical Protestant Christians. The results of this study would likely be quite different if the sample population was from a region of North America where individuals tend to be more conservative in their religious beliefs.

Furthermore, the participants in this study were all students at secular universities and were thus likely to experience some stressors that may not have been present had they been enrolled in the same program at a Christian institution (e.g., feeling antagonized when sharing thoughts and opinions through a Christian perspective). They were also not privy to the abundance of possible Christian peer support in their academic program those attending a Christian university would

have access to, and were thus more likely to make the extra effort to seek spiritual

support outside of school. It might be interesting to hear about the experiences of

those students enrolled in graduate programs at Christian institutions to determine

if there are any fundamental differences in their experience of stress and the

frequency or genre of religious forms of coping they use.

Additionally, all data were gathered through self-reports. The events and

experiences shared by the participants were recalled from memory. I did not

witness them first-hand, and thus all of the results rely on the accuracy of the

recollections of the participants. When using self-reports, all information shared is

based on what the participants recall in the moment and which memories may be

triggered by the way the interview questions are posed, the way they responded to

previous questions, or by those more recent experiences that may be more readily

recalled and shared. This could have led to some salient events or experiences

being excluded from this study. I attempted to address this by sharing the details

of this study and sharing a list of the typical forms of religious coping as

identified in the research before beginning the formal interview. Future research

of this nature may include providing a copy of the research questions to the

participants prior to their scheduled interview to allow them the time to reflect on

their experiences, and then share those they feel provide the most accurate

portrayal of their experiences, as opposed to being put on the spot.

Finally, although I strove to approach the data as objectively as possible, because at the time of the study I was an inside member of the identified participant group as an Evangelical Protestant Christian graduate student, I am aware that my biases, values, and worldview impacted both the collection and analysis of the data. I noticed when analysing the data there were sections of the interviews where I had not always been successful at ensuring the participants elaborated upon terms or ideas that may not have been clear to a more impartial researcher. I noticed at times that I took common, in-group terms and ideas (e.g., "Turning to God") at face value, where further prompting for elaboration and explanation may have offered more depth and meaning to the experiences the participants shared, and subsequently to the results of this research study. That being said, I also believe that my familiarity with both the experiences of these participants and the literature on this topic facilitated my ability to build rapport during the interviews and enhanced much of my understanding during the data analysis.

Implication for Graduate Training Institutions & Clinical Practice

Clearly, graduate school is stressful, and clearly the individuals in this study employed facets of their religious belief system when faced with a variety of stressful experiences including many of those associated with graduate school. When religion is a central component of one's worldview and general orientation in life, it is just that: central, and it will permeate various facets of a person's

experience. The implication here is for teaching modules included in graduate school specifically addressing coping with graduate student stress. Because of the effectiveness and prevalence of religious coping methods, especially for religious individuals, this form of coping must be included in presentations of information and subsequent class discussions. Additionally, by gaining further understanding into the religious dimensions of the coping process, university personnel will also be better prepared to support religious students while pursuing their graduate degrees.

As demonstrated through the results of this study, religious forms of coping are beneficial and effective for deeply religious individuals (Pargament, 1997). Religious people also use their beliefs to give meaning to many negative life experiences. Understanding their struggles in this way helps them to make sense of their difficulties and process through them effectively (Myleme, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001). Because such a large majority of North American individuals describe themselves as religious, it would be beneficial for Counselling Psychology graduate programs to teach students about religion and spirituality, and how they can include conversations about religious forms of coping with their clients where appropriate. This would also likely help build the relationship between therapist and client, because the client would see the therapist as treating and respecting his or her whole person: body, mind, and spirit. Also by including information about the importance and significance of

religion and spirituality for many, and the positive effects it often has on life satisfaction and personal well-being for the majority of those who ascribe to its tenets, perhaps other non-religious students and faculty members might become more accepting of this form of diversity.

Implications for Future Research

Relatively little research, aside from dissertation research, has been conducted on the particular stressors of graduate school. Of the research that has investigated graduate student stress and the subsequent coping methods accessed, in general, simply the terms "religion" or "spirituality" have been used to delineate this type of coping. This study has taken a closer look at the involvement of religion in the coping process within this context. Beyond describing first-hand experiences of the religious coping methods employed when faced with some components of graduate student stress, this research also shares how one might conceptualize the functions of religion in the coping process. It would be beneficial for future research to perform similar studies with a larger, more diverse group of students in order to generalise findings.

Future studies may also want to investigate religious and non-religious forms of coping with religious individuals. It might be interesting to see which ones graduate students use more often, which they feel are more effective, and what purposes the differing types of coping serve.

Studies investigating the subjective stressors experienced by graduate students attending Christian universities and how those individuals make use of components of their religion to cope with stress would also be an area for future research. It would be intriguing to compare results between students from secular and religious institutions. One question of interest might be this: Do graduate students attending faith-based institutions experience superior well-being because of the available support provided by others in their programs who share their beliefs?

It might also be intriguing to investigate those individuals who make scripture reading part of their daily practice to ascertain whether or not those individuals perceive, handle, or adjust to stress differently than those not making Bible reading part of their regular religious practice. As Carly stated:

> In the Bible it talks about how the Word should be our bread, like, it's our food. And I think how I see it is like, when you are not feeding your spirit it shrinks up. And so then if you get stressed, your spirit can't handle it as much cause it's not strong. But then if you feed it and you exercise it and you strengthen it, it grows and then it's strong, it can handle that.

I greatly enjoyed conducting this study. Because I was struggling in graduate school and regularly turning to God to help me through trying circumstances, I couldn't help wondering if others were doing the same. Additionally, after conducting ample research on stress and coping, I noticed I

often felt dissatisfied when "religion" and "spirituality" were not elaborated upon when listed within repertoires of effective coping methods. I was dissatisfied with the brevity and simplicity with which this deeply personal phenomenon was paid homage, and I wanted to understand what it all meant. It was exciting to be involved directly in discovering in great detail the first-hand experiences of what it is to bring God into one's personal coping process.

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Appendix A: Letter of Introduction

Dear [Appropriate individual who has the authority to give me permission for the following; i.e., Department Head, Program Director],

I am writing this letter to introduce myself and invite your support by allowing me to advertise to recruit participants within your department at [appropriate institution here] for conducting research regarding religious coping in Christian graduate students. I am a second year Master of Arts Counselling Psychology student at the Adler School of Professional Psychology. This study is part of my thesis project to partially fulfill the requirements for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Kathleen Irvine.

I am conducting a qualitative study into graduate student stress and religious coping with Evangelical Christian graduate students. With your permission, I would like to advertise to counselling psychology graduate students who feel that their faith is an integral component in their lives. [This study has been approved by the Ethics Review Board at the Adler School of Professional Psychology].

Specifically, I am looking for five to six students willing to participate in one audio recorded interview, approximately 60 minutes in length. I am interested in exploring what students believe are the most stressful components of being a graduate student and particularly what religious coping methods they access to

alleviate their distress, and when and under what particular circumstances they are most likely to employ these coping methods.

I am wondering if I would be able to post a request for participation advertisement in the department and/or give a brief presentation to graduate classes including an overview of the study and request that students contact me if they are interested in participating, or to learn more about the study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions. Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Julia K. Mah

MA Student

Adler School of Professional Psychology

[email address]

[telephone number]

Appendix B: Advertisement for Participant Recruitment

Request for Student Participation in a Research Study

Topic:

A Qualitative Inquiry into Graduate Student Stress and Religious Coping

Details:

      I am a Counselling Psychology graduate student at the Adler School of

Professional Psychology, and I am performing my master's thesis research study

about the stress associated with graduate school and how and when Evangelical

Christian graduate students access components of their religion and spirituality to

help them cope with this type of stress. I am looking for participants to interview

regarding the components of graduate school they have found stressful and why,

how, and when they turn to components of their religion as a means to cope. All

participation is strictly voluntary.

      The American Psychological Association has identified the role religion

and spirituality play in the everyday aspects of an individual's life as requiring

more research as this is an important form of human diversity. More specifically,

the identification of specific religious and spiritually based methods individuals

use to cope with difficulties in life are of particular interest in the psychology

community because of the lack of current research on the topic.

Inclusion Criteria:

If you identify yourself as an Evangelical Protestant Christian whose faith

is an integral part of both your life and your general orientation in the world, and

you are also a Counselling Psychology graduate student currently enrolled in

academic courses either full-time or part-time, please join me in sharing your

valuable contribution to this important area of research.

Participation Requirements:

One interview up to 60 minutes in length at a mutually agreed upon

confidential meeting place that is convenient for you (e.g., a library study room).

Time and date will be arranged with you in advance.

Confidentiality:

Your participation in this study will be kept entirely confidential and the

responses you give will be kept anonymous. All participation is strictly voluntary,

and your identity will remain confidential except to myself, the researcher. The

interview will be recorded on an audio recording device. After the audio

recording of the interview, the data will be transcribed verbatim by either myself,

the researcher, or a third-party transcriptionist; however, all identifying

information will be removed and/or altered to ensure confidentiality.

Please contact: Julia Mah

Thank you for your interest!

Appendix C: Confirmation of Inclusion Criteria

Questions to ask all interested participants:

1. Do you identify yourself as an Evangelical Protestant Christian whose faith is an integral part of both your life and your general orientation in the world?

2. Are you are also a Counselling Psychology graduate student currently enrolled in academic courses either full-time or part-time?

3. Are you able to conduct a face-to-face interview in spoken English? If yes: A mutually agreed upon meeting time and place to conduct the interview will be established. If no: The researcher will thank them for their willingness to participate and tell them that unfortunately they do not meet all of the inclusion criteria to participate in this study.

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Introduction and explanation of study to participant

Review purpose of study

Review consent form

Participant sign consent form

Participant to fill out demographic information form

Interview

Research questions

Final question

Review interview content

Summarize interview

Clarify any mistakes or misunderstandings

Address any comments, questions, or concerns of participant

Ask participant if he or she has any comments, questions, or concerns

Check in with participant to ensure he or she is not feeling any distress and provide him or her with counselling referrals if necessary

Thank participant for his or her contribution

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Study Name: A Qualitative Inquiry into Graduate Student Stress and Religious

Coping

Student Researcher: Julia Mah

Supervisor: Dr. Kathleen Irvine

Purpose of the Research: Julia K. Mah, MA counselling psychology

student, is conducting a study as part of a master's thesis entitled "A Qualitative

Study into Graduate Student Stress and Religious Coping" to explore the religious

coping methods Christian counselling psychology students access.

Participation Requirements: Your participation will include your written

completion of a demographic information form and participating in one audio-

recorded interview up to 60 minutes in length regarding stress, coping, and

graduate school.

Risks and Discomforts: There is the possibility that talking about the stress

associated with graduate school could be somewhat distressing; however, the risk

is minimal because the interview questions are not designed to explore traumatic

experiences. In the unlikely event that you experience significant distress during

or following the interview please inform the researcher.

Benefits to You and Benefits of the Research: You may benefit from this

study by experiencing increased insight and self-understanding as a result of

having the opportunity to talk about, explore, and share some of your emotions,

thoughts, and experiences. Your participation will also be helpful in contributing

to the relatively unexplored topic of religion and spirituality in the lives of

graduate students. The results of this study will be made available to you upon

request after its completion.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely

voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time for any reason.

You also have the option to withdraw your contribution without consequence

after the interview by contacting the researcher.

Confidentiality: Any and all information you provide during the course of

this study will be recorded and stored in such a way as to protect your identity and

be kept strictly confidential. Only myself, the researcher, will know your identity.

After the audio recording of the interview, the data will be transcribed verbatim

by either myself, the researcher, or a third-party transcriptionist; however, all

identifying information will be removed and/or altered to ensure confidentiality.

Your name or other identifying information will not appear in any report or

publication of the research. All documents related to this study will be stored in a

locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. Raw data may be reviewed by

the researcher's supervisor; however, all identifying information will be removed.

Once completed, this thesis project will be available at the Adler School library.

If you have any questions regarding this research study, any tasks you are

asked to complete, or your rights as a research participant you may contact Julia

Mah or Dr. Kathleen Irvine. This research has been approved by the research

ethics board at The Adler School of Professional Psychology and conforms to the

standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have

any concerns about your treatment before, during or after the interview please

contact The Adler School of Professional Psychology's Chair of the Research

Ethics Board, Dr. Debbie Clelland.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

    I _____ (your name), consent to participate in A

Qualitative Inquiry into Graduate Student Stress and Religious Coping conducted

by Julia Mah. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate.

My signature below indicates my consent and that I have received a copy of this

form.

_____   _____

Participant   Date

_____   _____

Principal Investigator   Date

Appendix F: Demographic Information

Sex: Male   Female   Other

Date of Birth: _____

Relationship Status (married, single, divorced, co-habitation, dating, etc.):
_____

Number of Children: _____

Ages of Children: _____

Student Status: Full time   Part time

Year/Semester in graduate program: _____

Number of completed program credits: _____ out of _____ required
to complete

Are you employed in addition to being a graduate student? Yes/No

If employed, what is your current
occupation?_____

If employed, how many hours a week do you work? _____

Denominational Affiliation: _____

How would you rate the overall importance of your religion/faith in your life right
now?

Not important   Fairly important   Very important

Appendix G: Interview Questions

General Stress Questions:

How has your involvement in graduate school affected your personal life?

What has the impact been on you? Did the impact vary from year to year

or remain fairly constant?

What does stress mean to you?

Stressors within the Academic Program:

Which general components of graduate school have you found most
stressful? Why?

Which particular events or experiences have caused you to feel most
stressed?

Religious Coping Questions:

How often do you turn to God or religion when you are facing stress

associated with graduate school?

What religious coping methods or practices have you used in the past to

cope with this stress?

Which specific religious coping methods do you use more often than

others?

Tell me about any particular religious coping methods you use for

particular situations.

What leads you to choose religious coping methods over other non-

religious forms of coping?

How do you know if a particular religious coping method has been effective?

Under which specific stressful circumstances are you more likely to turn to God in some form of religious coping?

If your relationship with God has changed since you began graduate school, how?

Final Question:

Is there anything else you would like to add?