

**“I will get this degree”: An exploration of the  
motivations and coping skills of mature female  
postgraduate psychology graduates.**

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Masters Research Report

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**Abstract**

This research study explored the dimensions of motivation that may exist for mature psychology graduates when completing their postgraduate degree. And because it is widely acknowledged that stress is often a close companion to motivation, specifically in the pursuit of academic goals, the study also investigated those aspects of coping skills these individuals employed to sustain their motivation in completing their studies. Eight mature female psychology postgraduates from four different South African public universities were identified using a non probability sampling technique. Semi structured interviews were then carried out with the eight participants; the interviews were then transcribed and analysed using content analysis. The results of the study indicated that self efficacy; intrinsic motivation, attribution and achievement goals all play a role in the students' motivation. It further indentified perseverance as an important factor in the students' completion of their studies. Positive beliefs, problem solving strategies and social support appeared to be the most widely used coping skills by this sample.

**Declaration**

I \_\_\_\_\_ know and accept that plagiarism is wrong.

Therefore I declare that:

- The research report is my own work.
- I correctly acknowledged all direct quotations and paraphrased ideas/content. In addition I have provided a complete alphabetised reference list.
- I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is proof that this is not my own unaided work, or that I failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Acknowledgements

To my parents, George and Pam de Freitas who taught me the value of hard work and perseverance, their unwavering love and support sustain me always.

My brother, George whose honesty and humour inspires daily.

To my incredible extended family and friends, their wisdom, courage and strength make me strive to be the best me.

To Professor Kate Cockroft and Professor Garth Stevens, who provided me with the opportunity and resources to complete this degree.

To my supervisor, Noleen Pillay whose kindness, insight and encouragement taught me not only about research but a great deal about life too – I am very grateful.

Dedicated to the memory of Tonia Luisa Farinha, she believed in me long before I did.

“All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realisation everyone else appears to have been born with: that I am nobody but myself.”

Ralph Ellison, "Battle Royal"

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### ***1.1 Research Rationale***

Research into the experiences of mature students have been minimal in the higher education field, in comparison to the abundance of studies which have been more interested in students' academic performance (Richardson, 1994). Walters (2000) echoed a similar concern for mature students, who are first time entrants to full-time higher education; consequently she chose to examine their experience through the higher education sector especially focusing on their motivations, expectations and outcomes. Smith (2008) notes the core definition of mature students is that they are at least over 21 years of age at the start of their academic year. She describes mature students further as also being individuals who have gained considerable experience in the work place or home setting who are often considered nontraditional students by their educational institutions (Smith, 2008).

The National Commission on Higher Education (1996) noted that a challenge of the higher education system is to move in the direction of becoming an open learning system, organised for use by learners at different times, in different ways and for different purposes at various stages of their lives and careers. Walters (1999) points out that university education as a whole has largely been aimed at school leavers, but the commitment to lifelong learning has made the provision of learning to mature students of greater concern. Johnson and Robson (1999) point out that it is no easy decision for mature female students to return to the university environment and that their decision to do so usually indicates a time of change for them with consequences of a

psychological nature. Due to this dynamic period in their lives, it might mean that their motivation during the degree may be somewhat inconsistent and lack of motivation may mean not completing the studies they have embarked on.

It is noted by Walters (2000) that for whatever reasons mature students, like other students, have for partaking in education, they will bring to their studies their emotions, expectations and personal experience. She also discovered through the analysis of her data that mature students' assessment of their experience of higher education could be influenced by their motivations, expectations and outcomes and that while for most the result is positive, the process involved pain and loss and had a greater emotional impact than anticipated. There are also challenges facing mature students, which younger students may not face. Richardson (1994) found it important to point out that mature students are more likely to have a great number of non-academic responsibilities such as family and work in addition to their studying. This increase in work load and time pressures act as potential stressors together with having been away from a learning environment may result in a challenging first year of their studies.

Furthermore it is noted by Graham and Taylor (2002) that there is mixed empirical literature supporting the notion that females are more vulnerable to motivational deficits than males. The argument is that gender-role socialisation and stereotypes lead girls to question their academic competence more, which leads to them exhibiting more maladaptive reactions to failure, including low ability attributions, to identify more barriers to success and experience more conflict between individual achievement strivings and social conformity. Due to these findings, this study chose to focus on the mature female student.

In focusing on the mature female students, there has been a suggestion by Smith (1993) that most studies looking at women and higher education have been conducted using quantitative methodologies and that this has led to women's experiences being minimised and their voices being quietened. It is from this point of reference that this study has employed a qualitative methodology to explore this topic. Heenen (2002) argues that despite research starting to address the issue of gender and inequality in higher education; it is still a somewhat under-researched area.

It was established by Heenen (2002) that financial reliance on others is a major aspect underlying many of the problems encountered by women attempting to return to study and remains a noteworthy feature when coming to a decision about whether or not to continue with their studies. Lister (1996) noted that those women with part time work before or during their studies also struggle because part time work hardly ever supplies women with adequate income to achieve actual autonomy. According to Heenen (2002) this often means that the realities linked to going back to studying will often mean that it is not a viable option, because most students encounter financial difficulties in enrolling at a university, and this is especially true for women dependant on others for support.

Leder and Forgasz (2004) discovered that the major motivations for mature students returning to university included fulfilling their degree or qualification ambitions, career advancement, expected financial gain or for personal interest. The study also exposed varied pressures in students' daily lives that might impact on their studies. As a result of the lack of research on the

experiences of mature students in postgraduate studies, as well as the potential stressors that female students face, it is crucial to explore how this group of individual's cope and manage to remain motivated in achieving postgraduate qualifications.

### ***1.2 Research Questions***

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How do the dimensions of motivation play a role in influencing mature female psychology graduates in completing their postgraduate degree?
2. How do mature female students cope with stressors when managing their motivation?

### ***1.3 Research Design***

In order to investigate the above mentioned research questions the study employed a qualitative design; where participants were interviewed using a semi structured interview. These interviews were then transcribed and the data was analysed using thematic content analysis.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

This research seeks to explore the dimensions of motivation that may exist for psychology graduates when completing their postgraduate degree. Further it is not uncommon to find stress as a close companion to motivation, especially in the pursuit of academic goals, and therefore this study will also investigate which aspects of coping individuals employed to sustain their motivation in completing their studies.

#### ***2.1 Mature Students and Higher Education***

The National Plan (2001) noted that it was necessary to increase the potential pool of recruits for higher education; it suggested that recruitment be done amongst non-traditional students like workers, mature learners, and in particular women, and the disabled. This important policy goal was originally indicated in the White Paper and was then approved by the Council on Higher Education. In an address by Kader Asmal (2001) he reiterated the Ministry of Education's commitment to engaging in steps at both national and institutional level to address the participation inefficiencies in higher education by stating intent to draw a significant number of mature students back into higher education. This relates to the ministry's long term goal of increased overall participation, but also serves the short term goal of providing graduates to fill the demanding level of professional skills that are currently required in the labour market.

The Education White Paper (1997) views higher education as playing a central role in the social, cultural and economic development of a modern society like South Africa. It states that higher

education requires the creation of individuals with globally equivalent skills, and who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation. For this to begin, the Department of Education sees higher education institutions as needing to increase and broaden individual participation as well as generate new curricula and flexible models of learning and teaching to accommodate a larger and more diverse student population. (Ministry of Education, 2001). The Education White Paper (1997) further notes that transformation of the higher education system is necessary in order to redress past inequalities, serve the new social order, and meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities.

It is the view of McInnis (2001) that with any expansion of participation in higher education comes with the issue of increasing diversity in the student population. He hopes that the participation increases in higher education will generate more scholarly research on teaching, learning and assessment in higher education and more institutional research aimed at monitoring performance in the face of market competition for students and more detailed evaluations to meet quality assurance requirements (McInnis, 2001). Richardson (1994) argues that students who are 25 years old and above qualify as mature students. The best practice delivery model of a master's in psychology is demanding in terms of academics, emotional involvement and time. The mature female students enrolled in this course would more likely have to compromise their needs and schedule and fit in with the demands of the course as opposed to the course being flexible for them.

Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) suggested that mature students are more likely to endure feelings of inadequacy about their perceived deficiency of academic expertise; they are more inclined to experience self doubt and a lack of confidence. Also, as Whaley (2000) indicated females are inhibited by both internal and external barriers. Internal barriers might include restricted desires, imaginings and prospects, whilst external barriers might include economic and structural constraints. Three key reasons for women not progressing in higher education as identified by Heenan (2002) included caring responsibilities, economic limitations and poor career guidance. It is also important to remember, as noted by Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002) that the mature student's decision to come back to higher education is incredibly complex, as it might be related to the advancement of their career and better salaries or just to an appreciation for further academic learning. But whatever the reasons for their return to studying these authors asserted that despite the motivation of mature students to re-engage with their studies, other issues also impacted greatly on their decision to follow through with applying these issues of mature students focused on varied life roles, study costs, time etc.

Once registered though, Barna (2000) asserts that students are mainly motivated by their aspiration to accomplish academically and are ready to make the necessary sacrifices to do so, but that it should be noted that this process does not occur easily and most often is accompanied by a substantial amount of stress. Thomas, Clarke and Lavery (2003) found that household issues, economic pressures and family responsibilities can add significantly to the pressure experienced by students. A number of key themes that help clarify the contending forces in students' lives were identified by Tolhurst and Stewart (2004), they included the place of family,

culture in the student's life, financial demands and employment, logistical and travel concerns, student's readiness for university and matters regarding university infrastructures and resources.

Interestingly whilst researching adult students, Hanson (1998) discovered that adult students were:

“prepared to suspend their adulthood at the door of the institution and only too willing to submit themselves to its constraints” (p. 103).

Although Young (2000) revealed that students with a higher self esteem had a far more encouraging outlook on being assessed and receiving critical feedback from their lecturers. And as Boud (1995) reminds us lecturers often disregard the full degree to which students experience them as influential and controlling with regards to their studies. Young (2000) goes further and explains that one of the most significant and possibly precarious areas of students' feelings about critical feedback are the amount to which it influences their identity as individuals, as at times the division between critical feedback on a student's work that they have produced and them as an individual is not clear enough.

In their study, Murphy and Roopchand (2003) found that mature students exhibited higher levels of intrinsic motivation towards learning, their explanation for this was that these students had developed a well defined point of view on the function of their education purely through the gathering of life experience. Their research also found that as soon as mature students see themselves achieving well academically, their self esteem and intrinsic motivation increase and

they continue performing. Although Merrill (1999) comments on the life-changing nature of university for mature students in particular:

“Spending time as a mature student marked a period of transition in participants’ lives. They all changed their behaviour, values and attitudes to differing degrees; some more than others. The self was redefined and reconstructed. They could not go back totally to the person they were before entering university.” (p183)

## ***2.2 Postgraduate Psychology***

According to Trinder (2002):

“at this time psychology is an integral part of many students' education. The popularity of psychology appears to be a consequence of four major factors: its intrinsic interest; its perceived relevance to life in modern society; its role as a helping profession; and its utility in the job market” (p91).

Gaining entry into both professional and research psychology postgraduate programmes is incredibly competitive and that most students need to endure a rigorous selection process, including academic performance and personal interviews (Trinder, 2002).

A master’s degree in psychology ensures that students gain in-depth knowledge of major paradigms, principles, methods, and theories of psychology and human behaviour. Students are provided with a solid grounding in the academic theory underpinning the main concepts of the

field of Psychology. The curriculum includes a significant experiential component, culminating in a 12 month internship, which forms part of the final year curriculum. Applicants with either an honour's in psychology or a Bachelor of Psychology qualification may be admitted into a masters degree in psychology.

Students qualify for counselling psychologist accreditation if they have completed the masters degree in psychology, completed their 12 month internship (after completion of the academic component of the degree) in the Republic of South Africa at an institution under the supervision of a senior psychologist, registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). The duration of the internship is 12 months full-time. Meeting these two criteria will enable an individual to write the National Board of Psychology's Examination for Counselling Psychologists. The student must pass with at least a 70% and then after passing the examination the individual will then have to apply for registration to practice as a Counselling Psychologist in the category independent or private practice, within the provisions determined by the HPCSA.

The HPCSA requires that registered psychologists are able to correctly identify, assess, diagnose and intervene with people experiencing life difficulties, particularly those suffering from serious psychological distress or psychopathology. One of their key tasks is to perform cognitive, personality, emotional and neuropsychological functioning assessments as well as to apply appropriate psychological interventions to people with psychological and psychiatric concerns. Training and supervision roles are also essential, also having a thorough knowledge of professional ethics and the appropriate legislation. Lastly registered psychologists have to design, manage, conduct and report psychological research.

Professional postgraduate training in psychology is intended to furnish students with the skills needed to perform within a range of applied settings (Trinder, 2002). Trinder (2002) further explains that most postgraduate programmes consists of a blend of proper lecturers, practicum training in the form of internships and the completion of a research thesis, with the content varying according to the particular course's specialisation area.

Neumarkt (2005) suggests two explanations for engaging in studying psychology:

“one is to practice or teach it, the other reason is for self knowledge” (p29).

He further clarifies that the core of psychology is to understand oneself, because one must initially build up a consciousness of one's own mental state in order to successfully function in one's own life and as part of the broader community and then one can look towards understanding others and their undertakings.

It can be noted from the discussion above that a postgraduate psychology degree is a challenging course which requires not only that the student successfully complete the academic and research components but they effectively negotiate their practical internship where they are required to develop into professionals who can fully integrate theory and praxis. Due to the varied demands this course presents it would appear that a student would need to be very motivated to complete this degree timeously and with a measure of success.

### ***2.3 Motivation***

Various definitions exist for understanding motivation, according Covington (1992) as a theoretical construct, motivation explicates initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of goal directed behaviour. Murphy and Roopchand (2004) clarify further that motivation can be viewed as either an internal requirement to accomplish and develop understanding and skills or it is a creation of external circumstances and causes.

One of the most commonly linked concepts with motivation is self efficacy. Bandura's (1994) Self-Efficacy theory proposes that perceived self-efficacy is people's beliefs about their abilities to produce particular levels of performance that hold sway over events that impact their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs establish how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves and behave, and has been the basis to the most popular theories of motivation. Self efficacy is a very important area in the study of motivation and therefore it is an area of interest for this study as it is a component whose impact on students' motivation which should be carefully considered and understood as it has been found that students with high self-efficacy tend to perform better in a learning context, due to greater persistence levels and their ability to find alternative types of actions after an initial failure (Martin, 2002).

Chemers, Hu & Garcia (2001) adds that the impact of self efficacy on academic success relies on two factors, namely the heightened use of certain cognitive actions and the constructive influence

of self efficacy beliefs on the wider classes of metacognitive skills and coping strategies. Margolis and McCabe (2003) found that for students to significantly get involved in their studies and learning for the required period of time they need adequate self efficacy. Although Bandura's contribution of self-efficacy theory was significant, aspects relating to locus of control theories are also important. This subsequent approach operates on the premise that when an individual feels in control of their respective accomplishments or failures, this determines the level of their success expectancy (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

In their study, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) point out that despite the fact that individuals are aware that they have the ability to perform a task, they may have no pressing reason to do so. This question of why do individuals engage in certain actions is the concern for Intrinsic Motivation theories. The main theory from this perspective is the Self-Determination theory of Deci and Ryan (1995), which suggests that individuals have a fundamental need to be proficient, and so they vigorously search for and engage in activities that inspire and challenge them. In addition, it is only when individuals feel capable and independent that intrinsic motivation is maintained (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Beffa-Negrini, Cohen, and Miller (2002) see motivation as a multifaceted and complex psychological attribute, often classified as extrinsic (coming from outside the student and focused on grades) or intrinsic (genuine interest in learning originating from within).

These authors' is that intrinsically motivated students have several strengths. Intrinsic motivation is able to sustain desirable learning behaviours when external reinforcement is not available. Beffa-Negrini et al (2002) cite Stipek (1993) as stating that intrinsically motivated students show

higher conceptual understanding, demonstrate more creative thinking, are persistent, focused on the task at hand, using active problem solving and risk taking. Stipek also found that intrinsically motivated students are more involved emotionally and derive greater pleasure from learning (1993, in Beffa-Negrini et al). Gottfried, Fleming and Gottfried (2001) view intrinsic motivation in an academic setting being concerned with factors like enjoyment of the learning context, development of mastery, persistence and engaging in new and challenging learning tasks.

Attribution theory followed, and according to Martin (2002) in this theory it is the origin that individuals ascribe to situations or events that influences future behaviour. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) view attribution theory as linking expectancy with value constructs. Another view on motivation is discussed in the Self-Worth theory. Eccles & Wigfield (2002) discuss Covington's Self-Worth theory which argues that an individual motive for self worth was the inclination to create a positive image and consistently maintain it. Martin (2002) notes that from this perspective students may be viewed in light of their motivation to either move toward success or to keep away from failure, consistent with the self worth theory as it might help for an individual to protect their self image by promoting their academic success. The connection between the causal attributions a person makes and their motivation for achievement was emphasised in Weiner's (1985) attribution theory. An essential belief of this theory is that how an individual elucidates and assesses their achievement results is what will establish their future motivation to achieve and excel further.

Weiner (1985) further discussed how a person will look for the perceived causes of situations and how the causal attributions they make will then form major motivational perspectives, and it

was these causal attributions he believed would be the impetus behind their ensuing achievement. Furthermore, it was noted that ability and effort are considered to be the most frequently used attributions and that task difficulty, luck and interest were also considered central achievement attributions (Weiner, 1985)

This study is concerned with what motivates mature students to continue with their postgraduate studies to completion. Thus was important for the study to consider all of the above concepts and findings in consideration of a theoretical framework for this study.

Furthermore, the social cognitive model of motivation that forms the foundation of this study's theoretical framework is concerned with the link between motivation and cognition and with how motivation is interpreted into regulated behaviour (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). It is this perspective that will form the theoretical basis for this research study as it considers all the concepts and findings that were mentioned previously.

A main assumption of social cognitive models of motivations is that motivation is a multifaceted and dynamic occurrence that is situation, context or domain specific. Pintrich and Linnenbrink (2002) therefore believe that students can be motivated in various ways depending on the situation they are in, instead of being either "motivated" or "not motivated". Another assumption these authors highlight involves the role of cognition motivation, where an individual's thoughts play a major role in mediating their participation and resulting achievement.

Student motivation is seen by Pintrich and Linnenbrink (2002) as comprising of four components, namely academic self-efficacy, attributions, intrinsic motivation, and achievement goals, all of which represent the latest social cognitive motivational theory. The following discussion expands the underlying theory of each of these components which make up the social cognitive approach to motivation more fully.

Pintrich and Linnenbrink (2002) cite Bandura (1997) as referring to self-efficacy as the belief an individual has about their ability to perform on a specific task or in a specific context. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) draw attention to the belief Bandura (1997) held about a person's efficacy expectations being a main determinant of how they set goals, their choice of activity, readiness to spend effort and persistence.

In his discussion of attribution theory Weiner (1986) put forward that when a failure or success occurs, individuals will investigate the circumstances to determine the perceived source of either the failure or the success. The research on attributions generally advocates that for any type of success it is more useful for individuals to attribute their success to stable, internal factors such as ability, or skill as these factors would be seen as being present for future tasks. Weiner (1986) goes on to discuss that although attribution theory does not suggest a direct link to academic success, but says that indirect links are made via other processes. These include higher expectancies for success, better academic self-efficacy, and positive affect like pride or hopefulness, which are consequently linked to the individual's engagement with their studies, study skills and real achievement.

Within social-cognitive models of motivation, the notion of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation is common and Pintrich and Linnenbrink (2002) therefore have included it as an academic enabler. These authors consider intrinsic motivation as being a predictor for the continued success of students. In their article, Ryan & La Guardia (1999) define intrinsic motivation according to the self determination theory of Deci & Ryan (1995). From this perspective, intrinsic motivation is the natural tendency to exercise one's aptitudes, discover and learn about new ideas, and at the same time finding inherent enjoyment in doing so.

Finally, achievement goal theory plays an important role in student motivation. Pintrich and Linnenbrink (2002) highlight two general goal orientations involved when an individual approaches or interacts with a task. They refer to them as mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals help to familiarise students to build up new skills, improve their competence levels and to acquire confidence about their new knowledge, whilst performance goals help students to concentrate on what they are capable of and their self-worth, to determine their ability by outperforming others. Mastery goals have been positively linked to school learning and other academic enablers like study skills and engagement. Increasingly research has found evidence that performance goals are linked to academic achievement. This, one can imagine how stressful circumstances may become when performance goals do not necessarily lead to academic achievement. It is important to look at how females cope with all types of stressors when attempting to achieve scholarly success.

## *2.4 Coping Skills*

There are especially significant changes for a student returning to study at university not least of which are the unexpected demands of the academic learning environment. It was found by Aspinwall & Taylor (1992) that whilst it was unavoidable for the beginning students to avoid stressors, their ability to cope with the varied demands would contribute to their success at university. Stress is understood by Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen and DeLongis (1986) as an association between an individual and the situation that is being evaluated by the individual as being beyond his or her capabilities to manage.

In the past coping concepts were consequences of two different perspectives, the tradition of animal experimentation and from psychoanalytic ego psychology. In the former perspective, coping is viewed as the ability of an individual to respond to lowering tension in dangerous surroundings by using learned behavioural responses. This perspective was thought to minimise the complexity of coping, which the psychoanalytic ego model addressed with their emphasis on the individual's perception and understanding of their relationship with the world around them. From this viewpoint, behaviour was not disregarded completely, as the focus only shifted to the individual's cognition and traits (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus, a key researcher in the field, (1966) argued that stress consists of three processes, the first of which is primary appraisal where one perceives a threat to oneself. This is followed by secondary appraisal which attempts to think of a probable response to the identified threat and

finally coping, where one puts that response into action. Whilst these processes are described in a linear fashion, Lazarus (1966) points out that they may not occur in the same way. Instead the outcome of one process may resume an earlier process. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) made the distinction between two general types of coping, problem-focused coping and emotion- focused coping.

Problem-focused coping is directed at doing something to modify the cause of the stress whilst emotion-focused coping is directed at altering or managing the emotional anguish associated with the situation. Even though distress elicits both types of coping, problem-focused coping tends to dominate when people feel that something beneficial can be done, whereas emotion-focused coping tends to outweigh problem-focused coping when people feel that the stressor is something that must be endured (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Folkman et al (1986) put forward that problem focused forms of coping could include forceful interpersonal efforts to modify the state of affairs as well as calm, coherent and purposeful efforts to problem solve. Whilst they proposed that emotion focused forms of coping might include separation, self controlling, going in search of social support, escapism, admitting accountability and constructive reappraisal of the situation.

This was explored further by Folkman et al (1986) where they indicated that cognitive appraisal by an individual is a process whereby they appraise a specific occurrence in their environment that is relevant to their security and comfort and in what way the individual does this appraisal. They indicated two types of cognitive appraisal, namely primary and secondary appraisal. During primary appraisal the individual will assess whether or not he or she has anything at risk

in the situation, is their possible benefit or harm. Folkman et al (1986) discovered that a series of personality traits which included values, commitments, goals and beliefs about oneself and the world helped to describe the likelihood that the individual would recognise as being important to their comfort and safety in specific stressful dealings and situations. Following from this is secondary appraisal, where the individual reviews what, if anything can be completed to conquer or avert damage or to advance the projected benefits. Folkman et al (1986) found that an assortment of coping alternatives are considered for example attempting to change the situation, accommodating it, looking for more information or refraining from impulsive action. Although, as Carver, Weintraub and Scheier (1989) caution us, it is essential to remember all the pattern of coping a specific stressor will bring out from a particular individual is determined by numerous variables and it is key to bear this complexity in mind when considering coping.

As research into coping continued, the view of coping as being trait-oriented shifted to being process-oriented. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as:

“constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” (p141)

The process position is interested in three key points and that is what are the individual's actual cognitions and behaviours, in which contexts do these cognitions and behaviours appear and that the coping process means communicating about change in coping cognitions and behaviours as a demanding situation occurs. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) established a well-accepted

conceptualisation of coping as an ongoing process that is highly specific to the nature of the stressors involved. This conceptualisation suggests that there is no single set of coping responses that are always adaptive and that any examination of coping is highly dependent upon the stressors involved which means that the sample being studied would develop their own coping strategies based on their unique set of circumstances and demands. Whilst it is not possible to cite all of the skills individuals use to cope with the innumerable demands and tensions in their lives, Lazarus & Folkman (1984) name the most important categories of resources that are used. The categories are health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills, social skills, social support and material resources.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) health and energy are among the most all-encompassing resources individuals use as they are pertinent to coping in many if not all stress filled situation. A person who is ill, weak, worn-out or otherwise incapacitated has a smaller amount of energy to apply on coping than a fit, healthy person. Although they suggest that individuals are capable of coping astonishingly well regardless of reduced wellbeing and exhausted energy, they remind us that it is certainly easier to manage coping efforts when feeling our best.

Also regarded by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as an imperative coping resource is having positive beliefs about oneself, here they include those wide-ranging and precise beliefs that function as a foundation for hope in an individual which in turn upholds their coping efforts despite the most difficult and unpleasant circumstances. Their discussion goes on to further indicate that hope can be further supported by the notion that the outcome of the difficult

circumstances faced by the individual are controllable in some way and that the individual has it within their power to influence the outcome. It must be noted though that not all beliefs are useful to coping efforts, negative beliefs can actually restrain and hinder coping.

Problem solving skills is seen by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to be the capacity to consider and look for knowledge, scrutinise a set of circumstances in order to make out the dilemma so that the individual can produce other options or different courses of action. It is at this point that the individual reflects on these other options and considers them in terms of the preferred or expected outcomes and then decides on and executes the most suitable option. They continue their discussion of coping resources by talking about social skills which they indicate is an individual's skill to converse and behave with those around them in a manner which is not only appropriate to the situation but also effective. This is because it is these social skills which assist the individual in coming up with solutions in combination with the people around them, and the better their skills the better the chances that they will be able to recruit the support of others. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) dedicate a great deal of discussion to social support and how having a support system which gives an individual either emotional, financial or informational support is key to the coping process. They also show how those with more material resources usually cope more effectively than those without.

Recent research into coping suggests that adaptive coping would include actions aimed towards the stressful event as well as escaping from it, as noted by Patry, Blanchard and Mask (2007) that the interaction connecting problem-focused coping strategies like organising and planning as well as emotion-focused coping strategies such as distraction and support seeking has a

synergistic outcome. Their collective effects augment the coping process. It is important to note that distraction is poles apart from avoidance, Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen & Saltzman (2000) indicate that whilst distraction and avoidance involve an individual separating out from a stressful event, distraction means that the individual is directing attention towards actions that have a more positive leaning for example reading or listening to music.

It is essential for students to think positively about their studies. In a study by Struthers, Perry and Menec (2000), it was found that numerous students experience negative situations and suffer distress, but those that if they think that they have the capability to cope effectively they become motivated to attain their goals. This is in accordance with the conclusions of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that positive experiences exemplified by positive feelings help individuals cope more effectively by providing them with the option to escape stressful events for a small amount of time and also to experience happiness, which in turns helps restore exhausted resources allowing them to preserve their original problem focused coping efforts.

According to Connor-Smith et al (2000) leisure seems to perform most regularly as an emotion-focused coping strategy as it provides individuals with the option to decrease stress using recreation, distraction, and freedom., which in turn enhances problem focused coping responses and they found the amalgamation of problem-focused coping along with a transitory distraction an adaptive style of coping strategy for individuals faced with challenging events. Although it should be noted that research has found that the type of the stress can draw forth different patterns of coping strategies. The preference and efficiency of coping strategies depends greatly on how the individual assess the stressful situation, is it seen as potentially controllable like

planning for an assignment or an uncontrollable event like illness (Connor-Smith et al, 2000). The Struthers, Perry and Menec (2000) study further elaborates on previous research by indicating that academic specific coping styles can foresee university students' management of tension in the academic setting. Furthermore their research recognised that coping and motivation are interrelated processes and should be considered within the same model.

Goodman, Jaffer, Kerestztesi, Mamdani, Mokgatle, Musariri, Pires and Schlechter (2011) study investigated the relationship between motivation and academic performance in South African University students. These authors discovered a direct relationship between academic performance and intrinsic motivation where they acknowledged that intrinsic motivation was essential to good academic performance. Furthermore, these authors suggested that for future studies more homogenous samples be used, as well as looking at different years of study. Their work provides a context for this study as it focuses more on a homogenous group in a particular year of study.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methods**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

In attempting to answer the research questions, study used a qualitative methodology which was exploratory in nature. An advantage of qualitative research as noted by Leonard (2005) is that it studies phenomena in its natural situation whilst attempting to interpret it terms of the significance individuals bring to them. The study employed a cross-sectional design which meant that all the data was collected at one particular point in time looking at one slice of the entire population (Chambliss & Schutt, 2006). It is viewed by Green, Camilli & Elmore (2006) as a research design that allows diverse age groups to be considered at the same time and that is a fairly competent design in terms of time and cost. Data was collected by means of a semi-structured interview. The research sought to explore the relationship between the motivation and coping skills employed by mature female students during the completion of their psychology postgraduate degree.

#### ***3.2 Sample***

The sampling method used for this study was a non-probability, convenience sampling. Each person in the sample being studied does not have the same possibility of being chosen to participate in the study. Convenience sampling is described as the most convenient collection of subjects for research purposes (Huysamen, 1994). Anastas and MacDonald (1994) note that when seeking a sample of convenience “it is essential to specify carefully the selection and

exclusion criteria that are to be used” (p.273). The criteria for participation in this study were as follows:

- Participants should have achieved a postgraduate degree in psychology
- They should have had at least a two year break between their undergraduate and postgraduate degree
- The participant was a mature student (age 25 and over) during her postgraduate degree
- Sample consisted of 8 participants
- Participants were white females.

The researcher acknowledges the significance of race in influencing motivation and coping skills of female students in this context, however it was not the focus in this study. Two initial participants were approached at a nonprofit organisation where they worked. Those participants agreed to participate and recommended further individuals who met the research criteria. A list of prospective participants was created and six more from the list were randomly selected and interviewed. The participants was comprised of graduates from four different universities in the Gauteng area.

The demographics of the sample were as follows:

**Table 3.1: Demographic Variables of Sample**

<b><u>Respondent</u></b>	<b><u>Age</u></b>	<b><u>Postgraduate degree completed</u></b>	<b><u>Marital status (at time of enrollment in degree)</u></b>	<b><u>Work status (at time of enrollment in degree)</u></b>
1	26 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	Engaged	Unemployed
2	25 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	Single	Unemployed
3	26 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	Single	Unemployed
4	29 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	Living with partner	Working part time
5	25 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	In a relationship	Unemployed
6	26 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	In a relationship	Unemployed
7	27 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	Single	Unemployed
8	35 years	Masters (Counselling Psychology)	Married	Unemployed

\*Please note that none of the research participants had any children during the start and duration of their course.

### ***3.3 Interviews***

Babbie (2005) notes a qualitative interview as “an interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of enquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order.” Sheppard (2004) notes that interviewing is a core method in most qualitative research conducted and it enables the researcher to obtain data from the viewpoint of the participants themselves.

This research comprised of eight one on one individual interviews. As Reinharz (1992) has indicated that interviews permit an examination of the meanings and understandings of the participants and, if done well, allows the participants’ voices to be heard.

As indicated by McIntyre (2005) the most successful qualitative interviews are those that are not guided by the researchers but by the interviewees themselves, because the researcher wishes to elicit the interviewees’ perspective about the research area and their feelings regarding it. But she also suggests that interviewees usually expect some type of questioning so a prepared semi-structured interview format is probably best. So the interviewees can answer the general questions and bring up various issues and then the researcher should listen for those things that need to be probed or elaborated upon. McIntyre (2005) also cautions the researcher to note that the questions asked during the first few interviews will be different from the questions asked in the later ones, because from the interviewing experience the researcher will remove the questions that do not evoke the required response information.

This study employed a semi structured interview schedule (refer to Appendix E for the interview schedule), as it offers the participants the same set of topics and questions, which Sheppard (2004) believes offers a certain amount of standardisation between different participants. In addition, it allowed the researcher flexibility to explore further unexpected themes that emerge from participant's responses. A semi-structured interview was developed to elicit the participants' responses and opinions on the following identified variables relating to motivation namely academic self-efficacy, attributions, and intrinsic motivation and achievement goals. For investigating coping skills, questions which access information on health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving, social skills, social support and material resources were used.

In the development of the interview schedule, the schedule was given to two internal reviewers to enhance the credibility of the interview. Their feedback and critique was used to refine the interview schedule.

### ***3.4 Digital Voice Recorder***

A digital voice recorder was used to record participant's responses, while the researcher interviewed each of them. As the digital voice recordings last longer than tape it was used to record the one on one interview sessions. The recordings were then played back and transcribed by the researcher.

### ***3.5 Procedure***

The graduates were contacted telephonically or via email and invited to participate in the study. The aims of the research study (Appendix A) were clarified and any questions prospective students had about the study were answered. The graduates who were interested in participating were invited to take part in a one on one interview. The interviews took place in either the researcher's office or the participant's office at a time that was suitable for the participant. Once the participants agreed to participate and signed all the informed consent forms (Appendix B and C), they were requested to complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) which took approximately five minutes. On completion of the demographic questionnaire, the interview began. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. During the interviewing, the researcher endeavoured to create a relaxed and comfortable conversation and avoided leading the interview or imposing meaning, but the researcher did follow up on answers to get more in depth information on topics of interest to the study. After the interviews, participants were thanked for their participation and the opportunity for any necessary debriefing was presented. The digital recordings of the interviews were then transcribed. It is these transcriptions that were then analysed.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Thematic content analysis is the method by which the results of this study was investigated and analysed. Krippendorff (1980) describes content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. The task is to make inferences from

the collected data to specific aspects of their context and to validate these inferences in terms of the knowledge about the constant factors in the area of interest. Content analysis can be beneficial for deciphering data as it allows the researcher to recognise themes and frequencies with utmost competence and ease. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) point out that the process of reflecting on the data is almost more important than the precise procedures involved in gathering the data. This is achieved through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Zhang, 2006).

Thematic analysis is used to recognise, analyse and describe patterns contained in the collected data. Boyatzis (1998) as cited in Braun & Clarke (2006) clarifies that thematic analysis simply provides organised descriptions of the data in detail, and often it additionally interprets the varied areas of the research topic. Although Braun and Clarke (2006) have been criticised in the past, it was useful in assisting the researcher to follow the procedure, outlined by these researchers. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) note that whilst thematic analysis involves the probing across data to find recurring patterns of meaning the precise form and product of thematic analysis is varied and flexible.

The flexibility Braun & Clarke (2006) discuss allows the researcher to identify themes and their prevalence in a multitude of ways. However, they caution that the researcher needs to be very consistent in how they identify their themes across the data. The theme needs to indicate something significant about the collected data with respect to the research questions and it should signify points of meaningful patterns within the data.

Six phases of thematic analysis are identified by Braun & Clarke (2006) were followed in this study. Initially the researcher familiarised herself with the field of study by collecting varied studies, then reading it and making some early notes. Thereafter the initial codes were generated in a systematic manner, subsequently the researcher collated the codes into potential themes. Reviewing the themes was then essential, here the researcher ensured that the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts. Analysis was ongoing whilst the themes were then properly defined and named. The final chance for analysis came whilst choosing extracts for the final report and there it was required that the researcher to relay the chosen extracts back to the research question.

The process of coding the data was done by discovering latent and manifest concepts from the data, and labelling it accordingly. The data was then coded into the identified social were obtained from the theory but inductive reasoning could also have been used. This is where themes came out of the researcher's examination of the raw data.

### ***3.7 Ethical Considerations***

In designing and conducting this study the researcher considered the ethical implications. For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to complete and sign two consent forms agreeing to their participation in the study as well as the audio taping of the interview. These forms clarified for the participants that the interviews are confidential and that their names will not be in either the transcripts or the final report. It was also explained to them that they had the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any point should they feel uncomfortable for

any reason. There was no perceived threat of potential harm to the participants of this research. Those participants that required feedback from the study's results were assured that it would be made available to them on request. Ethics clearance for this research study was gained from an internal department review, including members of the Ethics Committee.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results**

As noted at the beginning of the report, this research sought to explore the dimensions of motivation that may exist for psychology graduates whilst completing their postgraduate degree. It was further noted that it is not unusual to discover stress and to motivation together, especially in the pursuit of academic goals, and therefore this study also investigated which aspects of coping individuals employed to facilitate their motivation in completing their studies. By using thematic content analysis the study yielded the following results.

The findings are separated into the various themes that emerged during the data coding. The first theme is motivation, which is broken down into the themes of self efficacy, attribution, intrinsic motivation and achievement goals. All these themes were in line with the theory discussed in the literature review. The discussion will then continue with a new theme that emerged during data coding which is perseverance. Following that discussion on motivation, coping skills themes are elaborated on. These include the themes social support, positive beliefs, health and energy and problem solving skills.

## ***4.1 Motivation***

With regards to the first research question of how do the dimensions of motivation play a role in influencing mature female psychology graduates in completing their postgraduate degree, the following themes were identified and explored.

### ***4.1.1 Self efficacy***

All eight participants referred to self efficacy in some way during the interviews. Some indication of the research participant's self efficacy in setting the goal of completing their postgraduate studies in psychology and their belief in having the ability to do so can clearly be seen in the quotes below:

- *“ . . . I had done undergrad in psychology and I liked it and I did well in it and I felt like I could be a good psychologist and it was pretty much my choice of profession from first year.”*
- *“For me I never ever thought that the academic part was the difficulty because I thought that if you got over 70 percent for your other studies you could cope with the academics . . . “*
- *“I always knew that there was going to be people in the course that out performed me but I also knew that I wasn't going to be bottom of the class either. I knew I could do it in the end.”*

These responses given by the research participants made it clear that they had set out to become a psychologist from the start and believed that they had the abilities to do so.

From the various interviews it can be noted from the responses that the research participants provided that all of them possessed a fairly high level of self efficacy:

- *“The path wasn’t a straight one, as I’d envisaged it would be. There were many distractions along the way, but each time I returned to the path more determined than the last time to eventually qualify, even though it seemed as if it would never happen.”*
- *“You have to be determined, motivated and confident in yourself and see where you are going and where you are going off and how to get back on track.”*
- *“ . . . I felt adequately prepared.”*

#### **4.1.2 Attribution**

All participants attributed the achievement of their studies to their own actions and experience, which appears to have given them the drive to continue through their degree:

- *“I think I performed for myself . . . whether that meant good or bad I was never trying to impress anyone or out do anyone or do it for anyone but myself. I was always just wanting to make myself happy. And to be okay with my own performance. I was really selfish about it . . . I could have done better but I was like I know I can, and I am happy with what I achieved so I am okay.”*

- *“I think I extended myself. In third year I got enough to get into honours and in honours I got a first and then I thought I am actually capable of this and I went through a shift and I used to procrastinate a lot and I realised that procrastinating doesn’t help me and so I just started working.”*
- *“I didn’t work all that hard in the end during my masters, but made up for it with knowledge and experience gained prior. I could’ve cum’d my masters if I’d put in the effort, and I was angry with myself during the year when I realised that wouldn’t happen.”*

As the quotes above indicate, research participants attributed certain behaviours to their internal factors. Although there were also certain instances where some research participants attributed their poor performance, difficulties and/or successes to external sources:

- *“For me I just always wanted to get over 70 percent and I accomplished that. I was disappointed with my master’s thesis though because my internal supervisor gave me a first and my external didn’t and they went with the external and that was disappointing.”*
- *“But I definitely needed more support from my supervisor and I could have chosen a better supervisor and been more supported. With the supervisor I had, he didn’t guide he left you to do your own thing if you were off track he didn’t guide you. You never knew, you were always in the dark.”*
- *“I just kind of came to expect that supervisors just don’t have that much time for you and then in my second year of masters my supervisor changed and he had time for me once a week and I thought wow, this is really, really awesome and that made a really big*

*difference in terms of us getting along really well and a good rapport and I was constantly doing work.”*

From the interviews it was clear that the participants tended to characterise their successes or failures to the factors which allowed them to feel as good as possible about themselves:

- *“Because I was living on my own I managed to my surprise very well because I was quite nervous I didn’t know if I would be able to manage it (the academic demands) and I was quite critical of myself because I always thought I wouldn’t do so well and then always did better than I thought I would.”*
- *“I am not a quitter, I don’t like to throw the towel in.”*
- *“I always felt like I was just managing and often times I felt like I was behind . . . but I thought, hey other people have done it and survived so it is doable.”*

#### **4.1.3 Intrinsic Motivation**

As emphasized previously, an individual exhibiting intrinsic motivation is genuinely interested in the task at hand. Examples of intrinsic motivation were exhibited by most of the research participants. There was a sense that the tasks assigned to them would be of benefit to them in the long term and most participants also reported a strong sense of satisfaction from completing either specific tasks or the degree entirely.

- *“Um, it was interesting because having worked on research masters the supervision style was so very, very different. In research masters it was so closely monitored and so closely watched and then going into the counselling masters programme where my supervisor was quite relaxed, quite laid back . . . it was very different. I actually responded better to that and I actually feel I was able to work better because I was working more independently.”*
- *“I think because the process is so you have to do this, you need to get through this, you have done so much already that you can’t not, you can’t fail now, you have to make it. Puts you in a paradox because you’re human so it immobilised me and I had to come to grips with who am I doing this for firstly and what am I doing this for and how do I want to go about it and is this important to me.”*
- *“I think I am internally quite a competitive person but I suppose I was just very, I don’t know, maybe I am ambitious and I think I am a very practical person so I just wanted to get it done and that was internal . . . and externally maybe wanting to not be dependent and get moving on with life.”*

#### **4.1.4 Achievement Goals**

Most of the research respondent’s vacillated between prioritising mastery goals over performance goals, but it appeared that for most participants in the end mastery goals seemed to be more important and most compromised on their performance goals.

- *“I really wanted to cum my masters, but had to be satisfied in the end with low 70s. Although I realise it wasn't too bad, it wasn't what I'd set out to achieve.”*
- *“ . . . midway through my internship because I felt overwhelmed by the amount of clients I was seeing that I couldn't put that amount of hours into research so that's when it shifted from I want to do well but I am not going to kill myself, I would be okay with a 60 or above, it doesn't have to be a 75, so then it did shift and it became more real. And thought okay fine, I need to stop focusing on my therapeutic skills not only on my academics which I felt was a good trade off.”*

#### **4.1.5 Perseverance**

Perseverance was defined by Carroll (1963) as being the amount of time a student was prepared to use on learning. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly (2007) refer to this perseverance as grit. They indicated that grit included tireless efforts made by an individual in their pursuit of success in a particular task or challenge despite disappointments and difficulties experienced. Regardless of the fact that during their studies, the motivation of the participants waned and took some knocks. These authors appeared to shift their perspective and contextualise the challenges and disappointments that they were confronted with and pushed on. Being able to persevere and push forward with their work required to complete their degrees was noted by all of the participants:

- *“But most of the time I just kept going and just pushed through.”*
- *“. . . then it was let’s just do this and let me tell you it takes everything you have to get there.”*
- *“I just told myself I will get this degree!”*

## **4.2 Coping Skills**

This section of the results focuses on the second research question of how mature postgraduate psychology students coped with the stressors and difficulties that confronted them during the completion of their master’s degree.

### **4.2.1 Social Support**

Most of the participants mentioned social support as being something that either helped or inhibited their progress during their postgraduate degree. All the participants discussed the support given to them by the academic staff of their various institutions:

- *“One of my biggest annoyances from that year was that I hadn’t managed to make any headway with my research. At the end of the year, after many attempts to work with my supervisor, I opted to change supervisors and my research topic. I feel comfortable with that decision and wish I’d done it sooner.”*
- *“I think I felt very much on my own during my first year and the academics . . . I remember telling one lecturer that I am completely lost in his course and he said yes, that*

*is how it is supposed to be and that I would eventually find myself. I don't know if I really ever did . . . but that sort of sums up my view of academic support from the lecturer side."*

- *"I found it really, really stressful but I think I'm a kind of just go with the flow type of person, a lot of people got bitter or disappointed and felt let down . . . "*
- *"I didn't feel like in my first year I was supervised, for the first six months we had group supervision and the one person I was grouped with dominated the sessions so I felt like it was useless because it wasn't the supervision style that I was interested in and it didn't feel like I had any time to express my concerns and address my areas of development."*

Most of the participants discussed how their partners (if they had one), family and friends were a genuine source of comfort and support. There were a few participants who discussed the pressure their loved ones exerted on them:

- *"I was unemployed, but married to an exceptionally career-driven overachiever, which actually also led to self-imposed pressure to finish my studies."*
- *". . . during my masters my dad would phone me with the same comment that he would phone me with from first year "you are doing well, hey" and it's like all this pressure and I was like listen here I am not doing this for you . . ."*

### ***4.2.2 Positive Beliefs***

Most of the participants reported that it was essential to keep positive and focused beliefs about themselves and their abilities. They noted that it was keeping their eye on their original goal that got them through the most difficult moments.

- *“The level of wanting it and driving yourself and having the social support is very important. People want it for different reasons and maybe some reasons are not enough to sustain you. Luckily mine were.”*
- *“It was always the plan right from matric. I left matric knowing that I wanted to be a psychologist and that it would take 7 years of study. I knew it was hard to become a psychologist, so I constantly kept my marks quite high.*

### ***4.2.3 Health and Energy***

Interestingly all the participants noted that looking after their health and wellbeing was very important, yet all except one reported that they were not able to engage in much self care or exercise and that by the end of their degree their energy levels were depleted. The one participant who reported being able to take care of her health and wellbeing really made it a priority and worked consciously to include it in her schedule.

- *“I didn’t do in my master’s year much more than the odd gym and coming home for weekends. I wasn’t free that year, I felt suffocated in a way. Like I tried to do things that were relaxing but I didn’t find them relaxing at that stage.”*

- *“Self care . . . Um I don’t know that I did, it got to the point where it was just momentum carrying me forward and I think that’s why the end of the two years I was just finished because that momentum came to an end and I was just really really tired. Self care is really important and I unfortunately did nothing.”*
- *“I think I did focus a lot on self care like number one was personal therapy try and exercise and tried to make sure that I was running and I tried to eat relatively well and I think in terms of stress management my sleeping was really important I would never compromise on my sleep.”*

#### **4.2.4 Problem Solving Skills**

In order to cope with the large amount of work demands during the master’s degree, most participants reported that it was necessary for them to come up with creative ways of dealing with the challenges they experienced. Most participants exhibited an open mind and a high level of flexibility when approaching these issues. As noted further in this section, it appeared that taking control of the problem in whatever way they could was usually their best and most successful option.

- *“It really was that I am a post-it fanatic and I had post-its everywhere with colours for different urgency levels and it would give me great joy to rip up a little post-it so I would literally get up in the morning, check the post-its, see what needed to be done that day and then that evening would enjoy ripping it to shreds. So it was just focusing and getting*

*through it and then knowing that okay that is done. Having a sense of what I have achieved that day and knowing that I was working towards what I want, what I've always wanted."*

- *" . . . I had a really frustrating relationship with my supervisor and the person would keep me waiting and hour an hour and a half and keep me waiting and miss appointments but again I just thought that it is really not in my best interests to get frustrated or irritated so I should just try work with this person and try work within their approach."*
- *" I did a lot of work on my own and spent many hours poured over books and searching the library . . . most of the time I felt left in the dark. I would have liked to have had more direction and more support but at some point in the year I realised that my lecturers don't know everything so I better learn to find the information I need on my own because I would eventually be on my own anyway."*

Most of the research participants appeared to have quickly decided during their studies that there were things which were out of their control and that did not work for them and then almost remedied that by focusing on those aspects of the problems that they could internally drive and control:

- *"I didn't feel they were really able to offer that theoretical supervision that I needed. I did a lot myself . . . "*
- *"I felt ready to resume studying . . . I felt stuck in my life career wise and personally because plans to have a baby hadn't materialised and my studying represented a movement forward, away from stuckness."*

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

The first part of this discussion will consider the motivation of the research participants. What gave them their sense of purpose and direction in successfully completing their postgraduate psychology degrees?

#### ***5.1 Motivation***

##### ***5.1.1 Self efficacy***

Bandura (1997) defined perceived self-efficacy as being focused on an individual's beliefs in their ability to influence various situations and occurrences that impact on their lives. This central belief, he believed, is at the root of human motivation, performance accomplishments, and emotional well-being. As noted earlier in this report, Bandura (1997) went on to say the self efficacy of an individual will assist them in determining the goals they set, the activities they choose to participate in, how much effort they are willing to expend on specific activities and how persistent they are in seeing these activities through.

It is clear from the findings that the mature students who managed to complete their postgraduate degrees had relatively high levels of self efficacy and believed that they had the capabilities to succeed in their chosen career as psychologists and therefore they believed they had the aptitude to get through the tasks and work required of them in their masters course. This relates strongly

to how when self efficacy is viewed in relation to an individual's career as Betz and Hackett (1997, p383) noted that their self efficacy then referred to an individual's belief's regarding "career-related behaviours, educational and occupational choice, and performance and persistence in the implementation of these choices".

Brown (1999) recorded that with regards to self efficacy and learning, when someone has low self efficacy expectations regarding their own performance or behaviour, they then limit the degree in which they contribute to a specific activity and are more likely to quit at the first appearance of challenge. Brown (1999) goes on to say that there are factors which can lower an individual's self efficacy, she notes things like poor marks and negative assessments. But she does note that the influences of these factors are dependent on the individual's perception of such factors. For most of the research participants it appeared that when they were faced with such factors during their studies but their perception seemed to shift and they were able to contextualise and overcome any disappointment they experienced from such factors and continue forward.

Stress and anxiety are known to have a negative impact on self efficacy and on learning says Brown (1999). She goes on to highlight the importance of a supportive environment, as this is where people's brains perform at their optimum (Caine and Caine, 1990). Brown (1999) contends that circumstances that contribute to disagreement and difference and may warn of low levels of self efficacy, which in turn would lead to decreased involvement and low outcome expectations. This became important when considering the impact of the social support surrounding the participants. For those participants who perceived that they lacked the support

of either their lecturers, supervisors or loved ones, it adversely impacted their self efficacy and it meant that they had to find their resources internally and problem solve in creative ways.

### ***5.1.2 Attribution***

Attribution theory according to Weiner (1992) is incredibly influential with regards to its inferences for educational motivation. He drew attention to the fact that individuals are immensely motivated by the enjoyable result of being able to feel good about themselves specifically in an educational setting. This was clearly noted amongst all the participants, success during their degree produced very positive feelings and gave them more motivation to continue achieving. Attribution theory admits that an individual's existing self-perceptions will powerfully sway the manner in which they will understand the success or failure of their progress in the activities they are engaged in which will in turn influence their propensity to carry out these same behaviours in the future (Weiner, 1990). The findings indicated this strongly, it appeared that as long as the participants felt that they were in control of their performance and outcomes they were more successful. The theme of attribution links strongly with the coping skill of maintaining positive beliefs. As participants who were able to hold on to their positive ideas about themselves and their eventual accomplishment, were also those who attributed their achievements to their internal factors.

Weiner (1992) said that an individual will attribute the origin of his or her success or failure to either internal or external causes. In other words, people believe that they succeed or fail due to factors that either have source within us or due to factors that emerge from the environment they

are in. Furthermore, Weiner (1992) supported the notion that individual's could also attribute their successes and failure due to controllable or uncontrollable factors. A controllable factor is one where an individual would think that they could alter the factor if they chose to do so, whilst those factors which an individual does not deem easy to change is viewed as uncontrollable. The participants followed this notion exactly, they reported consciously identifying those factors impacting their performance that were in their control and exploiting those opportunities to the fullest. Following on from that the participants then attempted to just make the best of those factors which they perceived to be uncontrollable and outside of their ability to change.

A significant supposition to consider regarding attribution theory is that it posits that individuals will construe their situation in such a way as to preserve a positive self-image (Weiner, 1992). In other words, they tend to characterise their positive and negative outcomes to the factors which allow them to feel good about themselves. Weiner (1992) discussed four factors connected to attribution theory that influence motivation particularly in education, these included ability, task difficulty, effort and luck. Ability is seen to be a comparatively internal and stable factor where the individual does not have a great deal of control, whilst task difficulty is viewed as an external and stable factor that is mostly outside of the control of the individual. An internal and unstable factor is effort and it is an area where an individual exerts a big amount of control.

Luck, in contrast is seen by Weiner (1992) as an external and unstable factor where an individual has next to no control. This held true for the participants interviewed, they believed that using their abilities to their full potential and making every effort would in the end pay off. They viewed it as luck as to whether they were assigned supervisors or lecturers that they worked well

with or not. As far as task difficulty was concerned their expectation was that the tasks would be demanding and most found that to be true but they felt prepared to deal with the challenges assigned to them.

### ***5.1.3 Intrinsic Motivation***

As it was noted previously, intrinsic motivation is the natural tendency to exercise one's aptitudes, discover and learn about new ideas, and at the same time finding inherent enjoyment in doing so (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Stipek (1988) proposed that there are many possible motives which would indicate why individuals may be missing some motivation, but Proctor (1984) suggests that one of the most important of these impacting on motivation and therefore achievement is teacher efficacy. The effectiveness of supervisors and lecturers during their postgraduate studies influenced research participants in a profound way. According to the data collected from the participants it appeared that during their course, their lecturers and supervisors attitudes and opinions were considered to be more important than those of their families and friends. From the perspective of the participants, lecturers and supervisors were integral in impacting their intrinsic motivation. Encouragement and support from their lecturers and supervisors spurred them on and kept up their enjoyment of the work, whilst negative experiences made them question their suitability and aptitude for their chosen path.

Walters (2000) describes how mature students' motivation for learning could be linked to a need to correct a harmful or unacceptable self concept into a more individually rewarding one, in order to recover self esteem and demonstrate to oneself and others that they are worthy.

Completing their degree was essential to all the participants. Most felt that they had made many sacrifices and efforts to reach their postgraduate studies and their sense of self depended on them completing. Most participants mentioned that failure was not an option and that completing their masters was the paramount goal. For most of the participants they tended to focus on very little else during the duration of their course, and completing it was at times more important than their own health and wellbeing.

#### ***5.1.4 Achievement Goals***

Most research participants reported that their marks and how they did in comparison to their peers was very important to them at the beginning of their course. This referred to the performance goals that was emphasised by Linnenbrink (2002). Interestingly as time progressed, some of the participants indicated that they were less concerned with these and more interested in being able to complete the degree with a sense of competency. There was a shift towards prioritising the mastery goals that Linnenbrink (2002) mentioned. King (1989) discovered that mature students tend to engage in higher education subjects that are of interest to them and assist in continuing their personal development; this tends to mean that these students will approach their studies in a much deeper way as opposed to narrowly following the prescribed work just to pass exams well. This was also the finding of this research, many participants reported wanting to understand the theory completely so that they could apply it in a practical setting.

Although performance goals have been strongly linked to academic achievement, the participants reported that by focusing on their mastery goals of improving their competency within the field

and getting more confident with their skills they felt they had achieved more than what their marks reflected. This shift though came with great anxiety on the part of the participants and this left the researcher to consider that it is perhaps due to the nature of psychological work that the shift happens. Many of the participants noted that the work was no longer just about them, but that they now influenced and impacted on the lives of others and so they were no longer concerned with achieving the highest marks but rather were worried about being the best therapist they could be. It also appeared to the researcher that the participants were more concerned about the verbal feedback given to them by their supervisors as opposed to the actual achieved marks.

#### *5.1.5 Perseverance*

As noted in the results section previously, perseverance was considered as the sum total of time a student was committed to apply to their studies (Carroll, 1963). The description of grit was also given by Duckworth and colleagues (2007) as their version of perseverance. This theme was an unexpected finding in the research. When considering all aspects of motivation and coping skills, perseverance did not come up as a dimension to consider. Although according to Duckworth et al (2007) it appears to be essential in high achieving individuals. They continue to say that these types of individuals approach their accomplishments as long term projects and they have the endurance to see them through.

One option considered by Duckworth et al (2007) is that the perseverance of an individual could be impacted by the individual's self beliefs and attribution. This suggests a likely association

with the findings of the research where most participants reported high levels of self efficacy in their ability to complete the degree as well as attributing their performance to mainly internal, stable causes. This recommends that the link between self efficacy, attribution and perseverance could be an essential one when considering the motivation and eventual success of a postgraduate psychology student. As mentioned earlier when an individual has low levels of self efficacy regarding their capabilities, they tend to then limit their contributions to that activity and are more likely to give up (Brown, 1999). This is in line with Carroll's (1963) perspective that perseverance can be assessed by the amount of time a student gives to working on their learning. It seems clear from the findings of this research that the area of perseverance is important and more attention should be given here in future research. As Howe (1999) noted

“Perseverance is at least as crucial as intelligence . . . The most crucial inherent differences may be ones of temperament rather than of intellect as such “(p15)

Scott, Burns and Cooney (1998) noted that high marks is one indicator of academic success, but that persisting with your goal of graduating is another indicator of academic success, one that they believe is linked to the students' strength of motivation. Achievement motivation is defined by Bartz and Matthews (2001) as an individual's capability to persevere at tasks or activities in order to achieve a goal or a learning outcome; it is essentially the force a student must produce to see things through. They claimed that it had more to do with the effort and concern students show in achieving a goal than in being overachievers. This was supported by the findings of this study, which saw most participants noting the importance of just getting on with the work, no matter how challenging, so as to complete it in order to graduate.

## ***5.2 Coping Skills***

The discussion will now focus on the coping skills exhibited by the research participants in order to counteract any challenges, hardships and difficulties they encountered during the completion of their postgraduate degree. This was an important part of the study as mature students coming back to their studies had to familiarise themselves with the university environment again and manage with academic demands which meant that they might need to develop new ways of coping or adapt existing methods. As noted in the literature review, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) distinguished between two general types of coping, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Participants reported using both types of coping during the completion of their degree.

### ***5.2.1 Social Support***

Seeking social support would be considered an emotion focused coping skill. Cobb (1995) sees social support as knowledge possessed by an individual that he or she is appreciated, valued and a member of a caring group with shared obligations and he goes further to say that there is evidence that social support can help protect individuals in times of crisis from a wide variety of pathological states. Most participants reported that the support of people around them was important. Although the researcher noted that the support and encouragement of their lecturers, supervisors and peers were deemed more important than their loved ones. The participants indicated that it was key for them to feel like their colleagues and seniors supported them as they

felt that these people knew more about what they were experiencing than their partners, friends and relatives did.

Folkman and Lazarus (1984) drew attention to the importance of the individual's ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with those around them as this helps them develop ideas on how to manage the situation that they are struggling with. This links with why the participants prioritised the interaction and support of their colleagues and seniors, as the individual felt like those people would be better suited to guide and advise them with regards to their degree as they had already had experienced. Participants all reported the importance of the varied emotional, financial or informational support that they received from their various support systems and how that helped them cope with the demands they were having to constantly meet (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### ***5.2.2 Positive Beliefs***

The studies findings supported Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) claims, as participants felt that remaining positive in their outlook facilitated focus on their goals. Also from the findings some participants reported how they attempted to find some way to control problems that were not necessarily within their control. Louw (1991) characterises locus of control as the individual's perception of their capacity to influence the path and result of a life events. Locus of control is seen as a significant determinant of adjustment (Louw, 1991).

Rotter (1975) distinguished between an internal and an external locus of control. With an internal locus of control the individual thinks he or she establishes their own deeds and conclusions whilst someone with an external locus of control believes they are at the mercy of outside external factors. Considering the coping skills employed by the participants of attempting to control aspects of those problems that were outside of their control, there appears to be a relationship with the coping skill of positive beliefs and locus of control. It appears that the participants shifted the locus of control in their favour as often as they could as this resulted in more favourable experiences during the course and enabled them to foster their positive outlook. This meant that they would try and take responsibility for as many aspects of the course as they could.

### ***5.2.3 Health and Energy***

It is noted by Morrison and Bennett (2009) that most working individuals will experience either short term or more lengthy stress in their workplace at some point in time. According to them this has been shown to impact an individual's sleeping and eating patterns as well as their relationships. An individual can either enhance or undermine their own health in the opinion of Morrison and Bennett (2009). Only one of the ten participants prioritised her health and well being, the others reported that they neglected it completely and focused only on their studies. They acknowledged that this is an area that should not be neglected and that they should have taken better care of themselves. It is interesting that none of them regret neglecting themselves; they saw it as a necessary evil to get things done. Of all the coping skill available to the

participants exercise and healthy habits was of the least used in order to ensure academic success.

#### ***5.2.4 Problem Solving Skills***

Participants reported that they engaged a great deal of problem-focused coping, in that they attempted to adjust and alter as many of the causes of stress that they could (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Participants reported innovative ways with managing the various demands they were dealing with, many discussed how they had just made decisions for themselves on how to approach certain tasks and get them done.

According to Vryonidesa and Vitsilaksb (2008) mature female students are often managing conflicting responsibilities and they are having to balance their academic self with their home self which can result in a variety of tensions. From the perspective of the participants interviewed they coped with this by organising and doing things in a manner which suited them. They formulated and executed plans that allowed them to meet all the demands Vryonidesa and Vitsilaksb (2008) mentioned by developing tailor made solutions which fit them. Most of the participants dealt with their academic demands by using problem solving coping skills, which as noted by Folkman et al (1986) noted could include strong interpersonal attempts to change the situation but also comprised, reasoned and determined efforts to problem solve.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this research project was to explore the motivations of mature postgraduate psychology students in completing their masters degree. As the degree is a rigorous academic and practical undertaking, this research also considered the coping skills these students employed to manage the difficulties that they experienced during their training. In order to explore this phenomenon a qualitative method was chosen and ten participants took part in semi structured interviews lasting about one hour.

The findings were consistent with the theory reviewed in that the student's motivation was seen to be an interplay between self efficacy, attribution, intrinsic motivation and achievement goals. An unforeseen finding that strongly impacted the motivation of the students was perseverance. When considering the coping skills, the findings were in line with previous research where the students had employed problems solving skills, positive beliefs and had depended on their social support systems. Interestingly, very few students used any health and wellbeing coping strategies. This appeared to be a much neglected area of coping during the completion of their degree. The findings indicated that each of these dimensions have an impact in their own right, but that it is the intricate interplay between them that might be more insightful when looking at particularly mature students in postgraduate settings.

### **6.1 Limitations**

One of the advantages of this study is that it observed and described the events as they occurred attempting to capture the richness of the mature postgraduate students' experiences. It attempted to discover and understand the complexity of their experiences in a vivid and complete way. A distinct drawback is that although qualitative methods allows researches to obtain an idea of what is presently occurring, it is limited to providing fixed pictures of that moment. It focuses on studying the existing concerns of individuals but does not give a clear indication of how the concerns might have come to be or the extent of their impact. Another disadvantage of the study is that the sample was a homogenous group and the concerns of gender, race and culture were not considered in this particular study and any of these could have diverse influence on the motivations and coping of mature students.

### **6.2 Recommendations**

Suggestions for future study are that the interplay between the dimensions be looked at more closely, particularly how perseverance may impact attribution and self efficacy in academic achievement. Another area for future study could look at how shifting the locus of control of a situation could be used as a coping skill. Future research would be valuable in enquiring into the experiences of postgraduate students from other disciplines as each may present with their own challenges. Furthermore, as noted by Scott et al (1998) there are other variables to consider when looking at a students' persistence to reach graduation, which can include age, life cycle stage, previous educational experience and marital status. It could also be that male students

might have employed different motivation and coping strategies to females and their perspective is another available avenue for future research. Whether the motivation and coping strategies of undergraduate students are the same as postgraduate students is also a question that could be asked in future studies.

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**Appendix A****Research Information Sheet****Psychology**

School of Human &amp; Community Development

**University of the Witwatersrand**

Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050

Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



Dear Colleague

My name is Selina de Freitas and I am currently completing my research for my Masters in Community Counselling Psychology as the University of the Witwatersrand. I am conducting research exploring the dimensions of motivation that may exist for graduates when completing their postgraduate psychology degree. Further it is not uncommon to find stress as a close companion to motivation, especially in the pursuit of academic goals, and therefore this study will also investigate which aspects of coping individuals employed to facilitate their motivation in completing their studies. Your participation in a semi-structured interview discussing the various issues connected to motivation and coping during your postgraduate studies would be greatly appreciated.

***Please note that:***

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary; you are free to choose to participate or not to participate.
- You may decide to withdraw from the study at any time, since there is no penalty for withdrawing or refusing to participate.
- All information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.
- If you agree to participate you need to sign this form as proof of your acceptance.

**Research procedure**

Participants will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview lasting no longer than 60 minutes.

**Risks**

There are no perceived risks involved in this study.

**Potential benefits**

There is no direct benefit to you from participating in this research however lessons could be learned on how mature postgraduate students manage the stressors associated with their studies and what motivates them to complete their degree.

**Contact details:**

In case you have any question about this research you can contact the researcher, Selina de Freitas, on 011 690 1742 or 082 956 9034 or selinad@mgi.ac.za.

I understand the aim, procedures, risks and benefits of participating in this project and I

\_\_\_\_\_ (name and surname) agree to participate voluntarily.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

**Informed Consent Form**



**Psychology**  
School of Human & Community Development  
**University of the Witwatersrand**

Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050  
Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



**INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY**

I understand the aim, procedures, risks and benefits of participating in this project and I

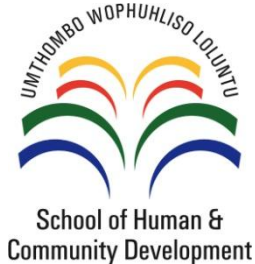
\_\_\_\_\_ (name and surname) agree to participate voluntarily.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C

**Consent for Recording**



**Psychology**  
 School of Human & Community Development  
**University of the Witwatersrand**  
 Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050  
 Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



**CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING**

The interviews conducted with participants will be audio recorded. The recordings will help the researcher to transcribe what was said during the interview, and all the recordings will be deleted once the transcriptions are completed. Please note that no participant will be identified in the recordings.

Your signature below is an indication that you understand the above conditions and agree to have your responses in the interview audio recorded.

I understand that my responses will be audio recorded and I

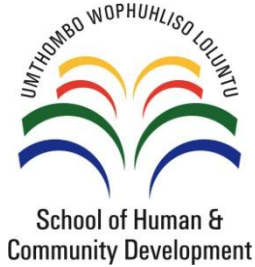
\_\_\_\_\_ (name and surname) agree to participate voluntarily.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D

**Demographic Questionnaire**



**Psychology**  
 School of Human & Community Development  
**University of the Witwatersrand**  
 Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050  
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**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please tick the appropriate box:

1. Please indicate your gender: Male  Female
2. How old are you? (Please state in years) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Marital Status (during the final year of your degree)  
 Married  Single  Divorced  Living with a partner
4. Employment Status (during the final year of your degree)  
 Full Time Employed  Part Time Employed  Unemployed
5. If you were employed, how many jobs did you have? (Please state in numbers)  
 \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you have any children? Yes  No
7. If yes, how many children do you have and what were their ages during your final year of study?

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8. During your final year of study, were there any other people living in your household that you had to take care of, other than your immediate family members?

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## Appendix E

### **Interview Schedule**

#### *1. Introduction*

- 1.1 Where are you now in terms of your career?
- 1.2 At the time you registered for your postgraduate course, what had prompted you to return to your studies?
- 1.3 Were you employed at the time of your registration and if yes, what were you doing?

#### *2. Motivation*

- 2.1 What value does a postgraduate degree hold for you?
- 2.2 Tell me about the path that led you enrolling in a postgraduate degree?
- 2.3 Tell me how you thought you would perform academically in your degree? (Self efficacy)  
Probe – the expected and actual performance
- 2.4 How do you feel you performed in comparison to your classmates? (Self efficacy)
- 2.5 What do you think attributed to your performance in the degree? (Attribution)
- 2.6 How did you keep motivated during the completion of your degree? (Intrinsic Motivation)
- 2.7 What were the goals you wanted to accomplish during your degree? (Achievement goals)  
Probe if they were accomplished and if they changed during the course of the degree.

#### *3. Coping Skills*

- 3.1 Discuss the level of academic support you experienced during your studies? (Probe: Positive beliefs, problem solving skills, material resources)
- 3.2 Discuss the level of family and friend support you experienced during your studies? (Probe: Social Skills, material resources)
- 3.3 Discuss the level of emotional support you experienced during your studies? (Probe: Health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills)
- 3.4 How did the demands of the course differ to what you had expected?
- 3.5 What strategies did you employ to help cope with the demands of the course? (Probe: Health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills, social skills)