THE CONDITIONS THAT FACILITATE OR HINDER ADJUSTMENT
FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

by

DEVEDA LYNN MAH

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1989

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
Counselling Psychology

We accept this Thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
September 1991
© DEVEDA LYNN MAH, 1991
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced
degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it
freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive
copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my
department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or
publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written
permission.

Department of Counselling Psychology

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date October 2, 1991
Abstract

Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique was utilized to explore what facilitates or hinders adjustment to graduate school. Twenty-two graduate students from the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia were recruited for this study. In interviews that were audio-taped, each individual reported events that either facilitated or hindered their adjustment to graduate school. Of 227 incidents reported from participants, nine categories were formed. Using percentage of agreement between judges in placing incidents into categories, reliability of the categories was at 94.4%.
Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................. ii
List of Tables ........................................ v
Acknowledgements ..................................... vi
Dedication ............................................. vii

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ............................. 1
Background of the Problem ............................ 1
Rationale and Significance of the Study .............. 2
Definitions and Views of Adjustment .................. 3
Views of Stress ....................................... 5

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE .......... 8
The Professor-Student Relationship .................... 8
Thesis-writing ....................................... 12
Family and Marriage Issues ............................ 13
Gender Issues ....................................... 14
Loneliness and Depression ............................. 16
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs ........................... 17
Summary ............................................ 18

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY ........................... 20
Review of the Critical Incident Technique ............. 20
Review of the Procedure and Mode of Data Collection 22
Participants ......................................... 27
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background of Participants</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Incidents Interview</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up Interviews</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER IV. RESULTS</strong></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Categories</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Basic Categories</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Rate of the Categories</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION</strong></td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of Research</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Theory and Research</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Further Research</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary and Conclusion</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFERENCES</strong></td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDICES</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Initial Recruitment Letter</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Consent Form</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Biographical Sheet</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Definition List</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  Percentage of Participators
Represented in Each Category............. 58
I would like to thank Dr. Larry Cochran for his encouragement, support, reassurance and guidance in the creation and production of this thesis.

I would also like to thank Dr. Norman Amundson for his guidance and constructive ideas, which helped immensely.

Special thanks goes out to Beverly Ogilvie, who through her encouragement and expert advice, assisted me greatly in putting together this thesis.

I also want to thank the twenty-two co-researchers who participated in this study, who with their enlightening experiences, made this production possible.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my father Dong, and brother David, for without their love and encouragement, I would never have found my way.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Mai, the "greatest Mom in the whole wide world", who, through her never-ending love and encouragement, taught me about "giving and loving", and who always believed in me....Thanks, Mom!!....I hope you are watching me from heaven.

This dedication also goes out to my father, Dong, who continues to encourage me, and to my brother, David, who, with his never-ending support and love, encourages me through "good times and in bad". Thanks, Mom, Dad, and David, for helping me to get where I am....for without you all, getting here would have been impossible.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background Of The Problem

For many students, adjustment to graduate school is difficult. According to Holmes and Rahe (1967), a life event is stressful if it upsets a person's normal routine, requiring change and readjustment. In this regard, entering graduate school might involve moving to a new location, making new friends, living on a small income, and coping with the demands of a new setting.

With reference to the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), one would expect that adjustment to graduate school would rank reasonably high in stress. Empirical investigations have demonstrated that students experience graduate school as a stressful period of adjustment, particularly with its threat of potential academic failure (Berg & Ferber, 1983; de Rosenroll, Norman, & Sinden, 1987; Gustitus, Golden, & Hazler, 1986; Heins, Fahey, & Leiden, 1984; Leong, Mallinckrodt, & Kralj, 1990; Munson, 1984; Phillips, Daubman, & Wilmoth, 1986).
Fondacaro, Heller, and Reilly (1984) found that the suicide rate of graduate students exceeded that of undergraduate students, and that the period of greatest risk was the first four months, the time when striving to adjust would be most difficult. Difficulties in adjustment might be related to poor academic performance, illness, and mental well-being, among other possibilities. Given the importance of adjustment to the experience of graduate students, this study is concerned with conditions that help and hinder. What categories of events facilitate or interfere with the adjustment of students to a graduate program?

Rationale And Significance Of The Study

Feelings of ease and or adequacy are important in helping one to succeed at graduate school (Berg & Ferber, 1983; de Rosenroll et al., 1987; Heins, et al., 1984; Munson, 1984). Identification of such facilitators and hindrances will increase awareness of issues that are of concern for graduate students. Actions can then be taken to develop preventive programs that can help facilitate adjustment for
graduate students.

In addition, results from this study may provide insight and ideas on how to help graduate students adjust to not just their academic studies, but their personal lives as well, since the stressors of attending graduate school will certainly affect other areas of their lives.

Definitions And Views Of Adjustment

Defining adjustment has been problematic. Many researchers disagree on how it is defined (Arkoff, 1968; Derlega & Janda, 1978; Lazarus, 1976; Schneiders, 1965). They agree that many life situations can interfere with adjustment, but they cannot agree on what constitutes "normal" adjustment.

Firstly, one's theoretical viewpoint often determines how adjustment may be defined. For instance, a person who believes in the psychoanalytic view will define adjustment differently from the person who believes in the behaviourist view, who, in turn, may define adjustment differently then the person from the humanistic approach.
Secondly, there is some disagreement on how adjustment should be viewed; more specifically, whether adjustment should be viewed as a "process" or an "achievement". Viewing adjustment as a process, for example, involves being able to set goals and to be able to decide on how to pursue them (Derlega & Janda, 1978; Lazarus, 1976). In other words, being "adjusted" is being able to cope with setbacks, and unforeseeable delays. It's being able to pursue different plans or options, if necessary. Adjustment if defined as a "process", involves being able to continuously handle stressors and problems as they arise, throughout life.

Another view of adjustment conceives it as an "end" or an "achievement". For example, for different persons, adjustment may involve satisfaction with one's life, discovering a meaning or purpose in life, or being free to be oneself (Derlega & Janda, 1978; Lazarus, 1976). For the purposes of this study, however, adjustment will be seen as a continuous process that occurs in one's life. Stress, therefore, is expected to occur; adjustment involves being able to handle particular stressors as they arise. An example of a challenging but also stressful experience might be...
"attending graduate school", which is the focus of this study.

Views Of Stress

According to Lazarus (1969, 1976), stress occurs when there are demands on the person that tax or exceed his adjustive resources. When an important goal cannot be met, frustration occurs. Lazarus further states that stress does not exist by itself; the individual's reaction has to be taken into account as well (1976). Examples of stressors include: military combat, diagnosis of a terminal illness, or loss of a loved one.

It is important to remember, however, that not all people react to the same stressor in the same way; some stressors are more stressful for some than others, depending on the person and what is important to him or her. Being evaluated in an exam, for example, or being rejected by someone we highly regard or love may be more stressful for some than others (Lazarus, 1976), depending on the degree of threat that one perceives is happening and the amount of control that he or she perceives to have.
Mechanic's (1962) study on graduate students, for example, revealed that 1) degree of stress reaction increased as the date of the comprehensive exam drew closer and 2) the type of behaviours used to cope with anxiety changed as the danger grew nearer. Joking for example, increased as the date of the exam approached. Students also sought out social support and avoided other people who aroused their anxiety. Physical complaints, such as stomach aches, tiredness, etc. increased around this time as well.

The experience of attending graduate school, therefore, is generally perceived by many as anxiety-provoking and alienating. Anxiety, however, is not always perceived as negative, as it has been shown that anxiety actually facilitates the performance of some students in that it helps them to adapt and to adjust; comments like "I work best under pressure" are examples of this. Events and or conditions that hinder adjustment for some may actually be a facilitator for others. One would expect that interviewing individual students as to the events that facilitate or hinder their adjustment to graduate school would provide
insight into this area. Before this is accomplished, an exploration of current research is necessary.
CHAPTER II

Review of Related Literature

There has been no direct research on the facilitators or hindrances to adjustment in graduate school. However, much research has been done in the area of stress and the graduate student, and how it relates to 1) the professor-student relationship, 2) thesis-writing, 3) family and marriage issues, 4) gender issues, and 5) depression and loneliness. Each of these areas will be discussed in turn. Maslow's (1970) theory of human needs will then be described to help connect the above ideas.

The Professor-Student Relationship

Munson (1984) investigated sources and manifestations of stress for social work graduate students. A relationship was found between field instructor supervision and students experiencing physical illnesses. Graduate students, who dreaded conferences with field instructors, reported having more colds and sleep problems. If the field instructor
was described as unapproachable or unsupportive, colds and gastro-intestinal (GI) upsets were more likely to occur. Students, who reported being angry at certain instructors and/or having disagreements regarding performance and/or unfair evaluations also experienced greater frequency of headaches, GI upsets and sleep disturbances (Munson, 1984).

In a study of role perception Descutner and Thelen (1989) explored student perceptions and expectations of the department and faculty. A questionnaire was given to entering clinical psychology students at two particular times, once before the semester began and once at the end of the semester. It was found that entering students had "somewhat similar" role perceptions to those of existing faculty. After one semester, students' perceptions were even more similar to faculty perceptions. What was intriguing was that these same students also indicated a greater sense of diminished control (i.e. a need to comply with disliked program policies) after their first semester than they had before they entered graduate school. Since his/her career might be at stake, the student might feel a
greater need to comply with department rules after one semester than before he or she started. Hence, students may not feel that they have control over their academic environment.

Heins et al. (1984) compared stress levels in medical, law, and graduate students. Law students reported experiencing the most stress, but both medical and graduate students reported experiencing intense stress as well. Intense anxiety often arises from two areas: academic expectations and the pressure to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships (Heins, et al., 1984). When these students were asked to rate the likes and dislikes of their respective programs, responses often described as "likes" were: the stimulation and challenge of their programs, and the specific content of their programs. Responses described as dislikes were: not having enough time to do all that was required of them, not having enough feedback regarding their performance, and having to deal with faculty members who were not supportive.

The quality of interaction between the students and the professors is key to the sense of well-being for the students (McLaughlin, 1985). If growth and
academic potential are fostered by professors, satisfaction will increase. Lack of interaction with instructors may not only increase the stress experienced by students but also hinder ultimate success as well. Support and mutual respect between instructor and student appear crucial (McLaughlin, 1985).

In a study of anxiety, Friedlander, Keller, Peco-Baker, and Olk (1986) examined role conflict and its effect on self-evaluations of counselling psychology graduate students. A sample of students responded to a "dilemma" in counselling and were exposed to one of four experimental manipulations: 1) conflict (the professor recommended the student counsellor take an action that was contradictory to what the student counsellor wanted to do), 2) no conflict (professor supported the beginning counsellor in what he/she wanted to do), 3) neutral (professor stated that counsellor’s intent and opposing option were equally valid) and 4) a control group (no input by professor).

Results indicated that role conflict did not produce adverse effects on beginner counsellors’ self-evaluations, but did produce adverse effects on
advanced counsellors-in-training (Friedlander et al., 1986). Reasons for this may be that beginner counsellors tend to not trust their own judgements, and will more likely change their opinion to conform to that of their professor. Advanced trainees, however, may view the conflict with the supervisor as a test of their competence and this attitude will more likely lead to feelings of anxiety and or negative self-comments. Generally speaking, trainee-performance was inversely related to anxiety levels; in other words, the more anxious the trainee was the worse he or she was likely to perform. This phenomena is supported by what is generally known as the "inverted U curve", indicating that a small amount of anxiety is good for performance, but that once anxiety exceeds a certain level, performance will begin to decline (Solso, 1988).

**Thesis-writing**

Another known source of stress for graduate students is the task of thesis writing. Rennie and Brewer (1987) discovered that students who suffered from "thesis-block" were often too afraid to tell their thesis supervisors for fear that they would be thought
"less of". These students lacked "time management skills" in that they found it difficult to abide by their own self-imposed deadlines. Students also see thesis-writing as an enormous task requiring an intensive amount of thought, work, and research ability. With these thoughts in mind, it is no wonder that these students, who often are completing research for the first time, feel anxious and overwhelmed.

Corcoran (1984) discovered that less preference for a cognitive model of reaching decisions was related to students evaluating the thesis as a positive experience. In other words, because logical thinking is often related to being rigid and unrelenting, students feeling this way may be less willing to make thesis revisions, and therefore, may see thesis-writing as a burden.

Family and Marriage Issues

According to McLaughlin (1985), the decision to enter graduate school will not only affect the life of a student, but his or her family members' lives as well. Lack of time, academic pressures, dissatisfaction with recreational pursuits etc. all add
up to enormous pressures. Time constraints due to academic pressures, for example, may affect and possibly strain existing communication between the student and his or her family members.

Married women, who were graduate students, were more likely to experience a feeling of "divided loyalties" in their attempt to be committed to both family and school. Women are expected to continue their "traditional household tasks" while being students. Presence of children also seems to be a negative factor for the graduate student. Close scrutiny of the data indicates, however, that arrangements for child care appear to be more of an issue than the actual presence of the children (McLaughlin, 1985).

Gender Issues

Berg and Ferber (1983) investigated whether success or failure in graduate school was related to one's gender. Women were less likely than men to complete or pursue graduate school, and most degrees were in the area of education rather than the sciences. In addition, female graduate students enrolled in the
physical sciences reported a lack of encouragement or support from male faculty.

Widnall (1988) discovered that drop-out rates for women graduate students were higher than those of men. Surveys, distributed to graduate students enrolled in scientific and technical careers at Stanford University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), indicated that male students not only expressed anger and rage at the system but also gave advice on how the system could be altered. Female students, on the other hand, expressed frustration and discouragement at the system. Widnall (1988) also discovered that more women than men feel a sense of powerlessness and isolation.

More female than male students reported that the environment was detrimental to their health, 23% of the women (versus 9% of the men) reported that they felt they were on the verge of a nervous break-down (Widnall, 1988). Female students (more so than male students) did not feel free to disagree with their advisors. Women may inadvertently contribute to this by relinquishing power to their advisers (Widnall, 1988).
Generally speaking then, females report lower levels of self-confidence, greater fears of speaking up in class, and less opportunity to publish (Widnall, 1988). It appears that increased sensitivity to gender issues is in order, and research possibilities exist in the area of resolution of these concerns.

Loneliness and Depression

Many students suffer from loneliness, anxiety, depression and feelings that one cannot meet academic expectations. Many are unable to cope with this pressure and subsequently fail or drop out (Booth, 1985; Ganz & Ganz, 1988, Head & Lindsley, 1983; O'Neil & Mingie, 1988).

It has been shown that absence of at least one confidante, loss of a significant person, changes in living arrangements, change in academic situation or change in financial state are risk factors for depression (O'Neil & Mingie, 1988).

Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression can all lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among university students (Dashef,
1984). Not only are suicide rates higher for those who attend university than for those who do not, but as stated earlier, suicide rates of graduate students typically exceed that of undergraduates (Carson & Johnson, 1985; Fondacaro et al., 1984).

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can be utilized to describe how a person experiences graduate school. According to Maslow (1970), every person goes through a progressive series of needs that clamour to be met. These needs are arranged in an hierarchial fashion, from the lowest to the highest and fulfilled in that order. For example, those lowest in the hierarchy, being physiological needs (hunger, thirst), must be fulfilled before safety needs can be pursued. Maslow’s needs, then, in ascending order, are as follows: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, aesthetic and cognitive, and self-actualization.

A student, like all human beings, would require food and shelter (physiological needs), structure and security (safety needs), affiliation and affection
(belongingness and love needs), self respect and esteem from others (esteem needs), awareness of knowledge and understanding (aesthetic and cognitive needs), and finally, the need to pursue one's potential in life, to be the best that one can be (self-actualization needs).

Summary

Much of the research on graduate students focuses on the stress and challenge of the experience. Many students enter graduate school with mixed emotions -- excitement mingled with fear and/or anxiety.

Previous investigators such as Descutner and Thelen (1989), Friedlander et al. (1986), McLaughlin (1985), and Munson (1984) examined the effects of stress on students and all conclude that adequate professor-student interactions were key to not just academic success, but psychological well-being as well.

Performing well in clinical courses and being able to write a thesis were just some of the concerns expressed by graduate students (Friedlander et al., 1986, & Munson, 1984).
McLaughlin (1985) discovered that attending graduate school not only affects the life of the student, but his or her family members as well.

Berg and Ferber (1983) and Widnall (1988) discovered that females were more likely to drop out than males. In addition, females were also less encouraged by male professors, particularly in the area of science.

Many graduate students also suffer from feelings of loneliness and depression and many fear that they are unable to meet academic expectations (Booth, 1985; Ganz and Ganz, 1988; Head and Lindsley, 1983; O'Neil and Mingie, 1988).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be utilized to describe how a person adjusts to graduate school. Before the pursuit of knowledge can adequately take place, needs for food and shelter, belongingness and love, esteem, etc. need to be met.

What is missing in the literature, however, is an exploration of the actual conditions that facilitate or hinder adjustment to graduate school. This study, therefore, will hopefully bring forth insights into this area.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The Critical Incident Technique developed by Flanagan (1954), was used to elicit events that facilitate and hinder adjustment to graduate school. Twenty-two counselling psychology graduate students were interviewed.

Review of the Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was developed to study activities and or job requirements by the Army Air Force in World War II, using observation of behaviours (critical incidents) to develop critical requirements for certain occupations. The "critical incidents" would then be put into specific categories and inferences/interpretations made.

Andersson and Nilsson (1964) checked the reliability and validity of this technique by analyzing the job of store managers. The average reliability coefficient was .83. In addition, the stability of the
categorization system appeared to be quite high when students were required to re-categorize the data.

Flanagan (1954) defines an incident as "...an observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (p. 327). A particular incident is critical if it makes a "significant" or important contribution, either in a positive or negative way (Broughton, 1984; Flanagan, 1954). In this case, it would be "adjustment to graduate school". The word "significant" refers to any event interpreted by the participants as having either a facilitating or hindering effect on their adjustment.

Flanagan’s Critical Incident Technique involves the collecting of data that helps to resolve practical problems. It’s use, therefore, will produce information useful in helping students adjust to graduate school.

It is important to remember that the data to be collected should come from participants who have some knowledge of expertise in the particular area being studied. The participants are asked concise questions to ensure that the experiences given meet specific
criteria. The data are analyzed and "critical requirements" are then discovered and organized. A "critical requirement" is defined as a situation or event identified by participants as making a difference in being able to complete a certain task (i.e. being successful in clinic, completing a research paper etc.).

Review of the Procedure and Mode of Data Collection

There are no rigid rules in the data collection stage of this research technique. Only reports from qualified observers, however, are to be utilized. Subjective data will be obtained, although it has been shown that participants do make similar observations (Flanagan, 1954). This similarity or overlap in participants' reports supports a sense of objectivity. One must ensure that the incidents are defined in a clear and concise manner, so that competence in interpretation can be achieved.

Incidents are collected from participants. No limits on how many events or critical incidents are required; however, three or four examples of each
critical behaviour or incident is suggested (Flanagan, 1954). Four types of data collection are suggested by Flanagan: interviews, group interviews, questionnaires and record forms (p. 342-343). The interview method will be utilized in this study.

Once the events/incidents are collected, the data will be described and summarized in a way that interpretations can be drawn.

Three important areas, according to Flanagan (1954), need to be addressed when analyzing the data. They are 1) frame of reference, 2) formulation of particular categories, and 3) general behaviour.

1) frame of reference: Determination of what incident falls into a particular category depends on its use. Categories to be used should meet the statement of requirements (Broughton, 1984, & Flanagan, 1954).

2) Formulation of categories:
   a. Categorization of events/incidents into piles.
   b. Definition of categories and placement of incidents into the piles.
   c. Development of new categories, and/or re-definition of existing categories, until all of
the incidents or events are classified.

d. Option to sub-divide large categories creating narrower ones.

e. Re-examination of definitions of the categories and headings, ensuring the best match between the incidents and the headings.

One could then decrease "subjectivity", by having other people review the categories.

3. General behaviour: It is important to determine how specific or general each incident should be. A balance between specificity and generality, however, can be obtained. In order for this to be achieved, one must ensure that any headings, titles, sub-headings and requirements be clear-cut, organized and well-defined.

Once this is done, the whole procedure is to be examined again, to ensure all possible bias is removed.

Andersson and Nilsson (1964) investigated whether categories are exhaustive by first collecting 5% of the incidents reported by each person; they then grouped these incidents together and took the next 5% of the incidents of each person and group those together. This continued until 20 groups of events were formed.
These incidents were then classified. When approximately two-thirds were classified, 95% of the subcategories appeared.

In other words, subcategories increased at a quick pace until approximately 2/3 of the data were collected. After that time, only 5% new subcategories appeared. On the basis of these findings, it was decided that data collection was adequate enough to determine what was essential to meet requirements of the sales manager positions (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964; Broughton, 1984).

The reliability of the critical incident technique was also assessed and analyzed by Andersson and Nilsson's (1964) study. They tested two types of collecting procedures (the interview and questionnaire) and discovered that subjects reported a different number of critical incidents via the questionnaire than by the interview method. This difference was statistically significant, according to the Kolomogorov-Smirnov two-sample test. However, the rank correlation between the sizes of the categories from each method was .85 (Andersson and Nilsson, 1964). They thus concluded that a strong correlation exists
between the size of categories between these two modes of data collection.

Control of categorization was done by asking 24 psychology students to sort out 2 sets of 100 incidents, that had been randomly chosen from each area. They were told to sort these incidents into subcategories, which were given to them. Andersson and Nilsson (1964) concluded that there was a strong tendency for different people to place the incident in the same category and thus stated that the critical incident technique was "plausible" and not "too subjective".

Andersson and Nilsson (1964) also examined the content validity of the data (whether the incidents obtained actually pertained to what determined the making of a good store manager). They examined training literature to ensure no content was missing, and came to the conclusion that the critical incident had been thorough and concise and had content validity.

They then wanted to verify if the incidents obtained were actually important as workable tools. The average reliability coefficient obtained was .83
when 86 subcategories were rated (on a lickert scale from 1-6) (Andersson and Nilsson, 1964).

Because of the above detailed analyses, Andersson and Nilsson both conclude that the critical incident technique was both a reliable and valid instrument for the purposes of their study.

Participants

Twenty-two full-time graduate students from the department of counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia were participants in this study.

Participation was solicited through personal networking and attending first and second year classes. The proposed research was then described to fellow students and interviews were arranged for those that were interested in participating.

Background of Participants

Participants ranged in age from being in their twenties to their fifties, with a median of 35-39 years of age. A total of 22 graduate students participated in this study, 16 female, and 6 male. Seven were Master of Education candidates and 15 were Master of
Arts candidates. Seven were enrolled in their first year, while 15 were in their second year. Eleven students were married, seven were single, three were separated and or divorced, and one was widowed. Average number of dependents were 2.25.

In terms of academic specialties within the department of Counselling Psychology, four were registered in adult counselling, five were in family counselling, two were in higher education counselling, seven were in adolescence counselling, one was in gender-fair counselling, one was in elementary school counselling, and two were in cross-cultural counselling. Thirteen students entered the program in 1989, two in 1988, and seven in 1990.

This sample was quite broad in that students came from various backgrounds and entered various specialties; not all specialties, however, were equally represented.

Critical Incidents Interview

Twenty-two full-time graduate students who were enrolled in the Counselling Psychology program at the University of British Columbia were interviewed. These
interviews took place at the university. The interviews were audio-taped so that the interviewer was more focused on the participant's responses, rather than on "taking notes" while the participant was speaking. All identifying information was deleted from the tapes to facilitate confidentiality.

At the time of the interview, the purpose of the research study was summarized; students were then told that they did not have to share any information or answer any question that they felt uncomfortable about. Consent form and biographical sheet were then completed by the participant. Issues to do with confidentiality were explained. The interview then began.

The following questions were then asked to the participants:

"Think back to a time, since coming to UBC, when something happened that significantly helped to facilitate your adjustment to graduate school". The question was clarified by asking the following:

"What was an event that helped you to feel adequate or at ease while at graduate school?"

Once the participant had a particular event in mind, the following questions were asked:
1. What were the general circumstances around the event?
2. What exactly facilitated your adjustment?
3. Why was this event so helpful in facilitating your adjustment?

Once the first incident has been fully explored, I then asked the following:

"Can you think of another event that helped to facilitate your adjustment to graduate school?"

This process was continued, until all facilitating events were explored. I then asked the following:

"Think back to a time, since coming to UBC, when something happened that hindered your adjustment to graduate school."

The above question was clarified by asking the following:

"What was an event that hindered you from feeling adequate or at ease while at graduate school?"

Once the participant had a particular event in mind, the following questions were asked:

1. What were the general circumstances around this event?
2. What exactly hindered your adjustment?
3. Why was this event so hindering to your adjustment?

Once the first hindering incident had been explored, the following was asked:

"Can you think of another event that hindered your adjustment to graduate school?"

This process was continued, until all hindering events were explored.

The participant was asked if he or she had anything else to add or clarify. Once this was discussed, the participants were then told that the interview was over. Confidentiality, was again ensured, and participants were guaranteed that audio-tapes would be erased, upon completion of the study.

Follow-up Interviews

Approximately six months after the interview, a sample of ten participants were contacted for a verification check. The purpose of this verification check was to verify that events were correctly recorded as to meaning and context. The participant’s experiences (as recorded on index cards), were read out to the individual. Each of the ten participants
confirmed that their experiences were correctly recorded.

Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, the events/incidents from the audio-tapes were then recorded on coloured index cards; different colours for facilitating events and for hindering ones. One incident was recorded on each card. To ensure for comprehensive recording, each incident was recorded in the following manner:

1. "Agent" (who performed the event)
2. "Event" (brief description of the event)
3. "Outcome" (what happened as a result of the particular event).

The participant’s initials were then recorded at the corner on the back of each card. The incident number was also recorded; for example, "LM-2", meaning the particular incident was the second one mentioned by LM. Once all of the incidents were recorded and coded for each participant, the audio-tape was reviewed again, to ensure the incidents were correctly recorded. This
process continued, until all incidents were coded, recorded, and checked.

Cards were then tentatively sorted into piles thought to have common meanings. Category names such as "Reassurance", "Connective Support", etc. were tentatively assigned. To ensure for conciseness and clarity, facilitating and hindering incidents were initially separated into their own categories. For example, "reassurance" was a different pile from it's polar opposite, "invalidation". At first, twenty-two categories emerged, most having bi-polar partners. Categories were then examined to ensure that each category was "unique" enough to stand alone. A few categories were combined together, due to similar meanings, so the number of categories were shortened to 17, sixteen bipolar and one unipolar.

Category names were then "sharpened" and re-worded, for conciseness of meaning. Incidents were re-checked, to ensure they were in the correct category. Each bipolar category was amalgamated with its partner; thus 9 categories emerged, 8 bipolar and 1 unipolar. Incidents were then checked again, to ensure they were in the right category.
A list of definitions was then created, listing "critical requirements" of each category (see appendix D). Participation rates (in terms of a percentage), were then calculated for each category.

Reliability for the conciseness of the categories was then checked by a separate rater and percentages for inter-rater reliability calculated.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this critical incident study on what facilitates or hinders adjustment for graduate students in counselling psychology, the 22 participants reported a total of 227 incidents - 120 facilitating and 107 hindering incidents. The average number of incidents reported per person was 10.31.

Reliability

One rater, a female graduate student enrolled in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia, was used to determine the reliability of the categories. A sample of 27 facilitating and 27 hindering incidents from the 227 incidents were randomly selected from across the categories for the graduate student rater to classify. A definition list (as to the meaning of each category) was provided so "consistency" in meaning could be reached. The graduate student achieved a reliability of 94.4%, which indicates strong reliability.
**Basic Categories**

The 227 incidents were sorted and categorized into groups with similar meaning until basic categories were formed. Each category contains a number of events/incidents that had similar meanings. Nine basic categories appeared, eight of which were bi-polar in nature.

1. Connective support
2. Reassurance of Ability
3. Practical Assistance
4. Flexibility
5. Safe Environment/Atmosphere
6. Information being provided
7. University or department services
8. Self planned activities
9. Crisis-like events

**Definitions of Basic Categories**

The categories were bipolar. Each category was defined in a positive manner; the negative, however, was implied as its opposite. Examples of facilitators and hindrances are given for each category.
1. Connective Support

There are 22 facilitating and 10 hindering events within this category.

Facilitating events range from experiencing a sense of comradery or "connection" with fellow students to experiencing a sense of empathy from professors, friends, and or family members. "Comradery" is often expressed as being with others who are in the same boat, almost like "misery loves company".

Hindering events range from adjusting to being alone, to being unconnected, and to adjusting to a move to attend university.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve a sense of feeling "connected" and or "being supported" by others.

The common meaning is a sense of feeling "in tune", "understood", "supported", or "one of the team". Lack of connective support is often associated with feelings
of loneliness, inadequacy, isolation, a sense of disconnection, a sense that one was an "outsider".

Affiliation with others experiencing similar feelings and experiences, therefore, appears to be important to a sense of comfortableness and well-being.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"At the orientation, I was with other students who also did not having the foggiest idea of what they were doing....I wasn't alone."

"Being able to talk to the department head whenever I need to; his positive manner, his open-door policy."

"Having someone to talk to, to complain about certain profs, to go out with, having a support, was good....helps me to feel connected."

"I don't think my background is like those of other students...I don't feel comfortable...I
"I don't feel I fit in."

"I'm from a city up north... when I got here, I felt unconnected, frustrated, I didn't know anyone... it was lonely."

2. Reassurance of Ability

There are 25 facilitating and 19 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from being encouraged that one had the skills to become a good counsellor to actually being evaluated to this effect. More specifically, getting feedback framed in a constructive positive manner that validates the person, helps one to keep going, to keep plugging away, to be inspired to learning more.

Hindering events range from being discouraged and undermined regarding one's skills and or capabilities to actually being evaluated to this effect.
The critical meaning of this category seems to involve being assured that one had the skills to be a good counsellor. In addition, it appears that being evaluated was anxiety-provoking for many students; thus, any verbal or written evaluation regarding one's counselling, written skills or ideas, were taken very seriously.

The common meaning of this category includes a sense of needing to be reassured that one indeed, did have the skills to not just be a good counsellor, but a good graduate student as well. All of the students interviewed report in some way or another, that they value and need assurance from professors that they are effective, and that they belong in the program. This is evidenced by what occurs if "discouragement or invalidation" of one's abilities occurs. Students often report saying things like, "It must have been a fluke...maybe I fooled myself and others through the courses so far..." This negative self-talk occurs when students feel undermined by professors and or peers. Nineteen hindering events were reported.
Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"I was reassured that I belonged....that I could succeed in grad school."

"Through feedback, the professor assured me that I could be a good counsellor."

"My supervisor is supportive....in helping me to put my thesis together; she validates me; assures me that I'm on the right track...I need that pat on the back."

"In clinic my supervisor undermined me as 'a person', and told me I did not belong."

"I got poor comments in clinic; he degraded me; I felt attacked."

"When I was notified that I got into the program, I was so happy, then a fellow student told me that the only reason I got into the graduate
program was because of my 'race'; that the department was looking for visible minorities... that really popped my bubble."

3. Practical Assistance

There are 16 facilitating and 15 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from being able to obtain assistance for academic papers and course advising, to being able to obtain financial aid. It is important to note that it's the actual "help" that is critical here. Students often report feeling grateful and more at ease, a sense of comfort that "help" is offered.

Hindering events range from not being able to obtain assistance in various situations, such as course advising, getting a practicum placement, etc. to not being able to get child care or not being able to obtain financial aid.

Students who report not being able to obtain assistance when needed often express feelings of
discouragement and frustration, that "nobody cares" etc. An event reported that is commonly reported as discouraging is that one is not able to obtain advising from one’s assigned pro-tem.

It is important to note again, that it is not the "information" that can be supplied that is critical here, rather, it’s the "assistance" or help that is often described as lacking.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve being able to obtain actual "assistance" of some kind, be it for term papers, housing, child care or money problems.

The common meaning of this category is that being able to get some sort of "help" greatly increases a sense of ease and adequacy.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"Obtaining expert help with framing a topic for my major paper; it was given in a
very relaxed and non-threatening way."

"I was able to get babysitting for my kids, from my neighbours...that was a great help."

"I was able to get a bursary and research assistant position from the university."

"I wanted to meet my pro-tem, and tried to get an appointment with her...she snarled at me."

"My husband is unsupportive at times....I need help with the kids."

4. **Flexibility**

There are 10 facilitating and 6 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from professors allowing students the freedom to develop their own counselling style to instructors providing extensions due to crisis situations.
Hindering events range from being forced to follow a certain philosophy of counselling to being penalized for having one's own ideas.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve that a sense that "flexibility" is allowed for, in various situations. The common meaning of this category seems to involve a sense of satisfaction that occurs when professors express "concern" by offering flexibility. On the other hand, however, students often report feeling angry and frustrated when professors do not allow for flexibility, or the freedom to develop one's own ideas.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"I told the department head that I was going through a medical crisis...I needed cancer surgery...extensions were given."

"In clinic, my prof allowed me to grow and to develop...told us all to allow our personalities to shine through in counselling."
"I was forced to follow the clinic supervisor's counselling style and was shot down for my style."

5. Safe Environment/Atmosphere

There are 9 facilitating and 12 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from being in a safe supportive learning environment where one was encouraged to "believe in one's abilities" to being in an environment where it was okay to make mistakes. A sense of being safe is important in this category. Freedom to disclose re: self, for example, without it being held against them, is commonly experienced. It is not necessarily the physical place that is important, but rather, the "psychological environment", feeling that the professor (or spouse or friend) could help one to feel safe and out of harm's way, out of a danger zone. Danger zones are places where one could not disclose without fear of penalty, where one was not treated as an equal, or where one could not express one's own ideas.
Hindering events range from being in a unsafe learning environment where disclosure was harmful to being in situations where violating experiences took place.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve a feeling of safety, where one felt free to express ideas and not feel "put down"; where one felt okay about making mistakes, where one could feel free to be oneself.

The common meaning of this category seems to involve feeling safe and comfortable, while expressing oneself.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"Professor made the place feel safe...I was encouraged to 'believe in myself', that I could be a good counsellor."

"Being able to be at a safe place, at home with my wife, who helps me with ideas regarding my term papers."
"Orientation session was a non-threatening environment...it was an opportunity to meet people so names could be attached to faces; it was great ice-breaker."

"I self-disclosed to him, and it came back to haunt me...in terms of how he evaluated me."

"Being discriminated against because I was a man....I felt I had to tiptoe around her, and had to be careful as to what I said."

"I volunteered to role-play in class....I thought my classmates would be educated by the experience, but the opposite occurred; I felt abused."

6. Information Being Provided
There are 7 facilitating and 5 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from being notified that one was accepted into graduate school to obtaining information about the professors.
Being able to obtain information is often empowering and often relieves one of anxiety and stress. Even events like waiting for the mail for that one letter, or awaiting that one phone call re: being able to obtain vital information of some kind, appears to be crucial to the well-being of many students. In particular, students who report being able to obtain information re: who the professors "really" are, enabled these students to relax; students report feeling anxious because they do not really know who they are registering with, that a name was only a name; one wanted information about the person; his/her likes or dislikes, personality etc. This information was deemed crucial, especially when it came to registering for clinical courses.

Hindering events range from not being able to obtain admissions information to not being given prior warning about the stresses of graduate school.
The critical meaning of this category seems to involve being able to obtain crucial information of some kind, deemed important to the student.

The common meaning of this category seems to involve a belief that "information is power"; that with knowledge regarding certain issues or certain people, one would be able to feel less intimidated.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"Being informed that I was accepted into graduate school."

"At the orientation, I was able to get to know who the professors were, and what their interests were, so that I knew who I was registering with."

"First time I applied to get into graduate school I was rejected, but the thing is, I wasn't notified by mail...I had to phone to find out."

"Prior to being admitted, I attempted to get an
in-person interview to discuss admissions information; I discovered that nobody wanted to talk to me..."

"I was not informed as to how heavy courses were going to be...lots of reading, analyzing etc.; it's hard on my husband and kids too...."

7. University/Department Services

There are 13 facilitating and 23 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from being satisfied with the services offered by the department or university to being happy with the content and or expectations of certain courses. This category encompasses a wide variety of incidences re: general feelings about the courses offered, services provided, and the psychological environment of the university.

Hindering events range from being disappointed in the content or materials presented to being
required to take statistics and or having to do a thesis.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve satisfaction or lack of satisfaction with the department and or services offered by the university.

The common meaning of this category seems to involve that being treated "well" by various personnel helps to increase satisfaction.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"I'm impressed by the services that are offered by the library..."

"It's great...being able to select when you can take courses, mornings, afternoons or evenings...also it's good that they are 3 hours long and only once a week."

"It's good...not having to take exams."
"The office administrator is very organized, efficient and friendly too...I trust her, and believe she is 'watching over us' ensuring we are all okay."

"Being required to do a thesis as part of the M.A; it has no relevance to being a counsellor."

"Having to buy ugly textbooks of no use whatsoever."

"Staff member at library was rude; I felt like a cow in a cattleine...".

8. Self Planned Activities
There are 18 facilitating and 3 hindering incidents in this category.

Facilitating events range from being involved in hobbies, exercise, time management etc. to obtaining personal counselling. Different events are obviously reported by different students,
because different students have different "self help" ideas that help them to get through each day.

Hindering events range from relatives/friends infringing on student schedules to having to make wedding plans at the same time one is attempting to complete assignments.

Negative impacts on one's pre-planned activities, therefore, affects their feelings of control over their situations.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve the student being involved in certain activities to enhance a sense of control over their environment.

The common meaning of this category seems to involve a sense of "well-being" and satisfaction when these activities are undertaken.
Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"I got my thesis supervisor 'early'....you know, ...before somebody else grabbed her."

"Having an attitude that I am the expert...not to second guess myself....not to have any negative self-talk...helps a lot."

"Getting up at 4:00 a.m. everyday to do homework, so I can fit in other parental duties the rest of the day..."

"Seeking counselling really helps me to cope."

"Staying in shape by exercising...helps me to relax and deal with stress."

"I have to make wedding plans and work on my major paper and practicum at the same time...it's hard."
9. Crisis-like Events

There are 12 hindering and 0 facilitating incidents in this category.

Hindering events range from losing a loved one, getting diagnosed with a life-threatening disease to experiencing extreme exam anxiety.

There are no facilitating events in this category.

The critical meaning of this category seems to involve a sense of fear, anxiety and sometimes helplessness that students experience when crises occur.

The common meaning generated by this category is an overall sense of bewilderment, fear, and loss of control experienced by those in crisis.

Below are positive and negative examples typical of this category.

"Mother died suddenly....had to fly home..."

"I found out I had cancer...and had to be put
on a wait list for treatment...."

"I froze during the exam...I panicked, the scratching of other students' pens made it worse; I couldn't understand questions on the paper...they didn't look like they were in english!"

Participation Rate of the Categories

The participation rate for the percentage of participants in each category is shown in Table 1. Participation rate indicates the strength of a particular category, in terms of how often particular incident are reported. For example, 91% of the students mention incidents relating to "reassurance of ability", an important need. Participation rates for "connective support" and "practical assistance" categories were substantial as well, at 86% and 73%, respectively.
Table 1
Percentage of Participators Represented in Each Category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>N(%)</th>
<th>F(%)</th>
<th>H(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance of Ability</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connective Support-</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Assistance</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Planned Activities</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University/Department Services</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis-like Events</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Environment/Atmosphere</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Being Provided</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY:

N = Percentage of total participants that reported an event in a category

F = Percentage of total participants that reported a facilitating event to do with that category

H = Percentage of total participants that reported an hindering event to do with that category
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This research study was done to determine the conditions that facilitate or hinder adjustment to graduate school. Through the use of Flanagan’s (1954) "Critical Incident Technique", 22 counselling psychology graduate students were interviewed to obtain the answer to this question.

Two hundred and twenty-seven incidents were obtained and classified into 9 categories. Participation rates for the categories ranged from 91 to 36 percent (Table 1), depending on the nature of the category. Highest rate for participation was for "Reassurance of Ability", at 91%, to be followed closely by "Connective Support", at 86%. Third in line was "Practical Assistance", at 73%. At the other end, lowest participation rates were "Information Being Provided" at 36%, "Crisis-like events", at 41%, and Safe Environment, at 41%. Although these participation rates were less than 50%, the incidents reported were unique enough to be classified into individual categories.
Limitations of Research

Since graduate students in counselling psychology were utilized, the sample is therefore, not representative of other graduate students at this university.

In addition, critical incidents are limited to the events that people are able to remember during the interview. Many experiences may not have been mentioned. Furthermore, certain details may be lost due to poor memory.

Also, most of the participants in the study were female; therefore, results obtained may not adequately represent males, since the ratio of women to men in this study was 15 to 6. Obtaining a sample representative of both genders, however, may be difficult, since the department’s student population consists mostly of females.

In addition, graduate students in this study were probably older than other graduate students in other departments, since the counselling psychology department requires at least 3 years work experience as one of the pre-requisites to enter the program. The students, therefore, were not representative of other
graduate students who entered directly to other departments from their undergraduate degrees.

Furthermore, the students interviewed were volunteers. Volunteers may differ from students who do not volunteer, in that those who do not choose to participate may be too busy with school and are in the midst of attempting to "adjust" to their environment. As a result, the 22 students interviewed may not be representative of other students in the program.

Another limitation may be that students may have anxieties about being recognized by the responses they had given. These anxieties may have thus affected what they subsequently chose to share. The students, however, were assured that "identifying information" would be deleted from the incidents they shared, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

This study was also investigated from one perspective, that is, the students' point of view. Professors' perceptions of various situations were not explored. However, since the purpose of the study was to explore the conditions that facilitate and hinder adjustment to graduate school, the students' perspective was utilized.
Implications for Theory and Research

Much of the research supports the view that graduate students often experience feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety (Berg & Ferber, 1983; Corcoran, 1984; McLaughlin, 1985; Munson, 1983; Rennie & Brewer, 1987).

For example, in this study, being "reassured" that one had the ability to be a good counsellor and a good graduate student was deemed to be an issue of concern. Examples of statements made in relation to this issue were as following: "Professor X really reassured me that I could be a good counsellor...he really helped me to believe in myself....as a result, I wanted to learn more". The need to be reassured or "believed in", was a common theme.

Students also reported being invalidated and or unfairly evaluated by certain professors which they described as being a major hindrance to their adjustment to graduate school. Many students felt undermined and personally attacked by their professors; in fact, 64% of the students interviewed reported at least one incident. As a result, many students seriously questioned their abilities. Furthermore, students who were discouraged by a professor, often
felt it was a fluke that they got "A's" in other courses, and that the professor who undermined them was probably correct! Students, therefore, took their "negative feedback" seriously, especially in clinic courses where counselling skills were observed. Students felt that not only were their counselling skills being evaluated, but their personalities as well. Yet, because counselling skills and personality is so intertwined, evaluation of these skills will always be difficult. Being "encouraging", for example, could be a counselling skill, but also a part of the person's make-up or personality; if this is criticized, then the student would naturally feel "put down", because this attribute is part of his or her "core self". On the other hand, how could a professor "safely" offer constructive feedback without misinterpretation? Perhaps an understanding of the dynamics of being evaluated in clinic needs to be explored further, to help resolve this continuing dilemma. As cited in previous studies (Berg & Ferber, 1983; McLaughlin, 1985; and Munson, 1983), adequate professor-student interaction is crucial to not just
feelings of adjustment, but also psychological well-being.

It was also discovered that students needed to feel connected and or supported by fellow students and professors. Affiliation with others who "understood" stressors they were going through helped them to adjust. For example, students stated that the orientation session helped because "it felt good to be with others who also did not have the foggiest idea of what they were doing".

Many students enter graduate school with mixed emotions, such as excitement and joy mingled with fear and anxiety. Many also fear that they are the only ones experiencing these emotions. Having a chance to express them to others who were in the same situation eased the anxiety somewhat. Being with others in the "same boat" also helps to build friendships and a sense of belongingness and connectiveness (de Rosenroll et al., 1987; Phillips et al., 1986; Quevedo-Garcia, & Gonzalez, 1985).

Practical assistance was also mentioned by many students, as an issue of concern. Being able to obtain
assistance with 1) course advising, 2) writing theses/major papers, 3) financial aid, and 4) child care, helped students to feel at ease.

Firstly, many students reported being upset about not being able to obtain course advising from their pro-tem advisor. In fact, only one person reported having a positive experience. Leong and Sedlacek's (1989) study confirms this need by discovering that "help with selecting courses" was ranked as the "no. 1" need by certain students.

Secondly, being able to obtain assistance with framing a topic for a thesis or major paper was also important in that many students reported feeling lost and confused when undertaking this task. Studies by Corcoran (1984) and Rennie and Brewer (1987) support this notion with their discovery that students who performed well experienced support and assistance from their supervisors. However, they also found that these students were also open to supervisory feedback.

Thirdly, students also reported feeling anxious because of the lack of finances. Complaints were made about the lack of availability of fellowships, scholarships, and bursaries for counselling psychology
students. Previous studies by Malaney (1987), O'Neil and Mingie (1988), and Weissberg, Berentsen, Cote, Cravey, and Heath (1982) confirm these results, that financial assistance was often mentioned as a major need, and that once the financial problem was solved, the person could then be freed up to focus on academics.

Fourthly, being able to obtain assistance with child care was deemed to be important to students who were parents. In fact, many reported that parental responsibilities in combination with student responsibilities, were burdensome. They complained of fatigue, anxiety, and fear that one could not do "everything". This is supported by McLaughlin (1985), who reported that parents, especially women, were more likely to experience a feeling of divided loyalties in their attempts to be a "super parent" and "do everything" and "be everything to everybody".

The category of "flexibility" involved feeling free to develop one's own counselling style, and to be oneself. Descutner and Thelen's (1989) research, as previously discussed, partially addressed this need in
that they discovered that students, who wanted to be successful felt they had to comply with rules they disliked. This was also the case in this study. One particular student commented: "if anyone wants to be successful in graduate school they have to 'go with the flow'....you have to ask the professors what they want...then give it to them....otherwise, if you don’t you will be 'asking for it'." Adjustment, for this student, therefore, meant compliance.

Many students, then, did not feel a sense of control over their academic environments, and frustration occurred. This is aptly portrayed in Lazarus’s (1976) definition of stress, where a person feels helpless or powerless to control the outcome of a particular situation, or where one "perceives" that one has no control over the particular situation at hand.

In allowing for the flexibility of developing one’s own counselling style, professors helped the student to not just feel at ease, but to also perform better. On the other hand, students who were forced to conform to learning a specific counselling style felt
angry and frustrated and gained little from the particular class.

Flexibility also referred to professors allowing flexibility for deadlines for term papers when crises occurred. Students were appreciative that allowances were offered, and hence, attempted to perform even better for these particular professors. It appears, then, that when flexibility was offered, a feeling of adequacy and ease results, which in turn, contributes to a desire for better performance.

The category of "safe environment" involved feeling safe to express oneself in an environment where he/she would not be penalized for making errors. Some students felt safe in a "flexible" variable environment, whereas other students felt safe in a more structured one. Kagan and Fasan (1988), however, discovered that anxious students preferred structured controlled environments, whereas confident students preferred flexible ones. In contrast to this finding, students in this study who reported feeling some anxiety also were the ones who preferred a flexible environment. Further research, therefore, is necessary to explore this area. Regardless of whether an
environment is structured or unstructured, students wanted an environment that allowed for "freedom of expression" and "freedom to grow and develop". Students, who reported feeling safe were more likely to risk trying out new counselling techniques. Other studies by Berg and Ferber (1983), Descutner and Thelen (1989), McLaughlin (1985), Munson (1983), and Widnall (1988), confirm the need to have academic environments that facilitate learning.

The need to have information was also important to students. As an example, some students in this study complained that the course sequencing information sheet that was distributed during the orientation was "skimpy and confusing". They also stated that the information should have been provided to students before registration, not after. According to students in this study, being provided with information reduced anxiety and tension. This is supported by Leong and Sedlacek's (1989) investigation of student needs, where it was discovered that the most "asked for" information was in reference to course planning.

The category of "university/department services" involved satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services
that were offered. More hindering than facilitating events were reported, as students were often disenchanted with university bureaucracy. Such events as dealing with rude library personnel, or being forced to buy textbooks (judged to be of little use) were other examples. This is supported by Widnall's (1988) study where some students commented that a reduction in bureaucracy was needed.

The category of "self planned activities", described students who involved themselves in activities that facilitated their adjustment to graduate school. Many students reported that hobbies and recreational activities helped them to relax. Other "self help" ideas included having a positive attitude, or utilizing various "thought-stopping" techniques to eliminate negative self-statements. These ideas on stress reduction have been supported by Archer (1986), and Mallinckrodt, Leong, and Fretz (1985), who in their investigations, discovered that multi-dimensional approaches were the most appropriate in managing stress. Archer (1986), for example, developed a "whole person" approach to stress management. Exercise, relaxation, diet, positive self-
statements, challenging irrational beliefs etc. were just some of the ideas posed to help students adjust.

The category of crisis-like events ranged from being diagnosed with a serious disease to exam anxiety. All were described as emotionally taxing. According to Grayson (1985) the most stressful time of the semester was at the beginning (when psychiatric emergencies occurred) and at the end, when academic pressures were at the greatest. Although crises such as deaths in the family, being diagnosed with a serious disease etc. can occur at any time, the beginning and end times of the semester still place students under the most pressure. Grayson (1985) also discovered that those who seek counselling either early or late in the semester were more likely the ones that were in "crisis". The intensity of academic pressures near the end of the term also added to existing stresses. Previous investigations by Heins (1984), Ganz and Ganz (1988), and O'Neil and Mingie (1988) support the need for stress management programs and counselling, to help graduate students deal with fear, anxiety, and helplessness.
Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs can also be utilized to help anchor the nine categories that emerged in this study. Most students, for instance, indicate needs for food and shelter (physiological needs), structure, order, and protection from harm (safety needs), support through affiliation and affection (belongingness and love needs), respect from professors and fellow students (esteem needs), knowledge (aesthetic and cognitive needs), and finally, needs to meet one's potential in life (self-actualization needs). The hierarchical order, however, was different for everyone, because of the uniqueness of each person that was interviewed. Despite these differences, however, students indicated needs to self-actualize; to be the best counsellors that they can be.

Implications for Practice

Results from this study can sensitize counsellors to factors involved in helping students adjust to graduate school. Since graduate students make up a substantial part of the university population, knowledge of these treatment issues will help the
counsellor to better meet the needs of graduate students.

Many of the factors reported by graduate students as facilitating their adjustment (such as "reassurance of ability, connective support, and practical assistance") are also relevant for undergraduate students as well, especially those attending first year. Results from this study may also assist counsellors who counsel students in their undergraduate years.

Results from this study can also benefit faculty at universities, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Knowledge of the conditions that facilitate and or hinder adjustment will help faculty to create intervention strategies. For example, if the no. 1 facilitator is "reassurance of ability", and the no. 1 hindrance is "invalidation of one's ability", then, perhaps a key to helping students to adjust may be to explore how one could offer feedback in such a way that is reassuring, yet constructive.

On the other hand, when confronted with criticism/feedback, no matter how constructive and reassuring it is, our natural defensive mechanisms are
called to action. Perhaps ideas could be generated as to how to help students deal with these situations. Attitudes toward "negative feedback", therefore, may need to change. Feedback and evaluation is part of the university system and will always exist. Exploration into the handling of conflict and disagreement, perhaps through the use of re-framing exercises, relaxation etc. is needed. In other words, it would be excellent if adequate professor-student interactions always occur, but since it does not, exploration into how to handle conflict and or stress may be in order, to alleviate tension and anxiety. Multi-dimensional stress management programs suggested by Archer (1986), Ganz and Ganz (1988), and Mallinckrodt et al. (1985) could be implemented for this purpose.

In addition, since connective support was also seen as crucial, orientation sessions and support groups can be developed to facilitate "belongingness".

Knowledge of the conditions that facilitate and hinder adjustment for students in graduate school may also help incoming students to better prepare for their lives as graduate students. In addition, knowledge
that others have gone through similar experiences will provide them with assurance that they were not alone.

**Implications for Further Research**

Further research is needed in many areas. For example, self-esteem levels of graduate students appear to roller-coaster, depending on what occurs. Students make statements like "I knew I wasn’t suitable for graduate school... maybe it was a fluke that I got "A’s" in the other courses...I must have fooled the professors...I guess I am a pretty bad student and counsellor...". One invalidating comment can therefore, send students into distress. Why do students over-generalize? Is it something that they bring in with them? Or is something else in the environment that is affecting their judgement? These are only some of the questions that can be explored.

Gender issues can also be explored in future research. Does being female really make a difference in the quality of student-professor interactions? Does it depend on the department involved, such as science versus counselling psychology?

Finally, do graduate students from other
departments suffer similar feelings of anxiety and stress or do counselling psychology graduate students have unique issues? Future studies utilizing this same technique then, could be done in other departments.

Summary and Conclusion

This exploratory study was done to determine the conditions that facilitate and hinder adjustment to graduate school. Flanagan’s (1954) critical incident technique was utilized. Nine categories emerged from the 227 incidents that were collected.

The first category, "reassurance of ability", was mentioned as a concern by many students. Students who were invalidated by a professor or fellow student reported feelings of discouragement and failure.

"Connective support", the second category, helped students to feel "part of the crowd". Students who did not feel connected felt lonely, alienated, and "outside of the clique".

The third category, "practical assistance", involved being able to obtain assistance with writing of theses/major papers, financial aid, and child care.

The fourth category, "flexibility", involved
professors allowing flexibility for students in developing their own counselling style.

The fifth category, "safe environment", involved being in places where students felt "relaxed" and at ease, where they did not fear being penalized for making mistakes.

The sixth category, "information being provided", involved the receiving of information relating to professors, course sequencing requirements, and the like.

The seventh category, "university/department services", involved being satisfied or dissatisfied with various services offered by the university.

The eighth category, "self planned activities", involved self-help ideas that students themselves utilized to adjust to graduate school.

The ninth category, "crisis-like events", covered a wide range of stresses and crises that range from being diagnosed with a serious disease to exam anxiety.

Previous investigators have outlined orientation programs, peer support groups, and stress management programs to help students to adjust to graduate school.


Utilizing Maslow’s (1970) theory of needs, it was discovered that students need to have their needs met, such as: food and shelter, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, knowledge, and to reach their potential in life, one of which is, to become better counsellors.

This study is only generalizable to other counselling psychology students who attend graduate school in the department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. Further research, therefore, is needed to confirm the results found in this study.
It is hoped, however, that despite this limitation, results from this study can still be utilized to help students adjust to undergraduate school as well as graduate school.
References


Appendix A

Initial Recruitment Letter

Department of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
5780 Toronto Road
Vancouver, B.C.
January 21, 1991

Dear

My name is Deveda Mah. I am currently conducting a study on adjustment for my masters thesis in the Department of Counselling Psychology at UBC. My supervisor is Dr. Larry Cochran and his telephone number is XXX-XXXX. I wish to discover the conditions that facilitate or hinder adjustment for graduate students in Counselling Psychology.

I plan to collect the information by conducting personal interviews. I need 20 people to be volunteers for this study and I hope that you are able to participate. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

The interview will take approximately 30 - 60 minutes. It will be audio-taped; however, all identifying information will be deleted to ensure confidentiality. The audio-tapes will be erased once the study is completed. You have the right to refuse to answer any question.

It is hoped that information gained from this study will provide some insight and ideas into helping students to adjust to graduate school. The results of this study will be available to all who participate.

I will contact you by telephone over the next two weeks, to discuss the possibility of setting up an interview time. Your participation will be helpful and valuable to my research. Please feel free to call me at XXX-XXXX if you have any questions. Thank you very much.

Yours sincerely,

Deveda Mah
Graduate Student
Department of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
Appendix B

Consent Form

I ________________________________ consent to participate in this study that investigates the Conditions That Facilitate And Hinder Adjustment For Graduate Students in Counselling Psychology. This study is conducted by Deveda Mah, a master's degree student in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia and supervised by Dr. Larry Cochran, Professor. This study will examine what conditions facilitate and what conditions hinder adjustment for students attending graduate school in the department of Counselling Psychology.

Information will be audio-taped during an interview. Some of the information will be transcribed from the tapes and placed into index cards at a later date. Identifying information will be deleted from all transcripts to ensure confidentiality. The person's identity will remain confidential. The tapes will be erased upon completion of the study. The amount of time required by you is between 30 to 60 minutes.

You have the right to refuse to answer any question and may also withdraw from the study at any time without consequences of any kind. Participation is voluntary.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE AND HEREBY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT OF THE CONSENT FORM AND ALL ATTACHMENTS.

Signature of Participator: ________________________________

Researcher: ________________________________
Appendix C
Biographic Data

PLEASE CIRCLE THE APPROPRIATE ANSWERS:

1. Gender: M  F

       40 - 44  45 - 49  50 - 54  55 - 59

3. Marital Status:
   Single  Married  Common-law  Separated  Divorced  Widowed

4. Number of Dependents: ______________

5. Title of degree you are pursuing:
   Master of Arts  Master of Education

6. Area of focus in your degree:
   - Elementary School Counselling
   - Secondary School/Adolescence Counselling
   - Community and Agency: Adult
   - Community and Agency: Family
   - Community and Agency: Gender Fair
   - Community and Agency: Cross-Cultural
   - Higher Education

7. Student Status: Full-time  Part-time

8. Is this your:
   - first year of graduate school
   - second year of graduate school

9. Year of entry into Graduate studies
Appendix D
Definition List

1. Connective Support

- A sense of comradery with fellow students
- Sense of support and understanding from professors friends and or family members.
- Being with others who are in the same boat as they are, like "misery loves company".
- Lack of comradery
- Having to adjust to a move to Vancouver to attend UBC

Critical meaning: a sense of feeling connected and or being "supported" by others.

Common meaning: a sense of feeling "in tune", "understood", "supported", or "one of the team".

Lack of connective support is often associated with feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, isolation, a sense of disconnection, a sense that one is an "outsider".

Affiliation with others experiencing similar feelings and experiences, therefore, appears to be important to a sense of comfortableness and well-being.

2. Reassurance of Ability

- Being encouraged that one had the skills to be a good counsellor
- Being evaluated in such a way that one had the skills to be a good counsellor.
- Getting feedback framed in a constructive positive manner that validates the person.
- Being discouraged, or undermined regarding one’s skills and or capabilities
- Being unfairly evaluated

Critical meaning: Being assured that one had the skills to be a good counsellor.

Common meaning: needing to be reassured that one did not just had the skills to be a good counsellor, but to be a good graduate student as well.

If discouragement or invalidation of one’s abilities occurs, negative self-talk often sets in, when students feel undermined by professors and or peers.
3. **Practical Assistance**

- Obtaining "actual assistance" for academic papers
- Assistance with course advising
- Assistance with finances (bursary, scholarship etc.)
- Assistance with child care
- Assistance with looking for a practicum placement

**Critical Meaning:** being able to obtain "actual" assistance of some kind, be it for term papers, housing, child care or money problems.

**Common Meaning:** being able to get help greatly increases a sense of ease and adequacy.

4. **Flexibility**

- professors allowing students freedom to develop one’s own counselling style
- professors providing extensions due to crisis situations
- being forced to follow a certain philosophy of counselling (narrow focus)
- being penalized for having one’s own ideas

**Critical meaning:** flexibility is allowed for, in various situations.

**Common meaning:** satisfaction occurs when professors express "concern" by offering flexibility.

5. **Safe Environment**

- safe supportive learning environment
- environment where it was safe to make mistakes
- freedom to disclose re: self
- not necessarily "physical" environment, but "psychological" environment, generated by a person (prof or family member) where one could feel safe and out of harm’s way, out of a danger zone.

**Critical meaning:** a feeling of safety, where one felt free to express one’s ideas and where they felt free to be "oneself".

**Common meaning:** feeling safe and comfortable, while expressing oneself.

6. **Information being provided**

- being notified that one was accepted into grad school
- obtaining info about professors
- being able to obtain vital information of some kind,
appears to be crucial to the well-being of many students.

**Critical meaning:** being able to obtain crucial "needed" info of some kind, that is deemed important to the student.

**Common meaning:** that info is power; that with knowledge about certain issues or certain people, the person tends to feel less intimidated.

7. **University/department services**

- being satisfied with services offered by either the department or university
- being satisfied with timing of courses
- being satisfied with requirements of courses, such as writing papers instead of having to write exams.

**Critical meaning:** satisfaction or lack of satisfaction with the department and or services offered by the university.

**Common meaning:** being treated well by various personnel helps to increase satisfaction.

8. **Self pre-planned activities**

- being involved in hobbies, exercise, time management
- planning one's own ideas re: adjusting to university and academic pressures

**Critical meaning:** self-planned activities enhances a sense of control over their environment.

**Common meaning:** helps students to feel better, physically and psychologically - satisfaction increases when these activities are undertaken. Helps one to deal with the stresses of school.

9. **Crisis-like events**

- losing a loved one
- being diagnosed with a life-threatening disease
- experiencing exam anxiety

**Critical meaning:** involves a sense of fear, anxiety, and helplessness that students experience when crises occur.

**Common meaning:** overall sense of bewilderment, fear and loss of control.