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STRESS, COPING, AND ADAPTATION  
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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
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the Australian National University

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Originality of thesis

Except where otherwise acknowledged,  
this thesis is my own original work.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Deborah Terry".

Deborah J. Terry

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## ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to determine the utility of a proposed model of family stress. For individual family members it was proposed that the level of strain (or subjective stress) in response to an event is related to (a) person variables, including importance of the event, beliefs about internal or external control, anticipated difficulty of the event, and familiarity with the event; (b) situational variables including ambiguity and timing of the event; and (c) accumulation of recent and concurrent stressors. It was also proposed that adaptation to the event depends on the level of strain, the type of coping behaviours utilised, and the extent of the person's coping resources--individual, marital, and social. For couples, it was proposed that their mean scores on the predictors and also the discrepancy between their scores on these same predictors affect their mean collective scores on the dependent variables (strain and adaptation).

A longitudinal study of 123 couples during the transition to parenthood was undertaken to examine the utility of the proposed model of family stress. When the individual marital partner was considered as the unit of analysis, the distinctive predictors of strain were the importance attributed to the event, its anticipated

difficulty, the extent of role ambiguity, and the experience of recent and concurrent stressors. Also, as expected, high levels of strain and emotion-focussed coping emerged as distinctive predictors of poor adaptation. There was, however, little support for the hypothesis that problem-focussed coping facilitates adaptation to new parenthood. The data provided mixed support for the hypothesis that an individual's coping resources would produce a high level of adaptation. This support was largely evident in relation to the individual resources of self-esteem and morale and tended to support the additive model that, irrespective of the level of stress, coping resources have direct effects on well-being, rather than an interactive effect of buffering the individual against stress.

When the couple was considered as the unit of analysis, the data provided general support for the expectation that mean couple scores influence collective scores on the measures of strain and adaptation. These results largely replicated those obtained when the individual was the unit of analysis. But there was little evidence for the effect of discrepancy scores; that is, the levels of strain and adaptation were generally not affected by discrepancies between characteristics of the spouses.

An additional study of heart attack patients and their spouses was undertaken to determine the extent to which the results obtained from the new parents would generalise to the effects of another stressor. The data obtained from the two studies were comparable when either the individual or the couple was used as the unit of analysis.

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