Maren Hermansen

Stress, coping and its complex relationship

A qualitative and explorative study of two student's experiences with stress and coping.

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Sammendrag

Studenter preges av desto dårligere mental helse og psykiske helseplager. Stress har vist sammenhenger med psykisk og fysisk sykdom, som vekket en interesse for tema. I denne eksplorerende studien, undersøkes studenters opplevelser av stress og deres mestringsstrategier. Gjennom to dybdeintervjuer diskuteres to ulike erfaringer og historier om stress sammen med teori fra feltet. Avhandlingen ønsker å bidra med kunnskap om stress i praksis hos studenter, utforske hva som påvirker stress og hvordan fenomenet igjen påvirker oss. Målet er at slik kunnskap og forståelse kan bidra med nyttige innsikter for både enkeltmennesker og hjelpere som møter mennesker preget av stress. Funnene i studien presenteres som to historier: 1) En historie hvor livet aldri er stressfritt, der stress er negativt og bare kan unnslippes dersom man rømmer fra det. 2) En historie av stress som avhenger av situasjonen, hvor stress kan være spennende, men også slitsomt og kaotisk, og kan ofte håndteres ved å ta tilbake kontrollen. Det argumenteres for at stress påvirkes av flerfoldige faktorer, for eksempel bakgrunn, sårbarheter, tidligere erfaringer og tankemønster, som gjør det hensiktsmessig å behandle hver historie av stress individuelt. Hjelpere kan dermed best bidra dersom klienter behandles som mysterier, heller enn mønstre av stress. Videre postuleres det at økt bevissthet av stress og mestring kan bedre mestringsstrategier, i tillegg til å forebygge psykiske problemer.

Abstract

Students report decreased mental health and psychological health issues. Stress has shown connections to psychological and physiological sickness, which caused an interest in the topic. In this explorative study, students' experiences of stress and their coping strategies are investigated. Through two in-depth interviews, two different experiences and stories are discussed together with theory from the field. The master thesis wants to contribute with knowledge about student's stress experiences in practice, explore what affects stress and how the phenomena further affect us. The goal is that such knowledge and understanding can provide useful insights for both individuals and helpers who meet people characterized by stress. The findings of the study are presented as two stories: 1) A story where life is never stress free, in which stress is seen as negative and can be handled by escaping from it. 2) A history of stress depending on the situation, where stress can be exciting but also tiring and chaotic, and is handled by regaining control. It is argued that stress is affected by many factors, such as people's background, vulnerabilities, past experiences and thought patterns, which make it appropriate to treat each story of stress individually. Helpers can thus best help if clients are treated as mysteries, rather than patterns of stress. Furthermore, it is postulated that increased awareness of stress and coping can improve coping strategies, and often also prevent mental health problems.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has finally come to an end, and it has been six intense, interesting and stressful months. During this time I have accumulated knowledge both in terms of academic benefits, but the process itself has also given me wisdom about my own coping mechanisms connected to stress. The research could not have been carried out had it not been for a few persons that deserve special thanks:

First of all I want to thank my informants, who have bravely disclosed stories and thoughts open and honestly. Your insights stand as important and interesting links between theory and practice. Further I want to thank patient friends and family, who have been supporting me unconditionally when I seemed to lose faith in myself. Thank you Sigvart, for consoling and consulting me through this chaotic process, for being patient, and for always bringing your contagious smile. I also want to thank my supervisor, and every professor who have provided wisdom, growth and challenges in our master program.

And lastly, a big thank you to my incredible classmates, in which each and every one of you have inspired me, and still fill me with tears of gratefulness.

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1 Introduction

> *To discover does not mean to see, but to uncover*
> *sufficiently that many can see and continue to see*
> *forever.*
>
> (Selye, 1956, p. 33).

Everyone experiences stress, and people may have limited knowledge and awareness of in the way it affects our lives. This research is testing a new pair of glasses, trying to see things from the perspective of stress. I am not alone in choosing to research such a popular topic, although this thesis is an attempt to explore and investigate the phenomenon beyond the popular conceptions prominent in society and myself. Through taking such a perspective, new knowledge of situations and a new world may appear.

1.1 Background for stress as a topic, and research question

The interest in stress started taking root when one of my dearest friends was being sick continuously one semester. She kept being stressed about her studies, and eventually got hospitalized in the middle of exams. It was never clear what was wrong physically, but we both agreed that the illness was due to the severe stress she had experienced. I hence started reading a book about stress, "When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress" by Gabor Maté (2017). This opened up a world where stress was in focus, which could not be unseen (Selye, 1956), that I wanted to learn more about. Given my sparse and limited knowledge about the topic before the project, this study has been exploratory in nature (Tjora, 2017). Explorative studies include openness towards data, often through inductive methods and open-ended interviews (Hollstein, 2011). Having seen the severities stress could cause, and especially how stress affected students, I was triggered to know more and explore the phenomenon. My research question soon emerged as:

> *How is stress experienced by students, and which coping strategies do they employ to*
> *deal with it?*

In my approach I did not suspect (nor look for) one clear answer, given that people might experience and handle things differently. What I wanted was to gain insight, hear stories, experiences, backgrounds and knowledge about the phenomenon, in order to understand it better in the sense of someone else's world.

1.2 Purpose and relevance

The reason for studying stress may already be apparent and obvious. First of all, it is important to study in relation to sickness and serious diseases. Maté (2017) found evidence that unconscious stress and suppressed emotions affect our immune system, which makes stress worthwhile exploring. Second, the motivation for studying students in particular is due to their bad mental health and its connection to stress. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (Mental Health, 2004). Stress and coping affects and is a part of student's psychological health, and research shows that students' mental health is worse than the rest of the population. The *Students' Health and Wellbeing Study 2018* (SHoT), with over 50.000 respondents (Norwegian students), shows that one in four students (29%) are struggling psychologically, in which only 16% reported the same in 2010 (Knapstad, Heradstveit & Sivertsen, 2018). At the same time, as little as four out of ten students report having a *good quality of life*, and one out of five students have *seriously considered taking their lives*. Further the report shows that every third student qualifies for having a *diagnosis of insomnia* and the same numbers of students are doing everything they can *to avoid disappointing their parents*. Stress affects our mental health, and can lead to higher levels of depression, feelings of hopelessness and suicides to name a few (Ciarrochi, Deane, & Anderson, 2002; Maté, 2017). Students are important to study not only because of the alarmingly high numbers of psychological issues, but because student's experiences of stress and how they cope eventually holds the key to solving their own challenges.

Additionally, with the world developing boundlessly and constantly changing, post-modern organizations are expecting us to be available and able to work anywhere and keep giving round the clock, which causes more stress than having a predictable environment (Brinkmann, 2017). Social media also makes us available all the time, causing continuous exposition to

comparison, in which everyone else seems to be doing better, leaving us less satisfied with our own lives. In the SHoT report, 86 percent of the students stated they were having at least one issue with social media, whereas the majority reports that the problem is being available all the time (63%) – even after bedtime (Knapstad et al. 2018). Being constantly available to our friends, family and work, might make it more difficult to set stressful situations aside than before.

With student's mental health worsening, and fatal consequences such as suicide or deadly diseases being present (Maté, 2017; Knapstad, Heradstveit & Sivertsen, 2018), knowledge about stress might be considerably important looking into. In helping professions, counselors, coaches or social workers can benefit from being aware of the possible realities of stress. Additionally, as friends and family practicing informal counseling (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015), knowing about its fatal consequences can possibly prevent them. This master thesis is an attempt to contribute with knowledge, hopefully creating awareness towards the phenomenon, seeing how it works and how it might affect us.

1.3 Further structure

My exploration of stress is divided into chapters following my research process quite chronologically. Firstly, in chapter two, I look into established theories based on substantial research, which was where my interest started. Given the quantity of literature and opinions of my given research topic, I chose to stick to a few theorists having influenced the area significantly, such as the work of Selye (1956) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Further I review my methodological choices in approaching this master thesis, retracing the steps that I took as a researcher. In chapter four the different data is outlined and I will present the two interviews separately from each other as two stories: "Life is never stress-free" and "stress depends on the situation". A discussion follows, which connects the previous parts together, and I discuss stress and coping with regards to the informant's experiences together with theory. Lastly there are some concluding comments, including limitations and advantages of this study and how it might contribute as a general opened awareness of stress, especially in counseling or other helping relationships. Throughout the thesis there will be given examples and extracts from the interviews, not just to make it interesting, but also to connect the theory with my findings, alongside keeping the reader close to the research.

2   What is stress?

> *No one can live without experiencing some degree of stress all the time. You may think that only serious disease or intensive physical or mental injury can cause stress. This is false. Crossing a busy intersection, exposure to draft, or even sheer joy are enough to activate the body's stress-mechanism to some extent. Stress is not even necessarily bad for you; it is also the spice of life, for any emotion, any activity causes stress. But, of course, your system must be prepared to take it. The same stress which makes one person sick can be an invigorating experience for another*
>
> (Selye, 1956, vii/preface).

One of the first theorists to write about stress, which is still frequently cited, devoted his whole life to studying stress. In 1956, Hans Selye released his many year's worth of work in a book, called *The Stress of Life.* He discovered biological reactions in the body when being exposed to different kinds of environments, in which he noticed what he described as an alarm system being activated. Living organisms activated this system under conditions being a threat to the organism's normal state of being. He found that the system had an adaptive and resistant function when handling threatening situations, instead of being "handled" or killed by the threat. Selye (1956) experimented on animals, and measured heightened stress responses when being exposed to both psychological and physiological strains. Stress is therefore, according to Selye, reactions in form of emotions and bodily functions, protecting and adapting us together with unknown stimuli. These might be both positive and negative stressors, causing us to react proportionally to the level of threat, and enabling us to return to our normal state of being once the situation is overcome (Selye, 1956).

Some years later, Lazarus and Folkman published the work *Stress, appraisal, and coping* (1984). Lazarus and Folkman treat stress more outside of biology, as something causing cognitive changes in us. In their book, stress is something in our environment seen as *stressors*, which creates an emotional *response* in us. They postulate that defining stressors and responses independently from each other, would be inadequate in order to explain what stress is. The two phenomena are related to each other, because stressors don't exist if there is no reaction or response to define it as something stressful, and without the stressor there would be no reaction: "A stimulus is a stressor when it produces a stressful behavioral or

physiological response, and a response is stressful when it is produced by a demand, harm, threat or load" (1984, p. 15). Therefore, stress is defined in this way: "Psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (1984, p. 19). The authors ascribe great meaning to the psychological assessment, referred to as *appraisal*, which add another dimension to stress. According to them, humans assess if something is a threat, on the basis of earlier experiences and patterns of reactions, similar to classical conditioning. Threats (stressors) are thus considered (appraised) individually, and depending on the resources the person mobilizes, an action (reaction) follows as a result of this process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moldjord, 2016).

Some disagree with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) excessive emphasis on the cognitive process stress involves, while undermining the physiological role of stress. Ursin and Hytten (1992, p. 2) state that "behavior affects physiology, and physiology may also affect behavior". Maté (2017) also shows the connection between stress and physiology. Through his many experiences as a doctor and researcher, he discovered a clear link between stress and sickness. He especially found that repression of emotions, and inability to act true to oneself (by sometimes saying no), was related to development of deadly and chronic diseases. This again makes some coping or defense mechanisms harmful in the long run when dealing with stress if it consists of a repressed self. For Maté (2011, p. 7), emotions and the body are interrelated, and he hence defines stress as:

> *A complicated cascade of physical and biochemical responses to powerful emotional stimuli. (...). Repression—dissociating emotions from awareness and relegating them to the unconscious realm–disorganizes and confuses our physiological defences so that in some people these defences go awry, becoming the destroyers of health rather than its protectors.*

Stress hormones staying in the body for a long time, will have effects on our immune system, health and wellbeing (Maté, 2017; Selye, 1956; Moldjord, 2016). Unless killing us, stress can lead to exhaustion, sickness or adaptation (Selye, 1956). The phenomena is seen slightly differently between the researchers, and in order to learning as much as possible of stress, every theory can provide important knowledge: Stress can be treated as a positive and negative bodily reacting system with possibilities to adapting to circumstances (Selye, 1956),

it can be threatening for us if the reactions are suppressed (Maté, 2017), and it can be dependent on how we assess these threats (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In the search for ways of handling stress, I have looked into literature describing *coping*. Based on the literature on stress, it became evident that the relationship between what causes stress, and our reaction to it, is closely connected. What people do when they meet "the stress of life", can determine mental and physical health. Therefore it was interesting to look into what and why people act in certain ways in particular stressful situations, and how it affects their lives.

2.1   Coping with "the stress of life"

Reactions to stress may be called coping. Moskowitz (2001, p. 312) defines coping as "efforts to deal with demands perceived as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". This is in accordance to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) theory, which further the phenomenon by saying coping depends on how we *appraise* threats. Appraisal means the continuous and individual evaluation of stimuli: "cognitive appraisal can be most readily understood as the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31). Again, the relationship between stressors and reactions are highlighted, making coping and stress inseparable concepts. The cognitive evaluation involves determining how big the risk is, and how to overcome the stress reaction being elicited in accordance to this risk. This process may happen unconsciously, and patterns of evaluations develop through time. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) are therefore careful to distinguish coping from "automatized adaptive behavior", in which coping requires *effort* and is being done purposefully, as opposed to something *automatic* – like driving a car. The divide between the two can be confusing, given that our cognitive "styles" also consist of internalized defense and coping mechanisms, being formed through life, effectively combating obstacles.

 There are different ways and styles of coping, and some have tried differentiating between these. For instance, Vaillant (1997) distinguishes between mature and immature ones. According to him, immature mechanisms may include fantasizing, projections and passive-aggressive behavior, while mature coping mechanisms will include altruism, anticipation and humor. Altshuler and Ruble (1989) makes another divide in coping, separating behavioral

from cognitive distractions in uncontrollable stress situations. Behavioral distractions will include physical avoidance, or directing energy elsewhere than what is causing stress, whilst cognitive distractions is the ability to switch focus in the situation and think about something else. Both theories – coping as being more or less mature, or coping as distractions from reality, sounds restrictive when researching the phenomenon. Firstly, avoidance is one way of coping, but one should not ignore other strategies. Secondly, coping mechanisms cannot be regarded as better or worse objectively. In a situation were bad economy is causing stress for instance, I would not define altruistic behaviors (such as giving money to charity) as a mature way of coping…

Further, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) makes an interesting divide between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, with its different strategies of overcoming stress. Emotion-focused strategies are ensuring a stable self, for example seeking support, using humor or avoiding certain people we don't feel like meeting. Problem-focused coping on the other hand, are efforts to control or stabilize the surroundings. This may include more practical attempts at solving tasks – including planning, preparation, studying, time distribution etc. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping does not necessarily mean that situations are handled in a "good" way, but taking care of ourselves as best can in the long run: "coping should not be equated with mastery over the environment; many sources of stress cannot be mastered, and effective coping under these conditions is that which allows the person to tolerate, minimize, or ignore what cannot be mastered" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 140). Take the loss of a loved one - there is nothing to be done, and good and bad strategies may be necessary and favorable in the given context. Further, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) view coping as a cognitive and conscious process. Seeing that coping is not something I have thought much about myself, even in my counseling studies, I did not feel like their theory was adequate for explaining what coping can be. Unless having a well-developed awareness, coping is not necessarily something we "control", think about or do on purpose when being in a stressful situation. In my opinion, most people act upon situations without thinking about how and why, which led me to further seek what coping might be. Ursin and Hytten (1992) agrees with my view, of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) having an overly focus on the cognitive appraisal, treating coping as something independent of physiological changes. They define coping as "established positive response outcome expectancies" (p. 174), which means a person will act from experience, doing what he or she normally would expect to be the best in a situation. People's responses to situations are dependent on whether their resources

assumingly affect the outcome positively (coping), negatively (hopelessness) or not at all (helplessness) (Ursin & Hytten, 1992).

Coping and defenses may sound similar in function, which can be confusing. The researchers Maricutoiu and Crasovan state that "coping and defences are synonymous" (2016, p. 83). They point out that both defense and coping is about protecting ourselves from negative influences, and promote well being. By coping strategies the authors refer to "actions individuals use to deal with stressful experiences" (2016, p. 84). Freud's concepts of defensive mechanisms on the other hand, are unconscious ways of dealing with threats towards the ego (Maricutoiu & Crasovan, 2016). In this thesis, a further distinction between the concepts will not be discussed, and at times defense mechanisms will be used as a synonym to coping, which is the primary topic of research in connection to the phenomenon of stress.

2.2   How can stress be connected to counseling?

Counseling consists of a helping situation and relationship where a person can get help in realizing his or her true potential (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015). In order to do so, a helper (coach, therapist, counselor) must be able to gain trust, which can be done through active listening, creating report and confront eventual incongruities within a person (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015; Kvalsund, 2003). Through a relationship based on trust, empathy and respect, a helper can support the client in regaining control of his or her life (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015). The notion of stress, as something exceeding one's coping capacities, can cause serious diseases and mental disorders if one fails to cope over a long period of time (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maté, 2017). Counseling can contribute to identifying what is causing stress, and may perhaps prevent a person getting further out of control, by taking back control of the self (Kvalsund, 2003). By introducing an *awareness* of stress and how it affects life, one can avoid being subject to inner processes by taking informed decisions about ourselves in relation to the world (Ivey, D'Andrea & Ivey, 2012; Jordan, 2001). *Awareness* can be defined as "the most basic experience of consciousness" (Brown, 2009, p. 202), and *self-awareness* is our ability to reflect and direct our attention upon ourselves, for instance our emotions, desires and cognitive processes (Jordan, 2001). In order for a client to grow, a broadened awareness can be provided in counseling, and leading to conscious processing rather than letting it swell up inside (Brown, 2009).

3   Methodology

Qualitatively oriented researchers are willing to change both theory / hypothesis, method and what may be data during the study period

(Wadel, 1991, p. 129)

This chapter reviews the research process in this project, which has consisted of a qualitative approach. I start by emphasizing the qualitative paradigm and why it suited this project given my epistemological and ontological standpoint. Thereafter I will explore how I got access to informants, and the ethical dilemmas I faced. Further I problematize writing in a language different than the empirical data and transcripts, and lastly look into the way I analyzed the material with support from the stepwise deductive-inductive method (Tjora, 2017).

3.1   Qualitative Research and Standpoints

What initiated my thesis question, *how is stress experienced by students, and which coping strategies do they employ to deal with it,* was an *interest* in a topic I had little knowledge about from before. This resulted in choosing an explorative and qualitative approach, which allowed me to approach the question with freedom as to how to obtain the material that I sought (Tjora, 2017; Wadel, 2007). Qualitative methods enable researchers to have a flexible design, making it possible to change course on the basis of different data emerging (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Thagaard, 2013; Wadel & Wadel, 2007). For instance, after conducting one interview, I could change my interview guide slightly – improving it before the next. Such inconsistencies may be explained by the fact that "good social science is problem driven and not methodology driven in the sense that it employs those methods that for a given problematic, best help answer the research questions at hand» (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242).

I wanted to study individual worldviews and constructions of stress as a phenomena, which coincides with the view of constructionism or phenomenology, as approaches towards developing facts about phenomena in the world (Tjora, 2017). *Constructionism* perceives knowledge as socially constructed, as a result of different social factors, co-creating certain interpretations of reality (Thagaard, 2013; Tjora, 2017). *Phenomenology* has its basis in the subjective, first hand perspective, forming people's experience and interpretations of phenomena (Ivey et al., 2012; Thagaard, 2013; Tjora, 2017). This type of approach seeks

"backstage" knowledge about stress and coping, as experienced by informants (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Thagaard, 2013). Additionally, I use elements from *narrative theory*, giving the presentation of stories to explain the informants' plot in the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). *In-depth* interviews are especially fruitful as a method with these particular standpoints (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By being open and giving informants room to explain and tell stories in the interview situation, one is allowing the informant to express and reveal their understanding and meanings of the world (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Tjora, 2017). I was interested in how my informants experienced and defined stress, which makes my type of facts deviate from something factual "out there", like positivists see it (Silverman, 2006). Stress is not something objective - it cannot be defined in one way and stress factors may differ from person to person. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define it as a relationship, between a subjective stressor and a subjective reaction - between inner and outer conditions (Selye, 1954). I see stress varying individually – something that cannot be defined independently of context (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and with in-depth interviews I could best explore the subjective experiences and logics of stress.

3.1.1 Two in-depth interviews

As a person, I consider myself to easily talk to people at a deeper level, and I find much excitement in this. Therefore, when choosing how to gain material containing stress, in-depth interviews were an easy choice. In-depth interviews can be used in order for informants to reflect about something specific, in a conversation floating freely. Further the goal could be exploring someone's subjectivity and meaning making systems (Tjora, 2017). Additionally, interpretations, values and actual experiences, are best available in qualitative methods, and open-ended interviews especially (Silverman, 2006). I used a semi-structured interview, meaning that I had questions I wanted answers to, but no specific or strict order for these. I used an interview guide (see Attachment 3), to guarantee relevant material, but also wanted the informant to create diversions. The prepared questions were guidelines, but digressions from these where regarded as advantageous rather than problematic (Silverman, 2013).

Some qualitative scientists would argue that two informants are insufficient to answer how students experience stress in general. Most theories opt for three or more informants or until a level of saturation is reached, where no new information seems to appear (Tjora, 2017). Contrary, I used two informants, which I treated like key informants, because they provided

rich information and confessed both deep thoughts and emotions (Silverman, 2013a; Wadel & Wadel, 2007). The amount of research material conducted is not substantial to create new theory or claim that "students" follow certain patterns of stress and coping for instance. The two cases can however provide expert knowledge, meaning and practical information about the realities of stress, given that "predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 224).

3.1.2   Clean language

Prior the interviews, I had been inspired by a woman named Caitlyn Walker, who presents a method called "clean language" (TEDx Talks, 2012). Although the method was developed in purpose of therapy, the questions can also be used in interviews (Tosey, Lawley, & Meese, 2014). The method consists of using the client's or interviewee's own language as a basis for asking questions, without the interviewer imposing her own interpretations and worldviews. The goal is captioning experience as the interviewee sees it: "Clean Language pursues naturally occurring metaphors systematically and in greater detail (...), that provide more authentic and rigorous accounts of the way individuals experience" (Tosey et al., 2014, p. 639). The method can be said to be naturalistic, facilitative, phenomenological and humanistic in the way it validates the client's/interviewee's core experience in the process of bringing it into awareness (Tompkins & Lawley, 1997; Tosey et al. 2014). To best understand the phenomenon of stress, I thought such a language could be fruitful in getting more authentic experiences and stories, in addition to being aware of my own impact. This again, could enhance the transparency and rigor of the project (Tosey et al., 2014). Through basic counseling skills, like paraphrasing, repeating of words and rephrasing (Kvalsund, 2006), I saw that I had skills enabling me to test the method. I wanted to enter their world by playing their "game", seeing that "language exists as a type of game that exists and makes sense only in the context of the world created by speakers of the language" (Flaherty, 2010, p. 24). In practice this meant using words or metaphors already being used by the informant, without imposing my own words with an expectation of certain associations. It is impossible for language to be entirely "clean" (Tosey et al., 2014), but I tried limiting my inputs. Consequently, a researcher can extract rich and uninfluenced material by using this method. Here is an example from an interview ("C" being the informant Chris, and "MH" the researcher):

C: Yes… Stress can be chaotic

MH: What is it that is chaotic, or how does that look?

C: Hmm, how it looks… I just have to think of an example… If you have to hurry because you're doing something, and then it can be a chaotic experience because you don't know where the keys are, you don't know where… You may not have packed, you have a lot of things lying around and you have to find several things and catch something. Then I would say I am stressed, because things are chaotic. Another example of stress, that's not chaotic, is if the band's going to have a concert, and I am very nervous, dreading it and being afraid, but excited, then I can experience myself as being stressed, but it's more like an exciting feeling. So it doesn't have to only be chaotic, there are different forms of stress, and that's why I mean stress doesn't always have to be negative… If you're kind off flustered, either that things seems chaotic, or that you're excited, then… And all that has to do with stress, and so it's positive to stress sometimes.

By acting on the material that emerged, I got the opportunity to ask further and deeper into what I wanted to research. The method can feel a bit like going into a rabbit whole, with limited knowledge of what knowledge will appear. Luckily, I had an interview guide, guaranteeing me with relevant material, and helping me keep a red thread if I got uncertain of the direction leading me away from the topic. I also acted non-clean at several occasions, which was due to lack of training, and also the fact that I wanted certain knowledge about a certain topic, which again consisted of certain words, followed by certain associations and metaphors… The point here is, it is not passible to be a hundred percent clean, and given that an interview is a "conversation with a purpose" (Ringdal, 2001, p. 494), one must insert some input when steering the conversation. Asking clean questions also takes substantial training, and it can be applied at different levels (Tosey et al., 2014).

3.1.3 Diverging Qualitative Research Criteria - Validity and Reliability

The criteria of doing qualitative research are not agreed upon, which provides freedom, confusion and maybe less credibility or reliability for some. This section is dedicated to the research criteria reliability and validity, and why I don't follow these in demands in a quantitative way. Still, some may postulate that this project is both reliable and valid - it depends on what you put into these concepts.

When asking a qualitative scientist what "good" qualitative research is, one can get very different answers (Rolfe, 2006; Tracy 2010). There are several standpoints to take in this case, which may vary in line with the ontology and paradigms that the researchers hold true: "Unless we use the negative criterion of being 'non quantitative', there is no agreed doctrine underlying all qualitative social research. Instead there are many 'isms' that appear to lie behind qualitative methods" (Silverman, 2006, p. 56). A simple definition of reliability for instance, is difficult finding, because the qualitative paradigm is not united about the criteria (Tracy, 2010; Silverman, 2006). Some are holding it true that the criterion of validity and reliability should be used in the same sense as quantitative (Denscombe, 2002; Kirk & Miller, 1986). This entails that the criterion could be defined as such: "Reliability relates to the methods of data collection and the concern that they should be consistent and not distort the findings. Generally it entails an evaluation of the *methods* and techniques used to collect the data" (Denscombe, 2002, s. 100). The problem is that the criterion of reliability is developed to guarantee safe replication of results – being able to produce the same data over and over again (Ringdal, 2001). In qualitative methods an interview is neither possible to replicate nor is it desirable (Fog, 2004; Golafshani, 2003).

Other scientists are claiming we should have the same criteria as in the quantitative paradigm, but these should convey a different meaning (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010; Golafshani, 2003). The criterion *reliability* could for instance be defined as *dependability*, which can be achieved through an open showing of data and research steps (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). Given that our goal in the qualitative paradigm is to understand, replicating or reproducing results to get consensus would be unfavorable in the search for depth and meaning (Golafshani, 2003; Fog, 2004). In this project, the criterion of dependability is regarded as important, but I operate with the term *transparency*, which can be confusing.

Further, others call for the need for concepts and terms that is relevant for qualitative research alone (Brinkmann, 2012; Tracy, 2010; Fog, 2004), suggesting "credibility" instead of reliability, and replacing validity with "rigour" for instance (Tracy, 2010). Rolfe (2004) on the other hand, proposes not having any common criteria at all. He claims that every research project should be judged individually, and on the basis of ontological and epistemological grounds - needing differentiated approaches.

This jungle of criteria and their varying meaning may make it confusing to understand and navigate as a researcher. I have taken the standpoint of not using the terms *validity* and *reliability* - because it conveys a quantitative meaning for me. The motivation for this chapter is however to make my project as transparent and "thoughtful" as possible. Qualitative research provided the advantage of having freedom as a researcher conducting material, but in return I see it as my job to be honest and mindful about how my choices have indeed affected the finished result. Since validity and reliability may be irrelevant criteria in the qualitative paradigm, "trustworthiness" or "credibility" could be a better measure of good qualitative research (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010; Silverman, 2006). This can be properly done through self-reflection and documentation of the researchers steps (Fog, 2004; Golafshani, 2003), which I have tried doing through honest and open reflection. In addition to this, I have mainly focused this project around being open, ethical, transparent, reflective and rigorous. By this, I see it as important not to hide elements that may have affected the outcome of the project, but rather shine light on it and problematize or discuss it (Tjora, 2017). Transparency also conveys this, making it possible for the reader to follow the path I have taken in the project. The honesty and reflectiveness I wish to provide, is aiming for a trustworthy project, providing the details and context needed for the reader (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). In being ethical I imply the notion of following rules I have been given from NSD, and also following my own moral in protecting the informants. An ethical project should be confidential, respectful and based on trust (Tjora, 2017), which I will explain further at a later point. By rigor I am referring to Tracy's (2010) argument: "Researchers should evidence their due diligence, exercising appropriate time, effort, care, and thoroughness". I have had a goal of thoroughness, and although the time spent on the projects has been sufficient, one could always be even more thorough…

The methodological paradigm I have chosen provided freedom in terms of who to interview, how many to interview, what to ask and how to analyze. On the other side, I have also been stubborn - I wanted to ask clean questions, have a bottom-up analysis and ask someone who knows something about stress in depth. I have felt like failing, with mistakes being made, time being distributed unevenly, and methods being rearranged - which I have also accepted, because I knew this was going to be a slightly chaotic project (Tjora, 2017). Even though I have had some criteria in mind, these have not been unbendable rules. The reason why I ended up with these exact guidelines is most likely due to following my previous knowledge about qualitative research, alongside my "gut". Like Tracy (2010, p. 849) says, after

presenting her own eight "rules" for conducting good qualitative research: "While rules and guidelines are helpful, if it were really as straightforward as "eight simple criteria," there would be no magic, no surprises, and therefore no genius". Several researchers emphasize the unplanned and explorative nature of qualitative research in the same sense. Babbie (2004, p. 375, 376) refers to qualitative research in this way: "The activity we are about to examine is as much art as science. At the very least, there are no cut-and-dried steps that guarantee success". Wadel (1991, p. 129) calls it a "dance between theory/hypothesis, method and data", in which the researcher may not know the steps beforehand, but rather develops a path as he explores it. The freedom of doing this kind of research provides possibilities - one may find unexpected things simply by being open for this to occur. In this project, in-depth interviews opened up such a possibility. I could never had guessed which stories and meaning making systems the informants would talk about, and I could not have asked about these directly - I kind of got lucky. An example of this, could be when one of my informants mentioned using *fantasies* as a way of getting away from stress. I did not ask about this, but through clean questions, active listening and mutual support, he chose to tell me. I could tell this disclosure was sensitive or embarrassing from the way he stepped forward, and so I was supportive and interested while I kept digging. I found this way of coping, or story, very unique, and I'm very grateful that he dared to tell me such a personal and deep detail about the way he coped.

The incongruences and openness in qualitative research criteria may seem like good excuses to choose an "easy" method, (Tjora, 2017), with no plan or rules. In my case I simply believe in the strengths of qualitative methods - I believe in the possibility of finding the magic. Also, given my own personal strengths, I could provide the knowledge needed for reflection and openness, which I hold as an important principle. That being said, this qualitative project has been anything but "easy", sometimes I missed the notion of having a plan or a straightforward method towards finding the answers. The magical method of qualitative research has to be filled with patience and hard work, which I will explain further in my description of my experience with the analysis.

3.2   Getting access to informants with different roles.

Wadel and Wadel (2007) consider how different roles gain different *access* to information, and states that the researcher and informant should have *complementary* roles. It can be fruitful being aware of the roles one possesses, as well as being able to change between these. As a result, different data may emerge, because roles limit and affect situations differently (Wadel & Wadel, 2007; Silverman, 2011). As a scientist one should be aware of who one is, which roles one possesses and consequently how the knowledge affects the research project (Silverman, 2011). For instance, I am a student and I know how stress might feel, which makes me both a spectator and a participant in my own project (Wadel & Wadel, 2007; Silverman, 2011). By occupying the same role as I have chosen to research, I am allowed to embody and feel the focus of my project. This can be positive, because it allows me to know the "rules in the game", having first hand knowledge (Wadel & Wadel, 2007). It may also make me blind - by taking knowledge for granted and use categories already made (so called "pigeonholes"), instead of creating new ones and looking deeper into a phenomena (Wadel & Wadel, 2011; Silverman, 2011). At the same time, I may easier gain "depth", by skipping basic knowledge about phenomena and heading straight to the "core", because I am one of them.

In this project, there were several upsides of "being my own informant" (Wadel & Wadel, 2011). Firstly, it allowed me *access* to my informants, *physically*. In relation to my informants in the interview situation, I was a friend or acquaintance, I was a student at the same university, a researcher and a kind of counselor examining a sensitive topic: All of which contributed to getting information. Had I not been a friend, the informants would probably not have participated in the project in the first place. This is due to the responses that I got, and the one I didn't get. When asking my informant, who I have given the pseudonym "Andreas", if he wanted to participate in my project, I went through the social media Facebook. As a friend, this is the way I would communicate, and an email would feel wrong in this case. Later, when my informants wanted to participate, I sent information about the project on email, fulfilling the role of a researcher. I also tried writing a message to someone I am not friends with (not even on Facebook), but whom I have met a few times before. This person did not answer my message, in contrast to Andreas – who said he wanted to *help* me almost immediately. I asked three people, and the two that I have a relation to where the ones who wanted to participate. Had I not been good acquaintances or friends with them, I would not

have gotten access to them. Secondly, by being my own informant I could access my informants in depth *mentally*. With knowledge about how to approach the situation and "the rules of their game" (Flaherty, 2010), I was allowed into their worlds. Additionally, by using the role of a "counselor", "friend" or "interviewer" and making room for the informants' thoughts, they opened up in the situation (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). By knowing the field, terms, experiences and feelings within what I study, I can put myself in their place (Wadel & Wadel, 2011). When it comes to accessing my informants in depth mentally, the role as a "counselor", "friend" or "interviewer" have seemingly made room for the informants, gained trust and providing a situation where one can be open (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

When conducting interviews, and attempting to gain information about a possibly sensitive topic, I triangulated across roles. I found myself acting slightly like a counselor, somewhat of an interviewer and a friend. This shifting and confusion between the roles of an interviewer and a counselor was interesting, because I found there to be several similarities between the roles and relationships. My education, Science in Counseling, has provided me with communicational- and influential skills (Kvalsund, 2006), which I have practiced in order to get information from clients or coachees and be able to provide help. For counseling to be successful, one needs mutual trust, a symmetric and good relationship (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015; Whitmore, 2014). The quality of the counselor-client relationship is the most important factor in being helpful, which can be facilitated through open, mutual and including communication (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015). Similarly, the interview situation should consist of creating a relaxed atmosphere, where the informant openly can share and reflect upon personal experiences, and diversions are accepted and appreciated (Tjora, 2017). The researcher should try to lessen the potential asymmetry (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). I believe what caused the need to act counselor-like was the similarity of these situations. In counseling the goal is to help someone (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015) – often with sensitive or vulnerable topics. In this interview, and especially Andreas', I found myself in this known situation again. This role confusion resulted in a situation where I felt "tongue tied" or "sitting on my hands". As a counselor, I want to help someone sort their thoughts by active listening and challenging belief systems in an emphatic way. Whereas an interviewer I found myself only looking for information, and not supporting as much as I wanted to – as a person or counselor. Additionally, usage of clean language, which is both a method in therapy and interviewing, has shown to have effects in people's lives after an interview (Tosey et al., 2014). With this in mind, the boundaries between an interview and therapy may be skewed.

I resolved the inner conflict, or role confusion, by commenting on some of the sensitive situations after the tape recorder had been switched off. Then I could be a friend again. In general, having different tools in a conversation, I believed helped in order to understand and ask deep questions. I may also be oblivious and biased as a researcher, because I'm also a stressed-out student – but this knowledge also helped me know what to question, provided me with understanding, which again contributed to gaining trust and information.

3.3   Ethical Considerations

In any research project involving others, ethical dilemmas may occur. In this section I want to address the moral and ethical aspects of doing psychosocial research involving people in my network. I see my informants as *psychosocial*, because I am not reducing the experience of stress to either psychological or social reasons, but acknowledge interplay between these (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

The interviews were conducted with an informed consent, and with approval from NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Informed consent should ensure people's willingness of participating in a project, knowingly of the project's nature (Silverman, 2006). In this project, it meant giving information (see attachment 4: Informational sheet) in an understandable manner, to read before the day of the interview. I also explained what the project was about orally at the interview, before they signed with an understanding of what it meant to participate.

Anonymiation is an ethical principle used to safeguarding the informant's confidentiality (Silverman, 2006). This was done in practice through recording the interviews on a digital dictaphone, and storing them on an encrypted flash drive without connection to the Internet. The recordings were deleted after careful transcriptions were made, and the transcripts will be deleted after the project. Gender and specific information has also been changed to not reveal their identities, both in the transcript and especially in this finished product. The informants have further been given pseudonyms, "Andreas" and "Chris", which are fictive names and genders.

Ethics are something to continually consider, and dilemmas may occur after as well as before an interview (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010; Silverman, 2006). This is especially relevant for in-depth interviews, because one cannot really inform about the questions in advance (Silverman, 2006): "The varying social contexts of action mean that such guidelines cannot cover every situation that will arise. This means that you should always be alert to emerging ethical issues and confront them as best you can" (Silverman, 2006, p. 334). The interviews accessed stories I never asked for, and I regard it as their choice to tell me. They were informed about being able to resign at any time, but here relational aspects could come into play - did they say yes because they wanted to help a friend in need? I am alert of these issues, and choose to think they can make their own decisions, instead of diminishing their integrity.

Another example of continually considering ethics was the consideration of the chance of my informants getting "exposed". At least one of them revealed their participation in the project to common acquaintances, which made anonymization harder, given my small sample. This revelation is their choice, but it led me to conceal their gender along the way for instance. I did this by randomizing the gender. Additionally, I have changed or avoided mentioning what kind of work or activities they do, and what they study (Tjora, 2017). I did not want them to read this paper for instance and feel exposed, but rather think - "it might be me, but it could be anyone". Further, the informants could not have predicted the exact questions beforehand and their reaction to these (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). They have participated by free will, but later, when the project is published, they might not agree on the analysis, or even regret the participating in the project (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). For these reasons a continuous consideration of the ethics has been necessary. The fact that I know my informants from beforehand provides the advantage of making them able to contact me if they had any questions or thoughts, hopefully lowering the bar of being honest if they felt uncomfortable or regretted their participation. They might on the other hand have been eager to help, and therefore not do this.

3.4   Transcription and Translation

A transcript should simply convert an audio recording to a text format (Tjora, 2017), but it can also convey meaning (Silverman, 2013a). I therefore used Silverman's (2013a)

transcription symbols, to include the meaning in the informant's speech. No transcript can ever be "perfect", and depends on what knowledge one is seeking and practicalities, for instance the time one has (Silverman, 2006). The symbols and technique I chose are not very advanced, but indicate pauses, changes in vocal pitch or breathing for instance. When reading the transcript again, it was easier to understand, remember and imagine *how* things had been said. On the way towards the analysis, I saw this method of transcribing as especially useful, because it made me more aware of what the informants may have meant. This resulted in having tools making me capable of looking for meaning even then.

I thought long and hard about what language to write this thesis in. I wrote the transcription in the original language, Norwegian, but chose to write the actual thesis in English. The reason why I wrote the assignment in English was because the literature was in English. Some words do not translate well, like *coping* for instance (*mestring*, *takling* or *håndtering* in Norwegian). Another reason is that I found a solution that I was comfortable with, and so I took it. I translated the extracts or quotes that I needed, and attempted to convey the same meaning, which I saw as adequate for this project. The presented material in this thesis may however lose meaning and details for the reader (Silverman, 2006). On the other hand, I did not regard the details of the language and individual words as the source of knowledge. What seemed more interesting was meaning making systems, metaphors and the reality of stress experienced, in which I believe the translation conveys this type of meaning. Writing this now however, in hindsight I see some disadvantages in my choices. I wanted to base the thesis on the informant's experiences, their stories and meaning, but my choice of language may reflects a basis in theory. When starting to read about stress, it soon became clear that I had an interest in coping. Even though I used other words in the interview (*takling*, *håndtering* or *mestring*), I still think of the phenomenon as *coping*, which is not a word coming from the informants, but from theory. The theory did in fact form my view of the phenomenon I wanted to explore, but I also wanted it to, because otherwise I wouldn't have known what I was interested in. My answer to these cons, is that the qualitative method both allowed me to act in this way, and now makes me reflect upon what I have done. I don't see my choice of language as a barrier for conducting good research, but rather choose to think it can open up doors. One might say that we only know the things we have words for. Well, now I can think in twice as many words, which can widen my way of seeing stress.

3.5 Bottom-up analysis

For new knowledge to emerge, one will need to deconstruct and then reconstruct the data one has (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). Different theoretical perspectives, as well as academic and cultural background will affect the material extracted from a researcher, what questions one asks - and eventually what one sees (Tjora, 2017; Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). Given my search after experience, thoughts, feelings, emotions and stories off stress and coping, an inductive approach felt right. Inductive means research being driven by explorations and empirical findings, rather than using theory to explain and label what is found (Tjora, 2017). Certain methods, such as grounded theory, holds a principle of being theory-free before starting a project (Tjora, 2017), though operating fully inductive is almost impossible without any previous assumptions or conceptions (Silverman, 2006).

In this project, I used Tjora's (2017) "stepwise deductive-inductive method" (hereby referred to as the SDI-method) when analyzing the data. The method is similar to grounded theory, aiming to extract the essence of material and facilitate new ideas to flourish on these grounds. On the basis of empirically close codes and a bottom-up analysis, one avoids premature conclusions and "protect" the specific findings (Tjora, 2017, p. 198). It requires a close and detailed reading of data, but as a reward, the possibility of misinterpretation or overriding the informant decreases (Tjora, 2017). Of course, the qualitative researcher will affect what knowledge is produced in a study, which is why two people will not be able to gain the same information in an interview situation (Fog, 2004). At the same time, the analysis would not be more valid or correct had the informants corrected it (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). Our impact is not to hide, both qualitatively and quantitatively – our reasons for conducting a study and the way we angle its relevance will affect the outcome.

3.5.1 My process with the analysis

Already in the transcription I started analyzing my material. In qualitative methods there is not necessarily a clear divide between the transcription, analysis and data collecting (Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). When starting to analyze, it was difficult, because I had no plan, no recipe, and no tradition I wanted to use. I figured I would do the dance between theory, method and data as the process emerged (Wadel & Wadel, 2007).

My supervisor suggested reading my material naively at first, and then reading more closely and look for categories (in accordance to Lindseth & Nordberg, 2004) - and so I did. I saw it wise to read closely examining what the categories were *about*, look for the meaning, and then formed small categories. In doing so, I created categories that felt like mine, and not my informants'. I found categories before reading the material, and *scanned* the transcripts, "locating specific information within a text" (Hong, 2013, p. 2) that suited what I looked for. The method was easy and fast, but I did not operate inductively like I intended. I wanted the research to be footed in my informant's statements, and found Tjora's (2017) SDI-method in search for guidelines. I started over, starting with creating a table consisting of all the relevant statements (which was basically the whole interview) and made small direct extracts (codes) from these. I ended up having circa one hundred empirically close codes per interview, which I could not have made before reading the material (Tjora, 2017). At the first try I jumped right to conclusions (forming categories as a start and then looking for evidence), while the SDI-method worked the other way – from evidence to conclusions, from the bottom and upwards. Further I started grouping codes together thematically, making connections and forming a structure of the analysis (Tjora, 2017). The difference between the methods does indeed affect the data, ending up with different categories. The result and difference between the first and the second way of analyzing is markedly different, and can be depicted by showing how the categories developed in the first in contrast to the second try:

1. Stress creators, effects, consequences in life, strategies to meet the stress
2. "Life is never stress-free", stress is constant, stress has to be escaped from, stress is never positive.

The first group could have easily been created without any material, while the second could not. Further, what differentiates the two methods is the amount of work and chaos. The first method is a fast method, in which students develop competency – skimming and scanning a text when looking for answers (Hong, 2013): What in this interview indicated a stressor? What in the interview are effects of stress? Etc. The method is effective, and a top-down way of learning - gaining knowledge to fit into our prior information, and being able to predict what is studied (Hong, 2013). The SDI-method, leading to the second analysis, consisted of a thorough deconstruction, with no guarantee of what to find. The process of deconstruction was chaotic and messy, because everything is laid out without any structure. On one side, the method "having my back" felt ensuring in what I was doing, enabling me to withstand the chaos. On the other side, the analysis has been conducted and interpreted almost in isolation,

in which it could and maybe should be validated in coherence with others (Tjora, 2017). Not everyone is lucky enough to being part of research communities such as Tjora (2017) suggests though. Having people cross-checking my findings is something I would consider very useful, but unfortunately did not feel like an opportunity being present.

The next step according to Tjora (2017) was to form concepts and develop theory, in order to conceptualize and generalize, making the research relevance bigger than the purely descriptive. In my research, given its lack of magnitude and the explorative approach of a theme already heavily explored, I neither could nor felt the need to generalize and create theories. Further, I therefore went "solo" at this point, seeing that the theoretical method had helped sufficiently. By using the topics I had found, I created stories describing each interview – "life is never stress-free" and "stress depends on the situation". In the analysis, the findings of each category are forwarded, and I argue why I formed them the way I did.

4   Research findings – two stories of stress

This section will examine the findings that emerged from the process of conducting interviews and analyzing the following data. I will present what the informants talked about individually, with different characteristics of how stress may be experienced. The two interviews have been shortened down to two stories, describing the essence of what they were about. These will be presented at the start of each review, making it simpler to get acquainted with the material.

4.1   A story of life never being stress-free

The interview with Andreas is a story built upon the conception that "life is never stress-free", where stress is defined as being more than one can handle, and the experience of it cannot be positive. One can escape from it temporarily though, by different "escapes" (moving away from it, fantasizing, distracting oneself). This is built upon several statements and impressions during the interview, which I will elaborate further.

4.1.1   Stress is negative.

In the interview with Andreas we touched upon quite heavy experiences, and the conversation was filled with light laughter at first, but then turned serious and quite heartfelt, for me at least. The descriptions of stress, and its correlation to negative life experiences, led me to create this category. We talked about bullying and depression in the past, familial conflicts, daily struggles and experiences that had been stressful in general. All of which was negative. When asked if stress could also bear motivation with it, Andreas replied:

> *No not, not really, I am a bit more... could be a bit that I think I'm going to be stronger when I get through this, but nothing more than that, in that way, I don't see it as something positive, but then again I have had stress almost all my life, right, so I'm used to the feeling, it doesn't affect my day so that it stops me from going to school, or going to work or... doing what I have to do. The only person it affects is myself, because I isolate myself in my spare time.*

In this excerpt Andreas explicitly says stress is not positive, and given that the word "positive" has the antonym "negative", I see it as natural to assume stress is something

negative. He did never actually state directly that it was negative, but the experiences he described regarding stress, never seemed to be very pleasant ones. They were more often described as "hard times" for instance, which is commonly associated with something negative.

In the extract above it is not clear what "get through this" means. "This" could mean life itself, given that stress is always there. Maybe life for Andreas is about getting through it alive, given that he has had suicidal thoughts from before. Or maybe "get through this" could mean getting through school, given that he wants to move away afterwards. Either way, he believes in getting stronger once he has gone *through* the stress. Andreas has made it through stressful situations before, for instance when getting through bullying. This experience sounded difficult, and having gone through it must have required *strength*. One could interpret Andreas' experiences as both requiring strength, and accumulating strength. Like a person working out, and having muscular tissues expand, maybe the same picture can apply for a person having gone through severe stress – the more Andreas goes through, the more he can handle. He also mentioned experiences being "heavy" or "hard", which makes it sound like the stress gets heavier or piled up, like the weight added to a workout. After a while one is expected to be able to increase the weight and tolerate a heavier work out, and Andreas might think he can cope with more and more stress. After all, the stress in Andreas' life does not "break" him, he still manages to do his duties while being under much stress. At the same time, it sounds safe to say it does affect his life quality, because of the following emotions, behavioral consequences and effects on his physical sensations:

> MH: That sounds like a lot of stress in your everyday life, and you're noticing that it affects other things too…
> A: Yes, it affects everything really, my social life, eating habits, workout habits, school, everything.
> MH: How does it affect your social life, for instance?
> A: I get very enclosed, don't make much contact, I'm more by myself. It is partly to get distance from people, from stress… the stress they are giving me, so I rather take some time to myself just to unwind totally.

Andreas had experienced an array of feelings that accompanied the stress. For instance feeling restless, sometimes angry, he felt like things were hopeless, or could be frustrated. He also

described his feelings in metaphors: "like holding a time bomb", something "tearing" him apart, "gnawing on his mind", "hard times". These metaphors draw a picture and embody feelings he cannot describe with words. It could be interpreted as a feeling of unrest, frustration and hopelessness, all in which could be "heavy" feelings. His negative associations to stress, understandably makes stress unwanted, but at the same time he treats stress as inevitable. This dilemma, of stress always being there, and it being negative, is probably why Andreas feels like it is one situation after another, and that "life is never stress-free". Stress for Andreas seems hopeless indeed. He talked about having to "push down the stress and the irritation", and that stress was "manifesting in his body". It sounds like stress is something inside of him, filled with energy, almost bubbling over, but not quite, because he manages it in his alone time. The stress of life in Andreas' life has come to stay, and it has come to make him sure he is never at rest, nor peace, except in his fantasies. The sensation of stress gets described with words having negative connotations, which could vary with the eye of the beholder. Although, I think we can agree that Andreas associates it with something unpleasant. It does not seem like Andreas is happy where he is because of the stress in his life. He states that he has "no familial love" anymore, he wants to move far away to a house in the woods, and he does not want to be present mentally in his job. He talks about "distracting" himself, and mentions wanting to "disconnect" or "unwind" at different times, which I will look further into.

4.1.2 Stress has to be escaped from.

Stress has many consequences in Andreas' life. Not only did he have physical and psychological effects on him, but it also caused him to behave in a certain way. When dealing with it, he tends to isolate himself or fantasize about being in another place or world - trying to disconnect in a way:

> *MH: Which method do you use if you are very, well, if there is a lot of stress and you're going to work for example?*
> *A: Then there isn't a special method really, the best to do in a situation like that is probably to listen to music on the way to work, and disconnect, disconnect with that and… My head is… it is a little eh… What can I say, there is a lot of thoughts in here, it is a lot of fantasies, so what I do at work or on my way to work, is that I like having music in one ear, and listen to some music that triggers my imagination, so in my head*

there is constantly worlds and stories and stuff which I play out myself and I just
fantasize myself away into another world like that.
MH: Aha, so you're kind of dreaming yourself away from the situation you are in?
A: Yes, basically

The transcript here implies that Andreas somehow wants to escape stress. People are causing him stress, and by avoiding them he also avoids the stress. By letting his mind wander, it seems like he is not conscious of the people around him, though they are still there. He isolates himself to get a break from stress and people, and when the stress is actually there, he can still let his mind wander and escape it. This may be his way of seeking isolation when being around people. This technique allows him not only to forget about the people who has the possibility of making him stressed, he can also get on with his life. The same goes for sleeping. When Andreas has trouble sleeping, because he is stressed, he listens to music and makes his mind unwind. Focusing on something else than the situation at hand seems like a coping mechanism working for Andreas, but maybe not solving his situation. Maybe the situation cannot be solved; perhaps the only way to live is by learning to shut certain things out. When asked how he manages to do life's duties, he answers with being on "autopilot", which could mean "zoning out" while still doing everything he is supposed to. It may seem zombie or robot like, and it seems as if tasks are managed while he is unconscious in a way. Additionally, a zombie or a robot don't have feelings and emotions, which might be why he choose to act on autopilot – not to feel the "weight" of these.

In dealing with stress, Andreas also "found comfort" in knowing that other people are having the same struggles, either through common knowledge, or by intentionally reading about people's stories online. The fact that he needs consolidation from his own situation makes me think that the escape may not be enough, but he also needs *support*:

So it is a little comforting too, that people feel the same way, I have even gone online
and read about people's problems and seen that they're kind of thinking like me and
then I'm thinking "if they can get through it I can too". There is nothing implying that
they are stronger than me mentally in a way. It is a little bit motivational, and in the
same way as working out: Many people have a role model with bodies and things like
that that you're working towards. For me it is kind of the same thing - they have come
there bodily, and they have come there mentally, if you know what I mean.

Given that it his family did not provide much support for Andreas, and even did the opposite, going online seems like a logical and easily accessible place to find consolidation. He seeks comfort himself, because it is a resource he do not possess, but still needs. Again he uses the metaphor with strength and training, seeing it as "mental strength" being able to overcome or go through stressful experiences.

4.2 A story of stress depending on the situation

In another story and interview, Chris' displays stress as something that "depends on the situation". Stress is something out of one's control, but can often be handled by trying to take back the control of the situation. From both interviews it has come apparent that life is filled with stress. In the conversation with Chris however, the diverging aspects of stress are emphasized. Chris presented himself as a person with many engagements, in which he often caused the stress himself – having many things he wants to do in life. Therefore, stress is not only negative, but could be thrilling and filled with excitement. Stress is multifaceted in how it is experienced, and dealt with. Further Chris had widened his awareness of stress, in which the phenomenon had changed how he felt about it. Further I will go through the categories I found, and account for what made these emerge from the material.

For Chris, stress was associated with both positive and negative situations. He is a person with engagement in many activities, which could cause stress, but he also really enjoyed being a committed person. Stating that stress could be exciting and thrilling, "like before taking a carousel", he regarded stress to be positive at times. He told me that stress additionally could contribute in decision-making: "Stress helps me find out, or lets me know about things", and "stress considers the importance of something". By this he meant that stress could show him what he cares about, *because* he is so stressed about the situation. The stress could make him consider possibilities, and "stress can show opportunities".

At times it seemed like Chris was defending the meaning of stress, underlining that "it doesn't have to be negative". This could be due him seeing it as part of his identity: "I see myself as a stressed person". Negative connotations associated with stress could also affect the need to

defend his way of seeing stress, in which Chris has found out "it is positive stressing sometimes". If stress is solemnly negative, his identity could be distorted into something negative. Chris had also changed the content of stress from life experiences, changing it from "only stupid" to "I don't see it as negative anymore". He has experienced different sides of the phenomenon, making it dynamic and relational - something depending on how he sees it: "I have become aware of the stress and the fact that it is not only negative, then I can allow myself to be stressed". By changing the way he view stress, it can fit into his narrative or meaning making system. In Chris' interview, it seemed important for him to signal that stress varies with the situations:

> *MH: If you should say how it felt bodily, that feeling, how would that be?*
> *C: Well, that depends on the situation then. If it is before a concert, if it is that kind of nervous, or an exciting type of stress, then it's maybe tickly inside of you. Very short of breath and it tingles, yes it tingles in the stomach. But when it is chaotic it is more like a pressing feeling, like maybe I can't breathe right, or I can breathe but it's difficult. If I must reach something, then it is more like a sad, frustrating feeling. It's not exciting, it's just like… "fuck".*

Stress is a big part of Chris' life, in which it makes sense that stress would be just as complex. He regarded it as being negative and positive, it gets things done - but can again make it difficult to relax during vacations, and hard to lay still. Stress varies, and can cause different emotions and effects, which I will look further into.

4.2.1   Stress can be tiring and chaotic.

Given that Chris was engaged and had many things happening at once, his lifestyle caused some stress. He defined stress as "things not being in my control", and regards it as being "very chaotic". He brings forth a situation where he is needed at three places at the same time, which is impossible. Also, he mentions being able to handle a lot, but reaching a point where it is all *too much*. Stress is uncontrollable things, which understandably are chaotic. Stress could be caused by not having enough money, being demanded at many places at the same time, or simply having several agendas he wanted to execute in a limited amount of time. All of which are examples I can recognize as a student, with many things having to be done and money being a problem for many. The situation can be hard to manage, but given that Chris

engages himself in even more than simply studying, having a job and other activities on the side, it appears as if he enjoys the chaos too, like the previous category recognized. On the other side, stress could make Chris feel bad: "stress can make you feel bad, and then it can really suck". Further it could be a "pressing feeling", a "sad, frustrating feeling" and be "shit", hanging over him for a long time. It could cause it being hard to breathe, difficult to sleep, or impossible to relax according to Chris. The feelings and consequences of stress in Chris's life seems to be many, leading to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Further I will look into how Chris deals with the stress in his life.

4.2.2 Stress can be handled by taking back control

Chris had different ways of handling situations causing stress. At work with several tasks needing his attentions at the same time, he could get mad, frustrated, irritated and blame his colleagues - in his head. He could swear and put the blame on them, but later also reflect on his own priorities in a situation. He "has an inner dialog" and his thoughts could "spin fast". He told me his first thoughts may be "you are not mastering this, you suck", but further a "defense mechanism" would cause him to think, "It's the others' fault, it is not your fault - you are not a failure". Interestingly, the thought "you suck" does not seem to help in the situation, but blaming others does. Further he did also reflect on his own performances, but in the moment, blaming others seemed more fruitful in order to get the task done. An idea may be that the irritation, frustration and anger that Chris gets, is contributing as fuel and continue whatever needs to be done, rather than giving up because one simply "sucks".

In other situations, with people complaining around him, he could use humor, seeing the situation as tragicomic. Another aspect of this situation was that there was "no room" for Chris' complaints. He would feel the same with people stressing on his behalf, and would "be in opposition", because that they are "stealing" his stress, which annoyed him: "It is my exam, it's me who's supposed to be stressed, but now I have got to take care of you, because you are so... I don't know". Seemingly, one should be taken care of when being stressed, and not having to take care of the others. Not being stressed when other people are sounds like a reasonable way of handling certain situations. If one is really stressed, and wants relief by other people's support, it does not help turning to people freaking out even more. Consequently, he might end up more stressed than originally, which may explain Chris' reaction - humor and opposition is more effective than joining the stress hysteria around him.

In other situations that cause stress, for instance when being blamed for something, it was important for him *not* to be blamed, but rather excuse himself. He would show that he is not a "bad" person by "not taking responsibility" and showing people he is not a bad person. Apparently, the worst someone could call Chris was that he was manipulating, mean, calculated or sly:

> C: *(...) The worst you can say to me is probably that I am mean, or calculated, or calculated manipulative, that is the worst someone can say to me, cunning"*
> MH: *How do you think you would handle it if someone said that, and meant it?*
> C: *One time a person did say I was cunning and that was terrible. (...). I thought it was terrible to hear, because I didn't want to, I don't want to be, I am not... I see that I could be if I had wanted to, because I think I read people pretty well, and so I could have like… Only that is if I'd want to and I don't want to, I am very caring.*

 When he was at risk being called this, he would "start campaigns" to show he was not mean, because he did not want to be recognized like this. This way of stressing about social labels being on astray could be another example of things not being in Chris' control. Controlling (or "campaigning") other people's view of him could be a way for him to handle this type of stressful situation. The stress called forward by other people's opinions is luckily something one can affect or defend, which seems important for Chris. Additionally, when being inadequate in certain situation, he would blame others, which could be another way of gaining control. By claiming that it is "the others' fault" the ego can protect itself, instead of losing control of situations that one should have known about.

Trying to regain control was a strategy he used at other times as well, for instance when having too much to do, he would create lists. He told me "the number of lists is a stress indicator". By creating the lists he felt like gaining control, helping him "sort his thoughts", and it often helped. Another example of a way Chris would handle stress was by listening to a podcast when being unable to sleep. When going to sleep his head could be filled with "a thousand thoughts", and he could not sleep without listening to it. It makes him stress down, and maybe this also could be an attempt to control the uncontrollable thoughts being at unrest.

When using Chris' definition of stress - uncontrollable things, it makes much sense that his way of handling stress is trying to regain control. Although, Chris did say he enjoyed being

engaged, which he associated with stress, makes me think he enjoy uncontrollable things as well – making stress seem fun or exciting in this sense. However, I did get the impression that stress is changing, into being something more than just negative. Stress could be a good thing, but it "depended on how tired" he was. Additionally, it is clear that the stress could cause sleepless nights, making it hard to relax (in vacations for example), and hence making it something needing to be "handled" or controlled, to avoid the opposite.

5 Discussion

From the analysis, we have seen two stories of stress being apparent:

1. "Life is never stress-free": Stress is more than one can handle, and the experience of it cannot be positive. One can escape from it temporarily though, by different "escapes" (moving away from it, fantasizing, distracting oneself).

2. "Stress depends on the situation": Stress is something out of one's control. The experience depends on the situation, but could often be handled by trying to take back the control of the situation.

So, what can we learn from these stories? After having done research, both in empiricism and theory, I have learned about how *differently* stress can be experienced, and what coping might look like. Rather than looking for similarities, I saw it more interesting to focus on the significant differences between the two informants and their separate stories, which will be discussed first. The stories are mentioned throughout the discussion, with the headlines "life is never stress-free" and "stress depends on the situation", to remind you as a reader of essence of the informant's interviews. Further I will look into different ways of coping, discuss why helpers should treat people as mysteries rather than traits, and lastly examine how awareness may lead to better coping skills.

5.1 Different stress experiences, backgrounds and logics

The informants, Andreas and Chris, had several common associations to stress in their stories; both of the informants saw stress as something *exceeding their control* or capacities to handle it. They also had some of the same experiences, with stress leading to *exhilarated heart rate, frustration, irritation, anger,* and *racing thoughts*. Additionally, they shared the common coping mechanism of listening to podcast before going to sleep. So why should I not discuss similarities? Even though the stories were *similar*, the informants had very different experiences and reactions as well. The notion of what stress is, and which stories they associate with it, were totally different.

Andreas' had a conception of "life never being stress-free". He had racing thoughts, but used comforting thoughts to tackle what seemed hopeless - he would think, "things will be over with enough time" - because there was "nothing" he could do. The fact is that Andreas talked

as if stress was hopeless and negative, unavoidable and never positive: "you are born, you are stressed and you die" he said. For many years he experienced bullying, he has been a mediator of never ending conflicts in his family, and has experienced being rejected by them during his own struggles. He has no "family love" anymore, and his family are in fact causing him a lot of stress, which makes him want to move far away from them, and people in general: "People is what stresses me the most, actually".

Chris on the other hand, judged stress as exciting and chaotic, and "stress depends on the situation". He also had racing thoughts, but also an inner dialog, debating back and forth who's faulty of the stressful situation, having defending thoughts about oneself, swearing and eventually thinking rationally about what went wrong and where to go from there. Stress for Chris was also something he had learned to deal with - situations that caused stress before could now be seen in another way or handled differently because he had gained more "tools".

These stories may depict experience with similar features, but as one can see, they are also markedly different experiences, and are consequently handled very differently. This may be due to the stories they chose to tell me in the interview, although I imagine they chose these based on their relevance to stress. Andreas and Chris additionally had diverging life experiences, which seemed to have shaped their conception of the phenomenon. This connects to Lazarus and Folkman' (1984) way of seeing stress and coping as being affected by past experiences, meaning making systems and knowledge. Close social connections can additionally be important resources for coping and as stressors in our lives. On the one side, close relationships give us a sense of security and support, alongside a strong immune system according to Maté (2017). At the other side, our closest may act as stressors if it leads to repression of emotions and narrowed autonomy (Maté, 2017). There is a complex array of factors affecting how one copes, which also presented itself in the interviews. In regard to close connections, Andreas' story of life never being stress-free, had a restrained and cold relationship to his family, probably due to experiences of lack of support from them and long lasting familial conflicts. Maté (2019, p. 319) states: "vulnerability to subjective and physiological stress will be proportionate to the degree of emotional dependence". If this is true, it does not appear as Andreas has detached himself from his family emotionally, because they still cause him a fair amount of stress. Had he not been emotional dependent on his family, he would probably not feel any stress or care as much as he seems to be doing. He emphasizes a lack of love for his family, but still, he is very emotionally stressed because of them. It even causes him to act rather inauthentic towards himself, where he chooses not to

show how he really feels or utter his opinions, perhaps because it is best for his family. He wants to "stay neutral", which might be the best solution in an everlasting conflict:

> *I get stressed and irritated inside, because it is not something they should take with me, it is something they should have taken to the one it concerns, but instead they choose coming to me talking shit about everybody, which is devouring of course. It is not much response to get from me really, when I am in a situation like that. Because instead of saying something wrong, I'd rather say nothing, and sit there and say "mhm, yes, mhm" instead of coming with a real response, and just let them finish complaining, until they hopefully leave.*

This way of coping may avoid the stress of involvement in a conflict. Additionally Andreas had experienced being scolded for "taking sides" previously if he got involved, in which the neutral behavior avoids this. His family still causes him stress though, but getting involved may cause even more.

The informants also sat different tones of the interview, had varying logics and patterns of thinking. Andreas' story where "life is never stress-free" might have attributed stress negative meaning because it is connected to several negative life experiences, while Chris who claims "stress depends on the situation" gave stress a possibility of being more than simply negative. The differences in logic can be thought as having an inner versus an external locus of control (Ivey et al., 2012). This way of thinking separates causality into internal and external factors, depending on which are causing an effect (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Rothbaum, Wolfer & Visintainer, 1979). Further, "responsibility for success or failure is attributed to the actor when perceived as caused by internal factors (ability or effort), but less so when perceived to be due to external factors (task difficulty or luck)" (Ajzen, 2002, p. 675). Rothbaum, Wolfer and Visintainer (1979) have studied children's coping mechanisms, and discuss the relationship between locus of control and coping. They have found evidence of perceived external locus of control in an uncontrollable environment, being connected to *inward behavior*. This behavior is kept within the self and dealt with alone, making one inward bound and less attentive towards the environment (Rothbaum et al., 1979). Outward behavior on the other, can be described as *reactance*, and is behaviors done *with* the environment in contrast to acting within the self only. Disobedient or threatening behavior, being overactive, demanding attention and swearing are exemplified in the research.

Chris's story of "stress depends on the situation" seems to be acting from an inner locus of control - acting on the world (Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015; Ivey et al., 2012). Chris emphasized the fact that stress was something caused by himself, with things and plans he wanted to achieve. The stress was caused by having too many of these things taking control, and him hence losing control. He then acts to gain back the control, presenting an internal locus of control – he is the reason for his own outcomes. Additionally, he changed his way of looking at stress; again taking control by altering a word in which society have given negative connotations. Further, People with an internal locus are thought to be working harder towards goals, thinking they can control the outcome, but also blame themselves when things goes wrong (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Interestingly Chris mentioned the word "fault" twelve times, whereas five of these consisted of "my fault". Andreas on the other hand, mentioned the word five times, but never talked about things being *his* fault. Such knowledge can be hints of different logics being in play, which the perception of inner or external locus of control is an example of.

Compared to Andreas, Chris' patterns of thinking seems to be giving more options in regards to how to appraise the phenomena of stress, and maybe also in regards to styles of coping. It could be argued that Andreas ("life is never "stress-free) sees stress as environmentally bound, caused by external factors. It seems like he tries ignoring or escape the stress of life, if he could only get away: "I have always had a dream of buying a house, somewhere in the woods, isolated". Additionally he finds comfort in knowing that he can go into a world of fantasies at work, he isolates himself and "don't talk with anyone about it [stress], and no employer gets affected by it". No one else is affected by stress, except himself, which also shows inwards behavior. At the other side, Chris seems to be more able to act with the environment, making his behavior outward, and can be thought to be acting from an inner locus of control. In Chris' story of "life is never stress-free" there are limited options, in fact there is no solution at the moment: "I'm just trying to stall time until I finish my degree so that I can get away, get some distance from it, then maybe they'll be forced to take some responsibility themselves". The available options in this story seem to have been tried out, in which "bad" experiences (with Andreas being scolded when uttering his opinions and for taking sides) have contributed to his way of dealing with the situation.

Locus of control is not considered as an *either or* situation, where people act strictly from one logic, but it can be measured on a scale in which people's behavior lean towards one side or the other (Ajzen, 2002). It is interesting how the concepts of inward behavior and external

locus of control may provide knowledge of what the consequences of such behavior might be. People with inward behavior may experience more pains for instance (Ajzen, 2002), which is consistent with Maté's (2017) work. Theories are relative and do not reflect the absolute reality, but it can provide important clues of which behavior causes unfruitful consequences, for instance in a helping situation (Ivey et al., 2012). Further, Andreas' behavior coincides with an inward behavior, which is operationalized in research as for example "can't get his/her mind off certain thoughts – obsessions", "overthinking", "withdrawn – staying by self", "pains" and "lack of interest in surroundings" (Rothbaum et al., 1979, p. 122, 123). Inward behavior is also connected to helplessness, which is "psychological situations in which the individual does not see any relationship between the responses available to the individual, and the possible outcome of the situation" (Ursin & Hytten, 1992, p. 175). Andreas' situation does bear signs of this, given that nothing he does seems to work. Additionally, signs of hopelessness were depicted, which is defined as "high perceived probability that available responses will lead to negative events" (Ursin & Hytten, 1992, p. 176) in practice meaning that "everything an individual tries to do ends in highly aversive events" (Ursin & Hytten, 1992, p. 176). In fact Andreas' situation did seem hopeless and he seemed helpless given that during family conflicts, he got scolded if he involved himself. Additionally, when dealing with depression, he exercised outward behavior by talking about his problems of depression to his family, which worsened his situation. Such behavior did not relieve his situation, and nor does his inward behavior, there stress is still present, and according to himself it will be "over with time".

The differences in ways of thinking seems to have effects on coping, and what people attribute to have influence on their lives. Research connects external locus of control with inward behavior, and inner locus of control with outward behavior, which was also evident in the interviews. Stress and coping is affected not only by our thinking, but our thinking is also connected to our experiences, backgrounds, vulnerability and perhaps several other factors. It seems to be a complex interplay between these, and further it should be interesting to examine different ways of coping.

5.2   Coping with problems and emotions

Both the interviews uttered evidence of using many different strategies to overcome stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have found empirical evidence where the participants most commonly used more than one strategy overcoming stress, and mixed between emotion- and problem-focused strategies. These are explained as actions towards altering the stressful environment and circumstances (problem-focused), or efforts to alter unwanted feelings following stressful events (emotion-focused).

The stories, "life is never stress-free" and "stress depends on the situation", seemed to use several emotion-focused strategies when dealing with stress. Chris' story of "stress depends on the situation" was sparing his emotions by using humor, complaining, getting angry, procrastinating (or avoiding the task at hand), having an inner discussion, swearing, lowering the ambitions, having comforting thoughts - all dependent on the situation. These are coping devices focused on altering emotions, rather than contributing to the task at hand.

   Andreas on his part also used many if not all emotion-focused strategies. Examples could be comforting thoughts (thinking things will be over with time, reading about people online, or knowing he can find time to let his mind wander), isolation, trying to laugh when things are hurtful, getting perspective, distracting himself and more. In doing such, the intention is to lessen the effects of undesirable emotions. The coping devises are many, and the different ones may not always work, but luckily there are several to choose from:

> *A: I have tried getting to sleep, just to get the hours going, but then it doesn't work and I just lie there staring at the ceiling and try to fantasize about anything at all, something brain dead to keep me from thinking, read a book or something like that.*
> *MH: Does that work?*
> *A: Not always, no. It happens that if I read a book I have to read the same page several times, I don't process what I am reading, I just sit there thinking about it... But I also think, that things will be over with time, as long as I just give it enough time, it will disappear from my thoughts.*

In this excerpt it seems like knowing that things will ultimately be over in time contributes to calming his thoughts and emotions. He had a lot of these comforting thoughts: "It is kind of comforting actually, knowing that everybody is stressing, everyone has their struggles really,

and mine is not necessarily heavier than yours or anyone else's". He additionally found comfort in planning time for fantasizing or listening to music, which worked as a mental escape for him. These comforting thoughts provide some kind of self-care, and are emotion-focused because the techniques are alleviating emotional distress.

Problem - focused coping consists of altering the problem at hand, for instance through evaluation of options, planning and preparing for a task at hand (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the interviews I tried focusing on the multifaceted aspects of stress and coping - what one did, how it felt emotionally and bodily, and what one thought. During the interviews the ratio of attention may have been unevenly distributed problem- and emotion-focused coping mechanism. The counseling background and my own emphasis on emotion may have affected this outcome. At the same time, a few problem-oriented coping mechanisms did appear. Chris with his story of "stress depending on the situation", applied planning as a strategy when dealing with stressful tasks. This strategy focuses directly on the task – how it can be solved or how the demanded time is distributed for instance, which makes it a problem-focused strategy. At the same time, Chris created lists in order to "get control", "sort thoughts" and "calming down", in which the two former can be judged both as problem- and emotion-focused coping devices, and "calming down" is purely focused on alleviating emotions. Additionally, Chris did not mention actually *using* the lists, which makes it sound more important to get the emotional release than doing something related to the task. Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 153) states that "problem- and emotion-focused coping can both facilitate and impede each other in the coping process", which means there is an interplay between the two. The act of creating a list may alleviate stress towards the task, making Chris more positive towards solving it when the time comes, for instance. Another example of the interplay between the coping techniques are shown when Chris explains how motivation and ambition are having different effects when solving an assignment:

> *The motivation to get started cannot have ambition, but that is only to get started, and when I THEN manage to get going, motivation and ambition can work together, because then I have something to work with.*

High ambitions had a paralyzing effect when it came to completing a task, making him too critical and unable to start according to himself. Before starting an assignment, Chris avoided his feelings of ambition (emotion-focused coping) because it made him lose motivation. In

order to be able to write, he had to start writing even if it was "nonsense", which is a problem-focused strategy. The two ways of coping may hence be intertwined in a complex manner, hindering or making way for each other.

5.3 Seeing clients as traits and mysteries

An interesting note is that no matter the story, and no matter the type of stress, the informants still managed to complete tasks, such as going to work, finishing an exam or "having a life" (Andreas) in general. There are complex backgrounds and reasons for the different coping mechanisms, making them hard to predict, and more importantly; see how and in what way (emotion- or problem oriented) these benefit individuals. Alongside the exploration of Andreas and Chris' coping devices, theories reminded me of two things: (1) These strategies cannot be predicted, and (2) the coping devices are neither good nor bad, but they are *working*.

Theories of coping mechanisms, behaviors and locus of control have a tendency of making it seem like some styles are better than others. With this, I want to underline that theories cannot predict how stress is experienced or how well coping mechanisms might work for a person (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Theory can provide reference points and frames of understanding, which in turn can be falsified or verified by individual cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this explorative study, life's demands are managed and overcome, which must mean that the coping mechanisms are in fact working. The informants had experienced trying out different strategies, in which they have found techniques working for them – solving problems and/or alleviating certain emotions in stressful situations. It is important to remember that both coping and defense mechanisms serve a purpose, and is somehow protecting us (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is not always about which strategy solves issues in the "smartest way" – some strategies are protecting our self and self-esteem, which can be more important than managing tasks in the long run: "Emphasizing problem solving and mastery devalues other functions of coping that are concerned with managing emotions and maintaining self-esteem and a positive outlook, especially in the face of irremediable situations" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 139). Looking into the interview with Andreas, he did many activities trying to make him feel better, which may not have led to a better outcome, but took care of the self. He mentioned for instance fantasizing, driving for a long time, sitting hours on a bench, listening to music, working out, drawing, reading "comforting

stories" online and feeding ducks. All these things do not solve stressful situations or problems, but it is an *effort* to reduce emotional distress, even though it might not help:

> MH: *Did you feel like it helped? The things you did?*
> A: *No, not really.*
> MH: *It was still there?*
> A: *Yes, the thing is that when you're sitting there all alone, you are not doing anything, and so you're just sitting there wondering about the thing that is bothering you, right. So that can make things worse – sitting there overthinking, imagining that things are worse than they really are.*

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) do not want coping to coincide with a successful *outcome*. If one thinks of coping simply as solving problems, one may often fail to see how it serves the whole person. These mechanisms do indeed always serve the purpose of an individual somehow:

> *Definitions of coping must include efforts to manage stressful demands, regardless of outcome. This means that no strategy is considered inherently better than any other. The goodness (efficiasy, appropriateness) of a strategy is determined only by its effects in a given encounter and its effects in the long term.*
>
> (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 134).

Coping might be used for maintaining both a stable self and surroundings, both being equally important. In Andreas' case, he had experienced that overthinking did not help a stressful situation, but it was an effort to overcome it. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) elaborate by claiming people grow from stressful situations by learning skills of coping. In the case of Andreas, failures can be seen as unique learning opportunities towards finding out what works and does not work (Dweck, 2012).

There are advantages of seeing typologies, traits and patterns. Finding good and bad coping strategies, could serve as proposed solutions to issues. Research has in fact found context-based knowledge about coping. For instance meditation, which is a popular advice for stress release, has shown positive effects on capacities to cope (Schure, Christopher & Christopher, 2008). Moldjord (2016) also found "good" ways of coping in the military, in which preparation and training with realistic situations helped in handling stressful tasks. Different

coping devices are more effective than others, but this is also depending on the person, the stressful environment and the context in which these operate (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hence, theories judging the goodness and effectiveness of coping mechanisms may help us detect the best and the unfruitful ones, but still one should be careful thinking "one size fits all" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this research the differences in the stories was emphasized, precisely because the stories of stress and coping was far apart, even though they were facing the some similar situations as students. This may be due to different vulnerabilities, something destabilizing the self, which one has to protect. Such as Chris, where the worst someone could tell him was that he was "Cunning", "mean, or calculated, or calculated manipulative". It is clear that being called "cunning", calculated or manipulative, can be thought to not fitting into his narrative (Maree, 2011) or as something taken hard by the Chris' self. Chris is defending himself, maybe towards me as an interviewer, towards the person who called him cunning, or defends himself. Afterwards, he uses the comforting thought "I am very caring", which Chris has probably heard from people around him, he may prove that this is not true, and keeps his positive self, or life story (narrative). Though studying traits, "good" and "bad" coping mechanisms may be helpful guidelines or suggestions to the best ways of coping, a helper must keep individual coping differences in mind and what influence these (i.e. appraisal, resources and vulnerabilities).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) remind us not to treat any persons as if we know the answer, but treat people as mysteries when it comes to stress and coping. Only by treating people as mysteries and avoid imposing our own conceptions, can one truly be empathic (Flaherty, 2010). Clinically, or in counseling, one needs to be aware of people's varying experiences, in order not to "put people in a box", but rather treat *each* client as mysteries (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Flaherty, 2010). The unknown can promote change, and hence digging into the unfamiliar is necessary: "The mysterious unknown and perhaps unknowable aspects of your client are what allow for change, improvement, and even transformation" (Flaherty, 2010, p. 77). Looking for patterns, traits or stages of the phenomena stress and coping, might close the window for change, thinking one can predict someone's reactions to and experience of stress. Additionally, such expectations can pressure clients, sensing that their "deviant" feelings are inappropriate (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Remembering that people are affected in different contexts, such as their upbringing, family, resources, personality, biological and psychological factors, culture etc., acknowledges that there is a complex story creating different vulnerabilities in people (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ivey et al., 2012; Maté, 2017).

Treating stress and coping individually and separately from categories or traits, therefore might be a better help, seeing that coping as a trait will "(...) underestimate the complexity and variability of actual coping efforts" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 121). If one wants to understand a client, it has to be done through entering their worldview, in which judgment or labeling often denies both access and understanding (Ivey et al., 2012, Wadel & Wadel, 2007)

Having the tools and awareness to detect good and bad coping mechanisms, can be advantageous for confrontations and propositions to better ones. By evaluating a client's thought patterns and actions – their fruitfulness, background and reasoning, one can intentionally affect these with an opened awareness and get a more desired state of being (Jordan, 2001). Regarding coping as objective traits, and detecting patterns could thus have its advantages, if one stays open to its numerous functions for a given client and understands what is at stake for him or her.

5.4   Awareness of stress and coping mechanisms

The information that emotions carry affects how we appraise and cope with threats, and which reactions the body elicits as a result (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maté, 2017). Humans' abilities to pick up emotional signals are important and key to our survival (Maté, 2017): "We may become aware of our stress levels or need for rest before we become ill" (Brown, 2009, p. 19). Barrett, Gross, Christensen, and Benvenuto's (2001) research suggests that people who are better at activating their emotional knowledge, are better at differentiating between and regulating emotions. The *emotional knowledge* in their work include knowledge about how and why one is experiencing the emotions, what the causes and effects might be, and which actions to take. In this sense, Chris (with the story "stress depending on the situation") had some experience of learning to handle emotions, pointing in the same direction as the research. When asked how he would handle a previously uncomfortable situation today, he answered:

> (…) Actually the same handling, just a little better at expressing it maybe, I have more
> tools now, where I can have a difficult conversation by being more clear.

The "tools" in this seems to be the ability to "express" something and be "more clear", which could be interpreted as abilities to express one's emotion, wants or needs. He has gotten better at expressing himself, meaning that he has gotten better at knowing what to do about his emotions (Barrett et al., 2001).

Maté (2017) emphasize the fact that suppression of emotions and lack of genuineness will cause stress, because one cannot convey the real emotions and its real experience. By not being able to show emotion one is at risk of either having an inward behavior of not showing emotions or letting it out with outward behaviors as uncontrollable outburst (Maté, 2017; Rothbaum et al., 1979). Chris had developed his awareness, in which he had found his true experience of stress, which turned into being something he could also enjoy:

> But I think I've just gotten more aware of it. I have gotten more like, I know that I am, and then it is easier to deal with or live with. Yeah, I don't think about it as just negative anymore. Before, in addition to stress, I was stressing about not being stressed, I would be so CHILL, and use a lot of energy on that - being so chill when you're actually stressed out. But now that I know, I have made stress conscious and the fact that it is not just negative, and I can allow myself to be stressed then... I don't have to be so chill and cool, I am allowed to be a little like that.

It could be postulated that the real expression and experience of emotions has reduced stress in itself, which Maté (2011, p. 38) agrees with: "Emotional competence requires the capacity to feel our emotions, so that we are aware when we are experiencing stress; the ability to express our emotions effectively and thereby to assert our needs and to maintain the integrity of our emotional boundaries". By trying to avoid the emotions, and possibly having a low emotional differentiation of emotions, stress may have seemed "just negative". Through a true exploration and experience of the emotion Chris was able to differentiate between emotions, instead of simply regarding it as *either* positive *or* negative, making stress something nuanced. Chris has seemingly grown through his expanded *awareness* by making stress *conscious*, since "awareness is the essential ingredient in any process of growth" (Brown, 2009, p. 9). After all, stress can be regarded as an alarm system, with physiological and emotional danger signals (Maté, 2017; Selye, 1956). In order to listen to these messages, an awareness and emotional competence and knowledge may enable us to examine uncomfortable emotions and what they are trying to tell us (Barrett et al., 2001; Brown, 2009;

Maté, 2017). The consequence, of not listening to the emotions elicited by stress, is being on alert constantly without knowing why or be aware of the stress at all, which eventually could exhaust the body (Mateé, 2017; Selye, 1956; Stiegler, Sinding & Greenberg,). Additionally, not listening to emotions often results in unhealthy coping mechanisms, and one might lose contact with both one's feelings and needs (Stiegler et al., 2018). This process of being more aware may be scary (Brown, 2009), but for Chris, it was not as bad as he thought. He had evidence of stress being enjoyable too, by daring to examine it, because it included feelings of excitement as well. What seemed harder was using extra energy on concealing the actual emotions stress was trying to express.

Maté (2017) has researched how suppressing emotions, such as anger, increase the risk of developing serious diseases because the physiological stress grows as a consequence. The energy the emotion carries, turns inward, confusing our immune system and restricting our defense. Expressing anger, on the other side, leads to an improved longevity and life (Maté, 2017). Unconscious stress is evoking emotions in us, which will grow if not processed consciously (Brown, 2009, Maté, 2017). By evoking one's awareness, one can look at anger for instance, and explore it, instead of using energy in the process of hiding it. The energy and knowledge of the emotion might be used as a message telling us something is wrong, or providing us with what is needed to act.

Altshuler and Ruble's (1989) research suggests that children expand their tools of coping devices with age. Especially *cognitive coping strategies* (in contrast to behavioral), for instance the ability to ignore situations while physically being present, develop with age. At a younger age we have less access to our thoughts, and are less able to perceive the extent of stress (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989). This means that as we grow, our awareness and coping strategies have better possibilities of developing (Eigel & Kuhnert; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Additionally, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found that people who have not been exposed to stress in childhood, have consequently less developed coping strategies, and might have a smaller repertoire as adults than others who have been exposed as children. The theories stands as evidence of stress being possible to learn develop and be aware off to different degrees. Further it could coincide with both the informant's stories. Andreas with his story of life never being stress-free felt that stressful challenges made him "stronger", which I interpret as having an effect on his mental capacities to handle stress. The metaphor can be an image of him growing (stronger) mentally, after overcoming challenges and testing his

abilities to cope with these. On the other hand, Chris' story of stress depending on the situation, also depict him learning about stress through awareness and gaining more "tools" after having gone through stressful situations. This might suggest that stressful situations can better one's abilities to cope. Although, this does not mean that a person uses fruitful techniques, but that coping is something that has potential to be taught (Altshuler & Ruble; Maté, 2017).

5.4.1 Using awareness in helping professions

Expanding one's awareness towards stress, what it means to us (is it a threat and why?) and how we cope with it, can be done effectively through counseling. Kvalsund and Fikse (2015) explain that counseling as a general term consists of a helping relationship focusing on a client's understanding himself or herself, growth and development. Further, the client will experience oneself open and honestly, through self-discoveries, self-awareness, deconstructing and reconstructing themselves in the world. Challenges are seen as opportunities for growth, especially within the humanistic existentialistic tradition (Ivey et al., 2012; Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015). This master thesis directs attention towards stress and coping, which provides another angle for counselors to keep in mind. It shows that our reasons for doing what we are doing might be many and complex, and changing such patterns might not be an easy project. By keep questioning the client's logics, and staying curious a helper and client may be able to solve blocks on their path (Brown, 2009; Eigel & Kuhnert, 2016; Flaherty, 2010). Regarding students and their decreasing mental health, the attention and awareness towards stress and coping strategies could be very useful in counseling, stress reduction courses and as information in general. Schure, Christopher & Christopher (2008) found positive effects on coping (among several others positive effects) on graduate students after teaching them techniques of yoga, meditation and qigong. They report that: "Several students mentioned how their increased bodily awareness, and its connectedness with the mind, has enabled them to take better care of themselves" (p. 50). In addition to seeing the importance of awareness, it underlines my previous point of coping being something with great potential and learning opportunities.

Different theories might be especially useful towards expanding one's awareness. The psychosynthesis for example, has a goal of direct showing of emotions through a conscious examination of feelings, without being trapped "in" them (Brown, 2009; Whitmore, 2013).

Another interesting direction that might be especially relevant in dealing with emotions is emotion-focused therapy (EFT). EFT believes in authentic processing of emotions, and the therapist will try helping clients with an approach of giving words to their feelings. Further, by allowing emotions people avoid later troubles, create flexibility and strengthen person (Stiegler et al., 2018). For people using emotion-focused coping techniques I imagine this method being especially useful, which has not been researched directly (to my knowledge). Other theories also direct awareness towards different aspects: Narrative theories for instance, direct attention to the stories we are telling ourselves (Ivey et al. 2012; Maree, 2011), psychoanalysis directs attention to our childhood and unconscious defense mechanisms (Ivey et al., 2012), humanistic to authenticity and our being in the world (Clark, 2004) - all of which widens one's awareness in certain areas. Techniques shown to broaden our awareness in a helping relation can be questioning one's emotions, behavior or logics, meditating, exploring polarities is us, practicing mindfulness, or seeking feedback for instance (Brown, 2009; Flaherty, 2010; Jordan, 2001; Schure, Christopher & Christopher, 2008). To provide awareness, helpers have the possibility to extract the best of these theories, acting eclectically (Ivey et al, 2012; Kvalsund & Fikse, 2015).

6   Summarizing and concluding comments

This master thesis has explored the question how is stress experienced by students, and which coping strategies do they employ to deal with it. From my examination in both theory and two in-depth interviews, I have found that students experience stress and cope very differently. The informants' experiences, backgrounds and stories were very dissimilar, and they operated with stress by using different logics and coping devices. Their histories, resources and connections have most likely affected how they deal with stress, in addition to their relationship to their own emotions and self.

Further, I have found that stress can be experienced as negative, hopeless, positive and exhilarating, giving bodily reactions like a pounding heart, feelings of restlessness, anger and frustration. Additionally, cognitive reactions such as having racing thoughts, inner conversations and judgments are also present. When it comes to coping, there seemed to be a focus on emotions in this study, meaning that sparing ones emotional reactions may be more important than solving the stressful problem itself when coping when stress. In practice these coping devises consisted of for instance listening to podcast, having comforting thoughts, lowering ones ambitions, avoiding situations causing stress and swearing. Lastly, I have found that one can learn from being exposed to stressful situations, raising awareness of stress and ones emotions. In developing awareness one may also grow and better ones coping devices.

Seen in relation to theory and research there is evidence of the importance of processing emotions, to avoid health issues and especially psychological problems (Maté, 2017; Stiegler et al., 2018). In connection to theory, awareness should in fact lead to more genuine and authentic experiences and behaviors (Brown, 2009; Maté, 2017; Stiegler et al., 2018). It seems like the more awareness and emotional competency one has, the better the possibility of choosing our relationship towards stress and how we cope with it. Opening up our awareness, may cause us to take back the control of situations creating emotional distress, and have a conscious relationship towards how we cope. By investigating our ways of coping, for instance if it focuses on emotions or problems (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we can consider what we are protecting or trying to control. Additionally, by honest experience and expression of emotions, stress is more likely to decrease (Stiegler et al., 2018; Maté, 2017). Interventions in a helping relationship, such as counseling, can pinpoint unfruitful thoughts and coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

6.1 Limitations and implications

This thesis is an attempt to explore how students might experience stress and their following coping strategies. There are several limitations regarding what impacts the findings in this research. Firstly, the number of participants used in this study cannot be used as grounds for generalizations, and although my informants highlight some differences of stress experiences, one would need a bigger sample to gain insight in stress across instances. Secondly, It provides depth in subjective experiences, but these might also be affected by my subjective interpretations as a researcher, and a crosscheck with other students could have strengthened the trustworthiness of this project (Tjora, 2017). Additionally the excerpts selected in the analysis may not be representative for the informants or other students, and there are risks of meaning being conveyed to make it soothe the project's angle (Silverman, 2006).

Regarding further research, it would be interesting to investigate good and less good coping mechanisms for students, and how these can develop through raising awareness of the phenomena of stress. Further, mapping the mental health and psychological issues of students participating in awareness training with those who don't could highlight positive effects, like the ones Schure, Christopher and Christopher (2008) found. Such a study should be conducted at a Norwegian university as well, and stand as representative information for students and the helping resources they meet. For this kind of thesis though, one would need multifaceted and longitudinal mix of quantitative and qualitative studying. Time and resources have been a limitation in this project (Tjora, 2017; Tracy, 2010), and mapping coherence between variables in a large scale would be a quantitative project (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

6.2 How can the findings contribute?

This research can provide important knowledge and perspective for laypeople and professionals approaching people psychosocially. Social workers (at NAV for instance), (stress relief) course instructors, therapists and leaders can benefit from knowing about how the phenomenon of stress might work. I have investigated how different factors, such as close connections and awareness, have influenced stress experiences and coping, and also how coping serves many purposes – not just solving tasks. Leaders should be aware that stress is a relationship – people are different in terms of what they consider is a stressor, and reactions

may be just as dissimilar (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When it comes to solving a task in a workplace or work related stress, several elements may be in play (not just stress at work itself) and symptoms of stress might present itself in illness and unfruitful defense mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maté, 2017; Stiegler et al., 2018). Course instructors, either in relation to stress-management or stress-reducing techniques (such as meditation and mindfulness), should also be aware of people having different problems and different solutions, and room should be given to explore this. One proposed coping technique to handle the pressure of an exam will not suite all, and some might need emotion-focused coping methods, while others need to focus on the problems directly. Therapists, or any kind of helping relationship, can use this thesis to enlighten the perspective of stress and how it is important to treat people as mysteries – the phenomenon cannot be predicted and our coping strategies are complexly constructed by our life stories, environment, biology and psychological base (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maté, 2017). Lastly, social workers can also benefit from knowing about stress, given that people in difficult life situations may act from an external locus of control, depicting traits of helpless and hopelessness (Ivey et al. 2012; Ursin & Hytten, 1992). In understanding such behavior, the social worker may detect the relationship between stressors and coping behaviors, and facilitate the right kind of help with this in mind.

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Attachments

1. Project description (to NSD)
2. Approval from NSD
3. Interview guide
4. Informational sheet (to informants)
5. Declaration of consent

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Attachment 1: Project description

 For dette prosjektet er jeg interessert i å dekonstruere stress og stresshåndtering. Jeg er interessert i krysningspunktet mellom det stresset vi kan håndtere og det som føles som for mye. Dette stresset som er for mye, hva gjør at det føles som for mye, og hva gjør at man takler det?

I dette prosjektet vil jeg samle inn informasjon om hvordan spesielt stressende hendelser eller situasjoner oppleves og oppfattes, og hva selve stresset gjør og bidrar med. Formålet med prosjektet er å forske på stressopplevelser, og hvordan dette påvirker oss kroppslig og mentalt. Forskningsspørsmål som tas opp vil være "hvordan bidrar stress til vår fungering?". Spørsmålet ønsker å erverve mer bevissthet rundt stressets funksjoner, håndtering og påvirkninger. En slik bevissthet kan bidra til forskerens egen forståelse og kunnskap, som kan brukes i fremtidige yrker.

Attachment 2: Approval from NSD

NSD Personvern

Det innsendte meldeskjemaet med referansekode 393326 er nå vurdert av NSD.

Følgende vurdering er gitt:

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen, så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 22.01.2019 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD ENDRINGER

Dersom behandlingen av personopplysninger endrer seg, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. På våre nettsider informerer vi om hvilke endringer som må meldes. Vent på svar før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om helseforhold og alminnelige personopplysninger frem til 15.05.2019.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og art. 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a), jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen:

- om lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD:

Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

Attachment 3: Interview guide

Kan du tenke deg en spesifikk hendelse hvor du opplevde *spesielt mye* stress? (En hendelse eller opplevelse der du kjente at det nesten ble for mye).

Kan du fortelle meg litt om denne opplevelsen? (Kort om hva som skjedde og hvordan det opplevdes).

Hva gjør opplevelsen til *spesielt* stressende? (Hva gjorde at dette føltes mer enn daglig stressende hendelser for eksempel).

Hvordan reagerte du?

Kan du si litt om hvordan opplevelsen føltes kroppslig eller fysisk? (Kunne du kjenne reaksjoner i kroppen? Eksempelvis hjertebank, hevede skuldre, vondt i magen eller lignende).

Hvordan tolket du den psykisk? (Hvordan oppfattet/tolket du hendelsen, hva tenkte du om den?)

Hvordan taklet du opplevelsen? (Hva gjorde at du kom deg gjennom stresset?)

Dersom stresset skulle hatt en funksjon i opplevelsen, hva tror du denne ville vært? (Har stresset bidratt til noe?)

Spørsmål om stresshåndtering

Hva er stress for deg?

Fortell om stressende hendelser/ en spesifikk hendelse der du følte på stress

Følelser

Kropp

Tanker

Handling

Prosess: Forandring i tanker/følelser/kropp/handling ettersom hendelsen utartet seg over tid?

Merket du noen tanker/strategier/noe du sa til deg selv som ble viktig?

Attachment 4: Informational sheet

Informasjonsskriv til deltakere i prosjekt om stresshåndtering

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke **stress - hvordan vi reagerer, takler det og hva stress kan bidra til**. I dette skrivet beskrives målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål
Formålet med dette masterprosjektet er å forstå *stress* bedre. Stress er noe som kan drive motivasjon, samtidig som det er noe som påvirker opplevelser. Prosjektets foreløpige problemstilling er "hvordan påvirker hendelser som oppleves *spesielt stressende* et individ?". Dette prosjektet ønsker å forstå stress som fenomen og dets opplevelse gjennom studering av litteratur og intervjumateriale i forhold til tema, som foretas i løpet av våren 2019. Opplysningene som erverves vil brukes til å skrive en masteroppgave, samt til forskerens egen forståelse av tema.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?
De ansvarlige for dette forskningsprosjektet vil være undertegnede selv, veileder Gunhild Marie Roald, og institutt for pedagogikk og livslang læring ved NTNU.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?
Grunnet praktiske og relevante årsaker, er jeg ute etter studenter som studerer ved NTNU. Utvalget vil bestå av studenter, mellom 18 og 40 år. De fleste mennesker har opplevd stress i sitt liv, dermed anses denne gruppen informanter å ha verdifull informasjon om tema. Utvalget er trukket strategisk, gjennom kontakt med mennesker som forsker anser kan si noe om tema.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?
Dersom du velger å delta, vil jeg som forsker og du som deltaker ha et halvstrukturert intervju sammen, med varighet på rundt en time. Dette vil foregå på et sted som deltaker og undertegnede avtaler, gjerne et grupperom på NTNU. Intervjuet vil tas opp på båndopptaker.

Informasjonen som innhentes vil primært være knyttet til en opplevelse eller hendelse som du selv snakker om, hvor du erfarte spesielt mye stress. Spørsmålene vil omhandle kroppslige reaksjoner og følelser rundt stresset som opplevdes i den spesifikke situasjonen. At intervjuet er halvstrukturert betyr at ikke alle spørsmålene er planlagt på forhånd, men at det vil spørres ut i fra det som kommer frem i samtalen.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykke tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle opplysninger om deg vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger
Opplysningene som kommer frem i intervjuet vil ikke brukes til andre formål enn de beskrevet i dette skrivet. Ingen andre enn forsker selv vil ha direkte tilgang til opplysningene, og veileder vil få informasjon i forhold til hva som skal inkluderes i masteroppgaven og ikke. Personopplysningene behandles konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. I masteroppgaven vil alle personopplysninger anonymiseres.
  Intervjuene vil tas opp, og overføres til en passordbeskyttet harddisk før intervjuet slettes fra båndopptaker. Det samme gjelder for transkripsjoner av intervju. Alle personopplysninger vil slettes ved prosjektets slutt, 15. mai 2019. I selve masteroppgaven vil det skrives om opplevelser av stress, men uten tilkobling til saksopplysninger som kan identifisere personer.

Opplysninger om deg behandles basert på ditt samtykke.

Dine rettigheter
Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:
- Innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg,
- Å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- Få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- Få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger (dataportabilitet), og
- Å sende klage til personvernombudet eller Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Lurer du på noe?
Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med undertegnede (Maren Hermansen), prosjektansvarlig/veileder Gunhild Marie Roald på epost (Gunhild.m.roald@ntnu.no) eller NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS, på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen,

Maren Hermansen
Tlf: 99550323
Maren.hermansen@hotmail.com
Prosjektansvarlig (forsker/student)

Attachment 5: Declaration of consent

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet om *stressmestring*, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- Å delta i intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca. 15. mai.

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)