CHAPTER 5
Discussion
The main objective of the present investigation is to examine the linkage between helplessness and coping options. The empirical studies carried out on adolescents generate a number of features. Apart from their empirical contribution, several lines of implications are also suggested by the findings.

The theory of learned helplessness posits that three deficits (motivational, cognitive and emotional) are the products of the helplessness syndrome. Consequently, these three components are related with each other in a positive way. Our data, by and large, support this proposition.

An adequate testing of the proposition that a cognitive expectancy of no control underlies the debilitated performance was difficult, because of some confounding variables. First, the three components of helplessness operated in combination and it was hard to demonstrate one in isolation from the other. Secondly, it was necessary to show that performance impairment was mediated by motivational and cognitive components.

Despite such difficulty, early instrumental learning studies attempted to demonstrate the associative components in human helplessness. The observation of uncontrollability in human beings was explained in motivational terms but it provided a loose support to the construct. Other investigators attempted to isolate the associative component by employing
anagram tests. The findings did not distinguish associative deficits as postulated by helplessness theory from general intellectual impairment. Similarly, chance-skill studies could not demonstrate the existence of associative deficits of the helplessness independently of motivational deficit. Chance-skill studies were initiated on the assumption that helplessness cognitions were similar to Rotter's concept of external control, and out comes on previous trial had a greater effect on expectancies for future success when outcomes were dependent upon responses (skill-determined). Based on such assumptions, researchers examined verbalised expectancies of success on skill and chance tasks. Of course, the results provided some support to the contention that helpless and depressed students required a generalised expectancy of response-outcome independence which interfered with seeing the relationship between their response and outcome. But the very assumptions on which the findings were based, were questioned. Recent developments have shown that locus of control and expectation of response-outcome independence are orthogonal.

A series of experiments conducted by Alloy and Abramson (1979) indicated no associative deficit in depression. Depressed students demonstrated a surprising degree of accuracy in their judgement of contingency. Non-depressed students, however, overestimated the degree of control their responses
exerted over outcomes. Thus, no evidence emerged for an associative deficit on depression. Further experiments by Alloy and Abramson indicated that non-depressed subjects previously exposed to uncontrollable noises greatly over-estimated their degree of control over the non-contingent outcome, whereas non-depressed individuals previously exposed to controllable noises accurately judged that they had little control. Depressed subjects also gave accurate judgement of control regardless of whether they previously experienced controlled uncontrolled or no noises. Taken together, the findings suggested that the associative component of helplessness theory does not provide an adequate account of the individual's perception of response-outcome independence.

Thus the previous studies that employed manipulation techniques, attempted to separate the three components in chance-skill studies. In fact, it was very difficult to separate these three components. Consequently, it was also difficult for the investigators to assess the specific effects of such components. However, the present study has measured these three components separately with the use of specific sets of items.

Thus, distinction amongst these three components has been maintained at least at the level of operationalization. Furthermore, attempts have been made to examine the inter-relationship amongst these components as well as the association
between each of these components and a pertinent variable. By and large, the predicted pattern of relationship is supported by the present study. This helps in clarifying the network of variables connected with the construct of helplessness. In sum, the construct validity of helplessness is explicated.

Garber and Seligman (1980) have explicated two orthogonal dimensions of helplessness, personal and universal. This explication is also helpful in distinguishing the construct of helplessness from Rotter's (1966) concept of locus of control and Bandura's (1978) notion of self-efficacy. Supportive to this conceptual distinction of personal and universal helplessness, are empirical studies where two independent dimensions of helplessness are identified in the western context.

However, this orthogonality is not supported in the present study. In general, it is observed that participants scoring high on personal helplessness also were found to score high on universal helplessness. Thus, far from being orthogonal, the two expressions of helplessness are observed to be positively related. This appears to be a cultural phenomenon specifically in Indian socio-cultural system. This has also been observed in few other studies.

Sahoo and Tripathy (1990) have examined learned helplessness on seventy five employees (thirty from supervisory level and forty five from workers level). The participants were contacted in their work settings and were administered structured interview
individually in a room near to their work place. It was observed that instead of being unrelated as expected, the relationship between personal helplessness and universal helplessness was positive. The discrepancy was explained in terms of culture-specific elements of Indian society.

In another study, Sahoo (1991) examined the relationship between various aspects of learned helplessness on 220 employees of two different job levels from educational, financial and industrial organizations. One of the interesting findings of the study was that contrary to expectation, personal helplessness was positively associated with universal helplessness. In both of these studies (Sahoo, 1991; Sahoo & Tripathy, 1990), the results provided a contradiction to the western findings. This observation was explained in the light of the current understanding of the construct of helplessness.

The findings of the present study, in addition to the investigation indicated above, point out the unitary nature of helplessness syndrome in Indian society. It is shown that personal helplessness is strongly associated with universal helplessness. Although it is difficult to explain as to why this finding is an expression of cultural reality in India, a number of conjectures can be advanced to account for this observation.

First, it is plausible that the concept of self is embedded in the social pool. This is possible because of the
collectivistic nature of our society. Since individuals are immersed in social pool to a greater extent in our society compared to the individualistic western systems, people in India are likely to perceive 'self' in the context of others. In such a setting, they are likely to be influenced by the perception they have for others. The observation of others helplessness induce helplessness in them.

Moreover, the observation of others helplessness is more frequent in developing countries like India because of resource constraints. It is very likely that this repeated observation of helplessness generate in them a sense of helplessness.

Critical Features of Attribution

The construct validity of helplessness is further elaborated by examining the interrelationship among attributional style variables. As pointed out earlier, there are three important factors of attributional style (internality, stability and globality) that underlie helplessness syndrome. These factors of attributional style were conceptualised by the western findings to be independent. The present investigation corroborates this finding.

Further, the orthogonality indicated by the data in the present study shows that the measuring instrument used has been able to tap these dimensions independently. In other
words, the present scale applied for measuring attribution may also be employed in future investigations and research. Such observations are applicable in the context of measuring attribution for both bad and well as good events.

Furthermore, the internal, stable and global attributions for explaining bad events are considered to be insidious and these are expected to be associated with helplessness. Although no contradiction to such expectation is reported, the relationship between helplessness and these insidious attributions is observed to be weaker in strength. However, a clearcut positive relationship between helplessness and stable factors is demonstrated in most of the groups. This implies that individuals are affected by stability factor to a greater extent. They tend to regard bad situations as relatively lasting and permanent. This may be due to their exposure to bad events for a long period of time which is an indication of a culture specific experience. Thus, the major contentions are upheld in some domains of explanatory style.

Further to the expected pattern, association between non-contingency and attributional dimensions is indicated in the study. Similar patterns are also evinced in the context of dissatisfaction and motivational deficit. Again, when attributional dimensions of internality, stability and globality are considered in the context of explaining bad events, the
reverse pattern of association with helplessness is expected following good events. The present study also supports this prediction.

It is shown that persons with high personal helplessness adopt direct forms of coping such as confrontative, self-controlling, planful problem solving and seeking social support to a less extent than persons with low personal helplessness. This finding is explainable within the framework of the construct of helplessness. The construct implies that helpless persons would exhibit associative deficit as well as motivational deficit. In other words, these persons are not inclined to work out possible relationships among events and therefore give up attempts to solve problems. It is likely that such individuals avoid direct forms of problem solving.

Similar reasons would explain the positive relationship between personal helplessness and indirect forms of coping such as distancing, escape avoidance, positive approval and religion. It is also expected that similar pattern of relationship would be shown in the context of universal helplessness although the strength of associations is not likely to be as strong as it is with personal helplessness. The overall pattern of association between indirect coping and universal helplessness and between direct forms and universal helplessness does corroborate such expectation.
Non-contingency implies expectancy regarding response outcome independence. It is pointed out earlier that helpless individuals do exhibit learning deficits. Because of this learning deficit, it becomes difficult for them to relearn new forms of associations. Consequently, the negative association between non-contingency and direct problem solving is a likely phenomenon. The data support such relationship between non-contingency and direct forms of coping like confrontative, self controlling, and planful problem solving. Conversely, a positive relationship between non-contingency and indirect forms of coping is expected and the result corroborates such a prediction.

Apart from learning deficit, motivational deficiency is another symptom of the helplessness syndrome. This conceptualization would make a case for negative relationship between motivational deficit and the direct forms of coping. Since helpless individuals are not inclined to show initiation of responses, they are unlikely to adopt direct forms of coping that require a great deal of voluntary effort and outward activities. On the contrary, such individuals, with motivational deficit may lean on indirect forms (distancing, avoiding responsibility, escape avoidance). They prefer such indirect coping strategy because of the passive nature of the coping patterns.
While religion has been regarded as one of the indirect forms of coping and its relationship with helpless dimensions have been indicated above, a number of observations need explanatory comments. It is important to point out that all measures of coping strategy do not use religion in its scale of measurement. This specific aspect has been included here because of its relevancy in the Indian socio-cultural system. It is shown that religion emerges as an important coping strategy. With respect to its relationship to helplessness dimensions, present findings are in the expected direction.

It is clearly documented that religion is significantly related to each of the major dimensions of helplessness. This observation is explicit in the pool of total participants. The positive association with personal and universal helplessness implies that persons experiencing uncontrollability in their personal and social world lean on religious activities to gain some forms of control at a metaphysical level. Similarly, people with non-contingent beliefs are likely to turn to religion to find some meaning and coherence in their social and psychological world where they experience cynisism and negative cognition.

The result indicates important group differences. It is observed that girls demonstrate higher personal helplessness and non-contingency compared with boys. Two possible explanations may be advanced for such observations.
First, girls in our society generally live in a prohibitive atmosphere and they encounter comparatively greater number of do's and don'ts compared with boys. In other words, greater amount of social restrictions is imposed on them and on their work and behaviour. Hence, it is likely that girls may have more intense perception of difficulties or bad events compared to boys.

In the second place, the attributional explanations girls employ are of different nature. In the context of failure, girls generally adopt ability attribution whereas boys use effort attribution. This is observed even in western setting. The study of Dweck and Licht (1980) has demonstrated that teachers employ ability attribution when girls fail their task whereas they use effort attribution when boys fail the task. It is likely that this differential attribution does not confine itself to teachers and the school setting; rather it is manifest in other social environments like home, neighbourhood and other social spheres.

It is also revealed that boys have greater universal helplessness compared to girls. This can be explained in terms of differential social experience boys and girls do encounter in Indian socio-cultural system. In our society, boys are exposed to extraneous influences to a greater extent than girls.
Consequently, boys may come across greater number of people who have encountered uncontrollable situations. Such encounter may deepen their impression that many people are helpless. In other words, the observation of other's helplessness may perculate to their own thought and behaviour.

Interestingly, it is observed that our findings indicate greater use of internal and stable attribution by girls in the context of explaining bad events. This implies that girls not only indicate greater personal helplessness but also more insidious attributions while encountering bad events. As has been argued earlier, the use of these insidious attributions brings risk factors and it makes girls more susceptible to experience helplessness which is acute and chronic. The hardship of social surrounding placed on girls may be postulated as a causal factor of this phenomenon.

The sex difference on attributional style for positive events is not as explicit as with negative events. Since the greater use of stable factor by girls in situations of bad events predicts greater use of stable factor by boys in good events, this prediction finds corroboration in our study. However, the sex difference with respect to internality and globality is not demonstrated in the context of good events.

The finding that boys adopt direct forms of coping and girls use indirect forms is not unexpected. Previous studies
document that men use confrontative types whereas women use avoidant types of coping strategy. It is conjectured that the social system approves the assertive nature in boys and disapproves the same in case of girls. Hence, it is plausible that boys play a more dominant role and girls adopt a submissive role in their dealing with the day to day life situations and in their general problem solving behaviour. Thus differential social reinforcement due to difference in social approval may induce adoption of direct coping style in boys and indirect coping strategy in girls.

It has further been documented that direct forms of coping are more efficacious compared to the indirect forms. There are some evidence to indicate the superiority of males over females with regard to skillful coping of distressing situations. Sperry's (Sperry, 1966) neurophysiological studies of localization of functions have indicated that localization of skills in the human cortex is much more pronounced in men than they are in women. As a result, women find it more difficult to handle stressful situations with direct forms of coping. Women rather use more of avoidant forms and experience more neurotic symptoms.

Major Implications

The present investigation has a number of theoretical as well as applied concerns. Theoretically, it provides supportive information regarding the interrelationship amongst various
dimensions of helplessness deficits. Furthermore, the independence of attributional dimensions has also been supported. However, the major implications of the finding seem to be helpful in devising and implementing helplessness reducing and competence inducing programmes.

In the first place, the observed positive relationship between personal and universal helplessness has elements of cultural implications. It is important to point out that these two dimensions are found to be independent in the western context. The lack of this observation in Indian situation implies that people make a great deal of carry over from social world to their personal world. This leads to a lot of spill over effect. For example, people may experience uncontrollability in their interpersonal world and they may carry it over to their work life. Since the extent of such spill over is considered to be very high in India, careful programmes in the form of cognitive therapy should be arranged to reduce such spill over phenomena.

Further, since the study, by and large, has indicated the satisfactory nature of helplessness measures, the use of these tools in future endeavour may be instrumental in identifying target groups of helpless individuals. The identification of target group is an important step towards directing effective programmes. With identification, it would be possible to implement effective programmes within the constraints of resources and time.
The third major implication of the study suggests the essential component of training programmes meant for helpless individuals. Since it is shown that attributional factors of internality, stability and globality are associated with helplessness, reattribution training should be arranged so that such individuals develop the habit of using external, unstable and specific styles while explaining bad events. On the contrary, the individuals should be trained to use internal, stable and global attributions to explain positive events. In sum, the reattribution training programme needs to be designed in a way that helpless individuals to develop explanatory style that are less disfunctional and more functional in both bad as well as good situations.

The fourth major implication relates to another important parameter of training programme. Since direct forms of coping are considered to be more adaptive compared to the indirect forms, helpless individuals need to be trained in the direction of direct coping style. Effective training programmes may include important techniques like group discussions, role playing, case studies and modelling. These methods may be illustrated to explain the functional value of coping strategies such as planful problem solving, confrontative type and self controlling.

Another implication is derived on the basis of observed sex difference in attribution and coping. Since girls are shown
to exhibit greater helplessness and insidious attributions, they should be exposed to reattribution training programmes and counselling. Similarly, girls are also shown to indicate avoidant forms of coping strategy. Consequently, they need to be exposed to effective counselling sessions where training for confrontative types of coping style is stressed.

**Directions for Future Research**

The present study has employed cognitive measures of helplessness and coping. Although care has been taken to examine internal consistency, it has not been possible to eliminate all problems associated with self-report measures. Future studies may incorporate some of the behavioural or situational measures of helplessness. Situations can be contrived where individuals encounter difficult and insoluble problems. The extent of "giving up" may be indicative of their helplessness. Such operationalizations in conjunction with cognitive measures are likely to be more suitable.

Attempts may also be directed to develop instruments that are more pertinent in the Indian socio-cultural system. The Projective Inventory Approach (Puhan, 1982) is an important technique in this context. This approach combines the indirect method of presentation with objective format of scoring. Stories culled from daily life are presented to the respondents. These
stories depict situations of helplessness. Each story is followed by a number of statements relating to the characters and events depicted. Prior to its administration, a scoring key is developed to tap helplessness. Responses of the subject in the form of agreement or disagreement with the statements are evaluated in terms of this scoring key. Thus, helplessness index can be computed that is relatively free of social desirability effects. This is considered very appropriate in the Indian socio-cultural set up primarily because it helps us to get around the problem of desirability effect which is usually high in India.

The present study has used a relatively limited sampling frame. All participants are sampled within the higher secondary and pre-degree classes of the colleges. Adolescents of high secondary classes are designated as lower grade and those of the pre-degree classes are levelled as upper grade participants. In future research, care should be taken to sufficiently expand the gap between the lower grade and the upper grade participants. For example, boys and girls may be sampled from higher secondary as lower grade participants and from Post Graduate classes as upper grade participants to provide scope for a clear grade effect on helplessness and coping.

The present study has also sampled the participants from semi-urban settings. Future research work may take care to
sufficiently expand the setting to obtain more clear impacts. In addition to semi-urban setting, different other settings like rural, urban, tribal and the like may be taken that can map adolescents helplessness and coping more effectively.

Though the present study has attempted to measure the various coping forms, the effectiveness with which the coping options is applied has not been tapped. Of course, this problem is not peculiar to the present study, but common to most of the investigations on coping. In spite of such difficulties, well-planned studies in future may involve the examination of relationship between helplessness and effectiveness of coping.

Finally, a productive line of research in the future may concern itself with the study of adolescent behaviour problems in the context of helplessness. Future studies need to examine the association between helplessness and common behavioural problems observed in adolescents. Such problems include school drop outs, drug abuse, delinquent behaviours, sexual offences and other anti-social behaviours. Examination of such relationships may be helpful in devising appropriate remedial programmes to curb such behaviour problems in adolescents.

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