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PREVIEW

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**The relationship between hardiness, ego strength, stressors,  
academic performance and social competence in an adolescent  
population**

**Shaunessy, Barbara Alice, Psy.D.**

**Pace University, 1992**

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300 N. Zeeb Rd.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

PREVIEW

**The Relationship Between Hardiness,  
Ego Strength, Stressors, Academic Performance  
and Social Competence in an Adolescent Population**

by

**Barbara Alice Shaunessy**

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in  
the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

**New York**

**1992**



PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT  
PSY.D. PROJECT  
FINAL APPROVAL FORM

(Please type all information)

NAME: Barbara Alice Shaunessy

TITLE OF PROJECT: The Relationship Between Hardiness, Ego Strength,  
Stressors, Academic Performance and Social  
Competence In An Adolescent Population

DOCTORAL PROJECT COMMITTEE:

PROJECT ADVISOR: Alfred Ward, Ph.D.  
(Name)  
Associate Professor Pace University  
(Title) (Affiliation)

PROJECT CONSULTANT: Jack Herman, Ph.D.  
(Name)  
Professor Pace University  
(Title) (Affiliation)

FINAL APPROVAL OF COMPLETED PROJECT:

I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements for the Psy.D. degree in School-Community Psychology.

Alfred W. Ward  
(Project Advisor's Signature)

6/11/92  
(Date)

Jack Z. Herman  
(Project Consultant's Signature)

June 8, 1992  
(Date)

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## ABSTRACT

Life stressors have been reported to have a significant negative impact on virtually every area of functioning. While individuals with a history of profound stress such as abuse or having an alcoholic or psychotic parent have been shown to manifest more psychopathological symptoms than those coming from more "average expectable" environments, the correlation is far from perfect. Many individuals emerging from seemingly hopeless life situations do so with a minimum of psychological damage. This study explored personality factors which might serve as protective factors against stressors in an adolescent population.

The personality component known as hardiness (Kobasa, 1979) is proposed to have such protective properties. It is comprised of three factors, which together are believed to render one less susceptible to the negative psychological effects of life stressors.

The three factors which constitute the hardiness variable are commitment, challenge and control. Commitment refers to the degree to which one is committed to one's own values and purposive life goals, challenge to the degree to which one views adversity

as not only a negative experience but as a natural and essential catalyst for growth, and control as in locus of control, internal versus external.

Hardiness was measured by the Third Generation Hardiness Scale. Hardiness has been looked at primarily with adults of middle class and white background. One purpose of this study was to explore whether hardiness is a viable construct with regard to adolescents, and, secondarily, of varying socioeconomic and racial makeup. Number and degree of life stressors was measured by the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES) (Compas, et al., 1987). A measure of ego strength was obtained vis-a-vis a group administration of selected portions of the Rorschach Test to all subjects. An indicator of academic performance was obtained from an estimate directly obtained from the subjects. Social competence served as the dependent variable, and was measured by the Classroom Conduct Questionnaire (Loranger & Arsenault, 1989), which is a revision of a much longer measure of social competence based on the work of Milburn (1974).

Sets of Pearson product moment correlations were performed on all variables to determine the extent to

which each variable predicts social competence. Then multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the independent and hierarchical contributions of each variable on social competence. Six hierarchical regression equations were computed, with each combination of variables entered in a different order each time to determine the order of saliency in predicting social competence. Moderated regression analyses were also performed to detect any interaction effects between hardiness and stress. It was hypothesized that 1) Hardiness would predict a level of social competence above and beyond that portion of the variance accounted for by selected demographic variables, stress and academic performance; 2) There would be a significant interaction effect between hardiness and stress on levels of social competence.

The first hypothesis was supported, with the individual components which comprise hardiness accounting for a larger portion of the variance on social competence than the other variables. The second hypothesis was unrealized, however, with no significant interaction effect found between stress and hardiness on social

competence. Speculations about why the second hypothesis was unsupported by the data are discussed, as are suggestions for future research and implications of the study, to the field generally, and school psychology in particular.

PREVIEW



## CHAPTER I

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL RATIONALE

#### Introduction

This project was an attempt to integrate two bodies of research regarding stress resistance. One is a decade long effort to identify so-called "protective factors" in children considered to be at risk because of either stressful environmental or hereditary factors, such as a psychotic, alcoholic or abusing parent, but who nevertheless remain resilient or "invulnerable" to such stressors.

Despite the popular link between stress and mental and physical illness, the correlation is really not that great; generally below .30 (Holahan & Moos, 1986). Research shows that, with regard to children of schizophrenic parents, 12 to 14 percent will have succumbed to some form of schizophrenic manifestation by the end of the risk period at age 45, while another 35 percent will exhibit symptoms of deviant behavior. This leaves 50 percent of children of schizophrenic parents who function relatively stably and productively (Garmezy,

1971). Similar findings of "stress resistant" children have been found in connection to other risk factors as well.

This project addressed that 50 percent who somehow overcome the stressors which plague their young lives.

The other research area to which this study is most related is the concept of hardiness, a specific personality variable which is presumed to have value as a determinant of stress resistance in adults. This concept has been studied mostly with adults of white, middle class background.

This study, however, examined a not necessarily "at risk" adolescent population to see if the personality characteristic of hardiness can be found to have protective effects against stress in such a group. In studying such a sample it is hoped that results will be more generalizable, and provide normative degrees of variables such as hardiness, which may later be compared to clinical, or at risk matched samples in future research. More specifically, the concept of hardiness was explored to determine its applicability to adolescents, and to see if hardiness is, in fact, a correlate of adaptive functioning, i.e. resiliency.

Moreover, this project will hopefully expand the study of hardiness to a broader racial, ethnic and socioeconomic group than has heretofore been examined.

Despite the natural relationship that would seem to exist between hardiness and resiliency, the two concepts have never really been bridged. Although Cowen & Work (1988) cite Kobasa's (1979) work on hardiness in their discussion of resilience, they merely do so in the context of a cluster of possible factors which enhance an individual's ability to cope with stress. They note that in addition to a person's coping style, problem solving skills and "prior adjustment level and success in mastery" one's "cognitive appraisal systems and sense of control versus powerlessness"(p.596) have an effect on resiliency. They elaborate no further, however, and fail to establish a solid link between the concept of hardiness and the broader phenomenon of resiliency. The authors do link the concept of resilience to that of wellness, and attest to the importance of exploring resiliency factors in the service of primary prevention and fostering a psychology of wellness.

In the literature there are four categories of protective factors: 1) supportive, stable, cohesive

family climate, 2) "ethos" of the school, or nurturant aspects of the school, 3) broader external support systems and 4) personality disposition (Garmezy, 1987). Hardiness is of course a protective factor in the latter category.

Most of the stress resistance research heretofore done with children has been with children experiencing severe stressors such as the ones previously mentioned. Most of the research on hardiness has focused not only on young and middle aged adults, of white, middle class but on mostly males. This study utilized male and female adolescents between the ages of 14 through 18, and will hopefully provide normative data on hardiness because of their status as being not necessarily at risk.

#### Hardiness

Suzanne Kobasa (1979), the principal researcher of much of the work on hardiness defines it as a generalized ability to use all available personal and environmental resources to most effectively perceive, interpret and cope with stressful events. It is comprised of three basic characteristics; control, commitment and challenge. The first component, control, has to do with one's degree of internal locus of control,

the belief that one has power over his or her life events. Events, and change, are therefore less frightening and overwhelming.

Honig (1986) provides empirical evidence that children with internal locus of control will be more able to accept responsibility for their behavior. Johnson and Sarason (1978) looked at the relationship between stress, anxiety, depression and locus of control in college students and found that those with an external locus were more affected by stress than those with an internal locus of control.

Commitment refers to the degree to which one is deeply involved in, or committed to, oneself, one's work and one's goals, generally. Kobasa says it is based on a sense of community, the security that one can turn to others when needed. She cites Antonovsky (1979) who calls this sense of community "the most fundamental interpersonal resource for successful coping with stress." (p.7) Because of their higher level of involvement to themselves and their goals, committed persons do not give up easily. Committed persons utilize strategies of primarily approach rather than avoidance.

Challenge is discussed as the anticipation of change

as a necessary factor in the furthering of development. Honig (1986) gives an example of how even learning to walk can be perceived negatively or alternatively as challenges which foster more mature development.

The concept of hardiness was derived from existential psychology, an orientation which focuses on individuality, the true meaning of human existence in the world, and the authenticity of the individual (Kobasa & Maddi, 1977). It originated in the school of philosophy by the same name. Proponents of existential theory describe the authentic person as one who possesses the capacity to use symbolism, imagination and judgement, attributes which are also considered ego functions. Existentialists hold that the authentic individual uses such factors to influence his or her actions, while the inauthentic person possesses poor impulse control, and is in fact driven primarily by his impulses, in pursuit of immediate gratification.

All three components of hardiness derive from this school of thought, with challenge, and even failure of any kind, being seen as a catalyst for experiential growth and therefore true meaning. Moreover, authentic individuals possess internal locus of control, and

through use of symbolism, judgement and imagination enjoy greater degrees of freedom from artificial material and societal constraints. Existentialists hold that creativity is a natural life process to the authentic individual, and inferentially, then, to the hardy one as well.

In one of Kobasa's studies (1982) with all male executives who were predominantly Protestant, white and married, a modest positive correlation between stressful life events and illness of .23 (which is consistent with previous literature) was shown. Illness was also correlated with negative measures of hardiness; external locus of control .45, powerlessness .74, security .31, alienation from self .53, and alienation from work 1.00. Demographic variables showed no relationship with personality disposition, although the authors postulate that this may have been due to the relatively homogeneous nature of their population.

A main effect was found in that hardiness acted as a buffer against illness. A significant interaction between hardiness and stress was also obtained; hardiness served as more of a protective factor against illness among those with a higher level of stressors. However,

Holohan & Moos (1986) found that different resistance resources (feelings of self confidence, an easy going disposition, a disinclination to use avoidance coping and degree of family support as well as hardiness) and "life stress affect distress in an independent and essentially additive manner rather than an interactional one." (p.393) They suggest that resistance resources most likely have both main and interactive effects, depending upon the variable under study.

In the study with executives, illness was measured by the Seriousness of Illness Survey (Wyler, Masuda, and Holmes, 1971), a self report questionnaire containing 126 items representing both physical and mental symptoms. Although both are alluded to, Kobasa and her colleagues never really differentiate between physical and mental symptomatology. Further, in the previous work, hardiness was assessed with regard to stress and illness outcome.

In this study, hardiness was examined not in terms of outcome of illness, but outcome of health, and specifically mental health as evidenced through academic and social behavior, and ego strength as gleaned from the Rorschach test. The previous authors also stress the need to determine how hardiness develops, and discuss