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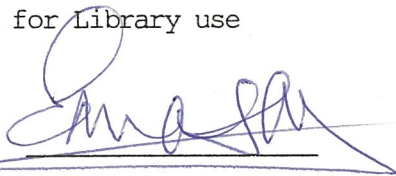
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SUBJECTIVE STRESS, COPING AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

IN WOMEN BEFORE AND AFTER THE BIRTH

OF THEIR FIRST CHILD:

A LONGITUDINAL CASE-STUDY APPROACH

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Psychology

at Massey University

Edward John Mason

1987

To motherhood: The hardest job in the world

ABSTRACT

A longitudinal case-study approach was adopted to explore the changes in subjective stress, coping and subjective well-being in women before and after the birth of their first child. Subjects were 16 women due to have their first baby. It was planned to see them at ten weeks, six weeks and two weeks before the *expected* date of birth of their baby, and two weeks, six weeks and ten weeks after the *actual* date of birth. Demographic information was collected in the first session. At each contact semi-structured interviews were conducted and subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to measure subjective stress, coping, appraisals, and subjective well-being. The specific approach was descriptive, and the specific aim was to look for patterns and themes. However, while there were no well-defined hypotheses, it was expected that subjective stress would decrease before the birth, increase in the first month to six weeks after and decrease again towards the end of the study period. The use of coping strategies were expected to follow a similar pattern to that of subjective stress. Subjective well-being was expected to follow the opposite pattern to subjective stress and coping. It was felt that making specific predictions about appraisal emotions would not be productive since it was expected that emotional lability would cloud the data and general patterns would not emerge. Results showed that subjective stress generally decreased as the expected date of birth neared, except for those women who experienced a specific stressor unrelated to the pregnancy as such. It increased dramatically immediately after the birth and decreased gradually as

the final contact approached. The predictions about coping and subjective well-being were also generally fulfilled. As expected there were no obvious general patterns for appraisal emotions. Empirical, theoretical, methodological and policy implications were discussed, and suggestions for future research were made.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present research thesis is to explore the changes in subjective stress, coping and subjective well-being (SWB) over the course of a major life event. A secondary aim is to explore the changing relationships between these variables. The emphasis on change implies a need to capture variability. Since the literature shows that there is considerable variability in women's psychological responses to different stages of the pregnancy and birth of a first child and early motherhood, this event was chosen as the object of study.

Within the stress field, the traditional life events approach (cf. Holmes & Rahe, 1967) does not account for the intervening person processes of appraisal and coping. Most research in this area investigates the relationships between objective characteristics of events and adaptational outcomes, while largely ignoring intervening subjective processes (e.g., Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974). Stress is defined as an objective environmental event or a particular style of response. Actual attempts of the organism to cope with objective stressors are downplayed, as are cognitive evaluations of experience.

Recently, however, the Berkeley Stress and Coping Project has redressed the balance somewhat (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1981,

1985; Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer & Lazarus, 1981). The theoretical and methodological thrust of the Berkeley model is directed toward measuring and conceptualising the role of the intervening person processes of appraisals and coping. Stress is not presumed, but is viewed as the result of cognitive evaluations of the significance of the event and the person resources available for coping with it. Coping is not conceptualised as a particular type of response or as an outcome, but is conceived as a dynamic, changing process. The coping strategies employed at any given point or for any given experience will depend on the transactions between multifarious person and environment variables. Sophisticated and naturalistic research designs are needed, therefore, to map the relationships between these variables.

In the SWB area, current evidence suggests that personally significant and subjective variables, as opposed to objective life circumstances and demographic variables, have significant impact on SWB (e.g., Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener, 1984). A life event such as the birth of a first child, which apriori seems to be an event of immense personal significance, would therefore be expected to have a substantial effect on SWB. While life events do correlate with SWB (e.g., Headey, Holmstrom & Wearing, 1984; Reich & Zautra, 1981; Warr, Barter & Brownbridge, 1983; Zautra & Reich, 1980), most research in this area is concerned with measuring the effects of minor life events on SWB (e.g., Reich & Zautra, 1981; Zautra & Reich, 1980), and establishing correlations between dimensions of SWB and different types of life events (e.g., Headey,

Holmstrom & Wearing, 1984; Warr, Barter & Brownbridge, 1983). There is also little research which examines the impact of major life events on SWB.

Although some research has been published recently from the perspective of adaptation-level theory (e.g., Cameron, 1974; Reich & Zautra, 1981; Zautra & Reich, 1980), this does not address itself to coping as a process, but to SWB as an outcome and indicator of adaptation. There is also little longitudinal research in the area.

Research into the role of psychological variables in pregnancy, birth and early motherhood contains only a small body of literature which studies person processes during pregnancy and after the birth, and which studies the relationships between pregnancy and postnatal psychological processes (e.g., Entwisle & Doering, 1981; Grossman, Eichler & Winickoff, 1980; Leifer, 1980; Shereshefsky & Yarrow, 1973). As Leifer (1980) argues, much of the research examines the effects of isolated variables such as anxiety on birth complications (e.g., Davids & DeVault, 1962; Davids, DeVault & Talmadge, 1961; Gorsuch & key, 1974; Grimm, 1961; McDonald & Christakos, 1963; Winokur & Werboff, 1956; Zuckerman, Nurnberger, Gardiner, Vandiveer, Barrett & Breeijen, 1963), a consequence of which is that there is insufficient empirical data on which to base a comprehensive hypothesis-testing investigation. Furthermore, while variables such as adaptation have been studied in some detail (especially Shereshefsky & Yarrow, 1973), processes

such as subjective stress and coping have been given little or no attention. Subjective well-being has been similarly neglected.

Therefore, a longitudinal case-study research design was adopted to explore the changes in subjective stress, coping and SWB in women before and after the birth of a first child. It was planned to conduct semi-structured interviews and administer a questionnaire at 10 weeks, six weeks and two weeks before the expected date of birth of the child, and at two weeks, six weeks and 10 weeks after the actual date of birth.

The present thesis is divided into four sections. The present chapter and the following four comprise the introduction. In chapters 2, 3 and 4 the literature relevant to the three main content areas of the present thesis will be reviewed. Chapter 2 examines the literature on the Lazarus model of stress, appraisal and coping, chapter 3 examines the literature on SWB, and chapter 4 examines the literature on the psychological correlates of the first birth. In chapter 5 the specific aims of the present research will be discussed. Chapter 6 presents a description of the method and design of the present study. The results are presented in chapter 7, and chapter 8 will present a discussion of the implications of the findings and discuss suggestions for future research.