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PERSONALITY AS A MODIFIER OF THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN STRESSORS AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
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Sheryl Corinne Zika

1984

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my son

Kurtis Richard Zika

1976 - 1977

ABSTRACT

An investigation was undertaken to explore the function of locus of control, meaning in life and assertiveness as moderating variables between chronic daily stressors and subjective well-being. Subjects were 120 adults drawn from randomly selected areas of the community and 161 extramural students. Respondents completed a questionnaire containing measures of well-being, personality, stressors, and social desirability, as well as demographic information. The hypotheses predicted that each of the personality variables (locus of control, meaning in life, assertiveness) would interact with stressors, to moderate between stressors and well-being; and that the combined personality variables would explain a greater proportion of the variance of well-being than any single personality variable. The results of the analyses revealed that stressors failed to consistently interact with any of the personality variables to effect subjective well-being. However, the main effects of personality and stressors showed substantial independent relationships to well-being. The personality variables jointly accounted for a greater proportion of the variance in well-being than any single variable, as predicted, although meaning in life was found to have the strongest relationship to well-being. The findings indicated that locus of control, meaning in life, and assertiveness each have an additive rather than interactive relationship with stressors in moderating well-being. Evidence suggests that the three personality variables constitute a personality style which predisposes an individual towards a sense of well-being. Support was found for the view that positive and negative factors independently contribute to the structure of well-being, and the implications for this were discussed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
I INTRODUCTION	1
II PERSONALITY AND WELL-BEING	4
Locus of Control	4
Locus of Control and Well-Being	6
Meaning in Life	9
Meaning in Life and Well-Being	11
Assertiveness	13
Assertiveness and Well-Being	14
III PERSONALITY AS A MODERATING VARIABLE	17
Well-Being	17
Health and Illness	21
Summary	25
IV MODEL AND HYPOTHESES	27
V METHOD	30
The Sample	30
Demographic Information	30
Procedure	32
Summary of Procedures - Community Sample	32
Summary of Procedures - Extramural Student Sample	33
Survey Content	33
Well-being Measures	33
Stressors Measure	35

(Cont'd...)

ChapterPage

V METHOD (Cont'd)

Personality Measures	36
Assertiveness	36
Locus of Control	37
Meaning in Life	37
Social Desirability Measure	38

VI RESULTS	39
Scoring	39
Missing Data	39
Selection of Variables	40
Interrelationship of Measures	41
Comparison of Samples	43
Analysis Procedures I	45
Results I	46
Locus of Control	46
Purpose in Life	48
Assertiveness Anxiety	50
Assertiveness Behaviour	52
Summary	54
Analysis Procedures II	55
Results II	55
Life 3	55
Positive Affect	57
Negative Affect	57
Depression	58
Summary	58
Subsidiary Analysis	59

<u>Chapter</u>		<u>Page</u>
VII	DISCUSSION	61
	Implications	64
	Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research	66
	REFERENCES	68
	APPENDIX A	75
	APPENDIX B	76
	APPENDIX C	88
	APPENDIX D	89
	APPENDIX E	90

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Diagramatic Representation of the Model	28
<u>Table</u>		
1	Age, Sex, Marital Status, and Socio-economic Status for Community and Student Samples	31
2	Pearson Correlation Matrix of Measures: Community Sample Above Diagonal, Student Sample Below Diagonal.	42
3	Comparison of Variable Scores for Community and Student Samples	44
4	Summary Data on Multiple Regression Analyses Involving Locus of Control, for Community and Student Samples.	47
5	Summary Data on Multiple Regression Analyses Involving Purpose in Life, for Community and Student Samples.	49
6	Summary Data on Multiple Regression Analyses Involving Assertiveness Anxiety, for Community and Student Samples.	51
7	Summary Data on Multiple Regression Analyses Involving Assertiveness Behaviour, for Community and Student Samples.	53
8	Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses, for each Well-being Measure, for Community and Student Samples.	56
9	Summary of Subsidiary Multiple Regression Analyses, for each Well-Being Measure, for Community and Student Samples.	60

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The history relating to the study of subjective well-being (SWB), also referred to as life satisfaction and happiness, is long and complex. Although people have been interested in what contributes to personal happiness and satisfaction for hundreds of years, the investigation of subjective well-being as a science is relatively recent. The results of the scientific study of happiness from the earliest research is comprehensively presented by Fellows (1966) in an attempt to encourage further thought and experimentation in this area.

The more recent pioneering studies of Campbell, Converse & Rodgers (1976); Andrews & Withey (1976); and Cantril (1965) were concerned mainly with the quality of life in the United States, while the research of Bradburn & Caplovitz (1965) attempted to establish national norms for mental health-related behaviours. Each of these studies contributed to the conceptual groundwork for the study of SWB and provided an array of measurement instruments from which to assess this phenomenon.

The quest to determine what makes people happy has led to investigations in a number of diverse areas. Objective life circumstances such as family, income, city size, religion and sex were found, with the marginal exception of unemployment and marital status, to be inconsequential predictors of well-being (Campbell, 1976; Andrews & Withey, 1976; Kammann, 1983). The relationship of social contact and active involvement to happiness has not been firmly established. The controversial evidence from these studies may indicate the complexity of these interactions (Diener, 1983). Life events have shown only a modest relationship to SWB (Kammann, 1982) although evidence suggests that a person's sense of control over the event may be an important factor (Reich & Zautra, 1981).

Since demographic and other external variables have been shown to account for only a small percentage of the variance of SWB, researchers began to contemplate the role of personality in determining happiness. Many variables including self-esteem, extroversion, neuroticism, intelligence, androgyny, and perceived control have gained attention (Diener, 1983).

The consideration of personality might explain why two individuals given similar life circumstances, stressors and demographics show differing levels of well-being. It is possible that personality moderates the effects of life experiences. In this context, SWB can be viewed as a positive adaptational outcome of perceiving, reacting to, and coping with life experiences.

Kammann (1983) argued for the development of a model of life satisfaction which does not depend on objective life circumstances to explain well-being. He believes there is an intervening psychological process which bridges the gap between objective life circumstances and well-being.

Several recent studies, originating from a number of related fields, lend support to this type of model. Antonovsky (1979) proposed that coping with stressors effectively is the key to maintaining good health. He believes that the underlying personality dimension "sense of coherence" is vital to this process. Kobasa and her colleagues (Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi & Courington, 1981; Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982; Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983) utilised a similar model in studies focusing on the relationship between stress and physical health. The results of these studies suggest that the personality dimension "hardiness" moderates the effect of stressful life events, leading to a low incidence of illness. Johnson & Sarason (1977) and Lefcourt, Miller, Ware & Sherk (1981) have adopted this approach in their studies on locus of control. They view locus of control as modifying the relationship between stressors and moods. Moum (1983) uses a similar, but more complex model to investigate the effect "resignation", a personality dimension, has in the relationship between socio-demographic factors and overall quality of life.

In these studies the personality variables which are most often viewed as having an influential effect on well-being and health may be grouped into two general categories. These are perceived control and sense of purpose or meaning in life. The importance of perceived control and locus of control is further substantiated by a number of studies focusing on the relationship of these factors to well-being of the elderly (Kuyper, 1971; Palmore & Luikart, 1972; Wolk & Kurtz, 1975; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Schulz, 1976; Wolk, 1976; Reid, Haas & Hawkings, 1977; Rodin & Langer, 1977; Schultz & Hanusa, 1978; Reid & Ziegler, 1980).

'Meaning in life' gains support from the existential theory of Frankl (1955, 1959, 1967) and the subsequent research of Kotchen (1960). In a recent article Lazarus and Delongis (1983) argued that patterns of commitment and belief about self and world give meaning to life changes and stressors. These meanings influence the way encounters of living are appraised and managed, effecting the outcome of well-being.

The studies to date have been impressive, but additional evidence is clearly needed to determine the factors associated with well-being. A synthesis of the research in this area suggests a direction which merits further investigation. In line with this direction, the purpose of the present study is to explore the relationship between chronic daily stressors (Hassles) and well-being and the moderating effects of locus of control, assertiveness and meaning in life on this relationship.

Since life event schedules have demonstrated only a modest relationship to well-being, chronic daily stressors were selected as an alternative. A recent article by Fried (1982) presents an argument for the consideration of "endemic stress" rather than acute stress in research which seeks to determine the relationship between stress and adaptational success. Additional supportive evidence is provided by Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer and Lazarus (1980) who found that the Hassles Scale was a better predictor of psychological symptoms than a life events scale, and DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman & Lazarus (1982) who reported that Hassles scores were more strongly associated with somatic health than life events scores.

Assertion was included as a personality variable because it was viewed as a behavioural extension of perceived control. Implicit in the definition of assertiveness is the concept of mastery of the environment (Dawley & Wenrich 1976). The positive relationship between internal locus of control and assertiveness has been demonstrated (Hartwig, Dickson & Anderson, 1980; Replogle, O'Bannon McCullough & Cashion, 1980). Assertiveness has been shown to mitigate the effects of job stress (Petrie & Rotherham, 1982). Finally, assertiveness has been found to be negatively correlated to depression (Langone, 1979; Sanchez & Lewinsohn, 1980; Lea & Paquin, 1981) which suggests a positive relationship to SWB.

In summary, the present study is an attempt to elaborate and extend a psychological model of well-being by investigating the effects of locus of control, assertiveness and meaning in life as intervening processes between chronic stressors and a positive adaptational outcome.