



Moderating effects of dispositional resilience on associations between hassles and psychological distress

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ABSTRACT

Resilience has been conceptualized in several ways, including a disposition that promotes positive outcomes in general and successful adaptation in the face of challenging or stressful circumstances. Using Wagnild and Young's [Wagnild, G. M., & Young, H. M. (1993). Development and psychometric evaluation of the Resilience Scale. *Journal of Nursing Measurement*, 1, 165–178.] framework, this study of 1221 German adolescents tested whether minor stressors (daily hassles) are associated with higher psychological distress and an increase in distress over time, whether dispositional resilience is associated with a lower level of daily hassles and distress and a decrease in both variables over time, and whether dispositional resilience buffers the effects of daily hassles on psychological distress and residual change in distress over a two-year interval. All hypotheses were supported at the first time of measurement. However, dispositional resilience scores were not predictive of number of stressors and psychological distress over time. Wagnild and Young's scale assesses a psychological resource that may have positive short-term effects but is of limited value for predicting change in positive psychological outcomes over time.

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1. Introduction

Nearly half of the adolescents from Western countries experience a lot of minor stressors in their day-to-day living (daily hassles), such as disagreements with teachers, academic difficulties, disappointments by friends, conflicts with parents, and problems with mastering the school-to-work transition. For example, Lohaus (1990) found that 71% of 12–18 year old Germans reported daily stressors, most often with regard to school (e.g., difficult class exercises and home work), but also with regard to conflicts with parents or siblings and problems with peers. A recent study with 12–16 year olds replicated these results (Lohaus, Beyer, & Klein-Heßling, 2004). Research indicates that daily hassles affect psychological adjustment, such as depressive symptoms and externalizing behavior (e.g., Chang & Sanna, 2003; Lohaus et al., 2004), and that these effects are often even larger than the effects of critical life events (e.g., DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, & Evans, 1992). This may be based on the fact that a) daily hassles are more frequent than critical life events and affect a larger proportion of individuals, and b) intervals between the occurrence of daily hassles and the measurement of psychological distress are, on average, shorter than intervals between the occurrence of critical life events and measurement of psychological distress. As effects of many stressors on psychological distress decline over time, effects of daily hassles can be identified more easily. In addition, c) effects of critical life events on psychological distress are often mediated through daily hassles (Johnson & Sherman, 1997).

Nonetheless, some of these studies may have overestimated the association between daily hassles and psychological distress as many daily hassles scales measure the level of psychological distress resulting from hassles rather than the frequency of daily hassles (e.g., Sim, 2000). In addition, most studies did not collect longitudinal data and could not test whether daily hassles affect psychological outcomes and/or vice versa (e.g., Chang & Sanna, 2003; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Lohaus et al., 2004; Sim, 2000).

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Thus, the first goal of the present study was to analyze whether the frequency of daily hassles predicts adolescents' concurrent level of psychological health and residual change in psychological health over time.

As internalizing and externalizing problems usually tend to increase during adolescence (e.g., Moffitt, 1993; Wichstrom, 1999), an important goal of applied developmental psychology is to identify factors that may protect young people from developing psychological problems. A relevant theoretical approach is the concept of resilience. Although this concept has often been applied to people in serious adverse circumstances, such as victims of child maltreatment, recent research has applied this concept to coping with daily hassles (e.g., Almeida, 2005).

Resilience has been defined as resource that facilitates overcoming adversity, surviving stress, and rising above disadvantage (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993). Other authors defined resilience as a resource that can promote psychological health and positive development in general, irrespective of the levels of stressors faced by an individual (e.g., Wagnild & Young, 1993). This resource may include the confidence in one's capacity to overcome stressors, the availability of coping abilities, self-esteem, emotional stability, and personal characteristics that increase the availability of social support (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1992). According to the definition by Cicchetti and Garmezy, this resource could be expected to reduce the number of stressors (e.g., Baruth & Carroll, 2002) and buffer the effects of stressors on psychological outcomes (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1992). Buffering effects would mean that the association between stressors and psychological outcomes is weakened or not found in individuals with high levels of this resource. According to Wagnild and Young's (1993) view, this resource should also have a main effect on psychological outcomes.

Integrating both views suggests that resilience is a resource that would a) reduce the levels of stressors the individuals face, b) have a main effect on psychological health, and c) buffer the effects of stressors on psychological health. The second goal of the present study, therefore, was to analyze whether dispositional resilience, as measured with the widely used Wagnild and Young (1993) scale, would show an association with the frequency of daily hassles and with the level of psychological distress, and whether it would have a stress-buffering effect on adolescent psychological health. Because the concurrent association of dispositional resilience with stressors and psychological health could mean that dispositional resilience affects the level of stressors and psychological health or vice versa, longitudinal analyses were conducted to obtain information about the direction of the observed associations. Answering these research questions helps clarifying the utility and limitations of measures of dispositional resilience for predicting concurrent psychological health and residual change in psychological health over time.

1.1. Hypotheses

Associations of dispositional resilience with the frequency of daily hassles are the topic of the first research question. We start with this topic because the other research questions are focused on predictors of psychological distress and will, therefore, be tested together. Resilient individuals are characterized as possessing high levels of self-efficacy, internal locus of control, ego-strength, optimism, confidence, perseverance, problem-solving skills, and flexibility, and scales of dispositional resilience include related items (e.g., Biscoe & Harris, 1994; Wagnild & Young, 1993). Thus, individuals with higher levels of dispositional resilience might experience fewer stressors as they would be more competent in avoiding or overcoming them (Baruth & Carroll, 2002). In fact, Klass (1989) and Cooley (1990) observed a negative concurrent association between dispositional resilience and the level of perceived stressors, although Pesce, Assis, Santoz, and de Oliveira (2004) could not find such an association. Whether dispositional resilience would predict a decline of the frequency of stressors over time has not as yet been tested. *Hypothesis 1*, therefore, states that higher levels of dispositional resilience would be associated with a lower concurrent frequency of daily hassles and with a stronger decline in the frequency of daily hassles over time.

Higher levels of daily hassles must be associated with higher levels of psychological distress and with an increase in psychological distress over time before stress-buffering effects of dispositional resilience on the association between daily hassles and psychological distress can be demonstrated. Daily hassles may affect psychological distress by causing negative feelings, adopting problem behavior as way of coping with stressors (e.g., substance abuse), detracting from normative ways of solving the age-associated developmental tasks, and through physiological pathways (Aldwin, 2006). In fact, cross-sectional studies have found that individuals reporting a larger number of daily hassles show more psychological and behavioral problems (e.g., Chang & Sanna, 2003; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Lohaus et al., 2004; Sim, 2000). As daily hassles show moderate correlational stability (Vollrath, 2000) it is also likely that they have some long-term effects and predict residual change of psychological distress over time. Thus, *Hypothesis 2* states that higher levels of daily hassles would be associated with higher concurrent levels of psychological distress and with an increase in distress over time.

The third research question focuses on associations between dispositional resilience and psychological distress. Studies on depressive symptoms (Aroian, Schappler-Morris, Neary, Spitzer, & Tran, 1997; Heilemann, Lee, & Kury, 2003; Humphreys, 2003; Wagnild & Young, 1993) and somatic symptoms (Leppert, Gunzelmann, Schumacher, Strauss, & Brähler, 2005; Schumacher, Leppert, Gunzelmann, Strauß, & Brähler, 2005) suggest that high levels of dispositional resilience are associated with lower levels of psychological distress. As previous studies showed high levels of correlational stability of dispositional resilience (Killien & Jarrett, 1993), it could also be expected that effects of dispositional resilience cumulate over time and that people with high levels of dispositional resilience would show a stronger decrease of psychological distress. This assumption has not yet been tested empirically. Thus, *Hypothesis 3* states that individuals with higher levels of dispositional resilience will report lower concurrent levels of psychological distress and a stronger decrease of psychological distress over time.

Stress-buffering effects of dispositional resilience are the focus of the fourth research question. Resilience has been suggested to facilitate the ability to identify stressors, to appraise one's coping capacities realistically, and to solve problems that would cause psychological distress (Beardslee, 1989; Rutter, 1985). Nonetheless, so far there is no empirical evidence that dispositional

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