



Kobasa Concept of Hardiness (A Study with Reference to the 3Cs)



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Abstract

The concept of Hardiness was first given by [Suzanne C. Kobasa \(1979\)](#) as a personality style or pattern associated with continued good health and performance under stress. According to her, hardy people are buffered against stressful life situations because they engage in certain affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. In her foundational paper entitled 'Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness', published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1979, Suzanne C. Kobasa introduced the concept of psychological hardiness and suggested that hardiness moderates the relationship between stressful life events and illness. Kobasa characterized hardiness as comprising of three components or the 3C's: Commitment, Control, and Challenge. This paper is an attempt to study these hardiness components and the subsequent additions to the research work in the area of study made by such succeeding scholars as Salvatore R. Maddi, S. Kahn, Paul T. Bartone, W. D. Gentry, et al. In 2005, Maddi added Connection as the 4th C and in my paper I have proposed Culture as the 5th C, a component relevant especially to the Indian context.

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to highlight the concept of Hardiness with special reference to the basic ingredients which constitute in making an individual stress-resilient. The concept of Hardiness was first given by [Suzanne C. Kobasa \(1979\)](#) as a personality style or pattern associated with continued good health and performance under stress. She was one of the first researchers who paid attention to personality features and showed that persons that experience a high level of stress without mental and physical illness have a different personality from those who became ill in stressful conditions.

According to [Kobasa \(1979\)](#), hardy people are buffered against stressful life situations because they engage in certain affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. In turn, buffering the stressors leads to better overall health.

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She described a pattern of personality characteristics that distinguished managers and executives who remained healthy as compared to those who developed health problems under life's stressful situations.

Stress can be a reaction to a short-lived situation such as being stuck in the traffic while we are going to catch a flight, or it can also be a longer experience if we are dealing with relationship problems, spouse's death or other serious life situations. Day-to-day stress has been observed in employees, especially those who work in the corporate sector companies where they have to accomplish certain targets and their work needs more of efficiency and good performance every month or nearly every day. This can affect the physiological or psychological functioning of an individual. If not managed properly, it can be very hazardous to a person's wellbeing.

The concept of stress was first introduced by [Hans Selye \(1907-1982\)](#), in his path-breaking study 'A Syndrome Produced by Diverse Nocuous Agents' published in *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry & Clinical Neurosciences*, the official journal of the American Neuropsychiatric Association in 1936, while experimenting with the strains experienced by living organisms in their struggles to adapt to and cope with changing environments.

2. Research Methods

Kobasa's Theory of Hardiness

Under stress exposure, many people experience degraded health and performance. Considerable research indicates that stressful life events contribute to the development of physical illness ([Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974](#) and [Rabkin & Struening, 1976](#)). There has been an established link between stress and health: nevertheless it is also true that a few others can maintain more resilient, healthy response patterns. Careful research and sound theorizing was required to advance our understanding as to what resiliency is all about; what constitutes and influences resilient response patterns. This led to the study of the moderating effect which keeps individuals healthy during stressful conditions.

In her foundational paper entitled 'Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness', published in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1979, Suzanne C. Kobasa introduced the concept of psychological hardiness and suggested that hardiness moderates the relationship between stressful life events and illness. Kobasa characterized hardiness as being comprised of three components or the 3C's:

- 1) Commitment,
- 2) Control, and
- 3) Challenge.

In her initial research work, hardiness was usually defined as a personality structure comprising the three related general dispositions of commitment, control, and challenge that functions as a resistance resource in the encounter of stress conditions. On the other hand, non-hardy persons, display alienation (i.e., a lack of commitment), an external locus of control, and a tendency to view change as undesirable.

The commitment disposition was defined as a tendency to involve oneself in the activities in life and having a genuine interest in and curiosity about the surrounding world (activities, things, other people). The control (internal locus of control) disposition was defined as a tendency to believe and act as if one can influence the events taking place around oneself through one's own effort. Finally, the challenge disposition was defined as the beliefs that change, rather than stability, as the normal mode of life and it constitutes motivating opportunities for personal growth rather than threats to security.

Research studies with a variety of occupational groups have found that hardiness functions as a significant moderator or buffer in the stress-health relation ([Kobasa, Maddi & Puccetti 1982](#); [Roth, 1989](#); [Collins, 1991](#); [J. L. Blgbee, 1992](#); [Williams et al, 1992](#); [Bartone, 1998](#)).

According to Kobasa, individuals high in hardiness are hypothesized to be better able to withstand the negative effects of life stressors and, consequently, are less likely than individuals low in hardiness to become ill. Their resistance to illness presumably results from perceiving life changes as less stressful ([Kobasa, 1979](#)) or from having more resources at their disposal to cope with life changes ([Kobasa, 1982](#)). In support of this hypothesis, it was found that hardy executives were more likely to remain healthy under conditions of high stress than were non-hardy executives. Thus, [Kobasa, Maddi, and Kahn \(1982\)](#) defined the concept of hardiness as "a constellation of personality characteristics that function as a resistance resource in the encounter with stressful life events" ([Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982, p. 169](#)). Kobasa added further to her finding in her subsequent papers, and her theory received active responses from the other researchers and scientists as well.

Consequent upon the advent of information technology, globalization, and corporatization in the late 1980s, hardiness was related with other factors as a result of coping with adverse stressful situations. S. R. Maddi (2004) has characterized hardiness as a combination of three attitudes (commitment, control, and challenge) that together provide the courage and motivation needed to turn stressful circumstances from potential calamities into opportunities for personal growth.

Conceptually, all three Cs of hardy attitudes need to be strong, in order to provide the existential courage and motivation to do the hard work of turning stresses to advantage; and that hard work involves hardy coping, hardy social interaction, and hardy self-care (Maddi 2002; Maddi et al, 2002; Maddi 2004).

The 3Cs of hardiness have been put forward as the pathway to resilience under stress (Bonanno 2004; Maddi 2005). Resilience is often considered the phenomenon of maintaining our performance and health, despite the occurrence of stressful circumstances. Maddi emphasizes that resilience should also be considered to involve not only the survival but thriving as well, in the sense that stressful circumstances can also enhance performance and health, through what we learn and then use. Thus, the combination of strong hardiness attitudes and strategies will result in the best possible living in our turbulent times (Maddi, 2013).

While acknowledging the importance of the three core dimensions, Paul T. Bartone (2006) considers hardiness as something more global than mere attitudes. He conceives of hardiness as a broad personality style or generalized mode of functioning that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral qualities. This generalized style of functioning, which incorporates commitment, control, and challenge, is believed to affect how one views oneself and interacts with the world around.

James A. Shepperd & Javad H. Kashani (1991) examined the relationship between the hardiness components (3Cs) and the experience of physical and psychological symptoms in adolescents. The most important finding was a consistent interaction of stress, gender, and hardiness for several of the health measures. Whereas low-stress males experienced few physical and psychological symptoms regardless of their levels of commitment and control, high-stress males experienced more problems when they were low rather than high in either commitment or control. The hardiness components did not interact with stress in the prediction of health outcomes among females.

Hardiness has also been a significant predictor of leadership performance (Bartone et al., 2009). The hardiness features of commitment, control and challenge appear to have more broad application for leadership success in different situational contexts. Results overall provide an interesting profile of the generally effective leader as competent and committed, confident in his/her ability to manage events and influence outcomes, and conscientious, persistent and savvy in the face of complex and changing conditions. This leader also has good insight into social relationships and the interface of individuals with social systems and organizations (social judgment).

Bartone, in 2013, presented a new taxonomy for organizing and thinking about the multitude of factors associated with suicide in the military. He presented a model in which military specific formative factors are shown to contribute to alienation and powerlessness: key factors that can lead to suicide. Drawing from the hardiness model of resilience, some recommendations are also provided for building up the sense of commitment (vs. alienation) and control (vs. powerlessness) in military personnel as a strategy for reducing suicide.

3. Results and Analysis

Maddi's 4th C - Connection

In addition to Kobasa's three C's -- a challenge, commitment, and control -- a fourth "C" has been added by Salvatore R. Maddi. In 2005, Maddi, a well-known scholar in this area of study, suggested "Connection" as "a crucial factor" in individuals who bounce back and resist stress. Research work on how and why people get well in therapy points strongly to the connection between the client and therapist. According to him, Mutual-aid or self-help groups owe their success, in part, to the power of belonging and connectedness provided by being a member of a community. According to this theory, social support plays a vital role in shielding people from the detrimental effects of stress and that those who are stress-hardy are able to turn to others for support when times are tough. Maddi has even founded The Hardiness Institute in Chicago which provides personal services like hardiness training. However, it may be mentioned here that this addition to the basic theory of Kobasa does not seem to have universal acceptability.

4. Conclusion

From the above sequential review of research findings, we can conclude that Kobasa's concept of Hardiness, as well as her 3Cs, have brought about a number of auxiliary studies. It has already been a long time after Kobasa gave her 3Cs, and Maddi gave his 4th C as the essential components of Hardiness. The world has not been what it was 35 years back when Kobasa propounded her concept of Hardiness. As mentioned above, consequent upon globalization, liberalization, IT revolution and unprecedented growth of the corporate sector, as well as the cosmo politicization of human life and living, the way we look at work, family, society, and life, in general, has undergone a sea change. Therefore, it is now necessary to re-evaluate the extant principles and seek new dimensions of strategies for coping with stress under the umbrella of hardiness.

In view of the changed and changing scenario of the workplaces all over the world, we need to explore the possibility of the presence of another trait (s) which could as well be looked upon as components of hardiness. Unfortunately, there has hardly been any study of Kobasa's concept and her 3Cs with reference to the post-globalization Indian corporate world. The study in such a perspective would be of immense value in so far as the stress coping of Indian corporate professionals are concerned. In all kinds of such studies, spatiotemporal dimensions have always to be taken into consideration. It is all the more important to do so because of the sociocultural background of an Indian professional. Up to now, most of the studies and researches have focused on the subjects belonging to countries other than India. Needless to say, India has a different cultural tradition from the other parts of the world. It has had a long and well-established culture built upon the sturdy edifice of the country's rich heritage of literature, religion, philosophy and value systems. In other words, Indians inherit not only a different culture but also a unique one.

Hypothetically, a strong background of culture can be a contributing factor to the formation of personality. However, the role of culture in the shaping of an individual's personality, hardy or otherwise, has not been adequately or convincingly studied. Culture is a way of life for a group, including habits, arts, morals, customs, learned behaviors, and spiritual, emotional and intellectual features of society. The values, beliefs, norms, and symbols of a culture are assumed to be learned and subject to change over time (Eshun & Gurung, 2009).

Nevertheless, there have been some studies on the effect of one's culture on personality vis-a-vis occupational stress and coping strategies. Some scholars and researchers have observed significant differences in the stress level and coping mechanisms of professionals coming out of different cultures (Cohen, 1976; Etzion and Pines, 1982). Hofstede, (1980, 1984) has reported that India presents a sharp contrast to the US in two significant dimensions of values: 'individualism' and 'power distance'. Lazarus (1966) also opines that "Often, individuals exposed to the threatening situation will make efforts to increase interpersonal contacts in an attempt to mobilize social resources" (*Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*, p. 108). Hofstede, in 1983, also indicated that individualism-collectivism was the major construct between the Eastern and Western societies. Collectivism, said to be a distinctive cultural trait of India, has been defined by Kapoor et al (2003, p.687), as "a set of feelings, beliefs, behavioural intentions, and behaviours related to solidarity, concern for others, cooperation among members of in-group and the desire to develop a feeling of groupness with other members". Similarly, a significant difference has been found in the perception of the source of occupational stress by examining a sample of female clerical employees from an Eastern (i.e. India) and a Western (i.e. the United States) cultures (Narayanan, Menon & Spector, 1999).

We understand from the works of some scholars that culture is partly acquired and partly leaned. Two eminent scholars in this field -- S. R. Maddi and D. M. Khoshaba -- have demonstrated that hardiness could be inculcated through proper training. In *Resilience at Work: How to succeed no matter what life throws at you* (2005), they describe how hardiness can be inculcated in individuals by proper training. They inform that their training at Illinois Bell Telephone (IBT) was effective in helping trainees learn hardy coping, social interaction, and attitudes (p. 56). According to their finding, resilience can be learned in childhood and that hardiness is often the outcome of family and social support. From their interaction with hardy individuals, they found that their parents supported these youngsters' capabilities through either encouraging their gifts and talents or assigning them family responsibilities, or both. In their school, similarly, teachers or other adults spotted and nurtured these youngsters (p. 52).

The Indian social structure is perceived to be supportive as it believes in collectivism/group life. Researchers have also revealed the role of social support in coping with stress and strain (Winnubust & Schabracq, 2002; Sinha, 1986 and 1988). Indian culture is characterized by extended family structure, inherent value systems, and collective life. Moreover, belief systems like Karma and Fatalism also play a deciding role in the way an individual looks at his/her profession and success and failure in the workplace (Niles, 1981).

The coping of stress is helped by the knowledge that one is being cared for and appreciated for his/her work by a network of caring individuals (Cobb, 1976). Indian social culture being collective, with close-knit family structures and extended family, and the like, an individual receives emotional support from his/her family/society. From the above observations, it appears that:

- 1) culture plays a strong role in building up resilience, and
- 2) the ability to cope with stress differs from culture to culture.

Thus, Culture could be one of the basic ingredients for hardiness among professionals and be added as the 5th C after Kobasa's 3Cs and Maddi's 4th C. This hypothesis needs to be explored by further study and research.

Conflict of interest statement and funding sources

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Statement of authorship

The author(s) have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author(s) have approved the final article.

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