The Role of Hardiness and Religiosity in Depression and Anger

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As personal stances out of which interaction with the world is conducted, hardiness and religiosity have certain similarities and differences. The major similarity is that both personal stances are spiritual, rather than material. The spiritual nature of religiosity is obvious, as it leads the person to think in terms of a higher order of meaning that emphasizes honesty, justice, courage and other values that transcend mere materialism. Although perhaps less obviously, hardiness is also spiritual rather than material, in that it provides the courage and motivation to find positive meaning, stay involved, keep trying, and grow in wisdom regardless of whether one’s life is easy or difficult (cf. Maddi, 1986, 2001, 2002b).

The major difference between hardiness and religiosity is in the source of spirituality and direction. In religiosity, the source and direction for spirituality is some supernatural order, typically a view of god or gods who have responsibility for the universe. In contrast, the source and direction of spirituality in hardiness is the person’s subjective struggle to interpret, order, and influence experiences so as to provide meaning in an otherwise indifferent universe.

Despite the difference just specified, both hardiness and religiosity are considered resources in maintaining and enhancing performance and health in whatever circumstances come your way (e.g., Atchley, 1997; Bergin, 1983; Bartone, 1999; Clark, Maddi, 2002a; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984; Maddi & Hess, 1992). In particular, these spiritual resources are most protective as stressful circumstances mount. The process whereby performance and health are maintained and enhanced under stress is similar for both hardiness and religiosity. Specifically, both constitute a set of beliefs that provide the courage and motivation to cope effectively, and participate in socially supportive interactions.

There are now rapidly growing bodies of research evidence showing that hardiness and religiosity each does indeed maintain and enhance performance and health under stress (e.g., Atchley, 1997; Bartone, 1999; Bergin, 1999; Clark, Friedman & Martin, 1999; Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco & Nicholas, 1999; Fry, 2000; Genia, 1998; Idler & Kasl, 1997; King, King, Fairbank, Keane & Adams, 1998; Kobasa, Maddi, Puccetti & Zola, 1986; Koenig, Cohen, Blazer, Pieper, Meador, Shelp, Goli & DiPasquale, 1998; Maddi & Hess, 1992; Maddi & Khoshaba, 1994; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984; Maddi, Wadhwa & Haier, 1996; Maddi, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Matthews, McCullough, Larson, Koenig, Swyers & Milano, 1998; McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig & Thoresen, 2000; McIntosh, Silver & Wortman, 1993; Wallace & Forman, 1998; Westman, 1990; Weibe & McCallum, 1986). Interestingly though, there does not appear to have been much effort thus far to compare the effects of hardiness and religiosity. So, several colleagues and I (Maddi, Brow, Khoshaba & Vaitkus, 2003) decided to study the roles of hardiness and religiosity in depression and anger. It seemed clear to us that both hardiness and religiosity should provide people with the courage and motivation to cope and interact effectively, so as to avoid depression and anger. In this, we were
conceptualizing depression and anger as signs of negative meaning, or meaningfulness resulting from ineffective coping and non-supportive interactions. More exploratory in our minds was the question of what the combination, or interaction of hardiness and religiosity, would show.

**Relationship of Hardiness and Religiosity**

We were able to collect relevant data on 53 senior U.S. Army officers attending a one-year supplementary educational program at an appropriate training facility. They completed relevant questionnaires. Needless to say, among the variables assessed were religiosity and hardiness.

Religiosity was assessed by the Duke Religion Index (DRI), that comprises five rating-scale items concerning organizational, non-organizational, and intrinsic religiosity (Sherman, Plante, Simonton, Adams, Harbison & Burris, 2000). Organizational religiosity involves the public practice of your religion, e.g., attending congregational ceremonies. Non-organizational religiosity involves the private observance of your religion, e.g., saying prayers at night. Intrinsic religiosity involves incorporating your religion into all aspects of your life. At least one study (Sherman, et al., 2000) has reported adequate internal-consistency reliability for this test. Numerous studies have shown this test’s validity (cf. Sherman, et al., 2000). In our study, the DRI items showed inter-correlations ranging from .39 to .85, and correlations with total religiosity ranging from .71 to .86. For our study, the DRI was supplemented by two additional rating-scale items addressing intrinsic religiosity. That these additional items are compatible with the Duke test is shown by inter-correlations of items ranging from .46 to .85, and by correlations with the total DRI score of .88 and .93.

Hardiness was assessed by the Personal Views Survey III (PVS III), comprised of 30 rating-scale items concerning the attitudes of commitment, control, and challenge (Maddi & Khoshaba, 1998). Those strong in commitment believe that staying involved with the events and people in one’s world is the best way to find meaningfulness and satisfaction. Those strong in control believe that continuing to struggle to influence outcomes that are going on increases the likelihood of having an effect on them. Those strong in challenge believe that it is most fulfilling to continue to learn, and grow in wisdom from one’s experiences, whether they are positive or negative. As to test reliability, several studies (e.g., Maddi & Khoshaba, 1998) have shown the PVS III to have adequate internal consistency and stability. There are by now numerous studies attesting to this test’s validity (cf, Maddi & Khoshaba, 1998). In our study, commitment, control, and challenge showed the expected inter-correlations with each other, and high correlations with total hardiness.

In our study, there was a moderate, positive correlation between hardiness and religiosity. This statistically significant correlation indicates that the two measures share some variance, but are hardly the same thing. Going further, the total religiosity score showed significant positive correlations with the commitment and control components of hardiness, but no correlation with the challenge component. This suggests that while remaining involved with and attempting to influence the world around you is consistent with religiosity, continuing to grow in personal wisdom through interpretations of one’s experiences may be too individualistic for religious convictions.

**Relationships with Depression and Anger**

The participants in our study also completed the Center for Epidemiological Studies
In our study, we found that both hardiness and religiosity were negatively correlated with depression at about the same moderate, though significant level. Further, hardiness was negatively related at a statistically significant level to anger-in, trait anger, anger expression, angry reaction, and total anger. In contrast, religiosity showed only one significant finding, and that was a negative relationship with anger-in. This suggests that hardiness is a better protection against anger in general than is religiosity.

Next, to determine the unique contribution of hardiness and religiosity to depression and the anger variables that yielded significant correlations, multiple regression analyses were run. Data were controlled for gender, age, and race. Hardiness and religiosity were centered for purposes of evaluating their possible interaction.

The regression analysis examined both the main and interaction effects of hardiness and religiosity on depression and the relevant anger variables. When hardiness and religiosity are purified of the effects of each other, only hardiness shows a significant main effect of negatively predicting depression. This suggests that the previously mentioned negative correlation between religiosity and depression is due to the degree to which the Duke Religion Index measures hardiness.

Further, in the regression analysis, the interaction of hardiness and religiosity is also a significant negative predictor of depression. In an attempt to understand this finding, we graphed the relationship between religiosity and depression for subgroups high, medium, and low in hardiness. For participants low in hardiness, a negative relationship exists between religion and depression. Participants medium in hardiness showed a similar, but less strong pattern. But, for participants high in hardiness, the relationship between religiosity and depression appears to have diminished. Their level of depression remains relatively unchanged over all levels of religiosity and, interestingly, they score highest in depression among the three hardiness subgroups when religiosity is high. Overall, the findings suggest that hardiness is a better negative predictor of depression than is religiosity, and that the latter may even have a paradoxical effect when hardiness is high.
Regression analyses also point to the greater role played by hardiness than religiosity in anger. Significant main effects for hardiness, but not for religiosity are shown for the negative prediction of anger-in, trait anger, anger expression, angry reaction, and total anger. This suggests the greater role of hardiness than religiosity in the avoidance and control of anger. Significant interaction effects appear only for anger-in, and angry reaction. As was done for depression, we graphed the relationship between religiosity and these anger variables for sub-samples low, medium, and high in hardiness. The outcome was similar to that of depression, namely, there appeared to be a negative relationship between religiosity and anger variables for participants low in hardiness, but this trend disappears, and even reverses, as hardiness increases. Overall, hardiness emerges as more important than religiosity in keeping anger from developing, and under control, if it develops.

Mechanisms Whereby Hardiness and Religiosity Have Their Effects

The findings mentioned thus far indicate that hardiness may be more effective than religiosity in helping people to avoid depression and anger. This highlights the importance of scrutinizing the relative power of hardiness and religiosity in leading people toward effectiveness in coping with stressful circumstances, and deriving social support from interactions.

Relevant to investigating this, our sample of officers completed questionnaires concerning their coping and social interaction efforts, and their experiences of stress and strain. As to coping, the participants completed all the items of the COPE test (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989), except those referring to one’s religious beliefs. The utilized items of this test were organized into two scales, one of transformational (or problem-solving) coping, and the other of regressive (or denial and avoidance) coping (Maddi & Hightower, 1999). These two scales have been shown, in one study (Maddi & Hightower, 1999), to have adequate internal consistency reliability and construct validity. Transformational coping should be more effective than regressive coping in helping people avoid depression and anger. As to patterns of social interaction, the participants were administered items based on Moos’ (1979) questionnaire charting the social support experienced at work and in private life. Used in numerous studies, this questionnaire appears to have adequate reliability and validity.

As to the stressfulness of ongoing circumstances, items were included that tap the subjective experience of both acute stresses (i.e., disruptive changes) and chronic stresses (i.e., continuing mismatches between what you want and what you get). Used in several previous studies (c.f., Maddi, 2002a; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984), this stress measure has shown adequate construct validity. Strain is the organism’s arousal response to stresses, and was measured using the total score from the Symptom Check List – 90 (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth & Covi, 1974). This approach has shown adequate reliability and validity in previous studies.

The bivariate correlations of hardiness and religiosity with these variables showing possible mechanisms indicate that hardiness is, as expected, negatively related to stress and strain, and positively related to transformational coping, work support, and private life support. In contrast, while religiosity is negatively related to stress, strain, and regressive coping, it is unrelated to transformation coping, work support, and private life support.

To clarify these relationships further, multiple regression analyses were conducted
in order to purify hardiness and religiosity of their effects on each other, and to study the interaction of these two predictors. These analyses show that there are main effects for hardiness, but not for religiosity on stress, strain, transformational coping, work support, and private life support. The only significant interaction effect is for strain, and there are no significant effects for regressive coping. Graphing the significant interaction effect for strain leads to results similar to what was found for depression and anger. Specifically, when hardiness is low, religiosity protects against strain. But, when hardiness is high, religiosity appears positively related to strain. Overall, it is hardiness, and not religiosity, that demonstrates the expected mechanisms that would lead to protection against such performance and health problems as depression and anger.

The Relative Power of Hardiness and Religiosity

The results of our study show rather clearly that it is hardiness and not religiosity that encourages effective coping and social support interactions such that stress, strain, depression and anger are minimized. In the regression analyses, it is hardiness and not religiosity that produces main effects on the dependent variables.

Further, the significant interaction effect of hardiness and religiosity on depression, anger-in, angry reactions, and strain deserves further attention here. The graphing of the relationship between religiosity and the dependent variable for participants low, medium, or high in hardiness produces an invariant pattern. When hardiness is low, there is a negative relationship between religiosity and the dependent variables. This suggests that religiosity can be helpful in the absence of hardiness. But, when hardiness is high, the relationship becomes paradoxically positive between religiosity and the dependent variables! Perhaps there is a conflict between hardiness and religiosity such that, when both are strong, strain, depression, and anger follow. After all, hardiness emphasizes an individual struggle to find meaning and fulfillment, whereas religiosity emphasizes more passively adopting a credo for life that is predetermined and relatively unchangeable. When one’s past life results in both hardiness and religiosity being simultaneously strong, personal conflict may result that could spur emotional difficulties.

Needless to say, one limitation of our study is its use of the Duke Religion Index, which is only one of the various measures of religiosity that is available. Further, our sample was relatively homogeneous—senior military officers—and that may limit the generalizability of the results. Clearly, more studies comparing hardiness and religiosity need to be done.

Nonetheless, our results encourage us to reflect on the possibility that something more secular—such as the existential courage constituted by hardiness—may be more powerful in the process of maintaining and enhancing performance, development, and health than is the typically supernatural belief systems of religiosity. Both hardiness and religiosity are spiritual in nature, but the former emphasizes individual resources, whereas the latter emphasizes universal given, in the effort to find meaning and direction in life.

Further Reflections on Religiosity

Let us speculate further on religiosity from the secular standpoint of hardiness. It is typical of religions to postulate a god or gods, who have created our world, ourselves, and the rules whereby we must navigate that world. Once a god-figure has been postulated, it is only natural to speculate on its appearance and manner of functioning. In this, humans tend to take
anthropomorphic approach, because it is difficult to conceptualize much else. So, the god-figure is often attributed a sex (in recent centuries, typically male), a humanoid appearance (typically the look that is most admired), a manner of operating (typically rewarding good, and punishing bad behavior), helpers (e.g., lesser gods, angels, disciples), and even an alter ego (which is the embodiment of evil).

Once formulated, a religion has many effects on people. It imparts the meaning of feelings and events, organizing them into what is good and what is bad. In this, you have a basis for moral evaluation of not only your own behaviour, but that of others as well. As to coping, you have an unchanging moral basis for struggling to achieve certain ends, for desisting from other ends, and for stoical survival or retaliation when you are victimized. As to social interaction, you define your community by those who share your religious beliefs, and react to others either benevolently (e.g., by proselytizing) or by rejection or hostility. Although there is some room in all this for individual decisions, the emphasis is on a formulated moral system of meaning and action that applies to all, and does not change, regardless of ongoing events.

The ubiquitous tendency to anthropomorphize god-figures without realizing that this has been done is a major danger in religious belief systems. Anthropomorphizing opens the way for projecting our unresolved conflicts onto religious systems, as Freud recognized. Speculate with me for a moment. Imagine a large group of people whose family life involves an authoritarian, even despotic father, a powerless mother distrusted for her sexual appeal, and children who are treated like burdens, and required to toe the line, having little enjoyment or rights. What religious credo is such a group of people likely to develop and endorse?

The answer is a religion of fire and brimstone. The god-figure will likely be a male, imbued with absolute power, and given to unforgiving brutality in keeping his flock in line. Flock members will be seen as weak, given to selfish, immoral behavior, and requiring the punishment their god is quick to give out. Flock members will work hard to overcome their seemingly inherent immorality, and be quick to see outsiders as heathen, dangerous enemies reveling in the very inherent immorality that is such a threat.

In this, a likely reaction to heathens would be to express the tendency toward punitive retaliation for bad behavior that is built into religions of fire and brimstone through violence ranging from holy wars (if the flock feels organized and powerful enough) to terrorism (if desperation and hopelessness abounds in the flock). Those involved in such aggression do not see it as incompatible at all with their god-figure and credo, and feel no guilt for, but rather pride in what they do, as it seems like god’s work.

Of course, it is also possible for the anthropomorphic projection process to produce a religion emphasizing love and encouragement, rather than fire and brimstone. Presumably, the development of such a religion builds on a group of people whose family life emphasizes a relatively egalitarian atmosphere, in which both parents love and respect each other and their children, and see their role as guiding and supporting their children in the journey toward expression of ethical values and principles. The resulting religious credo is likely to emphasize a view of humans as essentially good, though distractible, naïve, and in need of guidance, and a god-figure who is forgiving, supportive, and appreciative of human efforts to improve. In all this, flock members are likely to love and support each other, react to transgressions with forgiveness and corrective assistance,
and see the people outside the flock as potential members to be proselytized, rather than as enemies to be fought. In religions of love, there is much less threat of wars and terrorism, but still an established, unchanging sense of the good life and how it must be led that can limit individual development. Interestingly, examples of religions of love are few and far between, with Unitarian Universalism being the clearest contemporary example.

Further Reflections on Hardiness
Although religions of love come as close as a religion can to hardiness, there is still an insurmountable difference. Because hardiness does not postulate a god-figure and an unchangeable credo of acceptable behavior, it provides less basis for immortalizing family conflicts through a projective process. Consequently, hardiness can legitimately advocate a personal developmental process in finding meaning through immersing oneself in interaction with others and events (commitment), struggling to have an influence on outcomes (control), and continually learning from one’s resulting experiences (challenge). That the resulting life will be admirable, rather than reprehensible, is rendered likely by the fact that, because this life is not led in isolation, commitment involves cooperation, control involves credibility, and challenge involves creativity (Maddi, Khoshaba & Pammenter, 1999).

Needless to say, hardiness as an approach to life derives from existentialism (e.g., Maddi, 1986, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Interestingly, the first glimmers of existentialism surfaced in the context of religiosity. At the beginning of Christianity, for example, there was the Gospel of Thomas (Meyer, 1986), in which Christ was quoted as dissuading his followers from worshiping him, and encouraging them instead to look within themselves to find God. This is a clear admonition to finding one’s own way through individualistic pursuit of meaning. Perhaps this downplaying of an unchangeable credo for all, administered by an all-powerful god-figure, is why Thomas’ Gospel was never included in the Bible.

Another existential foray from within religiosity was initiated by Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th Century Christian minister and theologian from Denmark. The first fulsome existentialist, Kierkegaard (1954) emphasized that everything we do in life constitutes a decision. Each of these decisions can be made in a way that pushes us toward the future, or holds us back into the past. Choosing the future is best, because it stimulates development by bringing new information and meaning, whereas choosing the past leads to stagnation. Developmentally valuable though it is, choosing the future brings with it ontological anxiety, or the fear of uncertainty. But, choosing the past is even worse, as it brings with it ontological guilt, or the sense of missed opportunity and stagnation. With repeated choices of the past, ontological guilt accumulates, in a process that starts with boredom, transitions into a sense that one is wasting time, and ends with what Kierkegaard (1954) called “the sickness unto death,” or the conviction that life is meaningless.

To lead a vibrant and meaningful life, one must regularly choose the future despite the ongoing ontological anxiety and doubt that it will bring (Kierkegaard, 1954). As aid in tolerating ontological anxiety, Kierkegaard (1954) feels that one needs the religious faith that, in choosing the future, one brings oneself closer to God. After all, he proposes that God is the prototypical decision-maker for the future, having created the world and continuing its evolution. It is those who regularly choose
the future who will achieve paradise after death.

In advocating that people choose the future, Kierkegaard is not in any way insisting that they toe the line of some preconceived, unchangeable credo of right and wrong. They will find their own way, as did God. With such an individualistic message, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard’s fellow ministers came to regard him as a heretic, and that he was generally considered dangerous and rejected by Danish society. Living in isolation, he wrote book after book under a pseudonym, for fear of more retaliation.

Also in the 19th Century, the American theologian and minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1940) evolved from a more traditional religiosity into the view he called transcendentalism. This view emphasizes that although there is indeed a universal force influencing all our lives, it is not lodged in a god-figure, but rather in the universal human capability for finding essential meaning through observing and interpreting every day experience. As he went further and further in this existential direction, Emerson finally had to tell his congregation, during his service one Sunday, that he could not continue to be their minister, as he no longer believed in a god-figure. Shock and horror followed, and Harvard University stopped him from teaching in their Divinity School.

In the 20th Century, Paul Tillich (1952), also a theologian, continued this line of thinking. He agreed with Kierkegaard that everything we do constitutes a decision made for the future or the past, and that choosing the future brings ontological anxiety. He also agreed that choosing the future is the way of development and wisdom, insisting that “the god above God is doubt,” or ontological anxiety (Tillich, 1952). That Tillich was not summarily rejected by the religious community is a sign of how much things had changed by then. In his time, it was not unusual to encounter so-called “God is dead” theologies.

Considering Tillich’s rejection of a god-figure, it is not surprising that he did not emphasize faith in God as that which helps you tolerate the anxiety of uncertainty, but rather the more individualistic, secular “courage to be.” To my mind, hardiness is an operationalization of the existential courage Tillich was talking about (Maddi, 1986, 2001, 2002b). As such, it makes sense that hardiness facilitates maintenance and enhancement of performance, conduct, morale, stamina and health under stress (cf. Maddi, 2002a).

**Are Existentialism and Hardiness Moral Stances?**

It should be recognized that all of the philosopher-theologians mentioned thus far would have regarded existentialism as moral, in the sense that it aids people in avoiding the superficial semblance of moral behavior that can result from organizational religiosity, with its vulnerability to social desirability. Kierkegaard (1962) even went so far as to assume an inborn need for loving. Further, if they were alive now, these existentialists would point to the immorality of terrorism as an even deeper moral critique of conventional religiosity from the standpoint of existentialism.

Indeed, the 20th Century non-theologian who also championed the existential position, the Frenchman Jean Paul Sartre (1956), insisted that it necessarily fell outside of the religious context. Nonetheless, he devoted considerable effort to exploring how the individualistic search for meaning could be as moral as any religious conviction. First and foremost in this was his admonition, shared with other existentialists, that, because we formulate our own lives through the decisions we make, we are therefore...
responsible for what we think, feel, and do. If we do not like our lives, we cannot blame others, feel victimized, and either strike out at them or justify any sort of fiendish behavior on our part. Because we have formulated our lives, it is up to us to make them acceptable to us and to those around us whom we love and admire. That there is no freedom without responsibility is a strong basis for recognizing that existentialism is hardly immorality.

Further, Sartre (1956) argued that as our lives are inextricably led in interaction with others, their evaluations of our behavior make a deep impression on us to be the best human beings we can be. In this, he had no patience for superficialities, such as physical beauty, and material wealth. After all, it was Sartre who declined the Nobel Prize when it was offered to him, on the grounds that he did not wish to fall into superficiality by being tempted to define himself as “a great man.” He thought it safer to continue to choose the future, and learn along the way.

Still further, Sartre (1956) insisted, along with other existentialists, that not everything is possible, just because we are inveterate decision makers. There are givens that simply cannot be altered. For example, with my anatomy and physiology, I am unable to give birth to a child. Less unchangeable, but still givens while present, are laws of the land, and even the social norms that people have come to regard as important. How come, for example, no one came to this meeting nude? Laws and norms are especially relevant, because to violate them by our decisions means that we have to pay the consequences. Therefore, they ride herd on selfish, irresponsible decision making, as paying the consequences usually means radically limiting our freedom. This shows that it is in our own self-interest to work within existing laws and norms as we try to formulate our lives.

The emphasis of all this is that the existential life stance is not a celebration of immorality. Rather, it assumes that human beings are essentially good, ready to live responsibly, be close to others, and respect what is regarded as important to us all. This is in contrast to the common religious belief that humans are given to immorality, and must be controlled by an imposed moral credo.

Hardiness fits into the existential frame of reference. The attitude of commitment leads you to want to be inextricably involved with the people and events in your world. The control attitude leads you to the conviction that you deeply influence what is going on in your life. And the challenge attitude encourages you to keep learning from the resulting experiences, so that you can find meaning and wisdom. In all this, hardiness assumes that humans have both social and psychological needs (Maddi, 2002b). The social need leads you to want continuing contact, communication, and solidarity with the others around you. And the psychological need, based on the continual information requirements of the big brain humans that have evolved, leads you to search continually for the stimulation provided by new experience. Put the two needs together, and that is the human basis for the value of deepening social relationships in the direction of intimacy and caring, rather than mere contractuality.

Given this, I submit that hardiness is not likely to lead in the direction of immorality, as this would jeopardize the increasing intimacy of ongoing and new social relationships. Thus far, the research evidence showing that hardiness leads to enhanced performance, leadership, morale, stamina, and health under stress (Maddi, 2002a), while consistent with morality, does not test it directly. The closest bit of evidence we have is that, among adolescents, there is a negative relationship
between hardiness and drug or alcohol use (Maddi, Wadhwa & Haier, 1996). In this study, substance use was measured not only by self-report, but by urine screens as well. Although further studies are needed for full empirical validation, what we know thus far indicates that hardiness enhances conduct. This is certainly consistent with the view that hardiness is a morale stance, despite its individualistic stance on finding meaning through one’s own decisions.

References


