THE ROLE OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING IN RESILIENT INDIVIDUALS: The Development of a Perspective

William R. Beardslee, M.D.

Three studies are reviewed in which an in-depth life-history approach was used, and in which a strong connection was demonstrated between self-understanding and resilience. Subjects were civil rights workers in the South, survivors of childhood cancer, and adolescents whose parents had serious affective disorders. Dimensions of the concept of self-understanding which are evident in all three investigations are explored, and the study of resilience as part of an integrative approach to the understanding of human behavior is outlined.

There is increasing awareness of the need for health promotion and disease prevention as a complement to the more traditional approach in which disorders are dealt with only after their appearance (Richmond & Kotelchuk, in press). Interest has grown in ways of characterizing the range and complexity of healthy or adaptive, as opposed to psychopathological, behavior. A major factor contributing to this interest has been the research dealing with youngsters at risk due to a parent's mental disorder, parental divorce, or similar family stress. Despite the expectation that most, if not all, subjects would fare poorly, these risk studies have had in common the finding that significant numbers of youngsters are resilient and manifest highly adaptive behavior. Another contributing factor has been the observation in many longitudinal studies (Kohlberg, Lacrosse, & Ricks, 1972; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1981) that good psychological functioning in childhood and adolescence is the best predictor of good adult outcome. Thus, from a developmental point of view, adequate characterization of the dimensions of adaptation is crucial.

As yet no consensus exists with regard to the conceptual framework that would be most useful in assessing healthy behavior, and certainly none with regard to the instruments that would best serve that purpose. Much progress has been made in the refinement of criteria and the construction of standard interview instruments to assess diagnostic categories for psychopathology, but no such comparable effort exists for the measurement of adaptive behavior or resiliency. Part of the problem is that the researcher or clinician must define health or adaptation as a prerequisite to examining it, and there is no agreement on a definition. Indeed, as Offer and Sabshin (1984) have observed, widely divergent definitions ex-

Presented at a symposium in honor of Leon Eisenberg at the Harvard Medical School, Boston, November 1987. The author is at the Department of Psychiatry, Children's Hospital, Boston. Support for this work was provided by a William T. Grant Foundation Faculty Scholar Award to the author and by the Overseas Shipholding Group, Inc.
These are expressed in certain coping styles, in positive self-esteem and a sense of being effectual and in control of one's surroundings (Garmezy, 1983; Rutter, 1986). Within this range of ways of coping or responding fits self-understanding, the central focus of the present report.

The author's interest in self-understanding arose from the conviction that the place to begin in studying resilient individuals is with what they themselves report about their own lives, especially about what has sustained them. This is in part because standardized instruments for measuring resiliency do not exist and in part because the individuals studied—civil rights workers, survivors of cancer, and children of parents with affective disorder—lived and worked in life situations that were unusual and not well described. An open-ended, life history data-gathering method was developed. This was applied first to the study of civil rights workers who had stayed in the movement more than 15 years (Beardslee, 1983a, 1983b). Insights and concepts from that study were subsequently applied to the study of the survivors of cancer (Beardslee, 1981) and then to the resilient children of parents with affective disorder (Beardslee & Poddorefsky, 1988) systematically identified from a larger study.

The work represents an evolution in both conceptual and experimental terms from an initial study of a few remarkable men and women to a more quantitative approach for identification and description of adaptive behavior. It is based on an inductive approach that builds from individual life experience toward a more general concept of self-understanding. All three studies started with the gathering of detailed information about the many facets of individual lives of resilient young people faced with unusual stress. This paper provides the opportunity to reflect on the commonalities in the role of self-understanding in three rather different groups of resilient individuals.

As an orientation, self-understanding was defined in these studies as an internal psy-
chological process through which an individual makes causal connections between experiences in the world at large and inner feelings. The process of self-understanding leads to an explanatory and organizing framework for the individual. This organizing framework develops over time and eventually becomes a stable part of the individual’s experience. Self-understanding requires not only the presence of thought and reflection about oneself and events, but also action congruent with such reflection. In mature self-understanding there is an emotional importance tied to the organizing framework that has evolved: the individual believes that self-knowledge is valuable, takes the process of self-understanding seriously, and devotes time and effort to it.

STUDY METHODS

In the initial study, the author interviewed individuals who had lived in the South and worked in the civil rights movement for more than 15 years, and presented 11 of their life histories in depth. Six years later, 10 of the 11 were reinterviewed; all were found to be working in the same geographic areas, and all had maintained their commitments (Beardslee, 1983a; Beardslee, 1983b). In the second study, the author worked with the principal investigators of a long-term quantitative psychosocial outcome study of survivors of childhood cancer, conducted at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (Beardslee, 1981). The study of survivors was undertaken to explore the role of self-understanding in a context very different than that of the civil rights movement, not self-chosen and not under the control of the individual. Indeed, denial of the event and its consequences was expected to be more salient. Three resilient individuals from three different stages of the life cycle—early adolescence, early adulthood, and mid-adulthood—were described. The third study drew on a larger investigation of children of parents with affective disorders, involving 275 youngsters from 143 families, of which the author was principal investigator at the Massachusetts General Hospital (Beardslee & Podorefsky, 1988). By means of overall adaptive function ratings, the 20 individuals with best functioning in high-risk families were selected. Two and one-half years after the initial assessment, 18 were reinterviewed with a shortened, but standard, assessment of adaptive functioning and psychopathology and by means of the in-depth life history.

The method of data collection was similar in all three endeavors. It involved an in-depth interview with two main components: an open-ended history, starting with the individual’s current situation and eventually including both current and past experience, and a focus on the subject’s understanding of himself or herself. The interviewer asked specific questions about the individual’s history and current situation, and then put questions such as: “How do you understand yourself and your situation?” “What keeps you going?” “What are the sources of your strength?” “How have you been able to cope so well?” “What kinds of insights do you have that help you keep going?” “How would you advise others in this situation to best help themselves?”

The aim throughout was to describe the conscious perceptions and self-understanding of the subject. There was no attempt to interpret unconscious processes or to place the interviewer in the position of being able to make such inferences. The reasons for the study and for their selection were made clear to the subjects from the beginning. Every effort was made to establish and maintain rapport in the interviews.

The analysis of the interviews was done by repeated readings of the verbatim accounts, leading to the identification of common themes, then reanalysis of the interviews to see whether the themes identified appeared in all the histories. In the first two studies, all of the interviewing and the common theme recognition was done by the author. In the third (Beardslee & Podorefsky, 1988), a colleague did all of the
interviewing and the common themes were identified by both investigators. Thus, it has been possible to train others in the method.

FINDINGS

Civil Rights Workers

The first main theme in the civil rights workers’ accounts was a description of the common stresses they faced in their lives as organizers. They also spoke repeatedly about having to contain, over a long period of time, anger generated by the slow pace of change in the system and the death and disfigurement of so many of the workers. Another theme among the civil rights workers was their shared experience in joining the movement; they were aware of being gripped by and part of something new and strange and good.

Central to their being able to sustain themselves was their closeness to others. Their relationships in the movement involved deep, personal intimacy and superseded all other relationships in their lives. For example, almost all of their marriages reflected a shared commitment to the civil rights movement and almost all of their close friends were movement organizers. The way out of the intense segregation of Southern society led to deep and lasting changes in the personal relationships of those who got involved. These relationships had two dimensions: first, the organizers became dependent on and shared with the other organizers with whom they worked; second, their organizing led to new relationships with people in the communities in which they worked. Both were sustained over time. Also, at least in the workers’ accounts, the continual close relationships facilitated major changes in their lives and within themselves; they became organizers and leaders and were able to sustain their endeavors over many years.

Over time, a sense of worth and a belief in what they were doing came to characterize them. Taking action, being organizers, was the visible expression of a new inner consciousness. This new belief came to be integrated, either with a belief system about political organization or a belief system within a religious framework. Gradually, the workers became aware of what they could and could not do and were able to specify more limited goals for themselves. They also tied their current experiences and their psychological identities to their past experience. As one said:

My roots are here where I started in the Movement. Being in the Movement was the start of another lifestyle for me. Here I came open to another way of hope . . . This is the place where I found myself. (Beardslee, 1983)

They reported that self-understanding was an essential dimension of their being able to function effectively. This understanding involved an external dimension—an ability to perceive changes in the world and respond to them—and an internal dimension—a means of gauging their capacity to respond to situations and to follow through as required. From a psychological point of view, these few individuals underwent lasting change through the movement. They developed new or significantly altered identities. John Lewis, now a Congressman from Atlanta’s Fifth District, offered a clear description of the process:

Being involved tended to free you. You saw segregation, you saw discrimination, and you had to solve the problem, but you also saw yourself as the free man, as the free agent, being able to act . . . After what Martin Luther King, Jr., had to say, what he did . . . as an individual you couldn’t feel alone again. It [being in the Movement] gave a new sense of pride, it was a sense of new identity, really. You felt a sense of control over what was happening and what was going to happen. (Beardslee, 1983b)

From a longitudinal perspective, the identities of these individuals as activists and organizers became a stable part of their lives.

Survivors of Childhood Cancer

Somewhat surprisingly, the cancer survivors had detailed, in-depth memories of what had happened to them and of their medical treatments (Beardslee, 1981). They
believed relationships were key in their adjustment. They felt that self-understanding played an important role. Part of their understanding consisted in realistic appraisal of the likelihood of the recurrence of cancer. Putting the event of having cancer into perspective in relation to other events also was important. As an example, one of the survivors had had an amputation and had developed a career as a counselor, helping others with disabilities. His experience in understanding himself in relation to cancer contributed substantially to success in his occupation.

The importance of a developmental perspective was emphasized by examining the three individuals at different stages of the life cycle. Each described his understanding as evolving over time. The developmental life stage defined to some extent the challenges the subject faced; e.g., a high school student expressed concern about athletics, friends, and school, while a man in mid-life was concerned with employment prospects and his children.

Children of Parents with Affective Disorder

The study of adolescent offspring of parents with affective disorders involved two assessments, both employing standard quantitative measures; the later assessment, two and one-half years after the first, included an open-ended interview as well (Beardslee & Podorefsky, 1988). Fifteen of the 18 youngsters were functioning well at both points. At the second assessment, when their average age was 19, these young men and women had developed intimate and rewarding relationships with others; were achievers and problem solvers; were outstanding in school and related activities; and almost all were heavily involved in caring for their ill parents. They were deeply and uniformly aware of parental illness; they described their experience in terms of changes in parental behavior or outlook, such as parents' irritability, sadness, lack of energy, and excessive drinking; they focused on the loneliness of their parents' lives and the disruption of their own lives, rather than distancing themselves through diagnostic categorizing of their parents.

Self-understanding and understanding of their parents' illness were evident in many ways among the 15 individuals who were coping well. They were able to reflect on changes over time in themselves and in their parents' behavior; they were clearly able to distinguish between their own experiences and their parents' illnesses; they were able to talk about parental difficulties and, in many cases, be saddened by them and empathetic, yet not overwhelmed. Most importantly, they were clearly able to think and act independently of their parents' illness; in all cases, they were aware that something was wrong with their parents and had concluded that they were not the cause of their parents' problem. They claimed that the realization that it was not their fault was crucial to understanding what was happening and to their capacity to deal with the experience of having an ill parent.

Dimensions of Self-Understanding

The findings reviewed above suggest five dimensions of self-understanding common to all three studies. Three dimensions involve aspects of the definition of self-understanding which can be applied either cross-sectionally or longitudinally, while the other two can only be understood from a longitudinal perspective.

1. Adequate cognitive appraisal. The life situations the individuals faced were complex and changed over time in all three groups. In all three, the individuals were able to describe the major dimensions of the stresses and how they themselves changed. The appraisal of the stresses allowed the individuals to focus their energies and take appropriate action. For example, the focus for the civil rights workers, early in the movement, was the need to draw local people into the struggle, to lead them in demonstrations, and to help them form organizations. The workers' accounts
of their early involvement reflected this. In the late sixties and into the seventies, those who stayed had to develop managerial and fund-raising skills, and to assume leadership positions. Some ran for public office. They had to appraise correctly the shifting political and social landscape in order to find opportunities for small projects. Appraisals of the changing circumstances, and of the need for concomitant change within themselves, were crucial components in their long-term commitment to being organizers.

For the children of parents with affective disorder, the course of the parental illness and their life situations changed. Some parents underwent hospitalization and recovered. Some parents experienced chronic insidious disorder from which there was no recovery and which came to color and change their perception of the world. Some families underwent divorce, and relationships with their fathers were lost to the youths, while in other families this did not occur. In some families, extreme economic hardship was experienced and, indeed, the youngsters themselves became wage earners. In some instances, youngsters actually got their parents into treatment for their disorders. Each of the different aspects of parental disorder and the attendant life disruptions had to be identified and responded to separately. The set of issues to be dealt with changed over time; it was essential for the youngsters to recognize what they were dealing with and to change their strategies. Their accounts reflected this.

For the survivors of cancer, their actual medical disorder and its intensive treatment were in the past and had not recurred. The consequences, however, had somewhat different meanings to each, and each individual's awareness changed over time.

Quantitative evidence exists on the connection between stressful life events and short-term illness outcomes (Elliott & Eis dorfer, 1982) and on the importance of cognitive appraisal in managing specific stresses such as hospitalization (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This aspect of the changing nature of stress over the long term and the need for the individual to alter his or her appraisal in response, which has not received nearly as much attention, is emphasized by the experiences of these resilient individuals.

2. Realistic appraisal of the capacity for and consequences of action. This dimension has two main components: 1) the individual's assessment of personal capacity for action and 2) the individual's assessment of the effects of personal actions. Perhaps most striking in this regard were the civil rights workers, who had dreams of transforming the society in which they lived. This vision was vital to their work. Nonetheless, those who stayed in the movement were also able to focus on limited, achievable goals, such as the election of a black county commissioner or the organization of a successful economic boycott. More and more they came to direct their energies to what they could do and learned not to blame themselves for dreams that were not realized. They shaped what they expected of themselves to their capacities and to their assessments of what could be done.

The children of parents with serious affective disorder, who wished to cure their parents, came to understand that this was not possible. At the same time, they realized that their own lives would not be forfeit, and that they could be of great help to their parents in limited ways. This, too, involved realistic appraisal. A sense of identity and of continuity is necessary for an individual to be able to exercise this capacity. A sense of control over one's surroundings, the knowledge that the locus of control resides within oneself, has been shown to be important in a variety of other stressful situations (Lefcourt, 1981; Rotter, 1966). The value of a broad sense of control coupled with the capacity to recognize one's limits is underscored by the accounts of the study subjects.

3. Action. In all three studies the individuals who proved to be resilient were those
who engaged in actions in the world in addition to having an inner understanding. Children of parents with affective disorders saw themselves as active problem solvers and took a tremendous amount of pride in that. Civil rights workers defined themselves by the actions that they took.

4. Developmental perspective. The individuals' self-understanding in all three studies underwent change over time. Adolescents generally described somewhat different issues and had somewhat different concerns than did adults, and their perspectives on themselves were also different. Many of the civil rights workers were in late adolescence when first involved with the movement. They described their concerns at the time primarily in terms of successful actions, such as registering people to vote. At first interview, many had young children; by the second interview many had children entering adolescence. Much of the involvement of the workers now centered on teaching their children and others of their children's age about the movement, passing on what they knew. Thus, as their lives and family situations changed, their perspective changed. Among the survivors of cancer, a similar development of perspective was evident. One man had concerns about fertility because of the radiation treatment he had received. These concerns became prominent in his mind only when he became a young adult and thought of marrying. Another man, who was a father at the time of assessment, spent much time in describing and thinking through how to present his illness to his children.

As the individuals grew older, their understanding of themselves deepened and became more comprehensive. It came to include more elements. This was most explicit in the lives of the civil rights workers, for whom understanding the connections between life experiences prior to the movement and their roles and selves within the movement was essential. They came to recognize crucial continuity in themselves and in their actions and to tie their activism, their new selves as leaders, to their pasts. Each was able to remember a strong parental figure who, in one way or another, opposed segregation and supported the quest for racial justice to which they had dedicated their lives. One of the workers from Mississippi said that her mother always taught her that "black was honest." She indicated that this had been, and remained, very important for her in her activism and leadership (Beardslee, 1983b).

5. Understanding as a protective factor. Since self-understanding was seen by all the study subjects as important to their resilience, it is worth exploring the role that the achievement of understanding played in their adaptation to subsequent stress. Although resolving this question is impossible when only cross-sectional data are available, there is enough evidence from the retrospective reports and some longitudinal data to begin to address the issue.

In studying all the life histories, the author was aware that he was tapping into an ongoing process of understanding which had been present for a long time and would continue into the future. The study of the civil rights workers involved a longitudinal component; they were assessed at two points in time, six years apart. The presence of self-understanding at the first point was highly associated with continued self-understanding and continued good functioning at the later assessment. All had remained committed activists. The youngsters whose parents had serious affective disorder were also assessed at two points in time. Their adaptive functioning was relatively stable. Although their self-understanding was not assessed the first time, retrospectively, they reported considerable understanding which had characterized them in the years prior to being interviewed.

Over time, as all these individuals gradually came to find some certainty and predictability in their world and in their sense of themselves, they were able to build on their past experiences to anticipate future experiences. For example, among the
youngsters whose parents had serious affective disorders, initial responses to the anticipated illnesses of their parents were reactive. Eventually, however, the young men and women were able to deal with the various setbacks, hospitalizations, and difficulties of parental illnesses. They learned how to cope with them. That is, they anticipated both the stresses and their own responses; in fact, in coming to understand their responses they were better able to manage the stresses. This was true of the civil rights workers, as well: They initially entered the movement with great intensity and commitment. Through their work they found relationships with others and took actions that made a real and large difference in the rights and the ability of black people to participate in the nation’s political process. As these initial experiences became consolidated within the individuals, they were able to change and adapt to the shifting circumstances of the movement, particularly the very difficult times of the late sixties and early seventies. Their sense of themselves, once established, was not altered by subsequent negative events. Part of this was due to fundamental changes in confidence and self-esteem which allowed them to view the future with hope, albeit a “troubled” hope (Beardslee, 1983b). It was almost as if they expected, from time to time, sudden sharp turnings in the course they had been following. Central to their functioning was the ability not to be immobilized by these sudden turnings, but to assess them and then take action.

The survivors of cancer did not anticipate, at least not consciously, having cancer again. They learned what had helped them cope with the illness experience—close personal relationships, for example—and were able to apply this awareness to situations that came up subsequently. In this sense, elements of the individuals’ self-understanding can be seen as common across the three studies, although the resilience manifested may be rather different for a person coping with cancer than it is for a civil rights worker who stays in the movement for 15 years.

The factor of past experience was also important in some aspects of these individuals’ resiliency, particularly in relationships. In all three studies, those who coped best emphasized the importance of relationships. The capacity to experience relationships in depth, to have intimate and confiding relationships, evolved over time and, to some extent at least in these lives, was heavily dependent on having had good relationships in the past. All of the resilient individuals interviewed in these studies were able to talk not only about sound current relationships but about sound past relationships, as well:

Group Differences

While there are important similarities in the behavior of the three types of resilient individuals studied, there are also notable differences. Perhaps most crucial is the centrality of the stressful experience in the individuals’ lives. The civil rights workers’ psychological identities were bound up completely with their choice of vocation. That choice influenced much of the subsequent course of their lives, and was an essential element in their understanding of themselves. For the survivors of cancer, the events connected to the disease and its treatment were very important during the course of the illness. After they had recovered, much of their energy was spent in returning to regular functioning and in putting those experiences behind them. For most, the experience of illness did not determine the future course of their lives. Children of parents with affective disorders, on the other hand, underwent the experience of parental illness at a vulnerable stage in their emotional development. Their experience during childhood and adolescence had profound influence on how they later saw themselves within their families and on the leadership roles they adopted within those families. The extent to which this early experience will continue to be a crucial de-
terminant in their lives as they grow up and move outside the sphere of family influence remains to be seen.

DISCUSSION

Conceptual Framework

The method of study reported has been inductive, building from the individual life experience to three main definitional components of understanding and the recognition of two other fundamental concepts: that understanding is a process of development and that it appears to function as a protective factor. The perspective on self-understanding delineated in this paper may relate to several theoretical and conceptual traditions. The first of these is psychoanalytic ego psychology. Following Hartman’s (1958) fundamental observation that there are a large number of internal psychological processes which are not defensive and do not rest on conflict, but perform functions in the larger sense of adaptation, control, and integration, a fruitful elaboration of such processes has taken place (Blank & Blank, 1979). In this context, self-understanding can in part be conceptualized among the higher level, complex, integrative ego functions. A sense of self is necessary for self-understanding. Recent explorations of the meaning and role of self in psychoanalytic theory may have some relevance in furthering the conceptualization of self (Pine, 1986; Stechler & Kaplan, 1980).

Secondly, Erikson’s (1950) concept of a series of life stages, each with its own particular developmental challenge, is relevant to the way that long-term stresses were responded to by the resilient individuals in these studies. In Erikson’s terms, the central task of late adolescence is identity formation. At least for the civil rights workers, understanding themselves and what had happened to them became integrated into a sense of identity. In fact, the identity was made clear through the understanding manifest in language in the interviews. Thus, in these resilient individuals, the development, over time, of a capacity to understand themselves both helped them form psychological identities and allowed them to communicate these identities to others.

Within psychology, stemming from the fundamental observations of Jean Piaget, developmental frameworks have been described that demonstrate a series of stages in the evolution and growth of moral development (Kohlberg & Colleagues, 1987) and the capacity to conceive of and enter into the world of the other, i.e., friendship and peer and family relationships (Selman, 1980). Of particular importance within this framework is the capacity for mutuality in adolescence (Beardslee, Schultz, & Selman, 1987). Following a similar theoretical framework, Damon and associates (Damon & Hart, 1982, 1986; Shorin & Hart, 1988) have articulated four increasingly complex and differentiated stages of self-understanding that apply to all youngsters—from early childhood, to middle and late childhood, through early adolescence, and into late adolescence. Dimensions of the self in each of these stages are explored in four main spheres—physical attributes, active attributes, moral or personal choices, and overarching belief systems. As in Selman’s work, Damon and associates’ theoretical observations are grounded in empirical evidence and the application of these principles to clinical work has begun (Shorin & Hart, 1988). Their work is concerned with describing a universal process and provides an important conceptual framework for the development of self-understanding in individuals.

Whether in the interpersonal negotiation framework of Selman or in the self-understanding framework of Damon, the approach has demonstrated a growth in the cognitive capacity of the developing individual to conceive of the world in increasingly complex terms over time; that is, what is measured is the capacity to think in increasingly differentiated levels. The present author’s study of resilient individuals involves subjects who not only have the cog
The Nature of Self-Understanding

The aim of the interviews and of the studies was to be comprehensive in allowing the individuals to describe the breadth and nature of their way of thinking and understanding of themselves and their capacities. Family influence, broader social forces or cultural influences, difficulties they had experienced and strengths they had identified were all inquired about in detail. At each point, opportunity was provided for the individuals to comment on what weight the particular factor had had in determining how they developed and how they understood themselves.

Given both the in-depth nature of the interviews and the longitudinal perspective, the resulting concept of self-understanding is broad. It is complex, involving many perceptual, cognitive, and affective responses. This approach has not aimed at demonstrating the validity of a larger theory, but rather at examining the proposition that resilient individuals have a total organizing conceptualization of who they are and how they came to be. Furthermore, the way this organizing framework, or self-understanding, contributes to their resiliency has been explored. This comprehensive view yields different insights than does the study of individual component processes of understanding.

Limitations of the Concept

It is important to emphasize that this article has dealt with self-understanding in resilient individuals in particular life circumstances in which identification of stresses and reflection appear to help in adaptation.

Self-understanding was certainly important in the lives of the civil rights workers. It guided their choice to become involved in and then to remain in the movement. Furthermore, they were public figures, involved in leadership. They were able to use their understanding of themselves and their situations to guide others. Their own experiences, their own life stories, were a part of what they shared, of who they were, and of why they were able to be effective leaders. Self-understanding may thus have been of particular importance because they were leaders and organizers. It is possible that in certain other life situations, processes of reflection and self-understanding are less prominent or less meaningful—for example, in performing certain clearly defined tasks, such as coping with an extreme physical environment.

A more general theory of the role of understanding would have to involve study of its application to all individuals, not just those who are resilient. Self-understanding may be particularly strongly associated with resiliency in the face of certain intense stresses, but not so important in general adaptation to living in groups of people in general.

In all three groups of individuals, there had been sufficient time, and the event or stressors had been sufficiently large, for reflection to take place. Focusing on the role of understanding in general problems of adaptation or living would require a somewhat different strategy. The level of understanding that could be expected to be developed within a short time in response to a new stressor remains to be described.

This is not an examination of the etiology of self-understanding or of resiliency. These studies do not deal directly with genetic factors or constitutional ones, such as temperament, which undoubtedly are important at least in laying the groundwork for later resiliency. For example, the children of parents with affective disorder who...
were resilient were free of medical illness, had relatively high scores on measures of intelligence (average IQ 112), and did not have a history of learning disability or developmental delays. Many youngsters in the overall risk sample who were without physical illness and had high intelligence were not among the resilient, but the coming together of these three characteristics suggests that, on average, the resilient youths probably had some constitutional factors that contributed to their strength.

There is a strong element of judgment inherent in this work, both in the way the interviewers elicited the information and in the recognition and identification of common themes. This may be tempered somewhat by the knowledge and skill of the interviewers. The author had considerable personal experience and had worked in depth in all of the areas investigated. The co-investigator in the third study was experienced in work with children of parents with affective disorder. Still, there is a subjective element in the studies and their findings.

The concentration on the connection between resiliency and self-understanding does not address the issue of how much understanding there is in individuals who do not cope as well in the face of such stresses. For example, the role of understanding in depressed children of parents who had serious affective disorder was not investigated; children who became depressed were not studied because they did not fully manifest resiliency. Furthermore, a means of gauging partial or incomplete self-understanding would have been required, and quantitative instruments to do this are not yet available.

Research Implications

The robustness of the finding of the connection between self-understanding and resiliency in three separate studies, each with more rigorous selection methods and quantitative assessment of adaptive behavior, strongly suggests that self-understanding is an important inner psychological process in resilient individuals. The connection between resiliency and self-understanding in these three nonclinical samples emphasizes the role of self-understanding as a general process in individuals' mastery of difficult situations.

Much more study of the concept of resiliency is indicated. It should involve exploration of genetic and constitutional dimensions and environmental influences, as well as much more detailed characterizations of the components of resiliency. Refinements in the quantitative measurement of self-understanding are also needed. Some recent work indicates that self-understanding can be reliably and validly measured in relation to other ego functions (Beardslee, Jacobson, Hauser, Noam, & Powers, 1986).

In terms of assessment, the life history method has value primarily when used in combination with quantitative measures. What the life history method does provide is a comprehensive approach to describing the stresses that individuals have faced. Furthermore, it presents a rich opportunity for the generation of hypotheses about factors that may contribute to resiliency which may not be captured by existing instruments. The use of the life history method in the study of understanding allows descriptions of individual lives and individual responses. It also permits the investigator to recognize many other qualities, such as courage, personal identity and integrity, and empathy for others, which are distinct from self-understanding but linked in the accounts. Above all, it allows the investigator to probe the comprehensive organizing framework through which an individual makes sense of life experience, and to learn how the individual assesses the influence of that framework.

From a clinical perspective, the work emphasizes the individuality of experience in response to a common stressor, whether it be having cancer or having a parent with serious illness. Clinicians working with individuals who have undergone similar


Eisenberg, L. (1979). A friend, not an apple, a day will help keep the doctor away. American Journal of Medicine, 66, 551–553.


REFERENCES


For reprints: William R. Beard, M.D., Department of Psychiatry, Children’s Hospital, 300 Longwood Ave., Boston, MA 02115.