

Dispositional Resiliency and Adjustment in Protestant Pastors: A Pilot Study

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Published online: 28 April 2010
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Abstract Several studies of pastoral adjustment have examined sources of stress and support. This pilot study, drawing upon a positive psychological perspective of resilience, examined the role of dispositional hope and gratitude in coping with the demands of ministry. A non-random sample of 24 pastors completed online surveys containing measures of congregational demand and support, hope and gratitude, and pastoral well-being and adjustment. As expected, demand was negatively associated with adjustment, while gratitude was positively associated. Regression analyses suggested that gratitude is the more salient variable.

Keywords Clergy stress · Resiliency · Gratitude · Burnout

Introduction

Some studies of clergy have reported that there are positive benefits that come with the pastoral role (e.g. Barna 1993). McMillan (2003), for example, referring to data from a Duke University Pulpit and Pew study of a large sample of Protestant pastors, argues that ministry was a “deeply satisfying calling” (p. 4) for a majority of those participating in the research. Sixty percent of the respondents had “never doubted their call to the ministry,” while 70% “have never considered leaving pastoral ministry” (p. 4). The same statistics, however, can be read in the other direction (e.g., Carroll 2006): 40% of pastors have doubted their call, and 30% have considered abandoning the pastorate.

Which interpretation is “correct”? Probably the best response is to say that ministry is simultaneously both satisfying and demanding. Pastors, when asked, are quite capable of listing both the satisfactions and the stressors of ministry (e.g., Rowatt 2001). While congregations are in continual need of pastoral leadership, clergy continue to leave the profession for a variety of reasons, some of them family-related (Hoge and Wenger 2005;

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Jud et al. 1970). An important question, then, for both pastors and those who work with them, is how best to deal with the intrinsic demands of the profession, in order to increase pastors' sense of satisfaction in the ministry and thus the likelihood that they will remain.

Some of the research done with pastors and their families has utilized constructs from *family stress theory*, of which Hill's (1949, 1958) so-called ABC-X model is the most parsimonious example. The model posits three classes of factors which interact to influence the degree of stress or crisis (X) experienced by a family.

The A-factor refers to *demands* and *stressors*. For clergy, such demands include a heavy and poorly-defined workload (e.g. Blanton 1992; Kieren and Munro 1988; Ngo et al. 2005). It also includes the problem of *boundary ambiguity* (Boss 1977; Boss and Greenberg 1984; Lee 1995) between the family and the congregation, as often expressed in the intrusive behaviors and expectations of congregations (e.g., Frame and Shehan 1994; Lee and Balswick 1989; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003; Morris and Blanton 1994).

The B-factor takes into account the *resources* available to the family to meet the demands. The lack of adequate financial resources, for example, is a common complaint among pastors (Carroll 2006; Hoge and Wenger 2005). But the availability of socially supportive relationships is another key resource (e.g., Meek et al. 2003). Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) found, for example, that the greater the number of supportive relationships pastors had in their congregations, the lower their reported levels of burnout and the greater their optimism about remaining in the ministry.

The C-factor, however, is a higher-order construct. It refers to how families perceive both demands and resources, and therefore has to do with the dimension of *meaning*. Family stress theorists like Pauline Boss (2002) emphasize the importance of interpretive meanings. As an empirical example, it is not simply the number of supportive relationships (B-factor) that may influence a pastor's levels of optimism and burnout, but how satisfied the pastor is (C-factor) with the support received (Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003). Such findings leave open the possibility of other ways of assessing the role of meaning in pastoral adjustment.

Recent trends in stress theory suggest that the construct of *resilience* may be a productive way to address this issue (Patterson 2002). The concept has its origins in the longitudinal study of children who seem to develop normally or even thrive in environments that pose significant social risks or obstacles (e.g., Werner 1984). Resilience encompasses both *elasticity*, the ability to maintain one's level of functioning in the face of challenges, and *buoyancy*, the ability to recover or "bounce back" even after disruptions to functioning (McCubbin et al. 1997). The study of resilience moves away from a primary emphasis on risk factors toward an examination of the importance of protective factors and processes that make children (and adults) less vulnerable to stress (Benard 2007; Garnezy et al. 1984). Thus, applied to clergy, the empirical question becomes: what characteristics might help pastors to be less susceptible to the potentially deleterious effects of the demands of ministry?

Patterson (2002) distinguishes between *resilience* and *resiliency*. The former refers to actual adaptive processes, while the latter refers to assumed traits or capacities. The present study was designed to explore resiliency in pastors, or the dispositional traits associated with the ability to cope with the demands of the pastorate. Some authors have, in fact, already begun using the language of resiliency to refer to a pastor's coping resources. Meek et al. (2003), for example, reported the results of two qualitative studies of the "personal resiliency" (p. 342) of pastors, but without defining the term or referring to the extant literature on the subject. Resiliency was presented as an extension of the recent emphasis on positive psychology (e.g., Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and the more specific

question of how people “cope with stress and maintain well-functioning” (Meek et al., p. 339). More recently, Wimberly and Wimberly (2007) have also used the term in a manner consistent with the literature, even to the point of using the phrase “spiritual elasticity” (p. 29). Again, however, no direct reference is made to the empirical or theoretical literature on resilience. It is therefore the goal of this research to extend the literature on stress in the pastorate by explicitly incorporating the construct of resiliency.

How, then, is pastoral resiliency to be operationalized? The literature on assessment in positive psychology (Lopez and Snyder 2003) suggests at least two possibilities: the dispositions of hope and gratitude.

Hope theory (Snyder 2002) assumes that people are goal-oriented, intrinsically motivated to reach and sustain positive goals while avoiding or delaying negative ones. In this context, Snyder proposes that hope is a cognitive process with two major components. *Pathways* thinking refers to the ability to link the present situation imaginatively to a desired future goal, or more simply put, seeing as many routes as possible “from Point A to Point B” (p. 251). *Agency* thinking refers to “the perceived capacity to use one’s pathways to reach desired goals”—as expressed in the self-statement, “I can do this” (p. 251). Hope has been conceptualized both as an enduring trait or disposition and as a variable state. In terms of stress theory, dispositional hope can be considered a C-factor, as those who are high in hope are “less likely to construe... impediments as stressful” (p. 252), clearly implying an appraisal and meaning process. As such, it is also associated with resilience (Shorey et al. 2002).

Related to hope is the disposition of gratitude (McCullough 2002). Grateful people attribute at least some of their success and well-being to others; the most grateful experience life itself as a gift (McCullough et al. 2002). Grateful people also tend to be both spiritually inclined, and prosocial in their concern for others. Furthermore, there is experimental evidence that actively counting our blessings may benefit one’s health and well-being, as compared to focusing on things that annoy or bother us (Emmons and McCullough 2003).

McCullough (2002) has posited that what hope and gratitude share in common is a “mindful attentiveness” characterized by a “cognitive habit of savoring...life circumstances” (p. 303). The present study employed self-report measures of hope and gratitude to determine whether these dispositional traits did in fact represent pastoral resiliency in the face of demands. Four general hypotheses were tested. First, it was predicted that the greater the frequency of intrusive demands reported by pastors, the more problematic their personal adjustment, as indicated by measures of burnout, emotional and spiritual well-being, satisfaction with life, and marital satisfaction. Second, and conversely, it was hypothesized that a greater level of perceived social support from the congregation would be associated with better adjustment. Similarly, hypotheses three and four predicted that pastors with more resilient dispositions, namely those who were more hopeful and grateful respectively, would report lower levels of burnout and higher levels of the four well-being and satisfaction variables.

Materials and methods

Participants and procedure

The small, non-random sample for the study consisted of 24 clergy. Nine participants were ministers in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Four denominations were represented by two

participants each (American Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, Reformed Church of America, and United Methodist), and seven other denominations by one participant each. Twelve of the participants were senior or solo pastors, and ten were associates. Ten of the pastors served small churches (up to 100 attendees); six served medium congregations (up to 300 attendees); seven served large churches (up to 800 attendees); and one served a larger congregation (1,200 attendees).

Six of the 24 participants were female. The pastors ranged from 26 to 64 years of age, with a mean of 46.78 ($SD=11.33$). Their years of service in their present congregations ranged from 4 months to 23 years, with a mean of 4.16 ($SD=5.37$); years of service in the ministry ranged from 4 months to 32 years, with a mean of 13.06 ($SD=10.22$).

Volunteers for the study were recruited through brief notices included in mail invitations for two simultaneous events held on the campus of a large Protestant seminary. No incentives were offered for participation, though potential participants were advised that the results of the study would be presented at a breakfast hosted by the seminary. Interested parties meeting the inclusion criteria (i.e., married and currently serving a local congregation as a member of the pastoral staff) were directed to send a query to a designated email address. A research assistant then replied to each query with an electronic message containing both the informed consent document and a link to the online survey.

Measures

Social environment Two measures were used to operationalize factors related to the social environment of congregational ministry. The A-factor of demands/stressors was measured by the Ministry Demands Inventory (MDI; Lee 1999), which assesses the frequency of intrusive behaviors perceived by pastors from members of their congregations. Respondents were presented with 17 social situations such as “Your sleep was interrupted by a phone call from a member,” or “A member came by your home unannounced.” Participants indicated how often each situation had occurred in the past 6 months, on a scale ranging from 0 to 6 or more times. The measure was internally consistent, as indicated by a Cronbach’s alpha (an index of reliability computed from the intercorrelation of the items in an instrument) of .85 in the present sample.

The B-factor was operationalized by the Congregational Support Scale (CSS), a measure of social support created for this study and modeled after Cutrona and Russell’s (1987) Social Provisions Scale (SPS). Cutrona (1989) has tested source-specific versions of the SPS, reworded to assess support from parents, friends, and marital partners. The CSS extends this notion, and is similar in intent and design to Fiala et al.’s (2002) Religious Support Scale, but written with a view to pastors rather than church members as informants.

Cutrona and Russell (1987) based their scale upon Weiss’ (1974) theory of social support, which postulated six provisions of social relationships needed for one to feel adequately supported by others. The first two provisions, *guidance* and *reliable alliance*, point to the assistance needed when one is under stress. The former refers to advice and information, while the latter refers to the subjective sense that people are ready to help. The other four provisions are *reassurance of worth* (having others who value one’s competence), *opportunities for nurturance* (having others that rely on one for care or well-being), *attachment* (emotionally close and secure relationships), and *social integration* (belonging to a group with shared interests and concerns). The Social Provisions Scale is comprised of 24 items, four for each of the six provisions.

For the present study, the subscales for opportunities for nurturance and social integration were dropped, given the pastor’s public role of leadership and care for a group

of people organized around common beliefs and activities. The remaining 16 items from the Social Provisions Scale were simplified and reworded to address congregations as sources of social support. One item, “Other people do not view me as competent,” was dropped as inappropriately extreme for pastors. Thus, participants were presented with 15 items measuring guidance (e.g., “I have someone in the congregation to talk to about decisions in my life”), reassurance of worth (e.g., “There are people in the congregation who value my skills and abilities”), attachment (e.g., “I feel a strong emotional tie with at least one person in the congregation”), and reliable alliance (e.g., “There are people in the congregation who will help me if I really need it”). Responses were given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. With the present sample, the Congregational Support Scale showed high internal consistency, with an alpha coefficient of .89.

Dispositional resiliency The C-factor of perception/meaning was operationalized by two measures of dispositional resiliency. Hope was assessed by the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (ADHS; Snyder et al. 1991; see also Lopez et al. 2003), a 12-item measure designed for use with individuals of the age of 15 or above. Four items assess agency thinking (e.g., “I energetically pursue my goals”) and four assess pathways thinking (e.g., “I can think of many ways to get out of a jam”). Four additional items are included as distractors. Hope scores have been demonstrated to be stable over time, with researchers reporting test–retest reliability coefficients ranging from .73 to .85 (Snyder et al. 1991). The ADHS was also internally consistent, with an alpha of .81 in the present sample.

Dispositional gratitude was operationalized using the 6-item Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough et al. 2002), which includes items such as “I have so much in life to be thankful for” and “When I look at the world, I don’t see much to be grateful for” (reverse scored). This instrument was found to be internally consistent in the present study, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .74. All items for both the ADHS and the GQ-6 were presented using 6-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = *definitely false* to 6 = *definitely true*.

Pastoral adjustment The emotional and social adjustment of pastors was operationalized using five measures. Given the concerns regarding pastoral burnout (e.g., Evers and Tomic 2003; Pector 2005; Willimon 1989), this variable was operationalized using nine items drawn from an earlier study by Lee (1999; see also Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003), originally designed to measure both burnout (e.g., “I am burning out in the ministry,” and “I have thought seriously of leaving the ministry”) and ministry optimism (e.g., “I am excited to be in ministry”). For the present study, all items were combined into a single measure, and the three optimism items were reverse scored. Responses were given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Alpha reliability was strong at a coefficient of .89.

Emotional and spiritual well-being were measured using two scales. The Family Member Wellbeing Index (FMWI; McCubbin and Thompson 1991) is a 7-item instrument with response scales anchored by opposing descriptions. An example is, “How relaxed or tense have you been in the past month?”, where 1 = *very relaxed* and 10 = *very tense*. Other items address such areas as concerns about one’s health, and experiences of fear, anger, and sadness. The FMWI showed good internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .85. Spiritual well-being was measured with the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS; Ellison 1983), a 7-item scale assessing the respondents’ perceived relationship with God (e.g., “I believe God loves me and cares about me”). Responses were given on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. The SWBS was also internally consistent, with an alpha of .87 in the current sample.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985) is a widely used measure of global satisfaction with one's life at present compared to one's ideals. Five items, including "In most ways, my life is close to ideal," were presented using the same response scale as the SWBS, and the alpha coefficient was identical.

Finally, the pastors' marital adjustment was assessed using a 7-item short form of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7; Hunsley et al. 2001). The original DAS (Spanier 1976) is a widely used measure of marital quality, and researchers (e.g., Sharpley and Cross 1982; Sharpley and Rogers 1984) have attempted to narrow the instrument to a shorter but valid subset of items. Three of the items utilized in the DAS-7 assessed the level of agreement between spouses on matters like "Philosophy of life," where 1 = *always disagree* and 6 = *always agree*. Another three items assessed the frequency of events such as "Have a stimulating exchange of ideas," where 1 = *never*, 5 = *once a day*, and 6 = *more often*. The final item asked respondents to rate their marital happiness on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *extremely unhappy* to 7 = *perfect*. In the present sample, the DAS-7 was found to be internally consistent at an alpha of .85.

Results

Table 1 presents the partial correlations between the major study variables, controlling for participants' age, number of years in the ministry, and number of years in the present church. The first hypothesis, with respect to demand, received mixed support. Frequency of demand was significantly correlated with both burnout and well-being, such that pastors who rated their congregations as more demanding also reported higher levels of burnout and lowered well-being. Correlations between congregational demand and the remaining four adjustment variables were non-significant.

Hypotheses two and three were unsupported. Congregational support was uncorrelated with any of the pastoral adjustment measures, as was dispositional hope. Gratitude, however, was significantly correlated in the predicted directions with all adjustment variables except marital satisfaction, lending strong support to the fourth hypothesis.

Exploratory hierarchical regression analyses were then conducted to examine the relative contribution of demand and gratitude to pastoral adjustment. Since both predictors were significantly correlated with the adjustment variables of burnout and well-being, the latter two were selected as dependent variables.

Table 1 Partial correlations between major study variables ($N=24$)

	Burnout	Well-being	Spiritual well-being	Satisfaction with life	Marital satisfaction
Frequency of demand	.41*	-.47*	-.35	-.04	-.04
Congregational support	-.17	.11	.37	-.01	-.31
Hope	-.33	.14	.35	.17	.31
Gratitude	-.52*	.54*	.67**	.49*	.20

Third-order partial coefficients, controlling for participant age, years in ministry, and years in present church

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 Summary of hierarchical regression of variables predicting burnout ($N=24$)

	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	SE	β	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Frequency of demand	.12	.08	.32	.12	.07	.31
Gratitude				-.87	.29	-.52*
<i>F</i> -change		2.51			9.12*	
Adjusted R^2		.06			.32	

* $p<0.01$

Table 2 presents the results for burnout. Frequency of demand was entered in the first block, accounting for a non-significant 6% of the variability of burnout. In the second model, however, demand and gratitude together accounted for nearly a third of the variability of burnout, with gratitude being the only significant predictor.

Table 3 presents the results for well-being. Again, frequency of demand by itself was not a significant predictor, despite accounting for 12% of well-being. With the addition of gratitude, however, the second model accounted for 40% of well-being, and both predictors were significant.

Discussion

The ABC-X model suggests that a family's experience of stress is related to a dynamic and ecologically-situated interplay of stressor events, resources, and the meanings associated with both. These conceptual categories help us to think more clearly about the various factors associated with the well-being of clergy and their families. While some researchers may talk about the role of "financial stress," for example, it may be more useful to think of this as a lack of resources than an actual stressor, because doing so would raise the closely related question of what goal(s) such resources were needed to accomplish.

Theoretical developments within stress theory, however, suggest that the C-factor of meaning and perception, operationalized as resiliency, may be a more productive and comparatively less developed line of questioning. The results of the present study lend support to this idea. The relationship of demand and support to well-being may be mediated by the meanings that pastors give to both. As Zondag (2000) has suggested, whether a

Table 3 Summary of hierarchical regression of variables predicting well-being ($N=24$)

	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	SE	β	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Frequency of demand	-.43	.21	-.40	-.37	.18	-.35*
Gratitude				1.97	.60	.55**
<i>F</i> -change		4.02			10.87**	
Adjusted R^2		.12			.40	

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$

pastor burns out is to some extent dependent on his or her expectations of fair exchange—those who perceive themselves as giving far more to their congregations than they receive are more likely to evaluate their situation negatively. This is not solely a matter of an “actual” discrepancy, if such a discrepancy could be objectively measured. It is a matter of expectation, interpretation, and meaning.

Might dispositional gratitude be a mediating factor here? The results suggest that pastors who report their congregations as more intrusively demanding are more likely to suffer higher levels of burnout and decreased well-being. Gratitude, however, appears to be the more salient factor.

The practical implication is that pastoral adjustment might be aided not only by teaching clergy how to maintain adequate social and emotional boundaries, but by helping them to cultivate the virtue of a grateful disposition. As stated in the literature review, there is empirical evidence suggesting that gratitude can in fact be cultivated, with positive benefits to one’s health and well-being (Emmons and McCullough 2003). In the experimental design, people who were instructed over 10 weeks to write down five things they were thankful for at the end of each week had a more favorable view of life at the end of the study than those instructed to write down five irritants. This implies that the development of gratitude as a spiritual discipline, rooted in a theology of gratitude, might be one important way to build pastoral resiliency.

These findings are highly suggestive, but must be interpreted cautiously, given the methodological shortcomings of the study. An obvious limitation of this study is sample size. The lack of significant findings for dispositional hope, for example, may in part be due to a lack of statistical power. All the hope coefficients are in the predicted directions, and three (burnout, spiritual well-being, and marital satisfaction) are of at least moderate magnitude. Future studies using larger and more representative samples might therefore still include dispositional hope, until it is demonstrated to be irrelevant to pastoral resiliency.

More importantly, the size of the sample also makes it impossible to generalize with any degree of confidence. These results, therefore, can only be considered a pilot study pointing to the need for further research on the role of gratitude in pastoral resiliency. Larger samples are needed, randomly selected from denominational directories. Larger samples would also make group comparisons possible, differentiating between male and female pastors, spouses, single vs. married clergy, and senior vs. associate pastors.

Because the data are correlational in nature, we cannot know that the cultivation of gratitude would directly cause improvements in pastoral well-being. An experimental study along the lines of Emmons and McCullough’s (2003) may be possible. The point of the current study, however, is to suggest the value of a positive, resiliency-based approach to the study of clergy adjustment. This does not replace the further examination of sources of demand and support, but points the way to a more strength-based orientation to the training and care of clergy.

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