Chronic Stress, Acute Stress, and Depressive Symptoms

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Although life events continue to be the major focus of stress research, recent studies suggest that chronic stress should be a more central focus. An evaluation of this issue is presented using data from a large community survey of married men (n = 819) and women (n = 936). Results show that chronic stresses are more strongly related to depressive symptoms than acute stresses in all but one life domain. The interaction patterns exhibited by chronic and acute stresses are predominantly associated with lower levels of depression than those predicted by a main effects model. This pattern suggests that chronic stresses may reduce the emotional effects of acute stresses. Although the processes through which this effect occurs are not clear, it is suggested that anticipation and reappraisal reduce the stressfulness of an event by making its meaning more benign. Implications for future research on chronic and acute stress effects are discussed.

Over the past two decades since Holmes and Rahe's (1967) groundbreaking work on life events and illness, acute life events have been the major focus of psychological stress research. Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that this attention is misplaced and that chronic stress should be a more central focus. When Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) asked a national sample of...
adults to describe their major sources of stress, chronic situations were mentioned much more often than events. Mattlin, Wethington, and Kessler (1990), in a more recent general population survey, asked respondents to describe their most stressful experience over the past year and found that chronic difficulties were again reported more often than life events. Recent empirical analyses of chronic and acute stress effects have also demonstrated that chronic stress is a stronger predictor of psychological adjustment than acute stress (Avison & Turner, 1988; Eckenrode, 1984; Mitchell, Cronkite, & Moos, 1983). The work of Lazarus and DeLongis (1983) documenting a stronger effect of "daily hassles" than major life events on psychological adjustment can be interpreted as consistent with this same pattern, in that many of the hassles in their inventory were indicators of ongoing role-related stresses.

Furthermore, several recent studies suggest that chronic stress can help explain the relationship between life events and psychological adjustment. In a study of working-class women, Brown and Harris (1978) found that chronic stresses of a variety of sorts can magnify the effects of life events on clinical depression. Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan (1981) demonstrated that the relationship between life events and depression occurs through the exacerbation of chronic role-related strains. Drawing on results such as these, several investigators have called for more serious study of the joint effects of chronic and acute stress (Costello, 1982; Mitchell et al., 1983; Wheaton, 1983, 1990).

The results of such an analysis are presented in this report. Unlike most prior investigations, we base our analysis on a data collection scheme that generates parallel information about a wide range of both chronic and acute stresses, thus allowing us to assess their relative effects on psychological functioning in an even-handed fashion. Substantive disaggregation is used to make domain-specific comparisons. We also investigate the possibility, suggested by Brown and Harris (1978), that chronic difficulties modify the effects of life events on distress. All of these analyses are carried out in a large population survey of married men and women designed to elicit broad-based information about the occurrence of major life events and chronic stresses.

**METHOD**

**The Sample**

Data were obtained from face-to-face interviews with 1,755 respondents in the Detroit metropolitan area in the spring and summer of 1985. All respondents were married and living in noninstitutionalized housing at the time of interview. Interviews took place in respondents' homes. Selection of households was made in a multistage stratified cluster design that gave each mar-