Improving Hardiness in Elite Rugby Players

by

Campbell Thompson

Student ID 3687500

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Abstract

Researchers in sport (Sheard & Golby, 2010) and other performance domains (Florian, Mikulincer, & Taubman, 1995) have identified hardiness as a personality characteristic that contributes to performance by differentiating the way individuals respond to stressors they face. The purpose of this study was to investigate how an applied psychology intervention to improve hardiness would affect the way athletes coped with stressors in their elite sport environment. In this qualitative study, I used a case study design consisting of an initial interview session followed by a further five intervention sessions, based on cognitive behavioural therapy. The participants were two first-year professional rugby players at an elite club in a top level national competition. I present each case as a separate story detailing the identification of sources of stress experienced by each player, the process of the hardiness intervention to address those sources of stress, and the outcomes for the participants. The analysis confirmed the effect of the players' 'hardy attitudes' on stress. Results showed specific examples of how hardiness facets related to performance and subjective experience. In both cases the Commitment and Control facets of hardiness showed greater change than the Challenge facet. Threats from competitive 'on-field' stressors proved more manageable than relationship-based threats. Based on the findings from the study, I question the fit of the Challenge dimension within Kobasa's (1981) model of hardiness, and the degree to which the facet is amenable to change within a short-term intervention. Although this study was limited to two case studies, I identified interpersonal factors relevant to the hardiness construct that interacted strongly with hardiness facets in determining subjective responses to stress.

DECLARATION

I, Campbell Thompson, declare that the Doctor of Applied Psychology (Sport) thesis entitled Improving Hardiness in Elite Rugby Players is 44396 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature: Date: 31/8/2016

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Involvement in an elite sporting environment reveals a wide range of issues that deliberately or incidentally exert psychological pressure on sports performers. When Jones (2002) reflected on his own consulting involvement in sport, he reported that potential stressors in elite sport came from a variety of sources:

> my early expectations as an applied sport psychologist were that I would be
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> dealing with performance-related issues…although the majority of challenges I
>
> have encountered can be described as organizational issues similar to those found
>
> in the business world, e.g., lack of resources, poor communication, and failure to
>
> delegate…a major, unwanted focus for performers in both domains (p. 270)

Given the ubiquity of stressors inherent in the performance and organisational environment of sport, Hanton, Neil, and Evans (2013) found it "unsurprising" that much of sport psychology has focused on training athletes to use effective means of managing these stressors in order to minimise the subjective experience of stress, which can translate into subjective distress and worry. The importance of effectively managing stress was highlighted by Suinn (2005), who described three basic response domains in which stress is observable, having direct consequences for athletic performance. First, autonomic-physiological reactions to stress may result in hyperarousal, excessive use of intra-muscular energy stores, even stomach cramps, loose bowels, and inability to properly sleep and rest. In the somatic-behavioural domain, fluidity and flexibility, and task automaticity may be impaired, bringing higher risk of injury, restrictions in accuracy and power, and decreased ability to execute complex motor skills. In the cognitive-affective domain, athletes under stress may ruminate excessively over possible short- or long-

term performance outcomes, become inwardly focused, self-conscious, and unduly apprehensive. Such cognitive-affective responses are likely to focus attention inappropriately and distract athletes' attention from task-relevant cues, interfering with performance demands.

Researchers have employed a wide range of methodologies in the investigation of sports stress across qualitative and quantitative domains. Sport psychologists have widely debated the most effective means of studying stress-related cognitions and behaviour (Burton, 1998; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Woodman & Hardy, 2001) and researchers have examined a wide range of sources of stress. These vary from training stress deliberately imposed on the body in order to exploit its natural ability to overcompensate and improve, to more indirect stressors, such as the uncertainty about travel arrangements for an interstate or overseas game. Fletcher and Hanton (2003) differentiated between organisational and competitive stress, based on qualitative analysis of what athletes said about their sports. They found this distinction useful, because it allowed them to describe the different cognitive processes that athletes marshalled in response to organisational versus performance stressors, and to suggest different interventions that could help athletes to maintain performance and well-being in the face of different stressors.

Kobasa (1979) adopted the term "hardiness" to describe the mental characteristics that she observed to be helping certain individuals maintain well-being despite facing the same rapid change and multiple ongoing stressors that led others to fall ill. She proposed hardiness as "a constellation of personality characteristics that function as a resistance resource in the encounter with stressful life events" (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982). Kobasa et al. defined a more hardy individual as having, "a stronger commitment to self, an attitude of vigourousness toward the environment, a sense of meaningfulness, and an internal locus of control" (p. 1). More recently,

Maddi (2002) summarized hardiness as the "best operationalization of existential courage" (p. 6),

particularly the "courage and motivation to face stressors accurately (rather than to deny or

catastrophize them)" (Maddi, 2005, p. 261). Kobasa (1979) proposed three facets comprising the

hardiness disposition: Challenge, Control, and Commitment; the "three Cs". These three

elements have remained largely unchanged in their definition since inception of the hardiness

concept. Hardiness has since been investigated in a number of performance domains, including

military training (Florian et al., 1995), workplace settings (Maddi & Khoshaba, 2005), as well as

elite (e.g., Hanton et al., 2013), and sub-elite (e.g., Anshel, 2001) sport. Across multiple domains

hardiness has been consistently associated with maintenance of well-being in a range of stressor-

laden situations. Maddi (2005) suggested that the attitudes of hardy individuals would allow

them to experience these environments without mobilising the stress reaction to the same extent

as less hardy peers. In recent studies, researchers examined the coping behaviour associated with

higher hardiness in sport, suggesting (for example, see Hanton et al., 2013) that more hardy

individuals are more likely to engage in more active, less passive, less avoidant forms of coping.

This coping may result in better functional outcomes (e.g., high levels of performance), perhaps

by effectively neutralizing possible threats in the environment, and, with them, subjective stress.

The Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provides a theoretical framework

in which to examine this interaction between threat appraisal, coping resource evaluation, and

engagement of coping behaviour. Although hardiness, its components, and its relationship with

stress-related behaviour and outcomes have been widely studied, the process through which

hardiness might be improved remains unclear. In a number of studies, researchers have used

statistical analyses of quantitative data to build insight into how hardiness differentiates

individuals beyond other personality characteristics, such as neuroticism (see Eschleman, Bowling, & Alarcon, 2010). These quantitative research methods have been used to gain insight into the relationships between hardiness components and criteria such as coping response, as well as aspects of health and well-being. In considering hardiness, transactional stress response, and health or performance outcomes, the coping process emerges as an example of a "Velcro construct, to which everything sticks" (Peterson, 2000). Although the links between these "Velcro" constructs are explored from several perspectives in the literature, a number of questions remain, particularly pertaining to intra- and inter-individual variance in hardiness. For example, across the wide array of possible stressors in a sport environment, how might individuals differ in the 'stressors' that provoke a stress reaction? How will the Challenge, Control, and Commitment dispositions carry across time and context from one stressor to another? If hardiness can be changed through cognitive and behavioural intervention strategies in one context, how will the changes carry across to other stressors?

In developing this study, I aimed to further the hardiness research in a way that could inform applied sport psychology, especially the paradigm of tailoring interventions to individuals in one-to-one therapeutic encounters (Andersen, 2000). In order to explore, in greater granularity, the links between stress and performance-related outcomes, and the relationship between Challenge, Control, and Commitment and the stress response that would add to existing hardiness research, I selected a qualitative approach. The research questions required an approach that would allow me to focus on the meaning of hardiness to individuals operating within a specific elite sport context: a professional rugby club playing in a globally-recognised international competition. Given the gradual unfolding of the therapeutic process, which

positioned me as part of each athlete's context, and the complex interactions between

psychologist and client, I selected a narrative approach. This approach involved developing a

narrative from the transcripts that would allow the reader to form conclusions regarding the

relevant and unique aspects of the participants' experience of the intervention. I constructed the

intervention using cognitive-behavioural methods to help athletes develop across the three areas

of Challenge, Control, and Commitment.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter comprises a review of the literature pertaining to hardiness in sport. I cover sources of stress relevant to elite athletes, theoretical models of stress in sport stress research, and then hardiness: the origins of the construct, hardiness research in a range of performance domains, and finally hardiness specifically in sport performance.

Stress in Sport

In order to provide context for examining research into athletes' stress reactions, I first consider the wide array of stressors that have been identified in sport, and then look at models of stress, both in general psychology and sport, that have provided a theoretical framework for considering individual difference in stress behaviour.

Sources of Stress in Sport

Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, and Fletcher (2009) examined performance-related stressors, and identified five general categories: preparation, injury, expectations, self-presentation, and rivalry. More recently, in an overview of organisational stressors encountered by athletes, Arnold and Fletcher (2012) identified 31 subcategories, which formed four categories of issue: leadership and personal, cultural and team, logistical and environmental, and performance and personal. Sarkar and Fletcher (2013) highlighted the importance of including both significant life events and ongoing daily stressors from a range of sources when assessing adversity in sport performers. In addition, Sarkar and Fletcher pointed out that considerations of stress and coping must go beyond just adversity, and consider events that are experienced with positive emotion, but which have unexpected side effects. They gave the example of an athlete winning a major competition, and as a result having to adapt to external expectations of further success.

In their analysis of stress in sport, Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, and Neil (2012) reaffirmed the transactional model of stress (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus, 1999) as providing the most contextually relevant theoretical framework for understanding athletes' responses to competitive and organisational stress. Jones (2002), however, observed that although the organisational stressors in elite sport mirrored those outside sport, the competitive performance stressors were largely unique to sport, requiring sport-specific analysis. Accordingly, the main model of stress and coping in sport that I discuss here (Hardy et al., 1996) was adapted from non-sport models (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McGrath, 1970) to account for sport-specific observations.

As a precursor to current models, the McGrath (1970) stress model delineated an interactive stress process for the first time, including four inter-related stages. The environmental demand, individuals' perception of the demands, and individuals' physical and psychological responses were all considered in determining the outcome behaviour. McGrath placed individuals' perceptions at the fulcrum between situation and response. In doing so, he reflected the paradigmatic shift happening at the time in Western Psychology, whereby self-reported behaviours and cognitions were becoming considered valid material for scientific study (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals' cognitions and behaviours were increasingly being considered as interacting with situational and social contexts. Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model took this contextual perspective further by defining an interactive relationship between the person and the environment. (Lazarus & Launier, 1978) emphasized the "relational meaning" construed by individuals.

In contrast to earlier models that had seen stress in physiological terms relating to environmental demands (e.g. Selye, 1956), Lazarus and Folkman (1984) saw stress as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). Lazarus' approach emphasised how stress was not created by the environment acting upon the individual, rather he presented stress as a product of individuals' perceptions of their environment. The "transaction" label given to Lazarus' model reflected how stress could not be fully considered without looking at the relationship between individuals' appraisal of stressors' significance to them and the way in which they reacted cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally following that assessment.

In further contrast to McGrath's (1970) model of stress, the transactional model emphasised an iterative process involving appraisal and re-appraisal of the stress phenomenon. If the McGrath stress model was three dimensional, taking into account the stressor, individuals within their environment, and their response, then Lazarus and Folkman (1984) added the dimension of time, and created a model capable of representing a sequence of coping and appraisal, interacting with a changing, non-fixed pattern of environmental demand. Hardy et al. (1996) described this Transactional Model of Stress and Coping as the dominant conceptual model of stress in sport. At a high level, both situational and personal variables determine the experience of stress, which Lazarus and Folkman defined as a state or situation where a demand is placed on an individual that requires a coping reaction. The coping response is therefore an integral part of the experience of stress.

The stressor itself is one of several situational variables that interact with personal variables to determine how individuals perceive and experience the stressor. A central tenet of

this view is that it is not just the stressor that places strain on the individual. Rather individuals'

experience of stress arises from their subjective appraisals of both the stress source and their

ability to cope with it. Specifically, stress is greater when individuals self-appraise and see their

coping resources as being insufficient to meet situational demands. The stress response is the

psychophysiological state arising when individuals sense that the environment now threatens

important aspects of their functioning.

Researching Stress Management in Sport

A large body of research literature has developed over the last 25 years focused on coping

with stress in sport (e.g. see Neil, Mellalieu, Wilson, & Hanton, 2007). Various elements of the

transactional model have been studied, for example, the stressor itself, the appraisals that initiate

the coping process, and then the scope and effect of the coping responses that are triggered. In

reviewing this body of research, researchers including Golby and Sheard (2004), Hanton et al.

(2013) and Kaiseler, Polman, and Nicholls (2009) have noted the paucity of research focusing on

the individual differences that may moderate the subjective experience that results from exposure

to various stressors. Thus, it is important to reflect on the individual differences that play a role

in the different stress reactions that people experience.

If personality represents a consistent pattern of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural

responses unique to, and differentiating, individuals, then this pattern might have a consistent

effect on how individuals respond and adapt to stressors. Researchers have studied a number of

personality characteristics, seeking to understand how personality might predict responses to

stress. Examples include self-esteem, optimism, Type-A personality, and neuroticism (see

Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001); Kobasa, Maddi, and Kahn (1982) explained how personality

disposition would influence the stress-coping process, identifying cognitive and behavioural aspects of personality-determined stress responses. At a cognitive appraisal level, personality may account for the consistent pattern of experience of a particular stressor, and the attribution of particular meaning to that stressor. At a behavioural level, given these perceptions, the personality disposition will "energize a particular set of activities experienced as appropriate" (Kobasa et al., 1982, p. 168). Expressed in the terminology of Hardy et al. (1996), a particular coping response is chosen based on appraisal of available coping resources.

Hardiness

The Introduction of Hardiness

Kobasa (1979) introduced the hardiness disposition in order to explain why some individuals develop somatic and psychological illness in the face of increased stressful life events, whereas others remain in good health. In the following section, I describe the origins and concepts of hardiness in more detail, and go on to summarise relevant hardiness research in mainstream psychology and within the sport domain.

Maddi (2002) described hardiness from his perspective in existential psychology, in terms of decision and choice. Within this theoretical framework, the Commitment disposition was expressed as "a tendency to involve oneself in (rather than experience alienation from) whatever one is doing or encounters (Kobasa et al., 1982, p. 169)." In her measurements, Kobasa operationalised Commitment as antithetical to alienation from self and from work. Committed individuals have a sense of purpose that allows them to identify with and find meaning in events, things, and persons in their environment. Commitment comes across as a sense of engagement and purpose, with a relationship with the external world defined by "activeness and approach

rather than passivity and avoidance" (p. 169). In this state of committed engagement it is assumed that individuals will be able to persist in a course of action believing in the merit of active engagement even in the face of high stress.

The Control disposition references the locus of control concept of Seligman (1975), being expressed as a tendency to feel and act as if one is "influential…in the face of the varied contingencies of life" (Kobasa et al., 1982, p. 169). For example, a hardy individual would likely retain a sense of personal control in interacting with stressors: the negative impact would be mitigated through application of specific thoughts or actions.

As the third element, the Challenge disposition, refers to the underlying belief in change, rather than stability, as the norm in life, with changes (potential stressors) representing incentives to grow, rather than representing threats to functioning (Kobasa et al., 1982). In terms of cognitive appraisals, those high on Challenge would tend to be characterised by openness and flexibility, and an ability to tolerate ambiguity (Baltzell, 1999).

Maddi (2002) proposed that more hardy individuals would appraise and cope with a stressor more effectively. The hardiness facets of Control, Challenge, and Commitment describe an orientation towards stress that generally leads to more adaptive types of coping, resulting in lower levels of subjective stress than experienced with less adaptive types of coping. These personality characteristics of Control, Challenge, and Commitment should be discernible in individuals' patterns of stress response. With higher hardiness, the stressor will be appraised as less threatening, and adaptive coping responses will be marshalled to transform the stressor into a positive and challenging experience (Gentry & Kobasa, 1984). Several studies have borne out this assertion (e.g. Goss, 1994; Orr & Westman, 1990; Williams, Wiebe, & Smith, 1992). In the

next section, I discuss research into hardiness, in terms of a) the health buffering effects thought

to associate with the disposition, b) the performance improvements found to be associated with

hardiness, and c) some of the behavioural and physiological mechanisms thought to mediate the

observed relationships.

The Relevance of Hardiness to Performance under Pressure

Hardiness arose from a research project at the University of Chicago in the 1970s to

investigate why stress seemed to be debilitating for some people, but "developmentally

provocative" for others (Maddi, 2002). The group conducted a 12-year investigation at the

Illinois Bell Telephone (IBT) company during the time parent company AT&T was undergoing

tumultuous deregulation and mandated divestiture of its subsidiaries, which included IBT.

(Kobasa, 1979) retrospectively studied five years of stress and illness data from 161 middle- and

upper-level managers from an original sample of 837. In these individuals, she had measured

Challenge, Control, and Commitment separately, using four standardised measures and two new

custom measures. Control was measured as a combination of the internal-external locus of

control, the "powerlessness versus control" and "nihilism versus meaningfulness" scales of the

Alienation Test, the Research Form's achievement and domination scales, and a leadership

orientation scale. Commitment was measured negatively by the Alienation Test's "alienation

versus commitment" scale. Finally, Challenge was measured by the Alienation Test's

vegitativeness versus vigorousness and responsibility scale, Hahn's (1966) Security Orientation

Scale and the Preferences for Interesting Experiences Scale. Kobasa measured participants'

stress level with the Holmes and Rahe (1967) Schedule of Recent Life Events, and illness with

the Seriousness of Illness Survey (Wyler, Masuda, & Holmes, 1968, in Kobasa 1979). Kobasa

found that, when the high stress and high illness group was compared to a high stress, low illness group, hardiness level served to differentiate the two groups. Although the high and low illness groups experienced similar levels of stressors (frequency and type), the high stress/low illness group perceived their lives as less stressful. Kobasa (Kobasa et al., 1981), and later (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982) attributed these findings to the ways in which a) the two groups were evaluating and appraising the threats posed by the environmental demands, and b) the coping behaviour marshalled in response. Given the possibility that the presence of illness, possibly via the mediator of mood, could have been causing participants to attenuate their hardiness scores on those inventories, Kobasa, Maddi, and Kahn (1982) conducted a 5-year prospective study, which showed that, across multiple measurement points, high stress was a precursor to higher levels of illness amongst the executives studied, rather than being always concurrent. Kobasa, Maddi, and Kahn concluded that hardiness acted as a prospective buffer against illness, particularly in the times of highest stress, as indicated by the highly significant stress and hardiness interaction in their analyses of variance. Hardy individuals were thought to appraise life stressors as less threatening, and then transform the stressor into a more positive and developmentally challenging experience (Gentry & Kobasa, 1984). Since Kobasa's early research and the introduction of the hardiness concept, there has followed much interest in the psychological literature, firstly in the health sciences, where many studies have borne out the relationship between health and hardiness, and have explored the link to both perceptions and coping behaviour in this process, and then in sport psychology, considering links between hardiness and performance-related factors.

The Hardiness-Health Relationship

Kobasa, Maddi, and Puccetti (1982) postulated that stressful events, by increasing sympathetic arousal, could eventually lead to exhaustion and accompanying illness or psychological distress as a result of chronic strain. Hardier individuals will experience less stress through a) perceiving events as less stressful, b) responding with active or "transformational" coping, c) marshalling increased social support (thereby indirectly affecting coping) and d) leading to more positive changes in health practices with the associated benefits.

Several researchers have compared low-hardy groups to high-hardy groups, according to their perceptions of retrospectively reported life events. Rhodewalt and Zone (1989) found that more hardy individuals saw life events as more positive and as more controllable, and Pagana (1990) found that hardier medical students viewed their professional demands as more challenging and less threatening than their less hardy peers. As Wiebe (1991) pointed out, these retrospective studies were open to a possible confound brought about by high stress levels. If participants were recalling past events, and describing their attributions, it could be that high stress levels at the time of measurement may in some way have affected their responses on the hardiness measures. She wrote, "it is possible that results have reflected differences in the outcome, rather than the appraisal, of the event" (Wiebe, 1991, p. 90) When Wiebe induced an experimental stressor with her participants, she found that the high hardiness group had more positive appraisals of the events than the low hardiness group. Her undergraduate participants experienced an "evaluative threat" whereby they listened to a highly technical recorded talk and were told they would be assessed by a panel of their professors on how well they presented on the same topic a short time later. As well as having less threatening appraisals of the stressor, the high hardiness group also had lower affective and psychophysiological responses (skin

conductivity) than the low hardiness group. Wiebe suggested that where Funk and Houston (1987) and Hull, Van Treuren, and Virnelli (1987) had failed to find evidence of stress moderation effects of hardiness, their combination of retrospectively reported life stressors into a single measure confounded what effect hardiness might have actually had on any particular stressor among the surveyed array. The granularity of their retrospective measure was too low to detect where the differences lay. Noting the disparity between retrospective studies with a broad array of ecologically-valid life stressors examined, and experimental manipulations of a single stressor, she concluded that perhaps, in the future, hardiness studies might focus on one particular real-life stressor that is shared across a particular sample. In this way, there would be more consistency within the independent variable, the stressor. Some performance-focused research, examined in later sections, has measured participants' reactions to a common training stressor that to some extent controls for the 'stimulus' part of the transactional stress process. Wiebe's experimental evidence did support Kobasa's initial rationale that hardiness affected stress outcomes by mediating the appraisal process. From an applied perspective, this would suggest that if patterns of appraisal, relating to the Challenge facet of hardiness, can be changed, then patterns of stress response could change as a consequence.

Beyond the appraisal process though, researchers also thought that hardier people marshalled more adaptive responses to stressors. Gentry and Kobasa (1984) suggested that hardier people will more likely engage in active, transformational coping, whereby the source of stress is typically approached by means of problem-focused strategies. This mode contrasts with regressive coping, where a stressor is avoided through cognitive or behavioural withdrawal or denial, but is then typically dwelt on in a pessimistic way (Funk, 1992). Bartone (1989) studied

the stress-illness relationship in city bus drivers under high levels of stress and found hardiness to correlate with coping style. Both hardiness and the use of avoidant coping differentiated between the high and low illness groups. Westman (1990) and Williams et al. (1992) found high-hardy people used more problem-focused and less emotion-focused strategies than low-hardy people. Williams et al. concluded that coping processes were the main mediators of the hardiness-health relationship.

Funk (1992) pointed out that much of the stress and illness research had relied on retrospective reporting. He suggested that such retrospective research could be confounded by inadvertently measuring underlying neuroticism, rather than hardiness. Coping processes more associated with the known variable of neuroticism would account for the greater link between stress and illness. Funk reported studies showing a correlation of up to -.44 between the Personal Views Survey (PVS) (Kobasa, 1985) and the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) (Eysenck, 1968). Funk reasoned that high levels of the underlying personality trait of neuroticism may drive individuals' "low" responses on a hardiness questionnaire, and the typical neurotics' exaggeration of somatic concerns may cause them also to retrospectively report more illness. Hence, the hardiness/illness relationship may be more parsimoniously explained by recourse to trait neuroticism being expressed in questionnaire answers. Wiebe (1991) however, measured participants' perceptions of a stressor immediately after experimentally presenting it, albeit via a 2-item paper-and-pencil measure, and measured stress via a psychophysiological observation, and the hardiness/perception/stress relationship still remained. If Weibe's undergraduate study is generalisable both to the wider population, and to events outside the laboratory, then it is likely that recall bias linked to neuroticism cannot explain the hardiness/stress/health relationship that

has been widely reported. It is still possible, however, that under high stress, more neurotic individuals would experience high psychological distress, and this psychological distress would cause them to appear less hardy and more likely to report poor mental and physical health. From this perspective, the hardiness/mental health relationship reported by Allred and Smith (1989), Drory and Florian (1991), and Rhodewalt and Zone (1989) could have been misread.

More recently, Eschleman et al. (2010) conducted the first meta-analysis of correlations between the hardiness construct and other personality variables. They found that hardiness was positively associated with other personality dispositions that are thought to buffer against stress: optimism, extraversion, sense of coherence, and self-efficacy. They also found a moderate negative relationship with neuroticism, selected as a trait that has been shown to worsen the effect of stressors, consistent with the 'neuroticism confound' idea put forward by Funk (1992). Eschleman et al., however, also examined the incremental effects of hardiness by means of a regression analysis using their meta-analytic data across a range of organisational domains, and concluded that hardiness accounted for unique variance in outcome variables, beyond that accounted for by Five Factor Model traits, self-evaluation traits, negative affectivity, or optimism. The outcome variables, with apparent relevance to performance within a sports organisation, included role conflict, role overload, emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, poor mental health, job satisfaction, physical symptoms, job performance, and turnover intention. Furthermore, hardiness was the strongest predictor in 21 of the 30 analyses. Looking at a wide data set they concluded that, while results were mixed, in general, "hardiness and hardiness components generally led to higher ratings of school and work performance" (p. 302).

Hardiness and Well-being in Performance Environments

Giving a deeper insight into the role of psychological distress in the hardiness/stress relationship, Florian et al. (1995) conducted a longitudinal study of Israeli Defence Force (IDF) recruits all undergoing a 4-month combat training period. Florian et al. (1995) described the training stressor experienced by male IDF recruits thus:

> The 4-month combat training is a natural, continuously stressful situation to which most Israeli young men are regularly exposed. Serving in the army requires radical changes in behaviour for the conscript to adjust to the new conditions during a relatively short period of time. The young men are stripped of their personal identities and forced to obey orders even when these orders conflict with their personal inclinations. These demands are exacerbated during the initial 4 months of army service, particularly for the soldiers who undergo combat training. These soldiers are exposed to a great deal of physical and psychological stress induced by events such as long periods of physical exercise and relatively short periods of sleep (p.690).

The 276 male participants were measured during the first and then the penultimate weeks of combat training on hardiness, mental health, coping style, and types of cognitive appraisal. Florian et al. used the Personal Views Survey, as well a general mental health factor measure, a translated version of the Ways of Coping Checklist (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) , and the Appraisal Scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) .

At time 1, a LISREL analysis to test goodness of fit showed that appraisal and coping variables were not mediating the hardiness to mental well-being relationship, and that instead, a

direct pathway between the Commitment component and psychological distress provided a closer fit to the data. This cross-sectional analysis appeared to support the neuroticism confound that Funk (1992) suggested, whereby neuroticism was suggested as the moderating variable between mental distress and low measured hardiness. In the second phase of analysis, any change in mental well-being at Time 2 not accounted for in the analysis of mental well-being at Time 1 was understood as indicating variance from other factors, possibly the ones being measured longitudinally. The researchers found that threat appraisal and 'distancing'-type coping at Time 1 were both significantly related to residual variance in mental well-being at Time 2. Although these correlations were in the moderate range (-.17 and .21 respectively), in their sample, it appeared that both Control and Commitment facets positively contributed to later well-being via reduced appraisal of threat, and higher Commitment also reduced later psychological distress through the use of distancing coping techniques. In contradiction to Kobasa's (1979) conceptualisation, the hardiness components appeared to contribute separately to the mental well-being outcomes. Combining them into a single hardiness score did not account for any more variance in the mental health outcome than the Commitment variable alone. It was on this basis that Florian et al. (1995) decided to conduct structural analyses using Control, Challenge, and Commitment as separate, rather than combined, variables. The differential contributions of the component variables to coping and appraisal, and mental well-being, seemed to vindicate that earlier decision, and also allowed them to make further interpretations of how hardiness works. They suggested that Commitment defines individuals' impetus to stay mentally engaged in the demanding situation, rather than adopting the "escapist manoeuvres" (p. 693) of avoidant coping. For this commitment to be effective, they suggested that hardier individuals will complement it

with a sense of control, a conviction that problems can be controlled or dealt with and that positive solutions might be found. In this context, use of social support was seen as a form of transformational coping. Florian et al. also went on to suggest, as Hull et al. (1987) had, that Challenge was not an integral component of hardiness as Kobasa (1979) had originally positioned it. Theoretically, a "Challenge" disposition should have correlated with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) appraisal scale, but a lack of relationship in this study indicated some issues with this component. Florian et al. suggested that individuals might only identify growth opportunities (i.e., make Challenge-type appraisals) when the situation is adjudged as meaningful to their goals or values in some way. A certain level of Commitment, therefore, may be a pre-requisite to making effective Challenge appraisals. The lack of relationship between Challenge and the mediating and outcome variables may also be due to issues with the measurement scale used. Despite improvements from previous scales, Funk (1992) criticised the PVS Challenge measure on the grounds of low internal consistency reliability and poor correlations with the other two components (<.50). Across the many Hardiness questionnaires, the PVS was the most reliable, but Challenge was least reliable of the three subscales.

Nonetheless, the Florian et al. (1995) study illustrated how a hardy disposition affected mental well-being in a group in which all participants were subject to similar performance demands and similar objective sources of stress because they were all recruits together in the same army training program. Their study however contained no exploration of how hardiness may have related to specific task-relevant behaviours, and overall cadet performance in their training or later military duty.

Roth, Wiebe, Fillingim, and Shay (1989) examined the relationships between exercise, fitness, hardiness, stress, and health. The stress-illness associations were similar to those found in previous investigations (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Holmes & Roth, 1985; Wiebe & McCallum, 1986). Despite observing this relationship, Roth et al. found that hardiness had little direct effect on health, instead showing a moderating effect of negative life events on stress levels. Their findings supported the view that hardiness may impact health indirectly by changing the way in which people interpret stressful experiences and a range of other factors may be involved in determining whether subjective stress translates into a discernible physical health decrement.

Hardiness in Elite Sport Environments

In sport, substantial literature exists to examine situation-specific responses across groups of athletes (see Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005). Nonetheless, as in non-sport research, less attention has been paid to personality dispositions that differentiate individuals according to how they respond to similar stressors (Hanton, Evans, & Neil, 2003). Almost two decades ago, Hardy et al. (1996) suggested that future research should look at the factors influencing athletes' coping efforts, and presented hardiness and optimism as the two major personality dispositions most relevant to effective coping. A number of researchers have investigated this link across a range of sport and performance domains.

In research similar to the Florian et al. (1992) examination of the role of hardiness in determining mood and wellbeing outcomes in a military training situation, (Goss, 1994) studied how hardiness was related to mood disturbances in swimmers during a pre-season "overtraining" period. She measured 293 US collegiate swimmers three times as they were preparing for the

collegiate competition season. During this training period, the young swimmers increased from

an average of 2,000 yards a day in September up to an average of 12,000 yards swum per day in

January, immediately prior to the "tapering" period leading into late February competition. Mood

disturbances increased as swimmers approached the end of the "overtraining" period, with higher

tension, depression, fatigue, and confusion observed in the group. Hardiness was associated with

fewer mood disturbances during this period, and high-hardy swimmers also reported more

adaptive coping behaviours on the Everly Coping scale than low-hardy swimmers. Low and high

hardiness groups were composed of those swimmers whose scores on the Cognitive Hardiness

Inventory (Nowack, 1990) were greater than one standard deviation from the mean in either

direction. Goss measured coping behaviours, and found them to be stable over time. The

hardiness measure had high test-retest reliability over the course of a year when a sub-sample

was analysed ($n = 62$). Consistent with Maddi's (e.g., 1987) predictions, the high-hardiness

group reported more adaptive coping behaviours and fewer maladaptive coping behaviours than

the low-hardiness group.

Across the three measurement points during the 'pre-season' build up, the high-hardiness

group experienced significantly lower mood disturbance, especially lower depression, anger,

fatigue, and confusion ($p<0.0001$) than the low-hardiness group. There was a large difference

between the low- and high-hardiness groups on degree of mood disturbance right from the start

of the measurement period. The high-hardiness swimmers were consistently less tense,

depressed, angry, fatigued, confused, and more vigorous than the low-hardiness swimmers.

Although Goss did not report effect sizes, making interpretation of the validity of the results

more challenging, the differences were pronounced. For example, average scores for the low-

hardiness group were 67.3 (*SD* = 34.4) at Time 1 and 74.5 (*SD* = 27.4) at Time 3. For the high-hardiness group, the corresponding values were 13.3 (*SD* = 18.1) at Time 1 and 17.9 (*SD* = 20.6) at Time 3. The low-hardiness group became more mood disturbed as the intensity of the training period escalated. Unfortunately, Goss took no measurements with the sample before the training period started, with the first measurement happening within the first two weeks of training. In this study, mood effects during the heavy training period were not compared to a performance measure, but it would be useful for applied practice to gain insight into the lived experience of the swimmers seems worth considering. The swimmers in the low-hardiness group were still swimming a mean of 12,000 yards at the end of the pre-season period, combined with escalating depression and fatigue, and decreasing vigour. Although these swimmers might have been completing the full training session, the technical quality of their swimming, the effort levels maintained, and the physiological responses to the training load all seem of relevance to understanding hardiness in an applies elite sport setting, as it related to both later competition performance, and to levels of satisfaction gained. Morgan, Costill, Flynn, Raglin, and O'Connor (1988b) examined mood-state profiles of swimmers engaged in an intense training period, and were able to predict with an 89% accuracy which swimmers would be 'under-responding' to the training load. Given this evidence, it is possible that hardiness would have a relationship to later performance via the degree of adaptation to the training or the effort levels that swimmers were able to maintain during the 'over-training' period.

Examining stress and burnout within a college sport training environment, but this time with athletic trainers on NCAA Division 1 football programs, Hendrix, Acevedo, and Hebert (2000) also found a tendency among less-hardy individuals with high ratings of 'athletic training

issues' to have greater emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lower levels of personal accomplishment. Although self-ratings of personal accomplishment may not accurately predict performance, Hendrix et al. concluded that, when faced with mounting organisational issues, the hardier individuals were able to maintain greater emotional equilibrium, and to maintain self-perceptions of effectiveness. In their regression analysis, Hendrix et al. found hardiness accounted for 40% of the variance in perceived stress, with severity of athletic training issues accounting for only an additional 7% of the variance. This study was open to the confounds proposed by Funk and Houston (1987) in that the self-reporting measurements, taken at a single time and examined for correlation, may have seen ratings of professional issues, and self-ratings of hardiness, skewed at the time of measurement by the subjective stress levels participants were experiencing. Nonetheless, this regression analysis suggests that it was less the job situation that the trainers found themselves in that accounted for stress levels, than factors relating to the make-up of the individual trainers. Hendrix et al. concluded by recommending research into the coping strategies that might protect athletic trainers against high subjective stress that could lead to burnout and attenuation of performance.

Ford, Eklund, and Gordon (2000) investigated other intermediate factors affecting athletic performance, specifically athletic injury. They looked at the psychosocial factors relating to injury incidence and recovery in the Andersen and Williams (1988) stress and injury model. They concluded that "athletes who experience high positive life event stress and who are less hardy in general, or perceive they lack situational control, tend to experience greater injury time-loss" (p. 309). They concurred with previous studies by Hull et al. (1987) and Pagana (1990),

who had found increased vulnerability to physical and psychological health issues amongst individuals low in hardiness.

Taken together, the Goss (1994), Hendrix et al. (2000) and Ford et al. (2000) studies indicated that hardiness is an important variable affecting athletes' ability to train and prepare effectively for competitive performance.

Hardiness Links to Sport Performance

Goss (1994) found a moderate correlation between hardiness and the level of competition, whereby NCAA athletes at Level 1, which is a higher performance level, had higher levels of hardiness in general compared to Level 2 and 3 athletes. Similarly, Golby and Sheard (2004) found that international level rugby league players had on average higher hardiness than those at national elite level, who in turn had higher hardiness than those at a sub-elite level. When the same authors conducted a larger analysis across a range of 16 sports in the UK (Sheard & Golby, 2010), they found that the differences between international, national, and county level performers were less than in their single sport study of rugby league. Although the differences were significant (total $n = 1,566$), the effect sizes for the differences between competitive levels were all small. These results suggest at any specific time there are many performers at the international level who rate low on hardiness, but are performing at the top level.

Hardiness, Stress and Coping in Sport

From the sport-specific studies previously cited here, the relationship between hardiness and patterns of coping in sport has relevance to both sustainable performance and athlete quality of life. Kobasa and Puccetti (1983) described a type of problem-focused coping characterising hardiness in which individuals would transform stressful events into opportunities for growth by

engaging with the stressor in some adaptive way. Florian et al. (1995) later found that hardier individuals reported greater problem-focused coping of this kind, which has been identified as a reason for less subjective distress in high-hardiness individuals (e.g. Florian et al., 1995; Goss, 1994; Williams et al., 1992).

Hanton et al. (2003) found not only that hardier athletes reported lower levels of anxiety, but when anxiety symptoms appeared they would be more likely to interpret these symptoms as more facilitative to upcoming performance than low-hardiness athletes. These findings were reinforced in a later study showing that performers interpreting anxiety more positively coped more effectively with the competitive experience (Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2004). Hanton, Neil, Mellalieu, and Fletcher (2008) found that athletes reporting a facilitative interpretation of anxiety would also use more problem-focused coping. Together, these studies add nuance to the discussion of the relationship between hardiness and subjective stress and anxiety: even if the initial stages of stress appraisal result in subjective stress or anxiety, there is still an opportunity to perceive and manage this in a facilitative way. When Hanton et al. (2013) investigated hardiness and the relationship with anxiety interpretation, again they found "only a few studies within sport psychology [that] have examined the individual differences that may moderate the influence of stressful competitive events upon…psychological distress" (p. 96). Hanton et al. (2013) examined the relationships that hardiness and the direction of anxiety interpretation (facilitative/debilitative) had with competitive anxiety and coping efficacy recalled from a recent sport performance. They split their 492 participants along median lines into four groups: high-hardiness facilitators, high-hardiness debilitators, low-hardiness facilitators, and low-hardiness debilitators. The high-hardiness facilitators not only reported "using more planning, active

coping and increased effort" in the face of competitive anxiety, but also "found the use of these strategies to be more effective in dealing with the stressful situation experienced than high-hardiness/debilitators" (p. 101). The effect sizes were in the small to medium range: partial chi squared of 0.2 for active coping effectiveness by hardiness and anxiety interpretation, and partial chi squared of .04 for effort effectiveness. The limitations in validity of questionnaire-based measurements of all main factors would be expected to attenuate the effect sizes. Perhaps eliminating scores within one standard deviation of the means, as Goss (1994) did, rather than splitting groups along median lines, may have yielded greater differences. Furthermore, Hanton et al. (2013) found that athletes high in hardiness generally worried less, experienced less somatic anxiety and also reported higher levels of self-confidence, and the reported effect sizes (partial eta-squared) were in the medium range according to statistical conventions (Miles & Shevlin, 2001). It is noteworthy that Hanton et al. were unable to find an interaction between hardiness and anxiety direction, showing there was no trend for those high in hardiness concomitantly to interpret their anxiety as facilitative when it occurred. All high-hardiness individuals would likely experience anxiety less frequently and intensely, but should anxiety arise, those interpreting the experience in a facilitative way would be the ones more likely to actually cope more effectively via strategies, including marshalling greater effort, planning, and active engagement. Hanton et al. proposed that a facilitative interpretation of anxiety may have developed over time by confronting stressful situations with hardy attitudes. Given the transactional model of stress, however, for the anxiety to arise, there must be some initial, perhaps reflexive interpretation of threat, even if subsequent evaluations are of sufficient coping resources. Hanton et al. recognised a limitation in their study was that they did not consider an

actual performance event, so links between coping effectiveness, anxiety interpretation, and performance were not explored. They suggested that further research could include an assessment of performance effectiveness alongside consideration of hardiness, anxiety interpretation, coping usage, and coping effectiveness. They concluded their study with a call for hardiness training to help people cope effectively with ongoing stressful circumstances, particularly through "developing an active coping philosophy with a more pragmatic approach to dealing with situations through planning effectively" (Hanton et al. 2013, p. 102). Based on the results of their three studies across 10 years, Hanton et al. suggested that training in hardiness may work via "feedback from successful coping [being used] to enhance attitudes of commitment (rather than isolation), control (rather than powerlessness) and challenge (rather than threat)" in order to enhance overall characteristic hardiness.

From this literature review, hardiness emerges as a concept that captures habitual individual differences in the stress response. It seems that the response to stress plays a central role in helping athletes manage their environment in an effective way in order to sustain physical and mental well-being and sport performance over time. Coping can affect mood and attitude during a training period (Goss, 1994), playing a role in differentiating successful and less successful participants in a military training environment. In a recent study, Hanton et al. (2013) suggested that the interplay between attribution, assessment of coping resources, the type of coping response, and hardiness will in part determine how athletes manage to adapt and thrive among the pervasive stressors experienced in elite sport environments. It follows that if athletes can be helped to increase hardiness, by a) moving towards Challenge versus threat perceptions, b) believing in their ability to exert control over a complex situation and c) finding personal

meaning in engaging in that situation, then they will likely experience less subjective stress, and interpret what stress they do feel as facilitative to their efforts. The studies examined suggest that this may have a beneficial effect on both performance and overall wellbeing. It is likely that the cognitive changes inherent in higher hardiness will also be companied by behavioural changes in the type of coping strategies that athletes enact, such as more frequent use of problem-focused coping and related approach types of coping behaviour, when they are appropriate.

The Present Thesis

In the literature review, I described and critiqued a number of studies indicating that hardiness can be enhanced through training. In their meta-analysis of hardiness and its components, Eschleman et al. (2010) concluded that each component makes a unique contribution to variance in outcome criteria, and suggested that researchers and practitioners should assess hardiness at the facet level to better identify these varying effects. They cited hardiness training programs, such as the group interventions implemented by Salvatore R Maddi et al. (2002). In these group-level training programs, researchers were able to demonstrate the effectiveness of training hardiness, and some positive functional and wellbeing outcomes for participants. Other studies examined in this literature review suggest that individuals within intervention groups had varying hardiness profiles, and showed markedly different stress perceptions and coping responses even to very similar sources of stress. This known variability suggests that if hardiness interventions could be tailored to individuals' unique hardiness profiles, then interventions might be more effective in helping athletes navigate their environments successfully. Furthermore, the study of individualised interventions might provide

additional insight into the interplay between Challenge, Control, and Commitment and the transactional stress response.

Exploring Stress, Hardiness, Coping and Performance at the Individual Level

Several studies reviewed in this chapter positioned selection of coping response as a key behavioural variable through which the hardiness disposition affects health and functional outcomes. This research suggests that, at one level, coping response may be, in part, a behavioural manifestation of hardiness. The transactional model of stress (e.g. Lazarus, 1999) laid out an iterative process in which perceptions of threat, assessment of coping resources, and then selection of coping response combine to determine the subjective stress experienced by individuals. An inference from this transactional and iterative process is that by learning to apply different coping responses, by learning to appraise stressors in a different way, and by finding meaning in situations they might otherwise disengage from, athletes may be able to learn to be more hardy, and to interact with their environments with lower levels of subjective stress.

Beyond health-based well-being, the literature examined so far suggests a link between hardiness and sport performance via tolerance of training load (Goss, 1994) one of an array of ongoing stressors at an elite performance level. One way of gaining further insight into the individualised effects of hardiness training on the different hardiness components, and insight into how these changes may link through to performance and well-being outcomes is through looking at hardiness at a greater level of granularity than via existing quantitative, group-level outcome studies. There does not appear to be any qualitative research investigating hardiness in sport so far. Investigating hardiness at intra-individual (different stressors, different situations) and inter-individual (similar situations, similar stressors, different responses) levels could both

add to current understanding of hardiness in sport and support the goals of applied practice (see

Martens, 1987).

Regarding the link between hardiness, stress, and performance, some studies (e.g. Anshel,

2001) have contained an implicit assumption that lower levels of subjective stress are facilitative

to performance. Hanton et al. (2013) focused on coping responses, but their interpretation of the

results of their study indicated that lower competitive state anxiety was facilitative of

performance. Given the wide array of both long- and short-term, competitive and organisational

stressors in sport, especially at the elite level, further understanding of the link between anxiety

and performance, across the array of different possible stressors may help practitioners in

targeting interventions in order to support performance.

In order that hardiness research continues to inform evidence-based applied practice (Martens,

1987), especially individual counselling approaches (e.g., Andersen, 2001), it remains necessary

to explore in greater detail the mechanisms through which hardiness might increase response to a

psychological intervention. From the literature reviewed, there appears to be a gap between the

positivistic, quantitative observations of hardiness, including intervention studies, and the one-to-

one counselling work that forms a large part of applied practitioners' work (Andersen, 2000).

The hardiness and stress studies reviewed suggested that there might be an iterative process by

which hardiness can be improved, but I found no studies that illustrated that this whether

possibility had been tested. If control options (approach coping methods) are repeatedly

identified and implemented for various major stressors, and these methods achieve successful

outcomes, then it seems reasonable to suggest that, through learning, individuals' sense of

control would then increase. If training is provided in recognising the manageable challenge for

achieving meaningful growth in the face of stressors, then it might be possible to 'reprogram'

initial appraisals away from a sense of overwhelming threat. If adaptive coping in stressful

situations is linked to personal motivations and meaning, then athletes might be less likely to

disengage and, through alienation, heighten their stress. All these learning processes may in turn

affect later perceptions and responses: "OK, this situation looks familiar, I've coped well with

this in the past, there is no threat here. I have experience of successfully exerting control, it's

meaningful to me to do that, so I'll back myself to engage in this situation again now.".

Aims

Given the relevance of hardiness for elite sport performers, and the opportunity vested in

examining hardiness at the individual level, I designed the current study with the following

research goals:

a) to explore how the hardiness attributes of Challenge, Commitment, and Control would

   manifest in individual athletes' patterns of perception, appraisal, and coping in a

   lived elite sport context;

b) to explore how a cognitive behavioural psychology intervention focusing on

   improving hardiness would affect athletes' experience of competitive and non-

   competitive stress; and

c) to examine how interventions aiming to develop 'hardier' attitudes and behaviours

   would affect athletes' experience of training and performance environments.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Design

Stiles (2007, 2010) described how theories of counselling and psychotherapy do not provide complete descriptions of phenomena or the "exact specifications of moment-to-moment interventions" (Stiles, 2007, p.124) to guide practitioners or to illustrate to practitioners how theoretical factors may play out in real life. Martens (1987) called for qualitative research in psychology to bridge the gap that exists between the theory that underpins evidence-based practice and the actual practice of psychology with real people. In the case of hardiness, as highlighted earlier, there was little in the research that described examples of Challenge, Control, or Commitment in action at a granular, individual level. All the hardiness training cited earlier took the form of group training with follow-up qualitative measurement. Stake (1995) summed up the utility of case-based qualitative research in psychology:

> The way the case and the researcher interact is presumed not unique and not
>
> necessarily reproducible for other case researchers. The quality and the utility of
>
> the research is not based on its reproducibility but on whether or not the meanings
>
> generated by the researcher, or the reader, are valid" (p. 135).

In setting out to investigate how hardiness could change during therapy, I moved away from research methods focused on reproducibility towards those that would allow the reader to make a judgement as to validity. More recent qualitative sport psychology studies (Richardson, Andersen, & Morris, 2008) have also eschewed post-positivistic or realist (Sparkes, 2007) forms of inquiry, for more narrative forms.

In the current study, I wanted to delineate how client and contextual factors would interact with dispositional hardiness to affect stress responses. As with theory-building research from health and clinical domains (e.g. Svanborg, Wistedt, & Svanborg, 2008), the context-bound nature of the topics being investigated here influenced a choice of multiple-case design.

Stiles (2003, 2007, 2010) advocated the use of case-studies as an essential tool in theory-building research in applied psychology. Unlike other methods of hypothesis testing, where unique features can be regarded as error (see Rosenwald, 1988) the detail available from multiple individual cases is intended to inform theory:

An adequate theory has to incorporate the distinct features of each case as well as the common features. If you restrict yourself to the themes that are common across cases, you will overlook the most interesting parts (Stiles, 2007, p. 123).

Results from the interventions with the two participants are presented as two separate stories with individual interpretation sections, according to narrative methods described in detail in the Methodology and Data Analysis sections that follow.

Recruitment and Participants

Participants were recruited from a professional rugby club (Rugby League). At the time, I had just completed a season working in another professional men's team, in the Australian Football League (Australian Rules football) where I had started out with one-to-one interventions with athletes. I had been in discussion with the rugby club's management regarding further work placement opportunities during my professional training. At the rugby club's premises, I met initially with the two assistant coaches with the team, and then with the head coach. They decided that only the new players at the club during their first season would be invited to

participate in the current study, with the objective of supporting them at a time of rapid learning and personal growth. Initially, the objective had been to make the intervention available to the entire playing group. The coaches, however, expressed discomfort with inviting senior, regular first grade players to be part of the program and decided that they would invite only the first year players, due to the steeper "learning curve" for these individuals. I also understood that the coaches had a greater tolerance of risk in entrusting new players to me, rather than the senior players on who's shoulders the club's fortunes would rest. This selection allowed me to invite a group with relatively homogenous organisational and environmental factors bearing on them. The first year players had all travelled interstate to join the team, were, thus, away from family and friends, were billeted in shared apartments, and, initially, were subject to the same training regimen, excepting individual injury rehabilitation and "extras" in training. I felt that there was some risk that in making the intervention available only to the first year players, the participants might view it as of lower value, and less warranting of their commitment than, for example, the physical strength and conditioning program, which was seen as an absolute necessity for all players, regardless of age and experience. This risk impressed on me the need to offer the participants, and the coaches, something of value. As a result my own performance anxiety would occasionally come into play, as identified in several places in the Results section.

The players invited to participate were all 18 or 19 years of age and over the prior month had arrived at the club to start their first seasons as professionals. They had all been selected due to performance at junior elite levels of their sport. The steps in recruitment of participants are described in the following sections.

Information Session

A round-table information session on hardiness was held with the 'young players' group at the club. This session served a number of purposes. The first was to start to build rapport. In presenting my own football background and my experience as a psychologist in their sport, I aimed to gain credibility and to demonstrate my understanding of their performance and organisational demands. Second, I was able to ask the group about their experiences with sport psychology to date in a group setting and to discuss some of the mental factors that they considered important for performance. Third, I was able to outline to the group the nature of the programme, and to explain the steps of the research in which they would soon be invited to participate. From my experience in working in the elite rugby environment, I believed that younger players rarely gave much consideration to written communications, so the opportunity to run a facilitated discussion with the group was welcomed.

Following the briefing, a letter (Appendix A, Information Letter) and a consent form (Appendix B, Consent Form for Participants) were sent out from the assistant coach to the playing list detailing the study and inviting the players to participate. Sealed envelopes containing expressions of interest in participating were collected at the administration desk and sent on to me. Initially I had aimed to recruit between three and five participants. Four players initially indicated their interest in the project. Participants were then contacted by phone to explain further the method for the intervention and study, and to arrange a time for the first interview. In this phone contact it emerged that one of the participants was returning to the club after some time away: although he was in the 'first year group', together we decided that due to his significantly different circumstances, experience and age, it was necessary to exclude him from this specific study. Another potential participant, at the conclusion of the first intervention

session following the initial interview, indicated significant ambivalence about continuing on with the one-to-one intervention, and that he would prefer to withdraw at that early stage. I decided to focus instead on interviewing and working one-to-one with two players whose different stories could then be analysed concurrently and then validly compared and contrasted according to the methods of analysis that I had chosen.

<div align="center">**Procedure**</div>

The project consisted of two case studies derived from interview and intervention data collected longitudinally over the course of the participants' first professional season. The participants were both interviewed at the start of the programme, and follow-up one-to-one intervention sessions were then conducted with participants. Each one-to-one session was voice recorded with participants' consent, and was complemented by notes made by me following each session. These stages are now described in turn.

Initial Interview

In order to understand participants' experience of environmental and developmental stressors and to develop an appropriate intervention, I interviewed each participant according to a semi-structured format. Prior to interview the participants' expectations of the interview had been set through the initial briefing, and I had had casual interactions with each of the participants while "hanging out" (Andersen, 2000a, p.4) at the club. Hence, at the start of the interview, some rapport had already been built in order to facilitate the personal disclosures that I encouraged from the participants. At the start of the interview, I reminded participants that we would be focusing memories on stressful events and, thus, could expect that some unpleasant emotions might be experienced. I also reiterated confidentiality procedures covering the voice

recording. All participants agreed to continue. The interview focused on the previous two weeks, with participants asked to report the most stressful situations they experienced in that period. Following Anshel's (2001) interview protocol used in a similar professional rugby setting, I asked players to think of any incidents that would score about an eight on a scale from one to ten, with one being "not at all stressful" and ten being "the most stress I can imagine". All players were able to recall at least two incidents that subjectively met the requirement. Once players had reported an incident, I probed for details of the incident, including time, location, and presence of other people, in order to understand their memory of the incidents. Following identification of the situational, organizational, and personal demands, prompting questions were prepared regarding their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses, both immediately and during the entire period of experience of that stressor. Following the interview procedure developed by Anshel (2001) with rugby league players, further probing focused where necessary on eliciting thoughts, feelings, and then behaviours that accompanied the experience of the stressor. Initially, I had intended to use a form of phenomenological enquiry (e.g., Smith, 2002) in order to explore participants' experiences of stress. In discussions with peers and my applied supervisors, it was decided that, since the intervention would be conducted according to the principles of my cognitive-behavioural theoretical background, it would be appropriate to probe explicitly for experiences of stress according to a cognitive model (Lazarus, 1999) that had guided my investigation to date.

The interview scenario was practised with my supervisor and a peer. During preparation, two potential pitfalls were highlighted to be guarded against: engaging the client in therapeutic discussions prematurely during the initial interview and failing to adequately probe the emotional

content of the stories. These two potential issues are discussed again in the Results chapter,

where I address the role of the therapist in more detail.

Measures

I also administered the 18-item Personal Views Survey-IIIR to participants (Maddi,

2003). The PVS II, from which PVS-IIIR evolved, has 50 rating-scale items to measure the three

subscales of hardiness, namely Challenge, Control, and Commitment. While the focus of the

study was qualitative, this inventory was used to add additional data to the qualitative interviews,

towards the rating of participants' hardiness at the inception of the study. In the Personal Views

Survey, Third Edition (PVS III), Maddi, and Khoshaba (2001) used the 30 most reliable and

valid items from the earlier PVS II to construct a more manageable measure of hardiness.

Research suggests that the PVS III has operated as expected (e.g., Maddi, Brow, Khoshaba &

Vaitkus, 2003), and Maddi and Hess (2004) were able to shorten measurement time even further

while keeping psychometric properties at acceptable levels, by introducing the Personal Views

Survey, Third Edition—Revised (PVS III-R). This latest inventory comprises the 18 most

reliable and valid items from the PVS III. Participants were given an overall score on hardiness,

which comprised their scores on the Challenge, Control and Commitment sub-scales.

Intervention

In the intervention, I focused on enhancing the hardiness of athletes, following Maddi's

(2002) model of hardiness as encompassing the elements of Challenge, Control, and

Commitment. The structure for the intervention was based on the techniques developed by

Gillham, Jaycox, Reivich, Seligman, and Silver (2001) for enhancing resilience in

schoolchildren, and refined for elite sport by Schinke and colleagues (Schinke & Peterson, 2002;

Schinke, Peterson, & Couture, 2004). The methodology incorporated techniques that encourage

reflection on assumptions and current patterns of thought, and the development and use of more

facilitative alternative patterns of thought and behaviour. The intervention methods chosen were

based on cognitive behavioural therapy approaches, and selected as a paradigmatic approach

within sport psychology applied practice at the time. The techniques outlined by Schinke and

Peterson (2002) involve, first, the evaluating of personal assumptions, second, developing

disputing strategies, and, third, decatastrophising. These are now explained in turn.

Stage 1: Assessment of Personal Assumptions

During this initial phase, participants were encouraged to reflect on the most common

acute and chronic stresses experienced during life as a professional rugby league player. I

encouraged them to look at how they interpreted and reacted to these stressors, and how these

interpretations and reactions may have affected future performance via motivation and the

subsequent choices made during training and in games. For example, in his study of performance

stressors in rugby league, Anshel (2001) found the most common form of high acute stress

during games to be "making a physical error", such as "I missed a tackle". If the player evaluates

the event as providing evidence that he is poor at tackling (ascribing permanence and

pervasiveness to the event), it is likely that he might avoid tackling positions during subsequent

phases of the same game, and may be demotivated to practice tackling technique during

subsequent training sessions. By contrast, if the event is interpreted as being due to specific

factors, such as a momentary lapse in physical intensity or technique, then the player may instead

actively seek out opportunities to make a further tackle during the game, or to reduce the

likelihood of subsequent momentary lapses by training in that aspect of his game during the

week. So the athletes were encouraged to think of responses to stress as following four steps: a) identifying events that trigger demotivating or counter-productive responses (e.g., a missed tackle), b) identifying thoughts that occur in response to these stressors (e.g., "I'm useless at one-on-one tackles"), c) understanding their emotional reaction to the thought or appraisal (e.g., performance anxiety, heightened arousal), and d) identifying which actions are most likely to result from the first three steps (e.g., consciously avoiding tackling positions during a game, or lack of enthusiasm towards subsequent tackling practice sessions).

Cognitive evaluations were considered within the evaluation framework provided by Rettew and Reivich (1995). This framework involves three factors, first, stability – the likelihood that a certain result will reoccur in the future; second, locus of control – whether events are seen as resulting from personal efforts and abilities rather than external, uncontrollable factors; and third, pervasiveness – whether personal qualities exhibited in one particular context will necessarily apply in other contexts. The objective of this process was to give athletes an understanding of how, even in the fast-paced, rapidly changing environment of the rugby game, thoughts or cognitions would still have a role in motivation and performance.

Stage 2: Disputing Negative Thoughts

In the first stage, participants were encouraged to identify how they interpreted events, and where these interpretations led to behaviours or emotions contrary to their goals. In this stage, participants would be encouraged to consider the evidence used in their evaluations of stress. Using the example above of evaluations following a missed tackle, a negative evaluation such as "I'm terrible at tackling one-on-one" would be evaluated for potential inaccuracy or bias, and the situation examined to see if evidence existed to support a more positively motivating

thought process. The intention was for the participants to identify a different way of thinking. In this mode, players would be committed to improving the stressful situation in some way, having the resources to do so, and it would be seen as more challenging than threatening.

Stage 3: Decatastrophising

This technique relates to the tendency to increase anxiety and detract from self-confidence through imagining 'catastrophic' worst-case scenarios prior to competition, as identified by Bandura (1997). These imagined scenarios would be clearly detrimental to performance. An example I identified from my own applied work was a football player who related how he feared in games that his fitness was insufficient to carry him through the whole game without catastrophic failure: "blowing up". Before games he imagined a scenario where he would "blow up" (be unable to continue any high intensity running), and fail his team-mates and embarrass himself. This thought process increased cognitive and somatic anxiety to a point where he would avoid engaging in the game to the fullness of his ability for fear of his fitness failing him at later stages. A realistic concern had become elevated to a debilitating level, and he did not feel able to control the stressful situations, and was withdrawing, and reducing his commitment to the game. As Seligman (1992) observed, thoughts of potential inabilities and ensuing negative outcomes made the imagined negative outcomes more likely to occur.

Schinke and Jerome (2002) outlined a five-step process for disputing such catastrophic ideation, which was identified for use in the current study where appropriate. In the first step, I asked the player to delineate how he would imagine the worst-case scenario eventuating. Second, I asked the player to assess the likelihood of this scenario occurring. Third, I encouraged the player to imagine some best-case scenarios that could also occur. Fourth, I encouraged the player

to identify, on the basis of currently available evidence, what the most-likely scenario would be. For the player in the example given above, this most-likely scenario was that he would be no more or less exhausted than his team-mates who followed the same conditioning programme as himself, and that any performance decrements as a result of this normal fatigue would be no smaller or greater than the team average. The final step in the process was for the player to consider how he could cope with the possible scenarios that were envisaged. The methodology allowed players to learn to see the game situation as a manageable challenge to their abilities, to develop strategies to control the situation, thereby remaining committed to the performance environment, rather than withdrawing or giving up. In this way, I provided players with cognitive coping strategies to take control over emotional states and possess alternative behavioural coping strategies to facilitate active engagement with the source of the stress.

Methodology

Widely-referenced studies such as Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1993) examining mental toughness, and Hanton et al. (2005) investigating the variety of stressors in elite sport, involved the analysis of semi-structured interviews to parsimoniously represent the topics being explored. In such studies, researchers employed qualitative methods that focused on parsing information and consolidating this into meaningful emergent "chunks" or themes (see Smith & Osborne, 2008) that provide insight into a phenomenon or concept. However, such methods may involve an inherent risk of underscoring core themes at the expense of explorations of variation and difference (Faircloth, 1999). In this respect these methods contrast with Stiles' (2007) ideas of theory-building through case-studies, and Sparkes (2002) also found such parsing-based "content forms" of analysis to have "a narrative detachment from the artfulness of storytelling" (p. 210),

and furthermore "by seeking common themes in the stories there is the danger of missing other

possible messages that individual stories might hold" (p. 21). In searching for a valid means of

analysing and reporting the work with two young athletes over the course of many months, I had

initially gravitated towards Sparkes' (2002) descriptions of "realist tales" as a way of conveying

what I understood about hardiness and the stress response from the interactions with the

participants. Telling a "realist tale", as Sparkes (2002) wrote, would allow me to "connect theory

to data in a way that creates spaces for participant voices to be heard in a coherent text." (p.55).

As I started to review, first, the initial interview and, then, the first 'intervention' sessions with

the participants with my supervisor, it became clear that I would need to deviate from "realist

tale" convention described by Sparkes (2002), where he stated "these kinds of texts tend to be

dominated by scientific narrators who are manifested only as dispassionate, camera-like

observers and listeners" (p. 44), a style which would distance the author from the data. To reduce

this tendency, Sparkes identified that authors "might consider writing more of themselves into

the text when, for certain purposes, they feel this to be appropriate (p. 54), I wanted to go beyond

simply a realist description of the hardiness of the participants, into providing insight into the

hardiness phenomenon in an elite sport setting within two individuals' personal context.

Furthermore, I wanted to shed light on what actually transpired in the process of "doing sport

psychology" (Andersen, 2000b): a student-practitioner sitting down to work on hardiness, face to

face with two athletes, in the midst of a professional rugby season. Ontologically, I was

approaching the project from a position closest to Cupchick's "constructivist realism" (Cupchick,

2001). Cupchick described how there does exist a "real" social world in which interacting

"phenomena cut across the physical, social and personal (self) worlds" (p. 1), and that these

phenomena, if they are valid, may be observed to manifest in the process of individuals'

interactions with their environments. He wrote:

> If our abstract concepts do not account for patterns in the lived-in world then our
>
> theories lack value, however they are derived. But if the in-depth examination of
>
> a phenomenon helps clarify patterns that lie within it, and these patterns are
>
> formally described, then the qualitative and quantitative approaches will have
>
> done their duty; richness and precision will have complemented each other
>
> (Cupchick, 2001, p. 9).

My purpose in the current project was to complement existing quantitatively derived

insight into the "abstract concept" of hardiness. Like Cupchick I believed that social and

psychological phenomena exist in communities "quite independently of professional

researchers" (p. 9) and I wanted to position myself in the "lived-in world" of the elite athletes in

such a way as to be able to both examine hardiness and cultivate change for the athletes.

> Cupchick described an ontological position in which qualitative method is:
>
> …not seen as providing access to the "meaning" of individual events…
>
> Rather…qualitative method provides a basis for "thick" description. This rich
>
> source of data is most productive when it focuses on events or episodes in which
>
> the phenomenon in question is well represented. To the extent that the interviewer
>
> and the respondent share an ongoing reference point, it makes it easier to locate
>
> the respondent's concrete discourse in a meaningful abstract theoretical context
>
> of interest to the interviewer. This enhanced intersubjectivity provides a basis for
>
> reconciling the problematic of realism-relativism in a "grounded" fashion.

As an applied practitioner aiming for evidence-based practice, I wanted to gain further understanding of the "real" phenomena of individuals' differences in their patterns of responses to stressors in the elite sport context (differences in hardiness), as well as gaining understanding of the human stress and coping response in a sporting context (see Hardy et al. 1996).

In their investigation of overtraining phenomena in athletes, Richardson, Andersen and Morris (2008) complemented forms of "realist tales" with "confessional tales". The initial expert perspectives were portrayed using "realist tales", but the interviews with athletes, in which the first author shared his own perspectives, were written as narrative case studies, presented as "confessional tales" (Sparkes, 2002). As Richardson originally wrote (Richardson, 2005) "[with] this divergence from thematic analysis, the athlete tales could be described as representing lived experiences, allowing the reader to identify with the athletes" (p. 88). In the present study, in order to allow readers both to judge my conclusions and to draw their own conclusions regarding the phenomena being described I aimed to preserve the "realist" aspect of the narrative, while staying true to a "constructivist realist" ontology (Cupchick, 2001). I did this by including a substantial number of verbatim quotes of both the participants, as well as my own contributions to the narrative in my applied psychology role. Furthermore, Smith and Sparkes (2009) emphasised the 'constructed' nature of stories, suggesting that narratives are not "stand alone" and exclusively the product of the teller. Rather, narratives are constructed with the participation and influence of the people reading or hearing the story: in other words, stories will differ based on to whom the story is being told. Similarly, researchers do not find or discover narratives, but instead actively participate in the process of their creation (Riessman, 2008). In the current investigation of how hardiness might be changed through cognitive-behavioural therapy, I

employed a narrative approach presented via "confessional tales" (Sparkes, 2002) to present the

two intervention cases, at the same time preserving a "realist" portrayal of hardiness-in-action

through providing the reader with substantial verbatim quotes to represent the participants'

experience.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcripts happened in three phases, as detailed by Stiles (2007): a)

gaining familiarity, b) selecting and focusing, and c) interpreting. Although each of these phases

can be identified in my analysis, the process was iterative in that, for example, once

interpretation was started, I returned frequently to seek out additional passages and to read and

re-read the transcripts.

Gaining Familiarity

Following each episode of data collection, I made my own notes of the sessions, and

listened back to the recordings in order to develop my strategy and direction for the next session.

After the initial intake interview with each participant, I analysed the main stressors that the

participants had reported, in order to identify material for later interventions. In addition, as the

data collection/intervention stage continued, I reflected on my approach during supervision

sessions as well as during group supervision sessions that formed part of my concurrent training

in applied sport psychology. Once the transcriptions had been completed, I read over each

several times, adding to the familiarity I had gained through the process of transcribing the

sessions myself. I made extensive notes in the margins of the transcripts. Much of my annotation

focused on my impressions of "what was unfolding" in the ongoing interpersonal process of the

psychology intervention, as well as what was being manifested relevant to hardiness, and I

included my additional retrospective recollections of the sessions that would add to the

"richness" of the transcript data.

Selecting and Focusing

This phase required a perspective more removed from the raw data in order to arrive at an

appropriate structure for each of the case studies. In this phase of analysing the transcripts I

referred to Riessman's (2008) descriptions of narrative thematic analysis, with its focus on a

case-centred approach. In constructing the two stories, and in conducting the sessions, I had a

predetermined agenda with pre-determined themes given by my research goals, similar to the

"top down" or deductive approach to narratives described by Braun and Clarke (2006). I,

therefore, approached the data with pre-existing questions to 'code around'. With the research

goals as the pre-determined themes, in this 'selecting and focusing' phase, I highlighted sections

and selected quotes from the original material that illustrated the theme of hardiness, and sought

to identify passages that demonstrated how the participants were describing their interactions

with the various stressors they encountered. I also made notes in the margins that provided

additional 'confessional' data, including my recollections and impressions and memories of the

sessions, adding to the richness of the narratives. Cupchick (2001) described the role of

qualitative investigation: "…this rich source of data is most productive when it focuses on events

or episodes in which the phenomenon in question is well represented" (p. 9). In line with this

description, I sought out quotes that showed hardiness in action, illustrating either the

participants' descriptions of their own stress-related experience, relating to the theoretical

frameworks presented in the literature review, or quotes that illustrated our discussions of those

phenomena. I also sought out passages that reflected my own contributions, for better or worse, to the narratives.

Once this coding according to themes had been completed, I read through the transcripts to ensure that the themes, and the extracts and quotes selected, 'worked' in terms of how the interventions played out chronologically. The re-reading also involved identifying any further themes and elements that had been missed in earlier stages. This 'recoding', as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), continued as an "ongoing organic process" (p. 99) into the initial stages of constructing the narratives.

Interpreting.

In this phase there were two stages, constructing the two separate narratives and then producing the results section in which the narratives were examined in light of pre-existing theory. In writing up the narratives, I aimed for Braun and Clarke's (2006) goals for narrative research of providing a "a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes" (p. 100). I aimed to provide readers with an account of how the intervention developed over time. In considering the authenticity of the text, my goal of creating a "coherent…and interesting"' account that would do justice to the exciting, fascinating, and emotionally-rich experience of doing this one-to-one applied research seemed at odds with the strict 'criteriological' authenticity criteria exemplified by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as discussed in Sparkes and Smith (2009). I was finding the research process to be dynamic, unpredictable, and fascinating and was inclined to move away from such authenticity criteria, as critiqued by Sparkes and Smith, that might dominate the narratives into being mostly "method driven, and so less dynamic, more predictable, and dare it be said, boring" (p. 495). .

Richardson (2000) had identified authenticity criteria that appeared more fitting to the current

project: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of a reality.

First, regarding contribution, in constructing the research goals in the initial stages of the project,

the aims and methods of the study were set out with my supervisor to provide additional insight

into the hardiness construct to support applied interventions beyond pre-existing research. To

enhance aesthetic merit, I asked peers and my supervisor for their impressions of the narrative as

it was being written. In addition, during the write up process for this project I co-authored an

additional paper as a 'confessional tale' (Thompson & Andersen, 2012), in which one of my

principal aims was to produce a compelling account of an applied intervention. In the current

study, I aimed to reproduce the aspects of pace and style of the 2012 narrative that had received

positive feedback from my co-author and from peer reviewers. To augment reflexivity, I used my

notes from the supervision sessions that occurred within the intervention as a basis for self-

awareness and self-exposure, which would further inform readers' perspectives on the stories.

For assurance on the study's "expression of a reality", I had my own recollections, as well as my

personal notes made during the intervention. Furthermore, my supervisor provided an additional

'reality check' for the stories given that we had discussed the interactions and the course of the

intervention, from the project's inception through each of the sessions with participants. During

the write-up I sought his perspective in order to help ensure the text and the quotations selected

would provide a "credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the

'real'" (Richardson, 2000, p. 254).

     Next, the analysis stage involved a process of viewing the two stories together through

the lens of the theoretical approaches that framed the study, namely the transactional model of

stress and the Challenge, Control, and Commitment facets of hardiness. The results by necessity

contained a confessional element, regarding my role as a neophyte psychologist. As I was aiming

to illustrate the Hardiness concept at work in the real lives of elite athletes, I sought to provide a

"warts and all" version of the intervention that portrays my relative naivety at the time of the

intervention as a researcher and a psychologist-in-training. In this way, and in keeping with the

objectives of narrative research (Sparkes, 2008), as well as Richardson's (2000) authenticity

criterion of 'impact', I hope to enable those who read the stories to form additional questions and

conclusions that go beyond my own analysis and discussion of the results.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The two stories featuring the two participants are presented below as separate cases, with separate interpretation sections. Following the Method, each participant was first interviewed to elicit details of his experience of the environment over the prior two weeks. The stories then go on to detail each subsequent session in the intervention. The stories are told separately, each with its own interpretation section. Chronologically, however, the stories were unfolding in parallel as I worked with the two participants during the same competition season.

Story 1: Alan

Alan was starting his first season as a professional in the rugby club. He had moved interstate to train full time with the team, leaving behind his network of family and friends in his home state. At the time of meeting, Alan had completed approximately half of the 'pre-season' training program. This 3-month program comprised a combination of physical conditioning and technical and tactical development, progressing in challenge level each week, in which teammates were effectively working with and competing against each other to stake a claim for a position in the senior team.

Initial Interview

Alan's expression was hard to read when he arrived for our initial session. We had met before, and Alan presented himself as slightly reserved, offering a short greeting before sitting down and taking a sip from his water bottle. Being the first interview in the study, I was also slightly apprehensive, and Alan was looking at me expectantly. I first revisited some of the research process and then started the interview by asking him if he could describe a stressful experience in the last two weeks that he would rate as eight or above on a scale of one to 10, with

ten being "the most stress he could imagine experiencing". He stayed silent. The interview had

not started how I had expected, especially given that I had already conducted the "rapport

building" phase as defined in the method section previously.

I rethought and repeated the question, and Alan described in general terms having to

"push through" fatigue. When I prompted him, he divulged that the most challenging situation

for him was being in the position Half Back, and organizing the team on the field.

You have to listen, take in what's being said. Positions of players around you.

Staying switched on otherwise you're in trouble. Even when you're feeling shot

[tired]. At first when I moved down [moved interstate to the football club] it was

hard. Now I'm pretty confident, the boys know me well enough.

Alan moved quickly from stating his worry to stating that he had effectively solved it. I

colluded with this impression management by nodding and smiling. Alan returned to the subject

of his personal challenge: "once or twice a week I'm still a bit confused and unsure what to do."

He went on to describe his experience in a training session at the end of a hard day of training in

the preseason period. He had woken up in the morning feeling "flatter" than normal, but pointed

out to me that "only once a week or so" he would feel this way. He described the interaction

between thoughts focused on the threat of fatigue and his motivation to engage in further

training. "Your motivation seems to drop 'cause you're worried how tired you are. Paying more

attention to how your body is feeling." The stressor was the low level of vigour felt during

waking. He then appraised his coping resources as possibly being insufficient to cope with this

stressor. In questioning his ability to cope with this fatigue, he encountered a potential threat to

his self-image: "you just have to get through it otherwise the boys will think less of me: that I'm

weak in the mind. I don't want them thinking that. So I just get through it." Seen through the

Transactional model (Lazarus, 1999), Alan evaluated his coping resources and identified a

potential deficit. A threat to his sense of identity was identified, namely that other players would

collectively judge him to be a weak person. In this instance, Alan revealed a pattern that would

be replicated through our work together: identifying threats to his sense of competence and

protecting himself from negative evaluations. Alan would go on to attempt to control other

peoples' perceptions of him, reacting with anger at authority figures, and myself, when

challenged.

He explicitly mentioned the self-consciousness arising from the environment of constant

evaluation: "I don't want to be seen lagging otherwise that's inconsistent...everything is looked

at by coaches and players, you have to make sure you don't make any short cuts." I then asked

him about how he responded to this situation, what he did, thought about, and felt next. He

described in general terms how he would cope by re-evaluating the stressor and then using

approach-focused coping (Hardy et al., 1996) to engage actively in the situation:

> Yeah if you get yelled at…it's not hard for me...you have to expect that if you are
>
> not doing your job properly...if someone yells I say 'yep sweet'...I see what I did
>
> wrong and try to make up for it...[by] communicating with everyone else, help
>
> them...tell myself this is what to expect in first grade...basically you just have to
>
> do it.

When I prompted him to describe his specific reaction, the response I got was quite

different from the ideal 'approach coping' described earlier. "Today! Ha! I wasn't happy, I

wasn't switched on and wasn't focused. Just disorganized. Everyone wanting the ball, wanting

structure. You don't want to do that...laying down the law and getting on the wrong side of people."

He continued, describing his real feelings and internal reactions in this situation where "trying harder" actually became counterproductive:

It starts to get a bit disorganised...you try harder, but when you try it just gets

worse. Every time I touch the ball it doesn't work. Focus wasn't there, confidence

wasn't there. Everyone is looking towards you, you get into situations where you

are confused...just start yelling stuff out and everyone starts to wonder what you

are doing…you try harder then you screw up…try harder to...reorganise

things...the boys...you end up digging a deeper hole for yourself.

He described how the anxiety compounded his mistakes, with his decision-making becoming more confused, leading him into a downward spiral of impeded performance, self-related anxiety and performance-attenuating attentional narrowing (Moran, 1996):

Mistakes happen more often because you are trying harder. You want to make up

for what you've done...brain ends up going 100 miles an hour...not thinking just

worrying about making up for mistakes...thinking about mistakes rather than what

you are doing. You know you have to stay focused and stay confident.

Alan's face seemed to drop as he admitted that to himself. Here Alan outlined a coping strategy that would become apparent several times in our work together. In his primary appraisal of a performance stressor he would see a threat to his sense of competence, and a threat to a feeling of confidence that he held dear, as well as the performance demands of the situation. This feeling of "confidence" is discussed in the analysis section of this case study. His secondary

appraisal (Hardy et al., 1996) focused on his ability to behaviourally cope with the stressor. When this initial approach-focused coping did not restore his sense of competence and restore a feeling of confidence, a new stressor emerged, which was the experience of anxiety itself, having threats both to his "confidence" and this sense of self, as well as threatening his performance. In other words, Alan was worrying that he was becoming worried. Alan's coping efforts then became focused on the anxiety and lack of confidence itself (emotion-focused coping), rather than focusing on the behavioural efforts to control the original stressor. His attention then became split in this way between controlling the internal state and the external situation, with attentional resources further attenuated by the repetitive thoughts concomitant with cognitive anxiety. Alan's descriptions showed how subsequent iterations of the primary appraisal identified a threat in terms of his team-mates seeing him as weak and incompetent. The anxiety intensified to debilitating levels. In other words, as he became more and more anxious, the threat of appearing incompetent loomed larger and larger in his reckoning, resulting in more and more anxiety.

Alan named a feeling of confidence as an important aspect of his functioning and sport performance and so attempted to control the feeling of confidence. Consistent with later sessions, Alan repeatedly described the state of 'confidence' as almost the direct opposite of a state of self-blame and guilt. My understanding of Alan became that he believed that if he could instil 'confidence' in himself then the guilt and self-blame would go away. He described the consequences of the anxiety he felt when his competence was threatened. He experienced his thoughts racing, with attentional resources focused on how to make up for mistakes. As a coping

response, he also described trying to eradicate aversive emotions and thoughts as well as

focusing his attention on the task in hand**.**

Alan paused for about 20 seconds, nodding, apparently considering what he had just

talked about. He then continued with an explanation of the event. "I guess it was just one of

those days. Most people have those days where things just don't work out. I've been doing really

well lately, I guess today just wasn't my day." He seemed to relax at this point, settling back into

his chair, shrugging, smiling for the first time. For Alan, this demonstrated a way to cope with an

experience that had been troubling him. He started to interpret the event as part of the challenge

of playing elite sport:

> I just look at myself. I was even laughing for a bit: for me it just doesn't normally
>
> happen. A lot of things that normally come off weren't working for me today. I
>
> know tomorrow or the next session I'll just pick those things back up.

This appraisal seemed to attenuate his anxiety, allowing him to preserve his sense of

competence. The stressor was interpreted as temporary, so having no implications for his sense

of competence and worth as an individual. Nonetheless, the belief "if I behave this way I am bad

and weak" was countered by the thought "I don't usually behave this way, therefore I am not bad

and weak." In this way the framework for interpreting errors as a reflection of global self-worth

remained unchallenged "if I am seen to perform this way it will make me a bad and weak

person."

From another perspective considering the establishment of trust in the therapeutic

relationship, Alan had revealed his fear, then retreated, then revealed his fear again, then

explained it away and then left it behind. Later in his relationship with me, Alan would repeat

this pattern of trusting me with his feelings of vulnerability, then assuring me everything was 'fine', trusting me then retreating behind positive affirmations again. From the perspective of my therapeutic agenda, I would feel that he was variously collaborating with the intervention and resisting it.

As the session finished I checked in with Alan on how this first session had gone for him. "Yeah it was good to talk. It let me unload a little bit I guess. I learnt about what I did wrong. Now I've talked about it I've unleashed it." As I reflected on the session, I noticed that the session had felt different to several of my previous first meetings with elite sport clients. Having deliberately listened to the story unfold and resisted the urge to adopt any particular therapeutic intervention, I felt I had provided space for the client to talk and engage.

Session 2

This session lasted only 20 minutes as Alan was called out to a rescheduled session with a physical therapist, according organizational priorities at the professional club. We started off by reviewing the first session, and a suggested it would be a good place to start in talking about the first stressor that he had identified in the first session with the on-field decision-making scenario. I asked him about his general feelings in training sessions during the week since we had last met. He told me that the scenario was difficult but that he felt he was coping fine. I shared my thoughts that, in the decision-making stressor, it seemed that there was an aspect of challenge to perform, as the same time as a threat he had clearly highlighted, the underlying fear that his teammates would think he was weak. I reaffirmed that it was clearly an important part of his life, and tried to empathise with him in understanding the feelings he had in wanting to perform well in from of so many seasoned and recognized performers.

I shared my understanding that the error-making situation was personally meaningful to

him and he wanted to engage with it but that the idea of failure was still threatening: he

acknowledged this but there was not a strong agreement.

He started to talk more about what he wanted from his football, to prove that he was good

enough and could make it into the team. He moved on quickly to discussing the fatigue stressor,

and coping with fatigue:

> Backing up for sessions wrecks you, you have a rest in the avo and then start
>
> thinking about how to get up for the next session if it's wrestling or drills...you
>
> just sometimes wonder why you're doing it, but then you get into it and that goes
>
> away…you see the older boys getting into it and you lift cause that's where you
>
> have to be.

In line with the Challenge construct I focused on identifying opportunities for growth and

development in the face of challenges like this, and identifying a cognitive approach to use when

vigour levels were low. I suggested disputing the negative thoughts: using experience from

successfully completing previous days with double training sessions as evidence for replacing

"maybe I can't get through this" with the thought "I will somehow get through, just focus on

preparation".

I was coming up with all the ideas and at the time felt that I was supplying most of the

energy in the work of disputing the negative thoughts when fatigued. We were then interrupted

by a coach who came in, asking if he could use the room for a team meeting because the massage

times had been moved forward. Alan and I both agreed to move and Alan, showing some anxiety

about being late for the new massage time, suggested we schedule another appointment time. I

felt that an opportunity to work on the decision-making and the fatigue stressors had been

missed. There was no apparent disappointment from Alan though in having to end the sessions,

and the interruption came at a time when I was pushing my agenda forward, without listening to

what Alan was saying in the way I had during the initial interview.

Session 3

Alan smiled when he entered the room, and asked me how I was. I asked him how

training and games had been going, and how he was faring in the halfback position. It was a

broad question, that invited generalities, and Alan started with a description of how he had been

doing well in his role. I asked him which team he was playing in and he said that he had been

playing in the under 20s team (the junior team, sitting below the first grade, and the senior

reserve grade teams). His explanation was that all the new players at the club would need to play

in the under 20s before going back up to the senior reserves grade. He described feeling that it

was difficult to prepare well for the game: "I'm used to having my own preparation in [the senior

reserve grade games] and it's more suited to my style of footy up there [seniors]."

When asked to elaborate on his style of football he described how he saw himself "as a

confidence player...I wanna feel confident...ruling the game, like I'm the man." He described

how he likes to "tell myself I'm going to rip it up [play well]" and would spend time making sure

his hair was done well and his taping of knees and boots [for athletic support] would "look the

part".

His speech at this point sounded enthusiastic and genuine and I was conscious of

indulging him. I moved the agenda back in line with the research method. This would have us

return again to exploring the stress reaction delineated in the initial interview, starting work on

reflecting on assumptions and current patterns of thought. I hoped that this would lead to the

development and use of more facilitative alternative patterns of thought and behaviour. I wanted

to find out how he was experiencing the role of half-back as decision maker, now that

competitive games had started. He told me first that he felt disappointed that he had been

dropped back to the under 20s team, but that in fact the coach was "a good bloke who just lets

me play." It had been explained to him that most of the players would need to play in the junior

team at some stage and that he was only going to be in the junior team for a few weeks. I asked

him how he was feeling in his role compared to the last time we had talked.

Immediately he replied that everything was going well, and when I prompted him for

more detail on what was going well he seemed to contradict the positive affirmations he had just

made. Alan said,

> Sometimes the other lot who you're playing with are a bit behind us [the regular
>
> Under 20s versus professional players returning to the team for weekend games].
>
> It's a bit of a waste of time because boys don't know what you're trying to do,
>
> they only practice a couple of times a week, so they just want to do like, just want
>
> the ball, and, well, I'm trying to do things at a different level, so they don't
>
> always get it.

He added as an afterthought "but Ben [the team's development coach] is good with that, eh."

Alan and I explored the experience further and I understood that he would become increasingly

frustrated with the other players, ostensibly blaming any failure, and his own frustration, on their

lack of awareness of the methods he was trying to apply. I was curious about the perspective of

the other players, and also the effect of Alan's own frustration on his performance. As described

in earlier account of our first session, Alan had described his growing anxiety arising from concern with others' perceptions of him, leading to further skill errors and a difficulty concentrating on his role. It was my intention to look with Alan at his communication with other players. He mentioned the belief that "they don't know what I'm trying to do because they only train a couple of times a week", which placed the locus of control outside his influence. In line with the agenda of focusing on hardiness, including increasing a sense of control, I asked Alan, "Is there anything you can do to help them understand what plays you are trying to get going?"

My intention was to explore beliefs about the other players, which might make room for him actively communicating with his teammates during the game. He could let them know where he wanted to pass the ball, and any opportunities on the field he wanted to exploit, in order to be able to put into practice his learning. His response went in a different direction though, describing how the playing environment in the Under 20's made it hard for him to prepare as he would have liked.

It's hard to get into it when it's like that. I'm a confidence player. [When I play

well] I have this ritual, I like to do my hair right, the socks, get the tape just right,

tells myself I'm gonna rip it up.

I wondered how the feeling of 'confidence' or otherwise was affecting Alan's game. I thought at the time that the appropriate performance-related focus for us would be to concentrate on Alan's communication with the other players. I suspected that the coaches would have particular strategies in mind for him to implement, but, when asked, Alan said "Brad's fine with it, just lets me play how I play." I took him at his word. In retrospect, analysing the transcript, I felt that Alan was trying to manage my impression of him, and wanted me to see him as a

capable professional player just being let down by an unsupportive environment. Actually, I felt that Alan was lacking awareness of his teammates and was missing an opportunity to improve his performance and enjoyment of the game by fostering better communication with his teammates.

I asked Alan how important communication skills were for a player in his position. His reply was an enthusiastic endorsement of communication as a key attribute, primarily focusing on being able to "give orders" and "instruct" players in how the game was about to unfold.

"Great!" I said, "So there's an awesome opportunity for you to try out these communication skills and to practice using communication to get everyone in the right place!" His reply was monosyllabic, and I didn't understand his lack of enthusiasm for turning this threat into a challenge, or for finding positive ways to control the situation to his advantage. I ploughed on, undeterred by his lack of engagement and I sought to enthuse him towards this goal.

I focused the conversation on how he might communicate positively with the other athletes, what he could say in order to direct them to different areas of the field so that he could direct things just as he wanted to. Alan moved the conversation back to his preparation, and the need to prepare well in order to feel right on the field, before we ran out of time and Alan had to go to his next appointment. We committed to meeting up in 2 weeks' time.

Afterwards, when discussing the session with my supervisor it seemed that the playing environment was offering a consistent challenge to Alan in being able to prepare for games in an optimal way even when the environment (changing rooms and numbers of support staff) were different to what he was expecting at the elite level. The cascade of thoughts and emotions from this stressor seemed clear, and a suitable candidate for the intervention technique.

Session 4

At the start of this session, Alan seemed different, he smiled when he saw me, and said hi, looking slightly tired, but also at ease. I didn't sense the same air of vigilance and defensiveness from him towards my questions that had been present at the start of the previous two sessions. When I asked him how the last fortnight had been his reply flowed freely, as he talked without prompting about his experience over the last week, how it had been hard physically, and how he felt that he was making progress in improving his football. In preparing for the session, I had decided to bring up the self-doubt that Alan had mentioned during the first session to find out more about it. This time he was quite open about his experience, saying that sometimes the self-doubt would surface. The self-doubting voices didn't seem to be as salient and as strong as the previous time we'd spoken. "You still worry about what the boys think if you stuff up, but I guess sometimes you just don't have time to stop and think about it, you just get on with it."

From my own perspective, Alan seemed to have less of the bravado he had displayed in the first session. He went on when I prompted him: "Well the coach gave me a bit to focus on so I've just been getting on with that really." He detailed a meeting with the head coach regarding his individual performance, since which he had felt more at ease and able to focus on improving his own performance. An underlying stressor still existed in a similar way to our previous discussions - performing in an environment subject to evaluations and judgments of coaches and teammates during training, and trying to put the learning into practice when playing for the under 20s side. Alan's attitude towards that stressor had apparently changed since the meeting with the head coach. From Alan's comments, I inferred that the head coach had given Alan specific areas

of his performance to focus on with improvement in mind. Consistent with the hardiness construct, I considered that if Alan could believe in his ability to have a direct effect through his actions on the stressor (making mistakes in games and training) his anxiety and self-conscious rumination would reduce. As I listened for evidence of 'approach-focused' coping following the coaching meeting, I heard his reply go in a different direction, "Well he [the head coach] didn't give me any specific pointers I don't think, just talked generally about how things were and about what it takes to improve, that sort of thing really."

He detailed how the head coach had spoken to him briefly, saying that he had noticed an improvement in Alan over the previous few weeks. The coach offered Alan encouragement to keep going. This approach seemed to have helped Alan to increase his commitment to the process of gradually gaining mastery in the performance domain. There seemed to be something about the coach's input that had allowed Alan to relax into the process of improvement that he was now describing, but there had not been any specific pointers as to what he should work on. As stated previously, I felt that Alan's commitment, the amount of personal meaning he saw in the situation, was at a high level, not requiring further improvement. "I'm glad I've kept at it. You have to have patience in this game. I actually thought about giving it all up at one time."

He then went silent and while I was trying to think of a suitable way to bring the conversation back to the work we had started, of disputing and decatastrophising his negative thoughts, he continued with a story that in retrospect provided an additional window into his experience of stress in sport. He told the story of how he grew up as a friend and contemporary of the son of a renowned player in their sport. When he described this friend he seemed to assign to him all the qualities of confidence that he wanted for himself; an unshakeable belief in his

own ability when compared to other players, and receiving constant reinforcement from others

around him, including friends, coaches, parents, and club administrators. Alan described how

they were friends, yet that Alan always envied his friend's "confidence". Alan described

confidence as an assurance in both his own abilities and the likelihood of his own success. He

then went on to describe a specific scenario, at a national junior tournament that was used as

trials for the junior national team. At the trials both boys' fathers were present. Alan's own father

also held a high profile nationally, in his own profession. Over the loudspeaker, Alan's friend

was announced as having gained selection for the national team, and Alan was not:

> My mum and dad were there and it was a total nightmare, just the worst I ever
>
> felt. I just wanted to get away from everyone. I just felt empty like my guts had
>
> been ripped out. I didn't want to be there.

Alan remembered seeing his friend's dad there, "really proud, like showing his son off, but in a

good way". Alan said nothing about his own father's demeanour towards him, but he felt

ashamed, and confided that he felt like crying "but held it all together and just went home". He

felt that he had played badly, felt hopeless and that he was no good at all. He went on: "I went to

my room. I just cried and actually took my boots and threw them away. I decided to give up on

football, as I was clearly shit at it." I realised that he was disclosing to me something that he had

never disclosed to anyone else. I was aware of the privileged position he had placed me in by

revealing these experiences.

Alan continued by describing how, afterwards, his father came and talked to him in his

bedroom. Initially his father had been angry at Alan for wanting to give up on football, but Alan

said that his mother had persuaded his father to talk to him. They spoke at length. I wondered

how often these father-son discussions had happened, given the specific encouragement his father had needed in this case. As a result of them talking though the situation, Alan said he felt much better about things. The relationship with his father helped solve the feelings of self-hatred and self-blame. I wondered how the feelings had arisen in the first place, but felt that this was beyond the scope of the present study. "My father talked to me about success, how you have to keep at it…you need patience. He said that his success didn't come overnight. He started off just working in a store and eventually [reached his present level of success in his profession]." Alan started talking in very general terms about what people had to do to find success, and he was relating this received wisdom to me. "You have to be patient."

At this point in the conversation, Alan was sitting back into his chair, the conversation was flowing, and he was speaking openly. He seemed to be discussing the idea of commitment, finding a way to stay engaged in what was clearly an environment replete with threats to his sense of self. So far in the session, the personal meaning was not made explicit in the conversation, rather it was touched upon tangentially. I prompted him to explore the idea of patience that he had raised, and he elaborated. He mentioned one of the older players who had been in the 'system' for about 5 years, was delisted (sacked) by another club before the current head coach drafted him into the current team. Alan mentioned him as an example of how "you never know how things are going to turn out and you have to keep working at it". This seemed a departure for Alan from his previous focus on proving his worth to teammates and coaches.

Listening, I felt persuaded by what Alan was saying, and felt like he was taking an approach that could greatly facilitate the process of increasing his skill and working his way into the senior team. I wasn't sure how we had got there, but the direction of the session felt helpful.

In my understanding of hardiness, Alan seemed to be showing an orientation towards Challenge rather than threat, finding meaning in growth for its own sake, even if he was not identifying specific areas on which to focus his attempts to control the environment. As it turned out, the problem for Alan was that in order to stay on track, he would have to find a way to endure, or even enjoy the process of personal development in order to stay engaged in it.

Then, despite just having exhorted himself to patience, he suddenly gave voice to an expectation that he reach the top of his game in 2 years: "it means not trying to do everything overnight...it could take a couple of years before you reach the top of your game." I wondered if he meant this literally. The club he was playing for at the time featured a number of players who had regularly been selected for the national representative team, players in their mid and late 20s who had reached the top level of their sport internationally. I wondered how heavily this aspiration to rapidly succeed was weighing on Alan's experience of training and playing. The session had gone over time, so I brought the session to a close with a brief summary of the desired focus on process, rather than outcome, and the need for Alan to focus on his own performance, rather than ruminating on the performance and expectations of others.

Session 5

Following Session 4, in which Alan had opened up and discussed many of his vulnerabilities with me, I expected that the relationship would resume at the same point. On greeting Alan I felt unsettled by his abrupt demeanour and I had the sense of being a stranger again. He looked fairly expressionless when we started. Immediately he told me what had gone well over the last week: "My defence was much better and my form in attack was good, so I'm good."

Although Alan had already started to lead the session into positive affirmations, I felt it was unlikely that the issues from the previous sessions had been resolved. I turned the discussion back to the previous time we met, in order to gain some continuity in the issues under discussion. "You were worried that it was going to be like last season, a bit of a letdown. So how are things going for you generally at the moment?"

Immediately Alan described a situation that he was struggling with, which became the focus for the day's session. He mentioned organisational stressors related to selection issues and coach personality clashes and Alan's response to them reflected an emerging pattern specific to him, with particular sensitivity to negative evaluations. While speaking about not being selected for the senior reserves team compared to the under 20s team that he had been playing in, his frustration became apparent. He saw his non-selection as being due to another player in the team being paid much more than him, meaning the reserves coach had to select him. Given this explanation, Alan perceived himself to be powerless: he told me that he had been playing to the best of his ability ("I've got best on ground the last three weeks"). Nonetheless, he was clearly not able to influence how much the other player would get paid, and his teammates were all aware of the situation. At face value in this explanation, he was doing all he could, but was unable to influence the situation. If the level of his subjective stress was indicative of the level of threat inherent in this uncontrollable situation, then the threat was clearly great. As Alan continued, there was a disparity between, on the one hand, the affirmations he purported to use to reassure himself, and on the other hand, the strong emotions and frustrations he felt at his situation. The contradictory beliefs were present within individual sentences, for example: "It

bothers me because I have played a higher standard before, but at the moment I'm not bothered

because I'm playing good footy down there in colts."

At the level of my own experience, I felt like I had no answers. At the time, I could not

identify any erroneous assumptions or perceptions that could be challenged in order to lessen

Alan's stress. I shared Alan's sense of hopelessness, and so decided to move away from the

anger and to explore his experience from another angle. I knew that other junior players were

playing in the under 21 reserves team, and were performing to expectation in those roles. I

wanted to address how Alan thought they were able to do that despite non-selection.

Alan quickly brought the discussion back to the other player, who was being selected for

the reserves team, and the coach who was excluding Alan from that team. His thoughts kept

coming back to the frustrated desire for his abilities to be recognized by those in power in the

organization. He spoke about rules that were apparently being violated: "I think that be it on

business or in sport, if someone's not good enough you drop them." He immediately reinforced a

cognitive strategy, involving approaching the performance stressor, in order to lessen the degree

of threat:

> I told myself don't let it affect you, because if I let it affect me my confidence
>
> goes down, and I play shit football. I've...got to...put it out of my way and focus
>
> on how I can play the game. It gets a bit annoying when a [senior first grade]
>
> player then comes back [back to the reserves team while rehabilitating an injury]
>
> and asks the coach to put me in the team.

These sentences summed up the course of the session. We would discuss cognitive

strategies and identify meaningful areas of endeavour, representing a challenge to grow, where

Alan could exercise control, but the annoyance would keep re-emerging and capturing our attention despite my best efforts to apply cognitive therapy techniques. In this respect the frustration was shared. I was contributing my best efforts towards improving Alan's hardiness, on reappraising the situation so that he could identify a performance focus without any personal threat attached to it, and on identifying appropriate behavioural responses. His frustration though remained unaffected. This frustration was starting to represent a threat to my own sense of competence. My stress levels began to rise, although I did not recognise this at the time. At one of the few times in the session that I acknowledged his frustration and the difficulty in the situation, Alan's bearing and tone seemed to change a little, displaying a little hurt and sadness in place of anger. He said: "I just don't understand why!"

The transcript then showed a pause that I didn't immediately fill. At this cross roads, I felt that our agenda of improving hardiness dictated that I move in a particular direction, divergent from the simple acknowledgement of Alan's emotions. I told Alan that from one perspective he was already changing his predicament, by playing his best football. If he wanted to put pressure on the coach to select him by playing as well as possible, this would be to optimal focus for his mental and physical energy. Alan nodded, but did into really engage in any further discussion. His attention seemed to be elsewhere, so sensing that I was heading off without him, I asked for more detail on what he was experiencing. "Last time we spoke you were pretty down about these things. You said it was affecting your performance." Alan's response was vehemently negative:

I was a bit pissed off, I went down and played a shit game of footy. The night before I

was still pissed off, about why they had done this you know? Even if he's playing shit

footy they are still going to leave me out anyway.

The situation seemed readily diagnosable from a hardiness perspective: he saw the

situation as out of his control, and the concomitant stress reaction was characterized by anger,

despondency—a withdrawal of effort—followed by a performance decline. In line with the

hardiness theory, my approach felt correct in conceiving elements of the situation as under his

control, but the way it played out in the dynamic of the consulting room went quite differently.

The session swung to a discussion of when Alan felt at his best. I considered that if I

could isolate controllable behaviours that correlated with a good performance, then Alan could

resume an active role in the stressful environment. Learning and repeating this process would

show evidence of his hardiness increasing. He related how, on a different week, he had prepared

well the evening before, relaxing in a hotel room on his own focusing on his game.

I was confident going into the game, all the boys in colts know me, they let me

play like me, I like being in control, I [make a play] and they just go 'ah yeah,

OK' and get on my shoulder [line up in position to receive the ball].

Feeling accepted by his peers gave Alan a sense of control, allowing him to play

"confidently". We then started to explore what confidence meant to Alan. As he described

playing well his demeanour changed, he smiled and relaxed in his chair. Soon, though, thoughts

returned to his non-selection. As soon as he mentioned the figures in power over him failing to

recognise his achievements, a cascade of anger, and unpleasant emotion and self-doubting

thoughts soon followed. I attempted to reinterpret the situation in a way that would identify a

manageable behavioural challenge, and allow him a sense of control. I asked him to name other players who had been selected for first grade in their second season after playing their first season exclusively in the under 20 and reserve teams. We identified a number of current first-grade players, so I brought the discussion round to what Alan could focus on, what goals he could have for himself, in the short term, over the coming weeks of football to maximize the probability of him playing first grade in his second season: "I'll just focus on this team this weekend, and set myself the goal to score 10 tries."

Restoring the feeling of "confidence" in himself would involve a superhuman feat of achievement. Somewhere there was a bar which had been set too high in Alan's expectations and I considered the consequences for Alan if this goal was not met. If this comment represented the criterion for satisfactory performance in his mind, then any actual performance or action of his would be insufficient, compared to this internalised super-standard.

Again the conversation turned back to the senior reserve-grade coach, this time contrasting him with the under 20s coach "a great bloke, a real, real nice bloke." In the next 5 minutes, Alan contrasted his relationship with the under 20s coach to his relationship with the reserves coach, in the process illuminating the nature of the threat that was triggering this pervasive stress reaction. He related how the reserve-grade coach had criticised his kicking and passing, without apparently offering any encouragement. Alan had "blown up" and told that coach that he would not change his style of football to suit him. Despite the frustration I was feeling, the interpretations inherent in Alan's anger reaction gave me some hope that I could help him. In my view, he was clearly interpreting the reserve-grade coach's comments as a global criticism of him as a person. This interpretation was resulting in feelings of alienation from the

playing environment, leading to a sense of despondency. If we could focus back onto ways to improve his footballing skill—enhancing his commitment again—then a sense of control might emerge. We explored his reaction to this particular coach further. Alan felt that criticism of his footballing skills was a personal attack, saying variously, "He's judging me on just one game," "no-one tells me that, that's the way I look at it," "he thinks he's better than me...like he's looking down on you."

As we discussed the coach further, Alan's aggression and anger was increasing, not decreasing. I did not feel threatened physically, but I did feel threatened professionally. I was trying to help the player to feel better, less stressed, and here he was becoming ever angrier, and apparently feeling more hopeless. Alan switched to trying to cope with the stress with cognitive avoidance, by dismissing the perceived threat: "if he doesn't change his mind then good luck to his team...if I don't agree with him, never mind." He spontaneously moved to approach-focused coping: "I'm going to reach my goal, if I'm playing good footy I'm happy, if I'm not I've got to address something about it." Both these strategies had the effect of calming Alan somewhat, but only for a limited time. When he attempted cognitively to reframe this stressor in this way, his body language and tone of voice belied the reality of his emotions, a high level of subjective distress.

Theoretically, enhancing the Control dimension should lessen the burden of stress by allowing an individual to identify aspects of the situation over which some control can be exerted. With Control in mind, I referred explicitly to the issue Alan was facing, with a "difficult" coach, who Alan would have to find a way round in order to succeed. Alan momentarily engaged in a conversation about the controllable aspects of the situation. He said "I

just got to not blow up anymore, cop it on the chin. If I don't agree, never mind," and after

saying this the speed and pitch of Alan's voice toned down and his forehead un-creased

somewhat. I summarised back to him the concept of keeping the focus on his own game, rather

than the coach or the other player, and since the session had to conclude quickly to allow him to

get a lift home with a teammate, we agreed to meet again the following week.

Session 6

At the start of the session, two days after a game in which Alan felt he had performed

poorly, I asked him what the weekend's performance meant generally, given his overall goal of

working towards first grade selection. "Dad always mentions patience so yeah I've always got to

be patient." I replied, "So how does patience play out?"

Alan then described again how "the process"—regularly making first grade selection—

would take perhaps two or three years. Looking back at this point in therapy, there was an

opportunity for me to address patience and perhaps start to operationalise it. It seemed a useful

concept, but at the time I did not feel equipped to explore it. Instead, I felt that my role involved

identifying stressors and working on how Alan could gain some degree of influence over them,

through approach-focused coping. I had little ammunition, conceptually or practically, with

which to address patience within the consultation. In order to keep some continuity in the work

we were doing, I revisited the emotions that Alan had described in previous sessions, namely the

frustration he had experienced when having to play in the junior reserves team where none of the

trappings of his professional status were apparent.

This time, Alan denied any of the unpleasant emotions. Anger was clearly on display as

the session went on, but when asked about any other emotions, he dismissed them as being

something that had happened previously, but had not re-emerged since then. "I was just eating myself up and not knowing why, but the last couple of weeks it's just been excitement and confidence." When I asked about confidence, Alan found it hard to describe what he meant. Nonetheless, I wanted to understand this 'confident' situation, hoping that, if we could find out more about it, we would be able to take active steps to recreate this experience. I hoped that there was as much to learn for Alan from discussing the pleasant experiences that felt like success as from discussing the unpleasant ones that felt more like failure. With some prompting Alan said:

> I just do what I want when I want to do it and um, I love it. We were playing against good halves [the half back position—a key decision-maker], I...felt he's got nothing on me, if I wasn't confident I'd be a little hesitant.

Alan perceived these situations as challenging, but he appraised his coping abilities as being equal to the task. There was little apparent threat perceived in the opposition's ability. Nonetheless, in an apparent divergence from the Challenge concept, as defined by Maddi (2002), there was nothing in the transcript at this point that indicated an identification of growth opportunities inherent in his low-stress excitement. There seemed to be just a desire to engage in playing football for its own sake. The experience of confidence seemed defined by what was absent, rather than anything special being present. The self-conscious rumination, vigilance to mistakes, and self-doubting thoughts were not present, and positive emotional reinforcement was experienced in that gap.

We then explored how Alan's preparation might have primed him for such an experience: "The night before I was thinking about the game, watching footy, thinking about what I can do to play good. Thinking about what I can do good." In this preparation Alan exhibited high levels of

hardiness across all dimensions. He deliberately relaxed, and prepared by running through

mental images relating to how he would engage in the game: "take a bath, iPod on, think about

what I can do." By taking control on this way, he seemed to reduce subjective stress by staying

"influential…in the face of the varied contingencies of life" (Kobasa et al., 1982, p. 169).

Challenge also seemed high, in that Alan perceived the other team's high skill levels as an

opportunity to perform well, as a challenge to his own abilities. In terms of Commitment, the

high levels of personal value and meaning in the situation continued to focus Alan's attention on

the demands of the changing performance environment.

When Alan went into more detail though, this hardiness started to appear more fragile.

Alan described preparing for the game by running through mental images with behavioural

components as well as emotional components: "[seeing myself with] an arrogant feeling, doing

what I want, strutting around, being a smartass on the field. Cause when I'm confident I'm a

smartass on the field." At this point I became concerned that the zone of optimal performance he

described seemed fragile, predicated as it was on the presence of a particular buoyant feeling.

From his descriptions and my experience in working with other athletes, this emotional state he

was relying on seemed fleeting, temporary, and difficult to evoke. In his own descriptions Alan

had defined it by the absence of unpleasant thoughts about himself. In his pre-game performance

preparation he was not able to consistently replicate this mood state, a mood state which

nonetheless he was relying on for performing optimally.

When Alan went on to talk about another game scenario in which he felt confident, he

described being involved in an ongoing verbal and physical exchange with his opposite number.

This involved physical confrontation in the tackle followed by verbal 'jousting', which the other

player eventually gave up on, leaving Alan feeling that "I'd won so it made me more confident." As he elaborated on how good halfbacks "are lippy, a smartass in the team" I felt that the session was going down an unhelpful path. Alan's engagement in battles for verbal or mental supremacy with individual players seemed likely to distract him from actions he could take to improve his football and succeed in his stated goals. I sought to bring the conversation back onto the things that Alan could directly influence in his preparation or engagement with the training and competition environments by saying:

> I think you'll reach a point where you'll be just as confident without [the talk]. That's just what I hear. Obviously confidence is a great thing. But it's not the talk that gives you confidence it's your actions and your ability that will give you confidence.

At this point my own feelings and stress response came into play. I felt frustrated that my agenda of working on hardiness seemed to be going off track, and we kept coming back to Alan telling me about situations in which he felt good about himself. The stated research interest was the mental skill of hardiness. Nonetheless, my own stressor, which would emerge at several times during the applied research, related to feeling competent and knowledgeable in my chosen domain, namely increasing the hardiness of elite footballers. At this point in the session, we were moving into an area I felt underequipped to explore, triggering a sense of threat on my part that the research agenda would continue to unravel indefinitely. My stress reaction was to seek to exert more control over the situation and force the session back on track with my agenda. I reminded Alan of the ideas we had originally covered in the initial presentation and information to participants regarding hardiness, Challenge, Control, and Commitment.

I returned back to my safe zone, which was the reframing of stressors to identify more adaptive responses. "So this coach is a good example of how you can rework this situation to your advantage." Even though our discussion of this matter had not progressed or identified any meaningful pathways so far, I returned to it doggedly, and Alan dismissed it. After a pause, Alan said he would come up with a different way to deal with the experience. I felt this was an opportunity to explore the situation further, but with the benefit of hindsight, my reading of the transcript was that Alan was trying to dismiss the subject. I then asked Alan what feelings would come up for him if I repeated what the coach said, about his kicking game being really poor and not 'using the short side' (reference to his passing of the ball). At this point, Alan seemed to close down, his expression became rigid, and he said that he just felt like physically attacking the coach. In rereading, I suspect that Alan may have felt like hitting me too for continuing to bring the topic up.

As delineated in the method section, I had identified a stepped approach to disputing such 'negative' thoughts. So far, Alan and I had clearly identified events that triggered counterproductive responses. These were reducing his enjoyment of the game and also his performance. We were now in the process of identifying the assumptions underlying these reactions. Alan's reaction to the coach seemed to be based on assumptions that the coach was implicitly telling him that he was "no good", "judging [him] on just one game" and that "no-one tells me that, that's the way I look at it." Next in the stepped approach, I was to outline possible 'best case' or even 'most likely' scenarios that could occur. The methodology would then have me analyse the evaluation for any inaccuracy or bias and see if there were any opportunity for developing a more positively motivating thought process. The purpose was to identify a more

resilient way of thinking in which challenge was highlighted, improving commitment to effect

some adaptive control over the scenario. In this session though, instead of us working as I'd

hoped towards some positive resolution, Alan's emotions seemed to escalate when I attempted to

work on an alternative scenario, and he disengaged when I sought to elaborate different ways of

viewing the situation. Alan readily revealed that he felt hurt as well as angry when he perceived

the coach as making such global and negative evaluations of him as a player and a person, and

his attention kept returning to these emotions. He also revealed that the effects of this experience

reverberated beyond the performance domain, "I'm eating myself up...I don't understand why...it

just goes through my head that I could have done better, what should I have done, and that kind

of stuff...a couple of days...I'm pissed off at him and at myself."

Alan then outlined other approaches he was using to try to reduce or change his emotions.

First, he described a cognitive avoidance strategy, to set aside the stressor and refocus on another

aspect of the situation: "[forget] him, I'm as confident as hell, I don't need that" and then a

reframing of the situation "I won the war, because I'm the one who will get to first grade not

him". I then attempted to reinforce this last strategy, as it held the possibility of Alan focusing on

the career goals that were purportedly so important to him, and returning to an internal locus of

control. Directly after agreeing that this approach would be helpful, I then asked Alan, by way of

review, how he would behave if the situation arose again: "I'll just fucking snap, I'll get up and

walk out." By this stage I noticed that the session had run considerably over time, and I sought to

conclude it. As this was the sixth and final session in our work together, I finished up with a

short review of the work that we had done so far. Alan was again sitting back in his chair, and

did not seem to respond as I summed up what we had been working on so far, and the current

session with the focus of turning threats into engaging and even exciting challenges. In line with

my preparation, I attempted to give Alan positive reinforcement regarding the effort he had put

into our work together and the changes he had been able to make, but the words felt dissonant to

the atmosphere that was present in the room. At the time, I felt that he was evaluating what I was

saying, and so pressed on, but in retrospect perhaps his attention may have been elsewhere. As

detailed in the Method section, protocols agreed with the team were that at the end of our work

within this research project, the players could choose either follow-up sessions with me, or to

identify areas that they would work on with one of the two assistant coaches. We agreed that I

would follow up with Alan three weeks later. When I called him, he reassured me that everything

was going fine, and that he was concentrating on just playing and training and that it was "all

going sweet". Despite my feelings at the conclusion to the last session, I felt that Alan had

benefitted from having someone to talk to and an opportunity to give vent to feelings that he

seemed not to bring into conscious awareness at other times. However, I felt it unlikely that Alan

would be actively applying the cognitive strategies that I had worked hard to inculcate in him

based on the current research goals.

Story 1: Interpretation

Sources of Stress

During the initial interview, Alan identified two key stressors, the management of

thoughts and feelings related to fatigue and coping with errors in front of new team-mates. As

the intervention progressed, other stressors emerged, specifically receiving negative feedback

from a coach, non-selection for the desired team, and performing in a physical environment that

challenged his self-perceptions. Analysis of the transcript during the write up also suggested that

the intervention to increase hardiness itself may at times have provided an additional stressor for Alan by threatening his sense of competence.

In addition, waking and preparing himself for a day of training feeling tired and fatigued triggered a stress response in Alan. He perceived these feelings as a possible threat to his training performance. He evaluated this stressor as being outside his control, and perhaps beyond his coping abilities. As a consequence, he ruminated over the possible outcomes. In hardiness terms, his descriptions showed a low level of perceived control, and high threat. This anxious transaction suggested that if vigour levels were low, then performance was at threat, and negative evaluations from teammates would result.

The second performance stressor that I identified related to training performance errors. In this stressor, the sense of control seemed to have a more complex relationship to subjective stress than Kobasa's descriptions indicated, defying the concept of a single measure of Control for the individual. Alan's sense of control seemed to be high in general, and following a mistake he tried to actively engage with the stressor: after making mistakes, he attempted to "make up for mistakes". His desired outcome was having the team well-organised and under control, but he found that, counterintuitively, the more he focused on controlling the outcome, the further away the outcome got. He summarised the predicament with the quote: "you try harder and it just gets worse." According to Maddi's (2006) conception of Control and the constructs from which it originated a perception of the locus of control as lying within himself should have contributed to Alan experiencing a reduced level of stress, either in the initial appraisal or in subsequent appraisals. In the stressed state though, when thoughts of mistakes and how to rectify them were running through his mind, a feeling that Alan 'could' control the situation was accompanied by a

belief that he 'should be able to' control the situation; the expectation was experienced as an additional stressor. In later sessions, the sense of control varied, and Alan's stress fluctuated with it. For example, in the third session, Alan talked about his frustration with the errors that arose as a consequence of other players not having the necessary training and skill levels. With these team-mate-related errors, the imagined consequence seemed to be the same: that others would negatively judge his competence and worth as a player, leading to a reduction in his own sense of competence as a footballer.

The third major stressor that emerged in this story was the organisational stressor related to his relationship with the Reserves team coach. The issue of selection and non-selection was wrapped up in the nature of Alan's relationship with the Reserves coach. Any comments from this coach were perceived as threatening, leading to a stress response characterised by either anger or despondency. It seemed that the same comments from a different coach would be received differently.

Working on the Stress Response: Challenge, Control, and Commitment.

To summarise the course of the sessions described above, the work with Alan started out with a recent performance-specific stressor, and gradually moved towards more ongoing organisational stressors, such as his position in the overall system of the football club, and his worth relative to coaches and team mates in the club. This course echoed the study by Hanton et al. (2005) in which organisational stressors were more frequent than performance-related stressors. By the end of the sessions with Alan, I considered that the way forward was in helping Alan to reevaluate his personal motivations and identity, so that common training scenarios and game situations would no longer be experienced as major threats to his self-worth. The scope of

the research and the deteriorating quality of the therapeutic relationship both precluded the effective continuation of this work.

Following the initial interview, I had highlighted Alan's assumptions regarding the fatigue stressor as likely candidates for disputing and decatastrophising, according to the intervention method. The fatigue stressor did not reoccur during our sessions and so remained unchallenged. Nonetheless, the perceived consequences of not coping with the fatigue stressor held much in common with other stressors that were addressed, namely the worry about being perceived as weak or incompetent by his teammates or the coaches if performance levels dropped. It was my initial intention to work on locus of control, helping Alan to identify actions and coping behaviours that were within his control through which he could affect others' perceptions of him. This course of action, however, was fraught. How could Alan really control the perceptions that others held? My approach to this stressor focused more on perceiving others' perceptions as a challenge, rather than a threat. However, whenever Alan perceived negative evaluations from others, he found this deeply threatening. We were unable to find a way around the issue of this threat perception within the limited number of sessions that we shared.

Through the intervention, the Commitment facet also related to subjective stress in an unexpected way. Alan would seem to score highly on Commitment by Maddi or Kobasa's definitions (Kobasa, Maddi, & Puccetti, 1982; Maddi & Khoshaba, 2005). He found a great deal of personal meaning in the situations in which the stressors arose. However, looking at the threats that Alan perceived, I propose that a single measure of his sense of commitment would miss important detail. Alan was engaged and active in the stressful situation and rarely showed the "passivity or avoidance" that Kobasa (1981) described as the domain of the uncommitted

individual. As our work together evolved, Alan's subjective stress often peaked, counter-theoretically, at times when the personal meaning and desire to engage in the situation was greatest. In the initial interview, describing the anxious state of mind in the training session, the high levels of Commitment and some aspect of internal locus of control appeared to interact to compound the situation. It seemed that Alan was sensing such a high level of personal meaning in the situations that threats to this sense of self became debilitating. In the third session, it became clear that his sense of competence in rugby performance was closely interwoven with his entire sense of self-worth. Evaluations of his performance were almost equated with his worth as a person. In this environment, threats to his competency as a footballer were felt as existential threats to his worth as an individual.

Challenge versus threat

The pressure to perform in front of his elite peers and the senior players was initially perceived in terms of a personal threat, rather than as a challenge to develop and grow. This perception led to high levels of somatic and cognitive anxiety for Alan on the field. Nonetheless, at the same time he demonstrated high levels of Control and Commitment in purportedly desiring to get straight back into training in order to rectify the 'mistakes' that he felt he had made. As mentioned earlier, we initially focused on reattributing performance demands as a challenge rather than a threat. By the second session though, a second organisational stressor emerged that required attention. This was non-selection for the desired level of competition. Anecdotally, in my own consulting experience as well as in reviews of sport stressors (e.g., Fletcher & Hanton, 2003), selection issues can loom large as a potential area of stress for athletes. This stressor, like others that evoked a strong threat response, related to the same aspect of Alan's functioning,

namely perceptions of his competence by esteemed others, such as coaches, parents, and experienced players. In line with the transactional model of stress, Alan's reactions were determined by the particular meaning to him of non-selection, rather than non-selection as an event per se. Furthermore, the fact of not being selected for his desired team did not seem as significant in determining the response as his relationship to the coach who was doing the selecting, and his feelings towards the other player being selected in his place. When the head coach engaged with Alan and provided reassurance regarding his position within the squad, Alan's stress levels reduced, and for a period, he was able to focus on his training and performance relatively untroubled by the selection situation, which remained largely unchanged through this decrease in subjective stress.

These findings seemed at odds with my conception of hardiness, particularly the 'Challenge' orientation as described in the literature. Evaluating Alan according to 'challenge versus threat orientation' would seem simplistic given the possible range of stressors that he faced and the multifaceted interpretation of those stressors. These results may help explain why in other quantitative studies (e.g., Florian et al., 1995) the Challenge component was not found to have a clear relationship to stress measures or performance measures. The Challenge disposition, while in Alan's case closely related to both performance and subjective wellbeing, may be so idiosyncratic and context dependent that current instruments may not capture the relationship with performance or subjective stress.

Intervention outcomes

In summary, Alan's reactions to the stressors changed as we worked, but not always in the direction that fit with my agenda. At a general level, the transcript showed that the

intervention was not successful in helping Alan to generally perceive stressors as challenges rather than threats, nor to develop sustainable ways of thinking and perceiving that would allow him to find greater control and also commitment to his performance domain. As a practitioner, I identified several areas of success, nonetheless, although these seem to relate to the provision of a supportive and non-judgmental therapeutic presence, rather than specific interventions per se.

For example, the only discernible time Alan volunteered positive benefits himself was after the first session when he said that it was good to 'get things off his chest'. Similarly, his ability to talk openly about his experience seemed greatest in the third session, in which the transcript shows that his contributions to the dialogue were at their longest relative to my own. In this session the agenda deviated away from hardiness and ventured into a reflection on his past experiences, and he explicitly described a range of important emotions in his stress reactions (worry, sadness, "feeling like giving up"). In other sessions, aside from anger, these emotional reactions were not explicitly recognised by him, and were intuited by me from his behaviour, rather than described in his own language. This third session was reportedly also followed by a period of training and playing that was relatively unimpeded by anger and frustration towards himself or others. This third session also followed a meeting between Alan and the head coach in which the head coach apparently told Alan that he was progressing in line with expectations, and Alan received assurances that his progress was being noted, and to continue focusing on the process of learning and performing. Following that meeting with the head coach, Alan told me that he could not remember any specifics about what the head coach wanted him to concentrate on in his football performance. This non-specific conversation with the head coach seemed to have a significant positive effect on Alan's stress reaction, allowing him to increase his sense of

control and commitment. It appeared to me that this reassurance buffered him against the sense

of threat in his environment, and prompted him to move to more adaptive, 'approach' styles of

coping, rather than the 'emotion-focused' coping he showed at other times. This approach mode

seemed consistent with the description by Hanton et al. (2013) of 'hardy' behaviour. In this third

session, following his meeting with the head coach, Alan also related that two years earlier

another conversation with a respected elder with a strong influence over his life's course had

helped him to reduce the sense of threat that elite football provided. That conversation had also

reduced his usual self-conscious rumination. Alan described that it was an open and accepting

conversation with his father that allowed him to let go of the intense self-blame and guilt that

almost had him leave the sport following non-selection for the national Under-18 squad. In both

these cases Alan's stress response changed most in response to being valued and listened to by

significant authority figures. These two conversations both acted as an effective foil to the self-

conscious rumination that characterised his stress response of anger, and beneath that, guilt and

self-blame. These conversations were both followed by Alan taking a break from the intense

'emotion-focused coping' to reduce the threat responses regarding his sense of self.

Given these observations, and the recurrent nature of the underlying threat to Alan's

sense of self, it seems likely that even if my work on reinterpreting or re-perceiving Alan's

selection stressor or his competitive error stressor had been effective, other exemplars of the

threat to his sense of self would soon have arisen in the performance environment. The

vulnerability to feeling incompetent or worthless pre-existed this intervention by at least two

years. The intervention was predicated on identifying particular stressors and effectively

developing a new way of perceiving them in order to reduce levels of subjective stress. In Alan's

case it seemed that the issue underlying his difficulties related more to his identity, and the relationship between football selection and self-worth, rather than his ability to exert control over specific stressors arising in the environment. Within the scope of the current intervention I was not equipped to directly address these factors.

One additional difficulty associated with addressing Alan's sense of threat with CBT-therapy using the Hardiness framework lay in the language inherent in the approach and the theoretical framework. The possibility of being 'more hardy', of perceiving life events as a challenge, and as an opportunity to grow, has a distinctly more positive valence than being less hardy and perceiving multiple threats in the environment, leading to repeated stress reactions. The CBT approach that I selected saw cognitions and behaviours as either more or less adaptive, describing some thoughts as negative and some as positive. Both approaches seem to have a value-laden perception of how someone should behave. Alan himself was already weighing on himself demands about how he should perform and succeed. In the fourth session, I may have added an additional form of pressure via explicit exhortations to 'be hardier' and to perceive less threat. Even though my intentions were to create a non-judgmental therapeutic relationship, value judgments may be inherent in the goal of the intervention, that is, creating hardier individuals. Apparent value judgements perhaps became more salient once Alan had come to trust me. I was not able to negotiate the therapeutic relationship artfully enough in order to avoid an ironic process of triggering Alan's sense of threat in the midst of trying to reduce it.

An additional factor in reducing Alan's stress that sat outside the remit of the intervention was the application, or cultivation of patience. Twice Alan referred to the concept of patience as being important in allowing him to focus on the job in hand: training and playing football. The

only times I had encountered the concept of patience being addressed in my cognitive therapy

teaching literature were in the Acknowledgements sections of text books or theses, as a quality

being recognized in the author's teachers or editors. I had not seen therapist and client patience

addressed in the literature, despite my supervisor and other important people in my life

frequently exhorting me to embody this quality more often. Although patience seemed a

prerequisite for the application of CBT techniques for both practitioner and client, little guidance

is directly given in the literature on how to conceptualise and operationalise patience. I was

operating under the assumption that Alan and I both knew what patience was, but I had few

resources for its steady and active cultivation. It seemed that we had defined clearly what the

maladaptive behavioural opposite of patience was for Alan, but had not defined what the more

adaptive version would be.

Story 1: Conclusion

My perception was that the work I did with Alan had little apparent impact on his

performance, and, although at times Alan found the work helpful, we were unable to make

significant progress in developing across the three facets of Challenge, Control, and

Commitment. The work was impacted by a number of interpersonal factors. Principally, the

nature of the interpersonal and organisational stressors seemed such that Alan was unable to

overcome his threat reactions, and unable to achieve the benefits for well-being and performance

that seemed to be on offer initially from improving his hardiness. The story can be seen as a

missed opportunity in which I was unable to establish the shared goals and the necessary

working relationship with Alan that would have supported the development of greater hardiness.

A more helpful intervention, with greater well-being and performance benefits, may well have

been possible had I not entered the work with the stated agenda of working on hardiness according to the preconceived model and methods, as pre-determined by the research aims.

Story 2: Sam

Sam, like Alan, had also moved interstate to join the team two months previously. His coach, after Sam had mentioned his participation in the project, told me that Sam had left behind a large extended family, and that he came from a highly collective and family-oriented culture, in which honouring and providing for the extended family was highly socially desirable. The coach told me he wondered how Sam would fare being away from his family. In the club, the majority of players came from the "white Australian" culture that was dominant in the city in which the club was located. A significant minority of players at the club, and a small number of the professional staff, as with a number of other clubs in the rugby competition, came from Pacific Island and Maori families. Their collective (versus individualistic) leaning, as the coach described it, contrasted with my experience of the mostly white, middle-class, tertiary-educated culture in which I was training, working, and socialising. At the time of this work, I had moved internationally to study, and had not been home to visit family and friends for 18 months. Nor did I feel there was anything amiss with this situation, given that I was pursuing a career path quite independent from that of any friends or family, and ought to focus on studying and working.

Initial Interview

When Sam arrived for the first session, he lingered at the entrance to the meeting room, then shook my hand with an open smile when I greeted him. He waited to be asked to come in and sit down. As I ran through the protocols he appeared receptive and open, nodding and

confirming. I asked him the initial question about a stressful event in the preceding two weeks, in line with the interview procedures. After I clarified for him the nominal scale out of ten for stress levels, he thought for a minute and seemed pleased when he came up with something. "Yeah, OK, well...um...oh yeah I know! The other day..." He talked readily about a regular conditioning session, describing how there would be a wrestling session (a physically intense competitive grappling exercise) for 30 seconds to one minute, followed by sprints of up to 50 metres followed immediately by another wrestling session. He described the intense physical discomfort accompanying the extended exercise, and went on to describe some of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to this stressor. He described how in sessions like this he would start to question his motivations for doing the training and even his reasons for involving himself in the whole endeavour of elite football: "I question, why am I doing this? Like...I don't know why I'm here. I just want to stop. I question why I am playing football in the first place hey!" In this stress response, the emotions were described as additional fatigue and a feeling of hopelessness, summarised as "feeling like I can't be bothered." At this point his facial expression showed what looked like a slight sadness. I sensed a readiness in him to talk and a relief to be sharing an otherwise private experience. As with many of his peers, this was his first extended period away from home and family. He had recently moved alone interstate and this was his first professional contract, and first time in paid employment.

The perceived threat was not explicitly clear to me, but the fatigue stress was being interpreted as a threat to his wellbeing in some way, with the concomitant thoughts and emotions described above. When I asked him about how he responded, and how he coped with the stressor, he described a cognitive approach-focused coping. He used self-talk, "telling myself it's

got to be good for me...focusing on the good things that come out of it." He said that these

thoughts were only sometimes effective in remedying the behavioural withdrawal that would

accompany the stress response (reducing effort, lagging at the back of the group in runs). The

effectiveness of this 'positive net effect' self-talk may indicate that the fatigue sensation was

being interpreted as having potential to cause harm in some way. He described having "felt like I

wouldn't be able to carry on." I imagined him going through the gruelling training exercise at the

limits of his physical ability, questioning his reasons for being there, and at the same time fearing

that he would not be able to continue, and responding emotionally to whatever consequences

might accompany that feared outcome. Looking to clarify post-coping outcomes (but at the same

time knowing what his answer would be) I asked him, "Have you ever stopped?" Immediately he

forcefully replied "No! Not ever! Just keep going!" We both paused to consider that. He nodded

for a few seconds, looked down, and then looked up at me with a rueful smile that suggested he

had just started to see the situation from a new perspective. At that point, I felt a desire to

intervene in some further way, but instead returned back to the interview protocol.

The response to the stressor indicated that low levels of Commitment were involved in

the stress response in some way. Following his initial perceptions of possible threat, he was

withdrawing, and calling into question the personal meaning of the situation. In terms of the

process described in the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) his secondary

appraisal was that he would not cope, and fear of failure (non-completion of the training

demands) then arose. Despite the stress that was happening, he consciously attempted to

reappraise the fatigue as non-threatening and to welcome it as consistent with his training goals:

"focusing on the good things that come out of it." Here he was taking an active role in

reappraising the situation, consciously diverging from his automatic (first) appraisal. He said that this strategy would "sometimes" work to change his feelings—and therefore sometimes would not. In later sessions we went on to explore this inconsistent application of cognitive strategies and found interventions that were able to work despite this lack of cognitive control.

He then chose a second example of the fatigue stressor, another training session this time focusing on ball-playing skills, which would typically take place immediately after a demanding physical conditioning session. He described one particular session: "I got the ball, wasn't concentrating properly...dropped a good ball." He rated his stress level in this scenario at 8 out of 10 on our nominal scale. His usual stress response during the preceding conditioning session had been exacerbated by knowing that a demanding skills session was about to follow, with additional opportunities for failure. The thoughts he described seemed to summarise his secondary appraisal: "I'm stuffed. I don't want to do this. I probably can't do this. It's going to involve heaps of concentration: that's what I'm weak at, hey." He again described the feelings as "I can't be bothered...I get really tired, eh!"

Here Sam provided more insight into the primary appraisal, that the sensations of fatigue meant that he was "stuffed". The fatigue signal was interpreted as evidence that he had exhausted all his stores of energy and endurance. The secondary appraisal saw coping resources as lacking: the situation would require concentration under fatigue, which he believed he did not have. He believed that failure—whatever that meant to him at the time—was imminent. He then described dropping a ball in the middle of a choreographed passage of play. The emotions that followed were again described as "low, hopeless...feeling negative and getting my head down." What then followed was a competing inner dialogue of both 'positive' and 'negative' self-talk. He described

how he would "try to think positive, tell myself it's going to be hard but that I can do it...try to

remember what I'm doing there...what the goals for the session are...what I have to improve on."

When I asked him what the outcome of this positive talk was he said: "I still feel like I don't

want to be there, like sometimes I don't care if something goes wrong." The reported thoughts

and emotions seemed to indicate that his Commitment levels were at a low level, yet he seemed

to be trying hard to change his thoughts and feelings and to find a way to improve his play. He

carried on, describing how "I go a bit harder though when I hear people geeing me up

[encouraging]." He elaborated on how the comments from teammates reduced his stress levels:

"[they say] get your head up...We all make mistakes...Keep going, keep pushing yourself, only

four to go...you can get through this." As he described these comments his posture and

expression changed. He sat up and forward in his chair, his expression and tone of voice both

lifting as he described the positive emotional and motivation effect of teammates'

encouragement. In this situation, Challenge, Control, and Commitment appeared to be at low

levels. He described an external locus of control: the encouragement of others. This put control

of his stress outside his own influence.

As a transactional process, his automatic reaction again was to sense a threat in the

fatigue. The primary appraisal seemed to represent imminent exhaustion, and the shame that

would come with such a perceived failure. There was the initial sense of alarm, then the

secondary attempt at cognitive approach-focused coping, and then when the stress did not go

away, a third response which was to emotionally and behaviourally withdraw—I still can't do

anything about it so I'm choosing not to care about it anymore. His appraisals in approaching

subsequent training sessions were skewed towards the perception of threat, and when he dropped

the ball, this threat loomed larger. I saw the drop in Commitment levels after he dropped the ball as a way of coping both with the low sense of control and with the stress by protecting himself against further self-threatening errors: not caring would mean not feeling bad. This withdrawal response "I tell myself I don't care" had the short term benefit of making failure less emotionally salient, but was likely attenuating performance by allowing him to reduce his effort levels. He felt that he "didn't want to be there" and "[would not] care when something goes wrong." His disengagement in the performance situations was strongly at odds with the engagement I felt from him in this, and later, sessions. I felt from him a desire to be helped, and to improve himself, and I reciprocated with a strong desire to help him. Despite the challenges we would encounter, I would look forward to our sessions.

In reviewing the interview in preparation for starting the intervention, I saw the chance to decatastrophise the fatigue attributions, in line with the intervention goals detailed in the Method chapter. In the fatigued state, he believed that he would have to stop, although the actual results of stopping had not been explored. My agenda also included helping Sam to reframe the fatigue itself as a challenge to grow, rather than as a threat, in line with the hardiness framework. A third, additional opportunity for reducing stress and improving performance lay in improving his locus of control. In his primary and secondary attributions, he felt that he did not have the mental skills (such as concentration) to cope with the situation, and then needed other people to persuade him that he could in fact cope under the training load. My goal was for him to feel that he had the internal resources necessary for coping.

Session 2

At the beginning of the session, I started by talking about the fatigue in training. The season had already started at this point, and Sam quickly elaborated on his performance, taking the session in a different direction. I was not skilled enough in returning the conversation to my agenda before he involved me in a discussion of the league games that were now underway. He described that fatigue was still an issue in these games, but assured me that nonetheless he was enjoying the experience. He talked about the positive experience of playing with and learning from his senior teammates. It was quickly apparent that when other players encouraged him his stress and fatigue would reduce. In games so far, being around more talented players was seen as a challenge and an opportunity to learn: "There was heaps of stuff I learnt off them during the game...and training as well." Here he experienced the large crowd as positively enhancing experience, "It was a massive buzz... it makes me sort of hyped up a bit...It's a bit of a boost for me, hey!"

At first the fatigue-related stress seemed to have reduced: "It's going alright. I still need to work on it, hey... That's all right. It'll come later, I think." He sounded comfortable with his physical performance during games, but when I questioned him training sessions were still causing a high level of stress. He explained this by telling me second time that his 'game fitness' was fine, but that training sessions were still an issue. This may have been a new coping strategy: he would downplay the importance of the training sessions, because his game fitness was already at a sufficient level. This response was in line with his strategy of avoidance and emotional withdrawal outlined in the initial interview above. He went on to explain that in training sessions he would have to wrestle and then sprint, wrestle again and sprint again, but that in games this type of exertion was not necessary, that after intense grappling (in a tackle), play would move

forward, in his role he could then step away from the action and recover. I resolved at the time to explore this explanation because it seemed to remove personal meaning from the training sessions, eroding his commitment to the stressful situation.

He quickly moved on to talk about another instance of a stress reaction: tackling and defensive positioning when the opposition were attacking during games. For him defence was a weaker part of his game. He described his stress reaction in defending against opposition attacking play. In his position he was effectively the last line of defence, the last player for the opposition to beat in order to advance territory or to score.

"[I feel] a bit unsure, not 100%. I start to get two-minded sort of...a bit shaky." Sam then elaborated, describing how the opposition was about to attack, and he was conscious of the desire not to make a mistake. This awareness resulted in him doubting his natural inclination to move laterally on the field. In this frame of mind, he seemed acutely aware of the threat of the opposition getting around him, and evaluated his own coping resources as not equal to the challenge. In hardiness terms, both Control and Challenge appeared at low levels. He went on though to describe how this evaluation of coping resources could change from play to play within a game. Despite this "two-minded" state his stress levels during the game had decreased once he had executed a successful defensive move. His sense of control in the game immediately increased and he perceived his coping resources as now equal to the task. Self-doubting behaviours and thoughts then decreased and he trusted his automatic instincts more, reacting quicker and increasing performance"

The next play, they come at me, then I'm sort of, 'Oh yeah, I think I can get this

one', or something like that. So I think once they come at me first and I don't get

it, then my confidence sort of drops down and then I sort of … when they come

again, I'm like, 'Oh, I'm not sure if I can do this again or if I can do it.'

I thought that he was being overly reliant on outcomes to give him further confidence. For

example

…if I get it right the first time, then I…then my confidence will go up and I'll get

it right most of the other times…if I get it wrong on the first time, then all the

nerves come in, hey. They start to come in, so I'm not sure. Maybe if I get it the

first time.

Even if he made a correct move the first time, he was leaving intact the underlying beliefs

that failure must follow failure. This belief eroded his sense of control. In the "two-minded"

stress scenario described above, his stress response took the form of low mood: "it gets me

down...I don't' want to go in there and have a run [call for the ball] in case I make another

[mistake]." It seemed that his sense of control dropped in response to stress, and he felt subject to

the currents of the game rather than an active participant in them. This belief became self-

fulfilling as he described avoiding an active role in the game.

We then looked at situations in which he would perform optimally. My intention, as

described in the method section, was to reduce stress levels by increasing locus of control. Sam

named "being switched on" as the main factor contributing to higher performance. This state

involved actively thinking about his role before the games would start, usually the night before.

He recognised that when he did not prepare this way, it might take an initial mistake to remind

him of the need to "switch on". The risk for him was that after making a mistake he would

experience self-doubt, under-appraising his coping resources and experiencing the self-doubting cognitions.

He described other parts of his positive preparation. In the changing rooms before the game he would mentally image his role, primarily in external visual and emotional domains (see Morris, Spittle, & Watt, 2005), especially the first opportunities to run with the ball. This preparation would help him let go of the lurking self-doubt and "get focused". It served to remind him of the positive actions he could take to cope with on-field challenges. I reinforced to him the benefits of mental imagery in performance. In doing so I felt comfortable returning to the more comfortable sport psychology cannon featured in my formal training (Andersen, 2000b). For Sam, the imagery also engendered a more positive mood in which he was less likely to experience the withdrawal described in several instances above.

We then discussed the possibility of building on this imagery strategy by devising a positive mental image that could be evoked during games to assist with refocusing attention when it would lapse. He agreed that such a strategy would be useful, describing how his concentration would wane under fatigue. Again, comments from other players were instrumental in switching his attention back to the job in hand. He described this as "waking up". With regard to hardiness, his Commitment lapsed under pressure. As his focus would lapse thoughts such as "I don't need to do this" would creep in to his mind. He would then start to prioritise avoiding mistakes or preserving energy, and other goals of performing in the game or helping team mates would recede into the background. Furthermore, with fatigue, he was more likely to drift away from focusing on the game into thinking ahead to what might happen in the rest of the game: "...and then I just get more tired, hey, thinking of the time [remaining until the final whistle]

instead of not worrying about it." I asked Sam about alternative strategies he could implement at those times. He suggested: "probably just focusing on what's happening at that time. And just take it bit by bit." He continued, returning the conversations to the training environment as he explained his experience, describing how his mood interacted with his effort levels in the session. As he became more tired, mood would drop and Commitment would wane. Sam then provided an insight into the interaction between his mood and his perceptions of coping ability. He spoke about a session just before a flight interstate to spend the weekend with his family. Despite the gruelling training demands, his enthusiasm about the imminent return to his family allowed him to tolerate the discomfort and enjoy the training session. Mood decrements and avoidance did not feature as a response to either mistakes or fatigue. This example stood in contrast to other sessions in which he apparently felt that there was little for him to look forward to. Looking back on the intervention I felt that he was describing an important nexus between his worry and the social environment. His stress response changed when he felt more connected to people who cared for him.

An exploration of how he felt in his life in the new city was not on my agenda for the session, and so we left this avenue unexplored, returning to discussing the training sessions when he felt greater enthusiasm. In retrospect I missed an opportunity to discuss a theme that was potentially underpinning the low Commitment states. He was still a teenager away from his family for the first time, in a highly demanding performance environment. He would speak to me later in the season about his connection to family, which in later years of his career he would cite in the media as a main reason for him leaving this team and returning to play closer to his home.

As we returned to sport, he described the peak of his nerves occurring before physical conditioning sessions, rather than games. There was a fear of impending physical and mental discomfort, as well as a fear of failing to meet the required standard in front of his team mates. Nonetheless he added that he was comfortable with this fear, and recognised that this fear was at least preferable to becoming highly anxious before games. He described how the thoughts arrive: "We're going to get smashed up...so I don't want this, I want to get it over and done with." There appeared an interaction between Control and Commitment. In feeling helpless to avoid a feared scenario, he started to hope for a way out, this disengagement characterising low Commitment (Maddi, 2006). At this point, he lost faith in his ability to complete the training session, despite the weight of evidence available to the contrary (his personal experience). As he continued, I felt that his awareness of his mental states was increasing. Sam described how "I seem to react a bit slower because my mind's maybe still nervous...and I react real slow." He added that the same process was playing out in games in the defensive situation, continuing:

> Like, when I'm not nervous, I…you know, I'm really, like, quick and that, real
>
> quick to react. And that's…in the games, I'm not nervous at all. I only get nervous
>
> when I make a mistake or something.

As we explored this difference, it emerged that the physical sensations he experienced were largely the same in games and conditioning sessions. The difference lay in interpretation: in training when he felt "shaky" in his legs he would "always think about it" whereas in games "I try not to think about it or else it will put me off."

I then moved the session to a discussion of alternative interpretations of the training stressor. Sam complied by suggesting other thoughts that he could hold in mind that would

increase his sense of Control, Challenge, and Commitment. He started with Commitment: "if it hurts then just try to push yourself because...that's what will happen in the game and that, so yeah, try and be positive." We finish up the session with Sam telling me once again that he listens to music in the changing rooms before games so as not to worry about the nerves, despite their occasional presence,providing a controllable response to the nerves of anticipation.

Session 3

The next session was held after Sam had been playing regularly in the first team, and was being talked about within the club and the media as a possibility for selection at representative level, at an unusually early stage in his playing career. The first challenge that he raised was ignoring the hyperbole being used to describe him, "just play and not think about it...trying to focus on here and now." He disclosed that when he thought about how he was playing, he began to think he had to try to "play good to make the [representative] side…but I think about it…it puts too much pressure on me and makes me feel no good."

He reminded me that he was using thinking as a positive strategy, but just a simple "thinking about what I have to do" just before a game. He went on to describe that there was a sense of threat present to him, the idea of not playing well, but that as it arose he would refocus on what he could control, or at least influence, in the coming game. He experienced the nerves, but to him it felt like a "buzz, really excited, great fun." He had started to develop a routine for pre-game preparation, except for one occasion when he forgot his music and ended up just "walking around, not talking to anyone, frustrated" and then it was not until the second half of the game that he felt he was involved. As part of his routine, he used mental imagery to recall past good performances, and also to imagine opportunities for getting involved early in the game.

He described how the stress he felt early on in the game had on occasion built to a debilitating

point, not being "able to take a run" early in the game. The more he stayed out of the game, the

more he became "nervous" and the more the self-doubting mindset developed. In this state he

would feel reticent about calling for the ball. As we discussed possible performance enhancing

strategies, he shied away from cognitive reframing, or actively disputing the negative thoughts.

Instead we focused on setting a clear goal, to call for the ball even when tired as a way of

keeping involvement in the game. In doing so he would be working in the face of the stress

response to reduce his own performance anxiety. In a casual conversation in passing the

following week he told me that this approach was reinforced in the coach's talk to the team five

minutes before running onto the field. The coach would review the game plan and the key

behaviours required to meet the team goals for the week. Sam's behavioural strategy was

explicitly reinforced by the coach.

Sam reported that his sense of control would often wax and wane with events on the

field: "[Sometimes] I think maybe I can score a couple more tries here, maybe a couple of

opportunities will come…[but] when I'm not involved I get put off and start not focusing."

His sense of control would diminish with less involvement in the game, and with it his

mood and apparent commitment. We discussed ways in which to cultivate greater control, by

identifying additional opportunities for getting involved in the game, as well as exploring and

disputing the reasons for not getting involved. In the safety of the consulting room, there was no

doubt voiced about his ability to affect the game positively if he did increase his involvement.

During the game however, a different mindset could arise: "'cause I'm new to the side, don't

want to be coming in there and telling everyone that it's my run, it's my run...I'm too scared or

nervous to tell him, so I don't get it [the ball]." When we tested this belief against observed experience we found that when he did ask for the ball, actually "they never get angry or anything so it's been good eh."

The initial or automatic response was to doubt his ability when faced with the performance demands of the situation, and to hold others' abilities in higher regard than his own. In a hardiness sense, the intensity of the game situation was being interpreted as a threat rather than a challenge to grow. Instead of disputing these beliefs or coming up with alternative cognitive evaluations of the situation, again Sam proposed a different course, and one that he had already employed to positive effect simply acting without getting involved with the thoughts. He described to me how he had been trying to apply the cognitive strategies we had previously discussed: reminding himself to "switch on and get involved" when the self-doubting emerged during times of high fatigue, but that it was not as simple as replacing a negative thought with a positive one: "I've been saying it in my head, I still have to get involved. Sometimes I say to myself I got to get involved but I don't." I was conscious that there must be some other condition required in order to allow the self-talk to work. Given this variation, there must have been some other mental factor, aside from just the thinking pattern, that was necessary to allow a cognitive intervention to work in the heat of the game. He explained that at times of high fatigue his Commitment, the sense of personal meaning in the game, would decline: "when I'm tired I say push yourself, but I don't get involved eh, after the game I think about it, at the time I don't care about it I'm too tired eh." Sam confided that there were actually two trains of thought present: one "saying yeah but you should" and "a louder one saying na don't worry." We discussed the latter thought and found that it was really about saving energy to avoid the 'catastrophic'

situation of being totally exhausted before the conclusion of the game. He decided, with my encouragement, to risk a behavioural strategy independent of any thoughts at all: "how about just give it a go, jump in and have a run, and see how it feels after." I could not explain at the time how this type of "don't focus on the thoughts, do it anyway" approach would fit into the cognitive model of hardiness. This approach left the threat perceptions unchanged, moving directly to behaviour, but did seem to resonate with Maddi's description of hardiness as "existential courage" (Maddi, 2002, p. 6). Sam was not sure that he could do it, and failure still represented a threat, and the personal meaning was no higher than before. The perceived value of trying and potentially succeeding had increased though.

Next, Sam reinforced an important aspect of his mental game, in describing how the support of other people would allow him to step out of the low mood and negative self-talk. "When people speak to me I get pumped up, but yesterday [his teammate who usually encourages him] was too tired." We finished the session with the idea of talking to teammates away from training sessions to ask for their support when tired. We reiterated the strategy of direct engagement in the game despite the low mood and negative self-talk, rather than engaging directly with cognitive strategies. Sam seemed genuinely grateful for my support and said he was looking forward to seeing me again.

Session 4

We started this session by debriefing the approaches discussed in the previous session. In place of the threat that he felt regarding dropping the ball, with support from his coaches he had adopted a behavioural strategy of practicing the threatening situation in training. He now felt more ready to take the ball in games. He also described how in games, support from other

players, as well as a sense of shared experience ("everyone was tired") helped him to remain

active in the face of the fatigue-related threat. He elaborated on the training protocol, in which he

would call for the ball and take the role of the first-up ball carrier after a restart in the game. It

was later apparent that the training had the effect of improving Sam's sense of control. He was

developing a deeper faith in his own ability despite the emotions and thoughts he would have out

in the game-day arena. He described how in training the negative self-talk started "this is hard,

I'm busted [totally fatigued]". But instead of disputing and otherwise cognitively intervening, he

says: "so I just get on with it." He alternated his descriptions between game and training

scenarios. He described his avoidance reaction when on his own: "this is too hard" whereas when

he felt supported by others, the approach-type coping was more active. A pattern began to

emerge, where the alternating states of mind can be summarised as "I can't do this", singular,

versus "we can do this", collective.

He was telling me what I wanted to hear: that he was applying the cognitive strategies we

were working on: "I tell myself get back quick, get up quick even when I'm tired." The support

offered from his teammates again seemed to provide a scaffolding for his hardiness work. He

again told me (now for the third time) that he was still having good days and bad days in

training: days when he felt more motivated and days when he was feeling "flat" or "I don't really

care." It was on these days that support from his teammates was energizing, but his apparent

levels of Commitment would wax and wane in line with his mood. His performance and stress

level in training both seemed to correlate with this change in Commitment as predicted in the

hardiness literature. We moved off from this topic into discussing moment-by-moment

performance anxiety in the game, missing another opportunity to understand why he felt these

"can't be bothered" feelings. These feelings would sometimes come up despite his having high

Control, and a generally strong Commitment combined with the understanding that training

represented an opportunity for growth and development. He seemed frustrated and disappointed

that these feelings would arise at all, as they seemed to work against what he wanted for himself.

My agenda, though, was to explore the variability in effectiveness of his mental skills

work that had been apparent in the previous session. I probed further: "When is it easiest to apply

these mental strategies and when it is most difficult?" His answer again confounded my agenda:

"…when I'm having a good day everything will start to flow a bit. When I'm positive it's easier

to practice that mental stuff, otherwise I can't really be bothered."

All the best mental strategies would not work unless he applied them. I found myself

wondering how he might find a way to stick to his motivations (or have his motivations stick to

him) even when differing emotional states would come and go. On one day he would seem a

highly committed individual, seen through the hardiness lens, on another he would seem flat and

disengaged. While I was busy rethinking, Sam offered a way forward that seemed to work for

him, an effective path divergent in method from our existing agenda.

He told me how he had been talking to a coach (the main sponsor of the work I was doing

at the rugby club) about his feelings and thoughts during games and the focus of our work

together. The coach had organised an extra training session for him to practice the specific

scenarios he was struggling with during games. He described how the exercise helped him

mentally to "just bust through to the other side." The focus in the session was on quickly

positioning himself to call for the ball as first ball receiver, even when he was fatigued and the

self-talk was telling him to rest. In a separate interaction, the coach had told me that Sam had

shared with him that he was working with me on the fatigue stressor. The coach had told Sam not to worry about getting tired and dropping back (the outcome), and instead just to practice coping in training. There seemed to be some quality inherent in Sam's relationship with the coach that allowed him to actively practice and focus on a dreaded scenario, with this focus being anxiolytic rather than triggering additional feelings of dread. Sam's fear had been that people would see him struggling and that he would let down the team, but the coach refuted this fear. Sam told me "the drill helps me out heaps, eh!." He continued, describing how he was applying his mental and physical training in games. When the other players were talking to and encouraging him he was able to step outside the anxious "two-minded" mental state. This was another instance of support from other people—the coach and his own team-mates—helping make his stress more manageable. There was something about the nature of the support from other people that galvanised Sam to apply his mental strategies, apparently by increasing his Commitment and reducing the intensity of the threat perceptions, rather than making them disappear. In Sam's case, the underlying levels of personal meaning in the endeavour to be a professional footballer remained constant, but the felt meaning changed day by day, or even play by play in games. Connection to other people provided meaning and increased Commitment. The resulting approach afforded him the agility metaphorically to side-step the perceptions of threat rather than confront them head-on. Without cognitively engaging with the threat perceptions, he adopted a strategy of "pushing through" the fatigue with the coach's support. The outcome from the additional training, in hardiness terms, was that his sense of control had improved: "I know I can do it".

Previously, I had thought that it if threat perceptions were adding to subjective stress, the perceptions must be changed towards an orientation of challenge (perceiving opportunities for growth) in order for the stress to be reduced. In transactional terms that would have meant cognitively reappraising the situation as non-threatening, so that stress could be reduced, and as a result, mitigating the stress-related performance decrements. In reality though, what we were finding was that Sam's sense of control could increase by leaving the stress just as it was, and getting into action, supported by other people, practising the feared scenario. An increased sense of control then arose. Rather than a reduction in stress dependent on believing: "I am effective in defence and my fitness is up to the task so now I don't feel anxiety", Sam was starting to think,

> even if I think I can't do it, or even if I worry that I am going to drop the ball, or even if I
>
> think my stamina is going to catastrophically fail, I can still get involved in the game and
>
> get in a position to make a tackle…and I have the coach's support.

Taking that step of faith, supported by the people around him, was allowing him to reduce the subjective levels of distress.

I was aware of a number of options for us to explore next, but refrained from offering up my own agenda, and I asked Sam where he wanted to go next. He quickly identified his mental game in defence as an area requiring work. He admitted that when it came to defending, "I say in my head, ah we have to defend again! I want to avoid that…that time where I thought negative. Bugger we have to defend again!" To check my understanding, and to normalise his experience I told him about another key attacking player in the team who had experienced a similar attitude to defence because he regularly received great positive reinforcement in the media and from coaching staff for his attacking game. Sam strongly confirmed that he was experiencing the same

thing: "Yeah! That's how I see myself in a game! I'm an attacker, so when we start to defend, I think, ah we have to defend again."

He confirmed that his attacking ability had been recognised and rewarded, and he had started to feel secure now in that role, looking for opportunities to attack. We did not explore explicitly which aspect of Sam's functioning felt threatened in that situation, but it seemed to be related to a sense of shame, related to other peoples' expectations of him. Similarly to the previous session, his secondary appraisal was that his coping ability was insufficient to meet all the possible demands of the situation, resulting in subjective stress. The stress response involved a greater subjective awareness of possible errors, with concerns about "not getting too wide" or "not getting wide enough". This avoidant orientation was accompanied by momentary hesitation, resulting in a negative performance outcome. We started to work on reattributing the defensive situation as a challenge, and imbuing it with greater personal meaning. As we explored this theme he agreed: "yeah so I think if I work on my defensive game, then I'll be more balanced as a player." We committed to finding opportunities in defence for learning and also for supporting the rest of the team, "doing his part" for the other players. I invited him to talk about the criteria for playing well in his position. He obliged by seeing an opportunity in defence to make tackles and therefore stop the opposition's advance down the field as early as possible, thus setting his own team up for more attacking opportunities, and so "[getting] involved early". My aim was to help him find a sense of opportunity in the tackling scenario rather than just identifying the obvious threats. Whereas previously he had seen "getting involved [in the game]" as taking offensive runs he was now coming to see it as including active defence. When questioned about his goals for the next game in he started to identify more aspects of his game that were under his

control. He mentioned "getting up on the line and defending", and became more animated and

enthusiastic. I felt that cultivating this 'approach-focused' frame of mind would have him both

perform better and subjectively enjoy the experience of defence more.

Sam told me that the coaches thought that he had potential to get involved more during

games. As we started to discuss opportunities for influencing the game further, I felt some

resistance from Sam: "Getting involved is not as easy as it sounds…sometimes I want to go there

but I can't!" So instead of pushing him I decided to invoke an imaginary scenario, by asking him

to picture how things would be in two years' time, with more experience and perhaps more

confidence. He told me about how other more experienced players would call for the ball at

different times. We explored the ways and opportunities to take the ball in this manner. He said

at one point "[I] see [a senior player] and all that, they go to the short side [redirect the play away

from the opposition's main defensive line], I think maybe I can do that too. But when it comes,

I'm not confident enough." The situation he feared was calling for the ball but then dropping it or

losing it in contact with the opposition. In this case, his perceptions of threat rather than

opportunity were attenuating performance. We talked about what actually happened when the

ball was dropped by the more senior players. He told me about simple ways in which the team

responded. By identifying specific opportunities to call for the ball at less risky times of the

game, and exploring the real, rather than imagined consequences of his mistakes, my agenda was

to decatastrophise the situation. The aim was to reduce threat perceptions and to start turning to

challenge-type perceptions in order to reduce stress and improve performance. As we reflected

on the 'most likely' reaction by teammates if he dropped the ball, based on evidence observed in

games, I found myself feeling content that we had exposed the irrational nature of the beliefs that

held him back.

Session 5

Directly after the initial greetings, Sam sat down, looking concerned. I asked him how

games were going and he started immediately with a fear:

I'm worried about losing the ball, in tackles, I don't think I'm running as

strongly. Half way through the season I started to fear losing the ball in tackles. I

don't think I'm running as strong. Back in round 8 I dropped a ball. I reckon I've

lost confidence in my hands.

Exploring this further he identified how, after our last session, things had improved for a number

of games, but that again:

I'm receiving the ball on my chest instead of out in front, and keeping it close to

my body so I don't knock it on. But I can't run as strong or step with the ball

close to my body.

Self-doubting thoughts had come back into his experience, correlating with a lower sense

of control. His actual ability to catch the ball was unlikely to have diminished but his perceptions

of control were resulting in avoidance. We again talked through possible outcomes if the feared

situation (dropping the ball) came to pass, he initially mentioned "teammates won't want to give

me the ball". We found that perhaps the reason he did not receive the ball was because he had

removed himself from further opportunities, rather than due to judgments by teammates. "I'd

lose confidence" was the assumed outcome of dropping the ball. At this point his face and

posture, usually open and relaxed, took on an anxious expression and he shifted awkwardly in

his chair. Part of the threat he was defending himself against was the feeling of a loss of confidence, and the feeling of shame in front of his teammates. His expression and posture when he talked about the loss of confidence seemed similar to when he had described the "can't be bothered" feelings experienced in response to training or game fatigue, in earlier sessions.

I considered ways forward from there. Given that we had already used behavioural rather than cognitive techniques successfully to repudiate the negative thoughts when training to cope with the fatigue stressor, I decided to take this road again. I felt that despite our best efforts to dispute 'threat' perceptions occurring during games, his greatest gains in hardiness had come by "getting involved". He had followed this course of action despite his maladaptive cognitions rather than by getting rid of them first, or by changing his primary appraisal into something more adaptive.

I avoided working back through the many possible reasons to engage and seek out the ball. Instead, I moved to talking to him about how he could use the training environment to prepare for the feared scenario of dropping the ball. I agreed with him that dropping the ball might be inevitable when playing close to one's limits of ability, and that this would compromise the performance of the team.

In contrast to Sam's stressed demeanour, I related this to him in a relaxed manner, and did my best to project my feeling that an error would just be a normal part of the ebb and flow of professional football, rather than representing, as Sam clearly felt, some threat to his functioning. As I related this in my own way, Sam appeared to relax and sit back in his chair, saying "I suppose so eh!" with a laugh. It seemed that he was feeling differently about the situation compared to a few minutes before. We discussed how we could simply work the scenario back

in to normal training, to try to take the ball at full pace with arms held out in front of him, rather than taking the ball close in on his chest, which would limit passing options and changes of direction and pace. We agreed that if he did in fact drop the ball, we would just see this as excellent opportunity to practice the positive coping mindset: getting straight back into the fray and focusing again on the key aspects of performance. He described this focus as having hands ready to receive, and an appropriate focus of visual attention, underlaid at my suggestion with a trust that his ability had not magically disappeared (here again in the conversation he shrugged and smiled bashfully). Here we were able to reattribute a mistake as an opportunity to grow, but instead of expecting that to change the emotional reaction, we started to see the cognitive and emotional reactions to mistakes as another part of the performance domain to be managed.

He agreed to discuss these ideas with the coach. It would be another five weeks before we were able to set up another meeting, due to the team's travel schedule, and the challenges I found in fitting around a professional football department's schedule as the team approached the eliminations finals for the season championship.

Session 6

The next time we met was during the elimination finals series. The team had successfully made it through to the last round of the play-offs, narrowly beating an opponent, playing at a larger and unfamiliar stadium, with larger crowd than Sam had previously experienced. Victory in the next game would see them make it through to the "grand final". The team had been playing as favourites, based on consistent winning performances through the season. Much of the ubiquitous press coverage had focused on Sam as an exceptional young player with precocious talent. As we started the session, Sam was reflective and talked comfortably about the challenges

that this status was bringing for him. He described in the previous game how he had "felt heaps of pressure, like I was supposed to do something amazing" going into the game. He described his mood in the warm up. Despite having played in many unfamiliar stadiums with 'away' games, before the most recent game, in a larger stadium in the team's home town, Sam had felt uneasy. He reported being unable to settle into his usual pre-game routines. On the field he had felt "unable to get involved, like I was just watching or waiting for something to happen." I had watched the team perform on that day, and it had seemed that much of the game was being played before the ball would reach Sam, with most of his involvement being in defensive situations. Sam described how the issues that he had effectively managed and moved on from had started to all revisit him during this previous game. He had entered the game with the expectation that the level of physical intensity to which he was becoming accustomed would increase again. He had doubted his ability to cope physically. The situation had deteriorated for him during the game. Instead of taking his usual approach, focused on involving himself by putting himself in situations where he would be passed the ball and have an opportunity to carry it, he had started approaching it differently: "I was just trying way too hard!" He went on,

>I used to just go out there to do my best, and just focus on my own game, but
>
>there has been heaps of people like…I feel they all expect me to be really good
>
>this time so I try to do too much it didn't really work, eh!

Instead of keeping his focus on the basic elements of his game, and allowing the exceptional break or move to happen in the moment, Sam was trying to force those moments to happen, out of fear that he would let down other peoples' expectations of him. The game was already being framed as a threat, and as the game progressed, his sense of control had

diminished, trying to bring about an outcome but diverting from the behaviours that usually

brought the outcome about. He felt unable to have an effect on the game, and so felt he had

failed to live up to the expectations of others. I asked him if he had received feedback from the

coaches, and he replied that "it wasn't that good." I questioned him further and found that in fact

the coach had simply reflected Sam's own evaluation of his impact on the game, and had

encouraged Sam to play the game the way he knew how. The sense of Challenge towards the

game remained. Previously he had perceived a threat in the possibility of letting his teammates

down. This threat had now generalised to the wider football community (he had been recognised

with an award for young players) and had extended to the family and friends, whom he now

assumed were expecting him to excel. Letting these people down felt threatening, and meeting

their expectations felt overwhelming. At this point Sam let me know that he was expected

imminently to a team function, and that he was running out of time. Fortunately, at this point he

had already met and overcome a number of stressors in our work together. We were then able to

reference this prior work. I reinforced to him that he had developed an ability to manage stressful

situations and that we now had an opportunity to go back to that work, and apply it again in this

similar, but nonetheless new, scenario. We discussed how he had coped in the past when fearing

that fatigue would overtake him, and how he had approached training, and games, when the fear

of failure had been present. Sam identified that he had benefitted from receiving support from

others, and again here we agreed that this support was still there. If his teammates did not change

their opinion of other people based on one game, then it was unlikely that they would change

their supportive attitude to him at this point. We also agreed that it would be necessary to go

back to the focus points, and behaviours that had served him well in previous situations. We also

agreed that there was some humour to be found in the situation: by reducing his stress and playing so well through the season, he had actually helped create new stresses for himself. We both smiled as we discussed this agreeing that in some respects the weight of expectation was a good problem to have. As we finished this final session Sam thanked me for the difference that our work had made for him during the season. He emphasised how useful it had been just to have someone to talk to about "all this sort of stuff", and also how much he felt working on the mental side of performance had helped his first season in professional sport. As we walked back downstairs to where the rest of the team were starting to gather, I finished up by reassuring him that he had everything he needed to perform to his utmost in the coming finals, and told him to go out there and enjoy it.

Story 2: Interpretation

Sources of Stress: Fatigue.

The first stressor that Sam discussed was the presence of intense fatigue during training. Predictably, as training sessions became progressively harder, the feeling of fatigue would grow. Sam would question whether he would be able to continue, imagining the consequence of shame in front of his teammates if was not able to complete the training session, failing to live up to the expectations he held of his role as a player. He perceived the fatigue as a threat to his sense of belonging and acceptance within the team. Related to this threat to his sense of belonging, accompanying the worry, he would also feel sadness: a feeling of being alone with his worries, wanting support but not receiving it. With this sadness came a drop in energy, a feeling of "wanting to give up". His sense of control over the stressor was low. He felt worry I anticipating fatigue, and increased worry as the fatigue arrived. His experience of the stressor was

characterized by feelings of threat rather than challenge. His Commitment – the personal meaning in the situations, remained high but paradoxically when the worry and sadness appeared, the meaning faded, asking himself "what's the point?" The intensity of his stress experience coincided with troughs in Challenge, Control and Commitment.

Sources of Stress: Mistakes and Failures.

The second main stressor was the making of a "mistake": a skill error resulting in a dropped ball or a wrongly-executed play. Sam had a propensity to feel a high degree of self-consciousness following a mistake on the field, and then to question his ability to meet the performance demands of the situation. This worry began to show up as anticipation of error, resulting in a reluctance to put himself into critical situations in which further mistakes could occur. This avoidant coping also reduced the likelihood of disconfirm his worry through positive experiences. In re-reading the transcripts, Transactional perspective (Lazarus, 1999) a fear of shaming himself was inherent in his stress as the underlying threat. The fatigue stressor did not present as a fear of the discomfort that would come with extreme fatigue so much as a fear of feeling shamed in front of the coach and teammates should failure under fatigue occur. Sam did not discuss a concern for the objective performance consequences for the team, for example concern that a dropped ball may result in a lost opportunity to score points. Sam feared showing a socially undesirable weakness, and especially feared the social or interpersonal consequences of letting down his teammates through not being competent enough. From a hardiness perspective, this stress reaction related to seeing fatigue as more threat than challenge, with a low sense of control, despite high levels of personal meaning.

Sources of Stress: Expectations.

Performance expectation emerged as a significant new stressor in the fifth and sixth sessions. With greater levels of success came greater levels of scrutiny from the media, and Sam perceived greater expectation from teammates, from coaches and from his network of friends and family. The more these other people became delighted with Sam's success, and the higher they rated his ability, the more he feared failing to please them. Similarly to the fatigue stressor, this expectation stressor involved a sense of threat to social status, particularly a fear of guilt or shame and loss of esteem in the eyes of others. In contrast to the fatigue stress though, when it had first arrived there was a sense of the expectation stressor also providing a challenge to perform at higher level. In the games approaching the knock-out finals, Sam's sense of control had been moderately high, evaluating that his ability to perform was a match for the demands. Commitment had also been high. The subjective stress reaction had been low to moderate, and he had been using approach-focused behavioural coping in competition to effectively manage the stressor, actively seeking support from coaches and teammates away from competition. At the time of the fifth and sixth sessions however, the addition of the 'do or die' environment of the knock-out finals (play-off rounds) and larger stadiums and crowds, exacerbated the pressure. Furthermore, Sam perceived that he would need to perform at a higher level than ever before in order to meet these perceived demands. Rather than just play his normal game in order to cope, Sam felt that he would need to produce something special. These factors combined to lessen his perception of his coping ability. His sense of control had reduced relative to the environmental demands. Although the balance of challenge and threat appeared unchanged, the reduction in this sense of control seemed to coincide with a greater subjective stress, an increase in worry and somatic anxiety. In this more anxious state of mind, Sam had left behind the mental strategies

that had previously served him well. It seemed that once a stress reaction had taken hold, his

ability to harness the coping abilities he had previously learnt was reduced. As detailed in the

story above, the intervention then focused on reminding him of these approaches rather than

learning entirely new ways to see the situation.

Working on the Stress Response: Challenge, Control, and Commitment

Through the initial stages of my work with Sam, we focused on performance-related

stressors specific to the relatively controlled scenarios of team training and pre-season

preparation. In this initial phase, we focused on the fatigue stressor and errors in defence and

attack. Threats to Sam's esteem within the playing group and to his sense of competence were

reframed, giving him a greater sense of a challenge aligned with his sense of commitment. We

also worked on giving Sam a greater sense of control, by identifying opportunities to actively

engage with the feared situations on the field and in training. We were also able to harness a

generalised sense of commitment to his ongoing growth a footballer, and the team's

performance, by finding personal meaning in specific scenarios, such as his defensive

positioning, that would help him achieve meaningful goals in terms of improved ability, and

effectiveness on the field.

The effectiveness of the intervention received significant support through the relationship

he enjoyed with one of the assistant coaches. Similarities can be seen between the coach's

apparent response to Sam's performance anxiety—normalising, non-judgemental, focused on

practical solutions, and framed by positive regard--and the approach that I took during therapy.

These combined approaches allowed Sam to reframe his fear of failure into specific goals that he

could train towards with the support of his coach. The coach spent a great deal more time with

Sam during the week than I did. Furthermore, the current intervention started as soon as Sam started playing in competitive games at the club. As a result, he learnt early on that the stress that was interfering with his performance could be identified, approached and managed and that through applying himself to extra work in training he could overcome perceived threats. This collaboration between the training environment and performance-focused psychology served to increase his sense of control over the stressors encountered in the first three sessions.

Regarding Commitment, there were significant fluctuations. Initially, his Commitment levels appeared low: during intense training sessions he would regularly question "why am I here?" Perhaps Sam was able to protect himself from feelings of failure by reducing Commitment levels: if he did not care, he did not need to involve himself in high-risk plays. If he did not involve himself in high risk plays, under fatigue, then errors would be less likely to occur. He was keenly aware of mistakes in front of his teammates. If these mistakes had have continued without positive emotional support from his teammates and coaches, it is possible that his Commitment levels would have shown further decline, and he would have accepted lower levels of performance. This emotional withdrawal ("I don't care...I question what am I even doing here?") Although these responses could be seen as a form of emotion-focused coping, as part of a larger stress response, the emotions Sam felt were those of disappointment, sadness, and a general sense of fatigue. Even though at these times Sam was performing at a high enough level to retain selection in the senior team, through more active engagement in the game Sam excelled in his role and gained selection for representative teams.

In Session 2 Sam had given me an additional insight into his experience of the fatigue stressor. Despondency featured strongly: "I feel like I can't be bothered, eh", and Sam gave the

impression of feeling overwhelmed by circumstances. At the time I focused my efforts on undermining the cognitions and finding behavioural alternatives, without differentiating the stress responses in the moment from any underlying personal concerns that may have been fuelling them. In retrospect, although we identified the apparent environmental stressor and his reactions to it in the moment, Sam may have more accurately identified the issue when he described its cure. The day before he returned home to his family, 'interstate' he experienced the same fatigue stressor, in the same environment. This time, instead of feelings of despondency and questioning his commitment, he felt buoyant, ready to engage in the training, and able to manage the performance demands. Given that this stress-reducing effect happened before he went home, the expectation of experiencing support and comfort from his family or simply anticipating a break might have served to attenuate the stress of the training situation (Campbell and Sonn, 2009).

The second phase of our work occurred when Sam was performing in the knock-out stages of the season. By this time, however, Sam already had a track record of success in managing stress. The stress 'events' were different, but the stress reactions and the threats perceived in the events were similar. By this time, relationships and processes were already in place that he could bring to bear successfully on these new instances of familiar patterns of threat and coping attributions, and behavioural stress responses.

Challenge versus threat: independent variables?

In Session 3, when we were addressing the 'dropping the ball' stressor, we identified a behavioural strategy that he could enact despite the threat level of the situation remaining high (calling for the ball, risking dropping a ball when fatigued). We attenuated the threat of failure

somewhat by examining potential consequences, and 'decatastrophising' the feared scenario. The situation, however, still remained threatening to Sam. We also reinforced the positive value that Sam saw in possible positive performance outcomes: calling for and receiving the ball. I believe that it was the increase in 'positive value' of the challenge, rather than the decrease in negative value of the threat that led to Sam being willing to risk a new behavioural strategy. It would seem possible to increase performance, and reduce negative coping behaviours, by increasing the positive value of taking on a performance challenge, even when the negative valence of failure at the same task remains high. In other words, increasing challenge to succeed in a task did not require a reduction in the threat-level of failure in the same task. It may be possible to make the 'threat' and 'challenge' factors even more independent by associating the positive challenge-focused act with a new sense of meaning, independent from the meaning attached to the 'failure' scenario. In this case Sam started to see 'running hard and calling for the ball' as a demonstration of personal growth, courage, and professional competence. In contrast, the threat of failure remained attached to the idea of value judgments by his peers.

Intervention Outcomes.

Regarding the fatigue stressor, Sam's sense of control increased: he came to see that he could cope and engage actively in times of fatigue-related stress. In the calmer light of the consulting office, Sam came to see that the feared failure scenario under fatigue would be unlikely to happen. The situation was decatastrophised and reattributed successfully as a challenge rather than a threat. Although Sam's locus of control expanded following this part of the intervention, the vulnerability to fear of fatigue still existed in the background, re-emerging later. When the intensity of the threat was turned up during the finals season, and other stressors

were added, as discussed above the stress reaction returned. When I debriefed the intervention with Sam following the end of the season, he said that he felt better placed to cope with any training demands that would be placed on him in the future, "I'll know I can just get through it."

The efficacy of the intervention was also affected by relational factors outside the consulting room. First, the nature of Sam's relationship with his coach proved instrumental in helping him succeed in increasing his hardiness. Once we had identified the 'fatigue' and 'dropping the ball' stressors in counselling sessions, and provided some language for describing and summarising them and their causes, Sam was able to discuss with the coach the stress response that we were working on. On finding that the coach did not perceive this response as a weakness, instead framing it as a workable challenge, backed up with instrumental support, the approach we were developing in our sessions was greatly strengthened. Sam was then committed to engaging in extra training that would mitigate this perceived weakness. The extra training sessions were not perceived as a threat, more as an opportunity for growth.

Teammate relationships also played a large part in Sam coping with the fatigue threat. The support of others seemed to attenuate the level of threat inherent in the situation when they would encourage him to "just one more set [of a training session]". His sense of control was bolstered when they encouraged him by saying: "you can do this." This external scaffolding for his hardiness was also repeated when he doubted his defensive positioning. Teammates' support made the situation less threatening, and with their support he felt he could cope. The teammate and coach relationships played an important part in the development of greater hardiness over the course of the season. When the physical intensity level had a purported increase, as the 'finals' season came about, the same pattern of threat perception and avoidance arose. The second time

around, Sam already had a psychological approach that he could marshal quickly, without need for additional coach involvement.

The relational factor in Sam's developing hardiness demonstrated a significant role for environmental and relational factors in individuals' adaptations to stress. Rather than social support having an additive effect, on top of an individual's hardiness, Sam's case indicated that social support and hardiness have a complex interaction. In order to engage meaningfully with a stressor, doing so in a social environment that invites active engagement and that emphasises a shared sense of meaning inherent in the stressor, may serve to bolster and individual's hardiness.

Story 2: Conclusion

My experiences of applying what I had intended to be the same hardiness-building strategy to two young performers in similar situations in the same club served to highlight the many differences between the two athletes' experiences and stories. In contrast to Alan's largely individual approach to managing the stressors in his world, Sam's example offers a wider perspective on hardiness as an individual characteristic, suggesting that hardiness interacts with and perhaps is even 'switched on' by a dynamic network of social and emotional relationships. In working at another football club subsequent to the current study I was strongly challenged by a head coach regarding the work a key athlete was doing with me to help him manage stress and mood issues on- and off-field. The coach regularly referenced the need for "mental toughness" as a core part of his coaching philosophy. He asserted that the player, who was coping well at the time with demands of turning around a performing slump under intense media scrutiny, was not "mentally tough" because he relied on his girlfriend for support, in helping him manage stress and adapt to his environment. A week after the final session with Sam (Session 6), just after he

had played a key role in the team making the competition's grand final, the team was exuberant. When Sam passed me in the corridor at the club he shook my hand and hugged me, telling me: "I couldn't have done it without you". This parting comment left me with an upwelling of positive emotion, but also with a number of questions regarding the hardiness construct and stress management in sport in general. What is the role of interpersonal support in stress management? Is it still hardiness when other people are required to scaffold an athlete's stress management? Does it still count as high hardiness if the psychologist passes on the key support role back to another key person in the athlete's entourage to support the 'hardy' behaviours?

CHAPTER 5: GENERAL DISCUSSION

I have discussed a number of concepts in the interpretation of each of the two stories in this thesis. In order to complement the readers' conclusions drawn from the stories, in this chapter, I explore the hardiness construct with references to related theory and research, as well as commenting on its application with highly competitive sports performers. Then I consider limitations of the present research and propose directions for further study of hardiness in sport. Finally, I draw a general conclusion on the whole thesis.

Sources of Stress

Organisational Stressors

In line with the investigation by Fletcher et al. (2003) of sources of stress, both competitive and organizational stressors emerged as key sources of stress for the two participants. Of the five categories of stress identified by Arnold and Fletcher (2012), the organisational stressors in the current study fell under the 'leadership and personal' category, centring around issues of selection or non-selection, and clarity of role expectations. For Alan the uncertainty over being selected in the Reserves team by the Reserves coach contrasted with the anxiolytic effect of having his position and status within the squad confirmed by the head coach independently of week-by-week selection issues. For Sam, in my interpretation, an underlying stressor emerged that sat below his day to day stress: the ongoing stress of separation from his social support networks, which sits under Arnold and Fletcher's category of logistic and environmental stress. This stressor may have acted as an underlying wave that gave additional height or depth to the shorter-frequency peaks or troughs of daily performance-related emotions.

Performance Stressors

With reference to performance-related stressors, the key stressors identified by Alan and Sam fell into a range of the categories as delineated by Mellalieu et al. (2009). For Sam, 'self-presentation', or how he would appear to his peers, underlay both the fear of fatigue and the fear of making mistakes. However, the fear of shame seemed to extend further than either self-presentation or the expectations categories, also containing a fear of how he would see and feel about himself. This source of stress appears contingent with the introjected regulation that Ryan and Deci (2000) discussed in which a person performs an act motivated by the need to maintain self-esteem and feelings of worth. Performing from this type of motivation, it is clear why Sam would fear mistakes or failure under fatigue, due to the feelings of low-self-worth that could result. No studies were identified that examined the links between motivational states and hardiness. Exploration of the link goes beyond the scope of this study, but remains a possible area for future research. For Alan, 'rivalry' (Mellalieu et al., 2009) served as a potent form of stress. There was rivalry for the esteem of the coaches, as well rivalry for the reward of a playing position in the reserves team.

In addition, Sam's story adds weight to the identification by Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) of apparently positive events as possible triggers for stress, beyond just instances of adversity. For Sam, the performance level he was able to achieve in his first year was a source of joy, both directly for himself and via sympathetic joy in seeing his family happy. Nonetheless, this experience directly contributed to the 'somatic-behavioural' stress (Suinn, 2005) that showed up in the finals games, in which 'expectations' (Mellalieu et al., 2009) of success had led to Sam changing his focus of attention: expecting he had to play differently in some way, rather than trusting in the processes and focus points that had helped him perform up to that point. In line

with Suinn's (2005) categorisation, this somatic-behavioural stress impaired fluidity of

movement, flexibility of his responses and led to decreases in complex motor skill execution.

Hardiness and The Transactional Model of Stress

The participants' stress experiences were analysed using the Transactional Model of

stress in sport (adapted from Lazarus & Folkman by Hardy, 1996). This model allowed the

participants' subjective experience to be broken down into elements that could then be subjected

to analysis and intervention as per the methods described in the method section above. The

intervention process validated the separate analysis using the hardiness dimension as well as the

Transactional model, where the Hardiness model provided a descriptive interpretation of the

individual's characteristics in order to provide an understanding of the what 'should' be changed

in order to make the stress response more useful and adaptive. The transactional model identified

relevant elements that could then be targeted using the cognitive-behavioural techniques

described in the Method Chapter.

Hardiness

One of the aims of the current research project was to examine the hypothesis that

increasing hardiness would reduce the negative impact of stress on well-being and performance.

By examining individuals' hardiness in detail and attempting to change the hardiness facets

through psychological intervention, a secondary aim was to gain additional insight into the

hardiness construct itself, and its utility in differentiating individuals, according to their stress

management capacity.

In summary, an analysis of the two participants' hardiness across time and situations

showed the difficulty of differentiating individuals effectively on trait-like dimensions when the

stress response involved complex behaviours in complex social environments. This study raises

some questions about the hardiness construct as described in Kobasa's and Maddi's work (see

Maddi, 2002), and these are addressed here.

Challenge

Kobasa's initial research (Kobasa, 1979), as well as subsequent experimental studies such

as that conducted by Wiebe (1991), suggested that changing patterns of initial appraisal would

result in more adaptive stress responses. As detailed in the interpretations of the two stories in

this thesis, there were marked differences between the two participants in their interpretations of

threat in their environments. Although the intervention targeted the conversion of threat into

challenge appraisals, the amount of change that participants made in this area was limited. Even

when a new understanding had been reached in the therapy session regarding the irrational nature

of particular threat appraisals, replacing them with more rational options, and even if these new

appraisals had been practiced at certain times already in the lived environment, the individuals

still remained vulnerable to these threat perceptions emerging under pressure. In other words,

despite our best efforts in therapy and in real-world application, participants remained vulnerable

to the same stressor, especially when it coincided with other organizational or competitive

stressors.

For example, Alan was able at times to identify that his threat-based responses to the

'reserve team' coach were unhelpful. In our sessions we discussed other possible ways of

interpreting the coach's input that would result in less emotional distress and that would create

the possibility of more adaptive responses. Identifying responses in the consulting room though

was easier for Alan than implementing them in real life. Furthermore, even after a period of calm

in which he had put aside the threat from the assistant coach, the vulnerability returned at a later time. Notably, the threat appraisals returned when Alan was experiencing more general 'expectation' stress, when his own hopes and his family's perceived hopes of achieving first-grade selection were being frustrated as the season advanced.

In general, Sam's disposition seemed aligned with descriptions of the Challenge dimension: a strong desire to learn and an orientation of being motivated to grow and develop as a result of his experiences. Nonetheless, despite what appeared at face value to be a 'Challenge' disposition, he did encounter a number of recurring stress triggers that were characterised by an initial perception of threat, even when there was objective challenge to grow, according to personal meaning. With both the 'fatigue' stressor and the 'mistake' stressor, Sam developed more adaptive ways of coping through the intervention. In the case of the fatigue threat, it was only once he had practised applying successful behavioural coping strategies to reduce the stress response that the initial threat response started to change, particularly with support of the coach. Despite our attempts to change the threat response directly, only after achieving a lower stress response through practising better coping over time did it actually reduce, apparently as a learning response. Even though the threat response did change to the fatigue and 'mistake' stressors over the course of the season, they both returned during the finals series at the end of the season. It seemed that in the generalised pressure of the finals environment, Sam had reverted to an old pattern. Despite things seeming to change, a vulnerability remained that could be triggered by context.

Taken together, these results suggest that some individuals can be comparatively hardy compared to others, but if subjective stress is allowed to accumulate from various sources, they

may 'devolve' into low hardiness behaviour as either high 'threat' thresholds are reached, or as previously challenging scenarios start to contain higher levels of threat. An implication is that in order to successfully buffer themselves against the negative effects of stress, an active, habitual process of management of self and the environment is required. Given the wide array of sources of possible organisational and performance stressors in the elite sport environment, which are likely to be broad enough to trigger a stress response at some stage, in order to maintain hardy attitudes even the hardiest individuals must remain vigilant to 'additive' stress levels, and the appearance of unusual stressors, so that hardy attitudes can be maintained.

Commitment, and Then Control: Adaptive Coping as a Way Out of Stress

The current study also partially supported the findings of Gentry and Kobasa (1984) that more adaptive forms of coping were associated with lower stress. Approaching problems, and investing energy and focus in active coping strategies, did result in lower stress at times for the two participants here. Both the stories, however, also demonstrated that the relationship between coping and stress is more complex than Kobasa (1983) and others proposed in hardiness theory. At times both participants were able to reduce their stress, not by actively approaching a problem, but rather by allowing the problem to be there without investing use of active, transformational coping, and directing their attention elsewhere. For example, after receiving reassurance from the head coach, Alan was able to tolerate the stress of the reserve coach's selection decisions, not by actively avoiding them or by actively engaging with the problem, rather by allowing the problem to be there, but focusing on his specific training goals. The non-selection stressor was still perceived to be a threat to his functioning, and not a challenge for growth, and still elicited a stress response, but the duration and intensity of the stress response

was attenuated when, following some reassurance from the head coach, Alan did the apparent

opposite of adaptive coping, instead refraining from engaging with the threatening situation and

allocating attention to other areas he hoped to influence. He did not interpret the specific

situation as a challenge to grow or perform better (despite my attempts to frame it this way), nor

did he exert greater control or increase his commitment. He seemed instead to connect to an

overarching desire to grow and develop, independent of any specific stressor. Alan himself

termed this approach 'patience', a quality that he aimed to take on, and to which he had been

exhorted by the head coach and earlier on his father. The more 'patient' he appeared to be, the

less subjective stress he seemed to feel, independently of re-evaluating the specific stressor itself

in line with hardiness theory. At face value, this attitude seemed close to the 'existential courage'

phrase that Maddi (1996, p. 6) used to summarise hardiness, in that it allowed Alan to find the

courage to tolerate a stressful situation and maintain goal-directed behaviour. In apparent

contradiction to the model though, his sense of control related to the stressor, and his

commitment to the specific and general situations we were discussing remained unchanged.

During our conversations, whenever the topic came up, the threat/anger reaction also remained.

Another instance of an attitude of non-engagement with the stressor resulting in

attenuation of the negative effects of stress, came from Sam in his approach to the fatigue

stressor. During the game, Sam again experienced the cascade of thoughts, emotions, and

behavioural avoidance impulses. However, instead of reappraising the situation or disputing the

negative thoughts and impulses, he "just got on with it." In this approach, he demonstrated an

ability to tolerate the distress that he felt, and an acceptance that the feared scenario of dropping

the ball might well come to pass.

Hardiness and Anxiety Direction

These observations show some consistency with, but also some divergence from, the Hanton et al. (2013) investigation of hardiness, coping, and direction of anxiety interpretation. Hanton et al. found that the use of "planning, active coping and increased effort" (p. 103) in the face of competitive anxiety was used most frequently by the high hardiness group, who also characteristically interpreted anxiety as facilitative rather than debilitative. The Hanton et al. study suggested that, once anxiety occurs, some individuals will see it as problematic while others won't. At the times when he coped best with the fatigue and 'dropping the ball' errors, Sam did not report seeing the anxiety as debilitative or facilitative, rather he seemed detached from the anxiety, and was able to immerse himself in the task in hand without attending to the anxiety. Instead he focused on task relevant cues that would help him maximise performance. Hanton et al. proposed that a facilitative interpretation of anxiety would develop over time through repeated application of hardy attitudes. As Sam implemented more adaptive coping, his interpretation did become less negative, in that the intensity and duration of the negative interpretation lessened, but it never showed signs of moving to a positive interpretation—with anxiety being seen as helpful. He seemed to be less affected by the presence of the anxiety over time and more able to focus on other aspects of the environment.

The Relationship Between Challenge, Control, and Commitment

Kobasa, Maddi, and Puccetti (1982) defined Commitment as finding a sense of personal meaning in the situation in which the stressor arises. The successful instances of coping and stress management by the participants provided further insight into this Commitment dimension. Sam showed that even when his attitudinal commitment was high, it was the ability to somehow

maintain behavioural commitment despite the stress reaction that allowed him to demonstrate hardy actions. The hardiness model suggested that finding personal meaning in the situation would have a direct stress-attenuating effect. In Sam's case, the emerging capacity for "tolerance" of the stress reaction provided a space or an opportunity for the application of committed action. This committed action, facilitated by "tolerance", appeared to result in the reduction of *subsequent* stress reactions through an apparent learning process: changing appraisals over time in favour of greater Challenge and greater Control. By demonstrating to himself that he could maintain effective goal-directed behaviour in the face of the stress-inducing appraisals, the sense of threat diminished, and his sense of control over the environment also increased. In later instances of the same stressor, therefore, his appraisals of his coping ability were enhanced through these positive experiences, leading to less subjective stress: the stressor became more manageable and so less threatening.

An additional interpretation for this learning process is that the maintenance of goal-directed behaviour may also have taught Sam to recalibrate the assumed point of fatigue-related failure. In other words, through experiencing, and not avoiding, fatigue multiple times, he learnt that his threshold for failure under fatigue was in fact much higher than he had initially assumed. The same level of fatigue would therefore not carry with it the same threat of failure.

Challenge, Control, Commitment and Connections

The quality of coaching relationships was a significant factor in both Alan's changing responses to the 'selection' stressor and Sam's responses to the fatigue and 'dropping the ball' stressors. These responses were evidence of his general Hardiness. In Alan's case, the coach modelled an attitude towards his current situation, which Alan termed 'patience'. When the head

coach met with Alan in between our Sessions 2 and 3, he provided Alan with a perspective in which non-selection was just a temporary challenge, and the process of training and learning was the necessary focus. Alan quickly internalised this perspective, and related it back to me as his own. Although the message carried the weight of the head coach's leadership position as a key selector, it seemed further weight was added by the degree to which Alan felt understood and valued, and not personally threatened. The same message coming from the Reserves coach would have likely carried less weight for Alan, as a function of the quality of the personal relationship. The conversation with the head coach was only 30 minutes in length, so it is unlikely that this session created new abilities in Alan, or new patterns of challenge versus threat appraisals, or even new abilities to cope in and control his environment. The relationship that Alan held with the key people in his environment more likely acted as a trigger for him to apply attitudes and capabilities that were already latent in him. Taking this further, if an athlete in this club worked over a long period of time to develop mental capabilities and to practice certain attitudes, the degree to which the athlete's hardiness would be "switched on" would depend to a significant degree on the quality and quantity of interactions with people around him.

The attitude modelled by the head coach attenuated Alan's stress level, as well as allowing him to focus his efforts on growth and personal development, rather than being distracted by his anger and indignation at feeling "not valued" by the reserves coach. In Alan's story about his past in Session 3, Alan described responded with anger and indignation when his childhood friend achieved selection for the representative team, and Alan didn't. He felt undervalued by the people around him and started to question his worth. At that time, his father had intervened. He came to his son's room when he had locked himself away, to talk to him

personally about his feelings. His father had counselled patience, and had encouraged Alan to continue his pursuit of a professional football career.

In Sam's case, he had been experiencing a growing and increasingly debilitating fear of dropping the ball, to the extent that he felt he had lost his ability to catch a pass at full pace without taking it 'on his chest'. Unlike catching the ball in front of the body in one's hands, Sam told me that this method of catching interferes with the running rhythm and timing, compromising agility and speed. In this example, Sam felt low levels of Control, and high levels of threat, coinciding with high levels of subjective distress, as predicted by the hardiness model. The coach, instead of approaching or discussing the stress that Sam felt, demonstrated actions that modelled attitudes of high Control, high challenge, and high Commitment. He identified extra training drills for Sam to work on catching and positioning under fatigue. This intervention provided Sam with the faith that he could manage the stressor through approach-focused practices. A threatening and debilitating threat was turned into an opportunity for growth and learning, and the coach demonstrated to Sam that the situation was important enough to warrant extra time and effort from both of them. There was some quality inherent in the relationship *prior* to the resolution being found that contributed to Sam taking the coach into his confidence. My impression at the time was that Sam felt that this coach was not passing judgement on him for demonstrating low hardiness. Perhaps, given Sam's young age, there was no expectation from the coaches that he *should or must* be able to manage the pressures of the environment in a different way. I knew from my occasional interactions with the coach that when our work together started, Sam was already highly valued for the prodigious ability he was demonstrating in training. Sam's affable and humble demeanour contributed to the rapport that we were

developing. He also showed these qualities in his interaction with the coaches. Simply, coaches seemed to both value and like him. In this instance, the sense of being valued, and not judged, likely contributed to both Sam's inclination to take the coach into his confidence, and the speed with which Sam internalised the attitudes that the assistant coach was modelling for him. When Sam had talked about brief interactions with the head coach, however, I saw respect but also awe and even fear of his judgement, and certainly a different personal relationship when compared to the assistant coach discussed above. Furthermore, Sam's story suggested a more generalised, underlying relationship factor involved in the stress response. Immediately before Sam returned home to his family for a weekend, his stress response was greatly reduced. Although we did not explore this phenomenon in any depth at the time, this anticipation of reuniting with his family seemed to either release him from appraising the training session as threatening, or improve his sense of being able to cope. Campbell and Sonn (2009) discussed the difficulties associated with the leaving behind of family and community ties in relocating as an athlete. They saw these difficulties as magnified when relocations highlighted social and cultural disparities and differences between 'home' and 'away' settings. Although Sam's cultural background is not discussed in the current narrative (in order to protect confidentiality) it is likely that the cultural discrepancy between his home environment and the rugby club served to heighten his subjective stress response.

Sam's situation can be contrasted with the relationship between Alan and the Reserves coach. In this relationship, there seemed little likelihood that Alan would take the coach into his confidence or work towards a collaborative resolution to his difficulties. Alan felt threatened in the relationship. Another instance of Alan reacting to a relationship threat came in the third

session when he and I discussed how he might increase his hardiness levels. I had been listening

to his concerns, and at a certain point referred back to my agenda of improving hardiness. My

implicit suggestion was that he was not hardy enough, and needed to change himself, and take

personal agency for this, in order to improve his hardiness. Alan reacted with anger to this

suggestion, and at this point the therapeutic alliance started to break down (see Andersen, 2000

for a review of therapeutic relationships in sport psychology). Tibbert, Andersen, and Morris

(2015) described the case of Joe, a first year player in an Australian football team. Joe had

gained acceptance in his group, but done so in a way that compromised his health and

performance, when he started to 'toughen up' by internalising a cultural norm that involved

denying emotion and vulnerability. In Alan's case his reaction may have indicated that accepting

vulnerability was no longer acceptable to him given his desire to 'fit in' with the rugby club

culture as he perceived it.

These examples reinforce a relational aspect of the stress appraisal process not

specifically identified in the earlier summary of the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman,

1984) or the Hardiness construct. The results also demonstrate the possibility, and perhaps

necessity, for significant others in the environment to model, reinforce and support hardy

attitudes in order to facilitate the development of the same attitudes in those in their charge.

When S. R. Maddi et al. (2002) conducted a group-level intervention with psychosocially 'at

risk' college students, using their custom *HardiTraining* method they included a social support

component to the training. This unit focused on training individuals in ways to bring hardiness

into their interactions with significant others. The current study indicates another possibility for

sports organisations interested in improving hardiness: training the 'significant others' in ways to bring hardiness into their interactions with the individual performers.

The relationship factor with Alan also highlight the inherent risk in targeting an intervention explicitly at a psychological construct that carries with it an emotional valence, and a sense of social desirability. At the start of the research project, I presented the players with an overview of hardiness, and it would have been clear to them that the coaches and I saw hardiness as a positive and desirable personality attribute. Later, implying to Alan that he was low on hardiness and needed to work on developing this attitude contained an implicit criticism. When I voiced this 'criticism' at a time when Alan was already feeling vulnerable and threatened in his relationship with the Reserves coach, I may have become a new source of stress, that Alan sought to avoid. Richardson et al. (2008) identified how athletes can struggle to maintain an image of toughness as imposed by a sport's subculture. From my experience as a player and a professional working in the sport, rugby had a subculture in which toughness was reinforced. The results here suggest that in individualized support program in a sport setting, practitioners should take care in the way that a hardiness training program is presented to athletes, to minimize the possibility that athletes, especially new arrivals, might see 'low hardiness' as contravening their sport's cultural expectations.

Issues With Challenge Within the Hardiness Construct

The contrasts in sources of stress between the two participants demonstrated the difficulty in comparing individuals on a singular Challenge dimension. Sam was threatened by ball handling errors in games, whereas Alan never mentioned this as a threat, citing the general training environment only. Alan was threatened by the success of others in 'his' position, and

the possibility of non-selection in favour of others, whereas Sam never was. Similarly, Sam and

Alan were both threatened by fatigue for similar, but qualitatively different reasons. For Alan,

fatigue, and the possibility of not coping with it, held the threat of his teammates adjudging him

weak. For Sam, fatigue held a threat that he would fail and feel shamed by disadvantaging the

team and failing to live up to assumed standards. Furthermore, within the two individuals, their

level of 'threat' versus 'challenge' was not consistent across time even for the same stressor.

These observations provide additional insight into Florian, Mikulincer and Taubman's (1995)

study of Israeli Defence Force (IDF) recruits undergoing a 4-month combat training period.

Although Florian et al. found that the Control and Commitment components of hardiness were

related to psychological distress and coping skills, they were unable to find a significant

relationship for the Challenge component. They suggested that Challenge was not an integral

part of hardiness. In the current study, I observed a high degree of variance of the 'challenge

versus threat' aspect of the stress response within individuals even in the face of the same

stressor. The two participants in this study showed a pattern of threat responses to different

aspects of the environment, in a complex relationship with quality of the relationships they

enjoyed with family, coaches, and peers. These findings would suggest that a single, general

measure of 'challenge versus threat' for individuals is unlikely to reveal a score that is

meaningful to their pattern of stress response within a specific context, and may not provide an

accurate insight into stress/health or stress/performance relationships. Furthermore, in this study,

and although this may relate to the methods used and my relative inexperience as a provisional

psychologist implementing them, the primary threat vs challenge appraisals responses were the

least amenable to change through the one-to-one intervention. The Control and Commitment

aspects seemed to be more amenable to the intervention. In Sam's case, the threat response seemed to diminish in intensity over time through a learning process. Rather than changing a threat response into a challenge response, it seemed that the threat response gradually assuaged as confidence in active coping skills increased. Sam's ability to grow and develop in the face of the stressor increased as he practiced the new Control- and Commitment-aligned responses. As discussed in the conclusion to the second story, for Sam the sense of challenge in the face of the 'dropping the ball' stressor increased while his sense of threat in the situation was still at a high level. This observation suggests the threat and challenge systems are at least partly independent of each other, and that conceptualising and measuring threat versus challenge on a single scale may not reflect the true nature of individuals' hardiness. Scaffolded by support from significant others in his environment, Sam demonstrated that it is possible to act in a hardy way, with high Challenge, Commitment, and high Control, even while a sense of threat (and subjective stress) stays moderately high.

It was through increasing Control and Commitment over time that specific threat responses were reduced. This process is consistent with the transactional model of stress, but may be inconsistent with the current conception of hardiness, with Challenge partially dependent on the other two facets. Additionally, the partial independence of challenge appraisals and threat appraisals related to the same stressor suggests a complex relationship between Challenge and overall hardiness. The significant intra-individual variance over time in the way stressors are appraised may also have contributed to Funk's (1992) finding that the Challenge component lacked reliability, as well as validity, as evidenced by the pattern of correlations with other associated variables not meeting predictions in that investigation.

Nonetheless, in this study, consistent with other results in sport (e.g., Goss, 1994), apparent levels of Challenge, Control, and Commitment were relevant to the emotional states that the participants were experiencing. When Sam and Alan showed low levels of hardiness in the face of stressors, they experienced higher levels of the emotions that Goss detected in her low hardiness group: tension, depression, anger, fatigue, and confusion. At the times when Sam and Alan displayed attitudes more consistent with high hardiness, their levels of vigour appeared higher. When considered alongside the overreaching literature (see Richardson, Morris & Andersen 2010), and the Goss (1994) study, these results suggest that hardiness is an important individual difference to consider when athletes are walking a fine line between overreaching and under-recovery during an intense preparation period.

Methodology

In developing the current project, I believed there was a gap in the hardiness and general sport and stress research, in providing insight into applied practitioners' real experiences when trying to achieve change with real, individual athletes, according to evidence-based agendas. In developing the current structure of 'story plus interpretation' to describe the two athletes' experiences, I believe my supervisor and I identified an approach that has allowed for additional insight into the hardiness construct, while also providing insight for readers into "doing hardiness-focused sport psychology".

When Trahar (2009) used a form of narrative inquiry to investigate her own teaching practice, she warned that research involving complex person to person interactions, and complex researcher/practitioner roles could "feel messy" at times (p. 6). One "messy" part of the research happened in writing up the narratives to illustrate the thought processes and observations that

were guiding the intervention; both during and after the sessions, as well as allowing for the

further reflection that had happened on reading the transcripts. The current structure of 'story

plus interpretation', felt somewhat "messy" in comparison with exemplary narrative methods,

such as those described by Riessman (2008), but it allowed me to demonstrate my thought

processes during the intervention as part of the main story narrative, as well as allowing post-

intervention reflections both on the athletes' experience, and on my own actions as an applied

practitioner. In developing this structure I felt I was straying from existing and established

approaches and so possibly compromising the authenticity of the project in readers' (or

examiners') minds. Nonetheless, although the research goals and method of analysis resulted in a

rather unique format, the arrived-at structure retained integrity with the aims and philosophies

underpinning the project.

In reflecting back on the research project from my current role as an applied practitioner

working full time in elite-level sport in both professional and Olympic settings, I am fortunate to

have a number of supports to my practice: regular one-to-one supervision, peer supervision,

informal and formal meetings with other psychologist colleagues, and regular participation in

training workshops, conferences, and other forms of professional development. Despite these

many interactions, I still find it relatively rare to find specific and real examples of what other

practitioners have done, said, and thought within their sessions with real people, and what the

actions of reactions of the clients have been. When these examples do occasionally emerge, I

find them of great value. It is my hope that in providing a rich, albeit unorthodox, illustration not

just of interviews and recollections, but of my own and the participants' reported and observed

experiences, this project has made a contribution to the literature in line with Martens' (1987)

goals of providing support to applied practitioners. I believe that the method elaborated here also provides an additional example to students and applied researchers of a form of narrative enquiry that can be repeated and hopefully improved in further applied case-based sport psychology research.

Limitations in the Current Study

The narrative style of the research project means that its value in part rests on the ability of the researcher to tell the story well. As specified in the study, the objective was to provide the reader with a substantial amount of the primary text from the transcripts in illustrating points. Substantially more text was omitted than included, according to my subjective choice. As discussed earlier the style of story presentation was chosen to give the reader insight into my experience of the intervention, through use of first-person disclosure. Nonetheless, the conclusions are grounded in subjective interpretation. In developing this research project, I made a trade-off between breadth and depth of analysis, and a design involving two participants was chosen, to give additional depth. It is possible that an additional participant, and a third story would have added to the value of the overall discussion. The selection of a two-participant narrative, however, allowed for greater exploration of intra-personal factors. Although the current format was a strategic decision to explore context for unique athletes performing in an idiosyncratic environment, it is possible that the addition of a third participant may have allowed readers additional perspective on some of the reflections on the guiding theory. For example, in the Interpretation and Discussion sections, I identified issues with the Challenge dimension, into which a third case may have given additional insight.

Nonetheless, the two stories may also serve as examples of the "instrumental" case studies as described by Stake (2005), wherein:

the case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our

understanding of something else…The case may be seen as typical of other cases

or not. Here the choice of case is made to advance understanding of that other

interest. We simultaneously have several interests, particular and general (p. 445).

In the present study, I aimed to advance understanding of hardiness as a general "other interest", including the way in which hardiness may be subject to change over time. A more particular "other interest" was how a person's hardiness may interact with stress responses and performance-related factors in the professional sport context. The method selected allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experience, adding to authenticity through richer 'expression of a reality' (Richardson, 2000). Additional instrumental value, both in terms of 'substantive contribution' and 'impact' (Richardson, 2000) may have been gained through examining these two participants from within their common sporting context, and in examining the overlap. Although it would have required a project of greater scope than this, this value could theoretically be enhanced by extending the number of cases, within the same team during the same season, extending the participant sessions out over time, or looking at participants across two or more different organisations, to add both breadth and granularity to the interpretation and discussion.

My intention though was that the narrative style would allow readers to decide, either in their experience as practitioners, or based on their knowledge of the research, whether the cases and the conclusions drawn from this study could be of value. To draw more reliable conclusions

about how susceptible hardiness is to change over time in elite sport participants, or about the

merit of the specific methods chosen, would require further studies of greater scope.

Given that the current study provided insight into the context of a single male

professional rugby team, within a specific, mainly 'anglosphere', cultural context, further

consideration of the organisational culture, and the personality and preferences of the coaches

and support staff could have added to readers' understandings.

Furthermore, according to Petitpas, Giges, and Danish (1999), within the extensive body

of research into the effectiveness of the counselling process, "of all the techniques and variables

examined, only one, the client-counsellor relationship, has related to positive therapeutic

outcomes consistently" (p. 345). Although other evidence-based therapeutic approaches (e.g.,

Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment; Gardner & Moore, 2007) have entered the fray since

Petitpas et al. wrote their 1999 article, the central importance of the relationship is unlikely to

have changed. There are indications in the two stories in this thesis that the quality of the

relationship between myself and the two participants varied, both between the individuals and

with each player, across the time of our work together. The results of any one-to-one intervention

must be seen as a function of both the accuracy of assessing presenting issues and of applying an

appropriate method or approach, as well as of the quality of the working alliance being formed.

At the time of the intervention, I was a relative neophyte both in counselling method and in the

cognitive-behavioural intervention tools that I was delivering within the working alliance. The

fulfilment or otherwise of the intervention goals depended in large part on the relationship that I

was able to develop with the two participants. The interpretations mainly focused on the insight

gained into the Challenge, Control, and Commitment facets as participants went through a

cognitive-behavioural change process. The speed and effectiveness of these changes should be considered along with my relatively untested counselling skill at the time of the intervention, and my relative inexperience in applying the methods selected for the interventions. In other words, more experienced practitioners may have helped the athletes improve their hardiness to a greater extent.

Directions For Future Hardiness Research

The current study indicated that the Challenge facet of hardiness may be less susceptible to change through cognitive interventions than the Control and Commitment facets, and also perhaps less stable across different domains of functioning. Particularly, an initial appraisal of threat was seen to remain even when perceived coping resources had increased, and control had been effectively exerted over a stressful situation. The results indicated that Challenge may be changeable over time when an individual develops a personal 'track record' of successfully applying behavioural coping responses to a particular class of stressor. The transactional model of stress would provide a theoretical basis for further, higher powered, studies to investigate the 'learning process' through which changes in Control and Commitment might contribute to strengthening an initial "challenge" reaction and reducing a "threat" reaction. A recent review by Mosley and LaBorde (2016) discussed Heart Rate Variability (HRV) as a physiological variable that could be used as marker of emotional reactions in pressure situations, given that HRV provides an indication of the degree of parasympathetic activity. Mosley and LaBorde described how greater parasympathetic activity has been associated with both better coping in stressful situations, and better cognitive performance (e.g. decision-making) under pressure. Further studies to investigate the development of adaptive "challenge" appraisals versus maladaptive

"threat" appraisals, might use changes in Heart Rate Variability under specific performance or learning demands as an outcome measure indicating the effective development and application of hardy attitudes.

Furthermore, a consideration of physiological consequences of psychological stress raises a question regarding the degree to which effective psychological coping might affect the total load under which an athlete is operating. Goss (1994) investigated hardiness in swimmers during a physically intense training phase. She found that more hardy swimmers had less mood disturbance. Mood disturbance has been identified as an indicator of overtraining or under-recovery (Morgan, Costill, Flynn, Raglin, & O'Connor, 1988a). It seems possible that hardiness could be related to performance by allowing athletes to cope better with total training-phase stress, a total including both psychological and physical stress. Better coping may lead to greater training adaptation. However, direction of causality remains unclear. Further research may clarify whether increasing hardiness, and reducing total subjective stress, and improving an overall mood profile, might allow athletes recover quicker, and potentially allow them take on a greater training load, contributing to enhanced sport performance.

The current study also partially confirmed that Hardiness is a set of attitudes that can be enhanced and learnt. Further research might also investigate the developmental experiences that contribute to the establishment of hardiness in individuals over time. This might be achieved by differentiating participants according to an initial assessment of hardiness, and then interviewing them about their developmental experiences in sport. From these retrospective interviews the factors that helped build hardiness might be further elaborated. Taking this concept further, if these contributing factors can be clarified, it would follow that a longitudinal intervention or

observational study with junior or 'development stage' athletes might then provide examples of

the development of these attitudes in situ. Such a study might be extended to provide insight into

the interpersonal factors that the present study suggests may also enhance hardiness, by looking

at the behaviours of key supporters around the athletes. Such insights may help guide the work

not just of psychologists supporting developing athletes directly but also those responsible for

setting coaching and learning environments in sport.

In this study, the participants described a diverse range of organisational and

performance stressors. It was not clear whether the two participants were able to generalise their

hardiness development across from particular, focused stressors, onto other stressors in other

domains. From the results of the current study, and the literature reviewed here, it remains

unclear whether hardiness developed in the sport domain would carry over into other domains,

for example family life, non-sport workplaces, or study. Given the wide array of possible

stressors in sport (Hanton et al., 2005) further intervention studies with athletes might consider

outcome variables, such as coping behaviour, or performance, across a range of domains.

Concluding Remarks

The aims of this study were to investigate how an applied psychology intervention to

improve hardiness would affect the way that athletes coped with stressors in their elite sport

environment, and to understand how hardiness would contribute to both their subjective

experience and their performance. The main findings were that hardiness largely had the

predicted relationship with subjective stress, but that the different hardiness facets of Challenge,

Control and Commitment had more complex relationships with each other over time, and were

less stable, than expected. A 'Connection' facet to hardiness was discussed, given that personal

and professional relationships showed a complex relationship with stress-related cognitions, emotions, and behaviour. This research has raised some interesting questions and I hope that other researchers will be stimulated to follow these up in the future.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS FORM

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study into **improving hardiness**.

As a rugby player you may have heard people talk about 'mental toughness' and 'hardiness', but what is this? And if it makes you a better player, how can you develop this ability?

Hardiness is about how you react when faced with tough situations, in sport and life. Research with the best representative players shows us that hardier players typically see a stressful situation as:

- a challenge to develop and learn rather than as a threat,
- something that can be controlled through your own choices and actions,
- a challenge you can engage in actively rather than withdraw from, or avoid.

Hardiness can be improved and built up, and can help you feel more confident, optimistic and positive in the face of stress.

You are invited to participate in a programme that focuses on how you can improve your mental skills, at the same time as you improve your physical skills and your conditioning. Like in other areas, mental skills take some practice to get right, but once mastered can be used to your advantage. The different activities involved in the study are outlined below.

Procedures:

1. **Initial interview**. We will discuss some of the highs and lows of your professional career so far. We will focus on what have been the stressful situations you have had to deal with both on the field in training and games, and off the field in club life and beyond.
    We will discuss how you approach these situations, and see if there are ways you could approach situations differently to optimise your performance, enjoyment and satisfaction.

2. **Questionnaire.** This is a brief 18-item questionnaire that will give me a more detailed understanding of how you cope with difficulties, and we will discuss the results in further sessions.

3. **Personal Development Programme**. Based on our initial discussion, we will identify areas to work on, and this will be focused on a series of 1-to-1 confidential meetings every 2 to 3 weeks, based on your preferences and availability. These sessions will be guided by you, based on the priorities we set out at the start.

4. **Review**. At an agreed point during the season, we will have a review interview similar to the one at the start of the programme. Here we will look at progress over the course of the season, development, and identify career and personal goals going forward. You'll also fill in the questionnaire used at the start again, to give an appreciation of your development during the programme.

5. **Write up. All interview, one-to-one and questionnaire material in this programme will be confidential between you and us.** At the end of the programme, I will be analysing all the interviews and questionnaires. The purpose of this is to communicate to other sport psychologists and students the ways in which the programme has helped players develop as professionals in their sport, and ways in which it could be improved in

the future. All names, specific details and any references that identify individuals and the club will be removed. The write-up will be submitted at Victoria University as part of Campbell's professional development in sport psychology, towards the award of Doctor of Sport Psychology.

6. **Debrief.** After the programme has finished, we will meet up for a debriefing session. This is also a chance for you to ask any outstanding questions you have about the programme, and about next steps.

Risks and Concerns:

It is natural that you may be concerned that the information you provide could compromise your position because it may point to mistakes made in the past by either yourself or others involved with the club. Please be aware that all the information you provide will only be used for the purpose of the study, and will be stored under lock and key, will only be accessed by the research investigators (Campbell, and Professor Tony Morris – a sport psychologist at Victoria University who oversees Campbell's work), and will be altered so that players, coaches and sports medicine personnel cannot be identified.

During the interview Campbell will ask you about areas of stress in your life and ways in which you cope with that stress. As such you may be recalling quite personal experiences, and some people find this brings about some difficult emotions. If you do find anything upsetting to the point that you do not wish to continue, you can end the interview and postpone it until a convenient time. Please remember that participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time without completion of the interview.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research

CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I**,**

of

(your address here)

certify that I am at least 18 years old and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to

participate in the study entitled:

Improving Hardiness in Elite Rugby League Players

being conducted at Victoria University by:

Campbell Thompson and Professor Tony Morris.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated

with the procedures listed to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by

Campbell Thompson and that I freely consent to participation involving the use on me of these

procedures.

Procedures:

1. **Initial interview**.
2. **Questionnaire**
3. **Personal Development Programme**.
4. **Review**.
5. **Write up.**
6. **Debrief**

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher (Name: Campbell Thompson ph. 0405675112 or Tony Morris 99195353). If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Industry & Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428,

Melbourne VIC 8001 (telephone no: 03-99194148).