

The traditional psychopathological research of adversity has led to a deficit- and treatment-oriented approach to adversity and its effects. However, even though adversities are distressing, negative experiences in the first place, they also inherit resilience and well-being enhancing opportunities which can foster a more fulfilled life under the right circumstances. The aims of this mixed-methods project were to review the research on ‘optimal’ adversity, and to empirically investigate the potential positive psychological effects of severe early-life and ‘optimal’ later-life adversity for successful aging.

The first study systematically reviewed the literature on a potential ‘optimal’ level of adversity for human resilience and wellbeing using curvilinear analyses. A moderate level of adversity was found to be associated with higher resilience and better wellbeing compared to higher and lower levels of adversity. The second study investigated potential age-specific salutogenic effects of ‘optimal’ adversity in later life. It was found that a moderate level of adverse experiences can support successful aging by supporting the maintenance of central psychological resilience resources and satisfaction with life while lower levels led to a decrease and higher levels to an increase. The third study investigated if a subgroup of the Swiss *Verdingkinder* (former indentured child laborers) was able to age successful not despite, but potentially because of its childhood experiences. Three overall factors emerged that were reported as supportive of successful aging: lightheartedness including effective stress-management, lifelong self-enhancement such as cognitive engagement and learning, and social mindedness such as altruism and helping others in need. Hence, this study showed that known supportive factors of successful aging can be the result of early-life adversity. Several underlying mechanisms and intervening factors of this relationship were identified.

In sum, this thesis gives further evidence for the salutogenic effects of adversity and that inevitable challenges of life can be an opportunity for thriving. It further shows that some moderate level of adversity might be a necessity for human resilience and positive development.