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Integrating Multiple Perspectives Into the Study of Resilience

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Resilience has become a popular buzzword in society today, both inside and outside academia. If you look at the mission statement of most companies nowadays, you are likely to come across some form of the term resilience. The United States Army has adopted The Ready and Resilient Campaign,

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which seeks to build and maintain resilience across all forces and integrate resilience into the culture of the U.S. Army so that improvements can be made in soldier resilience and unit readiness.

Whether academics buy into the concept of resilience or not, if we want to bridge the gap between science and practice, we must also let our work be informed by the applied world. As industrial–organizational (I-O) psychologists, we should keep in mind what is happening in the applied world and seek to ensure that the information and methods used are valid, reliable, and supported by research.

Although I agree with the focal authors' viewpoint (Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, & Klieger, 2016), I believe that by only comparing resiliency with the concept of hardiness, the discussion is missing out on similar research taking place outside psychology. To capture and clarify the construct of resilience, we must not ignore other researchers' work studying very similar constructs simply because they are not in our field of expertise.

Constructs similar to resilience are studied in sport psychology, education, and health, which should not be ignored in resilience discussions. I posit that research in this area has led to the emergence of constructs that are very similar to each other but are labeled as distinct constructs, resulting in the construct labels of hardiness, mental toughness, grit, and resilience. This then leads to several constructs emerging that all refer to the same underlying conceptions, known in academia as the jangle fallacy (Kelley, 1927).

To solve the jangle fallacy currently impeding the conceptual clarity of the construct, I will compile these research streams and integrate them into the study of resilience. In the paragraphs to follow, I will briefly review hardiness, mental toughness, and grit, as well as their similarities to and differences from resilience, and provide future research directions.

The Construct of Hardiness

Hardiness is the oldest of the four constructs and the seminal work on hardiness was done by Kobasa (1979) in the field of health and focused on studying why some people did not fall ill despite being under considerable stress. Kobasa (1979) found that what he termed the “hardy individual” holds three important personal characteristics: challenge, commitment, and control.

Individuals high on hardiness have an unshakeable sense of meaningfulness and purpose in life (challenge), attack life in a more active manner, and align their reactions to stressful events in line with their values, goals, and capabilities (commitment). Because of the above, hardy individuals perceive negative events as under their control, which allows them to reframe these events as positive opportunities for growth and personal development (Kobasa, 1979). Mosley and Laborde (2015) conceptualized it as a personality trait that helps an individual cope with and withstand stressful events

by engaging in active coping techniques such as reframing the event as an opportunity rather than a threat, which forms a pathway for resilience when faced with stressful events.

The Construct of Mental Toughness

Mental toughness emerged from sport psychology, and in the broadest sense of the term, it refers to several positive psychological variables that help to buffer the harmful effects of stress and allow individuals to perform consistently well regardless of the context (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002). Clough et al. (2002) introduced the 4Cs model of mental toughness, which includes all three components of hardiness, including challenge, commitment, and control, but elaborates further by adding a fourth component, confidence. The added component of confidence refers to an individual's tendency to have high levels of self-belief (Clough et al., 2002).

Mental toughness has been conceptualized as a positive psychological characteristic that provides individuals with the resources to cope and perform under stress but also allows them to approach stress in a more constructive manner (Crust, 2007; Gucciardi & Jones, 2012; Mosley & Laborde, 2015). This conceptualization allows researchers to envision the application of mental toughness to performance in domains other than sports, the most relevant of which to I-O psychology is the workplace.

The Construct of Grit

Grit is the newest addition to the literature and is conceptualized as an individual trait resulting in perseverance and passion for long-term goals. (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). This includes strenuously working toward challenges and maintaining effort despite failure, adversity, and plateaus (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Grit is associated with several outcomes in the domain of education, including lifetime educational attainment, academic performance, graduation from high school, and rank in the National Spelling Bee (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsson, 2011; Duckworth et al., 2007). Of more interest to I-O psychology, grit has also been predictive of the retention of United States Military Academy cadets in the long term, over and above the traditional predictors of SAT scores and high school rank (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit has also been predictive of retention in a military selection course and the retention of sales representatives in their current job 3 months later (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014). As far as training interventions goes, it is argued that grit can be trained, but to our knowledge, formal training programs do not currently exist.

Similarities and Differences Between Mental Toughness, Grit, Hardiness, and Resilience

Whereas hardiness is made up of the three factors of commitment, control, and challenge, mental toughness is a broader construct that includes other characteristics such as confidence. Mental toughness is thought to incorporate hardy qualities and perhaps be one and the same (Clough, et al., 2002). According to Clough et al. (2002), hardiness only differs from mental toughness because hardiness is not equipped to capture both the mental and physical demands that often accompany the competitive sport domain. The construct of grit predominately focuses on perseverance and achievement of long-term goals, while mental toughness is much broader and encompasses how individuals might have the ability to persevere and achieve their goals.

While subtle differences exist between resilience, mental toughness, grit, and hardiness, there are also many more similarities between them that provide evidence for overlapping construct dimensions and that warrant further study. All four constructs include the higher order themes of perseverance, determination, commitment, coping ability, discipline, and goal orientation. As stated above, all four constructs also lead to the appraisal of stressful events as challenge stressors rather than hindrance stressors. By appraising stressors as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat, individuals tend to adopt more approach-focused coping strategies, leading to positive adaptations when faced with stressful situations. All four constructs are also hypothesized to be malleable and therefore subject to improvement through training and experience.

I argue that a composite personality characteristic based on constructs such as hardiness, mental toughness, resilience, and grit may exist that allows individuals to appraise stressors as challenges under their control that line up with their goals and values. Framing stressors this way leads to the adoption of more problem-focused coping strategies, thereby allowing individuals to persist and persevere toward long-term goals, even in the face of obstacles.

Future research should examine the degree of overlap or similarity between the constructs of mental toughness, resilience, grit, and hardiness to further understand how individuals cope with stressful events in their lives. Before we delve deeper into the study of resilience in the workplace, we need to first clearly understand both what resilience is and what it is not by comparing it with existing constructs from other fields, including mental toughness, grit, and hardiness.

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Extending the Conversation: Employee Resilience at the Team Level

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In the focal article, Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016) are rightfully concerned that the topic of resilience may become a “quicksand” term that is used by different audiences in different manners. However, we

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