



## Inner strength—A theoretical analysis of salutogenic concepts

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Theoretical and empirical overlaps between the concepts of resilience, sense of coherence, hardiness, purpose in life, and self-transcendence have earlier been described as some kind of inner strength, but no studies have been found that focus on what attributes these concepts have in common.

**Objectives:** The objective of this study was to perform a theoretical analysis of the concepts of resilience, sense of coherence, hardiness, purpose in life, and self-transcendence, in order to identify their core dimensions in an attempt to get an overarching understanding of inner strength.

**Print method:** An analysis inspired by the procedure of meta-theory construction was performed. The main questions underlying the development of the concepts, the major paradigms and the most prominent assumptions, the critical attributes and the characteristics of the various concepts were identified.

**Results:** The analysis resulted in the identification of four core dimensions of inner strength and the understanding that inner strength relies on the interaction of these dimensions: connectedness, firmness, flexibility, and creativity. These dimensions were validated through comparison with the original descriptions of the concepts.

**Conclusion:** An overarching understanding of inner strength is that it means both to stand steady, to be firm, with both feet on the ground and to be connected to; family, friends, society, nature and spiritual dimensions and to be able to transcend. Having inner strength is to be creative and stretchable, which is to believe in own possibilities to act and to make choices and influence life's trajectory in a perceived meaningful direction. Inner strength is to shoulder responsibility for oneself and others, to endure and deal with difficulties and adversities. This knowledge about inner strength will raise the awareness of the concept and, in turn, hopefully increase our potential to support people's inner strength.

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### What is already known about the topic

- Inner strength is a human resource that promotes well-being, involves healing and is connected to health.
- Resilience, sense of coherence, hardiness, purpose in life and self-transcendence are inner resources of importance for recovery after adversities.

- There are statistical and logical associations between the concepts.

### What this paper adds

- The attributes that resilience, sense of coherence, hardiness, purpose in life and self-transcendence have in common.
- Inner strength relies on the interaction of the dimensions: connectedness, firmness, flexibility, and creativity.

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- Having inner strength means to stand steady, to be firm, to be connected, and to be able to transcend.

## 1. Introduction

People have resources to survive, grow, and mature, as people have abilities to resist adversities, endure suffering, and experience a good life in spite of harsh conditions. The ways people succeed in facing difficulties, such as prolonged illness, functional decline, grief, and loss, vary according to life circumstances and personal capacities and other resources. Inspired by the procedure of meta-theory as articulated by Paterson et al. (2001) we will explicate the theoretical foundations of the concepts of *resilience*, *sense of coherence*, *hardiness*, *purpose in life*, and *self-transcendence* as presented in relevant research. Our purpose is to identify core dimensions in order to reach an overarching understanding of people's inner resources. We hope that better understanding of the essentials of these inner resources will increase awareness of what may contribute to the ability to cope with adversities.

Our interest in people's inner resources and strengths stems from ideas raised in the Umeå 85+ project, where the oldest old people's strengths as well as their physical and mental limitations, are elucidated. The inclusion criteria were that the participants should be aged 85, 90, or 95 or older in the year the study was carried out, and living in a county in northern Sweden that includes both a medium-sized town and rural areas. Of the 527 people who were identified as belonging to the target group, 363 agreed to participate in the medical examinations, of these, 203 participants were capable to answer four questionnaires measuring various inner resources (resilience, sense of coherence, purpose in life, and self-transcendence). The project applies a salutogenic perspective and focuses on successful aging or experiences of health, well-being, and life meaning (e.g. Nygren et al., 2005; Aléx et al., 2006a; Santamäki Fischer et al., 2007a), as well as threats against successful aging described in terms of diseases, cognitive and physical decline, and malnutrition (e.g. Bergdahl et al., 2005; von Heideken Wägert et al., 2005, 2006). A study by Nygren et al. (2005) showed statistically significant correlations between scores on the Resilience Scale (Wagnild and Young, 1993), Sense of Coherence Scale (Antonovsky, 1988), Purpose in Life Scale (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964), and Self-transcendence Scale (Reed, 1986). The researchers proposed that these correlations indicate some common dimension of inner strength. There are, however, concepts other than and overlapping the above-mentioned concepts, among them *hardiness* (Kobasa, 1979), a concept commonly used in relation to the concepts mentioned above and to personal strengths (Maddi et al., 2006) that we felt should also be included in our analysis.

Theoretical and empirical overlaps between some of the above-mentioned concepts have been previously described, most frequently between sense of coherence and hardiness (e.g. Sullivan, 1993; Stämpfer, 1995), but also between hardiness and resilience (e.g. Bonanno, 2004); sense of coherence, hardiness, and resilience (e.g. Almedom, 2005), and self-transcendence, purpose in life,

and sense of coherence (e.g. Coward, 1996). Characteristics of people with a high degree of sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1988) are almost the same as those of people with high degree resilience (Jackson et al., 2007). Thus, reasonably the qualities of resilience, sense of coherence, hardiness, purpose in life, and self-transcendence are related. Despite these demonstrated overlaps, however, no studies have been found that focus on what these qualities have in common.

### 1.1. Theoretical background of the concepts under study

*Resilience* has been understood as a kind of plasticity influencing the ability to recover and achieve psychosocial balance after adverse experiences (Werner and Smith, 1982; Rutter, 1987; Richardson, 2002). Resilience is a protective mechanism (Staudinger et al., 1993; Dyer and McGuinness, 1996).

In the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century, research has increasingly focused on adults and older people (e.g., Staudinger and Fleeson, 1996; Nygren et al., 2005). Several questionnaires to measure resilience have been developed, including that of Wagnild and Young (1993), who identified five interrelated components that constitute resilience: equanimity, perseverance, self-reliance, meaningfulness, and existential aloneness. A recent factor analysis confirmed this result (Lundman et al., 2007). Resilience has been found to be an adaptive quality that can be activated to contribute to the maintenance of independent functioning and well-being and to decrease the risk of becoming depressed (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Aroian and Norris, 2002).

*Sense of coherence* is described as a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring – though dynamic – feeling of confidence that the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environment are structured, predictable, and explicable (comprehensibility); that resources are available to meet the demands posed by these stimuli (manageability); and that these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (meaningfulness) (Antonovsky, 1988; Lindström and Eriksson, 2006). The salutogenic idea of sense of coherence stems from Antonovsky's interest in research on social class, health, and the impact of stress on health and resistant resources later in life (Lindström and Eriksson, 2006). Antonovsky (1988) described a fundamental turning point in his work when he found that many of the survivors of concentration camps were in quite good overall emotional health in their middle age. The ruling paradigm during that time focused on disease and risk factors. Antonovsky stated that disease and stress can occur everywhere and all the time. The question of how people can survive in spite of high levels of stress resulted in research on resistant resources and development of the sense of coherence concept. A questionnaire was designed to measure coherence and it has been used throughout the world in various contexts and with people of various ages (Lindström and Eriksson, 2006; Eriksson, 2007). The most striking finding in this research is the relation between a strong sense of coherence and health (e.g. Antonovsky, 1985; Lundberg, 1997; Eriksson and Lindström, 2006).

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