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Resilience and Big Five personality traits: A meta-analysis☆

Atsushi Oshio[a,*], Kanako Taku[b], Mari Hirano[c], Gul Saeed[d]

[a] Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan
[b] Department of Psychology, Oakland University, MI, USA
[c] Faculty of Humanities, Tokyo Kasei University, Tokyo, Japan
[d] Department of Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The current review synthesized studies investigating the relationships between resilience and Big Five personality traits and aimed to investigate how the relationships vary according to the two types of resiliency, psychological resilience and ego-resiliency. Thirty studies with a total sample size of 15,609 met the inclusion criteria to be used for the current meta-analysis. Results indicated that overall, estimated average correlation coefficients for resilience were: $r = -0.46$ with Neuroticism, $r = 0.42$ for Extraversion, $r = 0.34$ for Openness, $r = 0.31$ for Agreeableness, and $r = 0.42$ for Conscientiousness. When comparing the differences between the two types of resiliency, a stronger negative relationship with Neuroticism, and stronger positive relationships with Openness and Agreeableness were obtained with ego-resiliency, compared with trait resilience. However, there was a lack of homogeneity in effect sizes across studies especially for ego-resilience. Directions for future research regarding resilience and the limitations of present research are discussed.

1. Introduction

After a highly stressful and potentially traumatic life event, some people adjust well by showing a stable trajectory with healthy functioning, while some people may experience distress in the immediate aftermath of the event. This phenomenon is referred to as resilience, a dynamic process that encompasses positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience involves the capacity, processes, and/or outcomes of successful adaptation in the context of significant threats to functioning or development (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Resilience or "psychological resilience" (see Bonanno, Romero, & Klein, 2015, for review) is, however, a complex construct that involves traits, outcomes, and processes related to recovery, and thus it has been defined differently in the context of individuals, families, organizations, societies, and cultures (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). One such perspective focuses on resilience as personality characteristics that moderate the negative effects of stress and promote adaptation. However even from this perspective, there have been two approaches—ego-resiliency (Block & Turula, 1963) and trait resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006; Wagnild & Young, 1993).

1.1. Ego-resiliency

The first approach, ego-resiliency, is derived from the theoretical model of personality development that was formulated by Block and his colleagues, which centered on two fundamental constructs: ego-control and ego-resiliency (Block, 2002; Block & Turula, 1963). Ego-control refers to the individual's characteristic response to behavioral or attentive impulses. Specifically, an *undercontroller* tends to be highly expressive or attentive to internal pushes and pulls, whereas *overcontroller* tends to be constricted in behavioral or attentive impulses, and thus constrained and disciplined (Letzring, Block, & Funder, 2005). This dimension reflects different life styles and has been indicated to be unrelated to adjustment or competence, as they both tend to be maladaptive. Laufer, Johnson, and Hogan (1981), for example, showed that the dimension of ego control discriminates drug offenders from murderers. Drug offenders showed lower ego control and were more impulsive and changeable, whereas murderers were more controlled, conservative, and preferred familiarity, structure, and order.

In contrast, ego-resiliency refers to the individual's adaptive reserve, a dynamic ability to temporarily change the reactions and perceptions to meet the situational demands of life. Ego-resiliency modifies the level of control in response to the environmental context. Ego-resilient people would reduce or increase behavioral control and expand or

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* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, Waseda University, 1-24-1 Toyama, Shinjuku, Tokyo 162-8644, Japan.
E-mail address: oshio.at@waseda.jp (A. Oshio).

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narrow attention to regress and progress in the service of the ego (Block & Block, 2006). Individuals at the higher end of ego-resiliency are, therefore, often resourceful in adapting to novel situations. They are capable of shifting their behaviors with a versatile set of cognitive and social procedures in the search for adaptation and are generally quick to adapt to changes. Conversely, those at the lower end tend to be brittle and exhibit little adaptive flexibility when encountering novel or stressful situations, and therefore, have difficulty in recovering from stress. Causadias, Salvatore, and Sroufe (2012), for instance, used a longitudinal study and demonstrated that ego-resiliency, but not ego-control, was a powerful predictor of adaptive functioning later in life. Overall, highly resilient people are more likely to be competent and comfortable in the fuzzy interpersonal world (Block & Kremen, 1996). Causadias et al. (2012) also suggested that when confronted by stressful circumstances, people with a low level of resiliency may act in a stiff and perseverative manner or chaotically and diffusely, and in either case, the resulting behavior is likely to be maladaptive.

By taking a typological approach, three basic personality types have been identified in the literature: ego-resilients, vulnerable over-controllers, and unsettled undercontrollers (Robins, John, Caspi, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996; Steca, Alessandri, & Caprara, 2010). The findings about these three types have been replicated in cross-cultural studies (Alessandri et al., 2014; Specht, Luhmann, & Geiser, 2014). Four types have been also found by applying cluster analysis, namely (1) those with high ego-resiliency and low ego-control, (2) those with above-average ego-resiliency and high ego-control, (3) those with below-average ego-resiliency and low ego-control, and (4) those with low ego-resiliency and high ego-control (Gramzow et al., 2004).This four-profile configuration of personality types has been validated, and more recently, have been suggested to provide greater coherence and predictive ability than the three-profile model (Isler, Fletcher, Liu, & Sibley, 2017; Isler, Liu, Sibley, & Fletcher, 2016).

1.2. Trait resilience

The second approach has been derived from a series of studies focusing on trait orientation or personality characteristics of resiliency (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Ong et al., 2006). Wagnild and Young (1993) defined resilience as a positive personality characteristic that enhances individual adaptation. These authors developed the Resilience Scale. Unlike the concept of ego-resiliency that was developed to capture the wide range of individual differences as a continuum from ego-brittle to ego-resilient, their 25-item Resilience Scale was developed by identifying the characteristics that are typically observed among people, mostly adults, who had adapted successfully following a major life event. The Resilience Scale items were originally selected from the theoretical definition to reflect five components of resilience by using the theoretical definition, namely equanimity (a balanced perspective of life and experiences), perseverance (willingness to continue the struggle to reconstruct one's life and remain involved in the midst of adversity), self-reliance (being able to rely on one's own strengths and capabilities), meaningfulness (realization that life has a purpose and recognition that there is something for which to live for), and existential aloneness (realization that each person is unique and that while some experiences can be shared, others must be faced alone). Although two-factor structure—acceptance of self and life, and individual competence—was found for a sample of adults, most studies use the overall score to reflect the characteristics of resilience (see Wagnild, 2009a, for review). This is consistent with the studies using the 14-item version (Wagnild, 2009b), which also relies on the overall score (Aiena, Baczwaski, Schulenberg, & Buchanan, 2015).

Similarly, Connor and Davidson (2003) developed the self-rated assessment scale, the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), but emphasize the aspect of ability or capacity to successfully cope with the adversity. The contents of the Scale were drawn from several studies, including the concept of hardiness (strong commitment and control; Kobasa, 1979); protective factors for mental disorders possibly triggered by the negative life experiences; adaptability to change, self-efficacy, sense of humor, and support of others (Rutter, 1985); and positive adjustment following trauma, that is, resilience (Lyons, 1991). By reflecting the numerous theory-based aspects, resilience has been considered a multi-dimensional concept (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Although the CD-RISC is used to assess the resilience for treatment, it has also been widely used to assess the resilience as a personality trait (Benetti & Kambouropoulos, 2006).

In addition, Oshio and his colleagues developed the Adolescent Resilience Scale to measure the psychological features of resilient adolescents (Oshio, Kaneko, Nagamine, & Nakaya, 2003; Oshio, Nakaya, Kaneko, & Nagamine, 2002). The scale contains 21 items with a three-factor structure (Novelty Seeking, Emotional Regulation, and Positive Future Orientation), derived from the literature (Rutter & Quinton, 1984; Thompson, 1994; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Although this scale was originally designed for Japanese youth; it has been translated into multiple languages and applied in other populations.

There are other resiliency scales (see Prince-Embury, Saklofske, & Vesely, 2015), such as the Resilience Scale for Adults (Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003) and the Resiliency Scale for Young Adults (Prince-Embury, Saklofske, & Nordstokke, 2017), which focus on the resources that protect against the development of psychiatric disturbances and promote resilience. Although some differences should be noted (e.g., the Resilience Scale for Adults includes the measurement of social factors known to be essential to withstand life stress), overall, all these scales are all assessing the individual characteristics that are associated with the status of being resilient.

In sum, trait resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Oshio et al., 2003; Wagnild & Young, 1993) has been studied by identifying the personality characteristics and abilities that are specific to those who are able to successfully cope with a highly stressful life event. On the other hand, ego-resiliency (Block & Turula, 1963) has been studied by using the scales that are designed to evaluate more general psychological characteristics, such as the California Q-set (Funder, Block, & Block, 1983; Westenberg & Block, 1993). The California Q-set, for instance, consists of 100 statements about personality and social characteristics. Similarities between the participants' actual Q descriptions and the criteria that was pre-determined by researchers to indicate prototypical ego-resilient individuals are used as an index (Funder & Block, 1989). Other scales directly measuring ego-resiliency, such as the Ego-Resiliency Scale (Block & Kremen, 1996; Vecchione, Alessandri, Barbaranelli, & Gerbino, 2010), were also derived from non-specific psychological inventories, including the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1956) and Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway & McKinley, 1951). This is different from the way the measurements were developed to assess trait resilience.

1.3. Present study

Ego-resiliency and trait resilience are grounded on different theoretical backgrounds, even though they both capture the individual differences in resiliency. The constructs of ego-resiliency emphasize normative development in personality during the childhood (Huey & Weisz, 1997), invoking as modulating the desires of the individual to adapt to external restrictions and constraints (Block & Block, 1980; Block & Kremen, 1996). Research on trait resilience, on the other hand, has been developed by focusing on children who show good adjustment in the face of risk or adversity (Masten, 2001). Studies have summarized the differences between ego-resiliency and trait resilience by focusing on their assessment and the methodological standpoints of assessments (Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011). However, little research has been conducted to conceptually understand the differences between these two constructs to further clarify the nature of resiliency as a personality characteristic. The purpose of the current study is to examine the differences between ego-resiliency and trait resilience by