Ordinary Magic, Extraordinary Performance:

Psychological Resilience and Thriving in High Achievers

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1   Abstract

2   Although resilience has been referred to as "ordinary magic" (Masten, 2001, p. 227) that is

3   more common than once thought, the majority of research in this area has sampled

4   individuals who have been required to react to potentially traumatic events outside of their

5   control. The findings of this work, however, are not easily applicable to those who *actively*

6   *seek* to engage with challenging situations that present opportunities for them to raise their

7   performance level. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to identify and explore resilient

8   qualities that enable high achievers to thrive and perform at extraordinary levels. Thirteen

9   high achievers (9 male and 4 female) from eleven professions were interviewed in the UK,

10   and interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to identify resilient qualities that

11   enabled the participants to thrive in pressured environments. Results revealed six

12   superordinate themes that characterized resilience and thriving: positive and proactive

13   personality, experience and learning, sense of control, flexibility and adaptability, balance

14   and perspective, and perceived social support. The data highlights the multifaceted nature of

15   resilience comprising a constellation of personal qualities that enable high achievers to excel

16   in demanding contexts. The themes are discussed in relation to previous research findings and

17   in terms of their implications for practicing psychologists. It is anticipated that these themes

18   will provide practitioners with an insight into the distinct features of resilience and thriving in

19   high achievers and help individuals to attain success and well-being in their careers.

20   *Keywords:* excellence, human performance, protective factors, resilient qualities,

21   work stress.

22

1   Ordinary Magic, Extraordinary Performance:

2   Psychological Resilience and Thriving in High Achievers

3   Resilience – the capacity to cope with stress and catastrophe – is the hottest new topic

4   in psychology, medicine and social sciences . . . Resilience is a critical skill. In a

5   stressful, fast-changing world it can even help inoculate against mental illness while

6   boosting achievement levels and productivity (Hoggard, 2009, p. 35)

7   Comments such as the above by Liz Hoggard, a journalist based in the United

8 Kingdom, illustrate that resilience is gathering popularity as a topic of inquiry in the

9 psychosocial sciences. In her seminal paper, Masten (2001) discussed resilience processes in

10 human development and concluded that, contrary to popular mass media and scholarly work

11 portrayal, resilience is a common phenomenon. She argued that resilience does not come

12 from rare and special qualities, but from "the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human

13 resources" (p. 235). Bonanno (2004) supported this perspective, reviewing evidence

14 indicating that the majority of individuals exposed to potentially traumatic events do not

15 exhibit chronic symptom profiles and that many show the type of healthy functioning

16 associated with resilience (see also Bonanno, 2012; Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2011).

17   Within the field of psychology, resilience has been defined as a "dynamic process

18 encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar,

19 Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543) and as "the positive role of individual differences in

20 people's response to stress and adversity" (Rutter, 1987, p. 316). These individual

21 differences, which are more commonly referred to as protective factors in the literature, have

22 been examined by scholars seeking to identify the qualities of resilient individuals (see, for a

23 review, Luthar, 2006; Masten & Reed, 2002; Rutter, 2000). In terms of the extant research in

24 this area, studies have typically been conducted with high-risk children, adults, families, and

25 communities that have been exposed to difficult circumstances in their lives, such as

1   terrorism (Moscardino, Axia, Scrimin, & Capello, 2007), natural disaster (Rajkumar,

2   Premkumar, & Tharyan, 2008), serious illness (Betancourt et al., 2011), and political violence

3   (Gelkopf, Berger, Bleich, & Silver, 2012). Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) recently observed that

4   the majority of resilience research has sampled individuals who have been required to react to

5   potentially traumatic events outside of their control. They pointed out, however, that the

6   findings of this work are not easily applicable to those who *actively seek* to engage with

7   challenging situations that present opportunities for them to raise their performance level.

8   This enhanced level of functioning is conceived, in the present study, to reflect the construct

9   of thriving (cf. Carver, 1998).

10   In one of the first papers to discuss the potential links and distinctions between

11   resilience and thriving, Carver (1998) noted that resilience is similar to thriving in that they

12   both reflect a capacity for positive adaptation (see also Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). In

13   differentiating between the constructs, he suggested that the term resilience denotes a

14   restoration to healthy levels of functioning, whereas thriving refers to the ability of

15   individuals to function at a consistently higher level. Carver further argued that, in contrast to

16   resilience, "thriving . . . does not depend on the occurrence of a discrete traumatic event or

17   longer term trauma" (p. 245). Similarly, when distinguishing between resilience and thriving,

18   Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, and Grant (2005) observed that the

19   conceptualization of resilience typically encompasses adversity, whereas "thriving can occur

20   with or without adversity" (p. 358). Thus, resilience refers to the ability to maintain relatively

21   stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning following an adverse event

22   (cf. Bonanno, 2004), whereas thriving represents a consistently higher level of functioning

23   that is not necessarily dependent on the occurrence of a potentially traumatic event (cf.

24   Carver, 1998).

25   In recent years, the construct of thriving has been conceptually refined in relation to

lifespan development (Benson, & Scales, 2009; Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010) and

work performance (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012).

Most recently, Porath et al. (2012) developed and validated a measure of thriving at work.

They found support for a two-dimensional structure of thriving; namely, the experience of

vitality and learning. Furthermore, they reported evidence for the convergent and

discriminant validity of the measure by comparing thriving to theoretically related constructs,

comprising positive and negative affect, learning and performance goal orientations,

proactive personality, and core self-evaluations. They also established a link between

thriving and adaptive behaviors, including career development initiative and individual job

performance.

        Although the concept of thriving has received a modest amount of empirical attention,

psychological resilience has been more widely researched across a variety of performance

domains, such as sport (see, e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), business organizations (see, e.g.,

Gittell, Cameron, Lim & Rivas, 2006), law enforcement (see, e.g., Miller, 2008), medical

services (see, e.g., Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007), military institutions (see, e.g.,

Reivich, Seligman, & McBridge, 2011), and education (see, e.g., Reis, Colbert, & Hebert,

2005). In one of the few sport-related resilience studies, Martin-Krummm, Sarazzin,

Peterson, and Framose (2003) examined the relationship between explanatory style and

resilience in a group of recreational basketball players. Following failure feedback in a

dribbling task, optimistic participants were found to be more confident, less anxious, and

perform better, than pessimistic participants. Although this study demonstrates the processes

by which explanatory style affects sport performance, it is not without its limitations. Firstly,

the study focused on a single psychological attribute (viz. explanatory style) which precluded

participants from providing a more complete insight into resilient qualities. Secondly, the

findings of this work were based on recreational athletes and it would not be appropriate to

1   generalize to athletes who perform at higher competitive levels.

2   Turning to the business context, researchers have sought to identify the factors that

3   promote organizational resilience (see, e.g., Gittell et al., 2006; Lengnick-Hall, Beck, &

4   Lengnick-Hall, 2011). These qualities include: a climate of reciprocal trust and

5   interdependence, problem solving processes tied to organizational learning, and human

6   resource flexibility. Regarding studies that have searched for the attributes that protect

7   employees from the stressors they encounter, only a limited number of articles have been

8   published and these have typically lacked an underpinning evidence-base (see, Coutu 2002;

9   Sonnenfeld & Ward, 2008). To illustrate, based on her personal musings and a cursory

10   perusal of the literature, Coutu (2002) concluded that resilient employees possess three main

11   characteristics: the ability to face reality with staunchness, to find meaning out of hardship,

12   and to improvise solutions.

13   Researchers have begun to investigate the construct of resilience in the law

14   enforcement and medical services (see, e.g., Ablett & Jones, 2007; Miller, 2008; Jackson et

15   al., 2007; Paton et al., 2008). For example, Miller (2008) identified a core set of protective

16   factors in police officers such as a learning attitude towards the profession, adequate

17   emotional control, a sense of optimism, and the willingness to seek help from others.

18   Moreover, in a study of operating room nurses, five variables (viz. hope, self-efficacy,

19   coping, control, competence) were found to explain 60% of the variance in resilience

20   (Jackson et al., 2007). However, 40% of the variance was still unaccounted for and, therefore,

21   the authors recognized the need for more idiographic research to gain a better understanding

22   of resilience in medical personnel. In an attempt to address this issue, Ablett and Jones (2007)

23   identified and explored the resilient qualities of palliative care staff using the qualitative

24   method of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Ten themes emerged including an

25   active choice to work in palliative care, past personal experiences, personal attitudes towards

1   work, and aspects of job satisfaction.

2   What is becoming clear from the findings of resilience research across various

3   performance domains is that resilience is a pivotal capacity not only for individuals reacting

4   to potentially traumatic events, but also for those who choose to operate in demanding

5   environments (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Indeed, Coutu (2002) asserted that:

6   More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of

7   resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That's true in the cancer ward,

8   it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the boardroom (p. 47)

9   Despite this observation and the notion that resilience is a more common phenomenon

10   than previously thought, little is known about individuals' capacity to thrive on pressure and

11   perform at extraordinary levels. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to identify and

12   explore resilient qualities that enable high achievers to thrive in pressured environments.

13   **Method**

14   **Research Design**

15   This study was deemed best suited to qualitative methods in view of the scant

16   knowledge of psychological resilience and thriving in high achievers. As Bonnano (2012)

17   recently asserted, "qualitative studies of putatively resilient samples . . . provide a valuable

18   source of new ideas and information, especially in populations that have not yet benefited

19   from systematic study" (p. 755). Qualitative methods are also particularly appropriate for

20   better understanding the complexity of psychosocial phenomenon, such as resilience and

21   thriving in the context of high performance. Indeed, qualitative researchers in this area have

22   stated that such an approach can account for the specific context in which resilience and

23   thriving is manifested (see Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, & Fine, 1998; Ungar, 2003). In

24   terms of an underpinning philosophical orientation to this study, we develop knowledge

25   through a process of interpretation (i.e., epistemologically interpretivist) and believe in

1   retaining a balanced outlook (i.e., ontologically realist).

2   In this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith & Osborn, 2003)

3   was utilized to explore individuals' subjective experiences. The aim of IPA is to investigate

4   how people make sense of their personal world and has its origins in phenomenology,

5   hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The approach stems from a

6   phenomenological tradition that seeks to explore the meaning participants' impart on the

7   phenomenon being investigated (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). It

8   involves a two-part interpretation with hermeneutic influences whereby the participants are

9   trying to make sense of their world, and the researcher is trying to make sense of the

10   participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is idiographic

11   in its commitment to analyze each case in detail, and attempts to provide an indication of

12   theme convergence and divergence. Indeed, Smith (2011) asserted that "the best IPA studies

13   are concerned with . . . not only presenting both shared themes but also pointing to the

14   particular way in which these themes play out for individuals" (p. 10). The importance of the

15   narrative portrayal remains paramount in IPA with the final analysis providing a detailed

16   interpretative analysis of themes; this is in comparison to content analysis, which can produce

17   a quantitative analysis of discrete categories from qualitative data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

18   Furthermore, studies using IPA tend to employ purposive sampling; that is, the experiences

19   of the most appropriate persons for the research question being addressed are sought (cf.

20   Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). This is in contrast to other qualitative methods, such as

21   grounded theory, which employ theoretical sampling where the focus of the recruitment is

22   largely based on the emerging concepts until data saturation (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; cf.

23   O'Reilly & Parker; in press).

24   **Participants**

25   In relation to the main focus of the research study, participants were recruited based

on them demonstrating high levels of functioning, and encountering everyday challenges and

major life events during the course of their careers. Guiding the recruitment of the sample

was the definition of a high achiever as an individual who had achieved at a high level in his

or her performance domain (cf. Jones & Spooner, 2006). Although it is acknowledged that

this description contains an element of subjectivity, the participants in this study were

considered to be high achievers on the following grounds: five were recognized in the British

Queen's Honours List[1] for their contribution to their respective fields, two were members of

senior management teams in the London Metropolitan Police, two had received a number of

highly contested national awards in their particular professions, one was a partner of an

internationally recognized accountancy and professional services firm, another was a senior

Member of the UK Parliament, and one held two world records in his respective performance

domain. During the course of their careers, the participants had encountered various types of

everyday challenges including poor working conditions, high workload, demanding clients,

organizational politics, peer jealously, and workplace bullying. They had also experienced

major life events including serious financial difficulties, discrimination, divorce, and the

death of a significant other. Hence, and in line with IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003),

the participants in the study were considered to be homogenous in terms of their high levels

of achievement and their common ability to thrive whilst operating in demanding situations,

conditions, and circumstances.

The sample consisted of 13 high achievers (9 men and 4 women) who were recruited

from the following 11 performance domains: sport, business, law enforcement, medical

services, education, politics, entertainment, extreme environments, aviation and space, media

and creative arts, and the public non-profit sector. A wide range of performance domains

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[1] The British Queen's Honours List is part of the UK honours system where honours "are granted to deserving and high-achieving people from every section of the community . . . [and] . . . rewards people for merit, service or bravery" ("Queen and Honours", 2008/09).

1   were sampled to enable the exploration of convergence and divergence in line with IPA

2   guidelines (cf. Smith, 2011). The participants ranged in age from 25 to 68 ($M = 50.6$, $SD =$

3   12.3), had worked in their respective professions for between 8 and 40 years ($M = 26.4$, $SD =$

4   10.5), and were operating at a high level at the time of the study.

5   **Procedure**

6   Following institutional ethical approval, a database of potential participants who met

7   the selection criteria was systematically created, and contact details for each potential

8   participant were acquired. Potential participants were subsequently contacted by email. This

9   correspondence informed them of the purpose of the study, what it entailed for participants,

10   and invited them to participate in an interview. All of the potential participants accepted the

11   invitation and were re-contacted to arrange a mutually convenient time and location to meet.

12   All of the participants provided informed consent prior to the start of data collection. Semi-

13   structured interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author. More specifically, a

14   phenomenological interview was employed to identify and explore resilient qualities that

15   enabled the participants to thrive in pressured environments. This approach was chosen to

16   collect descriptions of the participants' everyday world and to elicit the meaning of the

17   described phenomena (viz. resilience and thriving) as it was experienced by the participants.

18   In a phenomenological semi-structured interview, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) noted, the

19   interviewer seeks to interpret the meaning of central themes in the participants' everyday

20   world whilst attempting to obtain open nuanced descriptions of different aspects of both the

21   participants' daily life and specific situations.

22   In order to better understand the participants' subjective experiences and facilitate the

23   interview process, an interview schedule was developed. A guide was produced in advance to

24   help the interviewer explicitly think about what might be covered in the interview (Smith &

25   Osborn, 2003). Consistent with IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003), this schedule did not

1   represent a rigid document, but rather a flexible set of evolutionary questions depending on

2   the direction taken by the participant during the course of the discussion (see the

3   supplementary material for a copy of the full interview guide). This flexible approach was

4   used, within a semi-structured format, to facilitate the participants' ability to tell their own

5   story in their own words, a central premise of IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). As Smith and

6   Osborn (2003) stated, "[because] IPA researchers wish to analyze in detail how participants

7   perceive and make sense of things which are happening to them, it therefore requires a

8   flexible data collection instrument" (p. 57).

9   The interviews included a series of open-ended questions and began by asking

10   participants about their career background and personal development (e.g., "can you tell me

11   about events and incidents that you feel have been particularly salient in your experience as a

12   high achiever?"). In line with the purpose of the present study, the focus of the interviews

13   then shifted towards the participants' perceptions of the qualities they felt had enabled them

14   to thrive whilst operating in demanding environments on a daily basis (e.g., "what

15   characteristics do you think helped you to withstand – and thrive on – the pressures you have

16   encountered?"). A few of the questions also explored participants' views on what factors

17   would help them to manage future demands (e.g., "what experiences do you feel will help

18   you to react positively to future challenges?"). Finally, the guide concluded with several

19   questions designed to elicit advice for aspiring high achievers and to evaluate the efficacy of

20   the interview. The interviews, which ranged in duration from 60 to 102 minutes ($M = 77.1$,

21   $SD = 15.8$), were digitally recorded and were transcribed verbatim, yielding 214 pages of

22   single spaced text.

23   **Data Analysis**

24   The interview transcripts were analyzed by the first author using the principles of IPA

25   (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In accordance with the

recommendations of Smith and colleagues (1999, 2003), the analysis began with a close

reading of the first transcript with initial insights being annotated in the left margin. This

idiographic approach to data analysis is a core feature of IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Reid

et al., 2005; Smith, 2011). The next stage of the analysis involved a translation of these initial

notes into emergent themes at a higher level of abstraction and these were annotated in the

right margin (Smith & Osborn, 2003). When selecting and labeling themes, it is important to

note that both the prevalence of the associated extracts and the richness of the data were

considered. The themes were then examined to make conceptual links between them and,

accordingly, themes which appeared related were clustered together (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

As emerging sub-themes were clustered into superordinate themes, the transcript was

constantly reviewed to ensure that the interpretation was consistent with what the participant

actually said (i.e., an iterative form of analysis). This entire process was repeated for each

transcript using the superordinate themes from the first participant to help inform the

subsequent analysis, with the analyst also being open to identifying additional themes. After

the analysis had been conducted on each transcript, patterns were established across

participants and documented in a list of themes for the sample.

Research Quality

Although some scholars have opposed the development of permanent unvarying

standards for qualitative research (cf. Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2009), Tracy

(2010) argued that guidelines and best practices serve as helpful pedagogical tools, provide a

path for expertise, and encourage dialogue with the scientific community. Eight criteria were

employed to judge the quality of this study: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility,

resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (see Tracy, 2010).

These criteria were chosen since they make distinctions between common end goals of strong

research (universal hallmarks of quality) and the variant mean methods (practices, skills, and

crafts). As Tracy (2010) noted, "this conceptual discrimination of qualitative *ends* from

means provides an expansive or 'big tent' structure for qualitative quality while still

celebrating the complex differences amongst various paradigms" (p. 839).

The topic of the research was deemed to be worthy, interesting, timely, and relevant

for a variety of audiences. To achieve rich rigor, the study used appropriate and well-

established data collection and analysis procedures, and provides abundant rich data from

significant and distinctive participants. Specifically, this study meets Smith's (2011) criterion

for good IPA studies since "for larger sample sizes [greater than 8] researchers should give

illustrations from at least three . . . participants per theme" (p. 24). Furthermore, in line with a

recommendation by Smith (2011), the study points to the specific nuances of certain themes

(viz. balance and perspective, perceived social support) to indicate how the themes differ for

particular individuals. In accordance with the researchers' ontologically realist beliefs,

sincerity was realized through reflexivity about the potential subjective biases and

transparency associated with the methods. Specifically, a field log was maintained throughout

all phases of data collection and analysis, and a clear account of the research process was

recorded and reported to ensure that the reader can understand how the study was conducted

(Smith, 2011). To evaluate the credibility of the analysis, the researchers systematically

reviewed and discussed all the emergent themes. Although there were some initial

disagreements about particular categorizations, agreement was reached through a process of

critical and constructive debate. Resonance was achieved through the transferability of

findings, specifically by reporting direct quotations from participants, providing rich

description, and writing accessibly (cf. Massey et al., 1998; Ungar, 2003). This study's

findings offer new and unique understandings of resilience and thriving in high achievers,

and is practically significant for a broad range of practitioners' working in demanding

performance environments. The American Psychological Association's (2010) Ethical

Compliance Checklist was completed and, consistent with IPA principles (Smith, 2011) and the researchers' epistemologically interpretivist beliefs, the mutual connectedness between the researcher and participant was valued. Finally, regarding the criteria of meaningful coherence, the reviewed literature appropriately situates the study's findings, the results attend to the stated research question, and the conclusions and implications interconnect with the literature and data presented.

Results

The results derived from the data analysis procedures represent the collated interview responses from all 13 participants. Six superordinate themes emerged pertaining to the resilient qualities of high achievers: positive and proactive personality, experience and learning, sense of control, flexibility and adaptability, balance and perspective, and perceived social support. Drawing directly from the experiences of the participants, each theme will be illustrated by direct quotations from the transcripts.

Positive and Proactive Personality

High achievers possessed numerous positive personality characteristics which enabled them to thrive in challenging situations on a daily basis. These qualities comprised of openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, optimism, and honesty to oneself. The following quote demonstrates how a chair of a national sporting organization remained true to herself and her values during a difficult time in her career:

There was this group of [four] men who wanted me gone [from the organization]

primarily because I was a woman and they really bullied me at one point. I mean

that's the only word you'd use, [I was] really badly bullied. But I did what I've

always done and that is I stuck firmly to my belief that if I was doing what was right

for sport somehow it would come through. I think as long as you're clear about what

your mission is and as long as you don't allow skeptics to knock you off course, I

1   truly believe you can get there.

2   In addition, high achievers exhibited proactive personality traits, including continually

3   striving for improvement, showing initiative, and constantly seeking out challenge in their

4   careers. To illustrate, a participant who was recognized in the British Queen's Honors List for

5   his services to media and creative industries had an innate desire to engage in numerous

6   work-related activities at the same time:

7   I want to have a number of things going on [in my career] because if one is not

8   working, I'll get motivation out of another, and if that doesn't work, there are these

9   guys across here you can deal with. So there is always something that you can turn

10   your head back into and get a passion about . . . and I need that. I just need to keep all

11   of these things going on and never let go [of opportunities because] at the back of my

12   mind there will always be something else.

13   A partner of an internationally recognized accountancy and professional services firm

14   described how he actively sought out opportunities in his career in order to raise his

15   performance level:

16   I'm not the sort of person that can sit back and just put my feet up. There are a lot of

17   people in [my previous job] who would say 'job for life'. That's just not me. If I don't

18   have a constant challenge and something that's really driving me then I will create it

19   myself somehow . . . Being director was a key point for me and then ultimately

20   becoming a partner was a key point for me and I'm now thinking about what's the

21   next thing I can do. What is the next thing that is going to push me forward? A lot of

22   what I tend to focus on is 'how do I win the next big job for the firm?' and that gives

23   me a huge sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

24   **Experience and Learning**

25   Being confronted with potentially stressful situations and learning from such incidents

1   was perceived to provide a vital foundation for the resilience and thriving of high achievers.

2   A Borough Commander in the London Metropolitan Police highlighted the importance of

3   drawing on past experiences when faced with difficult circumstances:

4   [The name of a town] is a very challenging place, but a place where you just carry on

5   learning and uncovering new experiences which you had not had before. And

6   sometimes you get into that 'oh my God' moment when [you think] 'what do I do

7   here'? And despite all the training that you have, there are still issues that present

8   themselves to police officers where you think 'I don't know what to do here'. And

9   that's when you have to use your resilience and draw on your experiences as best you

10   can.

11   A number of high performers seemed to consciously value challenging experiences,

12 as this quote from an award-winning comedian illustrates:

13   I performed in [country] . . . where they didn't even have any water and they didn't

14   have any electricity. I had to do the gig in the dark and there were no seats because it

15   had been bombed. And to go to places like [country]and [country]and [country] and

16   to know that the stuff I've written can travel and that I can perform this anywhere in

17   the world and people will still laugh. I think it is great being able to translate your life

18   into a universal thing that people anywhere and everywhere around the world can

19   come and appreciate.

20   Interestingly, those who engaged in formal reflective practices seemed to learn

21 quicker from their experiences and, consequently, this appeared to be a particularly important

22 feature of thriving on pressure. A mountaineer, who holds two world records in his respective

23 field, recalled how he reflected on his performance after facing disappointment in his career:

24   Not succeeding in something . . . makes me want to understand why. I probably try to

25   understand why something hasn't happened to me and then reflect that little bit more

1   . . . I take a step back and go slower because I tend to find if I've not done something

2   it's because I've gone too fast and I've missed a point. So having that bit more

3   reflection helps me be better in the future.

4   **Sense of Control**

5   High achievers felt that having a sense of control in their work-related activities was

6   an important aspect of their resilience and thriving. Specifically, they recognized their active

7   choice to operate in demanding environments, possessed the ability to prioritize activities

8   during dynamic situations, and positively responded to capricious circumstances. The

9   following quote demonstrates how a director of a charitable trust acknowledged that it was

10   his active choice to work in the public non-profit sector:

11   I've actually been quite good at detaching myself emotionally from issues and that's

12   in a sense of feeling that 'actually I chose to do this job'. You know, nobody made me

13   do this job, I chose to do this job and I came into it with my eyes wide open about the

14   realities. So I was aware that I had to be dealing with things that were personally

15   challenging, which were distressing, which could be emotionally challenging but [I

16   had] a sense of 'actually, I chose to do it' and that [thinking] has helped me.

17   A surgeon, who was recognized in the British Queen's Honors List for her services to

18   medicine, described her ability to prioritize tasks and how this positively impacted her

19   productivity at work:

20   I do control things quite a lot and I think having a slight control obsession does help

21   you to get through a lot of work in not too much time, and that means being quite

22   ruthless about who comes into your time at various times; so not to the exclusion of

23   everybody else but working out which are the really important things to do and which

24   are the things not to do.

25   All of the high performers stated that displaying positive responses was a critical

1   aspect of their resilience and thriving. The following quote demonstrates how a world-

2   renowned sports coach took charge of a potentially stressful situation during his tenure as

3   director of coaching:

4   It's funny the different things that motivate you in life but the [employment] contracts

5   in those days were for two years, you were on probation for two years basically. And

6   I got it into my head that 'if these guys can't work out that I'm the best coach in the

7   world by that time then it's their stupidity not mine'. So I put my head down, went

8   flat out at the changes that had to be [implemented and] bought coach education into a

9   different dimension to the United Kingdom and it started what . . . was . . . the best

10   period of athletic success that Britain has ever had from [year] through to [year].

11   **Flexibility and Adaptability**

12   The ability to be flexible and adaptable was deemed to be a key feature of resilience

13   and thriving for the high performers. To illustrate, they were able to solve problems

14   creatively, demonstrate proficiency when learning novel work practices, react positively to

15   change, remain politically aware when working with others, and display emotional

16   intelligence in a wide variety of situations. For example, a businessman illustrated how being

17   emotionally intelligent was crucial when catering to the needs of two separate clients:

18   Every person has a different aspiration and a different view and . . . what matters to

19   one is not what matters to another. We've been in situations before – and this is where

20   the emotional intelligence comes in – where you will sit with people who are

21   interested in the technical detail of something and they want to know every single

22   section number of some tax code. And you can go to another meeting in the same

23   type of industry and all they want to talk about is 'how are you going to support me?'

24   and 'we're going to get to know each other and our families are going to know each

25   other'. You can go from one [client] that's entirely technical . . . to one [client] that's

1   much more personal and you have to be able to deal with that.

2   The following quote, from a vice chancellor of a leading university, demonstrates the

3   importance of being politically aware especially when working in an unpredictable

4   environment:

5   When we were bidding for the medical school we had lots of opposition . . . and there

6   were all sorts of nasty games that were played. And I just became incredibly

7   determined they were not going to beat us. And so we adopted firefighting tactics and

8   worked out who we needed to get on board and playing the politics of it . . . Being

9   alert to the politics of a situation . . . is terribly important. You just have to be alert to

10   it all the time and it means picking up the vibes, listening, working out who's pushing

11   for what, going with the flow on some things but working out who's going to be on

12   your side and how to bring everybody on your side.

13   The majority of high achievers indicated that the ability to adapt positively to change

14 was a critical aspect of resilience, as this quote from a senior Member of Parliament shows:

15   We joke in politics that the only constant is change because there's almost a cycle of

16   events. We see a lot of changes and we have to adapt to those changes. I've come

17   through twenty six years now of having to deal with change, so you become prepared

18   for change and you adapt and you try and make it as seamless as possible. I've always

19   tried to view change as 'change is good' as opposed to 'oh my God here we go

20   again'. So I've always tried to have a bright outlook [and] understand that change

21   happens. Change happens in the world so why should we be any different? So it's just

22   [a question of] facing up to it with vigor and determination and to accept it and move

23   with it. You can't fight it. I learnt that you can't fight it; you get sidelined very

24   quickly if you want to fight things so roll with it and make the most of it.

25 **Balance and Perspective**

1   Maintaining a balance between one's work and other aspects of life, and having a

2   sense of perspective in life were essential characteristics of resilience and thriving for the

3   high performers. They indicated the importance of achieving an optimal work-life balance,

4   retaining a broad sense of identity that was not too focused on a career-related role, working

5   in various countries to gain an appreciation of different outlooks, and creating time for

6   oneself. The following quote illustrates how a superintendent in the London Metropolitan

7   police recognized the need to take care of his health after long hours at work:

8   Once you become an Inspector or above . . . you have to manage your own time.

9   Yesterday I was on duty for over 14 hours because I had stuff in the morning and I

10   had an evening meeting. But what I will try and do at some point is to claw a couple

11   of hours back on that. You're only salaried for a forty hour week but the reality is that

12   it's a hugely pressing business and you need, at times, to do more than that. But again

13   you have to manage your own time around that. Talking about resilience you have to

14   . . . recognize that there is a limit to how many days you can do because the law of

15   diminishing returns means that at a point you become less effective . . . so you have

16   got to look after yourself in that way.

17   A businessman felt that it was necessary to be involved with conventional, day-to-day

18   activities to retain a sense of perspective in one's life:

19   I think it's important, as you move through organizations and no matter how much

20   money you earn, [to] actually still quite comfortably enjoy going to the pub and

21   having a pint every so often and doing things that are just mainstream in its own right

22   [so] you don't lose touch with reality. Because quite often you find people, especially

23   investment bankers, who tend to say 'a few thousand pounds here, that's not very

24   significant' and you think 'actually a few thousand pounds to somebody else is

25   significant'. It's all about perspective in life and I think not losing that perspective is

1   important.

2   Interestingly, although the majority of high achievers believed that one's work and

3   life roles improved the quality of each other, a couple of participants weren't entirely

4   comfortable with the notion of a work-life balance, as the following quote demonstrates:

5   In my area we deal with a lot of very senior people who are quite often in the press

6   and . . . their expectations of you are incredibly high. I suppose the hardest piece in

7   all of this is how you balance all of that within the context of your work-life balance,

8   which actually I never liked that term because it sounds to me like it's a trade- off.

9   It's not so much of a balance as getting the right equilibrium that works for you.

10   Balance suggests that it has to be even when, in fact in reality, it never is that way.

11   But you do have to have a perspective that allows you to get yourself outside work

12   and . . . you need to find the mechanism to allow that to happen. So whether that's

13   spending two hours in the gym a day, going out for a walk, or reading the newspaper,

14   these things are quite demanding to achieve but they're very important to achieve.

15   **Perceived Social Support**

16   High achievers perceived that high quality social support was available to them and

17   they considered this to be an important aspect of their resilience and thriving. This included

18   support from people within their performance domain (e.g., colleagues and mentors), and

19   support from individuals outside their performance domain (e.g., family and friends).

20   According to a senior administrator for the UK's government space agency, his partner

21   helped to protect him from the time-related pressures of his job:

22   I feel very fortunate that my wife has been very supportive. Last Monday I started at

23   5:30 in the morning and I didn't finish until 1:30 the following morning. I didn't see

24   the kids . . . and then I'm back at work the following day. It does impinge on you.

25   I'm struggling to . . . put my finger on how I feel I've been supported but just through

1   that understanding, just through never making a fuss about things, [and] not having a

2   long face when being woken up in the middle of the night by a phone call which

3   requires some action [on my part].

4   A number of high performers recalled the help they received from their personal

5   assistant (PA), with a vice chancellor suggesting that the rapport she had created with her PA

6   gave her the chance to air her grievances:

7   I have a fantastic PA . . . I know that [Name] will deal with a situation as I would deal

8   with it. She's the front line for everybody so, if she's rude to people, that impacts me;

9   she's not, she's wonderful, she's endlessly patient with people and she's tough as

10   well. So my relationship with her . . . I can come in and say 'you won't believe what's

11   just happened and I'm going to scream and shout', because you need that.

12   Interestingly, however, one comedian felt that peers operating in the same field

13   impeded her career development and she attributed her resilience and thriving solely to her

14   positive and proactive personality:

15   Nobody really went out of their way to help me . . . In fact . . . a lot of comedians

16   were actually quite jealous and they actually hindered my [career] progress . . . I think

17   when it comes down to it the only thing that kept me going was my own

18   determination - that I want to do this and I want to be the best at it - and I think it has

19   be the only factor because there was no other.

20   **Discussion**

21   Using IPA techniques, this study identified and explored resilient qualities that enable

22   high achievers to thrive in pressured environments. The findings revealed six superordinate

23   themes that characterized resilience and thriving: positive and proactive personality,

24   experience and learning, sense of control, flexibility and adaptability, balance and

25   perspective, and perceived social support. The data highlight the multifaceted nature of

1   resilience comprising a constellation of personal qualities that enable high achievers to excel

2   in demanding contexts. It is anticipated that these themes will provide practicing

3   psychologists with an insight into the distinct features of resilience and thriving in high

4   achievers and help individuals to attain success and well-being in their careers.

5   There are, perhaps, two overarching messages to emerge from this study and the

6   findings. The first message is that, during pressured times, high achievers appear to take

7   personal responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. For example, the positive

8   and proactive personalities of the participants stimulated them to identify opportunities in the

9   environment and underpinned their strong drive towards action. Previous research has found

10   a proactive personality to be an important characteristic in predisposing one to higher levels

11   of performance in various work settings, including politics (Deluga, 1998), business (Rauch

12   & Frese, 2007), and sport (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). More specifically, research has found

13   that a proactive disposition protects individuals from the potential negative effect of stressors

14   (i.e., resilience; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012) and also leads to consistently higher levels of

15   functioning (i.e., thriving; Erdogan & Bauer, 2005; Rauch & Frese, 2007). In the current

16   study, the high achievers' proactive personality traits appeared to facilitate career-related

17   behaviors including career planning, the implementation of new ideas, and the gaining of

18   information regarding power structures within an organization. Interestingly, Seibert,

19   Kraimer, and Crant (2001) found that a proactive personality indirectly related to objective

20   (salary and promotions) and subjective (career satisfaction) indicators of career success

21   through behavioral processes including actively managing one's own career, creating

22   innovative solutions to problems, and taking initiative in understanding the political

23   landscape.

24   Another example relating to the notion of individual accountability is high achievers

25   propensity to maintain a sense of control during challenging circumstances intertwined with a

1   belief that they possessed, or were able to access, the necessary resources to withstand the

2   demands they encountered. They typically perceived that a variety of social agents, from

3   within and outside their performance domain, would provide support and assistance if

4   needed. Specifically, tangible support from colleagues and mentors together with emotional

5   support from family and friends were instrumental factors in them withstanding – and

6   thriving on – pressure. Although the perception of support from family and friends has been

7   identified in various performance domains in the context of resilience (see, e.g., Fletcher &

8   Sarkar, 2012; Jackson et al., 2007; Miller, 2008; Reis et al., 2005), the participants in this

9   study also believed that specific support from colleagues and mentors related more directly to

10 their thriving capacity. In line with the identified features of successful family physicians

11 (Jensen et al., 2008), the high achievers felt that they were assisted by competent staff,

12 benefited from operating within multidisciplinary teams, and obtained good mentoring. By

13 taking responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and actions, high achievers rarely passively

14 react to the stressors they encounter; rather they make deliberate and decisive decisions

15 relating to their particular performance context.

16   A second overarching message to emerge from this study's findings is that high

17 performers appeared to be committed to personal development and mastery. To illustrate, in

18 order to raise their performance level, high achievers actively engaged with a range of

19 challenging situations including poor working conditions, imposed change, and

20 organizational politics. Importantly, experience of these demands presented opportunities for

21 growth and, when adaptation occurred, appeared to protect high achievers from the potential

22 negative effect of similar subsequent stressors. Within the psychology literature, this

23 phenomenon has been described as stress inoculation (see, e.g., Neff & Broady, 2011; Seery,

24 Holman, & Silver, 2010). Specifically, exposure to ongoing demands, such as workplace

25 stressors, is believed to have a shielding effect since it provides individuals with an

1   opportunity to learn from their experiences. In the present study, high achievers who engaged

2   in purposeful reflection seemed to accelerate their learning since the reflective process

3   offered a means of generating self-awareness, formulating new knowledge, and in some

4   cases, empowering individuals to implement change (cf. Ekeburugh, 2007; Richards,

5   Mascarenhas, & Collins, 2009). The learning dimension identified in this study provides

6   partial support for Porath et al.'s (2012) two-dimensional structure of thriving (viz. learning

7   and vitality). More specifically, the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills was

8   considered to be an important aspect of participants' high levels of achievement.

9   Interestingly, vitality did not appear to characterize resilience and thriving in our sample of

10   high performers, which appears to provide some support for Benson and Scales's (2009)

11   statement that "thriving persons *do not* [italics added] always exhibit positive affect" (p. 87).

12   Regarding their dedication to personal improvement and excellence, high achievers

13   also engaged in numerous non-work experiences to help them withstand the demands they

14   encountered. For example, some individuals sought out regular pastimes, such as exercising,

15   which appeared to result in perceptions of competence and feelings of detachment from work.

16   Other high performers were involved with intermittent relaxing activities, such as meeting

17   friends for dinner, which seemed to be related to emotional states, such as joviality and

18   serenity. Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) proposed four distinct off-job experiences that are

19   essential in capturing individuals' recuperation processes; namely, psychological detachment

20   from work, relaxation, mastery, and control. Empirical studies have confirmed that these

21   experiences are positively related to indicators of well-being (Fritz, Sonnentag, Spector, &

22   McInroe, 2010; Siltaloppi, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2009). A possible explanation for how

23   experiences away from work protect individuals from negative consequences is that work

24   demands require psychological resources to regulate thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and

25   thus engaging in activities that no longer tax these resources may subsequently help the

1   regeneration of self-regulation capacities (cf. Grawitch, Barber, & Justice, 2010).

2   When interpreting the findings of a qualitative investigation, it is important to

3   recognize some of the strengths and limitations of the approach. A notable strength of the

4   study, in our view, is the characteristics of the sample. Specifically, the high achievers who

5   participated in the interviews were some of the most eminent figures in their respective fields.

6   Indeed, it has been suggested that the study of significant samples (i.e., collections of

7   participants who are distinguished in some way) greatly enriches psychological science, and

8   that "one of the best ways of demonstrating the broader relevance of psychology is to show

9   that it helps to explain the . . . important people of the real world, including leaders, creators,

10 champions, sages, and celebrities" (Simonton, 1999, p. 442). Utilizing semi-structured

11 interviews to collect the data from these individuals ensured that insightful vignettes and

12 authentic data rich information relating to psychological resilience and thriving in high

13 achievers was gleaned. Notwithstanding these strengths, a potential limitation is that the

14 participants were interviewed only once during the course of their careers and this limited the

15 examination of the dynamic nature of resilience and thriving (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013;

16 Porath et al., 2012). Research investigating resilience and thriving over time across work and

17 non-work contexts will provide a better understanding of the ongoing process of managing

18 potentially stressful situations in different environments.

19   The findings reported here suggest that psychological resilience and thriving in high

20 achievers is likely to be a fruitful avenue for future inquiry. Pertinent questions in this area

21 include the following: Are there any idiosyncratic differences in resilient qualities for

22 attaining versus sustaining high performance? To what extent is resilience and thriving in

23 high achievers innate versus learned? What is the relationship between resilience and thriving

24 and, more specifically, to what extent are significant adversities and subsequent growth

25 instrumental in the development and realization of high achievement? Does thriving in work

1   transfer to other life domains, or does it leave very little space for other aspects of personal

2   development? In the context of high performance, the social phenomenon of tall poppy

3   syndrome – that is, the tendency to resent and criticize highly successful people because their

4   talents distinguish them from their peers – is particularly relevant (cf. Grove & Paccagnella,

5   1995; Kirkwood, 2007). In the present study, for example, participants identified instances of

6   bullying and jealousy and this appeared to be related to their career achievements. Future

7   studies in this area should explore high achievers' experiences of tall poppy syndrome and

8   strategies for managing its occurrence and impact. In line with the approach adopted in this

9   study, future researchers should carefully define and distinguish between conceptually similar

10   salutogenic constructs under investigation, such as mental toughness, coping, buoyancy,

11   hardiness, posttraumatic growth, stress-related growth, and benefit finding (cf. Wadey, Clark,

12   Podlog, & McCullough, 2013). Researchers should also consider examining the role of

13   diverse biological processes, such as neuroendocrinology and emotion regulation capacities,

14   in human resilience and thriving (see Cicchetti & Curtis, 2007; Luthar, 2006).

15   In terms of the praxis of this investigation, there are a number of practical

16   implications of the findings and themes presented. Organizations could use the results of this

17   study to design career management programs that empower individuals to take personal

18   responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and actions in potentially stressful situations.

19   Specifically, aspiring high achievers should be urged to update their skills, expand their core

20   competencies, engage in career planning, and involve themselves in mentoring relationships.

21   Psychologists working in demanding performance environments should also help individuals

22   cultivate a commitment to personal development and mastery. It is crucial that practitioners

23   carefully manage individuals' immediate environment to optimize the adversities they

24   encounter to stimulate and foster the development of resilient qualities that will protect them

25   from negative consequences. Where possible, aspiring high performers should be encouraged

1   to actively seek out appropriately challenging situations since this will make subsequent

2   demands seem more manageable, leading to improvements in performance (cf. Seery et al.,

3   2010). To illustrate, during exposure to a realistic critical incident simulation, a police-

4   specific training program was found to enhance stressor-specific adaptive responses, increase

5   controllability, and simultaneously improve job performance (Arnetz, Nevedal, Lumley,

6   Backman, & Lublin, 2009). To further assist individuals in their dedication to personal

7   improvement and excellence, psychologists should encourage those with a desire to achieve

8   at the highest level to seek out non-work activities associated with mastery experiences,

9   feelings of detachment from work, and relaxation. Examples of activities that may help

10   provide a balance and perspective between one's work and life include travelling, learning a

11   new hobby, reading a book, or going for a walk.

12   The findings of this study resonate with Masten's (2001) conclusion that "what began

13   as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary" (p. 235).

14   Certainly, the experiences of the high achievers interviewed in this study indicate that

15   resilient qualities are important contributory factors to them thriving in pressured

16   environments. However, just how common these qualities are in those attempting to achieve

17   at the highest levels remains largely unknown. Although it is becoming established that

18   resilience is common (Bonanno, 2004; Masten, 2001) when humans are required to react to

19   events outside their control (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; cf. Bonanno, 2012; Bonanno,

20   Westphal, & Mancini, 2011), it maybe that when humans actively seek out challenging

21   situations, the qualities used to thrive on pressure become the exception rather than the norm,

22   particularly at the highest levels of human endeavor. How humans rise above their comfort

23   zone and avoid regressing to the norm represents a fascinating area of future performance

24   psychology research.

25

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