Resiliency as a Virtue: Contributions from Humanistic and Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Resiliency is defined as the ability to achieve successful outcomes in the face of challenging circumstances. As a positive characteristic of persons, resiliency is a theme that falls within the domain of positive psychology, which is the study of positive human states and traits, as well as social institutions that shape such states and traits. Humanistic psychology has also been animated by similar concerns, with a primary focus upon the self-actualizing person who is striving to become fully human despite the imposition of difficult circumstances. The humanistic movement has been, in part, informed by classical Greek ethics, particularly Aristotle's ethics, despite some disagreements with the Aristotelian worldview. This chapter examines the ways in which humanistic psychology, as informed by Aristotelian ethics and the theory of virtue, can address some of the problematic assumptions of positive psychology's understanding of character strengths and virtues. Once these clarifications are made, it becomes possible to better understand the senses in which resiliency can be legitimately considered a virtue, and also those occasions in which it is inappropriate to refer to resiliency as a virtue. Most importantly, the humanistic approach strongly emphasizes understanding all human behavior as situated within a larger context, and this more holistic perspective is necessary to appreciate the virtues, as is a focus on human agency, as opposed to a deterministic view of human behavior.

Introduction

Resiliency constitutes one of the core concepts within the emerging frameworks of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive psychology, as a self-proclaimed new movement, focuses on two primary goals: to rectify the over emphasis on pathology and other negative aspects of the human condition prevalent in much of contemporary psychology and to approach the study of the positive aspects of the human condition by employing empirical methods aligned with philosophical positivism. Although positive psychology has tended to position itself as a radical innovation, it is closely related to the humanistic psychology tradition (Friedman, 2008; Robbins, 2008). This chapter explores some of the similarities and differences between humanistic and positive psychology as they pertain to resiliency.

Perhaps most noteworthy is that positive psychology understands resiliency as a virtue (or character strength), To understand resiliency as a virtue is, by implication, to also appreciate the relevance of it to a eudaimonic conception of happiness. In this regard, positive psychology tends to see resiliency (as it does other positive traits) as a "signature strength" that can be measured in isolation from other character traits. Humanistic psychology, by contrast, tends to look at resiliency more holistically. From this more holistic perspective, resiliency would be considered a "strength" only in certain contexts of significance (e.g., if one's life project were guided by wisdom and therefore as having proper ends), whereas in other contexts, resiliency would not be considered a strength (e.g., Hitler was very resilient but, in his case, it was hardly a virtue). Our aim is to confront the tendency of positive psychology to de-contextualize supposed "strengths," as we see this as a major limitation of positive psychology. We suggest further that it is precisely in this area that humanistic psychology can be of conceptual assistance.

Resiliency as a Virtue

Resiliency has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature. Greene (2003) identified "the risk and resilience approach" to psychology as "the study of what

circumstances contribute to successful consequences in the face of adversity" (p. 76). Within this approach, the researcher examines antecedents that are potential risks for later behavioral problems, as well as protective factors that may help minimize or protect the individual from harmful environmental events. Within the context of this approach, Greene (2003) operationally defined resilience as "the ability to overcome adversity and be successful in spite of exposure to high risk" (p. 77). Similarly, Block and Block (1980) defined resiliency as "resourceful adaptation to changing circumstances and environmental contingencies" (p. 48); Garmezy (1991) identified resiliency as "the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event" (p. 459); and Rutter (1987) conceptualized resiliency as "the positive pole of individual differences in people's responses to stress and adversity" (p. 316).

In each case, resiliency is identified as a personal trait of the individual that permits adaptive coping, the ability to survive and sometimes even to thrive, in the face of adverse circumstances. Such adaptation can minimally represent a lack of pathological symptoms when such symptoms would be expected or, at the more highly adaptive end of the spectrum, resiliency may also include post-traumatic growth, in which the person's quality of life is actually improved after having survived adverse circumstances (Miller, 2003).

Is it sufficient for resiliency to be considered an adaptive trait in order for it to count as a virtue? If we look to positive psychology, the answer is no. Peterson and Seligman (2004) have developed a system of classification for strengths and virtues, which they state has universal validity based on adherence to strict criteria. To be counted as a virtue or character strength, according to this system of classification, resiliency would need to meet the following eight criteria: (1) augment numerous fulfillments that compose the good life for other people and for one's self; (2) have intrinsic value that is not dependent upon beneficial outcomes, yet nevertheless the trait tends to produce beneficial outcomes; (3) possess a quality such that the possession of the trait when expressed does not diminish others who are present; (4) not be easily transposed into an opposite, negative term; (5) be empirically measurable in terms of behavior and should be trait-like in nature, with generality across situations and stability across time; (6) have distinct qualities from other virtues in the classification system; (7) can be found enacted by people in real life who are highly esteemed for it; (8) a person can be completely lacking in the trait-like quality; and (9) institutions and associated rituals exist in larger society to cultivate and sustain the practice of the virtue.

Based on these criteria, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have identified six major categories of virtue: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. Forms of wisdom and knowledge include creativity (originality, ingenuity), curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience), open-mindedness (judgment, critical thinking), love of learning, and perspective (wisdom). Among the types of courage are bravery (valor), persistence (perseverance, industriousness), integrity (authenticity, honesty), and vitality (zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy). Love, kindness (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"), and social intelligence (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence) are the types of humanity. The types of justice are citizenship (social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork), fairness, and leadership, and the types of temperance are forgiveness and mercy, humility (modesty), prudence, and self-regulation (self-control). Finally, the types of transcendence are appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, elevation), gratitude, hope (optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation), humor (playfulness), and spirituality (religiousness, faith, purpose). This system of cataloging the virtues is a groundbreaking moment in the history of the psychology, and most especially because it now enables constructive dialogue about alternate approaches to understanding virtue from a psychological perspective.

Is resiliency a trait capable of meeting the criteria established by Peterson and Seligman (2004) to be seen as a major category of virtue? A review of the criteria above demonstrates quite clearly that resiliency seems to meet most of the basic criteria. The criterion upon which resiliency might falter is number 6, as it appears that resiliency is a virtue that is not very distinct from other positive traits within the proposed classification system, nor could it be easily collapsed into them. In particular, resiliency seems to have a lot of overlap with the category of courage, defined as "emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal" (VIA Institute on Character, 2008, n.p.). Among the various types of virtue across the categories, resiliency also could be said to involve creativity, perspective, persistence, vitality, social intelligence, self-regulation, and hope.

One possible counter-argument, which we endorse, is that the overlap of resiliency and other virtues may not discount resiliency as a virtue. Indeed, one can point to any of the named virtues and find that, in order to be seen as a virtue, it highly relies upon the co-existence and co-enactment of other virtues within the system. Persistence, for example, also implies virtues such as vitality, prudence, self-regulation, and hope, otherwise it would risk becoming a vice instead of a virtue. Fowers (2005), along these lines, has argued that, by focusing only on cataloguing specific virtues without attention to their co-determination, any system of virtues risks falling short of "the development of an adequate general concept of virtue" (p. 10). To resolve this problem of the place of resiliency within the system of the virtues, and thereby to extend and potentially enhance current classifications of the virtues in positive psychology, we suggest understanding the role of potentially virtuous traits through a more holistic approach to character development, as articulated within a humanistic approach to human flourishing (Fowers, 2005; Robbins, 2009).

Resiliency and Eudaimonic Happiness
As it was first articulated, positive psychology had as its focus three major concerns: positive subjective experiences, character strengths and virtues, and positive social institutions (Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Seligman & Czikszentmihalyi, 2000). Much of the early work on positive psychology was focused on positive subjective experiences as operationally defined by measures of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, for example. As a result of this focus on positive subjective experiences, positive psychology took on the appearance of endorsing a hedonic vision of happiness, in which happiness is understood to amount to the ratio of pleasure to pain in a person's life (Diener, 2000; Kahnemann, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999). However, with increasing focus in positive psychology on character strengths and virtues, positive psychology shifted in emphasis toward a more eudaimonic conception of happiness. For example, the person who is flourishing in terms of certain personal traits, such as autonomy, mastery of the environment, personal growth, positive interpersonal relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, can be said to be high in eudaimonic happiness (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff, 1989).

The concept of eudaimonic happiness derives from the virtue theory of Aristotle (1934; 384-322 BCE). Robinson (1990; as cited in Compton, 2004) defined Aristotelian eudaimonia as follows:
The condition of flourishing and completeness that constitutes true and enduring joy... [E]udaimonia is not merely a set of pleasures of creature comforts or Epicurean delights. It is a life lived in a certain way, where life here refers to life-on-the-whole, not some number of moments strung together. Progress toward this end calls for recognition that the better course of action is not the one that invariably satisfies the current desire or even an abiding desire.... To be wise is to strive for a condition of

moral perfection or virtue (*arete*) by which the "golden mean" is found and adopted in all of the significant affairs of life (pp. 16-17).

The emphasis in positive psychology on character strengths and virtues has obviously become a return to this Aristotelian tradition of eudaimonic happiness. Harmonic convergence of the virtues, in this tradition, is necessary for happiness. Indeed, research has shown that while hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being are moderately correlated -- which is to be expected since subjective well-being is often a by-product of living the good life, according to Aristotle - hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are nevertheless seen by many as independent constructs (e.g., Compton, Smith, Cornish, & Qualls, 1996; King & Napa, 1998; McGregor & Little, 1998). In other words, the quantity of a person's subjective well-being does not necessarily imply the presence of those qualities that constitute the virtuous life. Indeed, there may be fundamental, qualitative differences between more superficial versions of happiness and enduring joy that flows from living a good life (Robbins, 2006, 2008). In fact well-being, as the evidence suggests, seems to be predicted best by the extent to which a person is engaged with and finds meaning in life, whereas hedonic motivation to maximize pleasure and avoid pain is a relatively weak predictor of well-being (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Vella-Brodrick, 2006).

Humanistic psychology long anticipated positive psychology's shift toward an emphasis on a eudaimonic conception of happiness (Robbins, 2008). The central concept of humanistic psychology has been the notion of self-actualization, which has been understood to be an innate potential in human beings to thrive and reach their full potential, given the proper context (Maslow, 1968). This concept is teleological, in the sense that persons are understood to be moving toward an ideal end-state in which they could potentially achieve maximum flourishing as a human being. This concept of self-actualization is very similar to the notion of eudaimonia, which defines happiness as the fulfillment of one's potential for excellence (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). For example, Maslow wrote that "Humanness and specieshood in the infant are only a potentiality and must be actualized by the society" (p. 160). Indeed, Abraham Maslow's (1965) notion of the good life included a vision of a good society that would reward virtue. In the following passage, the Aristotelian influence is unmistakable, down to the borrowing of Aristotle's acorn metaphor:

That which the person *is* and that which the person *could* be exist simultaneously for the psychologist, thereby resolving the dichotomy between Being and Becoming. Potentialities not only *will* be or could be; they also *are*. Self-actualization values as goals exist and are real even though not yet actualized. The human being is simultaneously that which is and that which he yearns to be.... Man demonstrates *in his own nature* a pressure toward fuller and fuller Being, more and more perfect actualization of his humanness in exactly the same naturalistic, scientific sense that an acorn may be said to be "pressing toward" being an oak tree. (p. 214)

Maslow (1987), however, was critical of Aristotle's over-emphasis upon intellect or rationality in his system of logic:

[An] advantage that we have over Aristotle is that we have learned... that self-realization cannot be attained by intellect or rationality alone. You remember that Aristotle had a hierarchy of human capacities in which reason took the top place. Along with this went inevitably the notion that reason contrasted with, struggled with, and was at odds with human emotional and instinctive nature. We have learned... that we must modify considerably our picture of the psychological organism to respect equally rationality, emotionality, and the conative or wishing and driving side of our nature. Furthermore... we have learned these are definitely not at odds with each other, that these sides of human nature are not necessarily antagonistic but can be cooperative and synergic. (p. 116)

Maslow's emphasis upon the integration of cognition and emotion is consistent with findings from contemporary cognitive neuroscience. (Gray, Braver, & Raichle, 2002). For example, in fMRI research by Gray et. al (2002), they found that emotional states

selectively influenced cognition-related neural activity in the lateral prefrontal cortex. These results indicate that emotion and higher cognition, at some point of processing, are fully integrated in normal persons, such that functional specialization of these brain areas is lost. Thus, emotion and cognition integrally and mutually determine behavior.

By integrating the eudiamonic conception of happiness shared by humanistic and positive psychology--and stemming from Aristotelian virtue theory, resiliency can be understood as a virtue in a fairly specific sense. Namely, resiliency can be understood as those collective traits in an individual that allow him or her to realize eudaimonic happiness in spite of, or even because of, adverse circumstances. In this sense, resiliency would be conceptualized as a kind of master virtue, or higher-level virtue, which incorporates all those personal qualities of a person--all those virtuous characteristics--that help protect a person from traumatic events and on-going stressors in order to persist in a process of self-actualization. Again, this notion of resiliency is unique in it emphasis upon a holistic perspective on the virtues that can illuminate the interrelationships of the virtues with one another in a larger integrated system of human traits, rather than only viewing the virtues as isolated traits

Within the long tradition of virtue theory, virtues have been understood as *arete*, or excellence. Thinking within this tradition, Fowers (2005) defined virtues as "*the character strengths that make it possible for individuals to pursue their goals and ideals and to flourish as human beings*" (p. 4; italics in original). The virtuous person, however, is not one who passively enacts good actions, but is rather one who intends to act towards an end that is good, in the ethical sense of the term. As noted by Fowers (2005): "Individuals who have developed good character want to act ethically because they are attracted by what is good. The attraction to worthwhile goals elicits a desire to pursue them wholeheartedly rather than being conflicted between duty and desire" (p. 5). In other words, a virtuous person is not one who has been compelled or manipulated through contingencies of reinforcement, or other external causal forces, to perform behaviors that are benevolent. Rather, the person acts with agency, with conscious ends, toward the good for one's self and others. If a character strength of a person has been compelled or determined, and if it is not the result of the agency of the person, then it should not be considered a virtue.

In his book *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) advocated the achievement of eudaimonic happiness by way of identifying and cultivating one's signature strengths and virtues. This positive psychological approach to virtue, which treats the virtues as isolated variables that are logically independent of each other, is quite unlike Aristotle's system (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2005). For Aristotle, the virtues were understood to be interdependent and therefore, he thought, they must be approached holistically and hierarchically, which is the humanistic psychology stance. Fowers (2005) notes that, by subdividing the virtues, a system of virtue may fail to see virtue as a property of the whole person. By missing that larger context, the theory may lose an opportunity to see precisely how virtues become "evident in relation to the overall shape of one's life and the harmonious integration of character" (Fowers, 2005, p. 11).

The holistic nature of virtues, understood in terms of the whole person, also includes an appreciation that not all virtues are equal in status. Some virtues operate as master virtues, or superordinate virtues, that regulate subordinate virtues so that they do not fall into extremes by which they become vice when put into practice. In particular, practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, was considered by Aristotle the master virtue that guides all the other virtues in their appropriate application in the everyday circumstances of life (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2005). Without *phronesis*, personal strengths would fall into vice, unregulated and unbalanced, rather than adjusted to their appropriate "golden mean" for each occasion.

In this way, resilience can be understood to be a superordinate virtue similar to, but inferior to,*phronesis*, which constitutes the network of virtues that protect the

individual from the harmful effects of adverse circumstances and which promote growth in the face of adversity. The construct of hardiness is a good construct to illustrate how one might conceptualize resilience as a superordinate virtue. According to Maddi (2006), hardiness is conceptualized as composed of three attitudes: commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment consists of the decision to remain engaged with people and events in one's life, even when faced with great stress. Control is the effort to continue to affect the events in one's life, rather than falling into a passive mode of engagement. And, finally, challenge involves the tendency for people to consider adversity as an opportunity for cultivating wisdom. When these qualities of commitment, control and challenge are present in an individual, that person is more likely to have social support systems to buffer stress, more likely to use problem-focused approaches to coping, and more likely to care for him or herself, so that performance and health will be protected and enhanced. Within the Peterson and Seligman (2004) system, for example, hardiness, and therefore resiliency as a superordinate virtue, would likely be a combination of subordinate virtues, including perseverance, self-regulation, and hope. These virtues, in turn, would be guided by the master virtue of *phronesis*.

When understood together rather than in isolation from one another, these virtues are more than merely the sum of their parts. For example, perseverance as a virtuous trait implies a capacity to hope, whereas hope without perseverance is passive and incapable of putting thought into action. In isolation from one another, perseverance and hope are not virtues at all, but merely strengths with a potential to become virtues. However, when hope and perservence are put together, along with the ability to regulate one's own behavior in order to achieve goals, they may emerge suddenly as virtuous traits. Their virtuous quality, in other words, would therefore be mutually dependent, and each would require the presence of the other in order to become a virtue. Thus, a resilient person may be defined as a person with a combination of traits such as perseverence, self-regulation, and hope, but resiliency as a virtue may be lacking without all or some of the traits acting in combination with one another.

Empirical evidence has shown that hope is directly linked to real-world persistence in meeting challenges, including rehabilitation from spinal cord injury (Kortte, Gilbert, Gorman, & Wegener, 2010) and pediatric primary care physicians' treatment of asthma patients (Tennen, Cloutier, Wakenfield, Hall, & Brazil, 2009). Research on self-regulation of behavior in response to health threats has focused especially on hope or optimism in the adjustment of chronic disease, as well as disengagement from unattainable goals (Rasmussen, Wrosch, Scheier, & Carver, 2006). The literature, therefore, already understands the deep, functional connection between the virtues of hope, self-regulation, and perseverance. Such a holistic approach to thinking about traits is consistent with both the Aristotelian tradition of virtue theory and also with humanistic psychology.

Resiliency as a Value in Action
According to the virtue hypothesis of positive psychology, individuals who are virtuous should be happier than individuals who are not virtuous. One major problem for positive psychology is that its confusion between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness has undermined its attempt to clearly examine the virtue hypothesis (Martin, 2007). More fundamentally, positive psychology has been inconsistent about the role of values in the science of positive psychology. While at times, positive psychologists have claimed value neutrality, at other times, such as with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of personal strengths and virtues, they have attempted to combine science with normative ethics. True, a hedonic approach to happiness, while anemic, can contribute to an examination of the relationship between virtue and feelings of pleasure and/or the reduction of pain. Yet, the ratio of

pleasure to pain in one's life is hardly a measure of how good it is, since many truly outstanding individuals, and the most resilient among us, are able to withstand temporary displeasure and misery for the sake of a greater future good. Perhaps it could be even argued that some degree of suffering in life is necessary for the cultivation of wisdom (e.g. Sartor, 2003; Thurman, 2005; Wegela, 2009). However, once we are in the realm of eudaimonic ethics, in which happiness is intrinsically associated with the virtuous life, it no longer makes sense to examine the relationship between happiness and the good life, because they are, in essence, one in the same. Consequently, by assuming a eudaimonic ethics, positive psychology, or any psychology for that matter, always already becomes a *prescriptive* science, in addition to being a *descriptive* and *predictive* one (Robbins, 2008).

Interestingly, consumers of science have a tendency to assume that empirical findings are morally prescriptive, even when they are not (Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009; Kay, Gaucher, Peach, Laurin, Friesen, Zanna, & Spencer, 2009). In fact, Eidelman and colleagues (2009) found that just believing in the mere existence of some thing or person was perceived to be evidence of its goodness -- a fallacy called "the existence bias" (p. 765). Because of this bias, it is easy for science to become prescriptive, even when it aims for value neutrality. Yet, if science is to remain honest and effective in working against such biases toward the status quo, it seems necessary to be much more explicit and critical about the ethical implications and assumptions operating within any research paradigm, especially as operating in positive psychology, which tends to naively assume a value-neutral stance. Eudaimonic happiness is already necessarily loaded with evaluative assumptions, which are unavoidable. Rather than conceal the nature of eudaimonic happiness, the better route is to approach the matter explicitly with critical tools for evaluating ethical problems. Taking resiliency as example, we venture to speculate that most people assume that a resilient person will use that character strengths as a means to achieve good, ethical ends in the world. Yet, this is not necessarily the case. To use an extreme example, consider the case of Adolf Hitler.

Hitler's father, Alois, was an illegitimate child, and Adolf was the 4th of 6 children to Alois and Karla Hitler (Rosenbaum, 1999). During his youth, Hitler's carefree and playful attitude took a more somber and serious turn after the death of his younger brother from measles (Payne, 1990). After the premature death of his father, his mother was penniless, and Adolf found himself homeless and a drifter. His mother died of breast cancer at the young age of 47. Yet, despite all of these tragedies in his life, the young Adolf managed to accomplish much. He became an outstanding orator, a dynamic leader, and a cunning manipulator of the masses--skills that would catapult him to become the dictator of Germany. If we did not know the context of Hitler's life, and the great evils he would inflict upon the world, most would readily concede that Adolf Hitler seems to have been a remarkably resilient person. But should we go so far as to say that, at least in terms of the 'signature strength' of resiliency -- and all of the subordinate virtues implied -- Hitler was to that extent a "virtuous person"? Of course, we would answer unequivocally, no.

If we return to Aristotle's virtue ethics, we see that Aristotle understood the goodness of any virtue to be inseparable from the goodness of the ends of that virtue. If a virtuous trait were to lead to evil, it would not therefore be a virtue at all, but rather a vice--a virtue perverted into a disposition toward evil, rather than goodness. Therefore, in the case of resiliency, the resilient trait of a person should not be considered a virtue unless and until that personal strength is used for benevolent ends. The question of what constitutes benevolent or malevolent ends is another matter, that is in itself a difficult challenge, but again, the normative ethics guiding such matters should always be made explicit and submitted to critical reflection. Consumers of science need to be informed, as a result of unavoidable biases, to identify when the empirical evidence is insufficient for determining right

versus wrong courses of action, so that they can be invited to reflect critically on the moral complexities generated by the research matter under consideration.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that resiliency is indeed a virtue. To be appreciated fully as a virtue, however, resiliency must be understood as a superordinate virtue that encompasses a network of related virtues all having to do with character traits that protect an individual from adversity and encourage growth in the face of suffering. Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, can be said to operate as a master virtue which guides people in their everyday life, as they engage in their daily practices, so that resiliency and the other potential virtues can be appropriately lived out as actual virtues, rather than character strengths that merely actualize a person's vices., or that produce maladaptive and/or immoral consequences. Resiliency and similar constructs, however, cannot be considered virtues, unless the character traits represented actually lead to benevolent, rather than malevolent, ends. The nature of these ends and, more puzzlingly, how to decide the benevolence and malevolence of actions, requires the analytic tools of ethics, in addition to empirical tools, that can allow researchers and consumers of research to reflect radically on the ethical and moral grounds of the science of the good life. Positive psychology has offered much of value in exploring the construct of resiliency, but its narrower focus on empirical research from a presumed ethically neutral stance belies the much more complex and holistic exploration needed, which humanistic psychology provides. The fact that the meaning of the same trait varies across contexts, such as the potential for resilience becoming a vice instead of a virtue (e,g., Hitler's life), suggests that an exclusive focus on the positive, without a holistic sensitivity to the complementary negative, aspects of the human condition can lead both theory and research astray.

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