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Ordinary Magic, Extraordinary Performance:
Psychological Resilience and Thriving in High Achievers

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Abstract

1
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

1 lifespan development (Benson, & Scales, 2009; Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010) and
2 work performance (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012).
3 Most recently, Porath et al. (2012) developed and validated a measure of thriving at work.
4 They found support for a two-dimensional structure of thriving; namely, the experience of
5 vitality and learning. Furthermore, they reported evidence for the convergent and
6 discriminant validity of the measure by comparing thriving to theoretically related constructs,
7 comprising positive and negative affect, learning and performance goal orientations,
8 proactive personality, and core self-evaluations. They also established a link between
9 thriving and adaptive behaviors, including career development initiative and individual job
10 performance.

11 Although the concept of thriving has received a modest amount of empirical attention,
12 psychological resilience has been more widely researched across a variety of performance
13 domains, such as sport (see, e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), business organizations (see, e.g.,
14 Gittell, Cameron, Lim & Rivas, 2006), law enforcement (see, e.g., Miller, 2008), medical
15 services (see, e.g., Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007), military institutions (see, e.g.,
16 Reivich, Seligman, & McBridge, 2011), and education (see, e.g., Reis, Colbert, & Hebert,
17 2005). In one of the few sport-related resilience studies, Martin-Krummm, Sarazzin,
18 Peterson, and Framose (2003) examined the relationship between explanatory style and
19 resilience in a group of recreational basketball players. Following failure feedback in a
20 dribbling task, optimistic participants were found to be more confident, less anxious, and
21 perform better, than pessimistic participants. Although this study demonstrates the processes
22 by which explanatory style affects sport performance, it is not without its limitations. Firstly,
23 the study focused on a single psychological attribute (viz. explanatory style) which precluded
24 participants from providing a more complete insight into resilient qualities. Secondly, the
25 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 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

1 on them demonstrating high levels of functioning, and encountering everyday challenges and
2 major life events during the course of their careers. Guiding the recruitment of the sample
3 was the definition of a high achiever as an individual who had achieved at a high level in his
4 or her performance domain (cf. Jones & Spooner, 2006). Although it is acknowledged that
5 this description contains an element of subjectivity, the participants in this study were
6 considered to be high achievers on the following grounds: five were recognized in the British
7 Queen's Honours List¹ for their contribution to their respective fields, two were members of
8 senior management teams in the London Metropolitan Police, two had received a number of
9 highly contested national awards in their particular professions, one was a partner of an
10 internationally recognized accountancy and professional services firm, another was a senior
11 Member of the UK Parliament, and one held two world records in his respective performance
12 domain. During the course of their careers, the participants had encountered various types of
13 everyday challenges including poor working conditions, high workload, demanding clients,
14 organizational politics, peer jealousy, and workplace bullying. They had also experienced
15 major life events including serious financial difficulties, discrimination, divorce, and the
16 death of a significant other. Hence, and in line with IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003),
17 the participants in the study were considered to be homogenous in terms of their high levels
18 of achievement and their common ability to thrive whilst operating in demanding situations,
19 conditions, and circumstances.

20 The sample consisted of 13 high achievers (9 men and 4 women) who were recruited
21 from the following 11 performance domains: sport, business, law enforcement, medical
22 services, education, politics, entertainment, extreme environments, aviation and space, media
23 and creative arts, and the public non-profit sector. A wide range of performance domains

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

1 recommendations of Smith and colleagues (1999, 2003), the analysis began with a close
2 reading of the first transcript with initial insights being annotated in the left margin. This
3 idiographic approach to data analysis is a core feature of IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Reid
4 et al., 2005; Smith, 2011). The next stage of the analysis involved a translation of these initial
5 notes into emergent themes at a higher level of abstraction and these were annotated in the
6 right margin (Smith & Osborn, 2003). When selecting and labeling themes, it is important to
7 note that both the prevalence of the associated extracts and the richness of the data were
8 considered. The themes were then examined to make conceptual links between them and,
9 accordingly, themes which appeared related were clustered together (Smith & Osborn, 2003).
10 As emerging sub-themes were clustered into superordinate themes, the transcript was
11 constantly reviewed to ensure that the interpretation was consistent with what the participant
12 actually said (i.e., an iterative form of analysis). This entire process was repeated for each
13 transcript using the superordinate themes from the first participant to help inform the
14 subsequent analysis, with the analyst also being open to identifying additional themes. After
15 the analysis had been conducted on each transcript, patterns were established across
16 participants and documented in a list of themes for the sample.

17 **Research Quality**

18 Although some scholars have opposed the development of permanent unvarying
19 standards for qualitative research (cf. Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2009), Tracy
20 (2010) argued that guidelines and best practices serve as helpful pedagogical tools, provide a
21 path for expertise, and encourage dialogue with the scientific community. Eight criteria were
22 employed to judge the quality of this study: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility,
23 resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (see Tracy, 2010).
24 These criteria were chosen since they make distinctions between common end goals of strong
25 research (universal hallmarks of quality) and the variant mean methods (practices, skills, and

1 crafts). As Tracy (2010) noted, “this conceptual discrimination of qualitative *ends* from
2 *means* provides an expansive or ‘big tent’ structure for qualitative quality while still
3 celebrating the complex differences amongst various paradigms” (p. 839).

4 The topic of the research was deemed to be worthy, interesting, timely, and relevant
5 for a variety of audiences. To achieve rich rigor, the study used appropriate and well-
6 established data collection and analysis procedures, and provides abundant rich data from
7 significant and distinctive participants. Specifically, this study meets Smith’s (2011) criterion
8 for good IPA studies since “for larger sample sizes [greater than 8] researchers should give
9 illustrations from at least three . . . participants per theme” (p. 24). Furthermore, in line with a
10 recommendation by Smith (2011), the study points to the specific nuances of certain themes
11 (viz. balance and perspective, perceived social support) to indicate how the themes differ for
12 particular individuals. In accordance with the researchers’ ontologically realist beliefs,
13 sincerity was realized through reflexivity about the potential subjective biases and
14 transparency associated with the methods. Specifically, a field log was maintained throughout
15 all phases of data collection and analysis, and a clear account of the research process was
16 recorded and reported to ensure that the reader can understand how the study was conducted
17 (Smith, 2011). To evaluate the credibility of the analysis, the researchers systematically
18 reviewed and discussed all the emergent themes. Although there were some initial
19 disagreements about particular categorizations, agreement was reached through a process of
20 critical and constructive debate. Resonance was achieved through the transferability of
21 findings, specifically by reporting direct quotations from participants, providing rich
22 description, and writing accessibly (cf. Massey et al., 1998; Ungar, 2003). This study’s
23 findings offer new and unique understandings of resilience and thriving in high achievers,
24 and is practically significant for a broad range of practitioners’ working in demanding
25 performance environments. The American Psychological Association’s (2010) Ethical

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

7 **Results**

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

14 **Positive and Proactive Personality**

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

20 There was this group of [four] men who wanted me gone [from the organization]
21 primarily because I was a woman and they really bullied me at one point. I mean
22 that's the only word you'd use, [I was] really badly bullied. But I did what I've
23 always done and that is I stuck firmly to my belief that if I was doing what was right
24 for sport somehow it would come through. I think as long as you're clear about what
25 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. Ekeburgh, 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.

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