

## Secondary Control Critiqued: Is It Secondary? Is It Control? Comment on Morling and Evered (2006)

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In an insightful review on secondary control, B. Morling and S. Evered (2006) argued that the seminal article spawning the construct (F. Rothbaum, J. R. Weisz, & S. S. Snyder, 1982) contained the roots of two distinct conceptualizations focusing on “fit” and “control” and that distinguishing between them clarifies inconsistent research findings. They concluded that the best definition of *secondary control* focuses on fit. The author of the current commentary agrees with Morling and Evered’s premises but draws the opposite conclusion. Herein, it is argued that (a) current control-focused definitions have more valid claims to the term *secondary control*, and (b) current incarnations that focus on “fit” are important, but they are not secondary and they are not control. Hence, fit-focused constructs should be liberated from the domain of control and studied in their own right, under their own more appropriate label, such as *accommodative processes*. Moreover, theoretical clarity and depth regarding the functions of fit-focused processes can be gained by examining these processes in relation to other underlying motives, such as belongingness or autonomy, to which they are more closely allied.

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The article that introduced the construct of secondary control (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982), like all ground-breaking papers, contained many different ideas. Morling and Evered (2006) teased out two threads, with differing emphases on “fit” and “control.” The authors argued that these concepts represent two valid interpretations of the original construct and that researchers should be explicit about their conceptualizations of secondary control. The authors concluded that “a fit-focused definition is best in keeping with the original article, empirical evidence, and parsimony” (p. 290). Although I agree with Morling and Evered’s premises, I draw the opposite conclusion.

In this comment, I briefly revisit the historical context in which Rothbaum et al.’s (1982) seminal paper appeared, both to highlight its general contributions and to point out a third definition of secondary control focused on predictive, vicarious, illusory, and interpretative control. I do not agree that all these definitions represent valid variations on the same construct. Although all can legitimately be traced back to the original article, at this point in the field’s development, each has a very different conceptual status: (a) notions of predictive, vicarious, and illusory control served as the most direct link to the control area and as the basis for many assessments, but the assertion that they are adaptive reactions to failure has received little empirical support; (b) current *control-focused* definitions, although not related as directly to the original article, have more valid claims to the term *secondary control*; and (c) *fit-focused* conceptualizations, because they are

not secondary and they are not control, should be labeled something else (e.g., *accommodation*) that allows them to be liberated from the domain of control and studied in relation to other motivational processes such as belongingness or autonomy with which, as Morling and Evered (2006) pointed out, they are more closely linked.

### Theoretical Context of the Original Article

When the concepts of primary and secondary control were introduced 25 years ago (Rothbaum et al., 1982), theories of perceived control dominated the field. At least four major perspectives, namely, locus of control (Lefcourt, 1976), attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1975) were important players in research on health, achievement, work, personality, motivation, coping, and almost every other domain within psychology (Strickland, 1989). As a result of the hundreds of studies these theories inspired, the area of control was mature, that is, the nature and functioning of control were relatively well understood (Skinner, 1996).

### *The Nature of Control*

Perceived control is fundamentally about *generative transmission* (Shultz et al., 1986), that is, the experience of exerting personal force that is effective in producing intended outcomes. It necessitates a challenge or resistance; only outcomes that require exertion are marked as related to control. The experience of control is dynamic. Expectations of control shape the quality of people’s engagement in activities, sometimes called *control strivings*. When

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people have a sense of control, they are more optimistic, try harder, and persist longer in the face of obstacles, leading to higher levels of performance and more elaborated knowledge about strategies, thereby verifying their sense of control. Conversely, control can be threatened or lost: Objective or subjective control can be low, initial resistance can be interpreted as failure, success can be attributed to others or to luck. Then people lose access to their highest levels of functioning, withdraw, and become discouraged, pessimistic, and passive, forfeiting learning opportunities and cementing their feelings of powerlessness. Concepts have been articulated for the general syndromes of cognition, affect, motivation, and behavior that characterize these adaptive and maladaptive states: mastery versus learned helplessness.

### *Control as a Fundamental Human Need*

A major point of contention in discussions of secondary control refers to the primacy of primary control. Part of the debate reflects confusion about what is meant by *primacy*. Does primacy mean universal? Or does it mean more important than any other human need? The answers to these two questions are very different. On the one hand, there can be no question that experiences of mastery, effectance, competence, or control are fundamental, universal, and intrinsically motivated (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Harter, 1978; Koestner & McClelland, 1990; White, 1959): The motivational effects of experiences of action–outcome contingencies have been documented in earliest infancy prior to any possible socialization; they are present in human and infrahuman species; their evolutionary value for learning how to operate environmental contingencies is obvious; and the species-general neurophysiological mechanisms through which they exert their effects are well understood. The psychological need for control is akin to the physiological need for food.

It is important to point out that the need for competence, effectance, or control is focused on the intrinsically motivated desire to experience oneself as effective in interactions with the environment. It is not about showing that you are smarter than others, achieving high status, seeking credit for individual accomplishments, competition, pushing oneself forward or pushing other people around, or any other form of demonstrating one's ability or power. Studies claiming to show that effectance motivation is not universal often measure the desire for control, control strivings, or ratings of the importance of control. These markers make no sense as evidence for whether control is fundamental; such assertions are akin to arguing that food is not a basic need, based on evidence that people do not eat everything that is edible, do not spend all their time looking for food, and do not rate food as the most important thing in their lives.

### *Other Fundamental Human Needs*

At the same time, no research has ever demonstrated the primacy of primary control in the sense of providing evidence that the need for competence is demonstrably more important than any other (let alone every other) human need. There are at least two other basic psychological needs that meet all the criteria for universal, fundamental, and intrinsically motivated (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). These are the need for connection or belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as described

by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973), and the need for autonomy as conceptualized by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Like experiences of control, experiences supporting each of these psychological needs have been shown to contribute to high-quality engagement at every point across the life span, from earliest infancy to oldest age. Although there may be local trade-offs (e.g., it is hard to eat and drink simultaneously), the needs are likely to be synergistically positive in their effects (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Even the idea of ranking psychological needs runs counter to basic underlying organismic assumptions; this is like arguing that food is more important than oxygen or water.

### *General and Specific Meanings of Secondary Control*

In the context of an intense focus on constructs of control, what did notions of primary and secondary control have to offer? First, they re-labeled all the previous work as *primary control* (corresponding to the syndrome of mastery) and relinquishment of control (corresponding to helplessness). However, the principal contribution was the notion of *secondary control* and the promise that this construct would add to our understanding of control-related processes. There is a general way and a specific way that secondary control can accomplish this. The general way is simply to point out that “primary control is not everything.” From this perspective, secondary control is essentially a marker for processes that influence adaptive outcomes over and above the effects of control. In the context of the original article, when theories of perceived control dominated, this was a major contribution, both thought-provoking and controversial.

At the time, however, it was probably very strategic (or very lucky) to label this concept *secondary control*. It placed the construct directly in the middle of the control area, challenging researchers to reckon with it. Other candidates for processes that are important above and beyond control, such as autonomy, attachment, or accommodation, were successfully ignored by control researchers for many years. However, although the recognition that “primary control is not everything” is a valid insight, it is not useful to label every process not included in primary control and helplessness as “secondary control.” Hence, it is important to critically analyze the more specific definitions of “secondary control” that have been offered.

### *Original Definitions of Secondary Control*

Rothbaum et al. (1982) defined secondary control as “attempts to fit in with the world and to ‘flow with the current’” (p. 8). They argued that the desire for control is so fundamental and pervasive that people rarely give it up. Situations that are usually considered to be prototypical cases of uncontrollability or helplessness—attributions of failure to low ability, powerful others, and chance accompanied by “inward behaviors” such as passivity, submission, and withdrawal—do not always represent relinquishment of control. These can actually be ways of aligning oneself with the world and thus reflect motivation for control and lead to gains in control. Rothbaum et al. focused on predictive, illusory, vicarious, and interpretative secondary control, not just as examples, but as lower order categories of the construct they were trying to explicate.

It turns out that this higher order idea (that people try to fit in and this can be adaptive) and notions of predictive, illusory, and vicarious secondary control did not converge. Specifically, there is no evidence that attributions of failure to ability, powerful others, or luck contribute to a sense of (predictive, vicarious, or illusory) control or any other adaptive reactions. In fact, decades of research on attributions have shown the reverse (e.g., Heckhausen, 1991; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993; Weiner, 1985). The kinds of inward behaviors elicited by these attributions are emphatically *not* good news—they are about discouragement, resignation, apathy, and self-blame. They are better classified as helplessness or relinquishment of control. Hence, an important conclusion I would add is that the original article contained some intriguing ideas that turned out to be wrong. The point is important because this idea was the only *direct* link in the original article between its conceptualization of secondary control and the area of perceived control. Moreover, attempts to measure these kinds of secondary control have diverted the field from the article's two most promising ideas, namely, those of fit and of processes through which people can create experiences of control in low-control circumstances.

### *Secondary Control That Emphasizes Control*

The definition of secondary control offered by its originators (Rothbaum et al., 1982) was fundamentally different from that later proposed by theorists who emphasized control (e.g., Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). At the most general level, Rothbaum et al. were trying to peel off a section of relinquishment of control (i.e., inward behavior) and show that it is actually motivated by a desire to experience control, whereas other control theorists, like Heckhausen and Schulz, were attempting to peel off a section of primary control and show how it can be turned on the self instead of the environment. Heckhausen and Schulz assert that secondary control “targets the self and attempts to achieve changes directly within the individual” (1995, p. 285).

Hence, as established by Morling and Evered (2006), there are clearly fundamental differences between these formulations, and to consider them as two facets of the same phenomena is confusing. However, whereas Morling and Evered (2006) concluded that “a fit-focused definition is best in keeping with the original article, empirical evidence, and parsimony” (p. 290), I argue for the opposite conclusion. I argue that it is necessary to conclude that Heckhausen and Schulz's definition of secondary control, although they did not coin the term, is in fact more consistent with the term *control* and thus more appropriately labeled *secondary control*. At the level of process, the life span conception of secondary control refers to active attempts to produce outcomes (within the individual); in terms of function, this conceptualization holds that secondary control “serves to minimize losses in, maintain, and expand existing levels of primary control” (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995, p. 284). I do not repeat the many arguments supporting this point provided by Morling and Evered.

*How is it secondary?* A key task facing researchers studying control-focused forms of secondary control is to clarify the reasons why these should be regarded as secondary. It has been suggested that secondary control comes into play when people are not able to influence the outcomes most important to them, implying several ways in which control could be secondary. First, it can be secondary in a temporal sense: After initial attempts to produce a desired

event or prevent an undesired event have failed, one can call for back-up by shifting resources from other endeavors to the implementation of the blocked goal (also referred to as the “primacy/back-up model”; Thompson et al., 1998, p. 587). Candidate processes for this kind of control include heightened exertion and focus, problem-solving, enhancing goal attractiveness, and volitional self-regulation; this type of control may also include accessing others through “proxy” control (Bandura, 1997; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

A subset of these strategies do not involve direct attempts to change the outcome but instead refer to means of suspending current efforts without giving up on the goal. When primary strategies prove ineffective, one can concentrate one's efforts on finding or creating alternative secondary routes. These efforts would include activities such as information search, consultation, and other attempts to find out more about possible contingencies. They could also include mental activities such as extending deadlines, waiting for the right moment, or bolstering optimism (e.g., Brim, 1992). These activities have in common a continued commitment to the goal, combined with a focus on action readiness and on monitoring opportunity structures for when they are likely to be favorable for control efforts (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002).

Another meaning of *secondary* refers to a hierarchy of outcomes. When a person is dealing with an irrevocable loss or a missed deadline, and it is no longer possible to “fix” the chosen target, people can shift their focus toward secondary outcomes they can more feasibly control. For example, in the case of an incurable illness, people can shift their focus from finding a cure to having an impact on the symptoms, course, or treatment of the illness and its effects on others (Thompson et al., 1993). Also referred to as “consequence-related control” (Thompson et al., 1994, p. 541), this kind of control can include turning efforts away from external events and toward the self, attempting to exert an influence on one's own internal states (such as emotions or reactions); some of these activities are also studied as emotion regulation (Gross, 1998).

All of these secondary control strategies, as well as confidence in one's capacity to enact them (also called coping self-efficacy), are directly related to increasing the probability that attempts to exert control (over the primary goal, secondary goals, or the self) will be successful. Hence, they confer many of the same advantages as primary control, and serve to create control experiences even in low-control circumstances (Thompson et al., 1993). Most of these strategies have already been studied in research on *coping*, which is the common term used to describe how people deal with losses and difficulties that threaten control (Folkman, 1984). Research on such processes supports Rothbaum et al.'s assertion that people rarely abandon the quest for control, even in “uncontrollable circumstances” and has forced researchers to relabel such real-life situations as “low-control” circumstances. Outside of the lab, researchers have not been able to locate any situations in which people cannot find something to influence.

As next steps in the development of control-focused conceptualizations, researchers should refine definitions so that they not only encompass the entire range of relevant strategies but also clarify why some of these reactions to loss of control should be considered primary and some, secondary. Currently, few category systems are exhaustive; most provide general definitions and selected examples. Moreover, there is no consensus about overarch-

ing definitions, and the criteria that have been suggested do not always allow for clear classification of all control-relevant lower order strategies. For example, the most well-accepted definition posits that secondary control targets the self (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). However, some researchers consider active attempts to change one's own emotional reactions or appraisals to fall within primary control coping (Connor-Smith et al., 2000). If secondary control is to add value beyond concepts of coping and emotion regulation, it is necessary to collect all the ways of coping that secondary control encompasses and clearly distinguish them from strategies of primary control.

*Is it all control?* Although Heckhausen and Schulz (1995) have the more valid claim to the term *secondary control*, I would also argue that they should cede some of the territory they have annexed to other constructs. Conceptual clarity could be improved by replacing terms such as *secondary control strivings* with *engagement* or some similar term, to acknowledge that not all active, constructive, goal-directed, emotionally positive interactions are motivated by control. Most importantly, however, Heckhausen and Schulz (1995) should relinquish those processes that fall outside the domain of control, specifically, those used to flexibly adjust goals to current priorities, resources, and constraints. There are two aspects to this process. The first is selecting goals based on the probability of their attainment; this falls within the domain of control. The second, however, is letting go of goals that one is no longer going to pursue, because they are not feasible or for any other reason. Although these strategies are sometimes referred to as "compensatory secondary control" (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999, p. 416), they are actually processes of accommodation or fit, and can be conceptually and empirically distinguished from processes of primary and secondary control (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). Accommodative cognitive, attentional, and behavioral processes, like downward social comparison, sour grapes, and focus on the positive, involve dissolving commitments to previously important goals and finding satisfaction in the current state of affairs. These are emphatically processes of goal adjustment and acceptance; they are *not* processes of control (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002).

Especially problematic are descriptions of maladaptive or dysfunctional strategies of secondary control, described in Heckhausen and Schulz (1995; Table 2). Some of the examples, such as pessimistic attributions, are more properly considered aspects of helplessness. Others, such as making unattainable goals more attractive or dwelling on them, are the opposite of accommodation, referred to more properly as rigid perseveration (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). Attempting to force all adaptive and maladaptive responses to obstacles and failures into the categories of control (whether primary or secondary) is confusing. Moreover, the presumption that all coping processes can comprehensively be accounted for by theories of control is misguided and impedes the study of alternative ways of dealing with adversity and the basic processes that underlie them (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Skinner et al., 2003).

### *Fit-Focused Definitions of Secondary Control*

Morling and Evered (2006) argue that work on fit-focused definitions presents a coherent picture of the human inclination and adaptive value of "going with the flow" and of "getting into

it," and cite this as an important reason why they prefer this definition of secondary control. Again, I agree with their premises but argue for the opposite conclusion. Morling and Evered (2006) reviewed clear evidence that fit-focused definitions are not conceptually related to control, that fit-focused measures show no clear empirical links to control as an antecedent or outcome, and that "going with the flow" can in no way be considered secondary to primary control. I agree. Hence, if fit-focused definitions are not control and they are not secondary, the only logical conclusion is that they should no longer be labeled *secondary control*.

In fact, the innovative and ground-breaking ideas from the original article (Rothbaum et al., 1982) began with the insight that "control isn't everything." People do not always strive for control. People can be actively and constructively engaged with their social and physical environments without having the goal of producing a desired or preventing an undesired outcome. People can be passive, that is, not actively trying to effect changes, without being a bit helpless, discouraged, or withdrawn. The brilliant insight from Rothbaum et al., in the midst of a psychology dominated by perceived control, is that control may not always be relevant. To fully honor this insight, however, it is necessary to disentangle the idea of fit from the control area by selecting a label that does not force it to be a part of control or to be in any way secondary. Other candidate terms include fit, "going with the flow," yielding, deference, flexible goal adjustment, accommodation, and accommodative processes (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990).

*If not a sense of control, then what?* Morling and Evered (2006) identified one of the costs of extracting fit-focused definitions from traditional constructs of control: "Theoretically, when we separate secondary control from perceived control, we lose the tidy bundling of primary and secondary control under the common rubric of control. These two constructs are almost always studied together in research, so unbundling them seems to leave secondary control stranded without a meaningful comparison construct" (p. 285). However, both processes can be studied together without placing both under the umbrella of control. As pointed out by Morling and Evered (2006), a likely motive underlying efforts to fit in may be the fundamental human need for belongingness or relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973).

Another, seemingly paradoxical, possibility is that activities described as "going with the flow" are motivated by the need for autonomy or self-determination. One developmental tenet of self-determination theory is that all people intrinsically desire to internalize the values and priorities of their social surround, and to integrate them with the authentic self, thus functioning autonomously (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1995). The kinds of social interactions (e.g., provision of love, structure, and autonomy support) that allow cultural values to be internalized may describe a set of socialization conditions that let people autonomously choose to "go along" or fit in. In fact, according to self-determination theory, the critical issue for autonomy is not freedom of choice, but instead whether one *assents* to the choices that are made. It is possible to choose for oneself, but to be internally pressured or coerced into selecting something one does not really want (Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991); this choice, although made by oneself, is not autonomous. By the same token, even when someone else chooses an alternative, it is possible to willingly enact it as long as one assents to it, that is, fully and freely endorses it.

Hence, a likely motive underlying accommodation is the desire to be autonomous. If one can assent to a set of circumstances, one would not feel (internally or externally) pressured or coerced by them. Neither would it be necessary to fight them, escape them, or admit there is no way to change them. In other words, control would be irrelevant. The concept of “assent” seems to capture perfectly what Morling and Evered (2006) intended by adding “acceptance” to “adjustment” in order to differentiate resigned (unwilling) acceptance from fit. This analysis also suggests that an element critical to the experience of accommodation is being pressured to do something one does not spontaneously want to do. Coercive (internal or environmental) events are to accommodation what encounters with resistance or failure are to the experience of control. With no resistance, there can be no experience of control. With no pressure, there can be no experience of accommodation. In terms of cultural and individual differences, it may be that people from collectivist cultures are more likely to assent to pressures from in-group members just as children with loving parents are more likely to willingly cooperate with their demands.

*If not secondary, then what?* Even as they defend the importance of fit, a certain ambivalence can be detected in Morling and Evered’s (2006) description of its benefits. They state, “If fit is the motivation, then the immediate psychological outcome of secondary control may be a subjective sense of coherence, cognitive satisfaction, or serenity. . . . Though probably not as satisfying as experiences of primary control (at least for individuals from the United States), they are undoubtedly positive emotional states” (p. 285). I think it is a mistake to assume that experiences of accommodation are mild. One of the possible benefits of “going with the flow” is flow itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), a state of intense joy. Observation of mothers’ attunement with their infants, young children engrossed in cooperative play, or adolescents hopping in synchrony at a concert can attest to the fervor and fun that can be generated from “fitting in.” These outcomes may describe the kind of constructive enthusiastic energetic engagement that promotes coping and development. Moreover, research on “not fitting in” suggests that exclusion, bitter resignation, and alienation are also powerful (albeit negative) experiences.

A critical point is that, although accommodative processes may be useful when primary control proves unattainable, there is no reason to assume that accommodation is only deployed in a secondary fashion, following losses of control. Accommodation may be an adaptive first line of defense, with primary control engaged only if accommodation proves impossible. In challenging situations, conclusions about the conditions to which one does not wish to accommodate may inform decisions about what is worth fighting for. Accommodation may be a first choice in many circumstances: when control striving would consume too many resources, disturb relationships, interfere with prior commitments, or jeopardize other more important goals. The principal mechanism for choosing goals should not be what is easily attained but what is genuinely worth working for. Accommodation may also be a first choice for adaptive disengagement. The cost of admitting there is nothing you *can* do is helplessness, which exacts a higher price than the accommodative strategy of deciding there is nothing you *want* to do.

*What are the processes of “going with the flow”?* In the area of control, a set of valuable capacities are practiced during control strivings: tenacious goal pursuit, exertion, focus, persistence, de-

termination, problem solving, and optimism. What are the corresponding capacities practiced during fit? Among these might be the forms of “interpretive secondary control” that have been found to be beneficial (also referred to as cognitive restructuring, focus on the positive, and benefit finding), namely, those in which people shift their attention to the genuinely positive aspects of the current situation (e.g., Thompson, 1985). Other virtues that promote assent might include deference, taking the larger perspective, empathy, gratitude, appreciation, humility, trust, self-discipline, will power, love, and even wisdom (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). A critical issue would seem to be articulating one’s own genuine priorities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Skinner & Edge, 2002). Experimental and naturalistic studies of the social, cognitive, and motivational processes that support accommodation (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002) and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) provide a firm foundation for further research.

### Constructing a Framework Larger Than the Domain of Control

In the 25 years since Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder’s (1982) provocative article, researchers have been inspired and perplexed by its complex intertwined insights. Morling and Evered (2006) have extricated two important strands of work, one on fit and one on control, that have been elaborated and investigated over several decades. I argue that control-focused conceptualizations should continue to utilize the term *secondary control*, and that an important next step for these theories is to collect the myriad ways people deal with limited resources, shrinking time horizons, low-control circumstances, and irrevocable losses, and to organize them according to clear definitions of primary, secondary, and relinquished control, while clarifying which of them fall outside those definitions. I also suggest that it is time for fit-focused conceptualizations to step out from the shadow of perceived control and stake their claim as critically important processes in their own right. To succeed, they will need a new label and a careful analysis of the constituents and the underlying motives that fuel its operation. I argue for a label like *accommodation*, which has at its core the experience of assent in the face of internal or external pressures, is motivated by the need for autonomy, and has as its antonym *opposition*, which includes rigid perseverance, unwilling participation, and resignation.

Unlike the area of control, which prospered by ignoring other important contributors, fit-focused constructs will benefit by continuing to consider them in tandem with perceived control. Well-articulated theoretical models backed up by strong empirical evidence can serve as examples of dual-process (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002) and multi-process (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985) models that include both control (assimilation or competence) and fit (flexible goal adjustment or autonomy). Building on Morling and Evered’s (2006) sentiment that “primary and secondary control [are] two strategies that meet different human motives in response to everyday events or stressful challenges” (p. 285), I argue that control and accommodation are two adaptive processes that work together to shape motivation and coping in all domains of human endeavor and in all cultures. Even though they are conceptually distinct and supported by different psychological motives, our theories and studies will be richer when they fully incorporate both processes of resilience.

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