

Sense of Self and Ego Resiliency as Predictors of Psychological Distress and Adjustment

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ABSTRACT - A cohesive sense of self and the ability to cope flexibly are central to psychological functioning. This study examined how ego structure (sense of self) and ego functioning (ego resiliency) relate to psychological distress and adjustment in 109 undergraduate students. Participants completed measures of sense of self, ego resiliency, distress, and an experimental adjustment scale. A coherent sense of self was strongly associated with lower distress and greater adjustment. Ego resiliency also predicted adjustment but did not uniquely predict distress once sense of self was considered. Mediation analyses indicated that ego resiliency partially mediated the link between self-structure and adjustment, and alternative models supported the role of self-structure in buffering distress. Findings suggest that ego structure anchors emotional stability, while ego resiliency supports adaptive functioning when grounded in a coherent self. Implications for developmental and psychodynamic models are discussed.

Keywords:
Sense of self; Ego resiliency; Psychological adjustment; Psychological distress; Ego structure; Self-cohesion

Introduction

Psychologists have long viewed the “ego” as the part of the mind that keeps us balanced between impulse and restraint, between inner demands and outer reality (Freud, 1923/1961). Early ego theorists such as Hartmann (1939) and Blanck and Blanck (1974) expanded this idea,

describing the ego as an adaptive system that facilitates clarity of thought, judgment, and emotion regulation. More recent perspectives suggest that the ego can be understood in two broad ways. One concerns its structure, or the relatively stable organization of self-representations that gives life a sense of continuity (Kohut, 1977). The other concerns its functioning, meaning the moment-to-moment regulation of thought and feeling as a person responds to changing circumstances (Bellak et al., 1973). These two sides, that is, structure and function, work together to maintain psychological integration (Cabaniss et al., 2016; Joines, 1976; McWilliams, 2011).

Ego Structure and the Sense of Self

The structural aspect of the ego is often discussed in terms of the self. Kohut (1977) described the self as the central organizing structure of personality, the inner sense of who one is that holds experience together. When this structure is cohesive, people tend to feel consistent, emotionally steady, and capable of authentic relationships. When it is weak or fragmented, they may feel uncertain or easily shaken by stress (McWilliams, 2011). Empirical research supports this view. Flury and Ickes (2007) found that individuals with a strong sense of self tend to report higher authenticity and life satisfaction, as well as lower negative affect. On the other hand, individuals with a weaker self-structure are more prone to fragmentation of the self, which has been related to mental health challenges, confusion, lack of direction and goals, pathological narcissism, and dissociative states (Stav et al., 2021). A well-developed sense of self therefore appears to support adaptive functioning.

Ego Functioning and Ego Resiliency

Ego functions have been described as including several elements which can be summated as cognitive and perceptual functions, self-regulation, and self-esteem protection, i.e., defenses (Kelly, 2020a). Functionally, the ego functions manage adaptation and change. One of the best-known indicators of this capacity is ego resiliency, defined as the ability to shift flexibly between control and openness depending on what life demands (Block & Kremen, 1996). People high in ego resiliency usually recover quickly from stress, regulate their emotions effectively, and remain socially competent even under pressure. Those with low resiliency often show rigidity or difficulty rebounding after setbacks (Block & Block, 1980). Ego resiliency can be seen as the active expression of ego strength, the ability to maintain psychological balance while adjusting to reality (Alessandri et al., 2007; Letzring et al., 2005).

Historically, ego psychology theorists described “ego strength” as the capacity to maintain a stable inner sense of self while effectively managing external demands (Hartmann, 1939; Erikson, 1950). Contemporary formulations tend to view ego strength as encompassing both structural self-cohesion and adaptive self-regulation (Block & Block, 1980; McWilliams, 2011). Consistent with this perspective, the present study distinguishes between the structural coherence of the self and the flexible regulatory capacity associated with ego resiliency to examine their unique and combined associations with psychological distress and adjustment.

Psychological Distress and Adjustment

Distinguishing the ego as having structure and function provides a useful framework for examining two contrasting outcomes: psychological distress and psychological adjustment. Psychological distress refers to the unpleasant emotional states that arise when a person perceives events as threatening or overwhelming (Kelly, 2020b). More concretely, distress encompasses anxiety, sadness, irritability, and tension (Löwe et al., 2010). Distress signals that coping resources are strained, though it does not necessarily imply mental disorder (Ridner, 2004).

In contrast, psychological adjustment represents the presence of adaptive functioning. Adjusted individuals generally report satisfaction with life, stable mood, and a sense of connection to others (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes, 2005). Though researchers sometimes measure adjustment as a lack of distress (e.g., Cruz et al., 2019), adjustment goes beyond the absence of distress to reflect positive mental health. Keyes (2005) described this difference in his dual-continuum model of well-being: one dimension reflects illness versus its absence, while the other captures languishing versus flourishing. By this view, a person can be free of distress yet not truly adjusted. Adjustment marks the flourishing end of that spectrum.

Linking Ego Structure, Resiliency, and Psychological Outcomes

Seen together, these concepts suggest a dynamic relationship. The self provides the structural foundation for personality coherence, while ego resiliency provides the flexibility to maintain that coherence when life changes. If the self is cohesive, resiliency can operate effectively, supporting balanced regulation and emotional recovery. When the self is unstable, the ego's adaptive functions may falter, leaving a person more vulnerable to distress. Studies of ego strength and identity coherence have found consistent links to resilience, well-being, and lower anxiety and depression (Letzring et al., 2005; Alessandri et al., 2007). These findings imply that the quality of the self (i.e., when the self-structured is weakened) may shape how ego functions perform under stress.

The Present Study

The goal of the present study was to examine how ego structure, represented by the sense of self, and ego functioning, represented by ego resiliency, relate to two broad indicators of mental health: psychological distress and psychological adjustment. Psychological distress was conceptualized as emotional discomfort stemming from stress (Kelly, 2020b). Psychological adjustment was considered as a reflection of self-esteem, life satisfaction, perceived social support, and emotional stability, consistent with multidimensional models of well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes, 2005). While relatively brief adjustment measures exist (i.e., 18-items; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), they were still somewhat long for our protocol. As such, we also attempt to develop a four-item index of adjustment.

It was hypothesized that both a stronger sense of self and greater ego resiliency would be associated with lower distress and higher adjustment. Because ego resiliency represents a functional expression of the ego, it was also expected to mediate the relationship between self-structure and psychological outcomes. Individuals with a cohesive sense of self were predicted to show higher resiliency, which in turn would correspond to less distress and better adjustment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

After providing informed consent, 109 undergraduate students (84 females, 22 males, 3 unspecified) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a small U.S. university completed the measures described below. Administration took place in classroom settings before regularly scheduled classes. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was offered.

The average age of participants was 21.4 years ($SD = 1.3$). Most self-identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 86$; 79.0%), followed by Black or African American ($n = 12$; 11.0%), Latinx ($n = 6$; 5.5%), Native American ($n = 1$; 0.9%), Asian ($n = 1$; 0.9%), and “other” ($n = 2$; 1.8%). Thirteen participants (11.9%) reported taking prescribed psychiatric medication, while 96 (88.1%) reported no current use. All questionnaires were completed anonymously. The study was nonregulated by the local ethics review board. Ethical standards conformed to the Declaration of Helsinki and American Psychological Association.

Measures

Ego Resiliency. Ego resiliency was assessed using the 10-item *Ego Resiliency 89–Revised* scale (ER89-R; Alessandri et al., 2007). Respondents rated each statement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Items were summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating greater ego resiliency. Structural and convergent validity as well as internal consistency reliability (.75), and a retest reliability over two years (.56) has been reported (Alessandri et al., 2007)

Sense of Self. An abbreviated 5-item *Sense of Self Scale* (SSS; Flury & Ickes, 2007) was used to measure the structural coherence of the self. The current brief version was created by selecting items with the highest item-total correlations reported in the original validation study. Participants responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Scores were summed such that lower total values represented a stronger, more cohesive sense of self. Convergent and structural validity as well as internal consistency (.86) and 3-week retest reliability (.83) have been reported for the full version (Flury & Ickes, 2007).

Psychological Distress. General psychological distress was measured with the 4-item *Patient Health Questionnaire–4* (PHQ-4; Löwe et al., 2010). The PHQ-4 combines two items assessing depressive symptoms and two assessing anxiety. Participants responded using a 4-point scale from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Nearly every day*). Scores were summed to form a composite index of overall distress, with higher scores indicating greater distress. Adequate construct validity and internal consistency reliability (.82) have been reported (Löwe et al., 2010).

Psychological Adjustment. Psychological adjustment was operationalized using a brief 4-item composite developed for the present study. This index was intended to capture adaptive functioning across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and affective domains. The items were: “I have high self-esteem,” “I am satisfied with my life,” “I have had close and trusting relationships,” and “I am generally relaxed and self-confident.” Items were taken from or inspired by validate measures of self-esteem, life satisfaction, perceived social support, and emotional instability

(Costa & McCrae, 1992; Diener et al., 1985; Robins, et al., 2001; Zimet et al., 1988) For ease of reference, we termed this the Brief Index of Adjustment (BIA). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Higher summed scores hypothetically indicated better overall adjustment. Given the instrument was developed for this study, no reliability or validity were available.

Sociodemographic Variables. Participants also reported their gender, age, race or ethnicity, and whether they were currently taking psychiatric medication (coded 0 = no, 1 = yes). These variables were used for descriptive purposes and as potential covariates in subsequent analyses.

Data Screening and Analysis Plan

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 30.0. Data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. Less than 5% of values were missing on any variable and were replaced using series means (three cases). Pearson correlations were used for preliminary analyses to examine relationships among all study variables. Primary analyses tested whether sense of self and ego resiliency predicted psychological distress and adjustment using linear regressions. PROCESS 4.2 (Hayes, 2022) was used for mediation analyses to evaluate whether ego resiliency accounted for the association between self-structure and psychological outcomes. Alternative models were also calculated to determine if self-structure accounted for the relationship between ego resiliency and psychological outcomes. Bootstrapped mediation analyses (10,000 samples) were used test indirect effects. Statistical significance was determined using an alpha level of .05 (two-tailed).

Results

All variables were examined for missing data, normality, and internal consistency. Less than five percent of data were missing and were replaced with series means. Skewness and kurtosis values were within ± 1.0 for all measures, indicating acceptable normality. Reliability coefficients were adequate across measures ($\alpha = .724-.888$; see Table 1).

Preliminary Analyses

Because they had not been examined previously, principal components analyses were conducted for the abbreviated Sense of Self scale and the newly created Brief Index of Adjustment scale. The Sense of Self scale yielded one factor (eigenvalue = 3.45) accounting for 69.0% of variance, with loadings from .82 to .85. The Brief Index of Adjustment scale also produced one factor (eigenvalue = 2.67), accounting for 66.8% of variance, with loadings from .63 to .88. Combined with internal consistency estimates, these findings offer preliminary support for the reliability and construct validity of both measures.

Sociodemographic Correlates

Age correlated significantly only with ego resiliency ($r = -.20, p = .038$), with younger participants reporting slightly greater resiliency. Women reported higher distress than men, $t(104) = 3.00, p = .003, d = .72$, and men scored higher than women on psychological adjustment, $t(104) = 2.61, p = .011, d = .62$. Participants taking psychiatric medication reported greater

distress, weaker sense of self, lower ego resiliency, and lower adjustment, t 's > 2.66, p 's < .009, d 's > .79. Thus, psychiatric medication use was included as a covariate in regression and mediation analyses.

Table 1: Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics of measures

Variable	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
1. Sense of self				15.04	7.27	.888
2. Ego resiliency	-.36**			50.63	8.16	.724
3. Distress	.50**	-.26*		4.06	3.07	.845
4. Adjustment	-.64**	.47**	-.51**	20.57	4.82	.831

Note: $N = 109$. * $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$. Higher sense of self scores indicate weaker self-structure.

Correlations

Correlation coefficients appear in Table 1. A weaker (higher scoring) sense of self was associated with lower ego resiliency, greater psychological distress, and poorer psychological adjustment. Ego resiliency correlated negatively with distress and positively with adjustment. Distress and adjustment were strongly and inversely related.

Table 2: Regression models predicting psychological distress and adjustment

Variable	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Psychological distress			
Medication (0=no, 1=yes)	.15	1.66	.100
Sense of self	.44	4.88	<.001
Ego resiliency	-.06	0.66	.509
$\Delta R^2 = .275, F = 13.25, p < .001$			
Psychological adjustment			
Medication (0=no, 1=yes)	-.17	2.28	.025
Sense of self	-.51	6.73	<.001
Ego resiliency	.25	3.27	.001
$\Delta R^2 = .497, F = 34.62, p < .001$			

Prediction of Psychological Distress

A simultaneous regression tested whether sense of self and ego resiliency predicted distress while controlling for medication use (Table 2). The overall model was significant, $F(3, 105) = 13.25, p < .001$, explaining 27.5% of variance in distress. Weaker sense of self predicted higher distress ($\beta = .44, p < .001$). Ego resiliency did not make a unique contribution in the model ($\beta = -.06, p = .509$).

Prediction of Psychological Adjustment

The second regression tested predictors of adjustment. The model was significant, $F(3, 105) = 34.62, p < .001$, accounting for 49.7% of variance in adjustment. Not taking psychiatric medication ($\beta = -.17, p = .025$), stronger sense of self ($\beta = -.51, p < .001$), and higher ego resiliency ($\beta = .25, p = .001$) each uniquely predicted better adjustment.

Mediation Analyses for Psychological Distress

Sense of self predicted lower ego resiliency ($B = -0.35, SE = 0.10, p = .001$) and higher distress (total effect: $B = 0.19, SE = 0.04, p < .001$). Ego resiliency did not predict distress ($B = -0.02, SE = 0.03, p = .509$). The indirect effect of sense of self through ego resiliency was not significant ($B = 0.01, 95\% CI [-0.020, 0.032]$), indicating no mediation.

In the alternative model, ego resiliency predicted sense of self ($B = -0.28, SE = 0.08, p = .001$), which in turn predicted distress ($B = 0.19, SE = 0.04, p < .001$). The indirect effect was significant ($B = -0.05, 95\% CI [-0.095, -0.021]$) and the direct effect of ego resiliency on distress was not ($B = -0.02, SE = 0.03, p = .509$), indicating full mediation by sense of self.

Mediation Analyses for Psychological Adjustment

Sense of self predicted ego resiliency ($B = -0.35, SE = 0.10, p = .001$) and adjustment (total effect: $B = -0.39, SE = 0.05, p < .001$). Ego resiliency predicted adjustment ($B = 0.15, SE = 0.04, p = .002$). The indirect effect of sense of self through ego resiliency was significant ($B = -0.05, 95\% CI [-0.098, -0.015]$), indicating partial mediation.

In the alternative model, ego resiliency predicted adjustment ($B = 0.24, SE = 0.05, p < .001$) both directly ($B = 0.15, SE = 0.04, p = .002$) and indirectly through sense of self ($B = 0.09, 95\% CI [0.041, 0.161]$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine how ego structure and ego functioning relate to psychological distress and psychological adjustment. It was hypothesized that a cohesive sense of self and greater ego resiliency would predict lower distress and higher adjustment, and that ego resiliency would account for the association between sense of self and psychological outcomes. Though the hypotheses were only partly supported, the findings supported the central importance of ego structure (i.e., sense of self) while revealing a more complex role for ego functions (i.e., ego resiliency) in relation to psychological outcomes.

Consistent with expectations, individuals with a more cohesive sense of self reported lower distress and higher adjustment. Ego resiliency was also associated with greater adjustment. However, ego resiliency did not account for the association between sense of self and distress. Instead, distress appeared most closely tied to the stability of self-structure. Ego resiliency did partially account for the relationship between sense of self and adjustment, suggesting that resilient functioning contributes to positive adaptation, but appears to draw strength from a coherent internal self-system. Together, these findings point to a model in which ego structure

serves as a foundational element of psychological stability, while ego resiliency supports flourishing when structural integrity is present.

This pattern is consistent with long-standing psychodynamic perspectives on ego structure. Theorists have conceptualized the ego as both a structural anchor and an adaptive system that organizes internal experience and mediates responses to external reality (Freud, 1923/1961; Hartmann, 1939; Bellak et al., 1973). Kohut (1977) emphasized the self as the central psychological structure fostering cohesion, vitality, and continuity, while Kernberg (1984) described fragmentation of self-structure as a precursor to affective dysregulation and vulnerability to distress. In the current findings, weaker self-structure was most strongly associated with psychological distress, supporting these clinical models. Similarly, contemporary psychodynamic frameworks emphasize that coherent self-organization promotes affect regulation and integration of experience (McWilliams, 2011; Luyten et al., 2021). When the self lacks cohesion, emotional experience may feel overwhelming or disorganized, increasing the likelihood of distress.

The findings also align with perspectives on ego functioning. Block and Block (1980) and Letzring et al. (2005) viewed ego resiliency as a capacity for flexible modulation of affect and behavior. Developmentally, Klohnen et al. (1996) found that ego resiliency predicted adaptive functioning in midlife adults, suggesting its relevance across the lifespan. In the present study, ego resiliency was strongly tied to adjustment, consistent with its role in recovery from stress, social effectiveness, and adaptive coping. However, ego resiliency alone did not account for distress. This distinction suggests that flexible coping may be more relevant to the presence of well-being than to the mere absence of symptoms.

Recent empirical work supports this interpretation. Trait resilience consistently predicts flourishing more strongly than symptomatic relief (Hu et al., 2015). Neurobehavioral models also conceptualize resilience as successful adaptation to contextually shifting demands rather than a purely defensive process (Kalisch et al., 2017). The current findings fit well within this framework. Ego resiliency was most closely associated with adjustment, but its effects on distress depended on the stability of the underlying self-structure. This observation ties to findings in which self-cohesion and mentalization capacities are viewed as prerequisites for flexible affective regulation (Luyten et al., 2021). It also converges with personality research demonstrating that stable self-representations predict lower internalizing symptoms and promote adaptive emotional functioning over time (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017).

The convergence of ego psychology theory and recent empirical evidence hints at a potential hierarchical organization. Structural self-cohesion may provide a psychological base from which flexible coping can operate effectively. Basten and Touyz (2020) similarly emphasized self-structure is at the core of emotional stability. Thus, while ego resiliency remains an important capacity for adaptive functioning, the present findings suggest that its influence is amplified when rooted in a cohesive sense of self. In more practical terms, adjustment appears to involve both maintaining internal continuity and flexibly adapting to life circumstances, whereas protection against distress may depend more heavily on structural integrity of the ego; that is, one's narratives about the self and experiences.

From another perspective, the current findings may also be considered in relation to the construct ego strength. Historically, ego strength referred to a person's ability to maintain internal

coherence while coping with external and internal pressures (Hartmann, 1939), reflecting both a cohesive sense of identity and effective emotion regulation. More recent views similarly conceptualize ego strength as involving both stable self-structure and the capacity for flexible adjustment (Block & Block, 1980; Cabaniss et al., 2016; Cramer, 1999). The present results remain consistent with this view and recent findings regarding ego strength (Daughtry et al., 2020). A cohesive sense of self appears foundational, whereas ego resiliency may capture the adaptive, regulatory aspect of functioning. Together, these findings suggest that ego strength may be conceptualized as an integrated expression of identity coherence and resilient self-regulation, and that disturbances in self-structure may undermine the effective deployment of these adaptive capacities. Additional research is needed to verify this.

Several limitations of the current study merit attention. The study relied on a college sample, limiting generalizability to broader or clinical populations. Measures were brief and self-reported, and although preliminary reliability and factor findings supported their use, further psychometric evaluation is warranted. The cross-sectional design also prevents causal inferences. Longitudinal and multi-method studies are needed to clarify how ego structure and resiliency interact over time to influence well-being and distress. For example, future research could examine whether interventions that ostensibly enhance self-structure such as object relations (Kernberg, 2016) or mentalization-based approaches (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016), may foster greater ego resiliency and improvements in adjustment. Additional research is also needed to further validate the Brief Index of Adjustment used in the current study.

In summary, the present findings suggest that ego structure and ego resiliency each contribute to psychological functioning, but in distinct ways. A cohesive sense of self serves as a foundation for emotional stability and reduced distress, while ego resiliency supports positive functioning and well-being, as long as it rests on a solid structure. These results underscore the importance of considering both structural and functional processes in understanding personality and mental health. Strengthening self-organization may represent a valuable pathway to enhancing resilience and promoting flourishing, particularly during emerging adulthood when identity and ego systems continue to consolidate.

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