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How Much Do We Really Know About Employee Resilience? More, If We Include the Sport Psychology Resilience Research

Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt
Western Kentucky University

Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016) present an argument for consolidation and conceptual unification of the resilience research. As one of the few industrial–organizational (I-O) psychologists who regularly work in the sport psychology field, I was compelled to note the omission by Britt et al. of any reference to the resilience research in the sport psychology domain. As an I-O psychologist practicing sport psychology, I have stood on the shoulders of giants in applying with athletes and coaches our I-O theory and knowledge in areas such as motivation (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002), training (e.g., skill acquisition, automaticity, deliberate practice, expertise, adaptive expertise, error based learning; e.g., Chen, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson, & Lehmann, 1996; Logan, 1988; Lorenzet, Salas, & Tannenbaum, 2005), leadership, and group and team dynamics (e.g., Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002; Salas, Cooke, & Rosen, 2008). I-O psychology tends to be on the vanguard in these areas, whereas sport psychology lags somewhat behind (compare Locke & Latham, 2002, with Gould, 1993, and Weinberg & Weigand, 1993; compare Vroom & Yetton, 1973, with Chelladurai & Haggerty, 1978). However, resilience has been a central research focus for sport psychologists for some time; it is a relatively recent area of interest for I-O psychologists. Interestingly, Britt et al. did not include even a single reference from the sport psychology liter-

Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt, Department of Psychological Sciences, Western Kentucky University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt, Department of Psychological Sciences, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101. E-mail: betsy.shoenfelt@wku.edu

ature. I strongly encourage I-O psychologists studying resilience to review, borrow, and build on the sport psychology research in this area.

Even so, sport psychology resilience research suffers from many of the same issues identified by Britt et al. in the I-O resilience research. An example is the issue of labeling and defining the construct of resilience. Along with resilience, sport psychologists use terms such as mental toughness (e.g., Crust & Clough, 2011; Jones, 2002), hardiness (e.g., Golby & Sheard, 2004), and robust confidence (e.g., Beaumont, Maynard, & Butt, 2015). Likewise, sport psychologists have identified measurement issues similar to those identified by Britt et al. (e.g., Madrigal, Hamill, & Gill, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2013). Fletcher, Sarkar, and colleagues (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar, & Curran, 2015; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) are attempting to right this ship in the sport psychology domain, as Britt et al. recommend doing in the I-O literature. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) conducted a comprehensive review of the resilience literature in education, business, and sport and cited research problems caused by the lack of conceptual unification including difficulties with comparisons across studies, the preclusion of meta-analytic studies, and difficulties with operationalizing the resilience construct for measurement purposes. Fletcher and Sarkar concluded that most definitions center on two key concepts: (a) experiencing adversity (b) to which there is positive adaptation. They further concluded that it is how these two concepts are delineated that has caused the inconsistencies and confusion in the literature.

Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) indicated what they believe is an important conceptual distinction between resilience and coping. Resilience consists of the interactive factors used in appraising stressors, metacognitive responses to the emotions experienced, and the selection of emotional and behavioral coping strategies that protect the individual from the potential negative effects of the stressors. Thus, this definition of resilience incorporates both trait and behavioral aspects of resilience. Coping, on the other hand, is the response to the stressors and may vary in its effectiveness in addressing them.

The case has been made for using sports performance and sports organizations as an analogue to performance in the workplace (e.g., Fletcher, 2011; Foster, 2002; Katz, 2001; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). Commonalities in sport and business organizational practices are readily apparent, including recruitment and selection, training, performance management, and performance evaluation on the “I” side, as well as motivation, leadership, and team dynamics on the “O” side. In addition, several characteristics of sport organizations make them appealing research subjects, including relatively short, scheduled performance periods (i.e., seasons) and the objective outcome of winning or losing. However, there are limitations as well, including relatively small numbers of team members, approximately 25% turnover

each year in intercollegiate sports, and criterion contamination in competitive performance measures (e.g., the competition).

Research targeting athletes is likely a better analogue with more utility for making inferences about most employees than are the clinical (Bonanno, 2004) or developmental (Masten, 2001) psychology models referenced by Britt et al., as most employees are mentally healthy and adult. Athletes frequently experience chronic stressors associated with performance in competitions and the daily practice and mental and physical preparation required for these competitions (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Employees may experience chronic stressors at work, at least some of which are associated with deadlines for performance, products, and services. Both athletes and employees encounter additional stressors from the organizational context and personal life events (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Most employees do not face the acute stressors experienced by first responders and military personnel, the most common subjects of I-O resilience research. Perhaps elite athletes (e.g., Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2015; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012) might be an analogue for these employees who deal with the most serious potentially traumatic events on a regular basis. For professional elite athletes, sport is the workplace; however, such athletes are relatively small in number compared with, for example, intercollegiate athletes.

The majority of the resilience research addresses adaptation to adversity, a negative event; however, resilience is required to adapt to the demands of circumstances in the context of some common positive events (e.g., promotion, marriage) that are frequently omitted from study (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Even in the context of adversity, the challenge of the situation should not have to be so severe that it results in psychological trauma for it to be of interest to resilience researchers. Luthar (2006) and Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) indicated that the domain assessed should drive the stringency of the criteria for resilience. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) stated that when there are severe potentially traumatic events, resilience might be defined as the absence of psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder), but when the nature of the adversity is less severe, average or excellent functioning may serve as an appropriate criterion. Sports performance provides a context in which both positive (e.g., championships) and adverse (e.g., injury) events occur and to which athletes must respond.

In conclusion, I recommend I-O psychologists conducting and applying resilience research be more inclusive of the sport psychology research literature on resilience. Sport psychologists attend to the I-O resilience literature (e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar, & Curran, 2015); it likely would behoove I-O psychologists to attend to the sport psychology resilience literature as well.

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