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Advancing Employee Resilience Research: Additional Thoughts

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Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016) draw attention to issues in the psychological literature regarding how we define, assess, select for, and build employee resilience. We offer a handful of recommendations for complementing and expanding on these important issues. Specifically, we propose that research should include more common forms of workplace adversity, versus extreme and rare types of adversity; resilience should be assessed via objective multirater methodology rather than subjective self-report; because context is important when studying resilience, researchers should delineate the purposes of the research; resilience should be treated as a malleable rather than a fixed characteristic; and finally, the field would benefit from qualitative research in addition to quantitative research.

Throughout their article, the authors insist that to advance resilience research, researchers need to clarify what is meant by “significant adversity” and document its occurrence in the workplace. Much in line with the authors, we define “significant adversity” as any challenge that is present at a high intensity or duration. Certainly, traumatic events such as abusive supervision and disasters count, but more common workplace stressors also represent significant adversity. In our work with organizations, we have witnessed many examples of workers who face significant adversity as defined

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by Britt et al. but who are not in the military, in the police, or involved in disaster relief: for example, workers faced with chronic heavy workloads and deadlines that contribute to significant mental and physical health problems and medical staff members who face multiple demands for their attention and time, at times affecting their performance to a degree that could diminish patient safety. Recognizing these more common forms of adversity opens up more avenues for fruitful research on resilience.

The authors spend a considerable amount of time reviewing methods used to assess resilience, with an emphasis on distinguishing *capacity for resilience* from *demonstration of resilience*. Specifically, they describe various personality-based assessments of resilience as well as research on resilient trajectories following adversity. The rest of our recommendations focus on these aspects of their review.

The authors note that the *capacity for resilience* has primarily been assessed via personality-based models. These models assume the following: The capacity for resilience is an individual-level characteristic, resilience is appropriately assessed through self-reports, resilience varies along a single continuum from high resilience to vulnerability, and individuals demonstrate a relatively consistent level of resilience across multiple contexts. The models differ in their assumptions about the extent to which one's current level of resilience is malleable.

The authors critically evaluate this personality literature but fail to make some important points. First, the fact that most resilience assessments are based on self-perception is highly problematic. Research across many domains of psychology converges on the notion that people tend to be flawed in their self-assessment (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). For example, self-ratings of skill hold only moderate to meager relationships with measures of actual performance (Mabe & West, 1982; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). Additionally, people are often out of touch with their own emotions and stress levels (Gilbert, 2006; Dutton & Aaron, 1974). Moreover, people overestimate themselves—they see themselves as more skilled than they actually are. These erroneous self-perceptions arise for a variety of reasons (e.g., people seek to see themselves in a flattering light, and they ignore relevant information such as past experiences and background circumstances; Dunning et al., 2004). Research shows that acquaintances see others at a more abstract level and often assess others' performance and abilities more accurately than they themselves can (Bass & Yammarino, 1991; Dunning et al., 2004; Eyal & Epley, 2010; Risucci, Torolani, & Ward, 1989). It is imperative that we incorporate a multirater perspective into our studies of employee resilience; otherwise, we risk introducing systematic errors into our conclusions about resiliency.

Britt et al. point out that researchers regard resilience as a uniform personality trait that remains stable across circumstances. Certainly, this is

worth addressing in future research. There is evidence to suggest that people are more tolerant of certain forms of stress compared with others. For example, Idris (2011) found that academics had a higher level of tolerance for role conflict compared with role ambiguity or role overload. Among a sample of nurses, role conflict more strongly predicted occupational stress compared with role overload or role ambiguity (Karimi, Omar, Alipour, & Karimi, 2014). Although the authors argue that the stress literature contributes “virtually nothing” to our understanding of resilience, we would argue that these are not distinct concepts and that how people respond to low-level stressors is predictive of their responses to high-level stressors. It is worthwhile, therefore, to make finer distinctions within the resilience literature regarding “resilience for what?” Resilience for extreme work overload? Resilience for abusive leadership? Resilience for disaster? By delineating these differences in the research, we will gain a more fine-grained understanding of individuals’ capacity for resilience and demonstration of resilience over time.

Next, resilience models vary in the extent to which they treat resilience as fixed. We argue that resilience researchers should move away from conceptualizing resilience as a personality trait to studying it as a malleable quality. Britt et al. cite research showing resilience training programs are effective and produce noticeable changes in people, even if these programs are evaluated in the same way as stress-management interventions. Moreover, organizational factors like learning culture and empowering leadership have been linked to increased employee resilience (Hodliff, 2014). What is more, interventions like meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy have been shown to induce neurological changes associated with greater resilience (Davidson & Begley, 2012). Although studying individuals using functional magnetic resonance imaging and other advanced technologies is inherently challenging, working with neuroscientists on this line of research could be vastly informative. Studying resilience as a developable and malleable characteristic is more productive, as it encourages both organizational leaders and employees to take ownership for their individual and organizations’ resilience, rather than “blame the victim,” as Britt et al. suggest may occur in some circumstances.

Next, the authors review research on the *demonstration of resilience*. The authors insist that time is an integral component of the study of resilience and recommend that researchers primarily use longitudinal designs to assess individuals’ adaptation. Specifically, they advocate that researchers first assess employees on relevant individual differences and contextual factors, then document significant adversity, and finally, assess workers on multiple measures of positive adaptation over the course of time. Certainly, this approach is worth pursuing. However, as noted previously, cases of extreme

adversity occur abruptly and infrequently, making longitudinal research very difficult to implement.

As a complement to, or in lieu of, this type of longitudinal research, researchers should consider incorporating more qualitative methods. Qualitative methods allow researchers to engage more deeply with participants and undertake a detailed process of inquiry that can uncover patterns and themes in humans' responses to adverse events. Through interview, field notes, observations, and so on, researchers gain a sense of the totality of the human adaptation process, including its link to the social context.

Ungar (2003) argues that qualitative research compensates for weaknesses in quantitative resilience research. For example, the selection of outcome variables is often arbitrary. If quantitative researchers do not test for particular outcome variables, they may erroneously conclude that someone was vulnerable and not resilient. This is an issue that was also acknowledged by Britt et al. Qualitative research, however, takes a bottom-up approach, allowing the relevant dimensions to emerge during data collection. In addition, quantitative resilience research studies behavior under controlled conditions, failing to contextualize the adaptation process. Qualitative research, on the other hand, acknowledges the context that informs the importance of various factors within an individual case. Overall, qualitative methods provide researchers intimate access to the processes by which individuals make sense of and respond to their own reality and may give rise to novel research questions and theory. Considering the personal and sensitive nature of the topic, this methodology is worthwhile.

Britt et al. provide a comprehensive review of the state of resilience research, shedding light on a troubling amount of discrepancy and uncertainty regarding our conceptualization of resilience. They offer valid critiques and recommendations for further research. The purpose of this article was to build on Britt et al.'s argument and suggest ways we can better assess and study resilience in the workplace.

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Resilient Employees in Resilient Organizations: Flourishing Beyond Adversity

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Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016) offer compelling arguments for the need to consider resilience trajectories and to identify the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors accountable for unique trajectories. We welcome the call for more focused research efforts toward uncovering the role of resilience in organizations and concur with Britt et al. that there is a need for a clearer characterization of resilience among employees, the correlates of resilience, and the way that resilience can be facilitated. Our objective here is to build on the main thrust of Britt et al.'s focal article by outlining a novel perspective on employee resilience, which we believe

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