

The Untapped Potential in Employee Resilience: Specific Recommendations for Research and Practice

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The focal article “How Much Do We Really Know About Employee Resilience?” by Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016) is an informative work concerning the paucity of resilience research in organizational science. This commentary serves two purposes: (a) to provide specific recommendations relevant to the aims of the focal article and (b) to present additional unexplored areas that would contribute to what we “really know about employee resilience.” First, I offer suggestions concerning two fundamental issues within resilience research mentioned by Britt et al.: the lack of conceptual clarity and the lack of agreement concerning the characterization of significant adversity. Second, I present three directions for future research: incorporating levels of analysis, developing resilience typologies, and deepening theoretical representations. **This commentary complements the focal article by highlighting both specific recommendations and novel areas deserving of exploration.**

Specific Recommendations Regarding Resilience Conceptualization

Issues of conceptual clarity and the characterization of significant adversity have been highlighted in previous resilience research in other disciplines (e.g., child development psychology; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). Clarity in the operationalization of resilience is important, as “good construct explication is essential to construct validity” (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 69). A construct must be understood before its relationships with other constructs can be interpreted and used to guide practical decisions. There is a tendency, as Britt et al. mentioned, for resilience researchers to label different constructs and construct

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types (i.e., traits, states, and behaviors) as resilience. The dangers of such overuse (and misuse) of the term resilience include, but are not limited to, stifling the development of our understandings—as we discuss differential constructs using one term—and creating barriers to the design of appropriate interventions—as we have not established the fundamental components of the dependent variable we wish to foster. The focal article highlights the value of “distinguishing the *capacity* for resilience and the *demonstration* of resilience” (Britt et al., p. 378), yet specific guidelines concerning how this can or should be done are not provided. Conceptual clarity will help researchers avoid misalignment of constructs and measures (e.g., using a trait resiliency scale in a study of resilience behavior) and foster collaborative science that builds on relevant previous research (e.g., avoiding trait resiliency research building on behavioral resilience findings due to construct confusion, and vice versa). **Thus, in agreement with previous authors, the term *resilience* should be used exclusively when referring to the positive outcome that follows exposure to challenging conditions, and the term *resiliency* should be used when referring to the trait that predisposes individuals to overcome adversity.**

A second issue concerning resilience construct clarity that is briefly mentioned in the focal article involves the potential for decrements in functioning following experienced adversity as a precursor to the characterization of a resilient outcome. Bonanno (2004) presents one perspective in stating that resilient individuals never need to “bounce back” because they never show any great decrement in functioning. This is an important distinction to discuss, as a standardized characterization of the resilience process will foster greater consistency in research. It is here argued that resilience research should work to maintain consistency with the original conceptualization of this construct. The word *resilience* comes from the Latin *resilire*, meaning to “leap back” or “return to the original position” (“Resilience,” 2010) and is typically defined as positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). In fact, this conceptualization of a return to optimal functioning is part of what makes resilience unique from other persistence constructs that involve continued effort over time with no discussion of experienced adversity or decrements in functioning. Resilience is unique in that it incorporates the idea that some adverse experience leads to decrements in functioning, yet resilient individuals are able to overcome these drops from their equilibrium and return to (or surpass, in the case of posttraumatic growth) initial levels of functioning. It is here asserted that resilience research is more than the study of an adverse circumstance’s presence and the determining of who is unaffected; Bonanno’s conceptualization would label these individuals as resilient, but resilience has been, and is, found in studying those who evidence negative impacts following

challenging experiences or risk yet are able to later achieve positive outcomes despite these experiences. **Only the conceptualization of “bouncing back” from adversity uncovers the “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001) of resilience.**

Variation in the characterization of adversity has also garnered attention in previous resilience research (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001). Resilience research has included adverse conditions such as socioeconomic disadvantage, parental mental illness, maltreatment, poverty and community violence, and catastrophic life events. In addition, adversity conditions examined have ranged from a single stressful life event (e.g., exposure to war) to aggregates across multiple negative experiences (e.g., examined via a life event checklist). Thus, it is difficult to determine whether all individuals who demonstrated resilience experienced comparable levels of adversity. However, standardization concerning the characterization of adversity may be instrumental for understanding and interpreting positive adaptation following such events. In response, the focal article argues that “many of the traditional work stressors examined by organizational psychologists, including job ambiguity, work overload, and organizational constraints, do not constitute significant adversity, especially if these stressors are judged as not being present at a high intensity and/or for a long duration” (Britt et al., p. 381). Unfortunately, the use of relative terms such as “significant adversity,” “high intensity” and “long duration” highlights the salient issue of subjective versus “objective” ratings of adversity. This commentary provides a different perspective and suggestions for resolving this inconsistency.

Researchers recognize that the meaning of a particular adverse event to the individual experiencing it can differ substantially from that of the researcher (Bartlett, 1994; Gordon & Song, 1994). Thus, the use of predetermined adversity categorizations determined by the researcher may not foster desired advancements in resilience research and may instead lead to misinterpretations that ignore individual differences in perceived and/or experienced adverse conditions. For example, some individuals may see themselves as relatively well off even though scientists may define their circumstances as being highly stressful, and the characterization of these individuals as resilient would not well align with the behaviors that resilience research intends to capture—a positive outcome achieved despite challenging circumstances. In order to standardize characterizations of adversity, researchers should incorporate the employees’ experienced level of adversity. For example, if job ambiguity is not a stressful experience for one employee and is significantly stressful to a second employee and both employees achieve positive outcomes, only the second employee should be considered resilient, as the first did not experience an adverse circumstance to overcome. Resilience does not concern the study of overcoming circumstances that *others*

perceive as stressful. Though the suggested perspective can foster reliance on self-reported experiences of adversity, this perspective is better aligned with the goal of resilience research to understand how individuals who perceive and experience adversity attain positive outcomes. **It is important for researchers and practitioners to maintain a person-centric approach to the study of resilience in the characterization of adversity.**

Additional Areas in Need of Exploration

In addition to providing the specific recommendations discussed above, this commentary presents additional unexplored areas that are in need of research attention. First, resilience researchers must begin to consider levels of analysis. Though the focal article does not touch on this issue and the authors state “our focus in this article is on individual employee resilience rather than team or organizational resilience” (Britt et al., p. 379), this is an important consideration. Shadish and colleagues (2002) cautioned that “sometimes an experimenter will draw a general conclusion about constructs that fails to recognize that only some levels of each facet of that construct were actually studied and that the results might have been different if different levels were studied” (p. 76). Organizations are multilevel systems (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Thus, as we uncover the antecedents, outcomes, and moderation variables in the nomological network of employee resilience, it is important that we situate this research within a consideration of levels of analysis. For example, findings concerning individual resilience as an outcome may (or may not) generalize to unit or collective resilience. What does team resilience look like? What factors influence organizational resilience? Is the nomological network the same for both individual and collective resilience? In addition, exploring cross level effects may provide valuable insights. **It is important to consider levels of analysis when further exploring this area.**

Second, employee resilience researchers should present and study potential typologies within this area. A common assumption within this domain, mentioned in the focal article, is that “resilience is a general quality (i.e., individuals demonstrate relatively consistent levels of resilience across multiple contexts)” (Britt et al., p. 383). One potential model that can be used to guide such exploration is a categorization of effectiveness outcomes that classifies these as (a) behavioral, (b) attitudinal, (c) cognitive, and (d) health and well-being related (e.g., Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). This framework could be used to detail potential types of resilience. For example, research should examine the potential distinction and interplay between *emotional* resilience and *behavioral* resilience. This distinction is in line with research showing that among adolescents who experience significant adversity, those who overtly reflect successful adaptation often struggle

with covert psychological difficulties, such as problems of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (e.g., Luthar & Zigler, 1991). Such observed effects may be especially relevant to the work context, in which impression management and external pressures to perform likely influence employee resilience. Sonnentag and Frese (2003) also showed that employees typically will protect their performance from being affected by significant work stressors and more often show mental health symptoms in the face of work demands. Thus, it is possible for individuals to feel as if they have not overcome the adversity emotionally (a lack of emotional resilience) yet return to normal behavioral functioning at work (demonstrated behavioral resilience). **Our understandings may be furthered by future research that investigates the potential for typological distinctions, how these types of resilience are related, and the unique antecedents and outcomes of each type.**

A third area of employee resilience in need of additional research attention concerns theoretical development and integration. To date, only one theory of resilience has been presented (the metatheory of resilience and resiliency; Richardson, 2002), and no theories have been proposed with a focus on this construct within organizational science. Luthar and colleagues (2000) argue that “progress in the area of resilience will remain seriously constrained as long as studies remain largely empirically driven as opposed to theoretically based” (p. 12). Here, I urge future research to develop theoretical frameworks of resilience and utilize existing theories to guide empirical investigations. In addition, integration of other theories into research offers an opportunity to apply established understandings to resilience. For example, self-regulation theories could not only further the exploration of resilience effects but might also inform how we conceptualize this construct. Whether resilience is considered a *return* to equilibrium after experienced adversity or presented as continued goal pursuit, even if the behavioral expression is different postadversity, would be a very interesting and informative possibility to explore. For example, as resilience falls under the area of positive psychology and involves achievement of “good outcomes in spite of serious threats” (Masten, 2001, p. 228), if an employee is sexually harassed by her or his supervisor, current conceptualizations may imply that resilience involves maintaining efficiency and commitment in this work situation despite such a challenge. However, goal pursuit theories may suggest that if returning to one’s normal functioning prior to adversity is in fact a barrier to achieving one’s goal (e.g., supervisor will not stop or change, and this will lead to negative impacts on the employee), perhaps demonstrated resilience would entail leaving that job to maintain pursuit of one’s goal of psychological well-being and productivity (even in a new role). **Thus, theoretical**

development and integration with other theories may help determine the boundary conditions and alternative manifestations of resilience.

Conclusion

Overall, this commentary complements the focal article by providing specific recommendations on the issues the authors highlight and presenting additional areas in need of exploration in the area of employee resilience. Future work would do well in maintaining precision in terminology (i.e., using the term resilience for a behavior and resiliency in trait conceptualizations) and allowing a person-centric approach to characterize significant adversity. More qualitative research may be helpful in this developing area seeking to uncover the possible process profiles and demonstrations of resilience. In addition, this article highlights the untapped potential for considering levels of analysis, presenting resilience typologies, and furthering theoretical development. I hope that this work will be used to further conversation and fuel the development of a parsimonious nomological network of resilience. I also hope that future resilience work will further the collective goal presented in the focal article of “creating and maintaining healthy and productive workers and organizations.”

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Emotion Regulation and Resilience: Overlooked Connections

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According to the focal article by Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016), it seems conclusive that all definitions of resilience involve an experience of significant adversity, regardless of whether it is examined as a trait or an outcome. This experience of adversity is inherently emotional. When considering the ability or outcome of “bouncing back” from a stressful or chronic event, one must recognize the emotional experience and consider how individuals may cope with their emotions. This said, there is a clear connection between resilience and emotion regulation. The focal article presents a descriptive model of resilience for employees, which includes mention of energy and affect as individual resources but does not acknowledge the connection between resilience and emotion regulation. In this commentary I argue that these two research areas are related but largely neglected in the current literature. I will discuss the (a) process model of emotion regulation, (b) points of connection with resilience, and (c) empirical research suggesting the importance of positive emotion.

Emotion Regulation

The process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) organizes emotion regulation strategies by temporal points in the emotion-generation process.

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