Exploring Workplace Resilience Through a Personality Strength Lens

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Resilience research has primarily focused on occupations that undergo a significant amount of stress, such as the military or trauma teams. In response, Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, and Klieger (2016) call for "future work on resilience to expand to include a wider cross section of workers and occupations" (p. 397). We suggest that viewing resilience through a personality strength lens will facilitate this expansion. Adopting a personality strength approach to resilience will more clearly (a) link the *capacity for* resilience to positive adaptation in the face of a broader range of stressors beyond objectively significant adversity and (b) open up new methods of investigating the *demonstration of* resilience.[1]

Personality Strength and Resilience

Personality strength is formally defined as "the forcefulness of implicit or explicit *internal* [emphasis added] cues regarding the desirability of potential behaviors" (Dalal et al., 2015, p. 263). The construct of personality strength can describe the relative stability of personality trait expression over time or across situations. Dalal et al. propose that people differ in within-person personality consistency (or variability) because they differ in the extent to which their behaviors are guided by situational cues versus inner states and dispositions. Personality-based conceptualizations of resilience, such as hardiness,[2] are operationalizations of personality strength because hardy individuals exhibit greater stability than less hardy individuals in behavioral expressions of personality across situations of varying levels of adversity. In other words, hardy individuals will emphasize internal cues that are consistent with their stress-resilient dispositional tendencies—and

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[1] We make the distinction between the *capacity* for resilience and the *demonstration* of resilience in the same manner as Britt et al.

[2] For the purpose of this article, we emphasize hardiness, but of course many other personality-based conceptualizations of resilience (e.g., psychological capital) are also operationalizations of personality strength (see, e.g., Dalal et al., 2015).

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will thus express low reactivity to adverse situations. Hardiness is a "one-sided" operationalization of personality strength, because hardy individuals are less reactive to stressors but are not necessarily less reactive to uplifts (Dalal et al., 2015).

Hardiness' effect on strain has been explained through coping (e.g., problem-focused and approach coping; see Eschleman, Bowling, & Alarcon, 2010) and subjectively interpreting events as less stressful (Roth, Wiebe, Fillingim, & Shay, 1989). We extrapolate from theoretical propositions regarding personality strength (Dalal et al., 2015) to suggest that hardy individuals and, more broadly, individuals scoring high in personality-based conceptualizations of resilience (i.e., the capacity for resilience) attend more to the aspects of adverse situations that encourage behavior consistent with their personality (e.g., opportunities for challenge and growth) and less to aspects inconsistent with their personality (e.g., threat, danger). As a result, hardy individuals will demonstrate a higher mean level of positive work outcomes and less variability in these work outcomes when faced with adversity compared with less hardy individuals.

Resilience and Daily Hassles

The personality strength approach to resilience emphasizes that individuals vary in their attendance to internal (i.e., dispositional) and external (i.e., situational) cues when faced with stressful events and therefore that two individuals who differ in personality strength may experience different levels of strain from the same stressor. The placement of a particular objective event on a continuum of stressors ranging from daily hassles to traumatic events is subject to the perceptions of individuals and will vary with their personality strength. In addition, in accordance with Britt et al.'s model for adversity, a hassle that is not particularly intense (i.e., severe) but that occurs with high frequency, that is unpredictable, and that endures over a long period of time does not necessarily yield less strain than a one-time, foreseeable traumatic event of short duration. That is, employees with weak personalities (e.g., low hardiness) may perceive ongoing workplace stressors (e.g., role ambiguity, workload) as significant adversity, resulting in negative outcomes. We therefore argue that resilience researchers should think twice before discounting unpredictable, frequent, or long-lasting stressful events that do not rise to an arbitrarily high, externally measured level of intensity. A sole focus on high-intensity stressors may preclude examinations of (a) how the capacity for resilience influences the demonstration of resilience in everyday work and (b) how the demonstration of resilience in everyday work predicts the demonstration of resilience in the face of high-intensity stressors.

Another reason why hardy individuals demonstrate resilience is because hardy individuals may simply experience fewer *objectively* negative events in

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the first place (Roth et al., 1989). Such a hypothesis is supported by research on emotional stability (Suls, Martin, & David, 1998), a trait correlated with hardiness (Eschleman et al., 2010) and another operationalization of personality strength (Dalal et al., 2015). Essentially, hardy (and emotionally stable) individuals choose and/or shape situations such that the situations they encounter have fewer objectively negative cues (Eschleman et al., 2010). As a result, hardy individuals would have fewer perceptions of adversity and, subsequently, fewer negative work outcomes (i.e., a higher demonstration of resilience).

An emphasis exclusively on objectively traumatic stressors (regardless of frequency, predictability, or duration) as a prerequisite to demonstrating resilience excludes, by *fiat*, the possibility of demonstrating resilience in most modern jobs (where objectively traumatic stressors are typically absent). This is unfortunate, because Britt et al. (a) point out growing interest among practitioners about whether and how to select employees on the basis of resilience capacity and (b) call for additional research to answer this question. Although we agree that not all studies examining the influence of self-reported capacity for resilience on stressor–strain relationships are actually studying resilience, we worry that the exclusion of the vast majority of these studies may result in "throwing the baby out with the bathwater."

Researching Resilience Through the Lens of Personality Strength

Researchers have available to them a plethora of tools for measuring personality strength (Dalal et al., 2015). These tools, including experience sampling methods (ESM), assessment centers, and situational judgment tests (SJTs), might also be applied to the study of resilience. An expansion in available assessment tools would facilitate both research on resilience and practical application in selection and training for resilience.

As discussed previously, the theory underlying personality strength suggests that the *capacity* for resilience, as measured by personality traits such as hardiness, influences the *demonstration* of resilience through the perception of situations. In other words, positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity, a key aspect of the definition of resilience, encompasses not only how employees respond to workplace stressors but also how they perceive these stressors. In accordance with personality strength theory, hardy individuals perceive fewer overall stressors and exhibit lower variability in this perception. Thus, ESM could be used to measure the capacity for resilience by asking employees to evaluate the presence of stressors several times a day and by calculating the mean and standard deviation of these evaluations. A lower mean level of perceived stressors, cou-

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pled with a smaller standard deviation, would indicate a higher capacity for resilience.

ESM provides not only an alternative to traditional, one-shot self-report surveys to measure the capacity for resilience but also an alternative to longitudinal performance trajectories to measure the demonstration of resilience. Although the study of trajectories is important, there is, as Britt et al. point out, little consensus regarding how to measure demonstrated resilience using trajectories of performance or strain (e.g., speed of return to previous performance levels vs. higher levels postevent—that is, adaptation vs. posttraumatic growth). More important, trajectories are likely to represent only one form of demonstrated resilience: The more general phenomenon involves variability per se. That is, because greater similarity in perceptions across situations relates to smaller within-person variance in performance (Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010), we define the demonstration of resilience more generally as less variability (i.e., smaller standard deviations) in and lower levels (i.e., mean levels) of negative stress-related work outcomes (e.g., lower and less variable task performance; higher and more variable turnover intentions and counterproductive work behavior). An ESM study provides a vehicle for such examinations.

Beyond ESM, methods such as assessment centers can examine the demonstration of resilience. An assessment center typically contains activities such as in-basket/in-box exercises, group role-playing exercises, and ability tests. Within each activity, various workplace stressors could be introduced (e.g., a computer malfunction and incomplete directions introduced simultaneously under a timed work overload scenario). It would be important to cover a broad range of workplace stressors across a large number of activities to provide a large enough sampling of stressors. In each activity, the employees' perceptions of stressors and behaviors (e.g., task performance) would be measured. By calculating the means and standard deviations of perceptions and behaviors across situations for each individual, researchers can examine the variability and mean level of perceived stressors and their impact on the variability and mean level of work-related outcomes. Practitioners could use assessment centers to measure the consistency and levels of performance as demonstrations of resilience. Such tools expand the current selection tools available that only measure the capacity for resilience (e.g., hardiness self-report measures).

In addition to being a good vehicle for assessing perceptions of stressors, an assessment center provides the opportunity to examine the impact of objective stressors. Objective stressors are difficult to examine in ESM studies, where participants' responses contain their individual interpretations of the situation. The ability to manipulate stressors imposed across or within as-

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sessment center activities facilitates the measurement of demonstrated resilience across objective situations.

As in assessment centers, situations can be manipulated in SJTs. An SJT could present vignettes of workplace situations with varying intensity, frequency, predictability, and/or duration of stressors, and employees could indicate a choice to enter each situation and/or could report how stressful they perceive each situation. Similar to assessment centers, SJTs could measure whether hardy individuals, compared with less hardy individuals, perceive less variability in and a lower mean level of workplace stressors in the situations. Concerns about the "paper" (i.e., facile) nature of "stressful" situations assessed via SJTs can be alleviated by using video-based assessments depicting highly immersive situations containing job-relevant stressors high in intensity, frequency, predictability, and/or duration. Thus, assessment centers and SJTs can help us understand how hardy individuals (e.g., those individuals with the capacity for resilience) demonstrate resilience through the selection and shaping of situations. These methods may be useful in basic research as well as in applied selection procedures and training programs.

Conclusion

By applying personality strength theory, we can reconceptualize the measurement of demonstrated resilience in the workplace beyond longitudinal trajectories using designs that can more easily be administered by scientists and practitioners for applied selection and training purposes as well as for basic research. With a more comprehensive perspective on workplace events that constitute significant adversity, we propose several research designs to study and to select and train for resilience in the workplace (e.g., SJTs, assessment centers, ESM). In addition, such methods will help us understand how the perception, shaping, and choice of stressful workplace situations mediate the relationship between the capacity for resilience and the demonstration of resilience. In sum, adopting a personality strength "lens" allows for the expansion of the study of resilience to a broader array of jobs (as recommended by Britt et al.) and enables the use of multiple hitherto underutilized methods to study and maximize the demonstration of resilience.

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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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