



Resilience in Organizational Psychology: An Integrative Review of Its Conceptualization, Measurement, and Development Across Levels of Analysis

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Abstract

Resilience may be the most heavily used construct in organizational psychology at the moment, and the popularity itself has created problems. The concept came into the field from developmental and clinical research, arrived with old definitional disputes unsettled, and has since split into separate literatures at the individual, team, and organizational levels. This review draws those literatures together around three questions: what resilience means at work, how it gets measured, and whether anything can be done to build it. Individual resilience is treated variously as a stable trait, as a developable state within psychological capital, and as a set of work-specific behaviors. Team resilience is modeled as an emergent capacity grounded in shared resources and coordination. Organizational resilience is a capability covering anticipation, coping, and later adaptation. The same weaknesses appear at every level. Adversity, which is what gives the concept meaning, often goes undocumented. Instruments frequently mismatch the level of analysis. Cross-sectional single-source surveys dominate the evidence base. Training studies show resilience can be raised, though the gains are small and short-lived without reinforcement. I argue the field needs discipline more than novelty: clearer definitions, designs anchored in real adversity, and measures that fit the level they claim to describe.

Keywords: resilience, employee resilience, psychological capital, team resilience, organizational resilience, positive organizational behavior

Resilience in Organizational Psychology: An Integrative Review of Its Conceptualization, Measurement, and Development Across Levels of Analysis

Work has become less predictable. Restructuring, new technology, economic shocks, and then a pandemic on top of it all. Adaptation to adversity is now a routine demand of working life rather than an occasional one, and resilience has moved accordingly, from the edges of psychology to the center of how researchers and practitioners talk about people at work. Employers want resilient workforces. Consultancies are happy to sell them resilience training. The journals keep publishing. None of this is hard to understand. Whether the science underneath has kept pace with the enthusiasm is a different question, and for the most part I don't think it has.

Some of the trouble traces back to where the construct came from. Resilience did not originate in organizational psychology. It grew out of studies of children who adapted well despite serious disadvantage, and later out of research on how adults respond to loss and trauma (Masten, 2001; Bonanno, 2004). When it migrated into workplace research it brought its unfinished arguments along. Trait, process, or outcome? Does the concept even apply without genuine

adversity? And how do you measure something you can't quite define? None of these questions was settled in the source disciplines. Importing the construct without settling them has produced a literature that is large, active, and conceptually uneven (Britt et al., 2016).

There is a second complication. Workplace resilience is studied at several levels at once. Individual employees. Teams. Whole organizations. These literatures developed mostly in parallel, with their own theories and measures and assumptions, and scholars have only recently begun connecting them (Hartmann et al., 2020; Raetze et al., 2021). The practical upshot is that the word resilience can mean quite different things depending on who is writing.

So this review sets out to pull the threads together. I want to clarify how the construct has been defined, including the odd but persistent habit of defining resilience with no reference to adversity at all. I want to look hard at measurement, and specifically at whether the instruments in circulation match the level of analysis they claim to capture. And I want to weigh the intervention evidence, since a good deal of practice rests on the assumption that resilience is trainable. The organization is by level, individual first, then team, then organization, followed by measurement, interventions, outcomes, and a critical appraisal. I am not going to propose a new definition. The field has enough of those. What it is short on is definitional discipline and design rigor, and that shortage, not any lack of constructs, is where its difficulties come from.

Approach to the Review

A word on method. This is an integrative review rather than a systematic one in the PRISMA sense, which is a deliberate choice rather than a shortcut. The material spans conceptual papers, psychometric studies, cross-sectional surveys, and intervention trials. Pool all of that into one quantitative estimate and you lose the very distinctions that make the literature interesting.

Sources were located through searches of psychological and management databases, plus backward and forward citation tracing from the major reviews and conceptual statements. Priority went to peer-reviewed work that did one of three things: defined the construct, developed or validated a measure, or tested an intervention. A handful of theoretical papers that shaped each level's thinking are included as well. The emphasis falls on occupational, organizational, and applied psychology outlets, though the developmental and clinical foundations stay in view throughout, because they still anchor how resilience is understood at work.

One caveat, and I want to state it plainly. There is no PRISMA flow diagram here. No record counts, no documented screening decisions, and none should be inferred from this synthesis. Making it systematic in the formal sense would require a pre-registered protocol, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, and reported numbers at every screening stage.

Conceptualizing Resilience

Origins and the Trait–Process–Outcome Debate

The modern study of resilience began with a puzzle. Some children exposed to poverty, maltreatment, or family adversity turned into competent, well-functioning adults anyway. Masten (2001) called the pattern ordinary magic. Her point was that resilience does not depend on rare or heroic qualities; it comes from ordinary adaptive systems doing their ordinary job. Bonanno (2004) found something parallel in adults. A substantial share of people hit by loss or potentially traumatic events keep functioning, stably and healthily, and that trajectory turned out to be far more common than clinical intuition had assumed.

Even in those founding literatures, though, the word carried more than one meaning. A stable personal trait for some scholars. A dynamic process of adaptation for others. For still others, an outcome, inferred backwards from the fact of good functioning after adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). Luthar and colleagues warned that this was not a semantic quibble. When a construct is sometimes a cause, sometimes a process, and sometimes an outcome, circular reasoning follows almost automatically, and so does inconsistent measurement. Richardson (2002) attempted a metatheory that would hold the strands together, resilience as the process of coping with disruption in a way that strengthens protective factors. The attempt was useful. The trait–process–outcome tension survived it intact.

The Adversity Problem

Now for the feature workplace research forgets most often. Resilience is conceptually meaningful only in the presence of adversity. It is not general well-being. Not adjustment. Not hardiness. It refers specifically to positive adaptation in the face of significant risk or disruption, and if there is no adversity there is nothing for the concept to describe. Britt et al. (2016) pressed this point hard in the organizational context. A great deal of research described as studying employee

resilience, they argued, never establishes that participants actually encountered meaningful adversity. Absent a documented stressor, a high score on a resilience questionnaire indicates a capacity, one that may or may not ever be demonstrated.

Capacity versus demonstration sounds like a fine distinction. It isn't. A cross-sectional survey correlating a resilience scale with well-being tells us that people who describe themselves as resilient also tend to feel well, which is nice to know and almost useless. It says nothing about how those same people function when something actually goes wrong. Hence the recommendation Britt and colleagues arrive at: sample populations facing identifiable adversity, or measure functioning before and after a disruptive event, so that resilience gets inferred from a trajectory instead of assumed from a trait score.

Resilience at the Individual Level

Resilience Within Psychological Capital

The most influential treatment of individual resilience in our field comes from the positive organizational behavior movement. Luthans (2002) wanted researchers to concentrate on positive psychological states meeting four criteria: theory-based, validly measurable, open to development, linked to performance. Hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism made the cut, and the four were combined into a higher-order construct called psychological capital, PsyCap for short, sometimes summarized as the HERO within (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017).

Here resilience means the developable capacity to rebound from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive but demanding change. A big promotion can test it as surely as a layoff. Two features of the definition carry the weight. Resilience is state-like rather than trait-like, relatively stable yet open to development, which is precisely what makes it a candidate for training. And it is one component of a broader resource. The four PsyCap elements are argued to work together, with the composite showing stronger links to satisfaction and performance than any component alone (Luthans et al., 2007). Since then PsyCap has been tied to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, well-being, performance, and, negatively, to stress and turnover intentions.

Employee Resilience as a Work-Specific Capability

A second individual-level tradition heads in a different direction entirely. Forget the general personal quality; think instead of resilient behaviors that are specific to work. Näswall et al. (2019) built the Employee Resilience Scale on this idea, defining employee resilience as a capability, enabled and supported by the organization, to use resources to adapt and thrive amid continually changing work circumstances. Attention shifts from an employee's private psychological makeup to things you could actually watch someone do. Asking for feedback. Learning from a mistake instead of burying it. Pulling colleagues in to solve a problem. Leaning on a network when change hits.

And the distinction matters empirically, not just terminologically. Personal resilience is a general stress-coping ability; employee resilience is resilient behavior enacted at work and shaped by the surrounding organization. Studies using the scale suggest the two are related but distinct, and that organizational conditions can shift employee resilience while general personal resilience holds still. Which explains something most people have observed at some point, that the same person can look resilient in one workplace and helpless in another. It also puts part of the responsibility for resilience on the organization rather than loading all of it onto the individual. I find that reframing both fairer and more practically useful.

Resilience at the Team Level

Most work gets done in teams, so a collective treatment was probably inevitable. Stoverink et al. (2020) drew on conservation of resources theory to model work team resilience as a team's capacity to bounce back from setbacks that would otherwise disrupt its processes and performance. Their central move: team resilience is not the sum of the members' individual resilience. It emerges from resources held at the team level and expresses itself through coordinated processes that keep the team functioning under adversity, or restore it afterward.

Emergent capacity, not fixed property. That phrase, in one form or another, runs through the whole team literature. The reviews also concede, a little ruefully, that much of the work is still conceptual, and that the empirical studies cluster in extreme settings, military units, emergency responders, and the like. How resilience develops in an ordinary project team, and what it actually buys one, remains surprisingly open (Hartwig et al., 2020). The theorized ingredients are familiar from adjacent literatures: psychological safety, transactive memory, collective efficacy, a shared mental model

of what the team will do when things break. Build these through interaction before adversity arrives, the argument goes, deploy them during and after, and let the learning that follows leave the team a bit better prepared for the next disruption.

Resilience at the Organizational Level

At the broadest level the question becomes whether an organization as a whole can absorb disruption and adapt. Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) framed organizing for resilience as developing competence and the capacity to bounce back from untoward events, drawing on positive organizational scholarship and on studies of how organizations manage the unexpected. Ducheck (2020) later gave the idea a capability-based structure with three sequential stages. Anticipate potential threats. Cope with unexpected events as they land. Adapt afterward, so the organization learns and renews itself. Knowledge, redundancy, social relationships, and financial reserves are the resources feeding those stages.

What separates organizational resilience from the psychological and employee varieties is mostly unit of analysis and outcome. One concerns an individual's beliefs and coping; the other concerns structural and relational properties of a collective, and it gets linked to survival, continuity, and performance under crisis. Still, the levels are not sealed off from one another. Employee and organizational resilience are theorized to reinforce each other. Organizations that support resilient employees may strengthen their own adaptive capacity, and resilient organizations supply the resources, and the psychological safety, that make resilient employee behavior possible at all (Kuntz et al., 2016). The integrative reviews have started formalizing these cross-level connections and are calling for models that specify how resilience at one level enables or constrains resilience at another (Hartmann et al., 2020; Raetz et al., 2021).

Measuring Resilience

The conceptual sprawl shows up again in the measures. Arguably it starts there. Several individual-level instruments predate the construct's arrival in organizational psychology altogether. The Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993) and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003) were built in nursing and clinical contexts to assess resilience as a general personal characteristic; both remain fixtures of workplace studies anyway. The PsyCap Questionnaire (Luthans et al., 2007) treats resilience as one of four components, with items about taking work stressors in stride and recovering from setbacks. Then there is the Employee Resilience Scale (Näswall et al., 2019), which breaks from all of the above by targeting work-specific resilient behaviors rather than any general trait.

Two headaches follow for anyone hoping the science will accumulate. Construct coverage is the first. A trait scale, a state scale, and a behavior scale can all report a correlation under the single label of resilience, and there is no guarantee those correlations are comparable across studies. The second headache is the level-of-analysis mismatch, and it may be the worse of the two. Team and organizational resilience get assessed, routinely, by aggregating individual self-reports or by asking individuals to rate the collective. Neither procedure captures a genuinely collective property. Whatever an individual-level instrument measures when it stands in for a team-level construct, it probably is not the emergent, interactional thing the theory describes. The fix is not conceptually hard. Decide what level your construct operates at, then find or build an instrument to match. That step gets skipped constantly, and each skip adds noise the field then has to argue about.

Developing Resilience: Intervention Evidence

If resilience is even partly state-like, training ought to be able to raise it. The PsyCap and employee-resilience traditions both stake themselves on that assumption, and a sizable applied literature has tested it. Robertson et al. (2015) reviewed workplace resilience training from 2003 to 2014 and concluded, cautiously, that it can improve personal resilience along with various well-being and performance outcomes. The caution came from the variation. Program content, delivery, and measurement differed so much across studies that comparison was genuinely difficult.

For numbers, the meta-analysis by Vanhove et al. (2016) remains the most informative synthesis. Pooling controlled and within-participant studies, they found a small but reliable effect of resilience-building programs on their targeted outcomes. Two findings deserve attention from anyone commissioning such a program. Format matters: one-on-one delivery such as coaching worked best, classroom groups came next, and train-the-trainer and computer-based formats trailed. And the effects fade. Gains measured shortly after an intervention had weakened substantially by the time more than a month had passed. Reviews in high-stress occupations, healthcare in particular, land in a similar place, with modest benefits constrained by methodological weaknesses in the primary studies (Kunzler et al., 2020).

Where does that leave practice? Qualified optimism, I think. Resilience can be developed. The gains are modest rather than transformative, they depend on delivery, and they decay unless something reinforces them. One more wrinkle: with programs and outcome measures this heterogeneous, the average effect conceals a lot of spread, and some of the larger effects probably owe more to weak designs, single-group pre-post comparisons and the like, than to genuinely bigger benefits.

The Nomological Network of Resilience at Work

The list of outcomes attached to resilience keeps growing. Individual resilience and the broader PsyCap resource travel with higher job satisfaction, commitment, engagement, and both in-role and extra-role performance, and with lower stress, burnout, and turnover intentions (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Positive emotion has been proposed as one mechanism of recovery; resilient individuals appear to use it to rebound from stressful experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Teams are theorized to hold performance and cohesion through setbacks when resilient. Organizations, when resilient, are supposed to persist and recover through crises.

One caution cuts across all of it. These relationships mostly rest on cross-sectional self-reports, which leaves them exposed to common-method bias and mute on direction. Perhaps resilience improves well-being. Perhaps well-being, decent conditions, or a supportive manager produce what merely looks like resilience. Nothing in a single-wave survey can tell those stories apart. Separating them takes designs that split the measurement of resilience from the measurement of its supposed consequences in both time and source.

Critical Appraisal and Gaps

Step back and the same limitations keep surfacing. Conceptual fragmentation sits underneath everything else. A trait, a state, a behavior, a process, an emergent team capacity, an organizational capability: resilience is defined as each of these somewhere in the literature, and the meanings are not interchangeable. Every serious integrative effort identifies this ambiguity as the main obstacle to cumulative progress (Hartmann et al., 2020; Raetz et al., 2021).

Adversity neglect comes next, for the reasons Britt et al. (2016) laid out; measuring a capacity without establishing any stressor capable of testing it undercuts the claim that resilience is what was studied. The methods compound the problem, since cross-sectional, single-source surveys dominate and can support neither causal nor temporal inference. Measurement heterogeneity and level mismatch add further noise, with aggregated individual reports standing in for collective constructs. And the samples cluster in Western, high-income settings. That last problem is hardly unique to this literature, but it is no less limiting for that, and it keeps confidence about generalization across cultures and economies low.

Directions for Future Research

The agenda writes itself, more or less. Anchor resilience in documented adversity, by sampling populations known to face disruption or by tracking functioning across a genuine stressor, so the construct gets inferred from a trajectory rather than presumed from a questionnaire. Retire the single-wave self-report survey as the default. Longitudinal designs, multiple sources, and experimental or quasi-experimental methods where feasible would let researchers pull resilience apart from its antecedents and its outcomes.

Measurement needs to respect level, which means building and validating genuinely collective measures of team and organizational resilience rather than aggregating individual reports and hoping. Cross-level dynamics deserve much more attention: how organizational resources and climate enable resilient behavior in employees, and how resilient people and teams feed adaptation higher up. On the applied side, given effects that are modest and decay, the useful questions are how to sustain gains, which delivery formats win in head-to-head comparison, and who benefits most. Progress on any of these would do more for the field than another resilience-adjacent construct. We have plenty of constructs.

Conclusion

Resilience earned its place in organizational psychology honestly. The problem it names, how people and teams and whole organizations adapt to adversity, is real and it is pressing. What the construct has not earned is the precision its popularity implies. Definitions conflict. Instruments drift across levels they were never built for. Study designs rarely include the adversity that gives the concept meaning in the first place. None of this argues against studying resilience. It argues for studying it better, with sharper definitions, with designs anchored in actual adversity and sensitive to time, and with measures matched to level. The trainability evidence is modest but real. Turning that modest signal into

something the field can rely on will take more rigor than the topic has usually received, and the topic is important enough to deserve it.

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