

**Preface to the Special Issue on “The Impact of Resilience in Developing Individual and Organizational Capacity to ‘Bounce Back’ from Challenges”**

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Special Issue: The Impact of Resilience in Developing Individual and

Organizational Capacity to ‘Bounce Back’ from Challenges

## Abstract

In this Preface to the Special Issue on “The Impact of Resilience in Developing Individual and Organizational Capacity to ‘Bounce Back’ from Challenges”, I introduce the need to study resilience in HRD, and lay out the most fundamental concerns surrounding the use of the term resilience in contemporary workplaces and scientific discourse. I also introduce the papers published in the Special Issue, and link them to the overall narrative around resilience at work.

Keywords: bounce back, dignity, HRD, resilience, workplace.

My colleague John Mendy, from the Lincoln International Business School, invited me in March 2019 to co-edit a Special Issue for 'Advances in Developing Human Resources' on the topic of resilience in organizations and individuals. Little did we know at that time how central this concept would become precisely a year later when the Covid-19 crisis reached Europe and the UK (where we are both employed). The global pandemic has caused a spike in the popularity of the concept of resilience, as the global lockdown, health pandemic, and resulting economic difficulties would be responded to with a call for a need to be resilient, and to develop resilience. The pandemic has confronted humanity with the sudden collapse of structures and certainties that seemed unshakable, and the sudden urgency of a capability to survive in the midst of a period which always seemed to be uncertain, but never so profoundly uncertain and unstable as the year 2020 would show.

Being generally somewhat skeptical of the term resilience, because of its particular use in the positive psychology movement (see e.g., Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Ehrenreich, 2009 for eloquent critiques on the 'positive psychology industry'), we started to advertise our special issue, and received a great number of interesting papers. We had to reject quite a number of papers simply because they did not talk about resilience, but some other similar, yet different concept. This immediately confronted us with the inherent conceptual vagueness of the concept of resilience. First, resilience is used across quite a few disciplines, including Ecology (Folke, Carpenter, Walker, Scheffer, Chapin, & Rockström, 2010), Geography (Cretney, 2014), Military Studies (O'Malley, 2010), HRM (Bardoel, Pettit, De Cieri, & McMillan, 2014), Career Studies (Mishra & McDonald, 2017), and Policy Studies (Joseph, 2013). Perhaps due to the use of the term resilience across so many different disciplines, its meaning gets somewhat obfuscated. Commonly held assumptions of its 'actual' meaning may unfold in science and the real world, which may actually be opposed to its real manifestation (e.g., while a focus on resilience may sound as a tool for empowerment, it may also be used

to actually enhance existing inequalities between those people who are resilient and those who are not). Hence, a critical assessment of resilience is needed, and the ways through which resilience emerges, is understood, and how it may be generated for actual improvement of society, the planet, and people.

The aim of the current special issue was precisely to investigate how resilience is understood and how it manifests in discussions around the possibility of coping positively with adversity in life and work. Even more so, is there a possibility for development during challenges every human and organization face? These questions which were at the heart of the Special Issue became even more relevant during the Covid-19 crisis as individuals, organisations and societies have once again been challenged to bounce back from a range of adversities. Resilience is usually understood as the ability to ‘bounce back’ when faced with challenges, and to be able to adapt, be flexible and cope constructively with adversity. Such qualities can be ascribed to people, organizations, societies, and natural systems and the environment. At face value, resilience carries the promise of something inherently desirable, something that transcends individual human beings into properties of social systems (Cretney, 2014).

Yet, at the same time, two questions pertaining to resilience are relatively unclear, and little discussed in the literature. First, to be resilient means to be able to ‘bounce back’, as the title of this Special Issue also suggests. In the light of the current Covid-19 crisis, discourse unfolds about the ‘new normal’ that people will have to adjust to. What exactly is this state that the resilient individual or organization returns to? What then is the meaning of resilience as the capability to bounce back? Bounce back to what state exactly or bounce back to a ‘new normal’? The outcome of resilience is often measured as engagement or behavior (i.e., whether resilient individuals are more engaged at work, or whether they outperform others), and this would indicate the importance of resilience. However, this approach does not

entirely justify the definition of resilience as the ability to bounce back to a point of equilibrium (Cretney, 2014). It remains unknown and to be investigated whether resilience involves a return to a previous state (assuming this state was a desired one, and assuming such a return would be possible), or whether resilience is really about the ability of individuals and social systems to learn from experiences, to be able to integrate them into beliefs and action repertoires in order to learn and develop oneself and as a social system. The recent global popularity of the Black Lives Matter Movement (and related to one of the contributions in this Special Issue about Black professionals in the workplace and their experiences of racism) indicates that resilience is not merely about a desire to return to a 'previous state' (as there was no desired previous state to return to), but more fundamentally about the ability of people to imagine new realities, and to have the resilience to believe in oneself even in the face of societal change, and shifting power arrangements. A truly more equal and dignified society positions resilience not merely as returning to what was before, but as the capability of people to learn, grow and develop oneself and each other.

The second question that emerges around the term resilience is about the process of bouncing back. This refers to the 'black box' of what happens in resilient people or resilient organizations that enables them to grow from adversity. Notwithstanding the potential neoliberal discourse around the meanings of resilience (Joseph, 2013), and thus the individualization of resilience, a question emerges as to how resilience as a capability plays out within people. How can resilience be nurtured in organizational life, without it being merely translated into an individual responsibility for people to be resilient, and being forced to cope constructively with adversity in life and at work? While the literature is generally silent about this, the current Special Issue presents a variety of papers which are important in addressing these issues.

This Special Issue brings together seven papers on resilience and HRD, and provides a variety of perspectives on the meaning of resilience and its implications for HRD as well as individuals in the workplace. The SI starts with a contribution by John Mendy, in which an overview is presented of the HRD literature and resilience, and the interventions on stress management which may be useful to enhance resilience among workers. Mendy's focus on collective rather than individualistic approaches is important, as the concept of collective resilience in workplaces is much more aligned with critical notions of resilience as discussed in ecology, geography and policy studies (Cretney, 2014; Joseph, 2013; O'Malley, 2010).

The following paper by Tibor Farkas, John Mendy and Niko Kargas deals specifically with the notion of resilience among autistic adults at work. The paper advocates community-based participatory research in order to truly empower marginalized groups, such as autistic workers, in a meaningful way. This involves bottom-up approaches to not only community-projects, but also scientific research endeavors. Such approaches are very useful and beneficial in theorizing how interventions can be implemented such that resilience can be effectively enhanced among autistic workers and others in organizations.

The subsequent two papers investigate the role of leadership in resilience building. Erin Richard's article emphasizes the role of emotion management by leaders to enhance resilience among workers, yet, at the same time warning that leaders as emotion-managers may also use their influence for good or evil purposes. Jason Eliot's contribution aims to explore the role of servant leadership for the accumulation of resilience, and the importance of serving others as centrally positioned in leadership for resilience. He also warns for HRM and HRD professionals to focus on interventions that truly enhance rather than drain resilience in organizations.

Stephanie Sisco's paper focuses on the interrelationships of racism and resilience. On the basis of 15 interviews with Black professionals in the US, she identifies a variety of

strategies Black professionals use to stay resilient during experiences of racism at work. Strategies such as safeguarding one's own Black identity and managing one's own expectations vis-à-vis those of white colleagues. This paper convincingly shows how resilient discourses play out differently for different groups in the workplace. Resilience in this paper refers to Black professionals' experiences of carefully constructed professional identities, and the need to navigate white-dominant spaces, while preserving oneself and not upsetting white people in organizations. This is an important paper to understand the implicitly and more generally contested nature of terms such as resilience, identity, and racism, and the ways these concepts play out for Black people in the workplace. There are also some beautiful references to De Bois and Baldwin, who continue to inspire contemporary thinking on racism. Their words are as relevant as ever, and will continue to be relevant in contemporary discussions on resilience and other important discussions in society.

The article by Francesco Montani, Jade-Isis Lefebvre and François Courcy on the importance of self-compassion for resilience builds nicely on the previous paper, and points not just at the relevance of kindness, warmth and compassion to oneself in order to stay healthy, but also implicitly more generally to the importance of compassion in the workplace as a undervalued aspect to resilience building.

The final paper is co-authored by Maria Kordowicz, Andy Brookes and myself and concerns a critical perspective on resilience in the workplace. More specifically, in this paper we argue that mainstream discourses on resilience have fallen prey to notions of instrumentalization and individualization, through which resilience is portrayed as something that has to be instrumental to organizational goals as well as being an individual responsibility for the worker to become resilient.

Jointly, these papers construct a meta-narrative of resilience in HRD and workplaces. This narrative focuses on the promise of resilience for the health and well-being of

individuals and organizations, something that can be achieved through thoughtful leadership including the notion of serving others, compassion and genuine concern for the emotions of others. However, resilience can also easily be individualized, and multiple authors warn against the capitalist-neoliberal projection of resilience on individuals. In response, multiple contributions call for collective approaches to resilience accumulation in the workplace, and bottom-up approaches that are community-led and truly inclusive. Through emphasis on such aspects of resilience, the term might not be simply hijacked by HRD-academics and consultants offering organizations the promise of short-term better-performing employees who are resilient, flexible and loyal soldiers for organizational benefit. In contrast, the concept may need some explicit liberation from its instrumentalization such that it can be valued in its own respect and diversity, regardless of its instrumental benefits for organizational life and society.

A final word may be said about the incremental validity of resilience in discussions of health, well-being and stress in workplaces. With the need in the social sciences for constant production of new terminology to keep disciplines alive, the question is whether resilience truly constitutes a new and important term beyond those already in existence. Is resilience nothing more than a new, fancier, term for adaptation, flexibility and coping? Perhaps, and the popularity of resilience is also testament to the need in science and society for renewal of its discourse without the necessary need to change its underlying paradigm. Resilience is often integrated into the dominant neoliberal-capitalist discourse, and its future success will be determined by its underpinnings and assumptions that lay at the heart of how resilience is used, investigated and implemented in workplaces globally.



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**Bio**

Matthijs Bal is a professor of Responsible Management at the University of Lincoln, Lincoln International Business School. His professional interests concern workplace dignity, ideology, and radical change in academia, workplaces and society. He is a co-founder of the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology (FoWOP) Movement, a network of academics advancing a more sustainable future for Work and Organizational Psychology. See also [www.futureofwop.com](http://www.futureofwop.com) for more information about the Movement.