

**A Workplace Dignity Perspective on Resilience:  
Moving beyond Individualized Instrumentalization to Dignified Resilience**

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## **Abstract**

### **Problem**

Resilience discourses in society and the contemporary workplace tend to emphasize the self-directed nature of resilience and the imposed demand for resilience for survival in the contemporary labor market.

### **Solution**

In this article, the anchoring point of resilience is analyzed when conceptualized within a neoliberal and self-directed ideology. Subsequently, it offers an alternative anchoring point through a dignity-perspective on resilience, through which the term is reinterpreted in a new meaning.

### **Stakeholders**

This article offers scholars, practitioners and policy-makers insights into how resilience can be conceptualized and used in practice. Analyzing resilience through a dignity lens provides new meanings and more effective uses of resilience in society and the contemporary workplaces.

**Keywords:** Resilience, ideology, dignity, performance, instrumentality

## **A Workplace Dignity Perspective on Resilience:**

### **Moving beyond Individualized Instrumentalization to Dignified Resilience**

In the context of the persistent phenomenon of work-related mental illness (HSE, 2019; WHO, 2019), organizational scholars are increasingly focusing on building employee resilience. Resilience at work is usually defined as the demonstrated competence of people to cope with adversity in the workplace (Caza & Milton, 2012). During the last decades, the dominant discourse of resilience at work has underlined the necessity of workers to overcome obstacles and to thrive at work (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). The resilience-turn in human resource development (HRD) and organizational behavior has increasingly normalized the need for resilience such that it becomes a sine qua non of the contemporary worker (King et al., 2016).

This article seeks to problematize the hegemonic discourse around resilience by positioning it in the prevailing performance-wellbeing distinction in HRD, whereby resilience is either instrumentalized as it enhances performance, or denotes an individual responsibility to ensure well-being (Bal, 2020). We follow Yorks' (2005, pp. 20-21) definition of HRD as its purpose 'to contribute to both long-term strategic performance and more immediate performance improvement through ensuring that organizational members have access to resources for developing their capacity for performance and for making meaning of their experience in the context of the organization's strategic needs and the requirements of their jobs'. Hence, a dominant stream in HRD has prioritized the instrumentalization of HRD towards organizational performance. At the same time, this prioritization of performance has allowed for a variety of problems to manifest, such as the neglect of the social and relational role of organizations, and thereby the potential alternative meanings than resilience as merely performance-driven.

The development of a conceptual alternative approach to resilience is offered through integrating a workplace dignity paradigm into resilience (Bal, 2017; Lucas, 2015). A dignity perspective on resilience may provide a way to integrate resilience into a human development paradigm through positioning the role of resilience to advance dignity at work. This article ends with a research agenda of how the study of resilience at work can benefit from a more plural approach to the meaning of the concept other than the instrumentalist and individualized perspective of resilience in current HRD discourse.

### **Literature Review of Resilience in Contemporary Societies and Workplaces**

Scholars have argued that resilience is no longer optional in the contemporary workplace (King et al., 2016; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Defined as the ability of people to overcome adversity and to cope effectively with obstacles in life and work, resilience has become one of the key terms in current psychology and human development discourses. Originating in the careers literature (e.g., London, 1983; Noe, Noe & Bachhuber, 1990), and currently positioned within a positive psychology discourse (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019), resilience has obtained semi-mythical properties, to such an extent that it has even been claimed that resilience is a 'strategically important behavior for survival' (King et al., 2016). Recent literature on resilience upholds the role of HRD in boosting individual resilience for organizational optimization. Tonkin and colleagues (2018) study the effects of a game to boost resilience, whilst the conceptual work of Mitsakis (2020) explores some of the limitations and opportunities behind the assumption that HRD is a key contributor to building organizational resilience. Akin to the wider movement around positive psychology, resilience has been firmly established as a term that is not just important for survival, but also inherently desirable and achievable for any citizen in society, as long as one obtains access to the right resources and support to develop one's resilience capabilities.

By presenting a concept in this way, it neglects the more problematic issues which could potentially surround the concept (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). Earlier publications have pointed to the problematic issues with resilience research (Britt et al., 2016; Rochat et al., 2017). For instance, Britt et al. (2016) have argued that the term resilience has become an all-encompassing concept to denote all positive attributes that emerge in stressful circumstances. Moreover, questions that are hardly asked in the resilience-literature are whether everyone has the same access to resilience-resources, and whether everyone is truly capable of becoming resilient (*cf.* Cretney, 2014; O'Malley, 2010). Questions of whether distribution of resources within and across organizations favors those people who are in possession of resilience versus people without resilience are conspicuously absent from discussions on resilience (Joseph, 2013). Yet, at the same time, resilience is presented as inherently desirable, and consequently, governments and organizations are pushed to drive a resilience-agenda. Arguably, it thereby ignores the more problematic features and refrains from critical reflection upon resilience, and the ideological agenda, or the specific understanding of what resilience is and should be.

Resilience is a highly complex human phenomenon but when it is explored from a narrow perspective and practiced in an instrumental way it becomes 'shorn' of this complexity and the core meaning becomes lost in the superficial discourse. The biological and clinical dimensions of the phenomenon become occluded and the term resilience becomes increasingly meaningless, other than being a new word in the management lexicon. Treating resilience as an 'ability' or a 'competence' overlooks the ontological nature of resilience as a mental process that describes the return to an equilibrium state of well-being after adversity. The factors that impact a person's agency to enact this process are far more than the organizational environment and include genetic make-up, personality, life-events (e.g. bereavement) and socialisation.

An acknowledgment of ideology is typically missing from resilience debates, as it concerns the implicit and invisible understanding of the social order underpinning resilience discourse (Žižek, 1989). To understand how contemporary resilience discourse is ideologically grounded, we can analyze the ‘anchoring point’ of resilience. The anchoring point is used by philosopher Žižek (1989, 2001) to explain how ideology manifests in society, and sheds light upon the non-critical nature of resilience conceptualizations in the literature.

### **Anchoring Point of Ideology**

Žižek (1989) uses the term anchoring point (quilting point or *le point de capiton*) to illustrate how ideology operates. More specifically, the anchoring point is the perspective through which people understand particular concepts, such as resilience. In other words, ideology may cause people to have a specific interpretation of and perspective on concepts. Concepts such as freedom, democracy and justice can have very different meanings depending on context (Žižek, 1989, 2001), and ideology offers an anchoring point to interpret the meaning of concepts in a specific way. Hence, through ideology, concepts which in themselves are interpretable in multiple ways, obtain a specific meaning in a context.

We can observe that resilience is anchored in the neoliberal construction of the contemporary human being and worker (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Cretney, 2014; Hall & Lamont, 2013; Joseph, 2013). Neoliberalism concerns the dominant economic-political paradigm governing societies in both the Western world and beyond (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017). Through its emphasis on economic freedom, utility maximization, individualism and meritocracy (Bal & Dóci, 2018), neoliberal anchoring of resilience has resulted in a specific meaning, including several core assumptions regarding the concept, and in particular two main conceptualized entities: instrumentality and individualism.

First, resilience perceived through a neoliberal anchoring point serves an instrumental purpose. This is notable in research on resilience emphasizing its ‘applicability and relation to

workplace performance' (Youssef & Luthans, 2007, p.778-779). In other words, resilience is of importance to societies and organizations because of its instrumental nature to organizational performance and productivity. As resilient employees will be better able to cope with workplace adversities, and will be quicker in bouncing back from negative events, it is postulated that resilience has importance to organizations and societies. For instance, the article by Bardoel et al. (2014) on employee resilience and HRM emphasized the importance of resilience for organizational performance because 'with resilient employees, the organisation itself becomes resilient and gains a competitive advantage' (Bardoel et al., 2014, p.288).

Absent from such an argument is the notion that resilience *could* have an intrinsic quality, or the notion that resilience may be important *regardless* of its instrumental nature for organizations. The problem is not that more resilient employees are more highly performing, but that resilience becomes the norm (Stewart, 2011). Thereby it is projected upon people, and thus expected to exist within the contemporary human being, who has to be an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Bauman, 2000; Žižek, 2014). Because resilience has an instrumental property in its potential to generate economic output, it is imposed upon people as a necessity. Those people who are not resilient have no utility, and therefore organizations are discouraged from investing or even employing individuals who are not resilient (Cabanis & Illouz, 2019). Such a perspective neglects the differential possibilities of people to realize such an imposed norm, thereby accentuating the dividing line between winners and losers. While highly performing individuals are rewarded by organizations, they will be more able to accumulate the resources needed to build resilience, such as training in Psychological Capital (Britt et al., 2016). In contrast, individuals who for whatever reason are not performing well, may not be offered such training. Hence, the adoption of resilience in a positive psychology paradigm may actually achieve the opposite of what was meant to be; instead of the

empowering quality of an emphasis of resilience for human beings, the projection upon a need to become resilient may delegitimize claims of unequal access due to structural inequalities, and amplify the individual responsibility for resilience.

A critique that resilience literature does not only take into account the instrumental nature of resilience for individual and organizational performance, but also looks at the importance of resilience for individual well-being, is insufficient. It is also notable how well-being itself becomes instrumentalized toward viability of the organization (Bal, 2020; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). Any claim that resilience strengthens individual and collective well-being (Cretney, 2014) should therefore be investigated carefully, and in particular its underlying ontological assumptions. With the tendency towards ‘instrumentalization of everything’ towards economic growth (and organizational performance as an important mediator in this relationship), well-being and resilience also face a similar risk: in particular that of the loss of an understanding of its intrinsic quality for human beings (Herrman et al., 2011; Stewart, 2011), towards an individual responsibility to contribute to maintenance of the current capitalist system through becoming a resilient soldier for organizational performance (Bal, 2020).

Second, it is precisely this individual responsibility towards resilience that corresponds to the neoliberal construction of resilience. Emphasizing the notion of meritocracy (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Littler, 2013), or the idea that everyone in society has a fair and equal chance to success, neoliberal ideology assumes the equal chances of each individual to become resilient. This has multiple implications: first, people have an individual responsibility to resilience. Resilience in the HRD literature is by itself a psychological concept and primarily aimed at explaining an understanding at the individual, psychological, level (*cf.* Cretney, 2014). Hence, resilience is individualized such that its meaning only manifests at the individual level. In other words, employees not only carry an individual

responsibility to become resilient (notwithstanding the individual differences among people to do so), but resilience also only reflects a value to the individual herself. Even more so, there is little research on the wider context around the development of resilience capabilities, and the extent to which communities, organizations and societies favor some individuals over others in the possibilities for resilience accumulation (see for exceptions Kossek & Perrigino, 2016; Mishra & McDonald, 2017). As resilience is conceptualized as ultimately an individual responsibility, meritocratic beliefs help to sustain a perspective on the workplace as able to distinguish between those individuals who are willing to exert effort into becoming more resilient and those who are unwilling.

It is the fantasy of the neoliberal unregulated free market that explains a social Darwinist perspective on resilience (Bal & Dóci, 2018; O'Malley, 2010). It is because individuals are either lazy or unwilling to 'bounce back' from adversity that those people who are not resilient have to pay the price of their inability of developing resilience. Because in the free market the 'invisible hand' sorts out the winners and the losers, it is not surprising to see how attributions are made accordingly: the winners are deserving, as they worked hard for their rewards, while the losers are unable to survive and manage themselves. A resilience discourse does not challenge such perspectives, but rather contributes to a further underpinning of social Darwinism. Any claim for organizational support to resilience capability-development is ultimately grounded in the instrumental logic, whereby resilience contributes to the bottom line. More fundamentally, it has been argued that neoliberal economic logic is pervading deeper into the very structures of society and psychology (Musílek et al., 2019), thereby having the potential to transform any concept through economic instrumentalization. Resilience is not different in its proclaimed possibility to contribute to employee and organizational performance, whilst at the same time being a solely individual responsibility, thereby delegitimizing claims for organizational or

governmental responsibility to ensure individual and collective resilience. Paradoxically, neoliberal regimes have consistently emphasized arguably resistance undermining policies - austerity, budget cuts, and slashing of social benefits (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017), further implying individualized responsibility for resilience building (O'Malley, 2010). Hence, a neoliberal anchoring point to conceptualize resilience results in a perspective on resilience as being driven by an economic logic and of which responsibility ultimately resides in the individual.

This notion can be problematized in multiple ways. Most importantly, the individual responsibility to resilience does not necessarily help those individuals lacking resilience. Due to structural inequalities in societies and workplaces, resilience may especially benefit those who are already in privileged positions (Cremin, 2010). Because privilege may ease access to resources, it is those people who will be more likely to 'survive' in the workplace. For instance, people with ample human capital will find it generally easier to find employment, thereby not suffering from the disappearance of permanent employment as much as those workers with less human capital, who are forced into precarious employment. Consequently, while the former may be more resilient and thereby retaining their resilience, the latter may find it increasingly difficult to find resources for resilience accumulation, whilst trying to survive in the hypercompetitive labor market.

Second, when resilience is merely instrumentalized within neoliberal ideology to create possibilities for economic value creation (Cretney, 2014), its meaning is reduced towards a narrow understanding, which effectively limits its potential for meaningful empowerment. When resilience is only of interest economically, there would be no incentive for organizations to invest in resilience if it would not contribute to performance. For instance, the study of Youssef and Luthans (2007) showed no significant relationships of resilience with job performance. This could lead to a conclusion that organizations should *not*

invest in resilience, due to the lack of ‘pay off’ for the organization. Such a logic limits its potential for human beings in contemporary workplaces. The question, therefore, is how resilience can be anchored, such that it both has an intrinsic value, and is not merely projected as an individual responsibility. We argue that resilience can be anchored through a dignity-perspective (Lucas, 2015; Kostera & Pirson, 2017), through which its meaning and conceptualization can be enriched for a wider use in academic research and practice.

### **A Dignity Perspective on Resilience**

We advocate a pluralist approach toward the study and practice of resilience as opposed to or an alternative to the dualistic instrumentalization and individualization perspectives of resilience in HRD discourse (Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2017; O’Malley, 2010). Pluralism allows for the coexistence of multiple paradigms at the same time, thereby allowing scientific debates to take place about the various (implicit) assumptions that drive research. Our intention, therefore, is not to advocate *against* the concept of resilience, but to retain its value and to explore how resilience can be used alternatively. To do so, we emphasize the importance of ‘dignity’ (Bal, 2017; Kostera & Pirson, 2017) as an alternative framework to conceptualize resilience, such that the role of collective welfare functions as an anchoring point in how resilience is conceptualized.

Dignity has a twofold meaning in relation to resilience. First, it offers the potential to attribute an intrinsic meaning to resilience, through which it no longer has to be instrumental to economic value creation. Second, dignity offers the possibility to conceptualize responsibility towards resilience development, through postulating the Kantian principle of duty towards dignity. Both will be discussed in detail below.

### **Dignity and Resilience**

Workplace dignity can be considered not just a concept in management studies (Lucas, 2015; Lucas et al., 2013), but a paradigm that offers an alternative perspective on

hegemonic management discourse and theorizing. It responds to the current debates around the tensions between shareholder and stakeholder value and the rising gap between corporate profit and wage stagnation (Lazonick, 2014). However, in contrast to proposed solutions around balancing organizational and shareholder interest in profit maximization with the needs of the environment, a dignity paradigm offers a more radical proposal towards today's questions. A dignity paradigm confronts the problematic nature of the very existence of organizations across the world for planetary survival and human dignity (Bal, 2017; Kostera & Pirson, 2017). As noted elsewhere, corporates play a significant role in the destruction of the planet, climate change, and maintenance of the contemporary capitalist exploitative system (Matthews et al., 2016; Žižek, 2014). A dignity paradigm offers the potential to reformulate the foundations of organizations through two key principles: extension of the principle of dignity throughout the workplace, and the role of dialogue and democracy in upholding dignity. Based on these principles, an understanding of resilience anchored in dignity can be gained, through which it obtains a fundamentally different meaning from a neoliberal construction anchoring of resilience.

### **Workplace Dignity as Alternative Paradigm**

Dignity has a long history (Bal, 2017), but most Western interpretations have been influenced by philosopher Kant (1785/2012), who described dignity as the intrinsic worth of each human being. Moreover, dignity implies that people have autonomy, and thereby not only freedom, but also the possibility to self-regulation. Dignity as the intrinsic worth of human beings has far-reaching implications (Thomas & Lucas, 2019). For instance, a Kantian perspective on dignity prescribes that people may never be used as a mere means towards an end, and therefore, the instrumentalization of employees for the achievement of organizational performance can be perceived as inherently *undignified*. However, in problematizing the notion of human dignity, Bal (2017) extended the concept of dignity as

intrinsic worth to everything that is part of the workplace, including animals and the planet itself. Departing from the notion that everything in the workplace has an intrinsic worth, a radical transformation takes place concerning the role of work in society. Contemporary business cannot escape the fundamental questions of today, including environmental destruction and rising inequality. If dignity is about the intrinsic worth of everything in the workplace (Bal, 2017), a question concerns how this translates into theory and practices of respect for and promotion of greater dignity in the workplace. It can be observed how dignity has been at the forefront of international discourse on human rights and peace, but nonetheless has not yet been integrated into everyday understanding of interpersonal contact and the functioning of organizations. In other words, dignity is still absent from organizational discourse.

Therefore, a dialogue is needed with stakeholders to formulate the ways through which dignity can be respected and promoted in the workplace. Dialogue arises when individuals enter conversations about what the most appropriate way of acting is in a given circumstance, and which aims for respecting, protecting, and promoting the dignity of other people, animals, and the planet (Bal, 2017; Bal & De Jong, 2017). Such conversations may be held among individuals, but can be also structured more formally through ways of democratizing organizations, where individuals within and beyond organizations are able to exercise voice and be a crucial part in decision making processes. This dialogue or workplace democracy, ensures participation of stakeholders, and most notably employees, in the process of decision making. Real involvement of employees in decision making ensures that employees are not merely managed top-down and used instrumentally towards organizational performance. Literature has shown that while company profits have skyrocketed, employees have not profited equally, and have faced wage stagnation for years (Wisman, 2013). This disconnect between organizational interest and the participation and inclusion of employees

calls for a more fundamental rethinking organizational structures (Kostera & Pirson, 2017). Hence, Bal (2017) described how dignity manifests through dialogue and democracy. While the relative difficulty of translating dignity into practice may be explained by the unclear nature of responsibility towards dignity, a conceptual way out is offered by introducing a dialogue-approach to dignity. As dignity is context-dependent, it is complex to define universal rules as to how people should be treated with dignity in the workplace.

### **A Dignity Perspective on Resilience**

Following a dignity logic, new meanings for resilience in the workplace can be generated. In contrast to a neoliberal anchoring, a dignity-perspective offers a number of key principles in relation to resilience at work. While resilience denotes the ability to bounce back from adversity at work, a dignity paradigm does not advance this concept as instrumental and as an individualized responsibility. In contrast, while dignity assumes intrinsic worth, it also denotes resilience as an important capability of human beings. As adversity is part of everyday life of every human being, it is indeed important to strengthen the resilience capabilities of each human being, whether they are in or out of employment. Perhaps it is the people without employment who are in even greater need of resilience, as paid employment may offer income and resources, which may be contributing to greater resilience (Mor-Barak, 1995). Hence, resilience is not merely instrumental to organizational performance, and thereby only of interest to organizations and government as it improves organizational functioning, but because resilience has important intrinsic attributes (Stewart, 2011).

Therefore, resilience is important for people to live a dignified life, and to contribute to greater dignity in the workplace. Therefore, it is not just instrumental to organizations, but may contribute to a wide range of 'outcomes' which are relevant to individuals and collectives. For instance, resilient individuals may have more resources to cope in times of

adversity, and thereby help others in their communities who are less well off. This creates the possibility of sharing of resources for greater social cohesion and belonging.

Moreover, resilience of individuals and communities is needed in the face of environmental destruction (Cretney, 2014). More specifically, it is well established that overconsumption is one of the main sources for pollution and climate change (Conca, 2001). This means that people, especially those in the West, will have to reduce consumption (e.g., eat less meat, fly less, and have fewer children) to decrease their contribution to environmental destruction. Facing this necessity, societies will need resilient people, who can deal with radical change in their lifestyles. The need to change one's lifestyle demands resilience of people to cope well with such changes. Hence, in a dignity-paradigm, resilience may be actually one of the main challenges for communities. It is important to build resilient communities, where people support each other in becoming more resilient in the light of radical societal transformation. Hence, a dignity paradigm may also inform the individual and collective ways through which resistance to neoliberal regimes can be generated, and how alternatives can be formulated (see also Bal et al., 2019).

A dignity perspective on resilience postulates that it is not only an individual responsibility to become resilient, but shared within communities. Whereas the basis for manifestation of dignity resides within the dialogue among individuals and within communities, it is through this dialogue that we can become aware of how resilience can be developed for individuals *as well as* communities. Resilience is thereby not positioned as an individual responsibility, but as a collective responsibility that may be formulated through debate. As a dignity paradigm acknowledges that people possess differential capabilities and access to resilience accumulation, it is a shared responsibility to ensure people become resilient. Even more so, dignity assumes that special attention is paid to those who, for whatever reason, have difficulties in developing themselves as resilient individuals. The

question thereby, is how communities and resilient people may help and support others to become more resilient as well. The notion of ‘duty of care’ (Jenkins, 2008) also corresponds to the idea of dignity in the workplace; when intrinsic worth of other human beings (and in extension of the planet) is central in the organization of our economic system, we have a duty of care towards other people, to not merely treat them as objects to an end, but as individuals with dignity. Consequently, a dialogue is necessary to formulate the ways through which people can be supported to become more resilient, and better able to cope with adversity in life and work. A subsequent question that can be asked is what exactly organizations and communities can do, and which structures can be designed such that dignity is respected and promoted (Bal, 2017). In sum, a dignity perspective on resilience offers the possibility to anchor resilience in a fundamentally different way, such that it obtains an alternative meaning.

### **Implications for HRD**

This paper explored the meaning of resilience as used in the contemporary HRD literature. While the literature is often unclear about its ontological assumptions, close reading reveals an understanding of resilience as anchored in the neoliberal construction of the individual, and in particular the instrumentalization of the individual for economic growth and outcomes, and the individualization of responsibility. This reduction of the individual human being strips the potential richness of resilience as a social phenomenon (Cretney, 2014; Hall & Lamont, 2012) to a narrow understanding of resilience. A dignity perspective offers an alternative understanding, and positions intrinsic worth and the relational dimension as central to resilience. Accordingly, resilience cannot be translated into an individualized responsibility, but is developed and built through dialogue. The assumption that resilience is an individual responsibility contradicts the very meaning of resilience as a way of coping

with external stressors (Cretney, 2014), as the ways through which people cope successfully is dependent upon the availability for social and emotional support.

HRD-practitioners who are interested in building resilience among employees, may be aware that resilience is built through close collaboration with employees themselves. This involves the close involvement of individuals in decision making processes about how resources are distributed among employees to build resilience. Practically, this may involve organizing sessions where the dialogue can be facilitated among stakeholders to ensure all employees have fair chances to collectively build their resilience in the face of adversity. Moreover, HRD-managers can also liaise with top management in organizations to ensure resilience is an entitlement of employees, and thus access to resources to build resilience should be granted to all employees, regardless of their standing in the organization.

### **Conclusion**

This article analyzed the anchoring points of resilience, and based on its assessment as grounded in neoliberal ideology, it advocates pluralism in relation to the underpinning of resilience. Therefore, alternative understandings, including a dignity-perspective on resilience may receive more attention. Researchers in the field, reviewers, journal editors, and teachers are therefore advised to be explicit with regards to the anchoring of resilience, and make it clear to readers and students what the underlying assumptions are of the use of resilience in the workplace. This could be done by explicitly discussing one's ontological assumptions regarding the meaning of resilience in one's work as scientific authors. In sum, this article and this Special Issue show that resilience is an enormously important concept in the contemporary workplace. Resilience is important for a wide range of individuals in organizations and leaders may focus more on building resilience among individuals, and this Special Issue has collected a variety of strong papers showing how this may be facilitated. Jointly, they contribute to better understanding of how resilience may developed to enhance

greater dignity, and to avoid individualizing responsibility to individuals to be resilient in the face of adversity.

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