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Gender and Resilience at Work

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High levels of uncertainty and disruption globally (James, 2011), and daily workplace stressors, such as austerity and work intensification, (Gittell, 2008; King et al., 2015; Zagelmeyer and Gollan, 2012) have contributed to a significant rise in scholarly, policy and practice interest in resilience. Whilst there is significant debate about how to define and measure resilience (Cooper et al. 2013), common conceptualizations include the “ability to quickly recognize and seize opportunities, change direction, and avoid collisions” (McCann, 2004: 47). Within prior research, key distinctions are made between the resilience of individuals and organizations, and between resilience in the face of everyday workplace stressors and in respect of extreme events such as floods or terrorist attacks (Branicki et al., 2016). The resilience of individuals is most frequently conceptualized within the paradigm of positive organizational psychology (Bardoel et al., 2014), which views resilience as an individual attribute or characteristic, defining it as “the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure” (Luthans, 2002 p.702). Coutu (2002) argues that resilient individuals possess an acceptance of reality, a strong belief that life is meaningful and an ability to improvise. Cooper at al. (2013) highlight confidence, purposefulness, adaptability and social support as key characteristics of resilient individuals. Theories of the influences on individual resilience highlight two key sources of resilience: resilience resources and protective factors. A key resilience resource is social support and the quality of interpersonal relationships (e.g. Flach, 1997; Jackson et al., 2007; Kossek and Perrigino, 2016; Powley 2009; Stephens et al., 2013; Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). Protective factors are thought to also include “self-esteem, self-efficacy, subjective well-being, self-determination, locus of control and support systems” (Bimrose and Heane, 2012 p. 339).

In contrast to much of the literature on individual resilience, research focused on organizational resilience has tended to be situated in the context of extreme events, and theorizes organizational resilience as a form of positive organizing in anticipation of extreme events (e.g. natural disaster, pandemic disease and terrorism) “that can contain, repair and transcend vulnerability in organizational systems” (Waldman et al., 2011:941; also see, Weick, 2003). Linnenluecke and Griffiths (2012) argue that organizational resilience is best defined as “the amount of disturbance the organization can absorb before it loses its structure and function” (2012, p. 19). Similarly, Herbane et al. (2004) position organizational resilience as an on-going capability “that underpins organizational development in complex environments” (2004:437).

Despite a growing body of work on resilience, there is a notable absence of research that seeks to advance understanding of the relationships between gender and resilience, and of the role of gender in creating and sustaining resilient individuals and resilient organizations. In part, this is because resilience is often associated with traditional workplace values of ‘strength, robustness, boldness, stoutness, bravery and not being womanish’ (Cooper, 1995:146-147). In the workplace, empirical research identifies that being resilient is frequently associated with machismo, stoicism and/or heroic tales of overcoming crisis (Branicki et al., 2016), which in turn serve to discount alternative routes to resilience.
An exception to this is Waldman et al.’s (2011) work on the role of compassion in producing resilience. More therefore needs to be done to understand the role of emotion in sustaining resilience. Additionally, work on resilience tends to emphasize white collar work, or the management of extreme events and as such lacks a focus on resilience in the face of daily experiences of precarious work and interrupted careers, which are features of work disproportionately experienced by female workers. Beyond addressing a significant gap in resilience research, raising the salience of gender in resilience research is of substantial practical and policy importance given the prevalence of women in precarious and vulnerable employment.

By advancing theoretical and empirical knowledge in relation to gender and resilience, research in this strand has the capacity to generate significant implications for policy and practice. Research has demonstrated that the global financial crisis has exacerbated existing gender inequalities and power imbalances, including the under-representation of women at all levels of economic decision making and their over-representation in informal, vulnerable, and casual employment (ITUC, 2011). Overall, women are more likely than men to be in precarious employment throughout their lives regardless of educational level, with the gender gap of people with low levels of qualifications in the age group 20-24 being nine percentage points and increasing up to 21 percentage points in pre-retirement age (60-64) (EIGE, 2017). Thus, the evidence suggests that female workers are disproportionately likely to face workplace situations that call for them to demonstrate resilience.

In light of these challenges and opportunities, this stream will explore relationships between gender and resilience across contexts characterized by routine stressors and extreme events, and across levels of analysis, including the individual, team, and organization. We invite papers critically engaging with the concepts of gender and resilience at the individual, team, and organization levels, and research that conceptually and empirically illuminates the practices and processes by which gender and resilience are related. We encourage interdisciplinary analysis and papers challenging existing conceptualizations of resilience in relation to gender.

Indicative questions and issues may include, but are not restricted to, the following:

- How might a gendered perspective inform conceptualizations of resilience? To what extent does a gendered lens offer distinctive ways of conceptualizing, enacting and embodying resilience at work?
- What is the role of gender in creating and sustaining resilience at the individual, team or organizational level?
- How do trust, openness, and transparency contribute to workplace resilience?
- Within a gendered frame what are the relationships between individual, team and organizational resilience? What are the mediators and moderators that shape these relationships? For example, how does gender balance shape the resilience of teams?
- What are the negative aspects (i.e. dark sides) to traditional masculine conceptualizations of resilience in the workplace?
- How is resilience undermined and/or supported by either containing or expressing emotions in the workplace? Does a gendered reframing of resilience raise issues of emotional authenticity and inauthenticity?
- Do sources of resilience vary by sex and/or gender? For example, is there a greater expectation that male workers contain their emotional responses to challenge and crisis?
- In which ways does precarious work undermine individual and/or organizational resilience? What are the routes of resilience accessible to precarious workers?
- What are the implications for management and leadership of a gendered perspective on resilience?

The stream will select suitable papers for a special issue proposal of the Gender, Work and Organization Journal.

For submission details go to: www.mq.edu.au/events/gwosydney

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References


