

Resilient Workplaces: An Initial Conceptualization

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Abstract

Resilience has become a mainstream concept in social work theory and practice. While resilience has been well applied to individuals and families, there has been virtually no application to the workplace, a social system that is central to the lives of employed people and their families. This article extrapolates the literature on the resilience of the family system to the workplace system. A provisional model of workplace resilience is proposed, incorporating the dimensions of stressor, risk factors, protective factors, and outcomes. Implications for occupational social work practice and research are detailed.

Implications for Practice

- Practitioners should, with critical thought and in light of theory, transfer learning from better-known systems to less well-known systems – from families to workplaces.
- Practitioners should creatively enhance the resilience of workplace systems, to build workplace communities that can resile in the face of adversity.

Resilience, along with assets, strengths, and solutions, has become an increasingly mainstream concept in recent years. The strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2008) and assets-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) are taught in many undergraduate social work programs. Resilience, defined loosely as the ability of people to bounce back in the wake of adversity, is now central to our understanding of human development and social work practice (Masten, 2001). Resilience has been well explored among individuals and particularly children (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004). There is also a solid body of literature on the resilience of families (H. I. McCubbin, Thompson, & McCubbin, 1996).

What is missing is a body of literature on the resilience of the *workplace*. This term is intended to encompass the full range of places where people work, be it schools, universities, hospitals, the military, mines, offices, shops, welfare agencies, or factories. I conceptualize the workplace as a social system.

Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006, p. 9) defined a system as “a set of elements that are orderly and interrelated to make a functional whole.” The *elements* in a workplace system include employees, their families, the local community, shareholders, and organizational structures and policies. These elements are in constant interaction with each other, forming a network of interrelationships, a *functional whole*. By *workplace*, then, I refer principally to the functional whole.

Most social workers are employed in a workplace. Some are employed under the title of occupational social worker, industrial social worker, or employee assistance practitioner. While most of these social workers are involved primarily in providing social services to individual employees and their families, a few recognize the “organization as client” (Googins & Davidson, 1993, p. 479). These social workers are interested in improving the wellness, functioning and humanity of the interactions in the workplace—of the workplace itself, as a social system.

Most social workers are not employed as occupational social workers, but as employees of welfare and related organizations, providing services to people in the community. Although these social workers are not employed to enhance the functioning of the workplace, they are part of the workplace system and thus shape and are shaped by the employing milieu. A sound understanding of the dynamics of the workplace could help social workers co-create a working environment that is more effective and efficient and a workforce that is more productive and fulfilled. This would have a ripple effect on interrelated systems, such as families and the local community.

Social workers who have adopted the resilience perspective and who work with organizations have the challenge of applying resilience theory to the workplace. There is not much literature on the resilience of systems larger than the family and virtually no literature on the resilience of workplace systems. I screened all peer-reviewed journal articles containing the words “resilient,” “resilience,” or “resiliency,” published in the past 10 years and indexed in the *Social Services Abstracts*. Of the 1,696 articles, not one addressed the resilience of the workplace as a social system. The closest authors got was to study the resilience of employees (e.g., Zwetsloot & Pot, 2004), often in relation to work-related stressors (e.g., Bacchus, 2008), such as military deployments (e.g., Maguen et al., 2008).

This gap in the literature is curious given that employed people spend approximately half of their waking hours at work. The workplace is thus a highly significant life context or social environment and should enjoy a similarly high level of interest from social workers. The workplace plays a crucial role in shaping the well-being and identity of employees and their families. Healthy, resilient, and humane work communities can contribute directly to healthy, resilient, and humane families, neighborhoods, and societies (McManus, Seville, Vargo, & Brunson, 2008). The resilience of workplaces is particularly salient at this time, given the devastating effects of the global economic recession on many companies and families.

This article, therefore, is an initial attempt to address this gap. I provide a brief history of resilience theory, showing how resilience has evolved over the past 50 years from an intrapsychic concept to a systems concept. I give priority to the development of family resilience, because it is this system that has the most developed theory. In addition, I contend that the workplace is a system much like any other system, and that what we have learned about family resilience may be valid also for the workplace. I then propose and discuss an initial conceptual model of a resilient workplace, drawing on family resilience theory. Finally, I suggest implications for practice and further research.

Resilience Theory: From Individual to Family System

Various definitions of resilience have been put forward. Vaillant (1993, pp. 284–285) defined resilience as “both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back.” Werner and Smith (1982, p. 3) described this as the “self-righting tendencies” of people. Resilience is defined in terms of the “presence of protective factors (personal, social, familial, and institutional safety nets)” that enable individuals to resist life stress (Kaplan, Turner, Norman, & Stillson, 1996, p. 158).

A review of resilience literature (van Breda, 2001) suggests four central themes: (a) resilience always requires the experience of adversity—there must be some kind of major life stressor that people endeavor to overcome; (b) resilience typically involves a kind of flexibility or “bounce-back-ability”; (c) resilience has come to be regarded less as a static trait and more as a process that is expressed over time;

and (d) resilience is oriented toward well-being and coping. What resilience is not is a form of rugged, rigid, “just-shake-it-off,” “don’t-look-back,” “Teflon-coated” invincibility (Schwartz, 1997).

The earliest studies of resilience focused on children growing up in adverse circumstances. These very large longitudinal studies tracked children for decades, from birth into adulthood, and endeavored to determine prospectively the factors that were associated with overcoming the odds. Werner and Smith’s (1982; 1992) study in Hawaii beginning in 1955 and the Lundby study in Sweden beginning in 1947 (Cederblad, 1996) are the classics. These studies were able to demonstrate social factors that enable children to bounce back from adversity, such as early bonding with a primary caregiver and the expectation that children assist with household chores.

An enormous number of studies have been conducted and theories developed to unpack our understanding of resilience. Central concepts include the sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1984), hardiness (Kobasa, 1982), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982), locus of control (Rotter, 1966), thriving (Ickovics & Park, 1998), and learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum & Ben-Ari, 1985).

This body of literature has been extremely helpful in moving social science away from its fixation on the origins of disease and pathology toward a curiosity about how people cope, survive, and overcome. Antonovsky (1984) has described this as a move from a pathogenic perspective (meaning the origins of illness) toward a salutogenic perspective (the origins of health).

There are, however, a number of critical limitations in these theories for social workers. First, most of these resilience factors are deeply embedded in the character of the individual. As such, they are personality traits—virtually impossible to change and thus of very limited practice utility. Second, many of the resilience factors are demographic variables, such as gender. Knowing, for example, that boys are more vulnerable than girls does little to help the boys. Third, there is very little literature on change processes. Typically studies in resilience take place in the natural environment and serve to describe the processes of resilience. There are few studies that seek to develop the resilience of individuals. Fourth, when social systems are described in these studies, they are usually described solely as a source of harm or benefit to the individual, rather than as a thing-in-itself.

In light of these limitations of individual resilience theory, family resilience theory opens the possibility of understanding resilience factors that are interpersonal rather than intrapsychic, that are amenable to change, and that focus on the resilience of the system itself. Early studies on family resilience continued to view the family as a source of harm or protection for individuals (e.g., Caplan, 1982). The shift to thinking about the resilience of the family system *as a system* was hard in coming (Frankel, Snowden, & Nelson, 1992; Hawley & De Haan, 1996; Walsh, 1996).

In the 1930s, the field of family stress research began to emerge (Huang, 1991), with particular attention to how various forms of stress damaged families (H. I. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1992). In 1949, Hill formulated the ABCX model, which predicts how stressors will impact on families. This model laid the foundation for all subsequent family stress research and family resilience models (Burr, 1973/1982; H. I. McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). In the 1970s, research on family strengths burgeoned. These studies endeavored to distinguish well-functioning families from poor-functioning families, in order to profile the characteristics of strong families (Ponzetti & Long, 1989; Stinnett, 1979).

In the late 1970s, Hamilton McCubbin, a social worker and then researcher in the U.S. Navy, began to study how military families coped with the stress of family separation due to military service. In 1983, he published the double ABCX model of family adjustment and adaptation (H. I. McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), which was built upon Hill's ABCX model. Since then, McCubbin and colleagues have developed several iterations of this model, which has grown in complexity and precision (H. I. McCubbin et al., 1996).

McCubbin's work on family resilience is groundbreaking for a number of reasons. First, most of the components of the models are interpersonal and not intrapsychic or individualistic, giving family resilience a systems perspective and moving resilience theory out of psychology and into social work. For example, he explores the typology of families—their regular pattern of relating to each other that is characteristic of the family-as-a-whole rather than merely an aggregate of individual family members (H. I. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). Second, many of the components of McCubbin's models are amenable to change, such as his interest in problem solving mechanisms or community relationships. As a

result, family resilience becomes a perspective for intervention (van Breda, 1999). Third, the models are strongly grounded in empirical and conceptual research, and a number of instruments have been developed to measure family resilience constructs (H. I. McCubbin et al., 1996).

Resilience Theory: From Family to Workplace

In the remainder of this article I propose a model of workplace resilience that is an extrapolation from McCubbin's work on family resilience, using my own work on the resilience of military families (van Breda, 2008), 15 years of occupational social work experience, and feedback on this model from the South African Occupational Social Workers Association. I use McCubbin's work on family resilience as a point of departure, because I believe that all systems have many features in common, including family systems and workplace systems. The model extrapolates the work done on family systems to the workplace as a social system.

We all recognize that a family or a group is more than just a collection of individuals—the family or group is a gestalt that transcends merely the individual members of these social systems. We speak easily of “family identity” (Gunn, 1980) or “group dynamics” (Forsyth, 2009), recognizing that these are characteristics of the system itself and not merely aggregated descriptions of the individual members. In this article I endeavor to think similarly about the workplace, as a system with its own properties and not merely a collection of employees. My hope is that this model will form the basis for empirical research into workplace resilience in the future.

A Definition of Workplace Resilience

H. I. McCubbin and McCubbin (1988, p. 247) have defined family resilience as the “characteristics, dimensions, and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations.” This definition focuses on the abilities of a family to withstand disruption and to reorganize itself after adversity. By analogy, one might similarly define workplace resilience as the characteristics, dimensions, and properties of workplaces that help workplaces

to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations. I propose refining this definition as follows:

Workplace resilience refers to the characteristics and processes of organizations that help them to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations.

This definition (a) acknowledges that organizations do experience adversity in the form of change and crisis, (b) emphasizes the need for flexibility by the organization in the face of adversity, (c) addresses resilience as both a trait (as a characteristic of a social system at a point in time) and a process (as something that is seen in the unfolding life of a system), and (d) leads toward an effective outcome defined as continued movement to the realization of the organization's goals.

Stressors

A model of workplace resilience must start with a stressor, since the crux of resilience is adaptation in the face of adversity. M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin (1996, p. 17) have defined a stressor as “a demand placed on the family that produces, or has the potential of producing changes in the family system.” They distinguish between normative stressors (those that form part of the expected family life cycle, such as the death of a grandparent) and nonnormative stressors (those that are unexpected, such as a family member's injury in a car accident).

There are numerous kinds of stressors that organizations can experience at organizational level, including economic recession, with its increased work pressure and retrenchments; a corporate experience of violence, such as the bombing of a branch of an organization; major reorganization of the workplace, such as experienced in South Africa after the end of apartheid in 1994; or changes in the demographics or needs of the organization's client base, such as an organization that provides a product or service that is becoming outdated.

One thinks in particular of the recent tragedy at Fort Hood on November 6, 2009, in which a U.S. Army officer killed 12 U.S. soldiers and a civilian, and wonders about the ability of the military to withstand and reorganize in the face of such a disruptive event. Such a stressor surely affects not only

individual soldiers and their spouses and children but also the entire military system—the workplace—raising potentially volatile questions of trust, authority, religion, and race.

Risk Factors

McCubbin's models typically address two main groups of factors that mediate between a stressor and an outcome, namely, risk factors and protective factors. These are consistent with other research on risk and resilience (e.g., Fraser et al., 2004). Risk factors increase the likelihood that the stressor will produce disruption or breakdown of the system; protective factors increase the likelihood that the system will be able to bounce back from the disruptive effects of the stressor. Ultimately, it is the interaction of stressor, risk factors, and protective factors that determines the outcome of the system.

Risk factors can be defined as “any influences that increase the chances for harm or, more specifically, influences that increase the probability of onset, digression to a more serious state, or maintenance of a problem condition” (Fraser et al., 2004, p. 14). M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin (1996, p. 17) have referred to these risk factors as “vulnerability.”

“Pile-up” is the central, indeed the only, component of vulnerability or risk in M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin's (1993, p. 28) last model of family resilience, and it is defined as “the accumulation, or *pile-up*, of demands on or within the family unit, such as financial debts, poor health status of relatives, and changes in a parent's work role or work environment.” The concept of pile-up is best known in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967), which measures the number and severity of various life events over the previous 12 months.

I propose adopting pile-up as the central risk factor in this model of workplace resilience, and I suggest three primary sources of pile-up: external, internal, and employee stressors.

External stressors. These are stressors (events or processes) that are located outside the organization and impinge on or spill into the workplace. *Spillover* is a notion derived from research on work–family interface (Googins, 1991; Segal, 1989; Skrypnek & Fast, 1996), in which the work and family systems are thought of as overlapping systems where the characteristics of one system spillover

into the other. In terms of workplace resilience, external stressors include economic recession, environmental changes, political uncertainty, and changes in trade requirements. The presence of external stressors increases the vulnerability of the organization to additional stressors.

Internal stressors. These are stressors (events or processes) that are located inside the organization and are characteristic of the organization itself, rather than of just some of the individuals in the workplace. Internal stressors include organizational transformation, mismanagement, fraud, mergers, changes in management, and changes in technology. All of these stressors require organizational adjustment, which increases the vulnerability of the workplace to additional stressors.

Employee stressors. The workplace system comprises people—employees and their families—who are the third source of pile-up. They have their own stressors, which can spill over into the workplace, increasing the vulnerability of the workplace to additional stressors. Surely, one individual with a personal problem is unlikely to cause the vulnerability of the workplace; but stress among many individuals increases the overall vulnerability of the entire system. These stressors can include family problems, health concerns, family transitions, mental health problems, and family crises.

The more vulnerable a workplace is in terms of pile-up of external stressors, internal stressors, and employee stressors, the more likely it is that a particular organizational stressor will result in the disruption or breakdown of the workplace system.

Protective Factors

Whereas risk factors increase the likelihood of breakdown, protective factors increase the likelihood of recovery or adaptation. Protective factors have been termed resilience by McCubbin and many others working in the risk and resilience field. Walsh (1996, p. 263) defined these protective factors as the “key processes that enable families to cope more effectively and emerge hardier from crises or persistent stresses, whether from within or from outside the family.”

Although stressors can be thought of as impinging on a system from inside or from outside, protective factors in workplace resilience are thought of as characteristics and processes that are located at

the organizational level. As such, they should be amenable to change—an occupational social worker should be able to do something to increase workplace resilience. Drawing on family resilience theory, I propose four factors that increase workplace resilience. These are by no means the only factors, but they may be thought of as these four critical and central factors: supportive networks, problem solving, appraisal, and harmony.

Supportive networks. The first workplace protective factor comprises supportive networks, which refers to the quality of interpersonal relations within the workplace and between the workplace and the broader community. M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin (1989, p. 20) have defined support systems as “all of those characteristics, competencies, and means of persons, groups, and institutions outside the family that the family may call upon, access, and use to meet their demands.”

Supportive networks can be located within the organization itself—horizontally between employees and vertically between senior and junior levels of the organization. The cohesiveness (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1988) or affective involvement (Epstein & Bishop, 1981) of the work community is a significant protective factor, enabling a workplace that experiences adversity to rally around each other, providing social, instrumental, affective, and material support to one another (Cobb, 1982).

Supportive networks can also be located between the organization and the broader community. This includes the good will, mutual benefit, and reputation of the organization. A workplace that is well regarded by the local community may be better able to mobilize support and assistance in times of crisis than a workplace that is disconnected from the community or that has a hostile relationship with the community.

In a situation like that at Fort Hood, the level of cohesion within the workplace—the support and trust between soldiers, across ranks, and among families and the local community—is key. Militaries have a culture of strong cohesion, but not always of personally or emotionally supportive networks. If they are able to move beyond macho cohesion toward authentic caring and compassion, as well as practical support, shared on an ongoing basis, the resilience of this workplace could be significantly increased, resulting in a better outcome of adjustment and adaptation.

Problem solving. The second workplace protective factor is problem solving, which is the ability of the organization to collaboratively identify and respond to a range of instrumental and affective problems. Problems are ubiquitous, and the ability of systems to respond effectively to problems is a key dimension of most literature on resilience (e.g., Cederblad, Dahlin, Hagnell, & Hansson, 1995) and family functioning (e.g., Epstein & Bishop, 1981). M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin (1996, p. 20) have defined family problem solving and coping as “the family’s management of stress and distress through the use of its abilities and skills to manage or eliminate a stressor and related hardships.”

The workplace definition of problem solving has two main elements. First, it includes both instrumental and affective problems (Epstein & Bishop, 1981). Instrumental problems are practical problems, such as economic challenges or the demand for organizational transformation. Affective problems are softer and refer to interpersonal and personal challenges, such as the spread of a health problem among employees (such as HIV) or interpersonal conflict between employees and management. Workplaces may be adept at responding to instrumental problems but less effective in identifying and responding to affective challenges. Workplaces that are sensitive to a wide range of problems, both instrumental and affective, are more likely to bounce back in the wake of adversity.

The second element of the workplace conceptualization of problem solving is that the emphasis is on collaborative problem solving. When a workplace system is threatened with a stressor, the entire system comes under threat. Thus the problem-solving response to that threat should include the whole workplace, or at least a representative segment of the work community. Participative and democratic processes are envisaged here, such as those used by appreciative inquiry practitioners (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008). Workplaces that respond collaboratively toward a stressor may be more likely than those that resolve problems only at management level to enable the entire workplace system to bounce back from the disruptive effects of the stressor.

In a situation like that at Fort Hood, collaborative problem solving could play a helpful role in facilitating adjustment and resilience. This shooting may have undermined trust and security within the military community—when one of our own turns against us, whom can we trust? A collaborative

approach to addressing a threat, rather than an approach engineered by commanders or social service personnel, could restore a sense of control over the workplace system. When organizations have a history of collaborative problem solving, this established strength can be mobilized in the midst of a crisis to positive effect.

Appraisal. The third workplace protective factor is appraisal, which is the organization's perception of the stressor and its consequent challenges as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. The process of appraisal is perhaps McCubbin's most significant contribution to the field of family resilience (Hawley & De Haan, 1996). In Hill's 1949 ABCX model, appraisal was defined as the family's definition of the seriousness of the changes demanded by the stressor event. By the time M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin (1996) updated their resiliency model in 1996, this had evolved into five levels of appraisal. The McCubbins sought to articulate the kinds of family-level processes of making sense of the world.

I have drawn on the McCubbins' understanding of family coherence to shape workplace appraisal. Family coherence is conceptualized as a family-level version of Antonovsky's (1998) sense of coherence, and it refers to "a dispositional world view that expresses the family's dynamic feeling of confidence that the world is comprehensible (internal and external environments are structured, predictable and explicable), manageable (resources are available to meet demands), and meaningful (life demands are challenges worthy of investment)" (M. A. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996, p. 42). This view of the world has the capacity to mobilize other coping mechanisms and resources that are available to the family (H. I. McCubbin, E. A. Thompson, Thompson, & Fromer, 1998).

A work community that perceives the world around it and the stressor in particular as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful is likely to adopt a positive and constructive orientation toward the stressor. Rather than viewing this stressor as another capricious instance of the randomness of life, they will locate the stressor in its broader context, recognizing what may have led to it and identifying points of leverage to resolve it. Rather than being overwhelmed and paralyzed by the unmanageability of the stressor, members of the workplace will perceive the environment and themselves

to be adequate to meet the demands of the stressor. Rather than viewing the stressor as a pointless and purposeless event that drains the system of energy, the work community will view the stressor as something worthwhile, recognizing the value for the workplace of working to overcome it.

What might this mean for Fort Hood? If this shooting is viewed as evidence of the enemy within, of the untrustworthiness of large groups of people, and of the inability of military leadership to create safe and predictable workspaces, the resilience of the workplace could be profoundly undermined. If, on the other hand, people use this shooting as an opportunity to show their ability to rally around each other, this could make the crisis more meaningful. If the workplace community believes that it has the social resources to cope in the midst of pain, this may make the crisis more manageable. If it becomes possible to piece together the story of the soldier arrested for the shootings, then the crisis can become comprehensible and even more manageable.

Harmony. The fourth and final workplace protective factor is harmony, which is the balance that the organization strikes between work and life, a holistic valuing of both spheres of life. M. A. McCubbin and McCubbin (1996, p. 16) have located harmony and balance at the center of their resiliency model and indicated that while stressors bring about imbalance or disharmony, systems endeavor to regain harmony and balance. They continued to identify four main domains of life in which stress acts and in which balance and harmony are thus important: “(a) interpersonal relationships; (b) structure and function; (c) development, well-being, spirituality; and (d) community relationships and nature” (p. 16).

In the context of the workplace, harmony has been defined as the balance between work and life (which includes the family). There are times when the demands of work overbalance the demands of life, leading to breakdown of both the workplace and the family system. And vice versa, life and family demands can overbalance the demands of the workplace. Resilience requires a harmonious balance between these two intersecting spheres of life.

Extensive literature has been published on the interface between the worlds of work and life (Googins, 1991). The “separate worlds model” (Andrews & Bailyn, 1993) perceives these two spheres as completely independent and separate—what happens in one has no impact on the other. This model has

rightly been termed the “myth of separate worlds” (Skrypnek & Fast, 1996). Increasingly, writers are recognizing that these two worlds intersect and have a mutual influence on each other. With the changes in the expectations of both workers and the workplace (Cooper, 1998; Kemske, 1998), there is an increasing need to ensure balance between work and life. It seems that organizations that holistically value both spheres of life may be better able to adapt to stressors than organizations that value one at the expense of the other.

After a major crisis, business cannot continue as usual. The workplace will, one hopes, recognize the importance of the balance between work and life. In the wake of trauma, attention given to personal support, counseling, debriefing, and family care will bolster the resilience of the workplace system. On the other hand, work is an important part of harmony, offering structure, predictability, and meaning, and should be maintained through the crisis. Working toward the delicate balance or harmony between work and life in Fort Hood may facilitate the community’s adjustment and recovery.

Outcomes

The final dimension of this workplace resilience model is the outcome. We may expect a stressor to produce a negative outcome for a workplace. This outcome, however, is mediated by the vulnerability of or risk factors in the workplace and the resilience of or protective factors in the workplace. The interaction among stressor, risk factors, and protective factors produces an outcome. In family resilience models, a good outcome is said to have been achieved when the family has integrated the demands of the stressor into the family functioning, when the family has been restored to a state of harmony and balance, and when the individual-to-family fit and family-to-community fit between demand and capability have become balanced (M. A. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993, 1996).

Workplace outcome is defined as the organization’s achievement of the triple bottom line of profit, environmental sustainability, and social engagement, while maintaining the well-being of the workforce. This implies that the workforce is content, the workplace achieves its primary goals, and the

well-being of the broader society and environment is ensured. As such, the outcome is holistic and multidimensional.

The triple bottom line (Savitz & Weber, 2006) has become an increasingly widely recognized and supported framework for responsible business. The triple bottom line, together with other international initiatives such as the United Nations' Global Compact and South Africa's King Commission, have encouraged companies to extend their organizational goals beyond profit, to include responsibility toward sustaining the environment and toward ensuring accountable treatment of human resources and investment in the community. It is envisaged that embracing these three commitments will lead to sustainable and accountable business.

In addition to the triple bottom line, the definition of workplace outcomes also foregrounds the well-being of the workforce. Although this is, to a degree, covered by the social component of the triple bottom line, it requires more explicit emphasis. In addition to achieving the workplace's own goals, workplace resilience must also ensure the well-being of the workforce. It is all too easy for companies to place organizational interests above those of the workforce. A resilient workplace is here defined as, in part, one in which individual employees (and their families) are well-functioning, healthy, and active members of society.

An Illustration of the Workplace Resilience Model

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the workplace resilience model that this article proposes. A workplace that is exposed to an organizational stressor, such as large-scale retrenchments, a significant change in the market, or a natural disaster, is at risk of a negative outcome. This outcome could involve a compromised triple bottom line—reduction in profits, poor environmental sustainability, or damage to the organization's social involvement—or a reduction in worker well-being.

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Two sets of factors increase or mitigate this risk. Risk factors increase the risk of a negative outcome. The principal risk factor, which increases the vulnerability of the workplace, is the degree of

pile-up of other stressors in the organization. These stressors can emanate from the external environment (other stressful events in the society around the workplace), the internal environment (organizational dynamics within the workplace), and the employees that make up the workplace (stressors in the lives of employees and their families). The greater the pile-up of stressors, the greater the risk of a negative outcome in the face of a new stressor.

The risk factors are, however, mitigated by four primary protective factors. These are the degree of supportive networks between people in the workplace and between the workplace and the community; the degree to which the workplace engages collaboratively with instrumental and affective problems; the way in which stressors and the world in general are appraised by the workplace as manageable, comprehensible, and meaningful; and the extent to which the workplace is able to balance the world of work with the world of life and family. Workplaces with more protective factors will be more resilient—more resistant to disruption in the face of a new stressor.

Implications for Practice and Research

The primary value of a model of workplace resilience is not so much to help with model building, but rather to guide social work practice. Occupational social workers are mandated not only to help employees who have troubles or to run workshops in the workplace, but also to develop the holistic well-being of the workplace as a system. Facilitating the resilience of the workplace itself is a creative, strengths-oriented, and proactive way to ensure the flexibility and health of the work community.

Practice Implications

The workplace resilience model has six main implications for occupational social work practice:

First, occupational social workers can monitor the levels of pile-up in the workplace through regular surveys, tracking of monitoring data, and environmental reading. The monitoring of pile-up is important because the model suggests that the higher the pile-up, the more vulnerable the workplace is to breakdown. When pile-up is low, occupational social workers can be reasonably confident that the

workplace is less vulnerable to negative outcomes. When pile-up increases, however, these social workers need to work particularly intensively to bolster the workplace's protective factors.

Second, occupational social workers can continuously work to build supportive networks among employees and between the workplace and the community. This can be done through facilitating regular workshops, team-building events, and other collaborative activities. Social workers can advocate for communal spaces in the work environment where workers can meet informally for networking and relationship building. Social workers can motivate the workplace to host regular community events so that the organization becomes well known and valued in the community.

Third, occupational social workers can facilitate collaborative problem solving in the face of stressors. Ideally, this should be done in the face of relatively small problems, so that a culture of participative problem solving is established. When larger stressors impinge on the workplace, the collaborative problem-solving culture ought to kick in. Occupational social workers can also help the organization recognize and respond to affective problems. This could be done through employee wellness and labor forums. It is, however, important to mainstream engagement with affective problems into the higher levels of workplace management.

Fourth, occupational social workers can help to develop a sense of coherence among the workforce, so that stressors are appraised in resilient ways. This could be done through workshops using case studies that help workers approach simulated challenges in a proactive, engaged, and thoughtful way. Social workers can also convene action groups to work through organizational problems, emphasizing comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.

Fifth, occupational social workers should continually develop harmony in the workplace. This could entail facilitating the establishment and monitoring the implementation of a work-family or work-life policy. Regular focus groups could be held to track the balance that is achieved between the worlds of work and family.

Sixth, occupational social workers should monitor employee well-being as a routine activity in the workplace. It is important to establish a feedback loop between data collection and reporting, ensuring

that the results of climate surveys are fed back to the workers themselves and to management. Social workers should be at the vanguard of ensuring that management and the unions engage fully with the well-being of the workforce.

These six practice implications all require occupational social workers to adopt a resilience perspective. It is necessary to work proactively—not only to respond to crises in the workplace but also, and more importantly, to work proactively to build the resilience of the workplace well before crises develop. In this way, a resilience lens is essential for effective social work practice in the workplace.

Research Implications

The fact that there is virtually no literature on the resilience of the workplace suggests that this is a fertile area for further research. The resilience perspective is increasingly taking center stage in social work theory and practice. There is, however, a gap in the field of the resilience of the workplace. The following areas could be interesting avenues for further study:

This article has postulated a parallel between the family system and the workplace system. This is an area for further theoretical or empirical study. One wonders to what degree family dynamics mirror organizational dynamics. If there were substantial parallels, this could suggest that family systems therapy could be applied in similar fashion to organizations, which might open up new opportunities for occupational social work practice.

This article has identified four protective factors in the workplace. These, however, have been conceptually formulated and not empirically tested. Exploratory research is therefore needed to determine the range of factors that protect workplaces from the disruptive effects of stress. This research would contribute to theory and model development, helping us to expand our understanding of the resilience of systems.

The definition of the outcome of the workplace resilience model requires further study. For some, the outcome would be simply an increase in profit, while social workers would no doubt call for a more

holistic and person-centered formulation of the outcome. Research could be conducted to further explore the ways workplaces might define what constitutes a healthy and resilient workplace.

Conclusion

The workplace is a community where employed people spend a considerable amount of time and invest a great deal of energy. This community, for better or worse, shapes and is shaped by the identity, social role, and well-being of employees and their families. As such, it is a crucial dimension of people's social environment and consequently of central importance for social workers.

Resilience theory has been enjoying increasing attention from the social work community, but it has not been adequately linked to the workplace. The literature available on resilience and the workplace tends to address the workplace as a context for individual resilience or the resilience of individuals within the workplace (e.g., Zunz & Chernesky, 2000), rather than the resilience of the workplace itself.

In this article, I have transferred the theory of family resilience onto the workplace, based on a belief that family systems and workplace systems have much in common. Drawing on family resilience theory, this article has advanced an initial formulation of a workplace resilience model. This model has important implications for occupational social work practice. The critically reflective implementation of these implications could shed new light on our understanding of the resilience of the workplace. This in turn could have significant benefit for the well-being and social functioning of individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

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Figure 1. *Workplace resilience model.*

