Workplace adversity and resilience in public relations: Accounting for the lived experiences of public relations practitioners

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Public relations practitioners face workplace challenges as they cultivate public relationships, resolve conflicts, and manage crises. Odds of adversities may be high in this role, requiring practitioners to be resilient. This qualitative study explores workplace adversities in public relations from a practitioners' perspective, and examines how they enact resilience. By asking current practitioners about their lived experiences, we found workplace adversities occurred on multiple levels and ranged from mundane to life-altering events. Patterns of resilience were, metaphorically, bouncing forward, bouncing up, bouncing back, and bouncing around. This study contributes to public relations and resilience scholarship by (1) uncovering workplace adversities and resilience enactment in public relations, therefore connecting practice with scholarship, (2) extending the "bounce back" metaphor in the resilience literature, therefore making resilience more inclusive, and (3) exploring the connections of multi-level resilience, and suggesting the complex and negotiated nature of resilience among individuals embedded in collectives.

1. Introduction

Public relations contributes to organizational goals by aiding in long-term relationship building with strategic stakeholders, resolving conflicts, and reducing costs caused by regulation, litigation, and pressure (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). Despite being a young discipline, scholarship is growing fast with research primarily focused on the functions and practices of public relations (see Grunig et al., 2006). However, limited attention has been paid to practitioners' lived experience (Edwards & Hodge, 2011). Among studies on practitioners, scholars have discussed roles (Dozier & Broom, 2006), gender (Aldoory, 2007), power (Berger, 2005; Berger & Reber, 2006), leadership (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Jin, 2010; Meng & Berger, 2014), and activism (Holtzhausen, 2002) These studies identified challenges faced by practitioners; however, there is scant knowledge of how practitioners perceive workplace adversities, and how they rise above the setbacks.

On the other hand, research on the concept of resilience is proliferating (see Buzzanell, 2010; Russell, 2015). This trend aligns with a shift from problem-based to strength-based psychology (Masten, 2001), and corresponds to mounting risks and crises around the globe (Zolli & Healy, 2012). Scholars (see, Buzzanell, 2010; Masten, 2001; Houston, 2015; Richardson, 2002) explored definitions, measures, processes, and levels of resilience from multiple disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, business, social work, and communication. Recently, Buzzanell (2010) issued a call to delineate the process and construction of resilience in specific contexts. A discursive, process-oriented perspective can contribute to existing understandings of resilience, particularly the interactions between individuals and the collectives they are embedded in (Buzzanell, 2010). Furthermore, critical scholars (Hutcheon &

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Lashewicz, 2014; Russell, 2015) recently critiqued existing measures of resilience and advocated for understanding adversities and resilience from a participants' perspective. These recent calls (Buzzanell, 2010; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014; Russell, 2015) guide the current study, which utilizes a qualitative methodology and privileges participants' meaning-making.

We consider public relations practitioners as an ideal group to study resilience, due to the various challenges they face on a daily basis. As boundary spanners and strategic managers, practitioners face potential workplace adversities when navigating turbulent organizational environment, balancing competing interests, seeking a table in the dominant coalition, resisting organizational misconduct, and facilitating organizational and community renewal after crises (Chewing, Lai, & Doerfel, 2012; Cotton et al., 2014; Grunig et al., 2006; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). However, public relations research has not formally addressed the subject of practitioner resilience.

Therefore, this study explores how public relations practitioners perceive their workplace adversities and how they respond to the situation, thereby enacting varying levels and patterns of resilience. Below, we review relevant literature that guide the design for the current research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Resilience: research stages, landscape, and a (new) discursive/critical turn

Resilience is a contested term approached differently from multiple disciplines and levels (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2003). There is no single definition of resilience; however, most scholars incorporated the idea of *bouncing back*, *reintegration*, and/or *adaptation* after a major *disruption* or *adversity* (Buzzanell, 2010; Fine, 1991; Masten, 2001; Richardson, 2002; Russell, 2015). The concept of resilience is complex as it involves a process, can occur at multiple levels, and manifest differently. In this study, we loosely define resilience as *reintegration after adversity* and explores the processes, manifestations, and levels of resilience among participants.

Richardson (2002) articulated three stages of resilience research after a metatheoretical analysis: the first focused on individuals' attributes, the second on fostering resilience, and the third questioned the driving forces and sensemaking of resilience, with a critical/postmodern turn. In terms of levels, research has focused on individual, organizational, and community resilience (Simenson, 2013). Individual resilience research evolved its focus from vulnerable/at-risk children to regular adults (Masten, 2001; Taormina, 2015), mostly grounded in psychology. Organizational and community resilience mostly took interests in organizational ecology, disaster/crisis responses, new communication technologies, and organizational change (Aldunce, Beilin, Handmer, & Howden, 2014; Chewing et al., 2012; Coutu, 2002; Houston, 2015).

Among extant studies, most followed the positivist paradigm and assessed individuals' and organizations' resilience (see Taormina, 2015) with imposed measures. However, organizational communication scholars (Buzzanell, 2010; Buzzanell, Shenoy, Remke, & Lucas, 2009) recently called for an interpretive/discursive turn: to understand how communication is constituted in and constitutive of resilience among individuals embedded in collectives. Buzzanell (2010) urged communication scholars to bring their disciplinary advantage to the resilience research by adopting a process-oriented approach and by attending to contexts.

Through a preliminary analysis, Buzzanell (2010) found five discursive processes that individuals constructed resilience: *crafting normalcy, foregrounding productive actions while backgrounding negative feelings, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, and putting alternative logics to work*. This shift from state-oriented measures of resilience to process-oriented meaning making on multiple levels, revealed individuals' internal agency and discursive resources following adversities.

Echoing Buzzanell (2010), Simenson (2013) emphasized the relational and dialogical aspects of resilience construction. He argued resilience is dynamic and complex, negotiated and contested during interactions. Similarly, a few studies grounded individual attributes in their relational and environmental contexts. For example, Greene, Galambos, and Lee (2004) found at-risk individuals gained more resilience when deepening their interactions with social workers and attachment to their community. Coutu (2002), by contrast, suggested most resilient employees tended to leave current workplace in their ceaseless search for better opportunities. Yet Doerfel, Chewning, and Lai (2013) founded organizations tended to enjoy successful post-disaster recovery if their leaders exhibited resilience, returned, and stuck with their organizations during rebuilding. These inconsistent views on the interactions between individuals and their environments/organizations needed to be further explored. Critical scholars contributed to the discussion by questioning assumptions surrounding the resilience concept.

Richardson (2002) noted the third stage of resilience research embraced an interpretive-critical turn. For example, Hutcheon and Lashewicz (2014) criticized the positivist and ableist conceptualizations of resilience. They urged scholars to unbound and expand the term by privileging respondents' voice. Russell (2015) noted the lack of resilience studies among the elites, indicating a reluctance to admit, let alone embrace adversities within this population. He also advocated contextually bound views of resilience and asked – *whose view counts when it comes to resilience*? These questions and calls drive the current study, theoretically and methodologically. Also, this study indirectly addresses Ulmer's (2012) call to explore how crisis communicators can respond to failure productively. Importantly, exploring resilience in the public relations context may help connect existing research in the public relations scholarship, including activist practitioners, empowerment, and the discourse of renewal, explained below.

2.2. Resilience in public relations: connecting activism, empowerment, and renewal

We consider public relations as an ideal context to study resilience, due to the occupation's power- and pressure-laden nature (Berger, 2005; Berger & Reber, 2006). Also, practitioners as boundary spanners work across organizations and communities (Grunig et al., 2006; Hallahan, 2004); this may contribute to a multi-level analysis of resilience. Finally, several research areas in public