

Mission field workers and resilience: a pilot study

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(research note)

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Abstract

Mission field workers are vital in the life of the Church. However, they represent a group of individuals who must contend with a variety of stressors, some of which may be of high intensity and/or long duration. It is therefore important for sending organisations to select psychologically resilient people while also promoting resilience amongst current field workers. In this pilot study a cohort of 20 resilient former field workers (8 males & 12 females) were interviewed about their experiences. Each participant had been impacted by at least one significant negative occurrence whilst in the field. In light of the participants' professional context five attributes which may have promoted their resilience were investigated. Interestingly, resilience was

demonstrated in light of impaired social supports. Surprisingly, the personality trait of Agreeableness appeared to be an important factor in maintaining resilience. Attitudinally, participants were described as having high levels of hope. Religiosity, not spirituality, promoted resilience. Finally, the participants were goal-driven. These findings not only extend upon the current literature but provide interesting opportunities for further research and important insights for organisational leaders.

Key words

Mission; resilience; social support; personality; hope; religiosity; goals.

Introduction

Evangelism emerges as a direct consequence of the Great Commission (Mat. 28:19) of which the most iconic form is mission work. Ostensibly, mission work occurs under the auspices of a Not-For-Profit entity often referred to as a sending organisation. Such organisations have a considerable duty-of-care to select, equip and support mission workers. More so for the fact that field work is inherently stressful (Carter 1999; Johnson & Penner 1981; O'Donnell, 1992). Yet some field workers are more psychologically resilient than others (Gonçalves, 2014; Selby, et al., 2009; Selby, et al., 2011). To identify context relevant factors which promote high levels of resilience therefore has significant benefits for sending organisations and field workers alike.

While coping “is what people try to do to overcome negative effects” (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2003, p. 36) resilience is often discussed in terms of adapting well to stressors, or “bouncing back” from adversity (Ayed et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, biological, developmental and experiential factors promote resilience alongside behavioural (e.g. exercise), emotional (e.g. positivity) and cognitive (e.g. flexibility & acceptance) factors (Crane et al., 2019; Luthar & Brown 2007; Southwick et al., 2005).

However, other factors are also likely to contribute to resilience. Within the present context social supports (Selby et al., 2009; Southwick et al., 2005; Sippel et al., 2015) and religiosity or spiritual beliefs (Coperland-Linder, 2006; Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Le et al., 2019; Park, 2005; Southwick et al., 2005; Maltby et al., 1999) must be considered. Similarly, personality traits, attitude and goal attainment also have relevance. For example, a number of personality researchers

have linked low levels of Neuroticism to resilience alongside high levels of Extraversion and Conscientiousness and, to a lesser extent, high levels of Agreeableness and Openness to experience (Aben et al, 2002; Campbell-Sills et al., 2004; Fayombo, 2010; Ormel et al., 2004). *Prima facie* a hopeful attitude would also be expected to promote resilience. However mixed results have been found meriting further research (Cheavens et al., 2016; Lloyd & Hastings, 2009). Finally, goal attainment contributes to personal wellbeing and therefore likely promotes resilience (Brunstein 1993; Oishi et al., 2009; Sheldon & Elliot 1999; Sheldon et al., 2004).

The importance of the above five resilience-related attributes were investigated in the current pilot study following engagement with a cohort of resilient returned field-workers.

Method

Twenty adult returned field workers (8 males & 12 females; mean age 55 years) participated in this pilot study. All participants had spent >5 years on the mission field. Participants were from a variety of Protestant Christian denominations and had served with a variety of sending organisations. Each participant took part in one semi-structured interview and completed the NEO-PI-R as a measure of personality and the Snyder Trait Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991).

Results

Initially it was important to determine if this cohort of 20 participants was resilient. Between them, the 20 participants recalled 32 significant negative experiences whilst in the field. As such, a number of participants had been impacted by more than one significant negative experience. Of the 32 significant negative experiences reported nine were reported as high intensity, three as medium intensity and 20 as low intensity. Notably, the median duration of all significant negative experiences was 3 years. Yet in spite of ongoing hardship all participants persisted in their work. Moreover, 17 participants rated their mission experience either positively or very positively. Considering these facts holistically the researchers rated this cohort to be resilient.

In spite of resilience social support was impaired for this cohort. Five participants did not have the support of family and/or friends to undertake mission work. When in the

field 24 of the 32 significant negative experiences reported related to inter-personal conflict which often persisted for months or years without resolution. In addition, only 11 participants noted the adequacy of their sending organisation's support in helping them to resolve interpersonal conflict.

According to past findings this resilient cohort should have demonstrated low levels of Neuroticism and high levels of Conscientiousness and Extraversion (Aben et al, 2002; Campbell-Sills et al., 2004; Fayombo, 2010; Ormel et al., 2004). Yet, only four participants demonstrated low or very low scores for Neuroticism while eight participants scored high or very high. As for Extraversion, 10 participants scored very low or low and only one scored in the high to very high range. In addition, nine individuals scored very low or low for Conscientiousness while only two scored either high or very high. With respect to the trait of Openness to experience seven participants demonstrated very low or low scores while six demonstrated high or very high scores. Finally, Agreeableness had no participant score either very low or low, but 15 participants scored high or very high.

Using the Snyder Trait Hope Scale the mean agency score from the 20 participants was 81% and the mean pathway score was 75%. This indicated that the cohort was comprised of "high hope" individuals.

In the context of the present study it was important to establish if participants' faith promoted their resilience. Of the 20 participants only 10 explicitly noted their mission work as a direct calling from God. Nevertheless, all participants undertook regular personal religious practices as well as worked either within a Christian context or held a Christian worldview within their community.

Finally, of the 19 participants who discussed professional and personal goal attainment 12 achieved all goals set. Of the remaining seven participants three suggested that all professional goals had been achieved but that some personal goals had not.

Discussion

Mission field workers represent a unique group when studying resilience given their medium- to long-term immersion in a foreign culture which may not be politically stable, economically affluent, nor welcoming of religious plurality.

Research Notes

Having established that this cohort was psychologically resilient the researchers investigated five context-relevant attributes thought to promote resilience. They were: (1) social support; (2) personality; (3) hope; (4) religiosity/spirituality; and (5) goal attainment.

For this cohort social supports were not optimal. A quarter of all participants did not have the support of family and/or friends to undertake mission work. Three quarters of all significant negative experiences in the field pertained to persistent inter-personal conflict, while more than half of the participants also felt unsupported by their sending organisation when it came to conflict resolution. That resilience was maintained in spite of limited social supports does not negate their importance but does suggest the presence of other compensatory factors.

Although personality traits are considered stable over time we must allow for the possibility that significant negative experiences, endured for months or years, may alter personality. In particular, persistent stress may reasonably increase Neuroticism which likely explains the greater than expected number of participants demonstrating high or very high levels of this trait. What is interesting amongst the findings related to personality is that: (1) only one participant demonstrated high levels of Extraversion which contradicts past findings; (2) only six participants demonstrated high, or very high, levels of Openness to experience in spite of the supposition that this trait would facilitate cross-cultural work; (3) 15 participants scored high or very high in Agreeableness; and (4) nine individuals scored low or very low for Conscientiousness in spite of high levels of goal achievement. To explain the findings for Conscientiousness we must remember that this trait has six facets within the NEO-PI-R of which only one is named Achievement Striving. Yet amongst the findings for personality it is the high level of Agreeableness which stands-out. We speculate that this personality trait is especially important for resilience when social supports are limited, “escape” is not a viable strategy and group cohesion is necessary for goal attainment.

In brief, the current study brings attitude to the fore as opposed to emotion. This is a unique contribution. The authors note that in spite of hardship the cohort was both resilient and had high levels of hope, albeit measured after their return to Australia. This represents a fertile area for future research.

Surprisingly, only 10 participants had an explicit calling to mission work. That 50% did not, and yet the entire cohort was resilient, is a fascinating finding. In explaining this it is useful to note that Coperland-Linder (2006) linked religiosity and resilience which is in accordance with the fact that all participants undertook regular religious practices.

Finally, while 79% of participants achieved all professional goals set it is also worth noting that 63% achieved all professional *and* all personal goals. Not only can we conclude that this cohort was goal-driven but we may reasonably speculate as to whether goal attainment mitigated the worst effects of on-going hardship and therefore contributed to resilience. Again, this is a matter requiring further investigation.

In conclusion, the current pilot study extended upon past findings pertaining to psychological resilience but did so in a context-appropriate way. Although much remains for other researchers it is hoped that the current findings will be of direct benefit to field workers and the organisations who send them abroad to fulfil Christ's Great Commission.

Acknowledgements

Mr Michael Walker for editorial assistance.

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