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

Sylvia Jiankun Guo*, Lindsey B. Anderson

*University of Maryland, Department of Communication, 2130 Skinner Building, 4300 Chapel Lane, College Park, MD 20742, United States*

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ABSTRACT

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 &

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* sguo09@umd.edu (S.J. Guo), lbander@umd.edu (L.B. Anderson).

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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

relations have implicitly touched on the idea of resilience: empowerment (Grunig et al., 2006), activist practitioners (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2002), as well as the discourse of renewal and restorative rhetoric (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010; Seeger and Griffin Padgett, 2010; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005; Ulmer, 2012; Ulmer et al., 2007). Below, we further explain the importance of researching practitioner resilience, and how resilience may connect the abovementioned research foci.

Practitioner resilience has not been explicitly addressed in the public relations literature, but it may be crucial considering the nature of public relations work, and the micro-, meso-, and macro-effect of public relations. Practitioners are in charge with task- and relationship-oriented responsibilities (Grunig et al., 2006); they seek to align interests of various stakeholders, which are not necessarily compatible (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Resolving conflicts and crises may trigger intense emotions among practitioners (Jin & Cameron, 2007). Also, social media have increasingly blurred work and life (Bridgen, 2011), posing more work-life balance challenges (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008). Since practitioners play the role of boundary spanners who scan organizations' environment and assist in the mutual adaptation of organizations and environment, their behaviors may affect organizational effectiveness and community growth in addition to their career success (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Hallahan, 2004; Heath, 2006). Therefore, they are an ideal group to study the connections of individual, organizational, and community-level resilience following perceived adversities.

Additionally, practitioners face ethical challenges (Bowen, 2004; Fawkes, 2007); they may experience divided loyalties when navigating conflicting interests between top management and publics. Practitioners have frequently reported ethical challenges at work (Kang, 2010; Parsons, 2016), ethical role ambiguities and lack of upper influence strategies (Bowen, 2008; Place, 2010), which triggered work-related frustrations and dissatisfaction (Kang, 2010). While scholars continued to debate over practitioners' ethical roles (Fawkes, 2012), rarely addressed are the realities of public relations workplaces, adversities that stem from ethical dilemmas, and resilience strategies employed by practitioners to move beyond setbacks.

Specifically, Berger and Reber (2006) revealed the political and power-laden nature of organizations. Using resistance and dissent, some practitioners pushed organizations to be more ethical. Scholars interested in power (Berger, 2005; Reber & Berger, 2006) and postmodernism (Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) further profiled the *activist practitioner*, who proactively challenged managerial practices and stood up for the publics, especially the marginalized. These activist practitioners seemed particularly resilient, by showing courage and coping with career risks. They were theorized to contribute to organizational resilience by reducing the possibility of crises caused by unethical conduct (Berger & Reber, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). However, activist practitioners are few and far between in real workplace (Bowen, 2008; Place, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate (1) how activist practitioners use resilience strategies and (2) the connections between activist practitioner resilience and organizational-level resilience.

In contrast, Grunig et al. (2006) believed public relations needed to be empowered to be excellent. The scholars (Grunig et al., 2006) equated power with empowerment, to be gained when the public relations executives have a seat in the dominant coalition, and participate in strategic decision-making. However, they did not discuss how this should happen: Whose responsibility is it to empower public relations? What does the process of empowerment entail? Within the resilience literature, Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013) made a crucial distinction between resilience and empowerment, with the former focused on internal adaptations (within an individual, unit, organization, community, etc.) and the latter aimed at outward transformation. They further argued resilience must precede empowerment; otherwise, efforts of seeking systemic change could backlash, especially with intransigent power differentials. Based on their analysis, perhaps public relations empowerment can only happen when practitioners foster individual and unit resilience. With enhanced resilience, practitioners may take more risks, push back organizations' ethical boundaries, and enhance the reputation of the profession within the organization and in society at large.

Finally, the theory of discourse of renewal (DR) has been developed in crisis communication (Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer, 2012) on an organizational level. DR focuses on the silver lining of crises, characterized by themes of being spontaneous, ethical, optimistic, and forward-looking, and of learning and adaptation. Not only do similarities exist between renewal and resilience, as both emphasize reintegration and adaptation, DR also stresses the discursive processes of moving beyond setbacks. However, DR has not been applied on an individual level or to non-crisis contexts. A few public relations and organizational communication scholars (Jin & Cameron, 2007; Waldron, 2012), however, called for more attention to everyday practices and associated conflicts and micro-crises. Therefore, DR may be productively applied to non-crisis public relations on micro-/meso-levels. Having reviewed these bodies of literature, and rationale for exploring practitioner resilience in public relations, we propose two research questions:

**RQ1.** What are the perceived workplace adversities, if any, from a public relations practitioners' perspective?

**RQ2.** How, if at all, do public relations practitioners enact workplace resilience?

Following an interpretive/constructivist paradigm (Buzzanell, 2010; Simenson, 2013) and addressing critical concerns (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014; Russell, 2015), we utilize a qualitative methodology, to be explained below.

## 3. Method

This study is exploratory (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) since resilience has not been formally studied in the public relations scholarship. To address our research questions, we used a critical incident technique (CIT) approach to collect data of adversities perceived by public relations practitioners and their responses that facilitated resilience (Flanagan, 1954; see also Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). We focused on adversities perceived as significant by participants, and explored how they enacted resilience in response to perceived adversities. This is aligned with the general approach to CIT (Butterfield et al., 2005).

### 3.1. Data collection

We reached out to public relations practitioners through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, via our network of practitioners, on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter), and via the online survey tool Qualtrics. In all 19 public relations practitioners participated in our study.

Through a survey via Qualtrics and other online platforms, our participants were asked to recall adverse situation(s) they faced in their jobs and recount how they resolved the situation. Specifically, they needed to respond to two writing prompts: *(1) "Please tell us about a time when you faced adversity in your job (as a public relations/communication practitioner). Please elaborate on one or several situation(s)/event(s)/incident(s) that you would interpret as an adversity (adversities) that confronted you in your workplace, with details and/or examples."* This prompt was designed to gather incidents that participants considered as challenging. *(2) "Please describe, in detail, the ways in which you handled the adverse situation. Please offer explanations as to how you felt about the situation(s), who you have interacted with, and how you have thought about and reached your own resolutions, as well as your reflections, if applicable."* This prompt was designed to collect data of communicative strategies, relational negotiations, and meaning making employed by participants to reintegrate from the perceived adversities. We distributed these questions to public relations practitioners during the summer of 2015. Together, participants offered detailed, retrospective, written data that revealed important insights into their perceived workplace adversities and subsequent resilience enactment.

### 3.2. Data analysis

After collecting the practitioner-generated responses, we analyzed data individually and collaboratively using an iterative process of data analysis–going back and forth between the data and literature (Tracy, 2013). We used a thematic approach, moving from a broad reading of data, which led to uncovering patterns and developed themes (Boyatzis, 1998). We completed coding when patterns started to emerge after 19 unique responses. The 19 responses were detailed, offering both depth and nuance that we needed. Reporting at this stage would help us reorient our ongoing research in practitioner resilience, and encourage other scholars to join in our efforts in this rarely discussed topic.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Public relations practitioners face multiple levels of adversities (RQ1)

For RQ1, we found adversities perceived by participants ranged from mundane to life-altering events. We categorized them on individual, PR function, and organizational levels.

#### 4.1.1. Individual level

On an individual level, practitioners struggled with time pressure, difficult supervisors, unappreciative C-Suite/clients, and more significantly, ethical clashes with colleagues and/or the C-suite, being laid off or unfairly accused, and being forced into unwise tasks. The workplace seemed to be full of power struggles, bruised egos, and emotional triggers.

While many participants reported time pressure, a few struggled with ethical conflicts, and unfair accusations. One participant reported, "… The biggest adversity is that PR professionals like to inflate results to impress clients or bosses. And that is neither productive nor ethical." Another wrote, "I have, more than one time, faced ethical adversity when a client's behavior conflicted strongly with my personal and professional sense of ethics." Among the few who complained about being laid off, one participant wrote about being let go unfairly after a highly visible organizational crisis, he[1] said,

> We erred badly in our judgment and I took the fall… My supervisors…were more than quick to point the finger and assumed no part in the unfortunate incident – even though it was their pressure that created the conditions that resulted in the errors… I lost my job; my 25+ otherwise stellar career was trashed…

His words demonstrated the high stakes and potential adversities associated with public relations; workplace finger-pointing seemed to add salt to the wounds when it came to practice.

#### 4.1.2. PR function level

On the PR function level, adversities usually had to do with the management's misunderstanding and marginalization of public relation, which led to outsourcing during hard economic times and/or encroachment from lateral functions such as marketing. For example, one participant confided: "When our company began to suffer financially during prolonged recession, the knee-jerk reaction of management was to consider outsourcing the PR function. This remains a possibility." Another related to particular challenges in the corporate world, 'management also fails to consult with its own PR people… due to its lack of knowledge about the PR profession as a whole; management tends to hire inexperienced personnel to perform what they believe is PR and slot them into the marketing department…'

Another source of adversity stemmed from inner-unit conflicts or unrealistic expectations for public relations. For example, one

[1] We did not collect information about gender and alternated genders in reporting for illustration's purpose.

participant recounted conflicts between previously separate PR functions when her firm was acquired. She summarized, "although I'd been the PR Director of firm A[2]… I wasn't privy to the work behind the scenes as the deal was being negotiated and signed. Adversity: no one's bothered to ask for my opinion on how to play this huge news story…" Her words revealed hurt feelings of being neglected, but more importantly, possible conflicts between the public relations units. Another participant, a COO, wrote about his frustrations when suddenly asked to run a new business for his company. The supposedly "minor detail" – as told by the upper management – turned out to be PR and corporate communication for an entirely different field. He said, "I thought it was to be a small part of my senior management portfolio. I could not have been more wrong." His words illustrated the reality of the PR function taking on additional tasks at the drop of a hat, as well as upper management's unrealistic expectations of PR handling all things.

#### *4.1.3. Organizational level*

On the organizational level, adversities usually involved major changes or crises. For example, an acquisition necessitated re-branding, sub-culture transferring, and policy adjustment; organizational wrongdoings and poor ethics led to blaming and shaming, and practitioner sometimes bore the brunt of consequences. Participants expressed uncertainty and anxieties toward internal issues accompanying these non-routine events, for example, the participant whose firm was acquired mentioned a bigger challenge of policy and cultural conflicts between the firms that heavily impacted her practice. Briefly, it was her customary practice to include value items in press releases due to the nature of her firm (A), but this practice was vehemently questioned by her PR colleagues at firm B, who were exceptionally sensitive to financial information due to FTC regulations and the nature of the firm (B). Our participant mentioned how she felt after seeing her news release being killed with legal support. She said, "I'm not sure if it was an OMG or a WTF moment for me… Although we hadn't completely worked out the new press release edit/approval process between the subsidiary and the parent company, I wasn't appreciative of them killing my release."

Another participant, who headed a PR consultancy, seemed to be both embarrassed by and furious about a significant internal embezzlement scandal, which "while endangering the firm's financial viability, was actually all the more serious as a culmination of a larger internal revolt that involved key administrative staff and senior client managers." Our participant admitted that he "had seriously underestimated the potential for Balkanization and it would take [them] another two years to recover." His words reflected deep concerns about the disruption.

Interestingly, we did not hear about adversities on a community or societal level that would involve external publics. We will discuss possible reasons in the discussion section. In addition, though various adversities exist on individual, function, and organizational levels, at least some overlapped around misconceptions of public relations and its multifaceted nature. Whether it was individuals encountering ethical dilemmas, or functions being outsourced during financial distress, or organizations experiencing cultural adaptations, a lack of valuing public relations' strategic management function, ethical imperatives and bounds of practices caused perceived adversities.

### *4.2. PR practitioners communicatively construct and enact workplace resilience (RQ2)*

For RQ2, we uncovered four patterns in which practitioners responded to adversities and enacted resilience. These were: (1) disengage and bounce forward, (2) persevere and bounce up, (3) risk and bounce back, and (4) struggle and bounce around. We used the word "bounce" to metaphorically describe the different strategies and levels of resilience, so as to extend the traditional conceptualization, "bouncing back." Also, we found resilience to be an iterative process, with an emotional and behavioral dimension.

#### *4.2.1. Disengage and bounce forward*

On an individual level, quite a few participants chose to "disengage and bounce forward." Participants in this category quit their jobs, "fired" their unethical clients, or switched between sectors. In one participant's words, "each time you pick yourself up and move forward. Looking for new opportunities and remaking yourself at the same time." She reported feeling good by finding a not-for-profit home after being laid off from a private for-profit company. Another practitioner echoed this sentiment as he wrote, "I was shocked, but then I got over it and found a new job." More notable were participants who unhesitatingly prioritized personal ethics over business deals. For example, one participant recounted a story where his client – CEO of a large company – shamed his executive team in front of the participant. He recalled seeing 'their faces redden with shame and anger' and was taken aback. Later, he pulled the CEO aside and said, "Tim,[3] I'm sorry, but I can no longer consult to your company because how you treat your employees is completely in conflict with my own values and ethics."' He added, "I have resigned other accounts under differing circumstances, with the common adverse issue being the client's lack of ethics."

Overall, these participants showed emotional resilience, career flexibility and commitment to one's personal ethics through their accounts. However, this individual-level resilience may not contribute to organizations' and/or clients' effectiveness and resilience if questionable ethics and practices are not dealt with.

#### *4.2.2. Persevere and bounce up*

Across levels, some participants enacted resilience by "persevering and bouncing up." Individually, persevering participants worked harder, leveraged personal resources, learned self-care, and sought to boost team morale and loyalty. They exemplified

[2] We deleted the name/field of the firm to protect participants' identity.

[3] Here pseudonym is used to protect the participant's identity.

positive attitudes, proactive actions, and empathy. The obstacles seemed to catapult them to a higher place, hence "bouncing up." For example, one participant wrote, "My solution was to meet the problem head on. For 6 months, I held an early morning meeting w/our PR/communications staff to deal with any issues that had popped up the previous day." The participant who attributed her most aggravating adversity to her company's acquisition shared her solution to the other PR team's harsh criticism. She said, "I took a few minutes to gather my thoughts. I consulted with my new manager and crafted an email response to the PR teammate [at firm B] to cc my legal dept. and senior managers here in firm A." Then, the participant called her [firm B] teammate and explained that including value in the press releases was not only standard practice in her industry but also the most newsworthy. She added, "Before I sent her the email, I attempted to sway her perspective, to relieve her worries about the feds taking us all to jail…" With empathy and strategic maneuvering, not only did she get email confirmation from her onsite boss and legal, she got a note from her PR colleagues who "had reconsidered and appreciated the enlightenment" and from legal at firm B thanking her for her thoughtful interaction. With enhanced understanding, the participant reported "we then began a beneficial and productive working relationship wherein I kept the parent company in the loop on our bigger media plays, but didn't seek approval of press materials prior to publication, making my work/life much easier!" It seemed she not only bounced back, but higher, with trust and respect from colleagues and upper managers. She has indeed, bounced up, with pride and satisfaction.

On a PR function level, we saw practitioners working cohesively to promote public relations. One participant wrote, "As a team, we have made extra effort to point out our worth, rather than just demonstrating it by the work that we do. We are doing PR for ourselves, in addition to working for others." Other participants aimed for "one outstanding PR victory – achieved quickly" to "win over management and provide smooth sailing for the remainder of your tenure in that job." One participant's public relations team meticulously tracked impact to "let results and data speak." Additionally, some sought to educate the clients/top management. For example, one participant wrote, "My experience in the corporate environment was to make every attempt to educate my superiors about my profession."

On an organizational level, participants taking leadership roles sought to emotionally bond with loyal followers amidst organizational turmoil. The CEO of the PR agency, mentioned earlier, confided his strategies during the internal tumult. He said,

> The solution on my end was to identify, and maintain faith in, those people who had remained steadfast; who were palpably still committed to the vision with which we had launched our business. It was essential to communicate to them the degree to which I trusted in their loyalty, and that my own ongoing loyalty to them would be reciprocated.

Overall, across levels and among various accounts, we noticed "guarded collaborations" between participants and various groups (e.g., other PR personnel, the C-Suite/higher management, subordinates, clients). Practitioners seemed to perceive at least some hospitality in the workplace and worked with adversities stemming from lack of respect, and/or internal tumult. Therefore, different from the first category, here we expect individual/functional level resilience translate to organizational resilience, as suggested by literature (Doerfel et al., 2013).

#### *4.2.3. Risk and bounce back*

The third category "risk and bounce back" characterizes the "activist practitioners" that scholars have theorized in literature (see, Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Though very rare, one participant took a stand when noticing the manufacturing plant bought by his client was knowingly polluting the ground water and that "corporate middle management was involved but seemed paralyzed." He shared this story,

I decided that I had to bring this situation to the attention of the President of the division. I told my boss and got his approval. Then I went up the management chain to make sure no one was blindsided. I wasn't sure what would happen. I knew I would resign if they didn't fix the problem, but I wasn't sure I was brave enough to blow the whistle and destroy my career, I met with no objectives from higher levels of management. When I finally told the president what was going on, he immediately dispatched a team of people to ensure the problem would be fixed and that no one was drinking from that ground water. Never prouder of a company in my life.

The account showed the participant endured fear when confronting the unethical matter, but regained pride and confidence once the issue was resolved. His emotional upheaval echoed the process of bouncing back as an *internal* shift (Russell, 2015). This critical adversity also showed complex relational negotiations in the process of resilience. Notably, our participant demonstrated political acumen in reporting the issue. He followed the organizational hierarchy and addressed the power structure cautiously. Every time he got approval, he went one level higher and was closer in fixing the issue. Here, we expect individual level resilience to translate to organizational resilience as long as the activist behavior was taken seriously, as suggested by both our participant and the activist practitioner literature (e.g., Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002).

#### *4.2.4. Struggle and bounce around*

Finally, we found several participants struggling with past or ongoing adversities, hence, "struggle and bounce around." Their accounts suggested continued sensemaking of the PR occupation, its certain practices or status in the organization. As they reconstructed meaning for the perceived adversities, they seemed to experience at least some disillusionment, anger, and helplessness. For example, one participant lamented at fellow practitioners' inflating data; he wrote, "I don't like poor ethics – it makes me sad. And I feel like I cause trouble when I deliver actual data and someone else has already given inflated results." Another was at his wit's end with management's lack of understanding, and wrote, "The biggest challenge facing new or experienced PR professionals in the corporate environment is trying to educate management about the 'science' of public relations, its benefits and potential. Unfortunately, very few MBA programs devote proper attention to public relations."

More disturbing instances had to do with organizational crises. The practitioner who earlier reported being the scapegoat of an

organizational crisis wrote, "It was not until months later that I learned how and why things had unfolded in the manner that they did–but the scars from being thrown under the bus were and remain deep." Whether or not he has reached a truthful understanding of the situation, his words reflected long-term internal struggle and deep emotional wounds, despite having started and succeeded at his consultancy only months after his resignation. In this sense, he has shown resilience behaviorally but not emotionally (Russell, 2015). Similarly, the CEO of the PR firm who previously reported appealing to internal loyalty shared continued concerns that led him to question his leadership. He wrote,

> At the same time, some real soul-searching of my own was needed: how, and to what extent, had I encouraged the disloyalty of those who participated in the revolt? Were there patterns in my own behavior that encouraged those others to lose confidence in me and break faith with our mission? … I don't know how to fix this, but I do know that I will need to conduct some searching discussions with other seniors and rank-and-file to enlist them in an effort to transform perceptions firm wide.

Both accounts illustrated the *iterative* process of resilience: whereas they adapted behaviorally after perceived adversity, their deep and continued reflections necessitated additional emotional or behavioral reintegration. In short, participants in this category have yet enacted complete resilience. Some struggled over certain aspects of public relations (e.g., unethical conduct, management's misunderstanding), while others have recovered behaviorally but not emotionally when deep reflections revealed new elements of the perceived adversity.

In summary, the four categories showed various ways participants responded to perceived adversity, and thereby enacting varying levels and patterns of resilience. Some reintegrated while others partially and/or iteratively. The discussion section will further delve into the variances of these enactment patterns.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative study explored the nature of workplace adversities perceived by public relations practitioners, and how practitioners enacted post-adversity resilience. This study not only contributes to the public relations scholarship by offering a first glimpse of practitioner resilience, but also extends the resilience research through an interpretive lens while attending to the connections among multi-level resilience.

Using a critical incident technique (CIT) approach, we asked current public relations practitioners about their workplace adversities and how they responded to the hardship, via written reports. Results showed adversities ranged from mundane annoyances such as unappreciative management, to identity-threating challenges such as ethical conflicts, and to distressing career-altering events when embroiled in an organizational crisis. Some adversities were unique to public relations, for example, marginalization, misunderstanding by the C-Suite, and managing cultural shifts during organizational changes. These adversities emphasized the importance to pursue context-specific resilience research (Buzzanell, 2010; Simenson, 2013). Also, from a public relations perspective, these workplace adversities deserve serious attention. Practitioners must learn to maneuver workplace challenges and rise above adversities, otherwise knowledge and skills may be irrelevant, however advanced or scientific they are.

For the second research question, we found four paths to resilience: disengage and bounce forward, persevere and bounce up, risk and bounce back, and finally, struggle and bounce around. These patterns corresponded with critical scholars' (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014; Russell, 2015) arguments that (1) resilience can manifest differently, not necessarily as regaining pre-adversity capacity, and (2) resilience has both behavioral and emotional dimensions (Russell, 2015); some participants in our study have recovered ostensibly, but they continued to struggle emotionally. Additionally, we found resilience can be an iterative process in which participants engaged in continual sensemaking that revealed new elements of the adversity to reintegrate from. This study also reinforces the need to study the elites (Russell, 2015) and groups not commonly considered as at-risk (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014). Though public relations practitioners are not all elites, they usually hold a college degree or higher, and some perform leadership roles. Also, some are *at risk* of being laid off during financial hardships. In our study, many participants attributed adversities to unappreciative or ethically problematic management/clients; they usually moved onto better and ethical clients/employers thereby exhibiting high resilience. By comparison, some conducted extended "soul-searching" leading to emotional or behavioral stalemate, or self-questioning or disillusionment of certain aspects of the public relations profession. This paradoxical relationship between external attribution and internal reflection deserves more scholarly attention. Ulmer (2012) called for examining how crisis communicators process failures; this study suggests productively processing failure might involve a healthy balance between external and internal attribution. It echoes the view that resilience may be neutral, not necessarily carrying positive connotations (Coutu, 2002).

The differences among the four paths to resilience seem to lie in individual attributes, perceived workplace environment, and sensemaking patterns (see Table 1). Participants in the "bounce forward" category tended to embody emotional strength, career flexibility, commitment to personal ethics, and importantly, an ability to craft a plausible and positive story to their career adversities. This echoed Buzzanell's (2010) strategy of "creating alternative logics," yet they decided to move forward due to perceived hostile work environment. Participants in the "bounce up" category embodied perseverance: they persisted by working with the thorny situation. Crucially, they seemed to perceive the workplace environment as reconcilable and they gradually formed guarded collaboration with various other groups. Only one participant embodied activism and enacted the "bounce back" pattern we found. He sought to rectify unethical behaviors, and did so with politically savvy maneuvering, following organizational power structure in a lock-step fashion. His gingerly carried out action led to ultimate success, yet he endured emotional upheaval and was ready to sacrifice his position. His descriptive account showed the importance of documenting activist practitioners in the making, thereby making the concept (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) learnable for other practitioners.

Finally, participants in the "bounce around" category struggled with sensemaking following perceived adversities; they have yet

**Table 1**
Enactment of Resilience among Public Relations Practitioners.

| Resilience Enactment | Personal Attributes | Perceived Workplace Environment | Sensemaking Capacities and Tendencies | Selected Quotes (Full Quotes in Results) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Bounce forward** Quit jobs, "fired" unethical clients, switched between sectors (complete resilience) | Emotional strength, commitment to personal ethical standards, career flexibility | Questionable, un-workable, hostile | Fast; one-time; complet Crafted a plausible and positive story to career setbacks (external attribution) | "you pick yourself up and move forward…" "resigned…with the common adverse issue being the client's lack of ethics." |
| **Bounce up** Stayed and worked harder, leveraged personal resources, used self-care, tried to boost team morale/loyalty | Positive attitudes, perseverance and tenacity, proactive actions, empathy | Workable, somewhat hospitable (results: guarded collaboration with colleagues/C-Suite/other PR team) | Fast, one-time; complete Talked themselves to presevere, conquer and control the situation | "My solution was to meet the problem head on…" "As a team, we have made extra effort to point out our worth…" |
| **Bounce back** Rectified internal (unethical) problem/situation while enduring emotional upheaval | Political acumen; cautious, emotional regulation (followed org hierarchy in reporting; addressed power structure strategically) | Workable (yet ready to resign if career is at risk) | Medium-speed; back-and-forth; complete Thought through possible consequences before reporting the issue | "I decided that I had to bring this situation to the attention of the President… I knew I would resign if they didn't fix the problem…" |
| **Bounce around** Exhibited disillusionment, anger, helplessness (e.g., with fellow PR pros' lack of ethics); continued to question PR practice/leadership | Varying levels of behavioral resilience (some changed situation while others merely lamented at reality); emotional struggles/scars | A general sense of disappointment; workable (yet unable to find solutions or simply continued practice without improving the situations) | Slow, iterative, back-and-forth, not-yet-complete, continued sensemaking and deep reflections of self-involvement in/contribution to the adversities | "I don't like poor ethics - it makes me sad…" "the scars from being thrown under the bus were and remain deep.." "some real soul-searching of my own was needed.." |

enacted complete resilience, particularly with the emotional dimension. Also, these participants were paradoxically, more reflexive of the public relations occupation, issues, and/or leadership. Deeper, continued reflections – particularly of their own involvement in/contribution to the adversities – seemed to hinder their construction of a coherent story that could provide clarify and direction. Therefore, it is important to instill in practitioners ongoing faith and confidence in the value of public relations, especially when external validation is lacking. Equally important, practitioners need to balance internal and external attributions and gain learned optimism (Seligman, 2011). Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the four categories of participants in line with the resilience enactment patterns.

## 6. Contribution

Several contributions stem from this research project. First, the findings extend Buzzanell's (2010) theorizing of communicatively constructed resilience, with more nuances emerging in each of her five strategies. Practitioners did not intentionally craft normalcy; many actually emphasized the disruptive nature of adversity, which triggered sensemaking and resilience strategies. Some went back to normal with a new career, but others learned to accept workplace turbulence, whether or not they perceived it as normal. Secondly, most participants focused on *productive actions while setting aside negative emotions*, following a perceived adversity. However, leaving previous workplace may not contribute to organizational resilience, and reintegrating emotionally should be a core component of true resilience (Russell, 2015). Thirdly, *identity anchors* needed further explanation, because one's professional identity can be attached to a certain workplace and/or occupation. Resilient practitioners who moved on did not attach their identity to any workplace; participants who stayed and worked harder showed commitment to both public relations and their employers. However, anchoring identities to employer and the public relations profession could trigger doubts, helplessness, and even resentment for those struggling to make sense of the adversity. Fourth, participants rarely mentioned *communication networks* as a path to resilience; only one reported seeking insights from fellow practitioners outside the company. One participant, on the other hand, considered internal conflict between PR teams as a source of adversity. Future research may explicitly probe participants' social/professional support systems in fostering resilience, as well as characteristics of people to be included in their networks. Finally, *building alternative logics*, especially a positive one, seemed to help participants gain resilience. With that said, when practitioners attributed problems externally, they tended to move onto a different job without deeper reflection. This tendency may discourage professional growth and long-term resilience.

This study also contributes to the resilience scholarship by exploring the connections between individual and organizational resilience. Based on participant's account and extant literature on activist public relations practitioners (see Holtzhausen, 2000), we argue the "risk and bounce back" practitioner would most likely contribute to organizational resilience, because he took the risk to confront unethical organizational conduct, thereby reducing the chances of organizational crisis. However, the premise is that activist practitioners succeed with political acumen, emotional management skills, and discursive strategies, like our participant. Unfortunately, only one participant fit with the category, suggesting a possible disconnection between practice and scholarship (Van Ruler, 2005). More research needs to explore practitioners' lived experience, thereby making scholarly ideals more practical and accessible. By contrast, highly resilient participants would leave dysfunctional or unappreciative workplaces, leaving problems unattended, thereby not contributing to organizational resilience. Other resilient practitioners formed "guarded collaboration" with organizations, and may or may not contribute to long-term organizational resilience depending on their tendencies to either confront problems or get co-opted. Notably, our participants did not report any adversities from external publics or communities. This may suggest adversities primarily stemming from internal sources, underrepresented sample of community-focused practitioners, practitioners' lack of concern for external publics, or their assumption that publics/community do not constitute an integral part of public relations workplace. Any one of the reasons rings alarm to scholars, especially concerning growing attention to public relations' societal impact (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Health, 2006).

From a public relations' perspective, this study contributes to scholarship by connecting several discrete ideas. Firstly, activist practitioners (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) were still rare; participants usually sought more ethical workplace/clients without ruffling feathers, or felt helpless in rectifying the unethical conduct. Secondly, participants did not seem to always have management support, suggesting the impracticality of waiting for external empowerment (Grunig et al., 2006). However, resilient participants who risked or persevered earned the C-Suite's trust and respect, and seemed to change perceptions of public relations, therefore empowering the function. This corresponded with Brodsky and Cattaneo's (2013) transconceptual resilience and empowerment model, which distinguished resilience as being internally oriented and empowerment externally directed, and that internal resilience is the precursor to external empowerment. Finally, our study found resilient practitioners embraced discursive strategies in the discourse of renewal (DR) (Seeger et al., 2005). Regardless of moving on or staying, they were more forward-looking, optimistic, emotionally resilient, and action-biased. Therefore, we argue DR can be productively applied to everyday micro-crises for individual practitioners, thereby further strengthening practice on a micro-level.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the complex, dynamic processes of resilience (Simenson, 2013), and the relational negotiations practitioners engaged in to gain resilience. An interpretive lens uncovered participants' various enactments of resilience in specific contexts (Buzzanell, 2010). We urge scholars to further examine the discursive constructions and embodiment of resilience in other workplaces, occupations, and contexts.

This study does pose limitations. Our sample size is small, but the 19 unique responses were detailed enough to offer us an intimate look at participants' perceived workplace adversities and chosen paths to resilience. Interestingly, Qualtrics showed 68 people had viewed the questions. The low response rate may reflect practitioners' reluctance to share failures, echoing Ulmer (2012) and Russell (2015). Secondly, we did not ask participants' background, due to the project's goal to gather a wide range of perceived

adversities and resilience strategies. However, asking background questions may help us better understand how contextual features contribute to certain sensemaking. Future research can also further explore connections between time and certain resilience strategies as well as the iterative process of resilience. Thirdly, though written reports allowed participants more time to reflect, their answers did not always provide enough contexts. Many participants attributed adversities externally, which could be a defense mechanism instead of fact. Therefore, future research can employ in-depth interviews, so as to identify real issues behind perceived adversities. Finally, we did not ask participants how they would define "resilience." We only asked about how they responded to perceived adversities so as not to prime them, and we identified all emotional, discursive, and behavioral aspects of resilience enactment based on the broad idea of reintegration. To reach a more precise, participant-generated, and interpretive/critical conceptualizations of resilience, future research can explicitly ask participants how they define the word, the extent to which they consider themselves as resilient, and why. Future research can also further explore the emotional/behavioral dimensions of resilience, as well as the interactions among multi-level resilience. Continued effort could help build a typology of public relations resilience as an extension of this exploratory research. Furthermore, our research suggests the potentials to shift the attention to adaptation to hard times from organizations to individual/unit employees, if employee resilience is fostered and commitment to the workplace is heightened. The connections between multiple-level resilience can be further explored, possibly with works from change management and employee engagement research. In summary, multi-level, interpretive/critical, process-oriented, and participants-based research of public relations practitioner resilience is sorely needed.

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