

Rethinking Resilience – Using Field Theory To Offer Us An Alternative Perspective

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Abstract

Does resilience reside in an individual or elsewhere? Field Theory (Lewin 1942) challenges a concept of resilience residing in an individual and instead offers a view where resilience is inextricably interconnected with both the individual and all aspects of the field surrounding them. Using field theory as a lens, cause and effect can only be understood in relation to the field conditions that have led to the manifestation of resilience, or lack of. A person's behaviour can only be understood in terms of their inter-dependence with their environment. When working with resilience, if the forces in a field are identified, including past and current perception, it is possible not only to understand why individuals, groups and organisations act with, or without, resilience, but also what forces would need to be diminished or strengthened in order to facilitate behavioural change. Field theory invites the leader, manager, organisation development practitioner and organisational psychologist into considering resilience in a nonlinear way. The implications for understanding resilience within organisations, groups and individuals are important, given the increasingly changing organisational environment, the drive to motivate, develop and retain people within work, and the increasing realisation of how important wellbeing and good mental healthcare within an organisational context. This article encourages the reader to understand resilience in a non-linear, multi cause and effect fashion, where it does not only reside within an individual, but is, in fact, a manifestation of field conditions surrounding that individual.

Background

Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) was the forefather of Field theory. He was one of the leading psychologists of his generation (Marrow 1969; Tolman 1948). His work provided the foundations of Organisation Development (OD) and is still considered by many as central to it (Boje et al. 2011; Burnes 2004, 2007; Burnes and Cooke 2012; Cooke 2007; Cummings and Worley 2005).

Lewin developed Field theory over a 25-year period starting in the 1920s (Marrow 1969). Drawing on unified field theory in physics, he argued that the order of coexisting facts in a psychological or social situation can be viewed as a life space (Lewin 1939). Field theory played a central part in all Lewin's work by allowing him and his associates to understand the forces that sustained undesired behaviours, and to identify those forces that would need to be either strengthened or weakened in order to bring about desired behaviours (M. Lewin 1998). His yardstick for relevance was that his approach to change should enable individuals and groups to understand and restructure their perceptions of the world around them (Burnes 2007; Lewin 1942).

Resilience

Resilience has long been seen as the ability to bounce back following adverse events and resume previously known functioning (Lengnick-Hall, Beck and Lengnick-Hall 2011; Richardson 2002). This view of resilience seems to draw on assumptions based upon notions of positively coping, and hardiness when exposed to adverse happenings (Waugh, Fredrickson and Taylor 2008). More recent views have described resilience as a way in which people, groups and organisations have used the situation to adapt, transform and identify opportunities and also to prepare for future adverse conditions (Lee, Vargo and Seville 2013; Lengnick-Hall, Beck, and Lengnick-Hall 2011). Kuntz et al (2016: 2017 p224) refer to a definition of resilience that is 'the behavioural capability to leverage work resources in order to ensure continual adaptation, well-being, and growth at work, supported by the organisation'. Buzzanell (2010) further emphasises that resilience can be developed rather than residing in an individual who either possesses it or not. Resilience can have a direct impact on wellbeing, mental health, happiness and consequently people's performance within an organisation. It is therefore a key organisational consideration.

Field theory (Lewin 1947) sees resilience as the ability to identify and recognise aspects of self and the surrounding field (context), which together result in an amount and type of resilience, and then to be choiceful over subsequent actions and behaviours. Resilience can be viewed as a result of what meanings are paid attention to in a current situation, how someone chooses to make contact or engage with the situation, and what lies in or out of awareness (Joyce and Sills 2002). Taking these constructs around resilience allows us a wider, more holistic way of considering any interventions to increase resilience, albeit a considerably more complicated one. The aim of this article in applying field theory to resilience, is to encourage leaders, managers, organisation development practitioners and organisational psychologists to move away from engaging with resilience using dichotomous cause and effect assumptions and interventions, towards viewing and engaging with resilience as a multi-causal, non-static phenomena. This differs from other more formulaic, binary or model-led approaches that are so prevalent today in the understanding of organisational functioning.

A constellation of influences on resilience

Field theory gives us a holistic way of understanding the constellation of forces that shape thinking, feeling and behaviour, including resilience. The term *field* is an informing metaphor to capture all the complex interrelated influences that affect individuals, groups and

organisations (Chidiac 2018). Seeing non dichotomously is a first and necessary step to gain understanding (Lewin 1947), that instead of examining resilience in an either/or and cause/effect way, we consider that any situation is a result of intertwining multi-impacting factors and influences. A Field theory lens would challenge any attempt to understand resilience as solely residing within an individual. Instead, there are three areas which form the field (Lewin 1942; Burnes 2019; Clarkson and MacKewn 1994). When questions regarding resilience are asked in relation to the individual alone, we see only part of the picture. Instead, the exploration needs to provide a fuller understanding by firstly exploring dynamics of this person's internal process, how they are experiencing their own resilience. Secondly, the field conditions for them in this situation, what are the influences from the surrounding field or environment. Thirdly, the interaction between their internal process and the external context or field. These three forces result in an equilibrium that results in a level and type of resilience. There is a reciprocal influence relationship between the whole and the parts (Stevenson 2018). An organisational development professional then in exploring resilience with a person, may consider all the possible influences on a situation in the field, how that person is processing this and reacting and then explore how they are relating to these external influences and their resulting resilience.

Lewin saw behaviour as the product of the environment and the way in which individuals interpret external stimuli. Therefore, applying this to a Field theory view of resilience, change in amount and type of resilience can be achieved by change in the individual and/or change in the situation/environment the person exists within. In fact, Lewin argued that it is not sufficient to identify one or two of the forces that impinge on the individual or group. Instead, all the forces, and how they relate to and interact with each other have to be taken into account (Cartwright 1952; Lewin 1939, 1944; Stevenson 2018).

These forces in the field reach a balance or equilibrium, which is dynamic. They are driving and restraining forces. It is from this concept that the model of force field analysis is taken (Burnes and Cooke 2013). In respect of resilience within people and organisations then, the overarching question needs to be, *what are the driving and restraining forces that leads us in this situation to be more or less resilient?* The answer is context dependent. We are dealing with a constantly shifting context/environment, and we need the ability to identify and deal with this, rather than attempt to try and render either ourselves or the situation as unchanging. Consider the latest pandemic as an example and the difference between organisations or individuals that have adapted out of realisation for the field conditions and those who have not. For example, those universities that have successfully moved seminars, tutorials, supervision, library services online and moved to teams/zoom for meetings, compared to those institutions where student teacher interaction was simply suspended for the duration of lockdown, and formal learning opportunities were paused.

A person is never independent or isolated from their field. This has implications for felt *ownership* of resilience. By only examining factors within the individual, there is an implicit assumption that the individual *owns* the resilience, or lack of. Alternatively, if it is explored in the individual as them being 'done to' by factors outside of their control, then this encourages denial that they are a part of it and can lead to a rather disempowered frame of mind.

In truth, a person is always in contact and connected with everything else (Joyce and Sills 2002), although they may not perceive themselves to be or be aware of the connections.

Defining the problem

Problem definition is difficult, as once a problem is named, it can imply a single solution. For example, saying that the problem with the NHS is funding, suggests that more funding will solve all problems. In actuality there is a complexity and uncertainty related to trying to understand problems. It is the same with resilience. Resilient causal factors are multi-faceted and ambiguous. If the forces in a field can be explored and even identified, it would be possible not only to understand why individuals, groups and even entire organisations become non-resilient, but also what forces would need to be diminished or strengthened in order to bring about change (Burnes and Cooke 2013). If personal and situational are not divided, but seen together as an integrated whole, then changes in one part of the field is likely to lead to changes in other parts of the field (Parlett 1997).

The cause-effect thinking, that has pervaded so much of organisational and individual attention, is simply not very effective. Every part of the field impacts on the constellation and therefore no part of the field can be excluded as irrelevant (Lewin 1944). This requires paying attention to what is momentarily or persistently relevant or interesting in the moment, sometimes known as the *here and now*. The past or history is important, however, it is how these past factors manifest themselves in the *present*, that we need to pay attention to (Stevenson 2018; Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman 1951; 1994) and how they impact on our individual and organisational resilience. It is by examining the present here and now experience, where our field awareness is greater and change can be addressed with a closer attention to current needs, rather than historical ones (Nevis 1998, 2001; Stevenson 2018). This allows people and organisations to adapt by much more accurately understanding the conditions around resilience and therefore to consider a wider and more tailored way of intervening for improvements.

Resilience as a dynamic consideration

The field surrounding an individual or organisation is in a continuous state of movement. No two days are ever the exact same. Similarly, resilience, when understood as a capacity to cope with one's place within the field, is not static. The individual forces within the field are themselves subject to change and, as they are constantly interacting with each other, they create a field that is in a continuous state of dynamic equilibrium. As Lewin (1947 p.199) put it: 'Change and constancy are relative concepts; individual and group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist' (Burnes and Cooke 2013).

Aspects of the field emerge in and out of focus as they are perceived to be more or less relevant. How many of us have lost sleep worrying about our work but within a few days it seemingly is less important while a new and different issue emerges? Within this ongoing organising of our field and what we pay attention to, some aspects become *figural* (foreground, in focus) and others *ground* (background, out of focus). Resilience is emergent, dynamic and unfolds into patterns dependent on the environment in which it sits (Poole

2008; Buzzanell 2010). In this sense then, our individual sense making leads to how we react to and interpret events (Parlett 1991). Resilience, or lack of, may often seem out of our control, but our sense making, interpretation and reaction is a choice. People, groups and organisations who are resilient are often able to recognise those elements in the field that might normally be in ground, and consider them as possibly relevant, hence making them figural. This goes some way to helping us understand how individual reactions to an event can be so different. We construct our meaningful perception of objects through selective attention to certain stimuli over others (Spinelli 1989; Clarkson and MacKewn 1994). As this sense making is a moving process, seemingly irrelevant data may emerge into the foreground and change the understanding and reaction to the whole situation. Therefore, what someone may consider to be non-important, may later become significant (Clarkson and MacKewn 1994). This is referred to as the principle of possible relevance (Parlett 1991). Resilience is an emergent process, not a binary on/off phenomenon. This of course has implications for how we address it. An ongoing dynamic set of interventions related to the emerging field constellation, is much more likely to be effective in increasing resilience, than a one-shot intervention based at a single fixed point in time.

The unique sense making and resilience of each person

A person is always actively sense-making as an ongoing process. The meaning that each individual assigns to their perceptual field is unique to that individual. (Clarkson and MacKewn 1994; Perls 1969; Joyce and Sills 2002). Due to this, two people may experience a situation in two very different ways, and subsequently have different kinds and amount of resilience. This goes some way to explaining why the 'one size fits all' interventions such as whole system restructures, compulsory training roll outs, unilateral policy change and whole organisation broadcast communications, often fail, despite good intentions.

Resilience is non-resolvable. It is in a constant state of change. It does not stop or wait for decision makers to formulate an answer. It will never be finished or completed. Any attempt to resolve resilience will change the nature of the issue. In this sense then it is a wicked problem (Rittel and Webber 1972). Intervening in resilience, will change, alter and morph the situation, but it will still be present in some form (Raisio et al 2019). As strength and type of resilience arises from the forces in a person's field, then changes within the field will impact on the amount and type of resilience (Cartwright 1952). It is in understanding the causal factors in the here and now where organisations and individuals within them can build resilience (M. Lewin 1998; Burnes and Cooke 2013). Some commentators (Nevis 1998; Stevenson 2018), believe that change comes from within and spreads throughout the system. However, Lewin (1947) was keen to point out that both internal and external forces are important. In individuals and organisations, reframing is one useful intervention that can change the sense-making, perception and resilience of a situation (Grint 2005; Fairhurst 2005; Maule et al, 2007). For example, as Grint (2008) points out, changing the name of the National Health Service to the National Illness Service, would alter our field, perception and subsequent actions.

Change and resilience

When resilience is seen as a dynamic equilibrium between forces, to bring about change, the balance between the forces which maintain the status quo have to be upset, i.e., unfreezing has to occur (Schein 1996). Therefore, the key change to levels of resilience, is how to unfreeze or upset the forces that are maintaining the equilibrium (Burnes 2019). Of course, as we have experienced with the Covid pandemic, sometimes this equilibrium is changed by circumstances in all our fields, which in many cases has altered the resilience of many individuals, teams and organisations. For example, how people and organisations have adapted to home working, social distancing, less work and leisure travel and environmental impact. How some organisations have re-imagined their offering to fit the new circumstances, such as how universities have moved to more online offerings. We can of course speculate how permanent this resilience will prove to be, but in line with Kuntz et al (2016: 2017) definition of resilience (see page 2), we can clearly see, in some cases, evidence of adaptive behaviours in organisations.

It is during adaptive adjustment, that new ideas, thoughts, experiences and feelings are encountered. At the time of this happening in organisations, it can seem and feel chaotic. But over time, as the new adjustments become the norm, order can re-emerge from the chaos (Bentley 2001). In fact, change at one level of the system impacts on all other levels of the system (Nevis 1998; Stevenson 2018). Does this lead us to consider that *any* change in the system will unbalance the equilibrium? Some of this depends on the strength and permanency of the forces being changed, and the readiness of an organisation to change. To increase resilience, Field theory would not see a single intervention as effective. Instead understanding resilience as multi-causal and hence needing multi-interventions. We become more resilient as we learn to identify and manage the constellation of forces with choice. This includes increased understanding that we as individuals have helped to construct our own experiences via our sense making process, choices and actions (Yalom 1980). Awareness is the precursor to effective action and leads to greater choice (Nevis 1998).

Changing resilience is an iterative process, facilitated by trying things out or experimenting. Experimentation with new forms of experience and perception is a critical source for change. Pilot studies and experimentation are a key source of learning (Nevis 1998; Stevenson 2018). Experimentation also carries risk with it and may be at odds with approaches that seek the silver bullet one-off solution to increase resilience. Resilience sits within a constellation of causal factors and so, when intervening in changing this, we need to consider a constellation of interventions.

Summary

Field theory calls on leaders, managers, organisation development practitioners, HR professionals and organisational psychologists to consider resilience in a nonlinear way. Calling on them to recognise the unique nature of situations, people and resulting resilience. Recognising that fields interconnect, overlap, and co-influence one another and that none sit totally independently. It encourages attention to be paid to the 'here and now' experience in a configuration which is in constant change, rather than a fixed historical construct. Above

all, it encourages a view that the field is organised by factors both internal to a person and external to the situation (Parlett 1997) and as such, interventions should be designed and applied with these assumptions.

Using a Field theory lens will help understanding of the wider influencing factors and forces. It helps organisations adapt by encouraging holistic thinking. It can prevent organisations designing single interventions that only address one aspect of the multi-causal factors. Field theory calls on us to work in a way that sees the possibility that everything or anything has relevance, to have an open and genuine childlike curiosity around the phenomena of resilience, withholding judgement as far as possible. Leaders, managers, organisation development practitioners, HR professionals and organisational psychologists within an organisation are encouraged to use more inclusive thinking. i.e., '*I am part of the situation*' rather than a more projective process which sees it outside of themselves only. We are used to thinking of the world in terms of contrasts, such as mind vs body, internal process vs external influences, work vs real life (a phrase I increasingly hear in organisations) (Parlett 1997). The study of resilience in organisations through a Field theory lens, emphasises the need to view resilience, or indeed any situation, with a unitary outlook that dissolves a dualistic approach (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman 1951, p. 14). In turn, this leads to a more owned view of resilience, where instead of the leaders, managers, organisation development practitioners and organisational psychologists speaking of 'the organisation' and 'management' in a way that implies that they are not themselves an intrinsic part of the forces around a situation (Parlett 1997), it enables us all to understand that each of us are part of a wider inclusive field and as such are more empowered to influence forms and amount of resilience, understanding how to influence self, others and the context in order to achieve this.

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