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Developing understanding of the spiritual aspects to resilience

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to deepen conceptual understanding of the spiritual components of resilience.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual paper drawing on research the authors have been conducting on resilience within the police community for a combined period of over half-a-century.

Findings – A more holistic conceptualisation of resilience and particularly a more detailed and accurate picture of the spiritual aspects to resilience which is applicable to a wide variety of public and private sector leadership situations, not just those within the police.

Practical implications – The paper provides an increased appreciation of resilience which the authors hope will lead to more practical research in this area, with the longer term goal being to impact positively on practical workplace issues of major current concern in a wide variety of workplaces across the world.

Originality/value – The paper's contribution is to promote the importance of resilience, provide a greater theoretical understanding of holistic perspectives of resilience and further develop the spiritual component of resilience. This contribution is important because many leaders currently have a limited appreciation of all the aspects of resilience.

Keywords Spirituality, Stress, Resilience, Coping, Holistic

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Resilience is a topic experiencing a burgeoning interest in a wide variety of areas including leadership development, the helping professions, psychology, sport, child development and the military (Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Peterson *et al.*, 2008; Seligman, 2011). Despite this interest there is still much to be done; much to learn, both in the development and testing of theoretical explanations of resilience and within professional practice in using and applying these theories.

According to Richardson (2002, p. 308) resiliency inquiry did not emerge from academic grounding in theory, but rather through the phenomenological identification of characteristics of survivors, mostly young people living in high-risk situations. This paper returns to these roots of drawing on practical lessons from survivors living in high-risk situations. This time rather than survivors or young people though we evaluate the lessons from a public service; particularly police officers. We focus on this area because we believe this group demonstrate exceptional survivorship as well as thrive ability. Richardson (2002) identifies three waves of resiliency inquiry, and in the third, resulting in the concept of resilience (p. 309) we see an emphasis emerging on "the forces that drive a person towards self-actualization" (p. 308). Here (p. 310) Richardson brings in the spiritual aspects to resilience, using the term "biopsychospiritual homeostatis" to describe the adapted state of mind, body and spirit.

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A lot of the work on resilience focuses on physical, emotional or social resilience, but what is important in Richardson's ideas is the emphasis on a holistic view to resilience, which incorporates all this work. Within this holistic perspective, the most complex, contentious, often avoided, neglected and underdeveloped aspect is the spiritual component and particularly the application of this component in the workplace. This is despite there being a growing body of research on spirituality in the workplace emerging (Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2011; Smith, 2011; Neal, 2013), and a real interest in the field evident within leadership studies (see, e.g. Hyson, 2013).

This paper addresses this gap connected to the spiritual aspects of resilience; focusing largely on deepening understanding of the conceptual aspects of the spiritual components in a holistic view of resilience. This exploration draws on research we have been conducting on resilience within the police community and leadership for a combined period of over half-a-century. Whilst we draw on this public services context in developing the theory, we argue that the conceptualisation that emerges is applicable to a wide variety of leadership situations, not just within the police. The paper ends by considering the practical implications of these ideas and offers recommendations for further research and testing of the aspects discussed.

The paper's contribution is to promote the importance of resilience within leadership, and specifically a greater theoretical understanding of holistic perspectives of resilience. The spiritual component in particular is further developed. This contribution is important because many leaders have a limited appreciation of the spiritual component of resilience. Increased appreciation we hope will lead to greater consideration of the spiritual components to resilience within leadership and more practical research in this area, with the longer term goal being to impact positively on practical workplace issues of major current concern for leaders internationally including well-being, ability to cope with stress, employee satisfaction, engagement and on reducing levels of sickness absence, labour turnover and costs of ill health in a wide variety of workplaces across the world.

Methodology

This paper is a conceptual one which seeks to develop greater understanding of the spiritual aspects to resilience. In order to ascertain whether this is an issue and whether research on the topic is needed a systematic literature search was undertaken. This searched all the academic literature databases (many hundreds) available from the library at Lancaster University using the terms resilience and spirituality. This search revealed only 101 hits. The majority were from Taylor and Francis On-line, Medline and Springer link. The majority related to children, old people, disasters, sexual abuse victims or women and did not focus on leadership or the workplace specifically. There were non related to policing. Ones that were relevant to this paper's focus were then interrogated and used in this paper to develop the conceptualisation presented.

What does resilience mean?

We begin this exploration with a definition by Haglund *et al.* (2007, p. 899) who suggest that resilience refers to the "ability to successfully adapt to stressors, maintaining psychological well-being in the face of adversity". Toland and Carrigan (2011, p. 97) argue that there are two defining aspects to this type of resilience. The first is exposure to significant threat or severe adversity, which actually draws out resilience and provides the opportunity to tests it. The second is evidence of the achievement of

positive adaptation following this threat to development. Smith and Charles (2010) provide evidence to suggest that the vast majority of police officers are both exposed to significant threat and are extremely skilled and capable of handling the adversity and many stressors they encounter. What we are particularly interested in is how these resilient officers manage to do this and what others within the police and more broadly can learn from this. Resilience then is not about eliminating risk and stress but being able to deal effectively with adversity and the stressors encountered. Developing Toland and Carrigan's (2011) argument, resilient individuals or organisations are not only those that never fail. Resilience is as much about recovery and positive adaptation after a setback. This could be related to a short-term issue, or over a longer term period and links to Luthan's (2002, p. 702) well-known bouncing back aspect of resilience.

Research by Seligman (2011), Alexander *et al.* (2011) and Brigadier General Cornum (2012), who until recently led the $125 million emotional fitness regime for the US military, are suggesting that the things that enable a person to "bounce back" (Luthans, 2002, p. 702) are not all due to an individual's make-up, and effective coping strategies can be learned and developed. Masten (2001) argues that everyone has the ability to develop resilience.

Much of the research on resilience has come from the public services and emergency and caring professions, probably because the high levels of stress experienced in these roles call for more knowledge about effective coping strategies. Examples of this type of research include the police (Paton, 2006), army (Cornum, 2012), ambulance service (Gayton and Lovell, 2012), paramedics (Boyle and Healy, 2003), nursing (Zander *et al.*, 2010) and social work (Grant and Kinman, 2012). A lot of the focus in personal resilience has been on emotional resilience (Paton, 2006; Vielife, 2008, p. 10; Gilmartin, 2002). This links people's physical and emotional reactions, seeks to explain why the body reacts in the way it does and offers useful strategies to help overcome the negative reactions and effects. As Sillence and Shipton (2013) articulate, emotions are clearly important, but it is increasingly evident that emotions do not provide the complete picture. Beddoes-Jones (2012) extends this analysis and highlights the physical, mental and emotional aspects to resilience. Richardson (2002), Connor *et al.* (2003), Scott (2011) and Cornum (2012) are some of the few to broaden this still further to include the spiritual dimension as an important aspect to resilience.

Relevance of resilience to leadership

A host of studies are identifying the relevance of resilience to leadership success (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005; Morris, 2014; Cooper, 2014 to name but a few). These are showing resilience is useful at an individual level in assisting the leader to cope more effectively with the stressors they encounter; at a team level in being able to build teams who are better able to cope with the challenges they have to deal with; and to building organisations that as a whole are more resilient (Cooper, 2014, p. 5).

Holistic resilience

As we have said, much of the work on resilience has focused on various single aspects including emotional and psychological, but what is emerging now is a broader conceptualisation of resilience. From our research it is clear that there are physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual components to resilience at both individual, organisational and societal levels. As a result we argue that it is important to draw these aspects together and emphasise a more holistic view of resilience. This needs to not only consider each individual aspect but also how these interact with and influence

each other, as well the whole. This paper aims to take one small step in the work that needs to be done here and focuses specifically on further developing one neglected aspect in this holistic view: the spiritual dimension.

The spiritual dimension is a complex and controversial area, which is underexplored within both resilience and holistic approaches more generally. It is though increasingly being identified as a vital element (Smith and Charles, 2010, 2013), which can have a large influence on physical, mental and emotional aspects (Zohar and Marshall, 2000; Rayment and Smith, 2013, p. 12; Hyson, 2013, p. 113). Rayment and Smith in their development of one holistic framework, for example argue that the spiritual elements interact and significantly shape the other aspects. Fairholm (1998, p. 113) makes a similar call for integration of the whole self within the leadership process and maintains that leading without drawing upon the spirituality of employers and workers is to overlook the "essence of who we are". Duchon and Plowman (2005, p. 19) also argue that spirituality, especially in terms of meaning making, articulation of values and beliefs and in physical organisation and ritual, is often the missing link in the workplace in terms of holistic approaches. The spiritual aspect to resilience is also an important element, that is emerging from our own research.

Unfortunately the majority of studies that explore spirituality and resilience tend to treat spirituality as one single entity. This is understandable as it is then easier to comprehend, measure and control, but it is inaccurate. This is highlighted by Hicks (2002, p. 380) who argues that the spirituality and leadership literature currently depends upon "problematic assumptions, concepts, and definitions". Spirituality is in reality a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon. Boyle and Healy (2003, p. 353) contend that emotion-laden organisations such as the police need to approach the practice of spirituality as an extremely sophisticated and complex phenomenon, and to recognise that it may well remain one of the few ways in which workers can practice resistance in a controlled work environment. Hence theories and research, which embrace a broad interpretation of spirituality rather than simple single entity considerations is important and still needed in order to expand our understanding of all elements to resilience. In the next section we seek to draw out some of the significant aspects of spirituality within this family of meanings in order to gain a greater understanding of the territory under consideration.

Spirituality

According to Smith (2009) there is a growing awareness of the importance and significance of the spiritual dimension within policing. In the UK, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary recognised the importance of this issue back in 2003. There is a section in its 2003 report (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), 2003, p. 119) which specifically relates to the spiritual needs of staff in the police service. This stated:

> In the context of dealing with the stresses and strains of diversity, attention needs to be given to the spiritual needs of people.

HMIC (2003, p. 120) also made a clear recommendation on this issue:

> HM Inspector recommends that all forces have resources in place to meet the spiritual needs of police officers and police staff, while respecting the diversity of faiths and beliefs both inside the service and in the communities which they serve.

More recently the Equality Act (2010) places a duty on public authorities to promote better understanding between people who hold different faiths, and those who none.

In relation to a policing context, if the fundamental challenges for leaders in this environment are considered – dealing with death, establishing right from wrong, good from evil, being ostracised by communities, building relationships, embracing diversity, making contributions to communities and societies, for example – many are fundamentally spiritual challenges. These types of challenges are, however, not just encountered in a policing environment and are also similar for leaders in many organisations. As many of the challenges are fundamentally spiritual challenges then at a practical level it would seem logical that the skills and abilities – required to cope with these – the resilience in other words – would, at least in part, need to include consideration of the spiritual if they were to be fully effective.

Spirituality as we have said though is a complex and contentious issue. There are many who argue that the term spirituality should not be used at all. Crust (2006) and Paley (2008) are two examples. Crust (2006) suggests that the term derives from religion and is still largely associated with that. This narrow religious interpretation of spirituality, which in a number of parts of the world including America and the UK is often seen as a Christian interpretation, is not appropriate either for the police service who pride themselves on their anti-discriminatory practices, or the majority of work organisations. Crust (2006) also argues that the term spirituality is not specific and it is not clear the reported empirical work actually points to something termed spirituality as distinct from psychology. Crust suggests that the term psychological, in terms of need for significant relationships and need for meaning, is quite sufficient.

Swinton and Pattison (2010) though argue that spirituality does not have to be specific. They suggest there are many different words, especially core values such as equality or freedom, that too are vague or general. People's actual understanding of spirituality, and its meaning often seems to develop more over time through dialogue and by being put into practice (Pettigrew, 1979), so its meaning is socially constructed. As a result there are likely to be many different perspectives of spirituality that emerge, as Boyle and Healy (2003, p. 352) also highlight. Seeking to develop conceptual understanding of the spiritual aspects to resilience, as we are aiming to do in this paper, is not made easy then as it does not appear to be something that can simply be defined in rational terms. As a result it seems unlikely to be something that lends itself to being scientifically objectified. Wilber (2000) and Mitroff and Denton (1999) also both argue that spirituality is not a technique that can be commodified, or utilised just as a tool for gaining greater engagement, commitment, productivity or profit in the workplace and adopting spiritual practices in this way will not work.

Spirituality – a distinct category in a holistic view?

Drawing distinctions, for example as Richardson (2002, p. 310) does, between mind, body and spirit, is a convenient way to highlight the different components of resilience which can make it easier to describe. It does, however, seem to be a rather simplistic perspective that indicates that spirituality is just one discrete element of a whole, and different from, in this case, mind and body. Robinson and Smith (2014) argue that spirituality is not a separate area but that which holds together the whole and connects to all aspects of people, organisations and societies. Whilst Robinson and Smith (2014) do not explore the relevance of spirituality to resilience their argument highlights a much more nuanced perspective of spirituality which is useful within the conceptualisation of resilience. This perspective seems to more fully meet the interpretation Boyle and Healy (2003, p. 354) are looking for when they call for a framework that can cope with the co-existence and intertwining of organisational spirituality and emotionality.

Spirituality – positive or negative?

Many researchers exploring spirituality in the workplace, seem to present the benefits of spirituality with an almost evangelical zeal and focus predominantly on the positive aspects. As Boyle and Healy (2003, p. 352) remark "Spirituality is now viewed in an organizational context as the ultimate transformational fixative both at the individual and organizational level". There are a number of limitations evident in some of the research that identifies the benefits of spirituality in the workplace but these are often overlooked. Only some of the more recent studies on spirituality such as Tourish and Tourish (2010) and Lips-Wiersma *et al.* (2009) are beginning to highlight these difficulties. Many explorations fail to consider whether all interpretations or outcomes are positive. Rayment and Smith (2013) on the other hand argue there are negative as well as positive forms of spirituality. They suggest that a positive spirituality implies overall objectives, philosophies and values that focus on we, not I. Negative spirituality, they argue, includes deliberate exclusion of other faiths, philosophies and values; misconstruing other's beliefs or demonising their followers; being exploitative, or prejudiced. In reality spirituality can contain both positive and negative aspects and it seems all these need to be considered when developing theories about how spirituality might be an important component of resilience.

Understanding more of the territory

What is emerging from this exploration is that there are a wide range of different perspectives on spirituality that are likely to be developed through practice and dialogue. However, much of the small amount of work on resilience which includes the spiritual component does not account for this wide range of possible different perspectives.

Having said this, it is important and useful in this conceptual exploration of the spiritual aspects to resilience to at least have an appreciation of the territory under consideration. In this section we seek to explore this and draw out several common aspects to interpretations that are consistently covered in the literature on spirituality although not previously applied in the exploration of resilience. Smith (2005, p. 71), who developed and tested this definition within the UK police training environment, highlights some of the important territory:

> Spirituality is a state or experience that can provide individuals with direction or meaning, or provide feelings of understanding, support, inner wholeness or connectedness. Connectedness can be to themselves, other people, nature, the universe, a god, or some other supernatural power.

This has many similarities to Wolman's (2001, p. 83) definition:

> […] the human capacity to ask ultimate questions about the meaning of life, and to simultaneously experience the seamless connection between each of us and the world in which we live.

In both these definitions the issue of meaning is prominent. The literature on spirituality includes repeated themes of meaning and purpose as components of spirituality (Hyson, 2013, p. 110). This sees people striving to find some purpose and meaning to their lives – a basic human need evident since the earliest tribes according to Robinson *et al.* (2003, p. x). Conklin (2013, p. 300) highlights the importance of meaning for motivation and in coping with stress. Implicit in much of the writing is that the search for meaning is a personal one and there is no one single meaning. The meaning and purpose discussed here though is not purely for personal or material gain and has a larger focus

(Duchon and Plowman, 2005). It refers to work that "contributes to something bigger than myself", "striving to produce goods and services that serve all of humankind" (Mitroff and Denton, 1999, p. 89), "service to God" or to "fellow human beings" (Reave, 2005, p. 666), "serving others", "making a difference", "contributing to a greater good" or "higher goal" (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004). These examples of terms used also link to having a sense of worth – I am of value, I am doing something, that is worthwhile, as Robinson *et al.* (2003, p. 31) highlight.

Robinson *et al.* (2003, p. 31) suggest meaning be thought of on four levels: cognitive (to do with ideas about the world), affective (to do with emotions), somatic (meaning mediated through physical experience and creative action) and relational. Robinson and Smith (2014) emphasise the importance of not seeing the relationship of these different aspects as being simplistically and harmoniously integrated just by focusing on spirituality. On the contrary they argue that spirituality is a continuing, and often messy dialogue between beliefs, concepts, value, identity and practice. This highlights that it is not just the different aspects that have to be considered, but also the interaction, that is continually taking place between the holistic aspects. These are continually testing each other and may be in tension, but need to be held because they inform our awareness and tests and deepens the meaning of the other aspects. This illustrates clearly why the term spirituality in resilience cannot be given one narrow definition. An example of this interaction and testing between the different elements is given by Boyle and Healy (2003, p. 353) who argue that spiritual work is parallel to and as a consequence of emotional process work, and that workers will draw upon their spiritual selves and experiences in order to renegotiate and rebalance their emotional selves when they have been placed out of kilter by the emotional demands of the workplace.

Connection

Another important aspect of spirituality noted in both Wolman's (2001) and Smith's (2005) definitions is connection. The concept of connectedness seems common in many people's experiences of spirituality (e.g. Buber, 1958, p. 140; Mitroff and Denton, 1999, p. 83). Zohar (1990, p. 136) argues it is this connectedness, or sense of community, that can be a key motivator for many in going to work. Smith (2005) identifies a number of possible vertical and horizontal connections including "themselves, other people, nature, the universe, a god, or some other supernatural power". All of these connections are referred to by Robinson (2004, p. 470) as "the other". This other seems to be one of the cores to the kind of pluralist spirituality appropriate to the contemporary workplace – an openness to the other, a relationship with the other and an ability to appreciate and value the other. This seems to underpin the kind of framework in relation to spirituality that Hicks (2002, p. 381) calls for – "a leadership framework in which conflicting views and practices of a diverse workforce – including religious, spiritual, political, cultural, and other differences – can be negotiated within organizations".

Isolation

A significant issue emerging from research within both leadership and the police in relation to the connectedness elements to spirituality and resilience, and also for many other leaders and employees, is the issue of isolation. A host of studies within the policing context (Niederhoffer, 1967; Burbeck and Furnham, 1985; Violanti, 1999; Kirschman, 2006; Waters and Ussery, 2007), including studies on police officers in Canada, India and Japan (Nickels and Verma, 2008), identify the pressures and threats on police officers which result in them isolating themselves from people outside the law

enforcement community. This isolation can become more pronounced the longer an officer serves. As a result officers can begin to associate only with other officers, gradually losing contact with others outside the profession, until the only relationships available to them are those with other police officers. According to both Millet (2012) and Sutton (2009) these pressures can also be experienced by leaders and employees in other professions. The pressures can cause individuals to become isolated from people outside the organisation, isolated from their friends and family and isolated from their own feelings and emotions.

This isolation highlights the importance of these connectedness elements of spirituality in resilience. Smith and Charles (2010, p. 329) argue that this isolation process is a primary coping strategy, but can actually constrict cognitive flexibility and remove people from the valuable social support roles that can help them build their resilience and cope more effectively with the adversity and stressors they encounter. This isolation process may also result in individuals not seeking help from the many support facilities available both within the organisation and externally, further compounding the issues.

Individual, team, organisation and society

The exploration so far has focused predominantly at the level of the individual, and indeed this is where the majority of research to date has taken place. However, within a holistic approach, as Rayment and Smith (2013) identify in their holistic framework, there are many aspects to both resilience and spirituality at team, organisational and societal level. We have seen for instance that in an organisational context the meaning aspect of spirituality and the alignment of individual and organisational elements of meaning needs to be facilitated by the leaders of those organisations. As Cooper (2014) highlights, there are many aspects to resilience that leaders can embed into the policies, practices and culture of the organisation so that the organisation as a whole enables all its members to be more resilient in coping with the adversity and stressors encountered. Although beyond the scope of this paper, and receiving little research attention to date, there also seem to be aspects of societal influence that may make some societies more resilient and so better able to cope with adversity than others.

Conclusion

This exploration of the spiritual aspects to resilience highlights its complex, contentious and multi-dimensional nature and raises many conflicts and tensions. It seems though that within a work and resilience context there are very many issues to spirituality that appear to be of relevance for leaders. As such it warrants further investigation as an important element to resilience. There are four key points that emerge from this exploration as being important with respect to consideration of the spiritual components to resilience. First, spirituality needs to be considered as a broad, multidimensional, fluid concept, with a multitude of different interpretations, including institutionalised religions as particular but not all expressions of spirituality, rather than a simple, single and static entity. Second, that spirituality is not one simple discrete aspect in a holistic approach. Third, that meaning and connectedness are two important components of spirituality. Finally, that spirituality is only one part in a holistic conceptualisation of resilience. There are physical, mental, emotional and spiritual components to resilience, at both individual, team, organisational and societal level and all these are important and need to be considered as part of a holistic approach. Each element not only needs to be considered in detail but the interaction between all the different elements are important as well as the whole.

Practical implications

If spirituality is taken to be an important component of resilience then one of the key practical questions for leaders, particularly as it is such a contentious area, is how they might bring this into the workplace in a way that enables all leaders and staff to embrace the ideas. The interpretation of spirituality identified in this paper highlights that it needs to be discussed openly from a pluralist perspective, and anticipate that there will be many different interpretations and narratives that need to be held and worked with.

For it to be effective building resilience needs to be a proactive strategy, not one, that is left until there is a problem. This highlights the importance of training in this process. The spiritual aspects of resilience and coping are not topics that can simply be taught though and part of an effective process of development seems more likely to be about providing the space, support and type of environment where employees feel safe to raise and explore the fundamental questions of meaning, connection and isolation in their work.

Recommendations for further research

The exploration has identified that more research is required on resilience which embraces a broad multi-dimensional interpretation of spirituality rather than simple single entity considerations. We also call for research which looks at holistic approaches to resilience; considers all the elements involved and their interaction, as well as the whole. Explorations which examine the practical application, benefits and difficulties with these holistic approaches which embrace the spiritual dimension are particularly welcomed.

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