

Organizational Adaptation: A Resilience-Based Perspective

Wenwen Liu and Yihua Wang

School of Economics and Management, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, 100084

liu-ww06@mails.tsinghua.edu.cn

wangyihua@sem.tsinghua.edu.cn

Abstract

The incorporation of a resilience-based perspective into the study of organizational adaptation will serve not only to advance the scientific knowledge of organizational adaptation, but also to inform efforts to translate research on positive adaptation in the face of adversity into practice of building resilient organizations. This paper reviews the origins of resilience approaches in ecology and psychology, and a concept analysis is carried out to distinguish resilience from related constructs. We suggest that resilience is a multidimensional construct that describes the organizational adaptation to adversity in two ways. First, the resilience perspective emphasizes the capacity of an organization to absorb disturbance and buffer stresses while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function. Second, the resilience approach focuses on the dynamic processes encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Integrating the two ways, we insist that resilience is a meaningful framework for systematically thinking about organizational adaptation.

Although resilience is still a novel concept to some in the organization field, but it has considerable history in other fields. The roots of work on resilience can be traced back to mainly two areas. The first group suggests that the resilience perspective emerged from ecology in the 1960s and early 1970s, and has evolved from engineering resilience, ecological resilience to social-ecological resilience (Folk, 2006). A second body of scholarship indicates that the origins of the concept of resilience stem from the early psychiatric and psychological literature, and resilience is considered as a construct connoting the maintenance of positive adaptation by individuals despite experiences of significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). We argue that the two groups are relevant because both concentrate on the adaptation in open complex systems. Furthermore, the development of resilience research is facilitated by this interdisciplinary research.

Resilience-based perspective is considered as an approach to organizational adaptation analysis for three reasons. First, methods based on forecasting in organizational adaptation make it difficult in maintaining high levels of adaptation in organizations. An alternative approach is to focus on coping with whatever the future brings, without changing in undesirable ways. This can be done by building resilient organization. Second, resilience is a

framework for systematically thinking, which helps in our understanding of complex systems behavior (Anderies et al., 2004). Third, resilience assists organizations not only in dealing with uncertainty and change but also in capitalizing on environmental change to fuel new capability development.

Distinguishing resilience from related constructs of flexibility and thriving contributes to minimize confusion between these terms in organizational adaptation. First, although resilience is similar to flexibility in that it refers to an organization’s coping with environmental changes (Horne and Orr, 1998), resilience is clearly different from flexibility. On one hand, flexibility can occur without adversity, while resilience refers to the organizational adaptation in face of adversity. On the other, when an organizational adaptation occurs in response to adversity, it has at least four potential consequences: succumbing, survival, resilience and thriving. Flexibility is reflected in all the four potential consequences. Second, resilience is distinct from thriving. For one reason, thriving can occur with or without adversity (Spreitzer et al., 2005). For another, thriving involves a much more positive state than resilience. It refers that the organization can be better off after adversity than beforehand (Figure1).

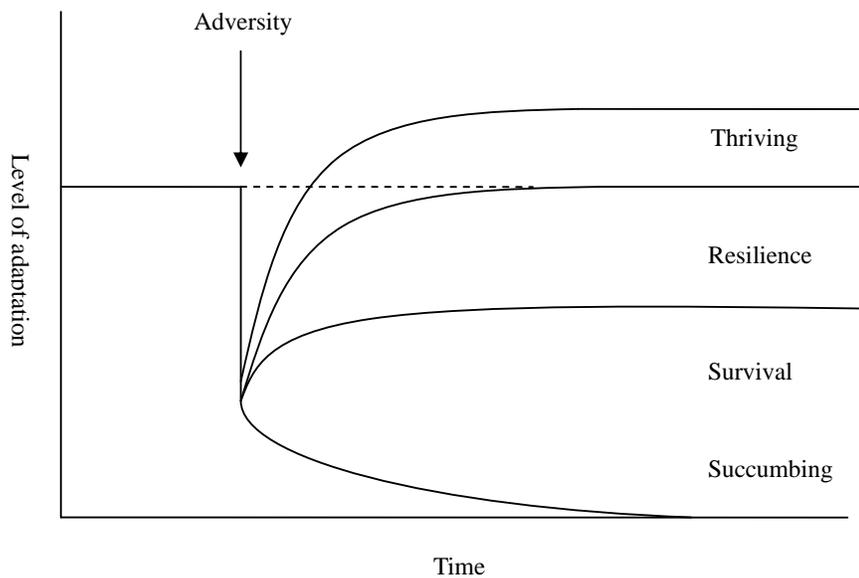


Figure1. Succumbing, survival, resilience and thriving in organizational adaptation

Resilience is a multidimensional construct which can be conceptualized from both capability and process view. From the capability perspective, resilience is defined as organizational capability to cope with adversity or trauma. There are three central features of resilience: (1) the capability to absorb or buffer disturbances and still maintain its core functioning; (2) the capability to self-organize; and (3) the capability of learning. From the process perspective, resilience is defined as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Resilience involves a developmental

progression, such that significant environmental change can be perceived quickly, accepted broadly, and adaptive responses implemented early.

This article will not be a paper for those that look for simple, clear-cut description of organizational adaptation. Although our work is preliminary, it draws from a broad range of related theory and research in emphasizing the explorative nature of resilience and the role of the resilience-based perspective as a way for understanding organizational adaptation. As a first and necessary step, it naturally requires further theoretical development and empirical research which will help to enrich our knowledge of organizational adaptation in turbulent environment.