

Probationary Faculty Development Grant

Final Report

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Project Title: How can students navigate the COVID-19 Pandemic by turning to the arts?

Project Objective: In March 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Further, Centers for Disease Control (2020) discussed how this pandemic is impacting our lives and can be a source of stress for adults and children (CDC, 2020). Stress under this adversity can lead to individuals responding with rigidity (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). This narrows the information individuals seek, which in turn impacts their behavior (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). How can one best adapt to this pandemic? The research question I was interested in is – How can student engagement with the arts during the COVID-19 pandemic lead to resilience? Professionals are increasingly relying on the use of poetry to improve doctors’ understanding and resulting patient care (Shapiro, Duke, Boker, & Ahearn, 2005) or on theater to improve medical residents clinical empathy (Dow, Leong, Anderson, & Wenzel, 2007). In this work I discuss engagement with the arts as an adaptive strategy that can increase individual resilience.

Project Description: This is a conceptual piece. I did extensive review of the current literature on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on individuals. For which I turned to news, articles and books in the field of management, psychology, arts, and medicine to read the current narratives and findings in empirical work. I focused on some constructs that I used in my theoretical model and deliberated on the linkages between them.

Engagement with the Arts: what does engagement with the arts mean? I conceptualize it both as actively engaging in a creative process as well as immersing oneself in works of art. During the pandemic we saw both forms of this engagement happen. When the pandemic started we saw how as a community we engaged in arts with musicians sharing their work from their balconies, art work displayed outside homes to thank essential workers (Braus & Morton, 2020). We saw various museums virtually opened to the public. Thus engagement with the arts is possible both by creation of new art work, as well as by immersion in existing art work of others.

Resilience: According to the American Psychological Association (2014) resilience is “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress.” I conceptualize resilience in the tradition of positive organizational behavior. Luthans (2002:702) defines resilience as “the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility”. Resilience is a complex construct and can be viewed as a personality trait, or a process, or an outcome (Southwick et. al., 2014) and exists on a continuum (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011). Research highlights that it is the highly resilient individuals that are more effective in a “fuzzier” world (Block & Kreman, 1996).

I focused on trying to understand the mediators in the relationship between engagement with the arts and resilience. Based on my research and thinking meaning making emerged the most important concept. COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in various forms of

losses (e.g. loss of normalcy, loss of loved ones, loss of financial security, loss of jobs, loss of identity, loss of work-life balance, loss of socializing, etc.). Living with uncertainty became a new norm for the general population. In times of disruptions like those one faces as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, emotions like grief surface as does loss of meaning or purpose in life (Berinato, 2020). There is cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1954) and thus a search for meaning is essential for restoring balance and in turn for leading to resilience.

Meaning Making: Meaning making is defined as “the restoration of meaning in the context of highly stressful situations” (Park, 2010:257). I argue that in and through meaning making individuals can go through a shift cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally. For example, reading a book where a character goes through a struggle and emerges victorious may result in the individual reading it rescript his or her story or view it with a new lens, or change one’s narrative. Similarly, reading a poem or listening to piece of music that embodies pain can lead a sense of not being alone and may generate feelings of self-compassion. Self-compassion is which is related to psychological well-being and correlated to reduced anxiety and depression (Allen & Leary, 2014; Barnard & Curry, 2011).

Project Results: I discussed this work as a panelist in the One World Initiative moderated panel discussion (open to public) on *Stories and Strategies of Resilience*. The One World Initiative, Office of Undergraduate Studies, California State University, Sacramento, April, 2021. Further,

this theory paper makes three contributions to the management literature. First, it develops a theoretical model and explores how engagement with the arts relates to resilience. In doing so it opens up new avenues for research that focuses on the value of arts in management scholarship and practice. Second, this work expands research on resilience by identifying multi-level factors that can act as antecedents in the development of resilience. Finally, the proposed model has implications for work on student and employee well-being where arts can play an influential role. In the future I plan to conduct an empirical study (with a student sample) using the ideas I have developed while working on this conceptual paper.

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