

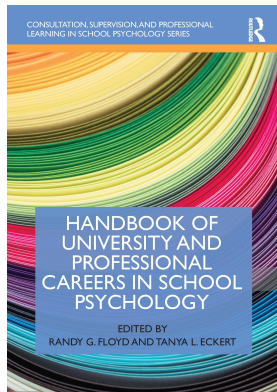
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## **Handbook of University and Professional Careers in School Psychology**

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### **Overcoming Adversity**

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# 15 Overcoming Adversity

*Tanya L. Eckert and Jina Yoon*

Faculty positions provide several unique professional opportunities, such as autonomy, collaborative opportunities, and academic freedom. However, there are also many challenges, which create potentially adverse situations both common and uncommon to other professions. For example, work–life conflict among faculty members is particularly salient due to the high professional demands and high levels of professional autonomy (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). As a result, faculty members’ professional roles and responsibilities may interfere with their personal lives. Further, adverse circumstances may differentially impact faculty members based on demographic characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (Ayala, Ellis, Grudev, & Cole, 2017).

Given the current and projected shortage of school psychology faculty members (Castillo, Curtis, & Tan, 2014) as well as survey results of school psychology faculty members’ perceptions regarding work-related challenges (Akin-Little, Bray, Eckert, & Kehle, 2004; Demaray and colleagues, Chapter 11; Little, Akin-Little, Palomares, & Eckert, 2012), it is important to identify effective strategies to support academic career choices, particularly for underrepresented or marginalized groups. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss professional and personal challenges that may affect school psychology program faculty in university settings. It will discuss strategies to address work-related challenges, such as caustic politics, interpersonal problems, or discrimination at the program, department, college, and university level, as well as mechanisms to cope with personal challenges by reviewing theoretical, evidence-based, and personal considerations.

## **Personal and Professional Challenges Impacting School Psychology Faculty**

According to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.), adversity is defined as “a state or instance of serious or continued difficulty or misfortune.” It notes that adversity “particularly applies to a state of grave or persistent misfortune” rather than “trivial instance of bad luck.” What is considered adversity may be somewhat subjective, given this definition. Research on stressful life events has examined a wide range of life experiences that demand significant adjustment at individual and family levels. It has been widely accepted that different domains of life events should be considered beyond the presence or number of stressful life events (Butjosa et al., 2017). These events could be categorized as normative versus non-normative (S. Price, C. Price, & McKenry, 2010) or major versus everyday life events (Wagner, Compas, & Howell, 1988). Major, non-normative life events are considered more unpredictable and thus more stressful, such as death of a family member and divorce (Buccheri, Mussaad, Bost, & Fiese, 2018). For example, a recent measure of stressful life events includes 43 life experiences in four subscales: Social and Financial Readjustment, Change in Habits and Family Dynamics, Social Misconduct and

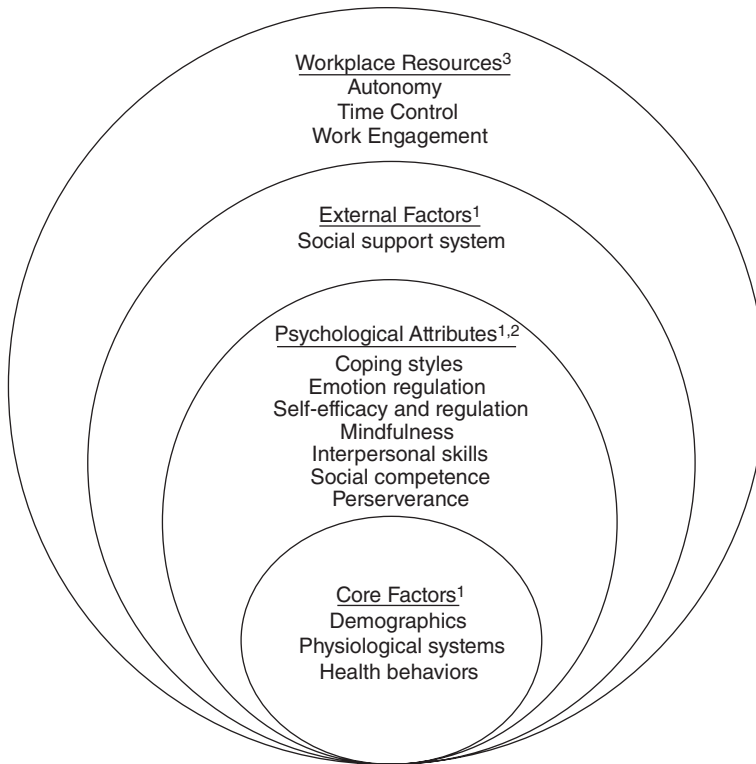
Work-Time Challenges, and Death and Change in Relationships (Buccheri et al., 2018). The Social and Financial Readjustment domain includes major personal injury or illness, foreclosure on a mortgage or loan, or changing to a different line of work. The Change in Habit and Family Dynamics domain includes events such as divorce, separation, and changing to a new school, whereas the Social Misconduct and Work-Time Challenges domain includes major changes in responsibilities at work, trouble with boss, and retirement from work. The Death and Change in Relationships domain includes events such as death of a partner, death of a close friend or family member, and a child leaving home. Some events may appear more normative (e.g., changing schools or a child leaving home), but it is important to note that these stressful experiences are not necessarily isolated events. In many cases of adversity, they are not single events or short lived. Rather, experiences of adversity involve multiple life stressors at the same time, with various life events that overlap and last for an extended period. Thus, both normative and non-normative life experiences should be considered as we strive to understand the extent to which these events affect personal and professional well-being.

Although these stressful life events include work-related situations, there are professional challenges that are specific to the academic settings. Like any workplaces, higher education is an organizational entity with inherent challenges at various levels. For example, many faculty members unfortunately experience racism, sexism, homophobia, and other prejudicial and discriminatory practices at the program, department, college, and university levels (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015). This becomes a harsh reality for many faculty members, resulting in hostile, unsupportive, unwelcoming work environments. The hierarchical nature of academic work in these negative work environments may be particularly harmful to those who are in early stage of academic career pursuing tenure and promotion. Many scholars articulated pervasive levels of psychological and social distress among faculty of color, particularly women of color in academia (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). Significant systemic issues continue to make them vulnerable in the academia, including tokenization (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019), salary disparities, limited leadership opportunities, and administrative roles without adequate preparation and support (Shavers et al., 2005), all of which are likely to result in significant levels of professional challenges.

### **Overcoming Adversity: Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations**

The ability of individuals to overcome difficulties and challenges in the workplace has garnered significant discussion across a variety of disciplines, including business, medicine, and education. In the social sciences, attention has predominately focused on the construct of resilience from a psychological perspective, emphasizing traits and processes associated with positive adaptations occurring in response to adversity (American Psychological Association, 2016; Cicchetti & Gamezy, 1993). Although theoretical and conceptual models of psychological resilience continue to be debated, a consensus definition of resilience was proposed as “the role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, p. 16). This definition recognizes individual characteristics impacting adaptation responses (Rutter, 1985) as well as capacity development following difficult and challenging encounters (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993).

Numerous theoretical and conceptual models have been proposed that attempt to account for the dynamic interplay between individuals, environmental contexts, and stressful or traumatic events (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). For the purposes of this chapter, we reviewed three prominent models of resiliency and highlighted constructs associated with positive adaptations to workplace adversity. Although there are many theoretical models of resiliency, we identified models with direct relevance to faculty positions. In addition, we created an organizational framework (see Figure 15.1) that summarizes the key factors identified in our review and discussed in sections that follow.



*Figure 15.1* Concentric circles provide an organizational framework summarizing key factors identified in theoretical and conceptual models of resiliency, including Multi-Systems Model of Resilience (Liu, Reed, & Girard, 2017), International Collaboration Workforce Resilience Model, and Job-Demands Resources Theory (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014).

**Multi-systems model of resilience.** The multi-systems model of resilience (Liu, Reed, & Girard, 2017) is a multilayered model that emphasizes the impact of socio-ecological contexts. Central to this model are intra-individual factors (e.g., reactivity of physiological systems, health behaviors, and demographic factors) that establish an individual's core resilience. In addition, a diverse set of interpersonal psychosocial attributes identified through resilience research, such as autonomy, self-regulation, hardiness, coping styles, social competence, perseverance, and interpersonal skills, constitutes an individual's internal resistance and is developed over time through social interactions and experiences. The final layer, external resilience, highlights the role of socio-ecological factors, consisting of formal and informal sources of resources, which facilitate individuals' coping and adjustment. Unlike other conceptual models, the interactive and dynamic nature of resilience is clearly delineated in the model by emphasizing the multidimensional role of intra-individual strengths (e.g., health), interpersonal factors (e.g., emotion regulation), and external resources (e.g., social support) that influence an individual's ability to adapt to stress and adversity (see Figure 15.1). Despite the conceptual advancements of this model, empirical evidence is limited. In addition, stressors associated with work environments, which may differ from general life stressors or traumatic events, are not explicitly considered.

**International Collaboration of Workforce Resilience model.** The International Collaboration of Workforce Resilience model (Rees, Breen, Cusack, & Hegney, 2015) emphasizes situation-specific stressors of work environments, including workplace stress and burnout. Four

constructs (i.e., neuroticism, mindfulness, self-efficacy, and coping) are conceptualized as impacting psychological resilience and predicting adjustment to workplace adversity. For example, the model stipulates that positive psychological adjustment is more likely to occur when individuals are (a) not emotionally reactive (i.e., neuroticism), (b) capable of self-reflection (i.e., mindfulness), (c) confident in their ability to exert control (i.e., self-efficacy), and (d) adept at problem-solving (i.e., coping). To date, empirical studies (Rees et al., 2016) testing this model among medical health professionals reported direct effects of mindfulness and coping and indirect effects of self-efficacy and neuroticism on psychological adjustment to workplace adversity. The implications of this theoretical model highlight the importance of individuals engaging in activities that build self-efficacy, coping skills, and mindfulness (see Figure 15.1). In addition, individuals with higher levels of neuroticism are more likely to benefit from coping and supportive strategies to overcome workplace adversity and improve well-being.

**Job-demands-resources theory.** The job-demands-resources theory (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014) exclusively examines adversity from an organizational framework. Empirically derived from antecedents and consequences associated with occupational well-being, this model emphasizes the importance of job resources, such as autonomy and time control, in buffering the negative effects of job demands, such as work-home conflict and work overload. Over a 15-year period, the theory was revised to account for evocative processes associated with job demands (e.g., burnout) and job resources (e.g., work engagement), resulting in dual pathways supporting individuals' well-being. Of the theoretical and conceptual models reviewed in this chapter, the job-demands-resources theory has received the most empirical attention and highlights the importance of concurrently reducing job demands and increasing job resources to improve individuals' health outcomes and work enjoyment (see Figure 15.1).

In summary, although there is a preponderance of theoretical and conceptual models relevant to overcoming adversity, the previously reviewed models provide a foundation for understanding the dynamic and complex interplay of factors impacting school psychology program faculty's response to professional and personal challenges (see Figure 15.1). Personal and professional challenges are intricately connected, but the nature of academic work (e.g., high work demands with great autonomy) makes it particularly difficult to draw a line between work and personal life (Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019). As a result, the models highlight individual and workplace factors that can be targeted to improve faculty well-being in university settings.

### **Overcoming Adversity: Evidence-Based Considerations**

Using the job-demands-resources theory (Bakker et al., 2014) to guide their empirical work, Dorenkamp and Ruhle (2019) examined whether professional commitment moderated the relationship between work-to-life and life-to-work conflicts and job satisfaction among university faculty members. In this study, professional commitment was defined as a psychological state that impacts a faculty member's association with their profession (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Although three dimensions of professional commitment were identified in the literature (i.e., affective, normative, and continuance), the affective dimension of professional commitment (e.g., belonging and connectedness to profession) was hypothesized to have the strongest impact on faculty members' job satisfaction due to prior research findings. Results of this study confirmed prior research demonstrating high work-to-life conflicts among university faculty members, as well as a strong, positive, and direct effect of professional commitment on faculty members' job satisfaction. Results also indicated that overall, faculty members' life conflicts did not significantly impact their job satisfaction. It was argued that the flexibility and autonomy of faculty positions buffer the impact of life problems on faculty members' work.

In addition, three moderating effects of professional commitment were observed. First, affective professional commitment (i.e., positive attachment to field) reduced the negative impact of work-to-life conflict on faculty members' job satisfaction only when faculty members were

interested in staying in their position (e.g., tenure-track). For this group of faculty members, experiencing high levels of connectedness to their profession compensated for high work levels. However, this relationship was not observed among faculty members who were tenured or held a permanent faculty position. Second, normative professional commitment (i.e., obligations to remain in profession) reduced the impact of life-to-work conflict on job satisfaction when faculty members held tenured or permanent positions. It was argued that professional achievements garnered over the course of faculty members' careers (e.g., awards and promotions) increased their normative professional bonds, which buffered the impact of life challenges. Third, continuance commitment (i.e., recognizing the costs of leaving the profession) increased the negative effects of life-to-work conflicts on faculty members' job satisfaction when faculty members held permanent positions.

It is important to highlight the changes in university settings, including technological (e.g., email), economical (e.g., reduced secretarial support), and faculty foci (e.g., grantsmanship), which has prompted some researchers to evaluate the impact of these changes on faculty burnout. Although faculty burnout has been conceptualized within the context of the job-demands-resources theory, the Job Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979) specifically examines the predictive nature of job demands and resources on burnout. A systematic review of the literature including 12 studies conducted in the United States and other countries (Watts & Robertson, 2011) indicated that the prevalence of faculty burnout was commensurate with other professions, such as medicine and education. In addition, student interactions, faculty age, and faculty gender were found to be significant predictors of burnout among faculty members. Specifically, faculty members who were responsible for teaching or mentoring large numbers of graduate students were more vulnerable to experiencing burnout as were women and younger faculty members.

More recently, Padilla and Thompson (2015) surveyed more than 1,400 faculty members employed in doctoral granting research universities in the United States regarding their work demands, social support mechanisms, and levels of burnout. A total of 27% of the respondents reported they experienced burnout at moderate to severe levels, with tenured faculty (44%) reporting greater burnout than tenure-track (30%) or non-tenure-track (25%) faculty. In addition, results revealed that burnout was positively related to increased pressure (i.e., grantsmanship and service) and task demands (i.e., teaching). Social support, which included health-related (e.g., sleep) and recreational (e.g., leisure activities and time with family members) behaviors, resulted in decreases in faculty members' reported levels of burnout. However, social support was not found to moderate the impact of pressure or time demands in relation to burnout.

In summary, these studies, in combination with the theoretical and conceptual models previously reviewed, provide evidence-based considerations for improving faculty members' well-being in university settings, particularly with respect to engaging in health-related and recreational behaviors (Padilla & Thompson, 2015). Although all the reviewed studies focused on self-reported evaluations of faculty members' perceptions, the findings highlight the prevalence of work-to-life conflicts and burnout. Factors mitigating these work-to-life conflicts included developing high levels of professional connectedness for tenure-track faculty members and increasing normative bonds for tenured faculty members (Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019). Further, providing administrative support and collaborative opportunities for faculty members to engage in grant-related activities has the potential to reduce the negative effects of university, departmental, or program pressure to engage in grantsmanship (Padilla & Thompson, 2015).

### **Overcoming Adversity: Personal Considerations and Recommendations**

As school psychologists with extensive training in supporting others, how do we cope with our own personal and professional challenges and overcome these adversities? For the first author,

her faculty position was marked by disparate representation of faculty from marginalized or underrepresented groups, continuous faculty turnover (particularly for untenured women faculty members or faculty members from marginalized or underrepresented groups), high levels of departmental pressure for research productivity and grantsmanship that was narrowly defined (e.g., NIH funding), and limited representation of women faculty at advanced rankings (e.g., currently only one woman faculty member at the rank of full professor). In addition, the first author served as the primary caregiver for her family due to limited local spousal employment opportunities. These challenges resulted in high levels of stress, job dissatisfaction, and ice cream consumption over extended periods of time.

Despite these challenges, the first author persevered at her institution and offers three personal considerations that were particularly helpful in overcoming adversity. First, several strategies described in the American Psychological Association's (2016) resilience guide were adopted, included making close professional connections inside and outside the university, creating professional goals, and engaging in self-care. Using materials created by the National Science Foundation (NSF; 2013), the first author and a small group of university colleagues created a support network that met monthly to engage in mentoring and self-care activities with a specific focus on goal development. Materials included in the NSF mentoring toolbox were adapted including the mentoring agreement form, the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely) goal development worksheet, the development action plan worksheet, and meeting journal. In addition, the support network scheduled self-care activities to celebrate milestones (e.g., end-of-semester mimosa brunch). The first author also engaged in additional self-care activities outside the university to address personal fitness goals, which were met and continue to be crushed on a monthly basis (e.g., 250-pound deadlift, 110-pound clean and jerk, and rope climbing).

Although not informed by the literature or recommended readings included at the end of this chapter, the first author adopted a mindset to perceive work-related challenges as a form of resilience training. Although not reviewed in this chapter, there is an extensive empirical literature base regarding the use of work-based interventions to support resilience in response to adversity. However, most of this research has been examined in settings outside universities. For example, in a recent systematic review of resilience training among military personnel, police officers, senior executives, and physicians, Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar, and Curran (2014) reported large, positive effects of resilience training on mental health and subjective well-being measures (e.g., stress, depression, and anxiety) as well as small to moderate effects on measures assessing self-efficacy, psychosocial functioning, occupational performance, and physiological functioning. The resilience training interventions included in this review focused on (a) specific interventions aimed to enhance protective factors (e.g., optimism, problem-solving, and compassion) and (b) cognitive-behavioral techniques (e.g., self-regulation of stress and self-talk). It is important to note, however, that the first author's approach to resilience training was unlike those adopted in the existing literature and focused on viewing work-related adversity as a contest and a form of capacity building (e.g., "Okay, bring it on.").

It has been noted that challenging life experiences often affect job performance, which may result in more job-related stresses, further complicating adjustment. However, in the context of work environment where colleagues understand the nature of stress and importance of social support, uninterrupted work with a great deal of emotional support can help maintain academic activities and buffer the impact of personal challenges. When dealing with major personal challenges such as a loss of a life partner and major medical illnesses with full engagement in research, teaching, and service, the second author struggled to maintain a balance between personal challenges and work responsibilities but found that teaching classes and mentoring graduate students gave her meaningful purpose, a nice distraction from personal stress, and a sense of normalcy. Colleagues in the department were a tremendous resource, with each person providing different types of social support from accompanying her to treatments to offering

to cover a class and excusing her from substantial committee work. This supportive work environment helped her find a balance between personal demands and professional responsibilities, allowing her to maintain research activities and to keep her professional identity. Although not utilized by the second author, it is critical to proactively consult with administrators and human resources and to understand legal rights and benefits when considering various options such as a leave or stopping the tenure clock. Depending on the nature and duration of life challenges, one may be able to exercise some level of control over the timeline of professional goals and responsibilities, giving oneself additional time and setting a workable pace that helps maintain the balance of both professional and personal well-being.

For those who are working toward tenure and promotion, personal challenges are particularly stressful, considering an overwhelming level of pressure for scholarly productivity within a relatively short period of time (e.g., typically 5 years). Any interruptions in this process associated with life challenges may be perceived as a setback, creating additional stress at work. In such a situation, considering different options, evaluating pros and cons, and making personal choices may bring some sense of control and relief. This is a difficult decision to make, but it is an important one because developing realistic, manageable professional goals will facilitate the maintenance of a work–life balance. We should acknowledge that we all have to deal with life challenges that are often unpredictable and unexplainable and also accept that we have to commit ourselves to maintaining physical and mental health at the same time.

As trained psychologists, we are well aware of the importance of social support in our well-being and personal growth. Yet, a lot of us struggle with seeking help when faced with life challenges—even when adequate social support is available. Although the contemporary literature focuses on seeking professional support (e.g., specific treatment such as mental health services), the construct of help seeking is much broader. Gourash (1978) defined it as “any communication about a problem or troublesome event which is directed obtaining support, advice, or assistance in times of distress” (p. 412). Adaptive help seeking is an important strategy for coping with challenges (Tatar, 2009). González-Vazquez, Mosquera-Barral, Knipe, Leeds, and Santed-German (2018) further suggested that seeking opportunities for positive interactions with others and meeting one’s needs for support are key aspects of self-care and that some people cannot seek and accept help from others while dealing with challenging life experiences. This is not surprising considering certain perceived costs associated with help seeking, such as feeling a sense of failure, incompetence, and dependence (Sandoval & Lee, 2013).

Seeking new support networks or utilizing existing social support may also mean identifying allies beyond the program, department, and college. For example, as a faculty of color, having a supportive network of other women faculty of color from all over the campus has given the second author another source of professional support and a sense of community as well as formal and informal mentoring. This group consisted of women faculty of color of different ranks from various disciplines on campus but shared similar experiences of life challenges and injustice. The group offered specific activities such as writing retreats, professional workshops on tenure and promotion, mentoring through the process of developing promotion materials, and social gatherings. Collective wisdom and insight about professional and personal challenges from other women of color in academia provided both contextualized support and an amazing testimony of strengths and resilience.

Overcoming adversity requires different strategies and resources, depending on individual and work-related issues. At the end of this chapter, we recommend four resources (APA, 2016; Ayala et al., 2017; NSF, 2013; S. Price et al., 2010) cited in our chapter, which provide strategies to support academic career choices. However, we also believe that our discussion of professional and personal challenges may be beneficial. Table 15.1 summarizes our personal considerations, including highlighting key strategies identified in the four resources that intersect with our recommendations.



Table 15.1 Recommended Strategies for Coping and Overcoming Adversity

*Strategies*


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Engaging in self-care activities  
 Developing close personal relationships *inside* the university and creating a support network  
 Developing close personal relationships *outside* the university and creating a support network  
 Establishing professional development goals  
 Obtaining professional counseling and therapeutic services  
 Engaging in formal and informal mentoring  
 Seeking assistance from human resources and examining relevant workplace policies

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**Summary**

Although there are many unique benefits associated with school psychology faculty positions, work-related challenges also exist, which can differentially impact faculty members, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalized groups. In addition, personal challenges, including normative and non-normative stressful life events, can further exacerbate the impact of work-related challenges and create adversarial circumstances that significantly affect personal and professional well-being. As a result, it is important for school psychology faculty to be mindful of the dynamic and complex interplay of factors impacting their responses to professional and personal challenges. In this chapter, we discussed current theoretical and conceptual models of resilience. These models emphasize the importance of engaging in self-efficacy, coping, and mindfulness activities, particularly for those faculty with higher levels of negative affect. We also reviewed empirical studies examining factors associated with professional conflicts and faculty burnout. These studies highlight the importance of faculty receiving support both at work and outside of work as well as engaging in health-related and recreational behaviors. However, it is important to note that different strategies and resources may be needed depending on the personal and professional challenges impacting faculty members. By discussing the authors' personal and professional challenges as well as strategies used to cope with these challenges, we hope that this chapter will serve as a helpful resource for other faculty to overcome adversity.

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