Resiliency essay:

Resiliency is defined by Oxford language, as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.” This definition, although it helps us to understand the foundational elements of resilience, does not encapsulate all of the different aspects of resilience and resiliency. This is in part due to how being resilient is a largely individual experience, as often (like our definition suggests) the need to be resilient occurs during incredibly difficult or even traumatic times. For many that have experienced times like these it is hard to describe the stress that one is under, whether that be physical, mental, or emotional; and for many it is when these pressures are too much that we see people quit and give in to whatever crisis that they are facing. Resiliency is often both felt and understood to be a largely internalized process and not one that can necessarily be gained through formal education, physical training programs and the like. Due to the complex nature of resiliency and the many different environments that we experience it within, we see many different propositions of what it means to be resilient arise. These theories, although centered around the same basic concepts, only seem to become specific when looking at resiliency more narrowly in specific environments.

For our group (Josh, Mel, Nate), although we are intrigued and wish to decipher this code that resiliency has become, we narrowed the scope of our research and interviews to a more limited look through the lens of sport and sporting injuries. As athletes ourselves we believe that centering questions and research around this more specific topic would help us to guide conversations towards more concrete experiences that our interviewees have had. This we believed would help those that participated in our research to grasp and begin to think about a

concept that often can feel abstract when trying to define its different elements. From this foundation of sport, we, both through our presentation and with this paper, plan to create our own theories of resiliency that have come to be through a combination of the research that we did on this topic as well as those that we interviewed. In our interviewing process we used a technique called appreciative inquiry that focuses on positive experiences and creates a more conversational interview that helps interviewees to be more comfortable when talking about their experiences as the interviewer guides the conversation past where perhaps more formal responses would end. These processes, although we admit stem from the lens of sports and sports injury, have helped us to create our own theory of resilience that we believe holds relevance to the larger concept itself.

Research and Data Collection:

In order to create our own theories and themes surrounding resilience in collegiate athletes, it was essential to collect data from real athletes in our community. To do this, we interviewed a diverse group of athletes in the Muhlenberg Community to try and understand their perspectives of resilience. After this we then analyzed their answers to determine what themes were present across different conversations. Our research population consisted of 15 athletes of varying ages (Freshman through Seniors) who all participated in different sports including: men's soccer, men's basketball, field hockey, and track and field. By doing this, we were able to create a large enough population of athletes at different stages in their college experiences, as well as sporting careers that we would then be able to pull stories from. Through the Appreciative Inquiry process, the questions we constructed for our interviewees were tailored to create a sense of

security, openness, and conversation that helped those that we were talking to to reflect in retrospect about what it meant to be resilient to them. For example, one of our questions asked the interviewee to think back on and discuss a sports injury that allowed them to create and define ideas about their own resilience. Asking a question of this nature requires a sense of trust between the interviewee and interviewer which was created through the Appreciative Inquiry Process. After hearing their stories and ideas about resilience, we were able to then create three distinct propositions about resilience. These three propositions include: 1) resiliency needs a process to follow and momentum is gained by working through this process, 2) optimism is an essential element of resiliency, and 3) once you are resilient in one area you can translate it into other areas of your life. Coming back together as a group we found that there was overlap in our conversations with the athletes and that elements of our theories were being referenced in each of these individuals' own experiences. We broke these different references down to more quantitatively analyze them and found that 4/15 largely based their ideas of resilience in Theory 1, 6/15 in Theory 2, and 5/15 in Theory 3. Seeing these major themes arise from our interviewees, through our research and data collection not only helped develop these propositions about resilience, but helped us to better understand its application to the lives of athletes.

First theory: Resiliency needs a process to follow, and momentum is gained by working through this process

The first of our group's theories that we postulate is that as resiliency is often associated with consistency, and that as a result of this individuals that are able to break down the large crisis that

they face into smaller and more manageable challenges are able to gain a sense of momentum as they complete this process and thus are able to maintain consistency. For our group and many of those that we interviewed this crisis often takes the form of an injury and a long rehabilitation process that stands in the way of the athlete returning to their respective sport.

This theory did however first come to our attention in one of our readings *'The process and mechanisms of organizational healing'* by Edward Powley that discussed the reacting and growing of organizations in reference to disruption. It was in this reading that they described the presence of resilience when paired with growth creates a process of organizational healing. Such healing occurs is often needed within organizations after a significant setback and is defined as the work of repairing practices, routines, and structures in the midst of disruption. Upon reading this we related this idea of organizational healing to the way an athlete, after a significant injury, must remake their own practices and put in place new habits and routines, such as physical therapy, in an effort to remain active and keep their body healthy enough for competition. Moreover, due to injury coaching staff and physical therapists will often break down their players' return to injury into several different stages, with different exercises as well as a phasing them back into live competition. In addition to this within the process of organizational healing, there are four mechanisms that facilitate this process. This includes empathy, interventions, collective effort, and leadership. These mechanisms, although more relevant to organizations, come together, much like the human body recovers from injury, to move forward within the three-step process for healing. First, leaders and members of the organization have an urgency to return to normal effectiveness. The second step involves drawing on internal and external networks to strengthen each other. Lastly, there comes a remodeling of the organization that

helps to create a new structure from which the organization is more resilient to the challenges that it faces. It was through our recognition of this process and our relating it to sports and sport injury that we started to understand that resilience and one's ability to be consistently resilient is aided by the creation of a process that breaks down the larger challenge being faced.

This theory of resilience being aided by the creation of a process, is something that we also saw a great deal as we conducted our interviews. Many of which started with talking about how daunting it was for the respective athletes to look with optimism at the long recovery time, and often surgery, that they would have to work through in order to return to their sports. Although a commonality among many of those that we interviewed, one person, Mel Poulos, stood out in particular as she talked with us about her recovery process after tearing her ACL in a team practice her sophomore year (she is now a senior). It was in this interview that she explained how when she first heard it was a torn ACL (an injury that instantly ends your season in any sport) she couldn't even comprehend the amount of time and work that she would have to put in to return to the soccer field. This immediate separation from her sport, as it is for many athletes, particularly those playing at a collegiate level, was quite overwhelming and she described it as even anxious making. This was something that became a theme across our interviews. Others described the impacts of this 'crisis' as challenging to their self-identity, detrimental to their self-confidence, and that it even extinguished motivation that they were able to manifest toward other aspects of their lives. As we continued to discuss these feelings and how they were resolved, many of the athletes talked about the value of starting their rehabilitation and how often after seeing doctors or specialists, they gained a sense of structure as they started the process of recovery.

In addition to gaining this structured perspective, what was interesting was that as the athletes graduated from these preliminary meetings and exercises, they gained a sense of momentum as they felt themselves edging through their respective rehabilitations. Another of our interviewees, Connor Yetmen, who had torn his Achilles, talked about this feeling, after expressing a similar sense of helplessness when looking at his recovery process. He explained his breakthrough came as he got his leg out of the boot that he had been in and could walk around freely and without assistance. When I asked him how this felt and how it might have affected his sense of resilience during such a grueling rehabilitation. He said, “It felt like a boost in morale for me” and that, “it reignited my motivation.”

After interviewing athletes like Connor and Mel, who had faced such serious injury, we came back as a group and discussed how seemingly rehabilitation had given the athletes a structured and step by step perspective from which they could look at their recovery. And in addition to this as they worked through the various steps of their rehab process their motivation and resiliency grew. Thus, it was through this combination that we saw the respective athletes be able to break down the larger challenge of returning to their sport and seemingly increase resiliency as they began to near their final goal.

Second theory: Optimism is an essential element of resiliency

Oftentimes resiliency is extinguished in an individual when the challenge that they are facing seems impossibly insurmountable and that even if they were to continue trying to overcome it

there would be no hope. This overwhelming sense of helplessness comes at different times for different people as there have been cases in the past where people have looked at what has been thought to be logically impossible by society with optimism and have shown resilience until their goal was achieved. Whilst at the same time there are others that are unable to be resilient through even daily tasks. What seems to be the difference between these people is a strong sense of realism combined with an undying sense of optimism.

One of the largest contributing factors to our recognition of this unique but important combination was through "*How Managers Use the Stockdale Paradox to Balance the 'Now and the Next*'" by C.W. Von Bergen and Marti Bressler. In this we see Von Bergen and Bressler talk about this combination as the "Stockdale Paradox," named after Admiral James Stockdale, an American naval officer who was held captive for seven and one-half years during the Vietnam War. Admiral Stockdale offered a unique perspective on life, as he simultaneously acknowledged the current reality of the desperate situation in which he found himself as well as holding beliefs about future optimism at the same time. This is the key to the "Stockdale Paradox": focusing on both the "now" (problems or expansions facing the present) and the "next" (problems or expansions in the future) while maintaining a sense of optimism, integrity, and credibility. This combination of both an accurate sense of reality as well as the presence of optimism is something that is also incredibly important in injury rehabilitation as athletes must have a positive outlook to maintain their confidence but also need to be realistic about where they are in the process of their recovery so as to not overdo it and reinjure or slow their return to sport. In addition to this, according to Admiral Stockdale, individuals must also never confuse faith that in the future they will prevail, regardless of the difficulties, with the discipline to confront the harsh facts of their

current reality. This being said, it does not provide rationale for being overly optimistic, as according to the "Stockdale Paradox", not only is that what western culture is morphing into but is one of the biggest downfalls for businesses nationwide. This idea that being overly optimistic is detrimental is also discussed in Diane Couti's *'How resilience works'* where she explains "a common belief about resilience is that it stems from an optimistic nature. That's true but only as long as such optimism doesn't distort your sense of reality." Thus, we see how this strategy requires what is known as "mental contrasting", as individuals must consider both positive and negative features of goal achievement. Reading this and understanding the essential presence of optimism but also the balance required as individuals must be acutely aware of the reality that they are faced with, we again came to understand how such a mindset is significant in the creation and maintaining of resilience.

This awareness of "Stockdales' Paradox" and the value that the combination of realism and optimism gives to one's ability to be resilient is something that we wanted to explore with our interviews. As we discussed this as a group, we agreed that when asking about their injuries we would try to have them share how they felt at different moments of their recovery and further would attempt to facilitate conversations about how they tried to stay optimistic during even those hardest moments.

After completing our interviews, we were pleasantly surprised at how the people we had interviewed had responded to our strategy. And as we compiled our responses we saw how "Stockdale's Paradox" was relevant to our athletes' experiences as optimism and realism played a part in their capacity to be resilient. One of the athletes that we interviewed on the Field Hockey

team, Maleah Hess, talked about how her coach in high school taught his players how to respond to different challenges that arose on the field with “positivity” whilst also maintaining an ability to “focus on the present" and what will help the “team get going.” As we looked at more examples of optimism being brought up in our different interviews we, as a group, came to understand how the skill of being able to remain positive whilst also realistic about the situation at hand is one that is almost constantly being practiced in sport. This is the case particularly on the Men’s Basketball team where Coach Hopkins writes on white board in the locker room before each game the quote, “DO THE NEXT RIGHT THING.” For his players, as interviewee Tom McGuire explained, this isn’t a message that comes with connotations of error but is more of a call to the player to not only be aware of what is happening in the game but to move past it with the mindset that there will be another opportunity. It is lessons like the one Coach Hopkins and Maleah’s high school coach try to communicate to their players that makes this paradox faintly familiar to athletes as even when their resilience is being tested, they try to maintain a sense of optimism about the next opportunity that they might be presented with.

Third theory: Once you are resilient in one area you can translate it into other areas of your life

After coming to understand, how resilience works, the different techniques/skills that help one be consistently resilient, the paradoxical mindset that is required, and how, often, if one persists, they are rewarded with the surmounting of whatever challenge that they faced; resiliency becomes a translatable skill.

For our group as we discussed our first two propositions of resilience we also talked about the successes and challenges that many of our interviewees had shared with us and that had occurred outside of their recovery from injury or what they had done on the sporting field. Many of such events required similar if not greater levels of resilience. For Connor Yetman the achievement that he shared in his interview was moving from a student ranked in the bottom quarter of all high schoolers in the state of New South Wales (Australia) at the beginning of his senior year, to a top 10% student by the year's end. This was an incredibly difficult task, as he explained that even after achieving such an improvement “several of my teachers came up to me mystified, as it was only months before that they were telling me to try to aim for just above average.” When asking him how it was that he was able to make such an improvement he talked about a conversation that he had had with his mom after his first set of exams. It was in this conversation that she asked him why he approached basketball practices so differently from studying. “This question caught me off guard and somehow immediately made me aware that I was preparing for basketball and recovering from losses and hardship like I wanted to be the best player in the school, whereas I was only studying to be an average student.” Once aware of this Connor changed his habits and started bringing the same resilience that he had on the court into the classroom. A specific example of this in practice for him came in the form of asking, what he called “dumb questions.” This was something that he usually shied away from as the embarrassment of asking such a question in a classroom made him feel as though he was admitting stupidity.

Another of the interviewees talked about this process of transferring of resilience happening in reverse. It was in this case that the athlete (wishes not to be named in reference to this story)

shared how when they were younger the passing of their dad was, and continues to be, an incredibly difficult thing to overcome. And to this day when this athlete faces difficulties, and they think back to working through their loss of their dad and how if they were able to do that then they can do anything.

It is through our interviewees sharing of these experiences and how it is that they channel resilience created in one aspect of their lives to many others that we have come to believe that resilience is a transferable skill. And although we acknowledge that a person resilient in one aspect of their life is not necessarily resilient in all situations, we also think that the presence and understanding of one's own resiliency makes this process considerably easier.

Conclusion:

Resilience is a concept that, although analyzed thoroughly in this essay, will always be described and defined in different and unique ways depending on the person that you are asking. This variation in the way that people see resilience and even experience resilience makes it such a complex concept to understand and deconstruct in a concrete manner. For the athletes that we were able to talk to throughout this process their resilience often came at times of both physical and mental crisis as they battled, often, serious injuries that had the capacity to permanently limit their movement and their ability to play the games that they loved. Understanding this we, as a group, worked within the walls of this area at first to develop ideas of what resiliency looked like in that process. Once establishing that core understanding we then took in account other sports related stories and experiences that our interviewees shared with us and combined them

with the academic perspective that we were gained through the various readings that we did during our research. This multi-dimensional analysis of resilience helped us to broaden our own propositions and theories as we worked to make them more relevant to the larger concept of resilience. Finally, as we reflect on this project we think that our propositions not only helped us to better understand what it meant to be resilient but have also helped to instil in us a foundational knowledge of what it means to be resilient and will help us to be more conscious of times were we need to break down a larger challenge into smaller processes, need to be more or less optimistic when facing a challenge, or finally should work to translate our established resilience in one aspect of our lives to another.

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