

# **How important is collegiality in building resilience in the lives of academic staff?**

Stream: New Ethnographies and Critical Creativity

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# How important is collegiality to building resilience in the lives of academic staff?

## Abstract

Resilience studies suggest that when faced with continuous change, individuals need to have a sense of community to rely on that builds a sense of collegial support, control and autonomy in their professional lives if they are to be able to effectively adapt to change. This paper focuses on the perception and impact collegial relationships have on how resilience is maintained in academic life. This is a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of business academics around their collegial relationships. This paper uses the voices of the academics to present the data and these are interwoven with the analysis and discussion. The conclusion suggests that academic staff are not averse to change, if they are well prepared, given opportunities to have input and are able to have access to the adequate resources to support the change process will demonstrate not only resilience but also in some cases a strong sense of self-efficacy.

## Introduction

When the researcher asked him about what it means to have colleagues nearby he said:

*"..you can share your concerns, discuss issues, ask for advice and even if there is no solution, you realize you are not alone, also there is a sense that there is some back up if there is a crises..."(Participant 4)*

Over the past fifteen years there have been major changes to the working environment of Australian Universities, changes relating to Government funding, industrial relations and employment contracts, new communication technologies, increased decentralization, globalization of education, and the new managerial approaches to university decision-making processes. In the past few years, individual and collective values have been put under increasing strain due to increasing demands for change and re-invention both personally and collegially.

Resilience studies are not new, but what is resilience? To be resilient according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976) suggests to "spring back, resume original form" and that a resilient person was someone "readily recovering from depression etc., buoyant". In other dictionaries, it is referred to as a state of elasticity, to return to a similar or previous form after facing some stress. From the definitions, it appears that resilience requires an ability to adapt to a crisis and have the capacity to draw on previously stored resources to respond to an unexpected change.

Resilience as demonstrated by an individual may be partly due to the individual having a strong sense of self-efficacy; however, self-efficacy is not a pre-cursor to resilience. A resilient individual may not be self-efficacious, but instead display a stoic determination, which may be more about "hanging in there" when there are no other perceived choices. As noted in Ostrow, (2003), an individual that has a strong sense of self-efficacy however, will be resilient because they will be more likely to have been prepared for change and to be able to take control of their situation.

*"..People must have a robust sense of personal efficacy to sustain the perseverant effort needed to succeed..."*  
Bandura (1994)

## The Study

This study attempts to observe the resilience of academics faced with continual change, and to see how this impacts on the collegial relationships. The data and discussion are interwoven to enable the process of making sense of the narratives in context. This is followed by a conclusion, a summary of findings and a short discussion on the implications of this study.

## Literature review

### *Preparing for change*

Glavovic et al (2002) refers to a term he has coined: "layers of resilience". He tells us that communities and/or individuals have to develop layers of strength so that they have the "capacity to absorb sudden change", Glavovic et al (2002:3). He talks about communities needing to "thicken the layers of resilience" by creating a healthy and sustainable community or work environment, which includes building up and reinforcing the social capital

Ostrow (2003) talks about the need for balance so that people are more able to persevere and adapt in a crisis. She talks about individuals being more tolerant, innovative and open to new things if the changing or ambiguous environment is perceived in a positive way.

So as suggested by Glavovic et al. (2002) and Ostrow (2003), academics are more likely to adapt to change when the environment is perceived as sustainable, tolerant, and supportive, and particularly if an opportunity for collegiality is reinforced.

Glavovic et al (2002) argues that individuals and groups need to be able to develop skills and knowledge to build up a sustainable lifestyle. This will enhance their ability to cope with adversity and change, an essential part of enhancing the capacity to be resilient.

### *Resilience is built up by valuing people*

Bell (2002) talks about a need for building an "enterprise culture" that involves empowerment, purpose, trust and accountability. Employees are encouraged to use initiative, to develop communities of practice and have access to mentoring programs. In Coutu (2002), she suggests that organizations must make the most of resources, both human and physical so that creativity may blossom.

Encouraging environments are necessary to explore ideas and be creative, however based on the many recent articles that write about academic stress, suggests that academics are not feeling valued and this is a major issue facing universities today. University managers need to find ways to build the level of individual and organizational resilience so that their institutions are healthy places to work, are able to be adaptive and remain viable into the future. Gillespie et al, (2001) discuss the lack of support for staff and how this will reduce the ability of staff to be resilient and adapt to the many changes and pressures of work.

### *Resilience and common values*

Glavovic et al (2002) argue that building up shared meaning within communities during the good times, will have long-term value in relationship building, providing recognition of achievements and support for cultural values. Stough et al. (2003), suggest that staff mediate their high levels of work stress and maintain a workable level of morale by drawing on the social network. They suggest that while staff may experience high work stress and poor management, at the same time maintain a high regard and commitment for the mission of the organization, which may be a reason for maintaining a sense of resilience.

Kazanis & Folkman (cited in Gillespie et. al 2003) suggest that if staff members have a sense of control in their work, social support and clarity of roles, and are able to make sense of the meaning of their work, and then they are less likely to be affected by stress. Bolton (2004) suggests that organizations need to support staff to develop their sense of control, perceived as self-efficacy, by providing staff with opportunities to build their own skill and knowledge levels and thus their preparedness for change.

## Research Design

This research study was guided by the interpretive paradigm, that suggests

*"empathic understanding of human behaviour....that reality is not 'out there' but in the minds of people...systems of meanings that actors use to make sense of their world...contains the meanings people use to make sense of their life ...approach is*

*inductive....presents reality symbolically in a descriptive form....value neutrality is neither necessary nor possible"*

*Sarantakos (1998 pp.35-38)*

This paradigm is particularly appropriate for a study of academics' perspectives and systems of meanings they use within the pressure and demands of a modern university. The data is subjective, socially constructed and has been interpreted with the understanding that the participants are "players" within a specific socio-cultural environment.

An ethnographic methodology was used within the interpretive paradigm, as this was a study into the culture of academic work through the eyes of the academics themselves. The researcher was embedded within the faculty culture, due to the academic support role being played, however the academics were the experts of their own worldview within that culture under analysis and that their interpretation and relation to it was the critical source of data to be collected and analysed.

The purpose of the original research undertaken was to explore how meaning was constructed, and as a result, how a sense of resilience was reflected in academic life in an Australian University. For the purpose of this paper, the theme of collegiality is explored with the hope that it might provide some insight into how resilience is demonstrated by academics through their collegial relationships within an Australian university.

### ***The participants***

The academics included in this qualitative study were drawn from a business faculty, and were either employed at Academic B or C level. They were specifically targeted as they could be regarded as being successful and resilient professionals, "success" this study is defined as having a recognized research track record by the university research output records, at least 3 years of satisfactory teaching experience (in terms of student feedback survey results), and evidence of considerable contribution to university life through active membership on decision making committees, formal and informal leadership roles, evidence of mentoring others, and contacts within the wider community.

Participants from the targeted group were sent individual letters and invited to take part. Nine participants were individually interviewed for between 60 to 90 minutes by the researcher.

Interviews were free ranging conversations around their perspectives of experiences of change at the university, with the following themes being explored: perception of support, leadership, identity and roles, mission, opportunities for creativity, and sense of meaning. Each interview was fully transcribed. This paper is focusing on data emerging from perspectives around collegial relationships that was identified and became a new theme through the process.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Change and the perception of academic collegial support***

All participants expressed a need to feel supported in their work. Most participants reported that if colleagues supported them, then they had a greater capacity to support others, and this resulted in experiencing a sense of community and resilience. According to the Gillespie et. al. (2001:66) *"talking with co-workers about work and 'having a whinge' and a laugh together, sharing one's workload..."* are particular moderators of stress relating to collegial support

Academics spoke about the value of having the support of experienced staff to help them build their academic skill capacity *"...I had a mentor, ( ), she was very inclusive, she was probably the only person that I think I have known in the School...who really has nurtured underlings..."* (Participant 6) One of the academics interpreted part of her role as needing to

support her colleagues in a formal way, and was quite prepared to share her experience with less experienced colleagues as reflected in this comment: *"I organized a couple of workshops on how to become a researcher...I feel I have got a strong mentoring role to different people."* (Participant 7)

In another case, an academic spoke about building her research skills through her collegial contacts, *"a chance comment, led to quite a research publication record... (.) and I began a career in research, and continued to write and we branched out and always wrote together and with other people as well..."* (Participant 1) and how her experience of being mentored led to her mentoring others *"...leading to a building up of a number of people's skills and confidence and expanding their careers as well..."* (Participant 1)

In all cases, collegial support was highly regarded; particularly the informal modes of support where "like-minded" staff get together to discuss and support each other. *"...working with other people can take you to places that you could never go on your own, because there is a limit to your own creativity.... because you are dealing with your own frame of reference."* (Participant 7) Informal contact with colleagues is highly valued as the way to maintain the supportive relationships that have developed *"the most effective means of communication is to have coffee with the people you work with, have lunch with them and talk about particular problems.."* (Participant 4)

This participant values the close relationships he has with the colleagues in his discipline group, and reflects on what they mean to him in this quote: *"When staff work closely together and are friends, there is a very supportive environment.."* (Participant 4)

### **Effects of Structural change**

How structural change affects the collegial support network was a major concern expressed by most participants. It is clear from the participants' responses that academics need to recognize early the likely affect of changes, and begin to plan a strategy to prepare themselves for the changes that may be required. *"...I think I would put more structure in order to meet with those people rather than just relying on corridor's, I might instigate coffee or whatever.."* (Participant 3) This academic was facing an office relocation that would place him far away from his collegial network

In another case, this academic was commenting on the temporary relocation from individual offices to open plan offices, and how this was affecting his relationships with his colleagues during the period. *"it has been really good for our relationships...when you have an office to yourself it is more productive but you don't know what other people are doing...seeing all their things and getting to know them better...informal support is probably better in a room like we have at the moment...than it does wandering up and down the passage looking for someone to do something for you..."* (Participant 9)

Structural change can have detrimental affects on the informal and collegial relationships that have been built up to support the individual. This can be a major frustration for staff, as suggested by Gillespie et. al. (2001) referring to the stress experienced by staff caused by organizational restructuring and mergers:

*"a lack of consideration of its impact on staff, and poor communication of the rationale for change (i.e. the intended benefits) and 'forewarning' of its implementation....little opportunity to consolidate one change process, and gain the intended benefits, before the next was implemented."*

Gillespie et al (2001:64).

### **Effects of having a sense of choice**

The research suggests that academics need to become pro-active in order to take control, in order to prepare for the changing nature of their work. Four out of the nine participants believed they had control over their destiny in the face of major change. They voiced an inclination to pro-actively share their concerns, made preparations and this suggests that they had a strong sense of self-efficacy. However the other five participants did not seem to have this sense of control, instead they seem to sense having less capacity for choice and were inclined to make the best of the situation and not "rock the boat". This suggests

that people vary in their sense of self-efficacy in the face of change, which may relate to their level of seniority or a personal characteristic. When each participant was asked about what they would do when faced with a major change, three of the participants suggested pro-active steps that they would take in response to change, the rest were more inclined to take a more passive approach.

According to Vickers and Kouzmin (2001) passivity may be due to not wanting to appear to be having difficulty with change.

*"In organizational life, emotions generally are discouraged, with the term 'emotional' having negative connotations associated with a person who is unbalanced, unsound..."*

*Vickers and Kouzmin, (2001:104)*

It is suggested that both responses (being pro-active, or taking a passive approach) can be interpreted as a resilient response; one being the stoic, "putting up with things" approach, while the more pro-active approach suggests that for some people there is a greater sense of a capacity to have a choice.

Informal support depended on the building of individual relationships with like-minded academic staff. These relationships provided opportunities for individuals to collaborate on research, to discuss teaching and to build skills and knowledge together as required.

These following excerpts suggest that these individuals feel the need for giving and receiving support from their peers, and understand the value to the self in giving support to others.

### ***Giving and receiving support***

In some cases there is a recognition that not all academics are inclined to look for support, nor give it to others; *"Look you are not going to turn solo academics into collegial people, who do their job, and probably do it well but they do not contribute anything else to anybody else..." (Participant 7)*

A senior participant in the study was quite clear that she did not need, nor seek the support of colleagues. She claimed that seeking support was for her unnecessary, and that academic work by nature, was solitary work and staff should be able to manage on their own *"I am self-motivated..." (Participant 1)* *"You don't look for it?" (Researcher)* *"No, .... ah I don't and I don't get it either..." (Participant 1)* However this participant also was very supportive of building up the skills of less experienced academics

Some less senior academics however are seen as being very altruistic in their informal supportive roles as suggested in this excerpt from one of the participants: *"...and yet there are others who are always doing things for other people and probably to their own detriment... like ( ), not part of her workload, but because she sees it as important and she will do it" (Participant 7)* This informal support is part of the hidden nature of much of the collegial support network.

In some cases, having multidisciplinary groups has helped build collegial relationships as they have pushed staff into working collegially across different disciplines. *"...I have been working with (discipline group) and it has been very much a team thing, that has been really good..." (Participant 2)* This academic suggested that if she was working within her own discipline group, she would have been more isolated and experience less support from her colleagues. *"...I would have been the only management accountant and probably wouldn't have had much collegiality in that sense, but (discipline group) has been much more multidisciplinary so we have worked well..." (Participant 2)* This suggests that diversity sometimes provides some opportunity to build new collegial relationships

The value of having a group of colleagues with whom you can collaborate and depend upon is very important for staff to be able to respond to change and build a sense of

resilience. This framework noted in Fig. 1 provides summary of the inter-relationships between collaborating, supporting and socializing.

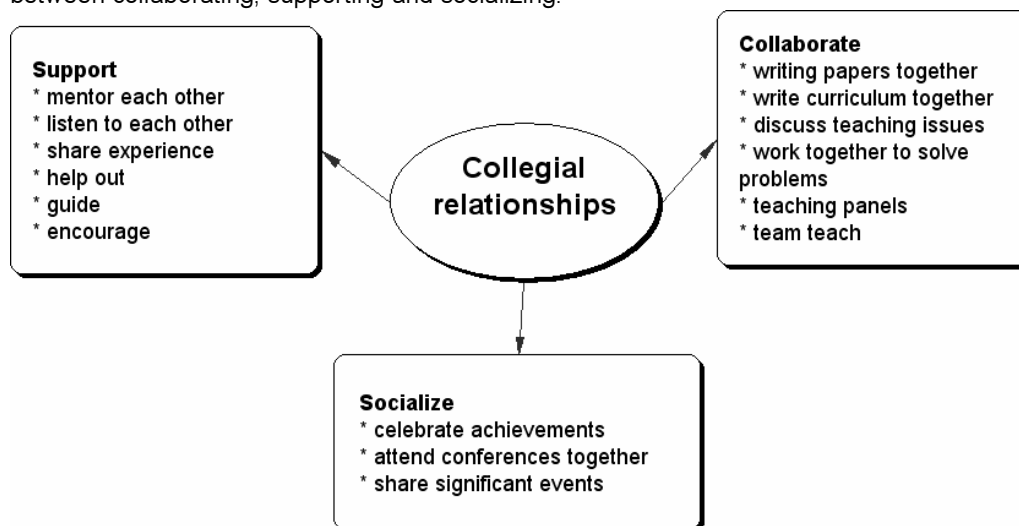


Fig. 1: Framework depicting perceptions of collegiality

This study suggests that the mythical stereotype of the autonomous, idiosyncratic and self-absorbed academic is not realistic in this Australian University. Rather, academics depend on the collegial network to cope with the raft of changes they are facing on a day-to-day basis. Recent events such as staff moves, role changes, office re-locations, all have an impact on the social and cultural context of these highly valued collegial relationships. As suggested by Glavovic et. al (2002) building up the “layers of resilience” is about maintaining a culture that will “enable, inspire and indeed empower.....helps preserve and build social capital – it is often one of the strongest assets that people have to combat threats to their survival and well-being..” Glavovic et. al. (2002:5)

#### **Change impacts on collegial relationships**

Change has an impact on the collegial relationships, and in some cases it can actually play a role in dismantling the collegial networks that sustain the academics as suggested by this excerpt: “When I started here there seemed to be a lot livelier debate around academic issues on an informal basis, I mean people would stop and have coffee and talk... maybe because I have changed and workload commitments those informal debates don’t happen” (Participant 7)

Another participant talked about how change can have a major impact on relationships that have been built up over time, “change becomes most impact-full on me, when it changes the people with whom I am working, even more than change in task.” (Participant 5) and this can have a lasting impact on the morale of staff and their ability to be resilient as suggested by this academic. “...if I suffer the loss of or significant change to the social context I personally find that as very disruptive and it is the thing that is most likely going to cause a withdrawal on my part” (Participant 5)

One senior level participant talked about playing what she saw as an important social role that involved being the social “glue” for her discipline group. This staff member chose to play a social connector role, however as a result of an unsatisfactory event that occurred at work she withdrew for a time and noticed with interest what effect this had on her colleagues around her. “I stopped doing that [being nice to people] and people instantly noticed it, it was amazing, I wasn’t doing anything different, except not being so much “hello” “oh! How are you.... and also I was a bit edgy with people, ...and numbers of people really noticed it, and thought I was sick, pissed off, whatever, whatever...” (Participant 5) If staff morale is dependent on voluntary “social connectors” who choose to play these informal roles, when it is taken away through relocations, staff changes, etc., this

may be an unforeseen risk to future academic morale that management should be aware of.

This study reveals that there is a perception from participants that the university does not seem to value the collegial nature of academic work so critical to sustaining the informal support network. *"I think that it is mostly left out of the change formula, because change management in organizations is usually around systems, processes, rules, that sort of stuff, but the transitions stuff is what happens to people"* (Participant 5). Academics are less likely to respond to change in a positive way, if they are feeling alienated, unsupported and devalued by the organization.

### **Colleagues matter**

It is clear from the transcripts of participants that collegial relationships are highly regarded by many of the participants in the study. In describing how she goes about mentoring new academics, this participant sees her role as assisting them to build their self-efficacy and academic capacity. *"I have had the three staff that I work with ... all new academics, ... so I have worked (with them) on teamwork things in terms of designing subjects, in terms of them coming back and describing to me what is happening in the class, me asking more questions, raising their awareness, trying new things for the next week, then coming back to talk to me about it."* (Participant 2)

And for another academic *"at the end of the day, it is the social fabric that supports people, we kid ourselves if we think we are self-made, we are highly socially constructed and if you want to know what you are going to be like in two years time, look at the people around you, because if you don't like the look of that, then look out, because that is what you are about to become, we are very socially shaped especially in our place of work where we spend a lot of time"* (Participant 5) So these socially constructed collegial networks are the place for sustaining academic work. It appears from these comments; collegial networks are critical to the well being of staff.

### **Meaningful impact of working with colleagues**

These excerpts reflect the value and meaning participants place on working with colleagues. *"If you are isolated, it is incredibly difficult, I think I am lucky, I work in a small team who are all passionate about teaching..."* (Participant 2) In another case, *"...I get my kicks when I can help other people and myself for that matter to deal with complex issues in constructive ways – that is a source of meaning for me..."* (Participant 5)

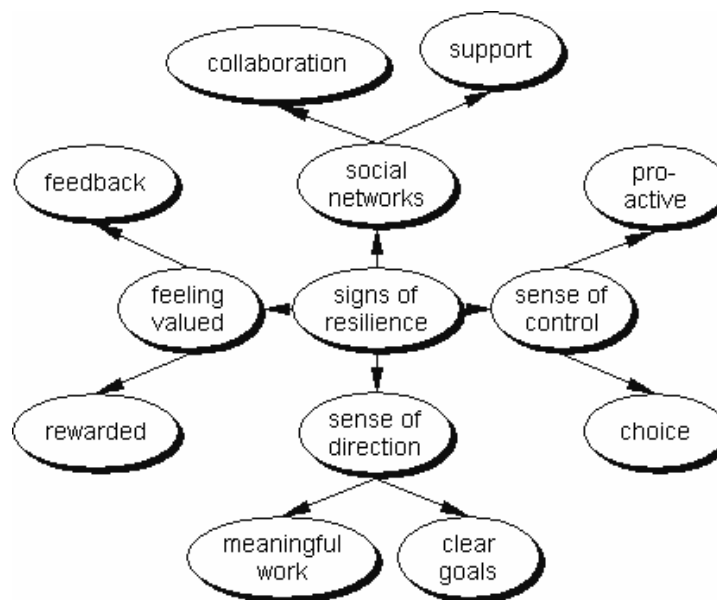
The collegial network can have a major impact on an academic career: *"...I think there are good career opportunities there, it is the luck of the draw whether you get in with a group of people who would make good colleagues and encourage things..."* (Participant 2)

### **Conclusion**

This paper summarizes some of the findings around the theme of collegiality from a bigger study looking at the impact of change on academics, and how a sense of resilience is reflected in their lives. This paper is looking at academic perceptions of change and the impact it has on collegial relationships. What has emerged from the data is that collegial relationships are an important social construct that assists academics to feel supported in their academic work and these relationships have a direct impact on their ability to adapt and demonstrate a sense of resilience.

A model of how resilience is reflected has been developed to summarize the important elements that build resilience based on the analysis of the data in this research, see Fig. 2. Factors that influence whether an individual and/or group will be resilient seem to come down to a combination of these elements.





*Fig. 2: - Signs of resilience*

Participants during the interviews were reflecting about their collegial relationships and how these had impacted on their working lives and had begun to think about these relationships in new ways, reviewing their own perceptions as they went. The common threads seem to be that participants were not averse to change, but that they need to be well prepared, provided with realistic expectations, have a supportive infrastructure, provided with opportunities for building strong social and collegial networks and time to build their capacity for change.

There have been a number of findings around collegial work that have emerged through this study, which are listed below.

- External threats to survival can place faculties/colleagues in competition with each other, thus limiting their ability to collaborate effectively and take up opportunities.
- Academics depend upon their colleagues for encouragement, emotional and professional support;
- Academics need to feel supported in their work;
- Academics are often playing informal roles that are very supportive of the social structure of the collegial network
- Academics place a high value on the collegial nature of academic work; the university needs to also place a higher value on this and provide support for these networks.

#### ***Implications for university decision makers***

If university decision makers are interested in providing a sustainable work place, where academic staff are creative, adaptable, and innovative and share a strong identification with the mission of the organization, they need to be aware of what elements make up a supportive workplace. Policy-making needs to be a more transparent and inclusive process. Academics need to feel valued enough to be able to have real input into the directions of the organization and to feel they are being heard. Opportunities to support staff to build skills of “portability” must be made available for them to maintain a sense of self-efficacy, so that they feel they have a real choice as to where they wish to be.

Whatever research may be undertaken, this project has identified the importance of providing support for the individual academic through institutional and collegial avenues. Academic staff who are part of a strong community of peers, sharing a mission and sense that their contributions are valued will be able to not only adapt to change, but will be able to innovate and develop new opportunities to the benefit of all

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