



**Research Note 2024-01**

**Role modeling resilience via belonging**

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**October 2023**

**United States Army Research Institute  
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences**

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**October 2023**

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# ROLE MODELING RESILIENCE VIA BELONGING

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Research Requirement:

Regardless of the industry, job location, or company size, it is important that employees feel a sense of belonging within their job and confidence in their ability to be resilient during change or stressful situations. This research investigated the impact of role models on follower resilience and belonging at work. In line with social learning theory, results showed that individuals who indicated having a role model had higher levels of resilience. Further, this relationship was partially mediated by belonging, suggesting that role models inspire belonging which can motivate resilience.

### Procedure:

This research investigated role models as a source of inspiration for increasing follower resilience. To understand how role models can increase resilience, we drew from a process model of social learning theory which explains that employees view role models overcoming challenges or persevering through adversity, then attempt to model their actions which promotes resilience (Bandura & Jeffery, 1973). Going a step further, we investigated feelings of belonging as the mechanism through which role models could improve follower resilience. Data to test our hypotheses came from a sample of 2,981 junior enlisted Soldiers in the U.S. Army. They completed measures online as part of a larger research effort, responding to questions about whether they had at least one role model in the Army, feelings of belonging, and level of resilience.

### Findings:

Hypothesis 1 was tested using an independent samples t-test, which compared resilience levels of individuals who have at least one role model to those without a role model. This was supported ( $t(2463) = 12.01, p < .01$ ) such that Soldiers who indicated they had at least one role model were higher in resilience ( $M = 3.92, SD = .61$ ) compared to those without a role model ( $M = 3.59, SD = .68$ ). Hypothesis 2 was tested using PROCESS Model 4 and 5,000 bootstrap samples in SPSS (Hayes, 2017), with the predictor coded as 1 (not having any role models) and 2 (having at least one role model). Results showed a significant indirect effect of role modeling on resilience via belonging ( $B = .27, 95\% CI = .23, .30$ ). Supporting our partial mediation hypothesis, the direct effect of having a role model on resilience was also significant ( $B = .06, 95\% CI = .01, .11$ ).

### Utilization and Dissemination of Findings:

Finding a role model at work could directly benefit individuals' perceptions that they are resilient. This research suggests that organizations wishing to build resilience in employees can encourage individuals to form bonds, albeit indirectly, with role models they find to represent the qualities they wish to embody. Further, the current research found that individuals felt more

resilient when their role model inspired greater feelings of belonging at work. This suggests that belonging is an important factor in strengthening resilience when Soldiers have a role model. By fostering role modeling, organizations can increase employees' sense of belonging and support employees in overcoming obstacles through increased resilience, which can improve both individual-level well-being in addition to broader organizational functions and goals.

ROLE MODELING RESILIENCE VIA BELONGING

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# ROLE MODELING RESILIENCE VIA BELONGING

## INTRODUCTION

In times of social disconnection, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that employees feel they belong to their workplace. Belonging is considered a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and studies show that a lack of social relationships negatively impacts physical health and emotional well-being (e.g., Cohen, 2004; Fiori et al., 2006). Employees across job sectors are at risk of experiencing this disconnect, which can decrease overall physical and mental health even for the most resilient individuals. Resilience has been defined as being able to bounce back from challenges while finding resources to boost well-being (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2009), and while many resources have been proposed (e.g., greater autonomy, meditation, social support) this paper focuses on the resource of a role model who can perform successful coping behaviors that can be observed and replicated. We propose that aspiring to be like one's role model or perceiving relatability can provide a sense of belonging.

Feeling disconnected or isolated at work can hurt mental and emotional health if employees feel ill-equipped to meet the demands of their job. Role models can provide a sense of belonging that motivates resilience in employees. Building resilience can allow employees to feel that they can recover from stressful events and find resources to succeed when encountering challenges (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2009). The impact of role modeling on resilience, and the impact on resilience through belonging can be explained using social learning theory. This behavioral theory expands upon how learning can occur through continuous interactions between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura & Walters, 1977). In a work setting, employees can observe and then match the behaviors of a chosen role model, who can be a leader, peer, or any individual they wish to emulate or strive to be like. Followers can gain a sense of belonging by selecting role models similar to them, making the employee feel like a part of a work group or the larger organization. The follower can become more like their role model by successfully imitating the behaviors that are found valuable.

Elaborating on social learning theory, Bandura and Jeffrey (1973) proposed a model outlining the process from modeled events to matching performance. Two key components of this process are that a role model receives a follower's attention and then something acts as a motivator for successful performance matching. Rather than using social learning theory to look only at a model and desired outcome, we consider an explanatory mechanism as a motivator of the desired outcome. Specifically, we highlight how role modeling can influence the outcome of resilience and how belonging can act as a motivator explaining the process from role modeling to resilience. These variables were chosen given that having greater resilience at work can help employees to see situations as challenges rather than hindrances, commit to goals to overcome these challenges, and foster a sense of control (e.g., Flinchbaugh et al., 2015). Feelings of belonging could impact resilience, such that employees can look to role models when under stress to either find inspiration or replicate behaviors that allow them to recover from challenges (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2009). Our research addresses a recent call for research that sheds light on interventions to cultivate belonging and increase resilience, benefiting individuals and communities (Allen et al., 2021).

## **Social Learning Intervention for Resilience**

Social learning theory provides a natural theoretical foundation for considering a resilience intervention in an organizational setting. Considering resilience as the intended outcome within Bandura and Jeffery's process model, we suggest that having a role model at work can increase employee resilience because this role model demonstrates behaviors that can lead to a desired outcome (Morgenroth, Ryan, & Peters, 2015). Of note, role modeling impacts behavior through motivational and informational means (Bandura & Walters, 1977) which does not require direct contact with the model, rather an individual views a behavior then determines how to reproduce that behavior (Bandura & Walters, 1977). In line with social learning theory, employees can find role models who have overcome challenges or unfavorable circumstances and observe successful coping behaviors. These role models can serve as inspiration to not give up and their behaviors can be imitated when employees feel stressed or stagnant in their careers.

The individual(s) chosen to be a role model could be an employee's supervisor, peer, or anyone presumed to be relevant to that employee. The employee then observes this model's behaviors and attempts to replicate them. For example, an individual may attempt to replicate a role model's ability to adjust to challenging situations, thus increasing their own resilience and ability to recover from career difficulties or other hardships. This is supported by previous studies finding that leaders' resilient behavior positively impacts subordinates' resilience (Harland et al., 2005). Other studies have demonstrated the success of social learning interventions in various contexts, such as using role modeling to increase computer skills (Yi & Davis, 2003), improve math performance (Marx & Ko, 2012), and increase assertiveness in intellectual settings (Asgari et al., 2010). Focusing on this direct influence of role models on employee resilience, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who indicate they have at least one role model will be higher in resilience compared to those without a role model.

## **Cultivating Belonging to Increase Resilience**

While role models can directly influence resilience, as described above, the process model of social learning theory highlights the importance of explanatory mechanisms linking modeled actions to an outcome (Bandura & Jeffery, 1973). Specifically, the follower pays attention to the role model, internalizes the actions of the model, determines how to reproduce those actions, and then something happens to motivate actual performance (Bandura & Jeffery, 1973). This research focuses on a motivational mechanism leading to an outcome, meaning either an internal or external force that reinforces observed behaviors of the model. Many forces can serve as motivators, but the need to belong is powerful in that belongingness is argued to be a universal need which implies the individual is valued and accepted by others (Leary & Guadagno, 2004). This is in line with previous research showing the importance of belonging for psychological resilience and suggesting increasing feelings of belonging as a stress intervention strategy (Silveira et al., 2022).

When discussing belonging as a motivator of resilience, we are referring to state belonging. Also relevant to the experience of stress and coping are the need to belong and trait belonging. The core psychological need to belong is a dispositional desire to create interpersonal attachments that can prevent anxiety and loneliness, while trait belonging is relatively stable over time and across situations (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). While the need to belong and trait belonging likely impact levels of employee resilience, these qualities are enduring and difficult to change. In contrast, state belonging is a situation-specific sense of belonging which is influenced by daily life events and stressors (Allen et al., 2021). For example, state belonging involves an employee's current perception of their connection and importance to their workplace. Feelings of state belonging can change throughout the day, similar to other emotions, and depends on situations encountered, meaning it can be influenced by important people such as role models.

According to Hagerty et al. (1992), belonging includes feeling valued and accepted, along with perceiving a fit with one's environment (e.g., job, work group, organization). Seeing as people naturally want to fit in and feel valuable, the desire to belong acts as a motivator such that people strive to achieve state belonging. While many organizations attempt to instill a sense of belonging using various socialization tactics (e.g., Allen et al., 2017), these are rarely targeted toward individual employees. Previous research shows that new employees with opinions, expertise, or social backgrounds that differ from coworkers experience low group cohesion and are more likely to quit despite socialization efforts to generate belonging (Hurst et al., 2012). If role models are used in place of typical socialization tactics, each employee can select a role model who possesses the specific qualities they desire, which can lead to finding similarities that facilitate feelings of belonging.

Studies show that role models can be supervisors, coworkers, or other members of an organization who can facilitate belonging by influencing workers' expectations and self-confidence (Filstad, 2004), and improving learning and career progression (Vinales, 2015). Thinking about the link from belonging to resilience, feeling competent and confident with realistic expectations and goals have been considered as tools for building workplace resilience (Bobek, 2002). Putting these ideas together and considering the longer process of linking role models to resilience through belonging, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2: Belonging will partially mediate the relationship between having a role model and resilience.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The sample included 2,981 junior enlisted Soldiers in the U.S. Army. Participants were on average 24 years old ( $M = 23.69$  years,  $SD = 4.43$  years). The sample was primarily white (White = 53.9%; Black, Not Hispanic = 20.1%; Hispanic = 17.2%; Asian or Pacific Islander = 7.5%; American Indian or Alaska Native = 1.2%) and male (75.1%). Participants completed all measures online as part of a larger research effort.

## Measures

**Role Model Status.** Role model status was assessed using “Do you have at least one role model in the Army?” Participants responded with yes, no, or unsure and those unsure were removed from analysis.

**Belonging.** Belonging was measured using a scale from Walton and Cohen (2007) adapted for the Army, with seven items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Example items include, “People generally accept me” and “I know what I need to do to succeed.” The scale reliability was .83.

**Resilience.** Resilience was assessed using seven items rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*;  $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ). The scale captures overcoming difficulties and functioning effectively during stressful situations (Knapp & Kirkendall, 2020), and had acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .73$ ). Three items asked what participants were likely to do when faced with a stressful situation, with an example item, “I am likely to remain calm,” while four items asked what participants did in the past six months when faced with a stressful situation with a sample item, “I was confident in my ability to get through the stressful situation.”

## RESULTS

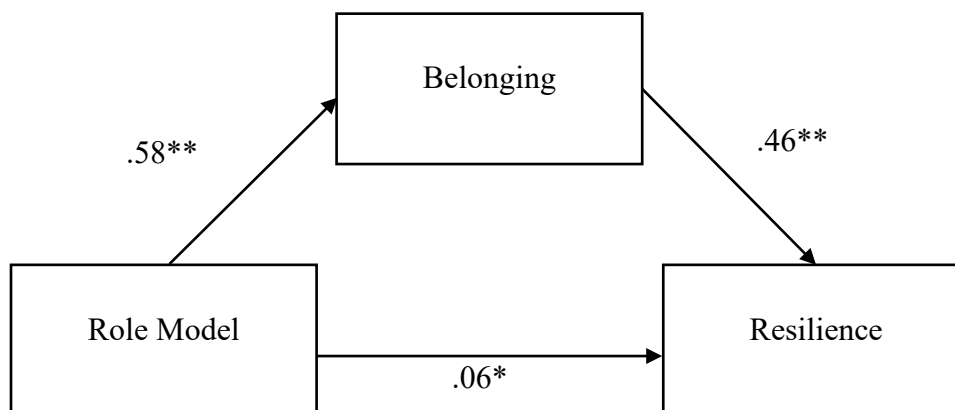
Hypothesis 1 was tested using an independent samples t-test, which compared resilience levels of individuals who have at least one role model to those without a role model. This hypothesis was supported ( $t(2463) = 12.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ) such that Soldiers who indicated they had at least one role model were higher in resilience ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) compared to those without a role model ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = .68$ ).

Hypothesis 2 was tested using PROCESS Model 4 and 5,000 bootstrap samples in SPSS (Hayes, 2017), with the predictor coded as 1 (not having any role models) and 2 (having at least one role model). Results showed a significant indirect effect of role modeling on resilience via belonging ( $B = .27$ , 95% CI = .23, .30). Supporting our partial mediation hypothesis, the direct effect of having a role model on resilience was also significant ( $B = .06$ , 95% CI = .01, .11). Results for the full path model are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

**Table 1***Direct and Indirect Effects of Role Models on Resilience through Belonging*

Direct Effects						
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Role Models on						
Belonging	0.58	0.03	19.25	<.01	0.52	0.64
Resilience	0.06	0.03	2.48	0.01	0.01	0.11
Belonging on						
Resilience	0.46	0.02	29.08	<.01	0.43	0.49
Total Effect of Role Model on Resilience						
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
					LL	UL
	0.33	0.03	12.03	<.01	0.28	0.38
Indirect Effect of Role Model on Resilience via Belonging						
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI			
			LL	UL		
	0.27	0.02	0.23	0.30		

Note. *n* = 2463. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

**Figure 1***Path Model Predicting Resilience*

Note: All coefficients are unstandardized.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .001

## DISCUSSION

Recognizing the importance of both belonging and resilience in today's competitive and constantly changing work environment, we investigated role models as a source of inspiration for resilience. Role modeling may be a more practical solution compared to existing interventions to foster belonging and resilience which are limited to a narrow population (e.g., Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014 looking at police officers) or are resource intensive because they require individualized planning (e.g., Jones & Gallus, 2021). Role models can be found in any work environment to show what is achievable and demonstrate specific behaviors that can lead to that achievement (Morgenroth, Ryan, & Peters, 2015). This process through which role modeling results in matching behavior can be explained using social learning theory such that employees view role models overcoming challenges or persevering through adversity, then attempt to model their actions which promotes resilience. Supporting this, our results showed that having at least one role model was related to overall higher levels of follower resilience.

Going a step further, we investigated a reason why role models increased follower resilience. Drawing from a process model that suggests motivation as an explaining mechanism (Bandura & Jeffery, 1973), a test of mediation showed that role models can increase belonging, which then increases resilience. Belonging is considered fundamental to human well-being regardless of the context (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but in the workplace, belonging has been shown as essential to seeing work as meaningful (Schnell et al., 2013) and can inspire engagement and performance (Filstad et al., 2019). Including belonging in our statistical model substantially decreased the size of the relationship between role modeling and resilience, showing that a key part of employees remaining resilient is finding role models who inspire a sense of belonging.

### Limitations & Future Directions

While this research highlights new insights for facilitating resilience, we note a few limitations. First, we hypothesized a process model implying that having a role model could create a sense of belonging that in turn increases resilience. Considering the cross-sectional nature of the data, we caution interpretations of causality (e.g., Shadish et al., 2002). While this research provides a necessary first step toward considering the importance of role models for resilience along with the potential role of belongingness in resilience interventions, future research should collect at least three waves of data to establish temporal precedence and more adequately test our mediation hypothesis.

Second, this research did not consider all motivators that may link modeled behaviors to matching performance in the social learning process. Belonging was a strong motivator of resilience in our sample of Soldiers, but other work environments do not have the same level of interpersonal contact and employees might not have the same expectations about belongingness. For example, feeling accepted by coworkers or comfortable in one's work group are not always applicable to individuals such as independent contractors. Someone who works independently may have role models who inspire resilience via other motivators such as self-efficacy or meaningfulness. Future research can examine how role models motivate resilience depending on the type of work.

## Conclusions

In summary, finding a role model at work might directly benefit employees' self-perceptions that they are resilient. This research provides evidence that organizations wishing to build resilience in employees can encourage individuals to form bonds, albeit indirectly, with role models they find to represent the qualities they wish to embody. Perhaps more interestingly, the current research found that Soldiers felt more resilient when their role model inspired greater feelings of belonging at work. This suggests that belonging is an important factor in strengthening resilience when individuals have a role model. In short, organizations that wish to bolster both resilience and belonging should encourage employees to find role models that embody the organization's goals, values, and spirit, so that employees can feel a greater sense of connection to their job and team, as well as their organization. By fostering role modeling, organizations can increase employees' sense of belonging and support employees in overcoming obstacles through increased resilience, which can improve both individual-level well-being in addition to broader organizational functions and goals.

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