

Keynote Topic

“Resilience is a natural part of our life.”

New York trauma researcher George Bonanno explores human beings’ astonishing capacity for self-healing



What exactly is it that underpins a person’s inner resilience? In the search for an answer, we turn to the findings of trauma research, a field of study that deals empirically with our ability to bounce back from life’s most challenging moments. For many years now,

George A. Bonanno, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University, has been looking into how people cope with distressing experiences and set about healing deep psychological wounds. Our inherent strength of mind is often underestimated, he explains.

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EVEN AS THE TWIN TOWERS were still crumbling to the ground, the realization was dawning that pretty much nothing – in global political terms, at least – would ever be the same again. Indeed, the world is still struggling to cope with the fallout from this enduring collective trauma. However, it is not only the leaders of the U.S. and its allies who have felt the chill of a new vulnerability since that September day; the citizens of New York were shaken to their psychological and emotional core. A few months on, a group of 2,800 volunteers helped Prof. George A. Bonanno, who witnessed the devastating consequences of the attacks from the campus of Columbia University, to explore how 9/11 had impacted on the psyche of New Yorkers. The results of his study took experts by surprise; our psychological powers, he concluded, are so effective that systematic recall work of the kind carried out through psychoanalysis is in most cases superfluous, if not actually damaging. “Our emotional make-up and repertoire,” explains Bonanno, “gives us a very effective tool that allows us to deal with loss and trauma relatively quickly.”

Bonanno’s studies set him on collision course with a traditional pillar of psychotherapy. The conventional school of thought has it that the psyche tends to suppress negative experiences. This can be counteracted with systematic therapy, which pulls experiences back repeatedly into the consciousness. Bonanno disputes the idea that suppressed feelings will constantly push back up to the surface if they are not fully analyzed and resolved: “It is not really a matter of suppressing or repressing. Feelings are not like balls in water, which you can push down but will only come up again somewhere else.” This nineteenth century industrial metaphor was used to understand the mind through hydraulics but, says the New York-based psychologist, it is unsuited as a way of explaining the psyche.

Bonanno uses the powerful examples of sadness and fear to highlight the mechanisms used by our system of psychological checks and balances to deal with experiences earmarked “difficult to process”: “When we experience a loss, for example, we activate an emotion

response program for sadness. We turn inward and that helps us take stock of what has happened. We slow down and we stop paying attention to the world around us, because we are paying attention internally.”

A circular process

However, Bonanno is also keen to emphasize that this “emotion response program” is not about sinking into a state of psychological sadness, from which the road to recovery is long and hard. Instead, he refers to a circular structure: “It’s important to understand that, contrary to common perception, feelings are ephemeral. We have emotions which are very brief. When we feel sadness, for example, we experience it for usually a few seconds or minutes, maybe at the most for a couple of hours. Since emotions are not a steady state, there are often times when we forget the experience. The effective mechanism of working through distressing experiences consists of visualizing the event for a moment and opening the door to the feelings that this triggers, before forgetting it again and returning to focus on the world around us. This program runs through a circular process, which repeats itself over time.”

This oscillation between different feelings – the swing between visualizing and forgetting – is therefore not a process of suppression, the mind securing an uneasy truce; what we are talking about here is a healthy, natural and successful mechanism for processing traumatic experiences and personal crises, such as relationship break-downs, serious illness or professional setbacks. The astonishing thing is not that we manage to continue with our normal lives despite traumatic experiences; we’re barking up the wrong tree there, says Bonanno – “Resilience is a natural part of our life!” No, the real question is why not everybody possesses sufficient resilience to withstand psychological trauma. What makes a person more (or less) resilient? These exceptions to the rule, as Bonanno refers to them – people who cannot cope on their own and have to come to terms with the experience systematically and with



RESUMÉ George Bonanno



His specialty, a German news magazine once wrote, was “dealing with death.” And indeed the focus of George A. Bonanno’s research is on how human beings come to terms with the loss of loved ones, trauma and other distressing experiences, and the related role of resilience and positive emotions. In his most recent studies, the 53-year-old Professor of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University has looked into the way New Yorkers have coped with 9/11. His findings have split the expert community and met with great interest well beyond the field of psychology. His emphasis on the natural and efficient power of oscillating human emotion is in stark contrast to the traditional idea of working through hard times and attending therapy, pitting him against popular thinking and practice. In his latest work, *The Other Side of Sadness*, published in September 2009, he addresses the question of how to deal with sadness healthily, and sums up his findings for a broader audience.

the support of therapy – continue to confound early research into resilience.

So is Bonanno saying that resilience is something inherent in our make-up that remains stable from cradle to grave? Or can resilience grow or wither? And how is resilience generated in the first place? Again Bonanno returns to the point that resilience has yet to be researched extensively. However, what we do already know is how circumstances can foster resilience: “You can almost think up an algorithm for resilience,” he says. “There are many factors that make a person more – or less – resilient.” Bonanno makes the distinction between risk and resilience factors, citing economical stability and social support as helping to strengthen resilience, while identifying stress as a drain on our psychological resistance. Whereas some of these factors can be stable, others are less so: “You may have a wonderful network of friends at home, but what about if you’re away – in New York, say – and something bad happens. Suddenly you’re not near the people you know and can talk to. In such a situation you are less likely to be resilient.” And, as he goes on to explain: “It really is a kind of algorithm based on how many of these factors you have going for you. Thus, we may be more or less resilient or more or less prone to severe reactions at different points in our lives. How we react psychologically to a traumatic event will depend on a cumulative summary of evolving risk and resilience factors that can be maximized or minimized. We cannot fix these factors or guarantee ‘disaster out-come’ with any reasonable certainty.”

The DNA factor

Genetic predisposition is another phenomenon which might just have a key role to play here, says Bonanno. Although the research still lacks the reassuring backbone of tried-and-tested knowledge, initial long-term studies indicate that the degree of resilience in each of us can be gauged from genetic material: “Researchers have discovered a couple of genes that are expressed primarily in the context of adversity. People who have two long alleles tend to cope better with extreme adversity. People who have short alleles tend to cope more poorly.”

Bonanno’s recent disaster studies suggest that the effect of experience on individual resilience should not be underestimated. These studies show that having been through a similar event in the past will make a person better able to cope with a disaster – but that people who

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have been traumatized in the past and have not coped well are more likely to be traumatized in the future.

Yet simply being exposed to potentially traumatic events or challenges is not enough, Bonanno maintains. Only working through these events successfully can strengthen our resilience and serve as preparation. However, he pours cold water on the concept of systematic resilience training: “There is a tendency to push resilience building and training; the military in the United States has just instigated a large-scale program involving resilience training for soldiers. I am very wary of that, because it gives people a false sense of safety.” Research is not yet able to gauge the effect of such training programs and how they should be structured to achieve optimum effect. “It is like putting the cart before the horse – rushing out to train people to be resilient without really knowing where the training is heading. What we really need to do is to find out who is resilient, and then analyze what distinguishes resilient people from others.” Only, it seems, when we can call on validated knowledge in this area will we have a basis from which to examine what can be achieved through training and to set about organizing it appropriately.

Flexibility as a key

Bonanno already has some initial ideas on the areas we need to address to strengthen individual resilience: “One important aspect of coping is flexibility,” he says. This he describes as an essential ingredient in being able to move between expressing and suppressing emotions, visualizing, and forgetting. Bonanno defines flexibility as “the ability to engage in the behavior of the coping processes that fit the demands of the situation.” And this flexibility could in theory be trained, says Bonanno. In contrast to therapy, whose aim is to fix things that don’t work, resilience training should improve skills and adaptation, and teach people to respond flexibly to different situations and demands. This critical issue of flexibility is one area in which the notions of individual and collective resilience are aligned. For in-

dividuals and companies, groups and families, Bonanno cites the ability to adapt quickly and the willingness to change as basic requirements for coping effectively with crises.

Intercultural studies carried out by Bonanno and his colleagues point to profound differences when it comes to collective flexibility. Bonanno sees the people of modern China as an example of remarkable flexibility accompanied by above-average resilience. Bonanno and his team recruited a sample of Chinese people and a sample of American people, and followed them over a period of time. “We based the study on many factors, such as age and gender, and observed how Chinese people and Americans dealt with loss, and how they coped over time.” The study showed that the Chinese group fared better than their U.S. counterparts, but how can these differences be explained? Bonanno traces the above-average flexibility of modern-day China back to a time of very strong disorientation and reorientation in Chinese society. In the past, generations of families had remained established in a particular region, while religious beliefs and a pronounced awareness of ancestry were also defining factors in how Chinese people shaped their lives. But this whole value structure has since been shaken to its roots. Following a period of transition, during which many people suffered the effects of disorientation and uprooting, many Chinese now move to the beat of the economy, changing the nature and location of their work at short intervals and summoning a high degree of flexibility from within themselves in order to participate in their country’s economic growth.

Resilience, according to Bonanno, is a naturally-occurring tool which most people have always had in their psychological locker, and which is enhanced or weakened by experience and circumstances. Future studies within this still embryonic branch of research promise to yield many more insights into how the power to overcome adversity can be strengthened. This knowledge, Bonanno believes, will in future also prove highly relevant to the business sector.