



Research Note 2023-03

**Examining the Impact of Mentors
and Role Models on Resilience**

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**United States Army Research Institute
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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS ON RESILIENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Requirement:

This research expands beyond previous efforts that have looked more narrowly at the unique benefits of having a mentor or role model on resilience by comparing four groups: individuals with only a mentor, only a role model, both a mentor and role model, and neither a mentor nor role model. Results show that having a role model or having a mentor independently are linked to greater resilience, while the group reporting the highest levels of resilience had a mentor and role model simultaneously. These findings suggest that mentors and role models provide unique benefits that can foster resilience.

Procedure:

The present research aims to compare the relative impact of mentorship and role modeling as resources that increase resilience. Within the Conservation of Resources framework (COR; Hobfoll, 1989), resilience is defined as the ability to withstand stressors and return to one's original state prior to encountering the stressors without enduring permanent harm (Hobfoll et al., 2015). Mentors and role models can act as resources and/or provide resources that promote resilience. Considering these different levels of interaction, it is unsurprising that researchers have focused on different outcomes of mentoring and role modeling. Mentoring has been studied extensively, with meta-analyses linking mentorship to subjective career success, positive work attitudes, and lower turnover (Allen et al., 2004; Eby et al., 2008). In contrast, studies on role modeling are narrower in scope, focusing on motivation and social comparison. In this research, we compared the relative effects of these two factors on resilience.

To test our hypotheses, a sample of 2,981 junior enlisted Soldiers in the U.S. Army completed measures online. As part of a larger research effort, participants responded to items assessing whether or not they had mentorship, role models and measuring their levels of resilience.

Findings:

Hypothesis 1, which suggested that having a mentor will be positively related to resilience, was supported ($r = .23, p < .01$). Considering the unique impact of mentorship, results of the ANOVA showed participants who only had a mentor ($M = 3.78, SE = .05$) reported significantly higher resilience compared to those with neither a role model nor a mentor ($M = 3.55, SE = .03; p < .05$). Hypotheses 2 that stated having a role model will be positively related to resilience was also supported with results showing a positive link between role modeling and resilience ($r = .24, p < .01$), and higher resilience was reported among participants with only a role model ($M = 3.82, SE = .03$) than those with neither a role model nor mentor ($p < .05$).

In support of Hypothesis 3, results showed significant differences in resilience between the groups $F(3, 72.91) = 61.93, p < .01$, with individuals having a mentor and role model

reporting the highest levels of resilience ($M = 3.98$, $SE = .02$). This was significantly higher than those only having a role model or only having a mentor, and having neither a role model nor mentor.

Utilization and Dissemination of Findings:

Although having a mentor or role model has been linked to positive outcomes such as persistence through challenges at work (Arora & Rangnekar, 2014), more positive work attitudes (Eby et al., 2008), and greater overall career success (McQuillan, 2002), rarely have researchers considered the effect of having both, neither, or either of these relationships. Results of the present research show that benefits of having a mentor or role model differ from having both relationships or neither of them. Specifically, having a mentor was linked to resilience and having a role model was linked to resilience, but individuals reporting the highest levels of resilience had both a mentor and a role model.

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS ON RESILIENCE

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Examining the impact of mentors and role models on resilience

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring and role modeling are distinct constructs with unique antecedents and outcomes. Mentorship implies a one-on-one relationship wherein more experienced mentors provide support and guidance to junior employees (i.e., a protégé) for career advancement (Kram, 1983). Role modeling does not necessitate personal relationships but involves an individual modeling career success and a pathway to achieving that success (Gibson, 2004). While these constructs might overlap, having a mentor may not offer the same benefits as having a role model, and vice versa. With exception of researchers who use the terms interchangeably (Mertz, 2004; Speizer, 1981) rarely are these constructs included in the same study, despite the likely additive benefits of having both a role model and mentor.

Given constantly changing and increasingly competitive organizational environments, one particularly relevant benefit of mentors and role models is they can foster resilience in employees (Pulakos & Kantrowitz, 2020). Resilience involves recovering from adverse events by utilizing resources that enhance well-being (Ungar, 2008). Mentors and role models can act as resources and/or provide resources that promote this resilience. Within the Conservation of Resources framework (COR; Hobfoll, 1989), resilience is defined as the ability to withstand stressors and return to one's original state prior to encountering the stressors without enduring permanent harm (Hobfoll et al., 2015). Using this theory as a framework, the current research is the first to compare the relative impact of mentorship and role modeling as resources that increase resilience.

Mentorship

Mentorship is a psychosocial resource that facilitates coping with work demands and acts as a buffer for preventing employee burnout (van Emmerik, 2004). According to COR theory, work demands are stressors while burnout is considered a strain stemming from resource depletion (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources are defined as valued objects, conditions, or energies, all of which can facilitate resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2015). Resilience involves adapting in the face of adversity (APA, 2014) and managing a stress response by harnessing resources to move forward and maintain well-being (Southwick et al., 2014). Currently, most research on resilience comes from studies focused around psychological health. Studies have emphasized the important role mentors play in promoting resilience in traumatized adolescents (Southwick et al., 2007), and that mentor-based support programs can increase resilience among women with breast cancer (Ye et al., 2017). Further, research addressing concerns over the physical and mental health of clergy showed regular contact with mentors decreased burnout and increased resilience (Doolittle, 2010).

While mentorship can foster resilience in the face of mental and physical health crises, indirect evidence suggests it could also promote resilience in the workplace. Researchers have proposed resiliency as an important factor for career success that should be instilled by those providing career guidance (Rickwood et al., 2004) such as a mentor. Returning to COR theory, resilience stems from protective factors (i.e., resources) that facilitate coping with change or adversity (Stewart et al., 1997). Specifically, research has demonstrated that employees with

mentors are less likely to quit their jobs in high turnover professions (Le Cornu, 2009) and more likely to cope and adapt during corporate mergers (Rigsby et al., 1998). Additionally, psychosocial mentoring predicted career resilience in a sample of managers (Arora & Rangnekar, 2014). These findings suggest that mentors and resources they provide could serve as protective factors that promote resilience.

Hypothesis 1: Having a mentor will be positively related to resilience.

Role Models

Whereas mentors are aware of their relationship to protégé, a role model is a cognitive construction stemming from an individual wishing to emulate attributes or increase similarities with another (Gibson, 2004). Drawing from social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), followers recognize skills they lack then compare themselves to that role model and learn (Speizer, 1981). Although less research exists on role modeling compared to mentoring, news outlets have touted role models as key for career success suggesting youths need stable, positive adults to emulate (McQuillan, 2002; Ross, 2002) and researchers have found individuals' self-concept evolves over time with role models associated with positive self-development throughout one's career (Cross & Markus, 1991; Ibarra, 1999). Additionally, role modeling has been linked to outcomes such as entrepreneurial motivation (Rahman & Day, 2014), job performance and satisfaction (Rich, 1997), and organizational commitment (Gibson & Barron, 2003).

Returning to COR theory, individuals are motivated to acquire resources for current or future use in their careers (Hobfoll, 1989), including intangible resources such as self-confidence, knowledge, and perspective. A method of acquiring such resources is by observing and learning from role models, which can then facilitate resiliency. Research has linked role models to resilience in the form of overcoming adversity and reducing risk of substance abuse (Yancey et al., 2011). Similarly, a resilience intervention that directed youth toward community role models led to improved decision-making, problem-solving, and resistance to drugs and violence (Griffin, 2005). In a healthcare setting, nurses higher in resilience were more likely to have a role model, and nurses without role models were more likely to be diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (Mealer et al., 2012). Further, role models have been shown to promote resiliency in patients recovering from spinal cord injuries (Monden et al., 2014) and transgender individuals struggling with self-acceptance and hope (Matsuno & Israel, 2018).

These findings suggest role models can serve as resources to help facilitate resilience. However, this effect of role models is rarely studied within organizations, but can address researchers' call for employers to provide resilience-supporting resources, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bardoel & Drago, 2021). While they are infrequently studied, role models can be sought out to serve as exemplars of reaching a goal by providing a model to follow and, directly or indirectly, giving inspiration to persist through difficulties.

Hypothesis 2: Having a role model will be positively related to resilience.

Mentorship versus Role Modeling

The impacts of mentors and role models are rarely examined in the same study and therefore their relative effects are unknown. Some researchers have considered role modeling a function of mentoring (e.g., Anderson & Shannon, 1988), which is why one could simultaneously be a mentor and role model. However, Gibson (2004) clearly distinguishes the two, offering that mentors are defined by their actions while role models are influential only because of others' perceptions. Said differently, individuals interact with a mentor directly, but typically observe role models from a distance.

Considering these different levels of interaction, it is unsurprising that researchers have focused on different outcomes of mentoring and role modeling. Mentoring has been studied extensively, with meta-analyses linking mentorship to subjective career success, positive work attitudes, and lower turnover (Allen et al., 2004; Eby et al., 2008). In contrast, studies on role modeling are narrower in scope, focusing on motivation and social comparison. For example, women with a role model were more likely to persist in academic settings (Hermann et al., 2016) and for graduating students exposed to a successful role model, higher identification with these role models resulted in greater proactive career behavior (Buunk et al., 2007). Similarly, individuals with high-performing role models were more committed to and satisfied with their goals (Earley & Kanfer, 1985).

As discussed, research has separately supported that mentors and role models may promote resilience. Within COR theory, mentors and role models can either directly act as resources for employees or provide resources that increase resilience. Thinking about a role model as the ideal self based on individuals' goals (Gibson, 2002), it is possible that having a role model serves as a motivational resource such that workers aim to emulate their role model. Mentors provide more tangible resources such as challenging work assignments, career advice, or information along with psychosocial resources such as counseling or friendship (Haggard et al., 2011) that could improve resilience. In this research, we compared the relative effects of these two factors on resilience. We also compared effects of having both a mentor and role model on resilience considering motivation from role models combined with resources provided by mentors might increase resilience more than having only a mentor or role model.

Hypothesis 3: Having both a role model and mentor will have a stronger positive effect on resilience compared to only having a role model, only having a mentor, and having neither a role model nor mentor.

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 2,981 junior enlisted Soldiers in the U.S. Army, who were on average 23.69 years old ($SD = 4.43$ years). Participants were 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 measures online as part of a larger research effort.

Measures

Mentorship Status. Mentorship status was assessed using “Do you have a mentor? (Your mentor may also be your role model.)” Participants could respond *yes*, *no*, or *unsure*. Those unsure were removed from analysis. A definition of a mentor was provided in alignment with recommendations from Dreher and Cox (1996).

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.

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

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested first using correlation analysis to examine simultaneously having a mentor and role model, and then with an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the unique advantage conferred by having a mentor or role model on resilience. Hypothesis 3 was also tested using ANOVA, dividing participants into four groups: 1) having a role model and mentor, 2) only having a role model, 3) only a mentor, and 4) having neither a role model nor mentor. Comparing among these groups, 49.6% of participants reported having a mentor and a role model ($n = 1,158$) with 25.6% with neither a mentor nor role model ($n = 598$), while 159 (6.8%) had only a mentor, and 422 (18.1%) had a role model but no mentor. Due to concerns that unequal group sizes may violate the assumption that group variances should be similar, we ran Levene’s test of homogeneity of variance which showed a significant statistic 3.41 ($p < .05$) confirming this assumption was violated. Following recommendations from past researchers (Wang et al., 2017), we interpreted the Brown-Forsythe robust test of equality of means.

Hypothesis 1 that stated having a mentor will be positively related to resilience was supported ($r = .23$, $p < .01$). Considering the unique impact of mentorship, results of the ANOVA showed participants who only had a mentor ($M = 3.78$, $SE = .05$) reported significantly higher resilience compared to those with neither a role model nor a mentor ($M = 3.55$, $SE = .03$; $p < .05$). Hypotheses 2 that stated having a role model will be positively related to resilience was also supported, with results showing a positive link between role modeling and resilience ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), and higher resilience in participants with only a role model ($M = 3.82$, $SE = .03$) than those with neither a role model nor mentor ($p < .05$).

In support of Hypothesis 3, results showed significant differences in resilience between the groups $F(3, 72.91) = 61.93, p < .01$, with individuals having a mentor and role model reporting the highest levels of resilience ($M = 3.98, SE = .02$). This was significantly higher than those only having a role model ($M = 3.82, SE = .03$), or only having a mentor ($M = 3.78, SE = .05$), and having neither a role model nor mentor ($M = 3.55, SE = .03; p < .01$).

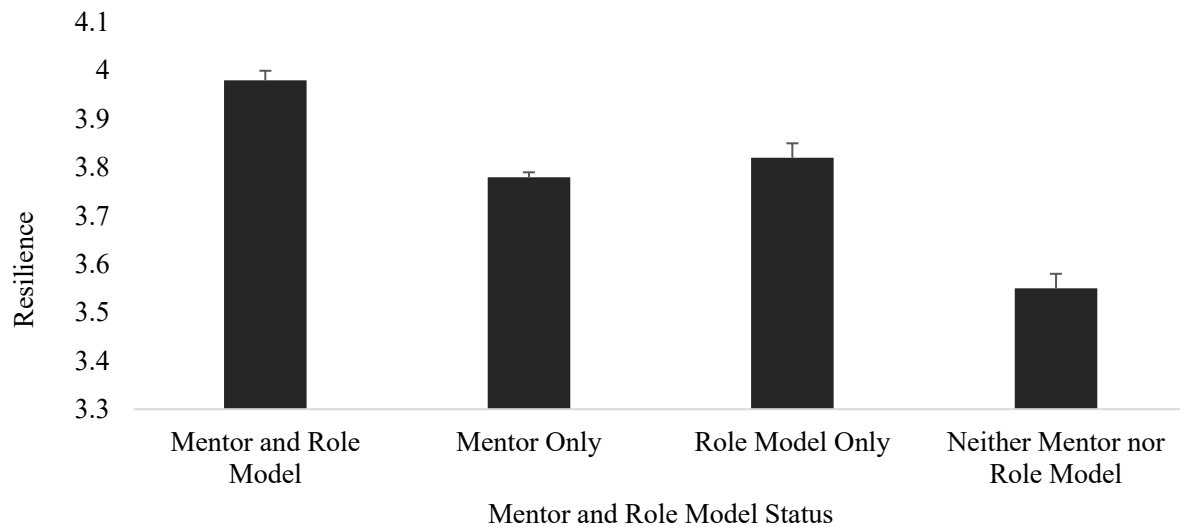


Figure 1. Comparison among four groups based on average levels of resilience.

DISCUSSION

Decades of research has highlighted stressors at the societal level (e.g., world wars and epidemics), organizational level (e.g., rude coworkers, unfair policies), and individual level (e.g., work-family conflict), calling upon future researchers to develop and test stress management interventions (Bliese et al., 2017). In line with COR theory, resilience is essential for managing stress and can be built through personal and professional relationships (Gittell, 2016). Mentorship might be considered both a personal and professional relationship, with protégés consulting mentors for career advice, challenging work assignments, or support (Kram, 1983) all of which can increase resilience against workplace stressors. Supporting this, we found that having a mentor was linked to higher levels of resilience.

Role modeling often involves a less personal relationship compared to mentorship, where an individual observes another who possesses certain skills or has achieved some goal which can be emulated (Speizer, 1981). When observing a role model, individuals may not get direct feedback or tangible resources to promote resilience, however, they can draw comparisons by looking at hardships a role model has overcome to learn and hopefully feel inspired to be resilient when facing their own hardships. Supporting these ideas, our results showed having a role model was linked to greater resilience.

Additionally, this research investigated the joint impact of having a mentor and role model on resilience. Not surprisingly, individuals without the resources provided by a role model or mentor reported the lowest levels of resilience, with less confidence in their ability to get through stressful situations. Conversely, those with a mentor and role model showed the highest levels of resilience, supporting that mentors and role models provide uniquely beneficial resources to employees which is associated with increased resilience. A one-on-one mentoring relationship in addition to observing a role model was the most effective facilitator of resilience.

As discussed, benefits of having a mentor are vast and studies from the mental health literature consistently find a positive link between mentorship and resilience (e.g., Le Cornu, 2009; Southwick et al., 2007; Ye et al., 2017). While numerous resources are provided by mentors, role models do not necessarily provide meaningful resources such as emotional or social support, but instead serve as figures to model behavior after (Ware & Stein, 2013). Receiving this direct support from mentors while simultaneously reaping the benefits of having a role model seems to be the most effective method of promoting resilience.

Limitations & Future Directions

A limitation of this research is that participants were Soldiers in the Army and were asked about Army-specific mentors and role models. These relationships might not reflect mentoring or role modeling dynamics in other work contexts. However, findings of this research are likely relevant to large organizations that are hierarchical with intense competition for upward mobility and a need for resilient employees. Future research could compare levels of resilience across the four groups of having a mentor and/or role model in a flat organization or within other industries.

Additionally, this research did not ask participants to specify who they looked up to as their role model. Existing research around social learning theory suggests that role models can inspire dysfunctional or constructive behaviors, such as high-resilience leaders with a future temporal focus facilitating follower resilience (Lin & Liao, 2020). An intervention to increase resilience at work should not only target employees, but also role models, making certain employees are looking up to someone who can adapt to change and bounce back from challenges. Future research should investigate characteristics of role models to determine their impacts on followers.

Conclusions

Although having a mentor or role model has been linked to positive outcomes such as persistence through challenges at work (Arora & Rangnekar, 2014), more positive work attitudes (Eby et al., 2008), and greater overall career success (McQuillan, 2002), rarely have researchers considered the effect of having both, neither, or either of these relationships. Results of the present research show that benefits of having a mentor or role model differ from having both relationships or neither of them. Specifically, having a mentor was linked to resilience and having a role model was linked to resilience, but individuals reporting the highest levels of resilience had both a mentor and a role model.

These findings highlight the divergence between mentorship and role modeling relationships. A mentor is a more experienced worker aware of their mentoring role, providing direct support to a protégé (Kram, 1983). Conversely, role models may not be aware they are serving as figures of inspiration or motivation. They may be highly accomplished or possess certain skills a less experienced worker wishes to emulate thereby serving as a source of motivation or demonstrating a path to achieving a desired goal. While both mentorship and role modeling are important for resilience and likely many other outcomes, rarely are their benefits considered concurrently. This research provides evidence for their joint impact on facilitating resilience in a workplace setting.

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