

Flourishing against the odds: positive deviance case selection and formative influences timeline as methodological tools for tracing resilience in nonprofit organizations

Evgeniya Pyatovskaya

*Department of Communication Studies, Loyola Marymount University,
Los Angeles, California, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – This article advances methodological possibilities for studying organizational resilience by combining Positive Deviance Case Selection (PDCS) with the Formative Influences Timeline (FIT) methods. It responds to the need for approaches that can capture the complexity of resilience as a communicative and materially enacted process in times of crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing from a case study of Apex for Youth, a New York-based Asian American nonprofit that thrived after the COVID-19 pandemic, the article demonstrates how PDCS enables researchers to identify organizations that not only endured crisis but flourished under conditions of utter constraint. It also shows how FIT can be used to uncover how resilience is triggered, made sense of and enacted across time and roles. Unlike conventional interviews, FIT surfaces lived rhythms of decision-making, emotional labor and values-work that are often omitted from official accounts or managerialist frames.

Findings – Taken together, these methods reveal the distributed, embodied and co-constructed nature of resilience in mission-driven work. They illustrate how resilience unfolds not as a linear process but through overlapping and recursive responses to crisis, often shaped by personal commitments and ethical tensions.

Originality/value – By treating difference and reflexivity as generative of insight in both case selection and data collection, these approaches bridge the gap between research and practice. They offer textured, process and practice-centered perspectives into what holds organizations together when familiar structures fall away and contribute to methodologically imaginative research in organizational communication and resilience.

Keywords Organizational resilience, Nonprofit organizing, Crisis management,

Organizational communication

Paper type Research article

Introduction

In the wake of prolonged crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, questions of how organizations survive – and who gets to shoulder the weight of organizational resilience – have taken on new urgency (Bomsta and Kerr, 2023; Buzzetta *et al.*, 2024; Herrero and Kraemer, 2022; Newby and Branyon, 2021; Stötzer *et al.*, 2022). For nonprofit organizations in particular, survival is not merely an administrative or financial feat, but a complex relational and ethical endeavor with consequences that spread beyond the organizational realm. Many nonprofits serve communities disproportionately affected by systemic inequities, operate under conditions of chronic resource scarcity and depend on relational trust more than strategic control (Shaheen *et al.*, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2023). And yet, some manage to not only endure



disruption but reimagine themselves in its wake. Across organizational communication scholarship, nonprofits consistently emerge as sites of remarkable creativity, improvisation and innovation during periods of disruption (Pyatovskaya, 2024). Research shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofit workers actively rewrote organizational rules, generated new resources, reconfigured roles, redistributed labor and engaged in relational sensemaking among other practices in order to cultivate resilience and to continue serving communities despite structural volatility (Buzzetta et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022).

While nonprofits often demonstrate remarkable creativity and strength during periods of disruption, their resilience is also shaped by – and constrained within – a broader political economy of chronic underfunding, labor precarity and market-driven pressures. Their resilience is constantly tested even outside of worldwide crises like the pandemic: they rely on external funding and unpaid labor, serve communities most impacted by social inequities, and often lack the buffer resources available to their for-profit or governmental counterparts (Lin and Wang, 2016; Never and de Leon, 2014). Research on nonprofit effectiveness during crisis underscores that many organizations enter disruptions in already fragile conditions: they face operational challenges, declining revenues and rising community demands, all while navigating the inherent tension between marketization and mission (Wang and Hamilton, 2025). The nonprofit starvation cycle further compounds these pressures, as unrealistic donor expectations and structural underinvestment erode the infrastructure required for sustainable resilience (Altamimi and Liu, 2022). Even when nonprofits adapt/transform, their ability to do so is deeply conditioned by the uneven distribution of resources, the burden of unpaid or underpaid labor, and the expectation that workers will absorb risk in service of community needs (Allan, 2019). At the organizational level, resilience depends not only on extraordinary acts of creativity but also on hybrid forms of organizing – formal structures and informal networks that broker information, labor and resources under volatile conditions (Kim et al., 2022). Taken together, these dynamics caution against viewing nonprofit resilience as an uncomplicated success story; instead, resilience is a situated, often burdensome practice negotiated amid systemic inequities, structural risks and contradictory organizational, societal and market demands. Such complexity calls for methodological approaches capable of accounting for these structural tensions, elevating the lived expertise of those who cultivate resilience, and challenging dominant assumptions about crisis and recovery of nonprofit organizations.

This article responds to this call by introducing a methodological pairing designed to engage – not obscure – the structural tensions that shape nonprofit life: Positive Deviance Case Selection (PDCS) (Bisel et al., 2020) and Formative Influences Timeline (FIT) (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021). PDCS is rooted in positive organizational communication scholarship as it asks researchers to intentionally seek out “honorable, nonnormative, and contextually meaningful” cases that withstand systemic pressures (Bisel et al., 2020, p. 279). By shifting analytical attention from dysfunction to possibility, PDCS resists idealized narratives of resilience and instead foregrounds how organizations improvise, stretch and survive despite conditions of chronic scarcity and structural inequity. Positive deviance approach illuminates solutions generated under pressure by centering local wisdom and bottom-up innovation (Bullock et al., 2025). When paired with the Formative Influences Timelines, which brings forward the lived, relational and affective dimensions of disruption, this methodological framework captures both organizational patterns of resilient practices and the micro-level communicative labor through which resilience takes shape. The goal of this article is to argue that pairing these qualitative methods allows us to see and understand resilience differently, opening new avenues for supporting nonprofits and their practitioners in cultivating organizational resilience.

In the sections that follow, I first outline the conceptual and epistemological foundations of PDCS and FIT, situating them within broader conversations about organizational resilience and qualitative inquiry. I then introduce the nonprofit case of Apex for Youth – a New York City-based nonprofit that responded to the pandemic not by contracting, but by expanding its

mission, reach and community connections – and describe how PDCS guided its selection and how I implemented FIT as a participant-led tool for tracing communicative resilience over time. Drawing from this case, I argue that embracing difference and reflexivity in qualitative research requires selecting methods that treat difference not as an obstacle, but as a generative source of understanding. Further sections illustrate what these methods reveal when used together – highlighting not only organizational patterns of positive deviance but also the micro-level practices through which resilience was enacted during the early months of the pandemic. Finally, the discussion considers the limitations of each of the methods and methodological implications of pairing PDCS and FIT, including their capacity to capture complexity without romanticizing resilience, and concludes by identifying opportunities for future research on nonprofit resilience.

Reframing organizational resilience

Resilience has been named “one of the most profound constructs across disciplines” (Afifi *et al.*, 2016, p. 663), drawing attention of scholars across psychology, management, international relations, and organizational studies. In management research, organizational resilience is often framed as a capacity to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to disruptions in order to maintain performance and ensure survival (Carden *et al.*, 2018). This framing emphasizes instrumental and outcome-driven concerns, positioning resilience as a question of how organizations can optimize under stress and maintain effectiveness. Within this logic, resilience tends to be operationalized through measurable factors like financial stability, constant environmental scanning for potential threats or performance metrics, while people are treated as mere variables within the system (see Andersson *et al.*, 2019; Annarelli and Nonino, 2016; Prayag *et al.*, 2018).

By contrast, communication scholars have reframed resilience as something fundamentally social, discursive and emergent. Rather than a static trait or capacity, resilience is increasingly viewed as a relational process – something co-constructed through interaction, meaning-making and everyday practices (Buzzanell and Houston, 2018; Johnson and Johnson, 2020; Pyatovskaya, 2024; Witmer and Mellinger, 2016). Largely based on Buzzanell’s (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR), this perspective understands resilience as unfolding through situated communication: in the stories we tell, the connections and relationships we maintain, the identities we affirm and the improvisations we enact in moments of disruption (Buzzanell, 2018). It shifts the focus from organizational systems to the lived, affective and ethical dimensions of work that support organizational adaptation/transformation amidst crises. Recent work further reinforces this communicative shift by showing that resilience is enacted through relational connections, emotional labor and ongoing meaning-making rather than through structural readiness alone (Doerfel *et al.*, 2022).

This communicative lens invites us to challenge linear, managerialist narratives that assume resilience follows a predictable bounce-back or bounce-forward arc (Bartuseviciene *et al.*, 2024; Hernes *et al.*, 2025). Instead, it understands resilience as a nonlinear and dynamic, and shifts our attention to those who contribute to resilience cultivation, the costs they shoulder, the emotional and relational labor that enables it and how this labor is often rendered invisible. In this way, communicative approaches make space for viewing resilience as a contested, negotiated and complicated process – shaped by power, identity and meaning-making – rather than a universally desirable outcome.

Qualitative inquiry is especially well-suited to study resilience through this lens. Organizations, and nonprofits in particular, are complex and adaptive systems that cannot be reduced to inputs and outputs (Searing *et al.*, 2021). With increasing environmental volatility, hybridized forms of organizing, and the rising importance of purpose-driven work, the communicative dimensions of organizational life demand methods that can capture their depth and nuance. Resilience – particularly as experienced and fostered in under-resourced or mission-driven settings – is rarely visible as a single moment of “success” (Guo *et al.*, 2025).

It is an evolving process, a pattern of relational and ethically complex navigation through uncertainty. As such, it eludes simple quantification and is best studied through approaches that can illuminate the messy, situated and affective ways people make sense of – and respond to – disruption. Additionally, previous qualitative research on disruptions shows that communicative, relational and affective practices become visible only when methods are attuned to participants' lived experiences and sensemaking processes (Cooper *et al.*, 2024; Horstman *et al.*, 2024; Okamoto, 2020; Petrun Sayers *et al.*, 2023; Randazzo *et al.*, 2025; Rush *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, studying how nonprofits not only survive but transform through crisis demands methodological frameworks that are attuned to context, individuals and meaning-making.

Positive Deviance Case Selection and the Formative Influences Timeline allow researchers to do precisely that. PDCS offers a methodological orientation for identifying cases of resilience where flourishing occurs under adverse conditions. FIT, meanwhile, provides a participant-led tool for tracing how individuals narrate and make sense of change over time, surfacing turning points and communicative practices that might be missed in traditional interviews.

In the following sections, I introduce PDCS and FIT, describe their utility for studying organizational resilience and demonstrate, relying on a case study I conducted, how they can be used to study organizational resilience.

Positive deviance case selection

Crisis has long been a focal point in business, management and organizational communication research. Yet, much of the scholarship concentrates on problems, failures and dysfunctions – what breaks or goes wrong under pressure (Mirivel and Fuller, 2024). While disruptions and crises are indeed threatening to organizational sustainability, they can also catalyze adaptation, transformation and, in some cases, generate unexpected flourishing. When organizations not only survive but thrive in contexts where similar organizations falter, they offer rich opportunities to shift our analytical lens from what is expected to what is possible (Bisel *et al.*, 2020, 2024).

This shift of focus is advanced by positive deviance approaches, that began in sociology and healthcare research (Marsh *et al.*, 2004; Merton, 1957; Marsh *et al.*, 2004) and have since been recognized in other fields – such as research into environmental change, organizations, human trafficking and gender violence – for their capacity to support change from within communities (Bullock *et al.*, 2025; Dura and Singhal, 2009, 2010; Jejeebhoy *et al.*, 2013; Herington and van de Fliert, 2018; Pascale and Sternin, 2005; Rose and McCullough, 2016; Vadera *et al.*, 2013). Spreitzer and Sonenshine (2004) define positive deviance as “intentional behaviors that significantly depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways” (p. 841). Scholars argue that positive deviance generates bottom-up insights and redistributes decision-making power to local actors, aligning with transformative adaptation goals that seek to redress inequities by valuing situated knowledge. Although these approaches emerged in different contexts, the underlying principle travels well to nonprofit resilience: PDCS centers the wisdom of practitioners who craft solutions under pressure and position their lived problem-solving as a legitimate and necessary source of knowledge.

Rooted in the early conceptualization of positive deviance as well as in Positive Organizational Communication Scholarship (POCS) (Roberts, 2006), Positive Deviance Case Selection invites researchers to identify and study organizations that exhibit principled and generative communication practices in the face of adversity (Bisel *et al.*, 2020). Similarly to Appreciative Inquiry – an approach to organizational development that points our attention in the direction of “valuing the best of what is” (Watkins *et al.*, 2011, p. 17) and moving toward it rather than reinforcing deficit-based models or valorizing dysfunction, PDCS shifts our attention toward organizations that succeed against the odds – those who are able to achieve transformative change in crisis and whose resilience is not only surprising but instructive.

[Bisel et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that PDCS challenges us to ask different questions: not just what went wrong, but what went right – and how. Crucially, PDCS is not about romanticizing success stories or cherry-picking outliers. It calls for rigor in case selection, ensuring that an organization's success is purposeful, contextually grounded and meaningful. Cases can be selected through strategies such as setting clear inclusion criteria prior to data collection ([Rush and Bisel, 2024](#)), historical reconstruction based on archival data and insider perspectives ([Pyatovskaya, 2024](#)) or surveying field populations to identify standout organizations.

In resilience research, PDCS is particularly generative. Resilient organizations are often framed as those that manage to “bounce back” from disruption, but positive deviance pushes us to look for organizations that not only recover but flourish – those that emerge stronger, more connected or more values-aligned than before. It offers a systematic way to locate such organizations, especially when their resilience is not due to structural advantages, but to meaningful communicative and relational practices.

Using PDCS in nonprofit organizational resilience research

Nonprofit organizations – often constrained by limited resources and navigating overlapping mission and market demands – offer especially rich terrain for studying organizational resilience as they routinely face conditions that require them to adapt, endure and transform. [Kumari and Eguruze \(2022\)](#) demonstrate that in crisis conditions, small grassroots organizations can survive and empower communities they serve by engaging in positive deviance – innovative, norm-breaking, resource-stretching practices that allow them to outperform expectations despite severe constraints. Using PDCS to identify such nonprofits – those that have successfully navigated disruption – enables researchers to trace how communicative and other everyday practices, such as improvisation, other-focus, distributed leadership, care-centered decision-making and boundary-crossing collaborations – contributed to resilient outcomes ([Pyatovskaya, 2025](#)). Ultimately, those who rely on PDCS can “produce a repository of empirically established craft communication practices in context” ([Bisel et al., 2020](#), p. 285), offering insight into what specific processes/practices contribute to organizational flourishing. The study of positive deviance cases might “encourage the least advantaged to strategize with their limited resources and survive against all odds” ([Kumari and Eguruze, 2022](#), p. 110). This makes PDCS not only a tool for academic inquiry but a valuable method for producing actionable knowledge that can inform how other mission-driven organizations prepare for and respond to disruption.

PDCS also aligns with the participatory and reflexive ethos of many nonprofit organizations by treating organizational members as co-producers of practical wisdom. [McGregor et al. \(2025\)](#) insist that frontline nonprofit workers already exhibit PDCS-like behavior as they adapt, bend or creatively reinterpret rules to serve their populations regardless of systemic constraints and deficiencies. However, traditional deficit-based case selection misses these dynamics because they are “subtle and situated” and emerge through practices undergird by “human relationships, professional judgment, and personal ethics” (p. 2). This perspective shows that PDCS is ideal for capturing these rare, exceptional, relational practices. It supports the study of resilience as a relational, communicative process that is shaped by ethical, everyday practices rather than top-down directives. Additionally, [Herington and van de Fliert \(2018\)](#) emphasize that positive deviance has the “potential to contribute toward resolving some of the most seemingly intractable of challenges facing society in the twenty-first century” (p. 2). This aligns with [Bisel et al.'s \(2024\)](#) argument that communicative resilience is a “specific form of positive communication” that can “bolster the good” (p. 761), contributing to individual and collective flourishing. While resilience does not always lead to equitable or desirable outcomes for all ([Buzzanell, 2021](#)), studying nonprofits that have thrived despite adversity allows researchers to examine what is *possible*, not just what is typical.

Ultimately, surfacing positive deviance cases will help other organizations “reach the heights of their potentialities” ([Socha and Beck, 2015](#), p. 173) and contribute to a growing

repository of communicative practices that are not only empirically grounded but ethically inspiring. By bringing attention to the ways in which resilience can be cultivated through principled, creative and context-responsive communication and practices, PDCS serves both theory and practice – empowering scholars and nonprofit practitioners alike to co-create more resilient, just and life-affirming organizations. The goal of focusing on positive deviance cases is, therefore, to promote communicative practices that create organizational cultures where resilience cultivation is not an extraordinary overextension, but rather harmoniously woven into the everyday.

Applying PDCS: case study example

The COVID-19 pandemic sent a lot of nonprofits out of business and many of them reported “operational fallout” (Kuenzi *et al.*, 2021, p. 822). Apex for Youth (hereinafter Apex), a New York based Asian American nonprofit, served Asian and immigrant youth through educational and mentoring services, and unlike many other nonprofits, it came out of the crisis thriving: it increased the number of its employees, the number of kids served, expanded its reach to 11 more states, and moved into a new office space. The author worked for Apex and firsthand witnessed its success in cultivating resilience [1]. The organization’s innovative responses were both contextually grounded and exemplary, offering rich opportunities to “document communication dynamics that facilitate[d] flourishing” (Bisel *et al.*, 2020, p. 281) and theorize communicative resilience. Following Bisel *et al.*’s (2020) recommendation for historical reconstruction as PDCS’s case-selection approach, the author drew on her own embeddedness within the organization as a program manager during the first six months of the pandemic to access both formal and informal knowledge, institutional memory, and staff reflections that helped surface how resilience was discursively and practically enacted over time.

Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) insist that organizations that can be considered positive deviants must enact an intentional departure from prevailing organizational or industry norms based on honorable intentions. One reason Apex meets the criteria for a PDCS is its willingness to abandon rigid definitions of service in favor of flexible, community-responsive action. As Jon, one of the managers, explained, “there was no set in stone idea of what Apex does and what it doesn’t do,” opening the door for almost unbridled improvisation during crisis. Ivy, a frontline staff member, reflected on the time of the pandemic, “we’d go above and beyond to help [the] families . . . in ways that [Apex] usually [does not] help,” demonstrating how individual values aligned with and expanded the organizational mission in practice. Staff embraced a mindset of service that was unfixed and values-driven: “Part of what Apex does, that’s not part of what the organization is telling us to do . . . I feel like together we are making an impact.” Mary offered a concrete example of this community-grounded creativity, describing how Apex responded to a school’s request for support by fundraising for 14 families who lacked Wi-Fi or devices to connect to Wi-Fi – a need that pre-pandemic Apex had never addressed. Similarly, Naya, a director, emphasized that “we’re not stuck on the way we’ve always done things,” underscoring Apex’s rejection of the threat-rigidity impulse (Mazzei *et al.*, 2025).

Further analysis of the case revealed how leadership’s communication commitments (e.g. transparency, care-centeredness, humility, etc.), staff’s reframing of the service the organization was providing, as well as creation and maintenance of communicative networks with other nonprofits and the community the organization served, were critical to the unexpected flourishing of the organization. At a time when many organizations might have focused inward and defaulted to safe, preexisting routines (Mazzei *et al.*, 2025), the organization’s response was marked by unusual determination to do more (service-wise) with less (resources-wise) and to allow itself to be guided by community needs. As a result, Apex expanded its programming, deepened its commitment to community, and reimagined what service looked like – all without abandoning its core mission amidst a major disruption. This departure from “identity anchoring” in traditional terms (Buzzanell, 2010) enabled the organization to reimagine what it meant to serve, building resilience with its stakeholders.

In summary, Apex exemplifies the criteria for PDCS by enacting intentional, creative, and honorable communicative practices – especially in a context where many peer organizations struggled to survive. It offers a powerful example of how organizational flourishing in crisis can be co-constructed through improvisational, values-aligned, and community-responsive communication. This case not only enhances theory but also formulates practical suggestions for nonprofits seeking to support resilience through everyday communicative practice.

Formative influences timeline (FIT)

FIT, a qualitative research “procedure” (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021, p. 879) that is particularly valuable for capturing how individuals and/or organizations perceive changes over time and uncovering the key influences that participants themselves associate with the topic under investigation (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021). It is an interview strategy that can be used alone or in combination with other data collection methods like semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and helps “[minimize] the likelihood of researcher influence on qualitative interview results” (p. 890) by being an entirely participant-led narration. FIT complements PDCS by inviting participants to author their own timelines of change, surfacing not only functional but also emotional, ethical, and relational turning points that traditional interviews often miss (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021). It ultimately enables researchers to trace how individuals within organizations experience, interpret and negotiate disruption – revealing the relational, communicative and affective labor that broader organizational narratives can obscure. Whereas PDCS identifies which cases are most instructive for understanding resilience, FIT illuminates how a disruption was experienced and lived through at the micro-level by those who carry its weight.

Jones and Donmoyer (2021) offer a procedure to follow to implement FIT. It is typically used at the start of an interview to gather rich, narrative data while also building rapport. Before the interview, the researcher prepares a blank sheet of paper with a horizontal line representing a timeline of the participant’s, organizational or program life. In a remote setting, this form might be sent to the participants ahead of time. At the beginning of the session, participants are asked to spend a few minutes noting key events or experiences that shaped their current identity, their team’s culture or the whole organization – the object depends on the research focus. These notes are then used for the participants’ personal reference as they are invited to walk through each event in detail. The researcher’s job is to listen closely, occasionally asking clarifying questions or prompting for additional thoughts, always following the participant’s lead. The collected data – primarily transcripts from recordings and the researcher’s notes – are later analyzed according to the study’s aims, with participant timelines optionally retained or used as visual aids in analyzing and/or reporting the results.

FIT has been applied in nonprofit research as an interview method to explore how philanthropists’ personal histories shaped their giving practices (Jones, 2018). Each participant created a timeline and shared stories about key life events. FIT’s open-ended and narrative approach was instrumental in uncovering the personal roots of philanthropic behavior and offered rich, explanatory insight beyond what traditional interviews could yield. In another study described by Jones and Donmoyer (2021), by inviting participants to share their developmental stories freely, FIT revealed a disconnect between a participant’s perceived antiracist activism and her underlying motivations. While one of the participants, named Claire, was viewed as an antiracist by her community, her FIT narrative lacked the self-awareness, discomfort and growth others described, instead revealing a static, superficial understanding of white privilege.

Overall, Formative influences timelines is a powerful tool for uncovering how people or organizations make sense of events and change over time by inviting participants to share key formative experiences in their own words. It allows collecting rich, narrative data and improves rapport by centering participants’ voices and lived histories. Especially useful in

qualitative research, FIT often reveals motivations and insights that traditional interviews might miss.

In what follows, I first explain the importance of using FIT for nonprofit resilience research and then provide an illustrative example of my research project in which FIT was utilized.

Using FIT in nonprofit organizational resilience research

Qualitative research of nonprofit organizations and their resilience has been steadily growing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand what has helped nonprofits survive the latest major disruption, researchers employed interviews (Buzzetta *et al.*, 2024; Chen, 2022; Newby and Branyon, 2021; Stötzer *et al.*, 2022), longitudinal panel survey (Fuller and Rice, 2022) and qualitative case studies (Lethielleux *et al.*, 2024; Pyatovskaya, 2024; Woznyj *et al.*, 2024). Sarkar and Osiyevskyy (2018); however, poignantly noted that research into organizational resilience has produced “more knowledge about accidents than organizations” (p. 48) or individuals who work for them. Buzzetta *et al.* (2024) insist that, given the unique nature of nonprofits that sets them apart from corporate or governmental sector, it is important to understand “the distinct constraints that nonprofit workers confronted during COVID-19, along with communicative acts that helped NPO employees generate agency” (p. 537) and cultivate resilience for themselves as employees and their organizations. I support this call and add that it is crucial for scholars and practitioners alike to get a deeper insight into how individuals contribute to organizational resilience so that organizations can better support their employees and contribute to both their individual and organizational well-being.

If we concede that individuals’ accounts of how they weathered a disruption as organizational members are important, then the use of FIT comes to light as a strong method for data collection that can significantly improve our understanding of individual journeys, triggers and strategies, without researcher’s influence on how the conversation develops (as is the case with interviews). FIT allows interviewees to mention events and points in the disruption’s continuity that impacted them the most, demonstrating the method’s unique ability to surface deeper truths about identity, response and intent. In what follows, I demonstrate how I used FIT in my case study of Apex’s resilience.

Applying FIT: case study example

To explore how resilience was cultivated during the early stages of the pandemic, I used FIT as a participatory tool, preceding my interviews with Apex employees. Creating FITs was a voluntary step and participants could deny drawing one. In what follows, I present three timelines created by three Apex employees who agreed to using FIT: Participant 1, an Asian American male who has served as Apex’s operations manager for approximately a decade. Operations manager was responsible for ensuring that the organization ran smoothly behind the scenes, including administrative support, overseeing payments, invoices and vendor relationships, and managing purchasing and supplies. Participant 2, an Asian American female in her mid-30s and a Licensed Master Social Worker, joined Apex one month before the onset of the pandemic and oversees the organization’s programmatic work. Participant’s 2 role involved overseeing all the programs that involved volunteers, which is a vast majority of the Apex’s programming. At the time of the pandemic eruption, Apex served about 1,000 youths. Participant 3, an Asian American male in his early 30s, had been with the organization for about five years before the pandemic and led Apex’s athletics programs, which included recruiting and training volunteer basketball coaches, leading athletic programs at each of Apex’s partner schools and organizing annual athletic events under the auspices of Apex. Participant 3 also assumed responsibility for managing Apex’s social media, creating content for its social media accounts and working with other employees to highlight program activities, showcase student achievement and ensure consistent messaging across programs.

I began each interview by first handing a participant a sheet of paper with a single horizontal line drawn across the center. I explained:

Please, take a look at this line. Imagine the line on this paper is a timeline from when Apex went remote to the sixth month of the pandemic. I would like you to identify the events and memories that you believe shaped what the organization is like today. Please, take about five minutes and jot down notes about these events. These notes are not for me. You will use them to prompt your memory as you describe these events and memories to me (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021, p. 896).

After giving participants time to reflect and record, I followed up with: “Now, please describe each of the events and memories you have identified as influencing what your organization is like today. I may stop you at certain points to ask for clarification or more details.”

You can see examples of FIT below (Plates 1–3).

As the participants charted their timelines, what emerged was not a shared organizational narrative, but rather complex mosaic of experiences. Each person’s timeline differed – some overlapped, others diverged or intersected – showing how the first six months of the pandemic

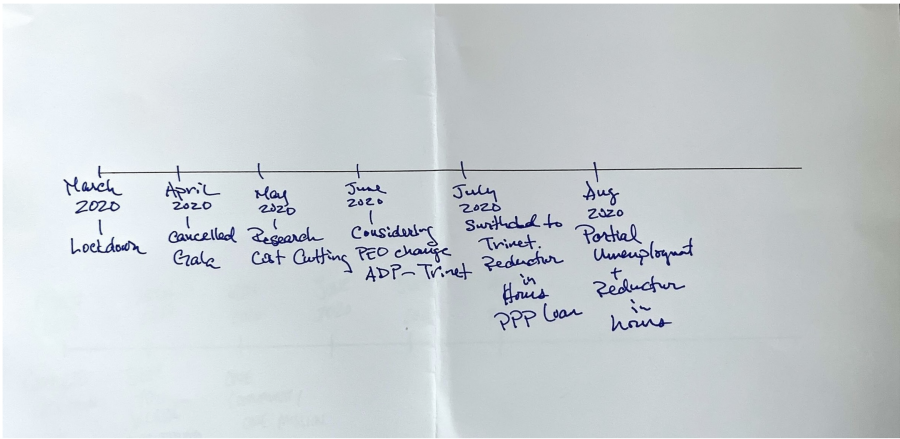


Plate 1. Participant 1

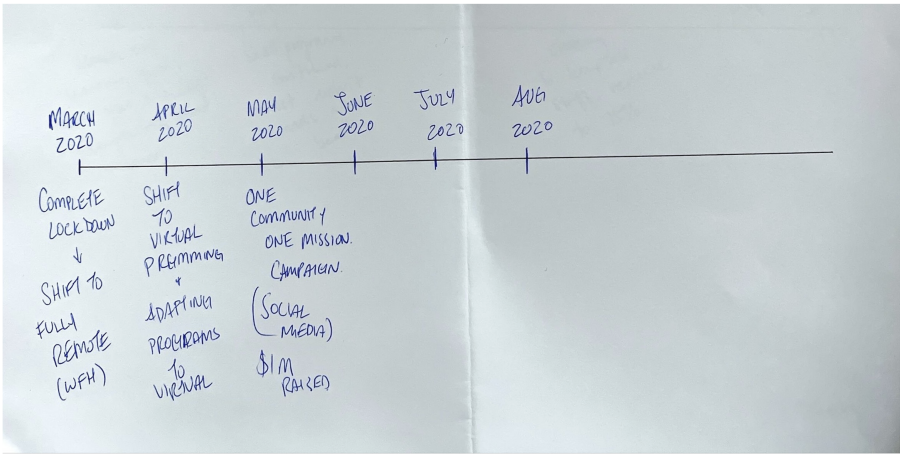


Plate 2. Participant 2

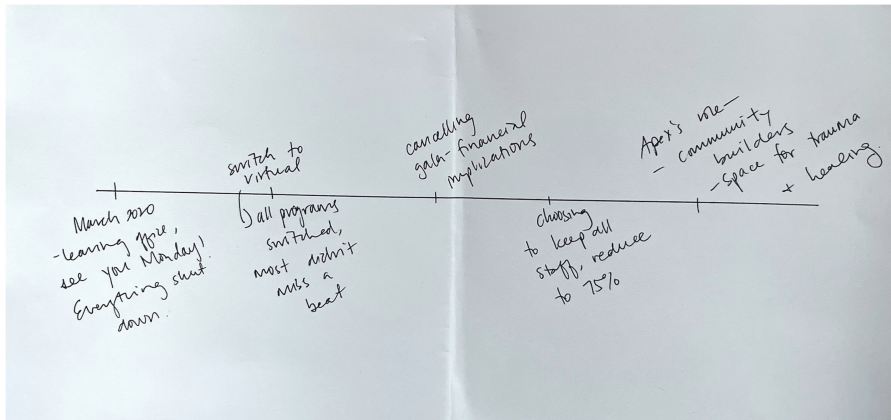


Plate 3. Participant 3

were experienced through distinct lenses shaped by organizational roles, responsibilities and convictions.

I, then, created visual representations of three individual FITs (see Figures 1 and 2). In Figure 1, each horizontal line in the diagrams represents a participant's story plotted on the timeline of the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–August 2020). The left end of each arrow signals a trigger event, including the gala cancellation, staffing decisions and the organization's reframing of its mission during crisis. The length of the arrows reflects

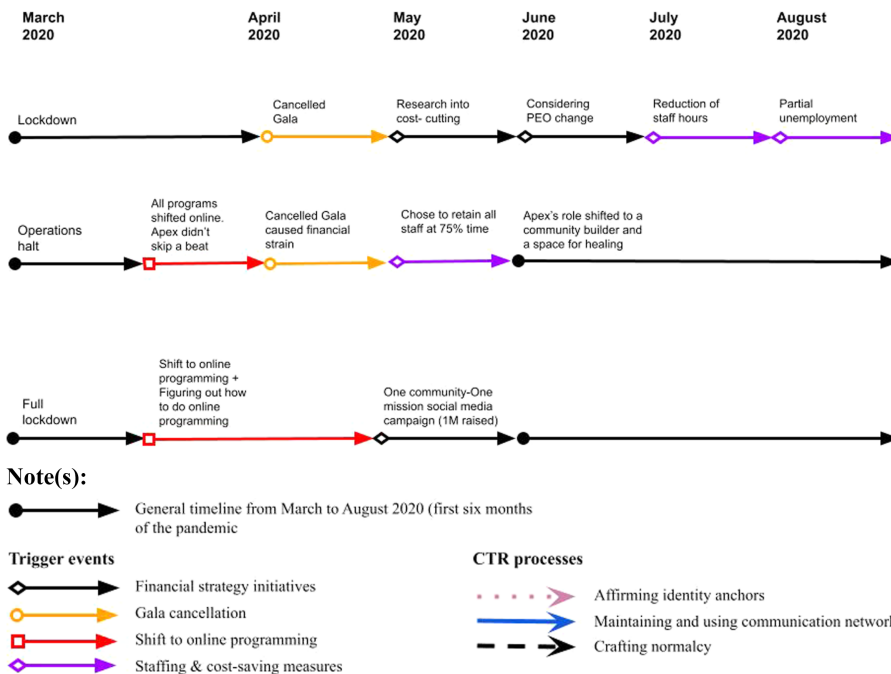


Figure 1. Visual representation of FITs

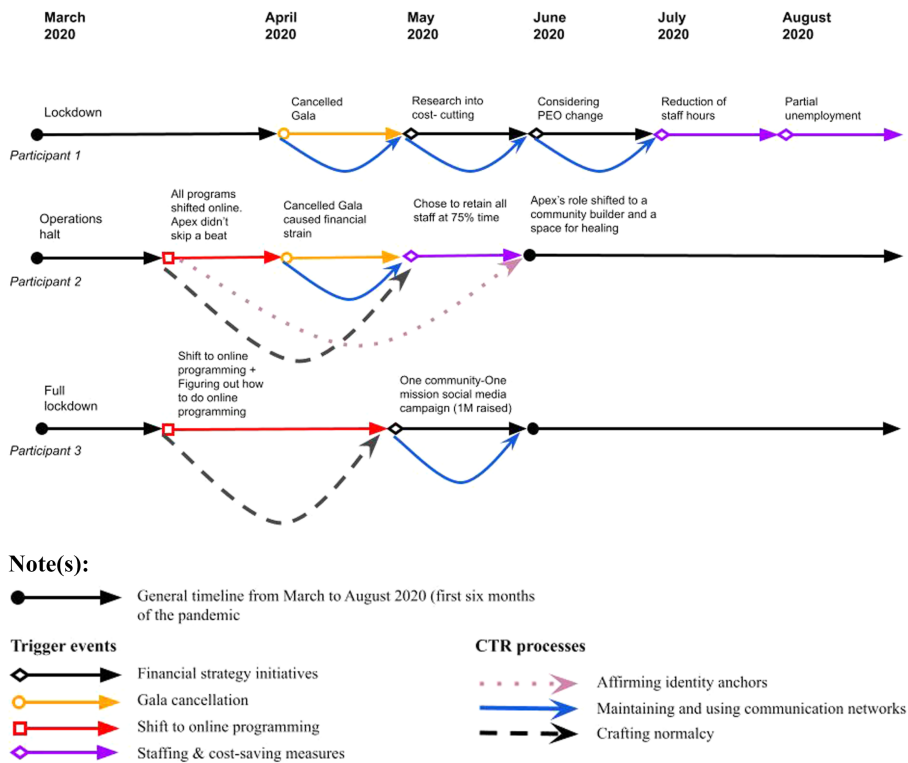


Figure 2. Resilience processes

participants' own depictions, illustrating their subjective sense of the temporal distance between one trigger event and the next. Different arrow colors represent triggers of the same category. For example, the yellow arrows denote the gala cancellation, showing how participants experienced this trigger diachronically, even though the event itself occurred at a single, shared point in time. In Figure 2, the curved arrows underneath the main timeline demonstrate how trigger events set off specific resilience-cultivating processes, described by the Communication Theory of Resilience (Buzzanell, 2010, 2018).

These diagrams show how organizational resilience emerges through distributed, role-contingent and communicatively constructed processes, helping us gain insights into the processes that standard narrative or interview-based methods might obscure. Below, I explicate a few insights that the use of FIT provides into resilience.

Resilience is a constellation of role-connected responses. Each timeline reflects a unique positional perspective on the same organizational crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – revealing how staff at different levels or in different functions experienced, interpreted, and responded to the disruption. The shift to online programming, marked by red colored lines, shows that while this was a shared organizational pivot, the implications varied: for one participant, it simply meant Apex “didn’t skip a beat,” while for another, it prompted deep learning and experimentation about *how* to deliver programming virtually. It is likely that some staff members carried a heavier load of adjusting organizational programming to a virtual mode than others, allowing some staff to use their resources somewhere else where a response was needed. In one case, this trigger event led to development and implementation of a high-impact social media campaign, while in another, it triggered budgetary reflection and a re-evaluation

of Apex's role as a culturally aware and trauma-informed community builder. These divergent arcs underscore Buzzanell's (2010) claim that resilience is enacted through every day, situated meaning-making and not through uniform strategy execution.

Trigger-response-trigger chains of communicative sequences of resilience. The arrows provide more than just narrative flow – they chart the *communication-action cycles* that define how resilience unfolds. For instance, the shift to virtual programming (red) is not a singular turning point; it's a node that activates other processes: cost-saving decisions, identity negotiation, and reimagination of purpose. That one event leads to two distinct pathways (yellow and purple in one case, and black in another) captures how a single organizational event can create multiple trajectories of change, depending on how it is interpreted and operationalized by staff.

FIT as a diagnostic and reflective tool. Finally, this visual representation serves as more than a retrospective analytic – it is a potential *diagnostic and learning tool* for the organization itself. It allows leadership and staff to collectively reflect on questions like which responses were reactive vs strategic; which adaptations/transformations relied on informal labor or unrecognized emotional work and how various response to crisis aligned with – or strained – the organization's core values and mission.

By visualizing distributed agency, these FIT diagrams foreground how organizational resilience is not housed in any one person or department, but emerges through dynamic, relational processes, demonstrating how individual resilience translates into organizational. It offers a methodologically grounded way to identify not just the how of resilience, but the what, who and under what conditions – questions that are central to both theory-building and practice.

What FIT reveals: beyond standard interviews

There are a few things that FIT allowed to see that would be difficult or impossible to see through regular interviews. First, the timelines showed that employees experienced the “extended crisis” (Williams *et al.*, 2022) differently: the same disruption – the pandemic – led to different “trigger events” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 10) for each individual. For example, one staff member illustrated the disruption as a series of jarring events: everything shuts down, the organization pivots to virtual programming, then another blow – the cancellation of the organization's annual gala – occurs. Another participant recalled less visible but equally powerful moments: the realization that they needed to reduce staff hours, cut costs and apply for loans. These responses show how the same external crisis manifested in vastly different internal landscapes, shaped by role, responsibility and personal values.

Importantly, FIT helped uncover hidden triggers of resilience – moments that were deeply meaningful for some staff but would likely be missed in leadership narratives and standard interviews. These triggers are not always public or dramatic; they often involve internal turning points or relational dynamics that shape how individuals respond to disruption. Traditional interviews might surface these events through narrative prompts, but FIT provides a concrete, visual scaffold that prompts recall of both high-impact and subtle moments. It encourages participants to consider what *shaped* them over time, not just what they remember as important. This process highlights the complexity of individual sensemaking and allows researchers to move from isolated stories to a broader tapestry of resilience that reflects real organizational life across roles and positions.

Second, when staff put similar events on the timelines (e.g. gala cancellation), the temporal position on the line often differed. For one employee, the cancellation of gala appears early on the timeline – as the initial disruption that set everything else in motion. For another, it occurs later, following events they deemed more central to their own experience, such as navigating technology for remote delivery or managing client outreach. This difference reveals that “trigger events” are not fixed points in a collective history, but subjectively and functionally weighted depending on the individual's role and embeddedness in organizational processes.

Standard interviews may elicit mention of the same events, but without the timeline structure, they rarely show how participants *sequence* those events in their memory or experience. FIT reveals how individuals make sense of disruption, assign meaning to experiences and enact resilience over time. Without access to participants' temporal framing, we risk flattening the lived experience of crisis into a homogenized story that overlooks the differential pacing and emotional weight of events. These narrative chronologies illuminate the hidden infrastructure of resilience: the moments people use to anchor their identities, justify actions or signal shifts in organizational meaning. FIT allows us to visualize not only what matters to different employees, but *when* it matters and how that timing reflects their role, access to decision-making or emotional proximity to particular disruptions. This temporal insight is crucial for understanding how resilience unfolds unevenly – and often invisibly – across an organization.

Third, FIT demonstrated how organizational resilience is relationally co-constructed across overlapping and complimentary (yet sometimes contradictory) trajectories. While traditional interviews may elicit personal narratives of adaptation/transformation, they often fail to show how these narratives coexist, intersect, or support one another across the organization. By visualizing timelines and placing them side by side, FIT allowed me to see how one team member's response to a particular disruption – such as quickly transitioning programming online – created conditions that supported others' resilience, even when they were responding to entirely different pressures (e.g. managing donor communication or applying for emergency loans). The timelines did not just show divergent experiences; they illustrated how those experiences, though asynchronous and differently valued, formed an interdependent *architecture of resilience*.

For example, while one staff member experienced the shutdown as a call to action to maintain continuity for students, another administrative staff member saw the same period as marked by financial precarity and the moral weight of recommending furloughs. Their timelines were different, not just in content or emphasis but in purpose – each one driving a resilience cultivation process that, when woven together, made the organization reach resilient outcomes. FIT made these relationships visible, allowing us to see resilience not as a single arc, but as a distributed, networked process rooted in the practical and emotional labor and communicative practices of individuals working in concert.

What makes FIT particularly powerful in organizational resilience research is its ability to surface these divergent and parallel disruptions. While conventional narratives may frame the pandemic as a singular trigger, FIT reveals that organizational resilience is not sparked by one disruptive event, but by multiple, simultaneous disruptions. As [Hintz et al. \(2023\)](#) noted, crises may cascade, but in this case, they ran parallel – impacting individuals in different ways and prompting resilience cultivation in various domains of the organization. One person may have been responding to technological challenges, another to emotional strain, while others navigated workload shifts or community needs. By mapping these moments individually, we see how resilience was fostered in overlapping, mutually supporting and at times contradicting ways across the organization. Overall, FIT does not just add detail – it fundamentally deepens our understanding of how resilience is communicatively and relationally built across uneven, nonlinear and subjective time.

Discussion

The pairing of PDCS and FIT for research on nonprofit communicative resilience is intentional and strategic. PDCS offers a principled approach for selecting cases that exemplify resilient practices under adversity, while FIT provides a narrative, participant-led method for tracing the micro-processes, sensemaking patterns and relational dynamics that constitute resilience from within. Together, they bridge the structural and the experiential: PDCS locates difference and FIT helps us understand it. This combination enables researchers to capture both the organizational patterns that signal positive deviance and the situated communicative practices through which resilience becomes possible.

Formative influences timeline

In nonprofit organizations, where professional responsibilities are often deeply entwined with personal commitments and moral values (Akingbola and Van Den Berg, 2019; Brown and Yoshioka, 2003; Newton and Mazur, 2016), understanding how resilience is cultivated requires methods that honor this complexity. Additionally, resilience is not a linear process – it is a tangle of communicative and embodied practices, many of which are difficult to see/recognize through traditional qualitative data collection methods. The Formative Influences Timeline method helps trace how organizational resilience emerges through individual, visually expressed stories of crisis and offers a powerful tool for uncovering the underlying rhythms of resilience – how it is felt, triggered, and practiced across roles and time. Unlike traditional interviews, FIT allows researchers to trace overlapping and sometimes contradictory processes of adaptation/transformation. These timelines reveal how resilience unfolds not as a single trajectory, but as a web of interdependent responses – some reinforcing each other, others straining organizational coherence (Buzzanell, 2010; Williams *et al.*, 2022). By illuminating this full spectrum of experience, FIT enables a more holistic understanding of nonprofit resilience, one that includes not just strategic pivots, programmatic and policy shifts, but also emotional labor, ethical dilemmas and internal tensions that catalyze or complicate organizational resilience.

This matters not only for research methods and theory but also for practice. By surfacing what typically remains undocumented, unseen or even unspoken, FIT helps bridge the gap between researcher and practitioner. The method makes visible both the celebrated and the concealed – the social media campaign someone is proud of and the furlough conversation they never want to have again. It invites participants to articulate not just their successes, but their uncertainties, doubts, and the conditions under which they had to make (im)possible decisions. Understanding these points of view of a crisis offers insight into the lived experience of resilience cultivation and the cost of organizational adaptation/transformation.

More broadly, this approach reinforces the value of qualitative inquiry for studying complex organizational phenomena. Unlike approaches that attempt to reduce problems to measurable parts, qualitative methods – particularly ones like FIT – allow us to view issues in their intricacy. They stay with the messiness, contradiction and nuance that define organizational life, especially during crises. As such, they are well-suited for contexts where hybrid solutions and multidimensional approaches are needed (e.g. Roeder and Bisel, 2024). Moreover, FIT fosters a different relationship between researcher and participant – one rooted in co-construction, reflection and attentiveness to the story that a participant wants to tell, not the one a researcher might lead them to tell. This kind of methodologically imaginative work is crucial if we are to truly understand what holds organizations together when familiar structures fall away.

FIT limitations

Of course, like any method, FIT has limitations. The quality and depth of responses can vary – some participants produce richly detailed timelines, while others offer minimal content or prefer not to draw one at all (see Plates 1 and 3 for comparison). This calls for interviewer flexibility and sensitivity (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021). As a self-report tool, FIT also reflects participants' subjective interpretations, shaped by memory, emotion and positionality. Researchers should account for this by seeking diverse samples and, where possible, combining FIT with other methods to validate insights through multiple data sources. Additionally, FIT can unintentionally lead participants to focus on certain events, which may bias how they respond to subsequent interview questions. Ethical concerns may also arise when timelines surface deeply personal or painful memories. In these cases, researchers must prioritize confidentiality, offer participants agency in editing or retracting data and remain vigilant about power dynamics and emotional safety throughout the process (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021).

One caveat that I identified using FIT in conversations about organizational resilience is that while the visual output appears linear, the actual experiences it represents are rarely so. The horizontal format of FIT encourages participants to plot events chronologically, which can give the impression of a clear, ordered progression of disruption and response. However, the real-world experiences of crisis, especially in times of extended disruption like a pandemic, are rarely so neatly ordered. In practice, the processes that shape organizational resilience – sensemaking, adaptation, emotional labor and transformation – often unfold in overlapping, recursive and nonlinear ways. People revisit decisions, reinterpret events, and experience delayed or layered reactions. The linear format risks flattening that complexity, potentially masking how resilience is emergent, cyclical or even contradictory.

Rather than treating the FIT as a literal sequence of events and cause-effect, researchers should approach the timelines as sensemaking artifacts – visual expressions of how participants are currently organizing and interpreting their past experiences. One way to work with this limitation is to combine FIT with narrative probing during the interview (e.g. “How did this event affect how you understood earlier challenges?” or “Looking back, do you see this differently now?”). Researchers can also analyze inconsistencies, overlaps or backtracking as data in themselves – clues about how resilience processes are nonlinear, recursive and layered. Acknowledging the tension between visual linearity and experiential complexity not only adds analytical depth but helps us better represent the tangled, evolving nature of communicative resilience.

Positive deviance case selection

In tandem with FIT, PDCS offers a compelling methodological approach for studying nonprofit organizational resilience. Nonprofit organizations often operate under chronic resource constraints, competing stakeholder demands and significant exposure to environmental shocks. Yet some not only survive disruptions – they thrive. These exceptional cases are what PDCS helps uncover. Rather than focusing on failure, PDCS asks: What can we learn from organizations that succeed under conditions where success is unlikely or where peers fail (Bisel *et al.*, 2020). This reframing is especially generative for resilience research because it foregrounds not just how organizations respond to adversity, but how they do so honorably, non-normatively and intentionally through communicative practices that center care, equity and contextual responsiveness.

PDCS offers two distinct benefits in this context. First, it enables researchers to identify cases that are empirically rich and theoretically illuminating – cases where communicative resilience manifests through everyday decisions, interactions and improvisations that are both context-sensitive and potentially transferrable. Second, it provides a grounded basis for creating a database of resources that can inform actions of other nonprofits facing similar crises. By focusing on positive deviance, we can move beyond managerial and leadership scripts and immerse ourselves in situated, relational wisdom that more accurately reflects the values and complexity of mission-driven work.

PDCS limitations

Of course, PDCS is not without its limitations. One risk is romanticizing exceptionalism – elevating a single successful case without sufficiently accounting for its unique context or constraints. For example, Apex’s ultimate success was in no small part due to unprecedented influx of donor support that began in the latter part of the first six months and might be attributed to the collective sense of guilt for the initial brutal and violent scapegoating of Asians and Asian Americans for the pandemic. This circumstance is important in the consideration and attribution of Apex’s success in resilience cultivation. Therefore, PDCS will benefit from triangulation – drawing on internal and external data sources to confirm that the organization’s perceived success is both sustainable and widely recognized, and that contextual factors are richly considered (Rush and Bisel, 2024). Additionally, to mitigate

for the unintended romanticization of the case, scholars must ensure that the practices observed are not only admirable but also analyzable – that they are purposeful, replicable in similar environments and aligned with the organization’s values and mission.

Another central challenge concerns the relationship between intentions and outcomes. As Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) note, positive deviance is defined by “behaviors with honorable intentions, independent of outcomes,” and “positive intentions do not always lead to positive outcomes” (p. 833). This reflects a long intellectual tradition that evaluates action by intention rather than consequence. Yet when applied to organizational contexts, where resilience unfolds as a relational, nonlinear and temporally complex process – this definition introduces methodological complications. If practices are identified as “positive” based on intentions alone, how should researchers account for the evolving, sometimes contradictory, outcomes that emerge over time? And if outcomes are considered, what counts as a sufficient time frame for determining whether a practice was, in fact, “positive”? These questions are particularly salient in cases like Apex, where resilience is the focus of study. The organization ultimately survived the pandemic and innovated in its wake, but resilience was not experienced as a singular triumph; it was a process marked by uneven burdens, emotional and mental strain, contested decisions and shifting resources. PDCS, by design, draws attention to isolated moments of an organization’s trajectory, yet isolating such moments risks obscuring the surrounding complexity: the partial successes, unintended consequences and labor that shape resilience in practice. One way to account for these tensions is to treat PDCS not as a tool for identifying heroic snapshots, but as an entry point into a fuller, temporally layered analysis of how intentions, practices and outcomes interact over time.

A further limitation of PDCS concerns the tension between its equity-oriented strengths and the practical demands it places on nonprofit employees. Marsh *et al.* (2004) emphasize that positive deviance “serves equity,” because it draws on the wisdom of disadvantaged “doers” whose strategies remain accessible to others facing similar socioeconomic constraints (p. 1178). The approach also offers the promise of immediate, “partial solutions today rather than waiting for long-term development,” thereby building trust and momentum during periods of uncertainty (Marsh *et al.*, 2004, p. 1178), which is especially important for resilience cultivation. Yet these strengths come with important constraints. While we can identify uncommon positive behaviors by and within certain nonprofit organizations, their replication (the intended end goal of PDCS) will still require mobilization of nonprofit staff to foster resilience for themselves and their organizations and communities with already strained resources, placing the burden back on organizations and individuals. In other words, when applied to nonprofits – especially those navigating chronic underfunding and systemic inequities – PDCS risks implicitly valorizing heroic, nonnormative acts carried out under resource scarcity. In doing so, it may unintentionally reify narratives of self-sufficiency while obscuring the broader structural conditions that produce the very need for resilience in the first place.

Finally, there is always a danger of selection bias: researchers embedded in the field may naturally gravitate toward cases that reflect their own values or ideals (Bisel *et al.*, 2020). Addressing this requires reflexivity and transparency in case selection and analysis. In response to this concern, I offer a brief researcher positionality statement to clarify how my relationship to the organization shaped case selection and access. I also attend to how proximity shaped both what became visible in the field and how selection bias was interrogated.

Researcher positionality. My positionality as a researcher shaped both the selection of Apex as a positive deviance case and the interpretation of its resilience practices. I am a white immigrant scholar from Russia, born and raised in Siberia. Although I am an outsider to the Asian American communities Apex primarily serves, my experiences of migration, geopolitical othering, and navigating life in the United States as someone from a country frequently framed as undesirable or threatening inform how I understand precarity, belonging and resilience. This location also created points of resonance with the immigrant populations

Apex serves, even as it did not erase important differences in racialization, history, or community membership. Attending to this partial overlap – and its limits – was a necessary component of my reflexive stance.

My selection of Apex as a positive deviance case is also inseparable from my prior relationship with the organization as an employee. I entered the field not as a neutral outsider but as someone who had collaborated with staff, contributed to the realization of the organization's community-centered mission and not only observed firsthand how staff and leadership navigated the uncertainties of the pandemic but also participated in that response. This proximity inevitably shaped my initial assumptions about what "resilience" looked like at Apex and the types of practices I expected to see. At the same time, it offered access to relational, contextual and historical knowledge that would have remained inaccessible through detached observation alone.

To mitigate the potential for organizational selection bias, I approached Apex with layered reflexivity. First, I made explicit to myself the values and commitments that drew me to the case – particularly my interest in community-guided organizing, relational leadership and equity-oriented nonprofit work. Naming these commitments allowed me to remain attentive to how they might influence both case selection and interpretation. Second, I used PDCS criteria not simply to validate an organization I already admired but to interrogate whether Apex's adaptations/transformations were truly positively deviant: Were these practices intentional and voluntary? Were they recognized across stakeholders? Were they sustained over time? Did participants themselves narrate them as meaningful departures from the norm? Engaging multiple data sources – including interviews, documents, timelines and field reflections – helped ensure that Apex's selection rested on demonstrable communicative resilience rather than personal affinity. Finally, I remained attentive to the tensions and contradictions that emerged in the field, resisting the temptation to frame the organization as exceptional in ways that obscured struggle or uneven labor. In this way, positionality functioned not only as an acknowledgment of subjectivity but as an analytic resource – a reminder that studying "positive deviance" requires holding admiration and critique in productive tension.

Attending to positionality in this way does not resolve the limitations of PDCS but offers an important step toward engaging them productively. By making visible how case selection, interpretation and access are shaped by researcher location and intersectional identity, reflexivity becomes a methodological practice within PDCS rather than a post hoc acknowledgment. Despite its limitations, PDCS offers an invaluable counterbalance to deficit-based approaches in organizational studies. When paired with tools like FIT, it can deepen our understanding of how resilience is co-constructed in nonprofit settings as a dynamic, distributed process rooted in communication.

Conclusion: toward reflexive and passionate inquiry

Studying Apex reoriented my understanding not only of resilience itself, but of resilience research. I began the project with the goal of understanding how one nonprofit managed to thrive in the face of a crisis; I left with a deeper recognition that resilience is not about heroic overcoming – it is about living through tension, improvisation and moral reckoning. I saw how resilience was cultivated through small moments of reframing, collaboration and care that rarely make it into annual reports. I also saw how essential it is to focus on the voices of those whose work carries the organization through disruption – voices that are too often marginal to the dominant narratives of resilience that focus on financial sustainability or leadership advice.

To see resilience differently requires reflexivity, creativity and attentiveness. It means listening not only for what organizations celebrate, but also for what they carry – unspoken losses, persistent ethical tensions and emotional undercurrents. The Formative Influences Timeline method made this possible by shifting attention to the participants, surfacing not only what happened, but how it was lived, interpreted and made meaningful. It is important to follow these stories wherever they lead, even when they unsettle our assumptions. And as

scholars of organizational communication, we must continue to develop methods that honor the full complexity of lived organizational life – its messiness, contradictions and paradoxes (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023). Together with PDCS, it advances an epistemology of listening and humility – one that recognizes the lived experiences of organizational actors as vital sites of knowledge creation.

Future research on nonprofit organizational resilience would benefit from expanding this commitment to relationally attuned inquiry. Studies might trace how resilience circulates between individuals and systems, how it is constrained or enabled by organizational power dynamics, and how it interacts with justice – especially in organizations that serve historically marginalized communities. The use of FIT alongside other dialogic methods could support this goal, allowing researchers to co-create knowledge with practitioners, rather than simply about them, because what FIT offers for communicative resilience research is a unique opportunity to hear people's stories about the crisis as experienced by them as organizational members, without being led or prompted by a researcher. The more creatively we approach resilience research methods, the more fully we can understand these hidden architectures of resilience. FIT, in this way, is not just a data collection tool. It is a lens that reveals how organizations live, adapt and hold together – through the voices of the people who make that possible.

Longitudinal studies might also follow how meaning and memory of disruption change over time, helping us see resilience as not just a process of survival, but of identity formation, repair and transformation.

Ultimately, passionate inquiry asks us not to observe from a distance, but to get close – to be moved, implicated and changed by what we study. It reminds us that resilience is not just about what endures – it is about *how* we endure, *who* gets to define it and *what kind of futures* our methods help bring into view.

Note

1. My access to Apex after the crisis had subsided was shaped by my prior role within the organization, a position that afforded deeper relational insight while also demanding ongoing reflexivity – a tension I address explicitly later in the manuscript.

References

- Afifi, T.D., Merrill, A.F. and Davis, S. (2016), "The theory of resilience and relational load", *Personal Relationships*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 663-683, doi: [10.1111/per.12159](https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12159).
- Akingbola, K. and Van Den Berg, H. A. (2019), "Antecedents, consequences, and context of employee engagement in nonprofit organizations", *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 46-74, doi: [10.1177/0734371X16684910](https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X16684910).
- Allan, K. (2019), "Volunteering as hope labour: the potential value of unpaid work experience for the un- and under-employed", *Culture, Theory and Critique*, Vol. 60 No. 1, pp. 66-83, doi: [10.1080/14735784.2018.1548300](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2018.1548300).
- Altamimi, H. and Liu, Q. (2022), "The nonprofit starvation cycle: does overhead spending really impact program outcomes?", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 51 No. 6, pp. 1324-1348, doi: [10.1177/08997640211057404](https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211057404).
- Andersson, T., Cäker, M., Tengblad, S. and Wickelgren, M. (2019), "Building traits for organizational resilience through balancing organizational structures", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 36-45, doi: [10.1016/j.scaman.2019.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2019.01.001).
- Annarelli, A. and Nonino, F. (2016), "Strategic and operational management of organizational resilience: current state of research and future directions", *Omega*, Vol. 62, pp. 1-18, doi: [10.1016/j.omega.2015.08.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.omega.2015.08.004).
- Bartuseviciene, I., Butkus, M. and Schiuma, G. (2024), "Modelling organizational resilience structure: insights to assess resilience integrating bounce-back and bounce-forward", *European Journal of Innovation Management*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 153-169, doi: [10.1108/EJIM-04-2022-0180](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-04-2022-0180).

- Bisel, R.S., Kavya, P. and Tracy, S.J. (2020), "Positive deviance case selection as a method for organizational communication: a rationale, how-to, and illustration", *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 279-296, doi: [10.1177/0893318919897060](https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318919897060).
- Bisel, R.S., Rush, K.A. and Roeder, A.C. (2024), "Professional caregivers' communicative resilience and flourishing during the COVID-19 pandemic: when disruption lasts", *International Journal of Business Communication*, Vol. 61 No. 4, pp. 760-782, doi: [10.1177/23294884241263556](https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884241263556).
- Bomsta, H. and Kerr, J. (2023), "Organizational resilience of intimate partner abuse nonprofits during the COVID-19 pandemic", *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 197-223, doi: [10.20899/jpna.9.2.197.223](https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.9.2.197.223).
- Brown, W.A. and Yoshioka, C.F. (2003), "Mission attachment and satisfaction as factors in employee retention", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 5-18, doi: [10.1002/nml.18](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.18).
- Bullock, R., DuttaGupta, T. and Miriti, P. (2025), "A positive deviance approach to understand gender relations and practices that support transformative adaptation: insights from Kenya dairy households", *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*, Vol. 9, 100280, doi: [10.1016/j.crsust.2025.100280](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crsust.2025.100280).
- Buzzanell, P.M. (2010), "Resilience: talking, resisting, and imagining new normalcies into being", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 60 No. 1, pp. 1-14, doi: [10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01469.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01469.x).
- Buzzanell, P.M. (2018), "Organizing resilience as adaptive-transformational tensions", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 14-18, doi: [10.1080/00909882.2018.1426711](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2018.1426711).
- Buzzanell, P.M. (2021), "Designing feminist resilience", in Eckert, S. and Bachmann, I. (Eds), *Reflections on Feminist Communication and Media Scholarship*, Routledge, pp. 43-58.
- Buzzanell, P.M. and Houston, J.B. (2018), "Communication and resilience: multilevel applications and insights—a journal of applied communication research forum", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 1-4, doi: [10.1080/00909882.2017.1412086](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2017.1412086).
- Buzzetta, A., Buisker, L.L., Williams, E.A. and Whittenburg, C. (2024), "'Nobody knew the rules': nonprofit resilience, rules, and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic", *Communication Studies*, Vol. 75 No. 5, pp. 537-558, doi: [10.1080/10510974.2024.2382623](https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2024.2382623).
- Carden, L.L., Maldonado, T. and Boyd, R.O. (2018), "Organizational resilience: a look at McDonald's in the fast food industry", *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 25-31, doi: [10.1016/j.orgdyn.2017.07.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2017.07.002).
- Chen, X. (2022), "Nonprofit resilience in a natural disaster context: an exploratory qualitative case study based on hurricane Florence", *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership and Governance*, Vol. 46 No. 2, pp. 145-161, doi: [10.1080/23303131.2021.1946455](https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2021.1946455).
- Cooper, K.R., Wang, R. and Atouba, Y.C. (2024), "Weathering the storm: nonprofit resilience and resistance in response to the refugee 'Crisis'", *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, pp. 1-13, doi: [10.1080/15562948.2024.2407583](https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2024.2407583).
- Doerfel, M.L., Kim, M., Kwestel, M., Yoon, H. and Quow, J. (2022), "Resilience organizing: a multilevel communication framework", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 72 No. 6, pp. 605-618, doi: [10.1093/joc/jqac027](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqac027).
- Dura, L. and Singhal, A. (2009), "Will Ramon finish sixth grade? Positive deviance for student retention in rural Argentina", *Positive Deviance Wisdom Series*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-6.
- Dura, L. and Singhal, A. (2010), "Utilizing a positive deviance approach to reduce girls' trafficking in Indonesia: asset-based communicative acts that make a difference", *Journal of Creative Communications*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 1-17, doi: [10.1177/097325861000400101](https://doi.org/10.1177/097325861000400101).
- Fairhurst, G.T. and Putnam, L.L. (2023), *Performing Organizational Paradoxes*, Routledge, New York.
- Fuller, R.P. and Rice, R.E. (2022), "Nonprofit organization communication, crisis planning, and strategic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic", *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, Vol. 27 No. 3, e1750, doi: [10.1002/nvsm.1750](https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1750).

- Guo, B., Gutkowski, V.A. and Chalise, N. (2025), "Resilience of nonprofits serving or led by People of Color during the COVID-19 pandemic", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Advance Online Publication, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 90-115, doi: [10.1177/08997640251332896](https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640251332896).
- Herington, M.J. and van de Fliert, E. (2018), "Positive deviance in theory and practice: a conceptual review", *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 39 No. 5, pp. 664-678, doi: [10.1080/01639625.2017.1286194](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2017.1286194).
- Hernes, T., Blagoev, B., Kunisch, S. and Schultz, M. (2025), "From bouncing back to bouncing forward: a temporal trajectory model of organizational resilience", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 72-92, doi: [10.5465/amr.2022.0406](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2022.0406).
- Herrero, M. and Kraemer, S. (2022), "Beyond survival mode: organizational resilience capabilities in nonprofit arts and culture fundraising during the Covid-19 pandemic", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 279-295, doi: [10.1002/nml.21524](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21524).
- Hintz, E.A., Betts, T. and Buzzanell, P.M. (2023), "Caring for patients without personal protective equipment (PPE): material conditions as multidimensional cascading triggers for resilience processes", *Health Communication*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 371-380, doi: [10.1080/10410236.2021.1953727](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2021.1953727).
- Horstman, H.K., Leverenz, A., Morrison, S., Jordan, E., Baltazar, A., Cen, X., Charvat, E., Okafor, E.B. and Butauski, M. (2024), "Pregnancy during the COVID-19 pandemic: communicated narrative sense-making and resilience", *Health Communication*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 205-215, doi: [10.1080/10410236.2022.2163103](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2022.2163103).
- Jejeebhoy, S.J., Santhya, K.G. and Sabarwal, S. (2013), "Gender-based violence: a qualitative exploration of norms, experiences and positive deviance", Technical Report, New Delhi: Population Council, doi: [10.31899/rh3.1013](https://doi.org/10.31899/rh3.1013).
- Johnson, M.A. and Johnson, N.R. (2020), "The resilience of sensation in urban planning", *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis and Invention and Invention*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 1-22, doi: [10.13008/2151-2957.1295](https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1295).
- Jones, J.A. (2018), "The unseen lens: the relationship between philanthropists' developmental meaning making and philanthropic activity", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 28 No. 4, pp. 491-509, doi: [10.1002/nml.21299](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21299).
- Jones, J.A. and Donmoyer, R. (2021), "Improving the trustworthiness/validity of interview data in qualitative nonprofit sector research: the formative influences timeline", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 889-904, doi: [10.1177/0899764020977657](https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764020977657).
- Kim, M., Kwesell, M., Youn, H., Quow, J. and Doerfel, M.L. (2022), "Serving the vulnerable while being vulnerable: organizing resilience in a social welfare sector", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 279-300, doi: [10.1177/08997640211013912](https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211013912).
- Kuenzi, K., Stewart, A.J. and Walk, M. (2021), "COVID-19 as a nonprofit workplace crisis: seeking insights from the nonprofit workers' perspective", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 821-832, doi: [10.1002/nml.21465](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21465).
- Kumari, G. and Eguruz, E.S. (2022), "Positive deviance traits and social entrepreneurship for women empowerment amid COVID-19", *IIM Kozhikode Society and Management Review*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 109-125, doi: [10.1177/22779752211030697](https://doi.org/10.1177/22779752211030697).
- Lee, J., Park, Y.J. and Kim, S.E. (2023), "Volunteers and resource management competencies of nonprofit organizations during challenging times", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 107-129, doi: [10.1002/nml.21562](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21562).
- Lethielleux, L., Demeyère, C., Artis, A., Vézina, M. and Girard, J.P. (2024), "Nonprofits and community resilience during a pandemic: a France-Quebec perspective", *Management Decision*, Advance Online Publication, doi: [10.1108/MD-11-2023-2079](https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-11-2023-2079).
- Lin, W. and Wang, Q. (2016), "What helped nonprofits weather the great recession? Evidence from human services and community improvement organizations", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 257-276, doi: [10.1002/nml.21197](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21197).
- Marsh, D.R., Schroeder, D.G., Dearden, K.A., Stermin, J. and Stermin, M. (2004), "The power of positive deviance", *BMJ*, Vol. 329 No. 7475, pp. 1177-1179, doi: [10.1136/bmj.329.7475.1177](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7475.1177).

- Mazzei, J.M., DeBode, J., Gangloff, K.A. and Song, R. (2025), "Old habits die hard: A review and assessment of the threat-rigidity literature", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 51 No. 6, pp. 2154-2181, doi: [10.1177/049206324186493](https://doi.org/10.1177/049206324186493).
- McGregor, J., Lohmeyer, B.A. and Roffee, J. (2025), "Positive deviants? How case managers navigate administrative evil and neoliberal violence when working with justice-involved young people", *Deviant Behavior*, pp. 1-15, doi: [10.1080/01639625.2025.2522777](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2522777).
- Merton, R.K. (1957), *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, New York.
- Mirivel, J.C. and Fuller, R.P. (2024), "A World of possibilities: introducing positive communication scholarship to inspire better business and organizational communication research", *International Journal of Business Communication*, Vol. 61 No. 4, pp. 743-759, doi: [10.1177/23294884241264268](https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884241264268).
- Never, B. and de Leon, E. (2014), "The effect of government contracting on nonprofit human service organizations: impacts of an evolving relationship", *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership and Governance*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 258-270, doi: [10.1080/23303131.2014.896300](https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2014.896300).
- Newby, K. and Branyon, B. (2021), "Pivoting services: resilience in the face of disruptions in nonprofit organizations caused by COVID-19", *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 443-460, doi: [10.20899/jpna.7.3.443-460](https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.7.3.443-460).
- Newton, C.J. and Mazur, A.K. (2016), "Value congruence and job-related attitudes in a nonprofit organization: a competing values approach", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 27 No. 10, pp. 1013-1033, doi: [10.1080/09585192.2015.1053962](https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1053962).
- Okamoto, K.E. (2020), "'As resilient as an ironweed': Narrative resilience in nonprofit organizing", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 618-636, doi: [10.1080/00909882.2020.1820552](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2020.1820552).
- Pascale, R.T. and Sternin, J. (2005), "Your company's secret change agents", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 83 No. 5, pp. 72-81.
- Petrin Sayers, E.L., Anthony, K.E., Tom, A., Kim, A.Y. and Armstrong, C. (2023), "'We will rise no matter what': community perspectives of disaster resilience following Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Puerto Rico", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 126-145, doi: [10.1080/00909882.2022.2069473](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2022.2069473).
- Prayag, G., Chowdhury, M., Spector, S. and Orchiston, C. (2018), "Organizational resilience and financial performance", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 73, pp. 193-196, doi: [10.1016/j.annals.2018.06.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2018.06.006).
- Pyatovskaya, E. (2024), "Zoom saved all our lives", in Nunes, M. and Ozog, C. (Eds), *'You're Muted': Performance, Precarity, and the Logic of Zoom*, Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 229-250.
- Pyatovskaya, E. (2025), "'We built our plane as we flew it': communicative resilience in nonprofit organizing during the pandemic", Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Randazzo, C., Kim, M., Kwestel, M., Doerfel, M.L. and Ammari, T. (2025), "'We're losing our neighborhoods. We're losing our community': a comparative analysis of community discourse in online and offline public spheres across disaster phases", *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 9 No. 7, pp. 1-30, doi: [10.1145/3757446](https://doi.org/10.1145/3757446).
- Roberts, L.M. (2006), "Shifting the lens on organizational life: the added value of positive scholarship", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 292-305, doi: [10.2307/20159202](https://doi.org/10.2307/20159202).
- Roeder, A.C. and Bisel, R.S. (2024), "Managing disruption (s) at work: a longitudinal study of communicative resilience and high-reliability organizing", *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 91 No. 1, pp. 56-78, doi: [10.1080/03637751.2023.2242918](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2023.2242918).
- Rose, A.J. and McCullough, M.B. (2016), "A practical guide to using the positive deviance method in health services research", *Health Services Research*, Vol. 52 No. 3, pp. 1207-1222, doi: [10.1111/1475-6773.12524](https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12524).

- Rush, K.A. and Bisel, R.S. (2024), "'She takes rest as seriously as working:' communicative resilience and professional caregivers' meanings of rest", *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 92 No. 1, pp. 49-73, doi: [10.1080/03637751.2024.2345892](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2024.2345892).
- Rush, K.A., McNamee, L.G. and Garner, J.T. (2024), "More than emotional coping: cultivating resilience in human services volunteering", *Western Journal of Communication*, Vol. 88 No. 3, pp. 482-504, doi: [10.1080/10570314.2022.2139153](https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2022.2139153).
- Sarkar, S. and Osiyevskyy, O. (2018), "Organizational change and rigidity during crisis: a review of the paradox", *European Management Journal*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 47-58, doi: [10.1016/j.emj.2017.03.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2017.03.007).
- Searing, E.A., Wiley, K.K. and Young, S.L. (2021), "Resiliency tactics during financial crisis: the nonprofit resiliency framework", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 179-196, doi: [10.1002/nml.21478](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21478).
- Shaheen, I., Azadegan, A. and Davis, D.F. (2023), "Resource scarcity and humanitarian social innovation: observations from hunger relief in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 182 No. 3, pp. 597-617, doi: [10.1007/s10551-021-05014-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-05014-9).
- Socha, T.J. and Beck, G.A. (2015), "Positive communication and human needs: a review and proposed organizing conceptual framework", *Review of Communication*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 173-199, doi: [10.1080/15358593.2015.1080290](https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2015.1080290).
- Spreitzer, G.M. and Sonenshein, S. (2004), "Toward the construct definition of positive deviance", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 47 No. 6, pp. 828-847, doi: [10.1177/0002764203260212](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203260212).
- Stötzer, S., Kaltenbrunner, K., Grüb, B. and Martin, S. (2022), "Coping with COVID-19—which resilience mechanisms enabled Austrian nonprofit organizations to weather the pandemic storm?", *Schmalenbach Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 74 No. 4, pp. 497-535, doi: [10.1007/s41471-022-00146-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s41471-022-00146-8).
- Vadera, A.K., Pratt, M.G. and Mishra, P. (2013), "Constructive deviance in organizations: integrating and moving forward", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 39 No. 5, pp. 1221-1276, doi: [10.1177/0149206313475816](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206313475816).
- Wang, R. and Hamilton, H. (2025), "Evaluating the relationship between nonprofit capacities and organizational effectiveness during a crisis", *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 156-183, doi: [10.1177/08933189241249759](https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189241249759).
- Watkins, J.M., Mohr, B.J. and Kelly, R. (2011), *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco.
- Williams, E.A., Donovan, J., Giles, L. and McKelfresh, D. (2022), "High reliability organizing through an extended crisis: a case study of a US university during COVID-19", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 50 No. 6, pp. 655-672, doi: [10.1080/00909882.2022.2141066](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2022.2141066).
- Witmer, H. and Mellinger, M.S. (2016), "Organizational resilience: nonprofit organizations' response to change", *Work*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 255-265, doi: [10.3233/wor-162303](https://doi.org/10.3233/wor-162303).
- Woznyj, H.M., Stewart, O.J. and Beck, T.E. (2024), "Stronger together: building nonprofit resilience through a network with a shared mission and organizational humility", *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 753-775, doi: [10.1002/nml.21590](https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21590).

Corresponding author

Evgeniya Pyatovskaya can be contacted at: evgeniya.pyatovskaya@lmu.edu