RESEARCH STATEMENT
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My research focuses on how people endure, respond and persist when experiencing adversity at work. I have two key streams of research related to adversity: one on motivation, primarily focusing on the underdog effect and impact of low expectations, and another on behavioral ethics, investigating how employees respond to the adversity of unethical behavior in their organizations.

A central idea in management research is that adversity prevents individuals from succeeding. For example, decades of theory and research on the self-fulfilling prophecy have shown that being the target of high versus low expectations from others—especially supervisors—is an important determinant of success at work (Eden, 1990; McNatt, 2000). When individuals are expected to perform effectively by others, they have greater confidence in their abilities, leading to more effort and better performance (i.e., this is known as the “Pygmalion effect”) (Chen & Klimoski, 2003; Eden, 1990). In contrast, related research on the “Golem effect” demonstrates that when supervisors hold low expectations for their employees, their employees perform worse (Davidson & Eden, 2000; Reynolds, 2007). Thus, extant theory and research propose that high expectations from others are beneficial, and low expectations from others tend to be detrimental. Furthermore, research on other forms of adversity indicates similar responses by individuals and employees. For example, research on stereotype threat reveals that when individuals or groups are the targets of negative group stereotypes, it can lead them to worry about confirming the stereotype and underachievement (Steele & Aronson, 1995). As such, the common assumption is that adversity is detrimental to individuals in the context of their work and career.

The crux of my theoretical contributions lies in reexamining these widely held assumptions related to adversity in organizational behavior theory and research, as I examine whether people can harness the adversity they experience and use it to succeed at work and in their careers. Despite recent research emphasizing the role of others’ high expectations or positive relational factors in motivating others, surprisingly little theory and research has attended to when, why, and how individuals can derive motivation and aim to succeed when others question their capacity to perform effectively or respond negatively to them or their ideas. Therefore, the primary theoretical contribution of my research lies in understanding how employees respond to the adversity they experience at work. My empirical research demonstrates that, in some instances, individuals succumb to adversity, behaving in ways consistent with the underlying theoretical assumptions outlined above. However, my research also reveals that individuals aim to circumvent the adversity they experience in many instances. This is seen in my research on underdogs, the adversity that emerges when employees encounter others’ unethical behavior in their organization (e.g., cover-ups, whistleblowing), and my research on other sources of adversity, such as inequality and social resistance to ideas. In the following sections, I summarize the primary areas of my existing research and future work related to these key areas of study.
II. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The following are my three most representative papers: “The underdog effect: When low expectations increase performance” [4; published at the Academy of Management Journal in 2020], “Against the odds: Developing underdog versus favorite narratives to offset prior experiences of discrimination” [1; in press at Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes], and “Understanding when and why cover-ups are punished less severely” [3; published at Academy of Management Journal in 2021]. These three papers showcase the major themes of my research using a variety of research methods (e.g., field experiments, survey methods, and lab experiments). A core tenet of my research program is constructive replication: using multiple research methods or samples to test and replicate a theoretical process. I use constructive replication to test and support my proposed theory in many of the research papers described below.

Motivation in Response to Adversity: Underdogs and Low Expectations

My primary research stream offers a nuanced understanding of how, when, and why employees experience motivation in response to adversity at work. In “The underdog effect: When low expectations increase performance” [4; representative paper], I seek to understand what motivates individuals to perform effectively when they perceive that others do not expect them to succeed. Whereas much of the existing research on the self-fulfilling prophecy assumes that the expectations of supervisors influence employees, research has overlooked how employees may resist the views of other stakeholders, including observers and evaluators.

My paper repositions existing theory to consider the impact of underdog expectations, introduced and conceptualized as individuals’ perceptions that others view them as unlikely to succeed. Drawing on theories of reactance and self-enhancement, I argue that underdog expectations motivate individuals to perform better through a desire to prove those holding the expectations wrong. Using field surveys in a multibillion-dollar food company and lab experiments, I found that underdog expectations are positively related to task performance and that the psychological phenomenon of proving others wrong explains why those experiencing underdog expectations perform better. Although my research on underdog expectations suggested that perceiving low expectations from others can be motivating, it departed from extant research on the self-fulfilling prophecy that seemingly reveals the opposite: perceiving low expectations from others is detrimental for performance. As such, I wanted to reconcile my theory of underdog expectations with extant research on the self-fulfilling prophecy that highlights the repercussions of low expectations.

To reconcile these two theoretical perspectives, I proposed that the perceived credibility of observers—the degree to which observers’ opinions are seen as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and valid—would shape these effects, such that underdog expectations would undermine performance when credibility was high (consistent with the self-fulfilling prophecy and Golem effect), but when observers’ expectations were less credible, it would boost performance (consistent with my proposed underdog effect). Perceived credibility is an important boundary condition to examine both theoretically and empirically because extant studies on the self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e., Pygmalion and Golem effects) tend to investigate the impact of
expectations in contexts in which expectations holders are seen as experts or highly credible, such as the military (platoon leaders) or educational settings (teachers).

The results mostly supported my theory with novel insights for integrating my theory on underdog expectations with existing research on the self-fulfilling prophecy. I found that underdog expectations and their associated effect of proving others wrong are a double-edged sword. Employees’ desire to prove others wrong motivates effective performance when they perceive others’ credibility as low. But, when employees perceive others’ credibility as high, the desire to prove others wrong detracts from the focus and attention required to perform effectively. This paper serves as a cornerstone of my research program as it presents valuable insights on when and why people succeed versus fail in the face of a source of adversity: underdog expectations.

Building on this research, I wondered whether the motivation stemming from underdog expectations could be harnessed through self-narratives by individuals who have endured a pressing form of adversity: prior experiences of discrimination. In “Against the odds: Developing underdog versus favorite narratives to offset prior experiences of discrimination” [1; representative paper with Timothy Kundro, a former PhD student advisee at Wharton, and Christopher Myers, who was a PhD student with me while at the University of Michigan], we introduce two distinct self-narratives: underdog and favorite narratives. Underdog narratives involve individuals reflecting on a situation in which they defied others’ low expectations to attain success, whereas favorite narratives feature individuals reflecting on a situation in which they fulfilled others’ high expectations of success. We theorized that underdog narratives are more effective than favorite narratives in offsetting prior experiences of discrimination on performance efficacy, which in turn boosts performance.

To test our theory, we partnered with the Department of Labor and Industry and Human Services in Pennsylvania to conduct a field experiment with a sample of job seekers facing substantive employment barriers and struggling to achieve economic self-sufficiency for themselves and their families. We trained a team to conduct one-hour workshops with 330 job seekers. As part of the workshops, we randomly assigned job seekers to develop underdog or favorite self-narratives (we also included an active control condition as part of the field experiment). We also measured prior experiences of discrimination before the intervention, performance efficacy after the intervention, and as a measure of performance, we retrieved archival data to code whether job seekers attained employment or not after 31 days. The results supported our hypotheses, as underdog narratives were more effective than favorite narratives at offsetting the effects of prior experiences of discrimination on job seekers’ actual job attainment (i.e., performance) through performance efficacy.

To constructively replicate our findings, we found similar results in an additional online study featuring a broader sample of job seekers and using multiple time-lagged surveys, additional performance measures, and accounting for individual differences. Our theory and results revisit Merton’s (1948) foundational paper on the self-fulfilling prophecy. Although considerable empirical research has focused on testing the benefits of high expectations, Merton (1948) also contended that the repercussions of experiences with discrimination and prejudice could be partially offset by changing how individuals make sense of these experiences. In this
way, my research provides insight into how underdog narratives can enable individuals to offset the repercussions of prior discrimination, one of the most notable forms of adversity experienced at work and in society. It also advances my research on underdog expectations by demonstrating how individuals themselves can harness prior situations of underdog expectations to formulate self-narratives to overcome present adversity.

My research on trash-talking further elucidates how adversity arising from competitors motivates people to perform better. “Trash-talking: Competitive incivility motivates rivalry, performance, and unethical behavior” [5 with Jeremy Yip and Maurice Schweitzer] demonstrates that being a recipient of boastful or insulting comments from competitors before, during, or after a competition enhances effort-based performance. Whereas my research on underdog expectations demonstrates how the desire to prove others wrong can motivate people to perform better, this paper indicates that trash-talking—as a form of competitive incivility and mistreatment—can boost performance through a different psychological mechanism: perceptions of rivalry. At the same time, although trash-talking increases performance in competitive interactions, it decreases performance in cooperative interactions and reduces creativity. Furthermore, my coauthors and I identify a dark side to trash-talking in competitive environments: it can increase the desire to see others lose and lead to unethical behavior. Our results across six studies, coupled with my prior research on underdog expectations and the desire to prove others wrong, demonstrate that there are instances in which being too motivated by others’ expectations can be detrimental to employees and their organizations.

I am also interested in how other forms of adversity impact motivation, and the role of employees’ self-expectations in shaping responses to adversity. For example, scholars often assume that performance pressure detracts from individuals’ focus on learning, hindering their performance. To address this assumption, “Who learns under pressure? Role self-efficacy promotes learning and performance in response to performance pressure” [11 with Timothy Kundro, Christopher Myers, and Wen Wu], draws on resource allocation theory (Bergeron, 2007; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989) to argue that not all individuals struggle to learn or excel in response to performance pressure. Specifically, my coauthors and I argue that individuals with greater role self-efficacy—individuals’ appraisals of their capabilities to succeed within a defined role—are more likely to learn and succeed in the face of performance pressure than individuals with less role self-efficacy. Using three distinct field samples—among aircraft pilot trainees, sanitation workers, and railway construction workers in China—we find support for our theory. Our theory and results challenge the prevailing perspective of a zero-sum trade-off between performance pressure and learning, as we find that some individuals more effectively focus on learning when experiencing performance pressure. Therefore, although performance pressure is often characterized as a form of adversity that employees experience, my research demonstrates that it does not always hinder learning and performance.

Relatedly, I have also examined how a sense of pressure and obligation impacts the effectiveness of initiative at work, as much prior research has documented a positive relationship between initiative and performance at the workplace. “The performance implications of ambivalent initiative: The interplay of autonomous and controlled motivations” [7 with Adam Grant, Susan Ashford, and Kathryn Dekas] examines how the relationship between taking initiative and job performance depends on external pressure that individuals perceive. Across
two field studies—one among job seekers and another among call center workers—my coauthors and I found that initiative only predicted performance when it was purely autonomous (i.e., intrinsic motivation). When individuals worried about others’ reacting negatively to their job search efforts or they were motivated by financial pressures in a call center, greater initiative did not contribute to greater performance, even if individuals held similar levels of autonomous motivation. Whereas my other research demonstrates that performance pressure does not always inhibit learning and performance, this research demonstrates that external pressures (e.g., financial or external evaluations) hinder the effectiveness of initiative. Moreover, our research advances theoretical and empirical debates on whether individuals hold autonomous and controlled motivations simultaneously (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and also demonstrates that when individuals are motivated out of a desire to please others, it actually hinders the effectiveness of their initiative since they experience a sense of pressure from these external expectations and obligations.

**Behavioral Ethics: Adversity in the Aftermath of Unethical Behavior**

Indeed, experiencing adversity may also lead employees to engage in behaviors that are counterproductive—or even unethical. I am intrigued by the adversity that arises for employees when witnessing or observing others’ unethical transgressions, as employees face a pressing decision: do they act in a way to prevent it from happening again, stay silent or actively participate? In this research stream, I strive to expand our understanding of employees’ responses to the unethical behavior they witness in organizations. “Understanding when and why cover-ups are punished less severely” [3; representative paper with Timothy Kundro, a former PhD student advisee at Wharton] develops new theory related to how employees respond to unethical acts—a form of adversity—in their organizations. Cover-ups of unethical actions often occur in organizations, but existing theory is unclear on when and why some cover-ups are punished less severely than others. Drawing on theories of attribution and social identity, we theorized that the punishment of cover-ups depends on two crucial factors: whether the person who committed the cover-up belongs to or is outside of one’s group and the type of cover-up that occurs. Most notably, we delineated between two kinds of cover-ups: whether individuals conceal their own unethical actions (personal cover-ups) or the unethical transgressions of another individual (relational cover-ups).

Using multiple methods that draw on both field and laboratory research, we found that in-group third parties punish relational—but not personal—cover-ups less severely than out-group third parties. Moreover, we find that perceptions of group loyalty—typically characterized as a moral virtue (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009)—mediates our results, explaining why in-group third parties punish relational cover-ups less severely than personal cover-ups. Beyond formally introducing and examining cover-ups in organizational research, our theory reveals that unethical actions with similar consequences are punished differently based on who is involved in the original unethical transgression. At a broader level, my research uncovers how employees in a group or organization use punishment to respond to situations of adversity that relate to unethical behavior. Indeed, “When are organizations punished for organizational misconduct? A review and research agenda,” [10 with Mary-Hunter McDonnell] integrates both micro- and macro-theory and research on punishment to understand the mechanisms that drive the punishment of organizations in the aftermath of unethical transgressions. Similarly, “Gender bias in third party
I have also studied when and why employees take a stand in the aftermath of unethical behavior. Existing theory on whistleblowing has noted that people are unwilling to report unethical conduct because they believe that their efforts will be futile, and it carries risks of retaliation from others at their workplace (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009). “Encouraging employees to report unethical conduct internally: It takes a village” [6 with David Mayer, Linda Treviño, Debra Shapiro, and Marshall Schminke] demonstrates that employees were most likely to report unethical conduct when both their supervisors and coworkers demonstrated ethical conduct across three studies—two field studies and a laboratory experiment. Furthermore, we found that it was a fear of retaliation—but not perceptions of futility—that accounted for why employees were more likely to report unethical conduct when both leaders and coworkers set an ethical tone. By documenting the influences of multiple levels of organizational stakeholders simultaneously, these results advance our understanding of what can lead employees and their organizations to ensure that people speak up when witnessing unethical behavior at the workplace.

Relatedly, my other research on ethical leadership (“Do I care if my boss does the right thing? An ethical lens on psychological contract fulfillment” [16 with Rebecca Greenbaum, David Mayer, and Bradley Owens]) demonstrates how greater ethical leadership in organizations enhances psychological contract fulfillment. Indeed, employees encounter situations of adversity in which their organizations do not act consistently with what they promise (Robinson, 1996; Rousseau, 2000). Across two field studies, my coauthors and I demonstrate that when employees perceive their leader to be ethical, they experience greater psychological contract fulfillment, motivating them to engage in greater affective and behavioral commitment. At the same time, we find that not all employees respond similarly to ethical leadership; employees with a high moral identity are more likely to express intentions to leave the organization when they experience less ethical leadership, but they still maintain similar levels of behavioral commitment. Thus, our research highlights that employees care about more than just the fulfillment of personal obligations; they also care about being part of ethical organizations, and the actions of leaders enhance their fulfillment of ethics and motivate them to engage in citizenship.

**Other Sources of Adversity: Inequality and Social Resistance**

Beyond the topics of motivation and behavioral ethics, I also study other sources of adversity, including inequality and others’ resistance to ideas and initiatives. Indeed, not everyone responds favorably to adversity at work. “How do I compare? The effect of work-unit demographics on reactions to pay inequality” [2 with J. Adam Cobb and JR Keller] demonstrates that pay deprivation—how much less employees make relative to colleagues in their workgroup—leads employees to voluntarily exit their organization when they make less than colleagues of the same sex or race relative to colleagues of a different sex or race. Using five years of archival data in a US health-services corporation, we found support for our hypotheses. This is somewhat counterintuitive, since prior research tends to suggest that people react negatively when they discover disparities between groups to which they belong and others in the
organization. However, we reconciled our results with existing research with a follow-up experiment, which revealed that the reason why we observe people voluntarily exit in response to earning less than colleagues of the same sex or race is that they tend to have more information about same-sex and same-race peers, whereas they do not tend to know how much colleagues of a different sex and race earn. These results demonstrate that people pay particular attention to inequality in reference to their colleagues who hold similar demographic attributes due to the selective attention and information they hold about these individuals.

I am currently working on two additional papers that relate to how entrepreneurs leverage the adversity they experience in response to their ideas and products as they seek to bring them to the marketplace. Using inductive qualitative research, “Dirty creativity: An inductive study of downplaying versus showcasing the stigma of off-limits materials in new designs” [9 with Spencer Harrison] reveals how entrepreneurs respond to and manage the stigma of using off-limits materials (i.e., waste, pollution, and other tainted resources) to convince stakeholders to try their products. Rather than fully downplaying the stigma of these materials, we find that entrepreneurs actively showcase the stigma associated with their designs. In a related paper, “Hearing crickets? How cultural entrepreneurs use storytelling features for contentious ideas” [14 with Spencer Harrison and Tyler Wry], we focus on the industry of entomophagy—using insects as food—to develop an inductive, meso-level theory of how entrepreneurs use communicative strategies related to storytelling to get audiences to try their products when these ideas face cultural stigma. Both of these papers reveal that entrepreneurs do not shy away from the adversity created by audiences’ negative reactions to their ideas; instead, they actively harness negative reactions to reformulate how others respond to their ideas and products.

Another paper reveals the way in which organizations can use rhetorical strategies to advance social issues that often face resistance in organizations. Despite company efforts to express their support for diversity in organizations, these initiatives often face opposition from managers. “Giving managers the business: The effectiveness of business case and moral language for diversity” [15 with Courtney McCluney, Lindsey Cameron, and David Mayer] draws on message matching theory (Lavine & Snyder, 1996) to suggest that majority group managers (i.e., White men managers) are more likely to support diversity initiatives when the business case for diversity is used, but minority group managers (i.e., women and ethnic minorities) are more likely to be receptive to the moral case for diversity. One field survey and two experiments involving 888 managers support the proposed theory, providing new insights into how organizations can advance social issues that face resistance from leaders in the organization.

III. HIGHLIGHTS OF FUTURE RESEARCH AND DIRECTIONS

My future work aims to build on the existing research program and understand adversity in understudied workplace phenomena. A new area of research that I am building focuses on a group of employees who experience adversity when joining organizations: alternate choices. Alternate choices are individuals who are ultimately hired by an organization but perceive or discover that they were not selected as first choices for their job. Although alternate choices are common across organizations, organizational research has neglected to examine the consequences of this status. “The impact of being an alternate choice on feedback seeking in
organizations” [12] documents the upsides and downsides of being an alternate choice on feedback-seeking, a crucial behavior for performing effectively, especially in a new role. Drawing on theory and research on self-regulation and avoidance-approach frameworks (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Elliot & Thrash, 2002), I argue that alternate choices experience greater underdog expectations, motivating them to seek feedback. On the other hand, I also contend that alternate choices experience less social integration, deterring them from seeking feedback from others. Across two experiments and two field surveys, I find support for my theory.

I am also working on a related project on how coworkers respond to the hiring of alternate choices within organizations. On the one hand, coworkers may perceive alternate choices as less competent since they were not the top choice for the job (i.e., performance penalty due to confirmation bias). At the same time, alternate choices may face lower performance expectations, resulting in others evaluating them more favorably if they perform at a high level (i.e., performance premium due to being underestimated). Thus far, my field and experimental research demonstrate that coworkers perceive alternate choices as less competent and worse performers than first choices, providing support for the confirmation bias perspective. In a follow-up experiment, I examined whether the stigma of being an alternate choice results in a performance penalty even when alternate choices perform exceptionally. My results demonstrate that coworkers evaluate alternate choices as worse than first choices even when they perform at exceptionally high levels in the same tasks as first choices. Thus, the performance penalty that alternate choices receive cannot be overcome by simply performing exceptionally; organizations need to more proactively address the performance stigma that alternate choices face as they enter new roles. I am now designing and conducting follow-up studies to identify what may enable alternate choices to offset this performance penalty since performing at an exceptional level is insufficient.

Lastly, I am in the process of completing a large-scale field survey with over 500 interns on the performance implications of recruitment experiences of new hires. As a follow-up on my research on performance pressure, I am examining the impact of exploding job offers—a common recruiting practice that creates time pressure for new hires—on subsequent performance and commitment in organizations. Although the practice of exploding offers is widely used to recruit employees who otherwise may not join an organization, its long-term consequences for employees and organizations after offers are accepted have not been investigated systematically. This research and my research on alternate choices extend my research on motivation in the context of adversity in several ways. First, my future research looks at how newly hired employees may experience adversity prior to starting their jobs. Second, my future work starts unpacking the role of adversity in the context of role transitions. This complements earlier research that I have done on organizational socialization (“From Past to Present and Into the Future: A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Socialization Literature” [8 with Susan Ashford]). Lastly, I aim to provide evidence-based solutions to overcoming adversity in recruitment and socialization experiences. Indeed, organizations often hire alternate choices and extend exploding offers, but have neglected to consider how these recruiting practices can be improved. In summary, I aim to rethink these standard practices and provide scholars and organizations better insights on how these practices can be improved.

IV. SUMMARY
My research program reflects an effort to build and advance theory and empirical research on how individuals endure, develop, and succeed when they encounter adversity from others. In the areas of motivation and behavioral ethics, my research uncovers how individuals respond to adversity in various forms, including low expectations, mistreatment, performance pressure, unethical behavior and a lack of fairness. I am grateful for the feedback and support of many colleagues and collaborators in driving my research forward. Overall, my aspiration is that my program of research will have a significant impact on our understanding of what employees and organizations can do to help individuals be successful when they face barriers to their success.

**SERVICE STATEMENT**

Within the Wharton Management Department, I am actively involved in numerous service-related activities. I have served on the Management Doctoral Committee for three years, serving as the OB representative in the group. In this position, I have managed the review of PhD applicants, as well as their socialization into the program. I also led the OB group’s efforts to restructure and revise the courses offered and currently serve as the course lead for three doctoral courses in Organizational Behavior at Wharton. I have served on two dissertation committees, including Tim Kundro’s with whom I have coauthored two publications prior to his completion of his PhD program at Wharton. I have served on the seminar committee for three years, helping coordinate the visits of prominent faculty members from other universities to our department. In addition, I have been the organizer of M-squared, a micro-meso workshop that helps faculty in our department receive feedback on their working papers, since I arrived at Wharton. I have also co-organized the annual Wharton Junior Faculty OB Conference during my tenure at Wharton. I am currently serving as a committee member on the Katz Fund for Research on Leadership and Emotional Intelligence.

Outside of Wharton, I am frequently involved in service-related activities in organizational behavior. I am on the editorial board at Organization Science, and I frequently review for some of our field’s top academic journals, including Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of Applied Psychology, and Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (OBHDP). I have been recruited for several panels, including two recent panels on the topics of adversity and minority status at the Academy of Management, our field’s premier conference. Furthermore, I was involved in the Academy of Management’s OB Making Connections Committee (MCC), a subcommittee that helps develop and foster relationships among new members of the OB Division. I led research and career progression workshops as part of this committee, including the inaugural “Mentoring Graduate Students” professional development workshop for three years.
REFERENCES


