

# Sociocultural factors, resilience, and coping: Support for a culturally sensitive measure of resilience<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This investigation presents 1) a literature review concerning how adversity and resilience influence the development of youth from diverse cultural backgrounds; 2) an examination of measures of resilience with regard to cultural factors that relate to the nature of coping and resilience among young adults from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds; and 3) the exploration of aspects of cultural resilience: childhood stressors, global coping, adaptive coping, maladaptive coping, and sociocultural support. Results for 305 college age women indicated that cultural factors were related to measures of these five aspects of resilience. Childhood stressors were experienced differentially by individuals from different racial/ethnic and social class status backgrounds, supporting proposals that ecological aspects, notably cultural background and experiences, influence the development of resilience. A conceptual framework illustrating how culture contributes to resilience and coping is presented. Implications for the development of a measure of *cultural* resilience and its usefulness for developmental community interventions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Resilience has been defined as a “process, capacity or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenges or threatening circumstances,” and “good outcomes despite high-risk status, sustained competence under threat and recovery from trauma” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426). Resilience from this perspective is critical to the discussion of children’s and adolescents’ well-being because youth with this quality are more able to overcome adversity and difficult life circumstances — or even normal developmental challenges (Clauss-Ehlers & Lopez Levi, 2002). Also, individuals who are better able to cope and adjust to difficult life situations are likely to prevent future, more problematic behaviors. The developmental aspect of resilience encompasses the idea that youth have “good developmental outcomes despite high-risk status” (Werner, 1995, p. 81).

Empirical investigations have examined coping mechanisms, protective factors, assets, and individual strengths (Lopez et al., 2002). More recently, the resilience literature has considered larger, contextual factors that influence the development of resilience and coping among youth (Clauss-Ehlers, Yang, & Chen, 2006). Part of this contextual focus

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examines cultural influences involved in resilience and coping. Clauss-Ehlers (2004) presents the term cultural resilience as describing the degree to which the strengths of one's culture promote the development of coping. This type of resilience has a number of aspects including a developmental trajectory within a cultural matrix composed of norms, family structure, and peer relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a conception of resilience that delineates how sociocultural aspects of support can promote positive coping among youth from diverse backgrounds who frequently confront adversities during childhood and adolescence. The aim is to explore how cultural constructs and processes can contribute to resilience, increasing successful outcomes of dealing with challenges that confront children and adolescents from a variety of backgrounds, with particular attention to the coping abilities of women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Finally, an initial exploration of the theoretical, empirical, and applied aspects of such a framework is presented through the examination of a new measure of coping based on the concept of cultural resilience in a sample of young women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

### *1.1. Incorporating culture into the concept of resilience*

A growing body of literature examines how cultural factors relate to and influence the development of coping and resilience in youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, this literature considers the problems faced by young women and men from diverse cultural backgrounds in the United States (U.S.). Such studies often recommend how communities can foster resilient development for children and adolescents.

In one study, Cabrera and Padilla (2004) examined school success in two (1 male, 1 female) Latino youth in the U.S. as one important aspect of positive and resilient development. An interview protocol considered the role of immigration in the informants' development as well as the role of the mother and father. Adversities confronted by the students in this study included border-crossing experiences, negative consequences of Proposition 187, which restricted illegal immigrants of all benefits except emergency medical care, and of Proposition 227, which virtually eliminated all bilingual programs in California. Other stressors faced by these students included poverty, racism, sexism, a lack of support from peers, and alienation. Rather than focus on the level of poor school achievement among these Latino youth, which is the focus of much of this literature, Cabrera and Padilla focused on resilience-factors that were *positively* related to academic success. Despite these adversities, the investigators found a clear connection between culture and study achievement. That is, students relied on family support to maintain a connection with their values and culture while also accessing social networks from which they could learn about the "culture of college" (p. 168).

Thus, it was the combination of both valuing one's culture as well as learning about the culture of the new system that helped the students be successful. Cabrera and Padilla (2004) wrote: "Some readers might argue that Erandi and Juan [i.e., the study participants] were the fortunate ones and that their success is atypical. We take the position, however, that Erandi and Juan succeeded only because they managed to learn what the middle class take for granted, that is, there is class- and culture-bound knowledge that is necessary to succeed in higher education" (p. 168).

In another study with members of a different cultural group, Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, and Cherry (2000) explored adversities experienced by 10–12 year old African American girls. Fifty-five girls were in an intervention group and 92 girls were in the comparison group. The challenges faced by the girls included having adult responsibilities (e.g., taking care of household chores), reaching puberty before girls from other racial/ethnic groups, being sexually active at an earlier age, and being less likely to use birth control. Belgrave et al. designed, implemented and assessed the effectiveness of a cultural- and gender-specific intervention program designed to increase resilience among these young girls. Participants were given access to new resources and relationships that promote successful child development. For the intervention group, key components included activities designed to increase feelings of self-worth, Africentric values, ethnic identity, and gender identity.

The emphasis on positive contributions of culture to promoting resilience were based on a theoretical framework focused on an Africentric worldview that values "spirituality; harmony; collective responsibility; oral tradition; sensitivity to emotional cues; authenticity; balance; concurrent time orientation to past, present, and future; and interpersonal/communal orientation" (Belgrave et al., 2000, p. 136). The rationale for this emphasis was centered on the idea that protective factors are more effective than general support as a way to moderate the effects of risk, strengthen resiliency, and enhance positive development among African American females during youth and adolescence.

The study revealed positive contributions of culture. Specifically, the intervention group had significantly higher scores on the Africentric Values Scale, Children's Racial Identity Scale, and the Physical Appearance subscale of the

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