



Culture and context: The differential impact of culture, risks and resources on resilience among vulnerable adolescents



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ABSTRACT

Using a socio-ecological measure of resilience, this paper examines changes in resilience profiles over time for a group of over 500 at-risk adolescents (12–17 years). Increases in resilience over time are observed, suggesting a developmental component. However, absolute resilience levels are significantly lower than those of adolescents not at-risk. Family and neighborhood risks have the strongest negative impact on resilience. Ethnic minority status is strongly predictive of higher resilience. Being in an intimate relationship and being on-track with education contribute smaller, but nonetheless significant amounts to resilience, while anti-social peers undermine resilience. Findings highlight the importance of addressing contextual and relational risks, maintaining educational progress and working in culturally-responsive ways with at-risk adolescents.

1. Introduction

The capacity of children and young people to develop into healthy, well-functioning adults when exposed to high levels of adversity is one of the most remarkable aspects of the developmental process (Masten, 2001). Such outcomes are understood to indicate the presence of resilience; positive adaptations to risks of such a magnitude that they threaten positive development (Cicchetti, 2013; Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 2012). The 21st century has seen a surge in interest in the concept of resilience (Masten, 2014). A comprehensive review of the field is beyond the scope of the current paper and there are several valuable reviews of current thinking that both exemplify the strength of current interest in and provide an excellent context for current research on the topic (see for example, Cicchetti, 2013; Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). The burgeoning interest in resilience has generated a vast research agenda, a key task for which is to assess how different combinations of factors combine together to shape resilience in different cultures and contexts (Masten, 2014; Panter-Brick, 2015). To date, the bulk of resilience research has focused on normative birth cohorts, however in order to better understand the resilience process there is a need for research that targets specific subpopulations of young people who are exposed to atypically high levels of risk because resilience is positive adaptation in the face of atypical levels of adversity (Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011).

The current paper speaks to this knowledge gap. It models changes in a socio-ecological measure of resilience over time taking into account

the impact on resilience of fixed factors (age, gender and ethnicity) and a range of time-dynamic contextual and relational factors in a cohort of young people who were exposed to a-typically high levels of risk during childhood and early adolescence. In doing this, the study provides valuable information which professionals can use to target their interventions with vulnerable youth to more directly boost youth resilience resources thus leading to better outcomes.

1.1. Resilience

As the field of resilience research has grown, so too have debates regarding how to conceptualize and measure this construct (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Masten (2007) traces the origins of resilience research to the 1970s and highlights its simultaneous emergence in the fields of ecology and psychology reflecting an interest in both disciplines with explaining how complex systems positively adapted to risks and stressors. Masten (2007) has identified four waves in resilience research, each reflecting a somewhat different orientation to the construct and each leading to important new knowledge. Beginning with a focus on resilience as an individual characteristic; the so-called “invulnerable” child (see, for example, Pines, 1975); attention has moved to defining resilience processes within human developmental systems in terms of the person < - > context exchange (Lerner, 2006), to intervention studies explaining how treatment can enhance resilience; to the fourth wave which explores how resilience is shaped by the interactions between systems and processes at multiple levels from

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the molecular to the macro-systemic (O'Dougherty Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). Rather than a static, individual trait resilience is now understood to be a “dynamic developmental process” (Cicchetti, 2013, p. 404) of positive adaptation in the face of significant risks and threats (Rutter, 2012).

A key focus for resilience research is explaining the wide variations in outcomes that have been observed in children exposed to broadly similar levels of risks (see for example, Rutter, 1987). It is thought that the way in which relational and contextual risks and resources in children's lives interact with each other and with the particular characteristics of the individual child, help explain this variance (Rutter, 1987; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Thus, resilience comprises contextually-anchored individual capacities, as well as wider relationships, resources and supports, that interact together to facilitate positive development in the presence of atypical levels of risks (Luthar, 2006). These relational and contextually-shaped interactions create differential patterns of adaptation over time.

This ecological understanding of resilience has a good fit with contemporary understandings of human development and there is growing recognition that studies of human development and of resilience have much in common (Svetina, 2014; Ungar & Lerner, 2008). When considering transitions through adolescence, ecological understandings of resilience are of value because they take account of key developmental processes such as a growing sense of agency and autonomy, the increasing significance of peer relationships alongside relationships with parents, and the importance of cultural and social resources in better outcomes (Lerner, 2006). In this regard, service systems have the potential to be resilience resources for youth exposed to atypically high levels of risk when they are relevant, meaningful and accessible (Obrist, Pfeiffer, & Henley, 2010; Saewyc & Edinburg, 2010).

An area of emerging importance to contemporary understandings of resilience is the role of culture as a protective resource for vulnerable youth (Wexler et al., 2014). For instance, reciprocal relational bonds are key resilience resources for indigenous Alaskan youth, and in particular the value of peer relationships as problem solving resources has been identified. The importance of peers as resilience resources is not unique to indigenous youth; however what is significant is the protective role of participation in subsistence activities, both in terms of creating peer bonds and by providing mechanisms for connecting to ancestors and gaining recognition as being competent in the eyes of adults within their communities. What findings such as these indicate is the need for greater understanding of the nuanced ways in which general developmental processes manifest themselves as resilience resources in different contexts.

1.2. Time-dynamic factors

1.2.1. The impact of contextual factors on resilience

Neighborhoods have a well-recognized impact upon children's wellbeing (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015). For instance, neighborhood poverty and social disorganization compromise young people's development (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Anthony (2008) suggests that neighborhood factors exert a powerful influence upon children's capacities to engage productively with education, upon the extent to which they are able to engage in pro-social behaviors and they also have a direct impact on mental health status. Despite these pervasive negative effects of disadvantaged neighborhoods, there is also evidence that not all young people domiciled in such places do poorly (Seidman & Pedersen, 2003) and further, that removing young people from such neighborhoods does not necessarily improve their chances of doing well (Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). Young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods have been found to have a strong sense of identity and belonging and this emotional connection to place is an important resilience resource (Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007).

Living arrangements also impact upon young people's capacities to respond positively to challenges. For instance, overcrowding, residential instability and homelessness have been found to undermine resilience and these are often exacerbated by other factors such as family adversity, health and mental health problems and unmet socio-emotional needs (Buckner, 2008; Cutuli et al., 2013; Haber & Toro, 2004; Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Bermann, Ramirez, and Neemann, 1993). On the other hand, strong family ties and multi-generational and extended family households can be protective, provide stability and contribute to better outcomes (Brakenhoff, Jang, Slesnick, & Snyder, 2015; DeLeire & Kalil, 2002).

Because of its centrality in the daily lives of children and young people and the impact that educational qualifications have upon future life chances, engagement with, and staying on track with education, can make important contributions to young people's resilience (Sanders, Munford & Thimasarn-Anwar, 2016; Savolainen et al., 2011; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Progressing well with education brings positive benefits for youth with high levels of chronic risk exposure; buffering the impact these risks have upon their capacity to do well (Sanders et al., 2016; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011). Not completing high school successfully or being unable to participate in mainstream education undermines resilience because it represents exclusion from the normative activities of mainstream society and it also compromises later life chances (Milburn, Rice, & Rotheram-Borus, 2009).

1.2.2. The impact of relationships on resilience

Family relationships, particularly those between parents and children have received a significant amount of attention in studies of resilience for very good reasons. Strong parent-child bonds have a well-recognized impact upon the ways in which children and young people adapt and respond to stresses and risks (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). The quality of the family environment is one of the most consistent predictors of resilience. Strong parent-child relationships are associated with resilience in children exposed to neighborhood violence, while parental warmth and positive expectations predict the positive adaptation of children regardless of exposure to other risks (O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muyeed, 2002).

While the literature unequivocally points to the positive impact that strong parent-child relationships have upon young people's resilience, there is less clarity about the role that peer relationships play in young people's lives. Positive peer relationships are protective factors, especially for youth who face other risks (Herrenkohl et al., 2001). Indeed, it appears that positive peer relationships may act as substitutes when families do not meet young people's social and emotional needs (Wilkinson, 2004). However, young people who are exposed to high levels of risk are more likely to have strong positive relationships with anti-social peers (Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2017). These types of peers intensify the risks around young people and can open pathways out of education and into substance use and offending (Herrenkohl et al., 2001). While anti-social peer association is linked in these ways to poorer outcomes, the emotional connection that peers, even anti-social peers, can provide may constitute resilience resources (Wilkinson, 2004).

While the quality of peer relationships (that is, are they pro or anti-social) seems to influence the direction of impact on young people, the same clarity has not been found in relation to intimate relationships. For instance, intimate relationships have been found to increase the involvement of young females in violent offending (Kerig, 2014). However, for males, this straightforward pattern has not been found. Rather there is some suggestion that an intimate relationship with a female has a buffering, protective effect for males during late adolescence, but not at younger ages. No such buffering effect has been identified for females (Cauffman, Farruggia, & Goldweber, 2008). Thus there are unanswered questions about the role that intimate relationships may play for males and females as either resilience resources or as

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