
Relational Resilience

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About the Author

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Abstract

Studies of psychological resilience have focused largely on the abilities of individuals to adapt to stress; some have emphasized factors within the person, like temperament or personality style which protect from adverse consequences of stress, while others have pointed to the benefits of social support. Each of these approaches, however, has been based on a "separate self" model of development. Thus they look either totally within the individual for resources of resilience or in a one-directional way from the point of view of an individual looking for support from another individual or group. The perspective put forth here suggests instead that resilience be seen as a relational dynamic. In particular, the concepts of supported vulnerability, mutual empathic involvement, relational confidence, and relational awareness are explored. Transformation through relationship also suggests not just a return to a previously existing state, but movement through and beyond stress or suffering into a new and more comprehensive personal and relational integration. Especially, in the case of disconnection, a primary source of stress in people's lives, resilience and transformation involve awareness of the forces creating the disconnection, mutual discovery of a path back into connection and building a more differentiated and flexible means for reconnecting.

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Given that life subjects all of us to tensions and suffering and that relationships as well as individuals are buffeted by forces which create pain, disconnection, and the threat of dissolution, the capacity for relational resilience, or transformation, is essential. Movement toward empathic mutuality is at the core of relational resilience. When individuals move from mutually empowering and mutually empathic relationships (Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1985) into disconnection, they are often beset by a damaging sense of immobilization and isolation. They lose the sense of a life-giving empathic bridge. In describing this loss, one client spoke movingly of her identification with the elderly Alzheimer's patient who was abandoned, without identification, by relatives at a race track in Idaho. . . utterly alone, utterly helpless, unable to even name or speak the horror.

When people are unable to move from disconnection to connection, the resulting combination of immobilization and isolation may become a prison, (not unlike Jean Baker Miller's notion of "condemned isolation," Miller, 1988) and may contribute to psychological anguish, physical deterioration, and sometimes even death. Thus, we can no longer look only at factors within the individual which facilitate adjustment; we must examine the relational dynamics which encourage the capacity for connection. Reframing our understanding of resilience in terms of a relational model has implications for both psychotherapy and social change. Therapy, then, can be understood as largely an effort to explore and enhance the capacity for relational resilience. And in moving beyond personal resilience to personal transformation and social change, the relational context is central.

Traditional views of resilience

Rutter, who has written extensively on resilience, views it as evident in an “individual who overcomes adversity, who survives stress, and who rises above disadvantages” (1979, p.3). Block and Block (1980) refer to “ego resilience” in contrast to a condition they call “ego brittle.” “Ego resilience refers to the ability to adapt flexibly and with ‘elasticity’ to changing circumstances” (Dugan and Coles, 1989, p.112).

Some researchers in the field of resilience have focused on factors within the person, like temperament or personality. Suzanne Kobasa has developed the notion of “hardiness,” which is thought to protect one from the harmful effects of stress; “Persons high in hardiness easily commit themselves to what they are doing, . . . generally believe that they at least partially control events, . . . and regard change to be a normal challenge or impetus to development.” (Kobasa and Puccetti, 1983, p.840). On the other hand, “learned helplessness,” a condition studied by Seligman (1975), that “results when people believe or expect their responses will not influence the future probability of environmental outcomes,” is seen as rendering people vulnerable to stress and depression (McCann and Pearlman, 1990, p.53).

Along these lines, some have suggested that girls develop “pessimistic coping strategies” that interfere with persistent problem solving efforts. This suggestion is based on studies indicating that girls’ expectations of future performance are affected more by past or present failures than by successes, a kind of reflexive pessimism. Girls attribute failure to internal factors while boys tend to attribute failure to external factors and success to internal factors (Dweck and Reppucci, 1973; Dweck, Goetz, Strauss, 1980); girls blame themselves more than do boys and also take less credit for success; and studies indicate that college women are more self-critical than men in response to failure (Carver and Ganellen, 1983).

In several studies of resilience, freedom from self-denigration emerged as the most powerful protector against stress-related debilitation; mastery and self-esteem were also seen as important (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). In general, women have been found to be “lower on self-esteem and higher on self-denigration than are men” (Barnett, Biener, and Baruch, 1987, p.319). Some have gone so far as to conclude that much of psychological literature “depicts women as having been socialized in a way that keeps them from developing resilient personalities” (Barnett et al., 1987, p.319). But, as Carol Gilligan notes, girls show an advantage in dealing

with stress until they reach adolescence when they become more depressed, more self-critical and begin to move into silence (Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer, 1990). As she writes, “For girls to remain responsive to *themselves*, they must resist the convention of female goodness; to remain responsive to *others*, they must resist the values placed on self-sufficiency and independence in North American cultures” (Gilligan et al., 1990, p.11). We might well question how women’s sense of worth can remain intact when the dominant culture denigrates the relational values which are at the core of our sense of aliveness and worth.

Role of control

In addition to the importance of hardiness and self-esteem, some have noted that stress is most clearly buffered by the sense of control, a personality attribute (Cohen and Edwards, 1986). Although there has been little observation of gender differences in the need to control one’s environment, it might be argued that a generalized need to be in control may be more pertinent for men than for women (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). A model of development that suggests there is a power/control mode into which males in this culture are socialized and an empathy/love mode into which girls are acculturated (Jordan, 1987) would imply that different coping strategies would develop as part of these general gender-related modes of being.

Indeed, studies have indicated that women’s coping styles are more emotion-focused (talking about personal distress with friends, sharing sadness) and men’s styles are more problem-focused or instrumental (taking action to solve the problem, seeking new strategies) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In line with a research bias that generally overlooks complex context-person interactions, however, early studies on this dimension did not actually assess the degree to which control was possible in various situations. More recently, researchers have noted that emotion-focused coping is adaptive in situations where one actually has little control, and problem-focused coping is useful where one can effect change. In general, it may be that women inhabit worlds where, due to a lack of power, the possibility of changing things is unrealistic; hence emotion-based coping strategies may often make the most sense (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). We have seen in the past year (in the Anita Hill case and in the public shaming of rape victims) that awful forces can be brought to bear against women who begin to feel they might actually have an effect on the system —