



An exploration of constructs of “resilience” and “vulnerability” as they apply to people with diverse abilities and their communities

Emily Hutcheon, Community Health Sciences (CHS), University of Calgary

(contact: ejhutche@ucalgary.ca)

Gregor Wolbring, CHS, University of Calgary

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Background

- Resilience is a well-explored topic in a variety of domains, including psychology, social psychology, psychopathology, and ecology
- Though it is largely framed as the ability of the individual to cope or adapt to risk or adversity^[7], there is little consensus among scholars as to what constitutes resilience^[8]
- There is little research on resilience as applied to those with diverse sets of abilities and bodies^[6]

Research Aims

- Provide an overview of existing understandings of resilience and vulnerability
- Critically examine the implications of these understandings (and policies which result from them) for disabled people
- Provide suggestions for further research and policy

Methods

A review of the literature constitute the methods of this paper. Sources of information include peer-reviewed literature as well as grey literature in the fields of resilience research and disability studies

Results

THE ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

- The **ecological approach** dominates the resilience literature. This approach emphasizes “...predictable relationships between [internal and external] risk and protective factors...and transactional processes that foster resilience”^[9, p. 324]

Challenges to the Ecological Approach

- The use of **outcomes-orientated definitions of resilience is problematic**. It has been noted in research with those with presumed learning impairments, for example, that “...outcome measures have been based exclusively on academic achievement”^[8, p. 62]. An expanded understanding of “good outcomes” is needed^[7].
- Resilience is often understood within the context of **normative definitions of health, wellness, and able-ness**^[5,10]. This is problematic for those whose health is deemed subnormative, or whose abilities are culturally undervalued.
- Research on resilience **tends to define resilience in terms of risk**^[10]. This presumes disability and different-ness to lead, *ipso facto*, to vulnerability and thus frames resilience as one’s ability to overcome one’s different-ness^[10].
- “...the **individualization of resilience** [seen in the ecological and psychopathological approach] distorts significantly the life context of individuals who occupy marginalized social positions^[10, p. 47]
- Existing **policy and program considerations have typically been grounded in traditional psychological understandings of resilience**^[1]. These programs:
 - Aim to foster the skills and attitudes characteristic of “resilient” in those deemed to lack such traits^[2, p. 235]
 - Maintain a deficit orientation
 - Produced labeling and tracking practices^[1]

As Young and colleagues (2008) note in their explorations of resilience in deaf youth, it is prudent to **challenge** resilience-building strategies that seek: “...exclusively to educate, resource and equip a child or young person with tools to better navigate the potentially adverse consequences of their deafness without also **fundamentally tackling the contribution of social systems to that risk and disadvantage**”(p. 47).

Results

THE CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

A constructionist approach views resilience as “...the outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to **define themselves** as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse”^[9, p. 342]. It leaves space for:

- A nonhierarchical relationship between risk and protective factors
 - Individual, cultural and social differences in understandings of resilience
 - A diversity in the way resilience is nurtured and maintained
- Additionally, this perspectives “...[offers] a critical deconstruction of the power [of] different health discourses”^[9, p. 345].

I suggest an **expanded constructionist understanding of resilience of relevance to those with diverse abilities and bodies which:**

- Includes a diversity of perspectives** of individuals and groups who possess plurality of ability-sets and preferences, body types, and levels of functioning.
- Engages with **multiple understandings of normalcy, ability, and wellness**, in order to avoid a further conflation of resilience with ‘health’.
- Critically deconstructs dominant **understandings of ‘ableness’ and ‘normalcy.’**

Results

A POLICY EXAMPLE FROM ALBERTA, CANADA

- This policy, derived from a handbook for mentoring ‘at-risk’ high-school teenagers and youth, describes resilience-building strategies available to mentors

Analysis using an ableism lens^[4,11] revealed the following:

- Resilience is defined as “...an individual’s *ability to overcome adversity* and continue their *normal development*” (p. 14)
- ‘Protective factors’ which are seen to be characteristics of resilient youth, are listed. Some of these characteristics include: “...assertiveness, the *ability* to solve problems, efficacy, the *ability* to live with uncertainty...self awareness, empathy for others...the *ability* to maintain a balance between *independence and dependence* on others...[the presence of] meaningful relationships with others, [and of] peer group acceptance” (p. 14).

Implications

- This policy is **ableist in its assumptions** (e.g it inaugurates normative ability-preferences)^[4]
- It is also **disablist (oppressive^[11]) in its consequences (e.g. labelling individuals ‘nonresilient’)**:
 - For some members of the neuro-diverse community, the ability to solve certain problems, or to express self-awareness or empathy, may prove difficult

Results

A POLICY EXAMPLE FROM ALBERTA, CANADA (CONT’D)

- The ability to demonstrate a balance between independence and dependence difficult to demonstrate (in culturally valued ways) for those who are dependent on others for their care, or for those perceived to be dependent regardless of their functioning. This is particularly salient in contexts where *interdependence* is neither valued nor acknowledged
- The development of meaningful relationships with others, and the ability to demonstrate peer-group acceptance, is often difficult for those who are excluded, isolated, or otherwise marginalized

Conclusions

- Programs which aims to foster resilience might seek to **challenge the ableist assumptions which pervade them**
- For example, they might **adopt language and action pieces which reflect more inclusive and diversity-conscious perspectives**. Mentorship programs, such as the one mentioned, could help engage youth in their own resilience by **discussing what resilience means to them**.

I submit that a **constructionist approach to resilience provides a fruitful first step in ensuring effective and inclusive policy of relevance to those with diverse bodies and abilities**, primarily because it:

- Provides space for individual, social, and cultural differences in defining and expressing resilience;
- Emphasizes subjective understandings of resilience, and in doing so, it provides the opportunity for ability-diverse populations to have a voice
- Allows for a critical deconstruction of existing ableist, and otherwise normative, assumptions which underlie our understandings of resilience to-date.

There exists a **continued need for critical examination of policy related to resilience**, and its capacity to incorporate ability-diversity. Further exploration is needed to ensure robust policy recommendations.

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