

Work in Progress

Strengthening Resilience in a Risky World: It's All About Relationships

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About the Author

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Abstract

Building on Judith Jordan's earlier work (WP #57), this paper challenges the commonly held view that resilience is a unique form of individual "toughness" endowed to a lucky few and suggests that resilience can be strengthened in all people through participation in growth-fostering relationships. The author reviews the research describing individual, internal characteristics associated with resilience and explores the relational aspects of these characteristics. A case example illustrates that efforts promoting relational development help people grow through and beyond experiences of hardship and adversity. In addition, the author proposes specific ways resilience can be strengthened through engagement in relationships that enhance one's intellectual development, sense of worth, sense of competence, sense of empowerment, and, most importantly, sense of connection.

Introduction

In 1992 when Judith Jordan wrote about relational resilience as a "life-giving empathic bridge," she offered a profound reframing of the source of human ability to overcome adversities, hardships, and trauma. She challenged us to move beyond a highly circumscribed focus on individual, internal traits to a broader and deeper examination of the relational dynamics that promote growth in the face of hardship. According to Jordan:

...we can no longer look only at factors within the individual which facilitate adjustment; we must examine the relational dynamics that encourage the capacity for connection. (p. 1)

Few studies have delineated the complex factors involved in those relationships which not only protect us from stress but promote positive and creative growth. (p. 3)

Rather than perpetuating the common notion of resilience as some form of intrinsic toughness endowed to a few unique or heroic individuals, Jordan opened the way to understanding resilience as a human capacity that can be developed and strengthened in *all* people through relationships, specifically through growth-fostering relationships.

Today, Jordan's reconceptualization of resilience leads us to a profoundly valuable source of hope and courage as we face accumulating evidence that we are living in a riskier world (e.g., terrorist threats, global economic instability and injustice, civil unrest, extreme global climate changes, violent international conflict, widespread destruction of natural resources, corporate corruption, and world-wide epidemics, as well as intractable hunger and poverty). Just as more researchers are becoming more keenly aware of how trauma, hardships, and adversities can derail the lives of children and adults (Banks, 2000; Bremner, 2002),

more individuals, families, and communities are facing forms of threat that were once unthinkable. Today, growing numbers of people have palpable fears about a repeat of the 9/11 tragedy; random rampage shootings; possible nuclear/biological/chemical weapons attacks; suicide bombings around the world; outbreaks of intractable, incurable diseases; etc. Given these developments, people cannot afford to wager that they are blessed with superior fortitude (individual resilience). Rather, all of us can find ways to strengthen our resilience *now* by developing our capacity to build healthy connections with others, our families, and our communities, that is, by developing our relational resilience (Jordan, 1992).

Based on a review of the research, this paper will explore the popular construction of resilience as an individual commodity and propose an alternate view: resilience as a relational activity. It will describe and examine the individual characteristics that are commonly associated with resilience and offer a relational understanding of these characteristics. Furthermore, it will begin to identify specific ways to strengthen resilience through relationships. Although this discussion is framed within the context of therapy, readers are encouraged to extend their thinking beyond confines of clinical practice. Because, as this paper proposes, in or out of therapy, *resilience is all about relationships*.

You are invited to begin this discussion with a brief activity to tap into your own experience of resilience. Please take a moment to respond to the following questions:

1. Reflect on a time when you felt someone contributed to your ability to be resilient after experiencing a loss, hardship, disappointment, or difficulty. What types of things did that person do that made the difference?
2. Reflect on a time when you felt like you contributed to someone else's ability to be resilient after experiencing a loss, hardship, disappointment, or difficulty. What types of things did you do that you think made the difference?

Please keep your reflection in mind as we continue our discussion by examining the research on resilience.

From Individual Strengths to Strengthening Relationships

The literature primarily defines resilience in two different ways. First, resilience is described as the

ability to achieve good outcomes in one's life after experiencing significant hardships or adversities, such as poverty, family discord, divorce, lack of access to educational opportunities, racism, etc. Within this definition, a "good outcome" for some individuals would be the absence of deviant and anti-social behavior. Another common definition suggests that resilience is the ability to recover from traumatic experiences, such as physical or sexual abuse, assault, severe neglect, and many other forms of trauma. These definitions tend to generate the notion of resilience as something located within the individual, some type of special individual competence or strength. From this perspective, the interest in individual characteristics and strengths move to the foreground.

The tendency to focus on individual strengths in the study of resilience is reinforced by traditional Western-European theories of psychological development that have historically emphasized individual development and experience. Most of these theories hold the underlying assumption that the goal of healthy development is to separate from relationships in order to become an independent, self-sufficient, i.e., strong adult (Jordan, 1992; Cushman, 1995). Consequently, these theories of development tend to lead researchers and clinicians to spotlight the experience of the *self*, the individual, while relational experience is relegated to the background and is all too often ignored. Within a scientific tradition that places relational experience on the periphery, researchers become absorbed in efforts to identify and describe characteristics located within the individual. With regard to resilience, much research focuses on identifying "special strengths," such as intelligence, good-natured temperament, higher self-esteem, internal locus of control, mastery, etc. This approach to the study of resilience promotes the belief that the lucky few, *those endowed with these special strengths*, will succeed, will be resilient, and will become independent and self-sufficient despite encounters with significant obstacles. The rest of us may be out of luck. But something is missing from this picture. How do people develop the strengths associated with resilience? Certainly, these strengths are not entirely inherent. Certainly, these strengths are not developed in isolation.

The Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) of psychological development offers a new foundation for understanding the research on resilience. RCT proposes that healthy development involves the formation and elaboration of growth-fostering relationships throughout one's life. RCT moves us