Reaching IN...Reaching OUT (RIRO), sponsored by The Child and Family Partnership, is an innovator in researching and promoting resilience on various levels—from providing evidence-based skills training to adults who live and work with children to helping organizations and communities create “cultures of resilience” through leadership training and knowledge mobilization.

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Introduction

The notion of resilience has been around for a long time. The word “resilience” originated in the 16th and 17th centuries, deriving from the verb “resile”, which in turn was drawn from the Latin verb “resilire”, meaning to “jump back, recoil”.

During these times, “resilience” enjoyed a broad kind of usage, referring loosely both to a property of physical matter (such as “elastic” or “springing” objects) and to personal characteristics (such as “tending to recover quickly or easily from misfortune, shock, illness, or the like; buoyant, irrepressible; adaptable, robust, hardy.”)(Oxford English Dictionary online).

As a concept connected to human development, ‘resilience’ emerged out of a variety of disciplines in the 20th century, including: psychoanalysis, trauma research, psychopathology research, stress research, ecological studies, and developmental science, etc.

The key cross-disciplinary starting point of the term’s current meaning derives most clearly from observations of the universal fact that people react very differently to similar adversities—what people sometimes refer to as differential response to adverse life events or circumstances.

As Hill and colleagues (2007, p.2) assert:

“It is this analysis of differentiated responses to adversity that offers something over and above conventional developmental psychology, attachment theory and assessments of children’s needs.”

But of course, that is only the starting place when it comes to discussing resilience.

The better we understand how infants, children, youth and parents respond to significant threats, the better that organizations can act to help develop various supports for individuals and families to overcome adversity. This understanding can also guide us in finding ways to reduce risk among vulnerable children and youth.
1. What is resilience?

It is important to state at the outset that resilience fundamentally involves a relationship between two conditions:

- significant threat
- positive adaptation

In the human resilience literature, researchers continue to grapple with the exact nature of the relationship between threat and adaptation, as well as with the set of interactions that make up the movement from threat to adaptation.

While resilience is an aspect of overall human development, it is only one part of human development. Resilience is more than possessing strengths or developing well; it essentially requires facing threats, especially those that undermine healthy development.

For example, if a young child is developing normally and excels in school and everyday life, can we say he is exhibiting resilience? Well, we can say he is on a good developmental trajectory or life course pathway or even that he is coping well with the ordinary demands of everyday life – but we cannot say that he is resilient. We can only say he is resilient if adversity strikes and he responds well to that adversity. Now if this same child loses a parent, contracts a severe illness, or experiences some form of abuse—any one of these could be considered a significant threat—and if the child adapts well, then we may be able to say that he is resilient.

2. Why is resilience important?

Being resilient is important because it refers to the phenomenon of successfully dealing with significant threats in our lives. Threats in this sense endanger our development, health or happiness and making our way through such threats is vital.

Understanding how one adapts well to threat is equally important because it will allow us to think better about how to make sure that individuals can be assisted to develop abilities and acquire internal and external assets and supports that will help them overcome adversity.
3. Who has resilience?

Are some people just born resilient? Do some people ‘have’ resilience, while others do not?

So far we have been building up a picture about resilience that necessarily involves successfully responding to threat. Because it is about a pattern of response, this means that resilience is not something that one is born with, and it is not something that one “has” or “doesn’t have.”

Research indicates that, in general, human beings (along with families and communities) have the capacity to respond well to adversity, but not everyone develops the abilities to do so. Being resilient isn’t the result of something rare or extraordinary in a person, or restricted to only a few people. Research confirms that the basic abilities that contribute to resilience can be developed through processes found in normal human development. Moreover, the continuing development of these many abilities is what helps us respond well to adversities throughout our lives.

4. Where does resilience reside?

Is resilience simply a set of attributes or abilities? Or is it something more?

Over the course of the field’s development, there has been a gradual shift away from considering resilience as simply a characteristic of individuals to a view of resilience as a result of a complex interplay between the individual, family, community, and society. While we may concentrate our analysis on describing how individuals respond to adversity, it is important to keep in mind that this view can also be readily applied to families and to other systems such as organizations and communities.

With the advent of systems theory (and in particular dynamic systems theory) and the development of ecological perspectives on human development such as put forth by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the literature now views the nature of resilience and human development as essentially involving the complex interaction of many features at all levels of the individual and the environment.

Thus, while we can still say that an individual is resilient, this is not to imply that resilience is a thing residing in just that one person. Rather, resilience is an emergent property that involves the systemic interaction of many internal and external factors. This broader notion of resilience as consisting of the interplay between the individual and his world is what is referred to as the “social ecology” of resilience. Resilience arises when the individual is able to make use of internal (e.g., coping skills, attitude, planning competence) and external resources (e.g., physical necessities, family and social supports, expert interventions, etc.). These external resources, of course, must be accessible, culturally meaningful and relevant (Ungar, 2008).
5. What roles do context, culture and timing play?

While resilience always involves significant threat and positive adaptation, the ways in which threat and positive adaptation are understood and experienced may differ from context to context, from culture to culture, and from individual to individual. We need to approach resilience in the context of the individual plus the community, culture, and broader environment.

For example, what some might consider a challenge (being born with partial blindness); others may view as a life-crushing adversity (blindness seen as punishment and a sign of unworthiness). What some cultures might consider a poor outcome for youth (membership in a gang) may be viewed as a sign of personal worth, strength and solidarity by that sub-culture. (This latter example, of course, raises additional issues and questions regarding behaviours that are illegal and/or could put others at risk.)

Resilience is also dependent on time and context. Resilience can refer to how well one is navigating through some current adversity (concurrent), how successfully one navigated through some past threat or adversity (retrospective) or the likelihood that one will successfully navigate through threat in the future (prospective). As well, a person may be able to respond with resilience in a particular type of adversity (flood) but not in another (abuse), or at one time in their development (while attending school) but not another (after leaving the care of child welfare), or in certain contexts (with family involvement or without).

6. Is there a definition that addresses all of these considerations?

Yes, we created a working definition by carefully assessing the literature in order to construct a definition that specifically describes resilience (and not human development, strength-based approaches or positive coping skills). The definition is presented with three distinct parts highlighted.

**Working definition of “resilience”**

**Resilience is successful navigation through significant threat.**

- within the context of individual/cultural definitions and lived experience
- through the interplay of all levels of the individual and the environment, including assets, vulnerabilities, and the threat itself
We’ll discuss ‘successful navigation’ and ‘significant threat’ in more detail next, however, it is important to note that the working definition addresses the critical aspects of resilience:

A. The main definition contains the “essentials” of resilience that distinguish it from general human development or strength-based approaches: significant threat and successful navigation. It also highlights that resilience involves navigating through significant threat, i.e., that resilience is something that happens—a dynamic process of navigation.

B. The second part highlights sensitivity to context—the context in which a person lives, and in accordance with recent work in resilience, one’s perceptions, attempts to make meaning, and ideas about the world—are all important features of one’s lived experience in successfully navigating through threat.

C. The third part draws attention to the nature of the mechanisms involved—the interplay of multiple features contributing to a pattern of adaptation. Resilience is variable or constantly in flux—intimately dependent on the circumstances of our continual development over time, the nature and timing of the significant threats that enter each individual life, the nature of our ongoing adaptation to those threats and other events in our lives, and the changing nature of the environment (e.g., social supports, family functioning, etc.) around us. For example, a person may be resilient to one threat at one time but this does not guarantee that she will be resilient to it at another time; a person may be resilient to a series of threats of one kind, but will not necessarily be resilient to threats of another kind. And, two people of similar personality characteristics will not necessarily be resistant to similar threats.

7. What is significant threat?

A threat can be understood in several ways—as a probability or likelihood that adverse outcomes will happen, as something which adversely affects the functioning or viability of the person, or as those things that negatively affect a person’s development and/or ability to flourish. In all of these instances, threat is significant, not simply the stresses and challenges in daily life or connected to developmental transitions. As well,

- **Threat has a strong temporal dimension.** Threats can be acute or episodic, that is, threats can occur over a very short space or time (e.g., the loss of a parent or one instance of abuse), or threats can endure (e.g., a chronic illness or growing up with a parent with mental health issues), and over the course of time there may be threats that repeat. The issue of the quantity and quality of threat in a person’s life may be quite difficult to capture accurately. This is especially important if we are trying to understand why people respond differently to threats. For example, are we sure they are not simply responding to different doses of threat?

- **There are different basic kinds of threats.** There is threat in the context of developing or maturing systems where normative development is put at risk and there is threat in the context of mature or developed systems where human flourishing (e.g., happiness, mental health) is put at risk.

- **There is a difference in the source of threats.** There are threats that (1) originate from the ‘outside’ (e.g., natural disasters or abuse) and threats that are (2) internally generated (e.g., risky behaviours resulting from decisions made by a person).
8. What is successful navigation?

Once again, there are no hard and fast criteria for “successful navigation” or “positive adaptation” or “good outcomes”, though there is likely consensus on the range of things that count. The resilience literature began in part by counting just the lack of symptomatology or pathology as a good (and measurable) outcome from populations dealing with risk. However successful navigation generally encompasses a broader continuum of outcomes, ranging from survival or absence of disorder through to coping and normative development and functioning to growth in exceptional ways at the far positive end. Choice between these can depend on the particulars of each case or sets of cases. As well,

- **Successful navigation has a temporal component.** Researchers encourage us to take a long-term developmental perspective regarding the unfolding of positive adaptation (or successful navigation) in life courses affected by significant threat. As well, age appropriateness of outcomes needs to be considered, just as developmental stage is important in considering the effects of significant threat. Finally, there are no firm rules as to when successful navigation through a threat can be judged to be complete. Such judgments will either depend on context, or need to be bracketed in favour of taking a longer, life-course view on resilience.

- **Successful navigation has contextual/cultural sensitivities.** Ungar (2007, 2008) and other researchers discuss the importance of cultural identification of what counts as positive adaptation or good outcomes, and contend that maladaptation in one context actually can be seen as positive adaptation or resilience in another.

- **Successful navigation has other distinctions** as well. For example, Masten & Wright (2009) point out the distinction between internal versus external adaptation (pp. 218-9), where one has adapted successfully to the external environment after significant threat, but still experiences substantial internal psychological distress. This also becomes a measurement issue concerning the relative importance of subjective well-being/happiness versus external adaptation, i.e., functioning well in the environment (e.g., at school, job).

**Conclusion**

We’ve provided you with a ‘crash course’ on resilience. Our goal was to help you reflect on what resilience is and is not and to consider how this affects your work and interactions with children, youth and families. We welcome your comments about this paper.

To reach us, please contact info@reachinginreachingout.com. To learn more about resilience and how RIRO supports resilience in children and families and to access other free resilience resources, please visit: www.reachinginreachingout.com.