

Resilience Theory: A Literature Review

with special chapters on
deployment resilience in military families
& resilience theory in social work

by

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ABSTRACT

Resilience theory, although it has been evolving over the past 70-80 years, has enjoyed a renaissance in the past two or three decades. What started as an enquiry into the childhood roots of resilience has grown into a broad, dynamic and exciting field of study. Resilience theory currently addresses individuals (both children and adults), families, communities, workplaces and policies. There are few domains of life that have not been touched in one or other way by resilience theory, including the military community.

This document serves to review the wealth of literature on resilience and to provide a consolidated summary of this literature. Close to 500 sources are cited in this document, published between 1945 and 2001, and drawing from books, academic journals, masters and doctoral dissertations, released government and military reports, training and family manuals, popular magazines and unreleased research reports. The comprehensive review addresses:

- ❖ Individual resilience (including resilience in children, salutogenesis, sense of coherence, thriving, hardiness, learned resourcefulness, self-efficacy, locus of control, potency, stamina and personal causation),
- ❖ Family resilience (including family stress research, Hill's ABCX model of family stress, family strengths research and the various models of family resilience developed by McCubbin and associates – Double ABCX Model, FAAR Model, T-Double ABCX Model and the most recent Resiliency Model of Family Adjustment and Adaptation),
- ❖ Community resilience (including social support systems and a number of cutting edge writings in this newly evolving field),
- ❖ Resilience-based policy (again with the latest thinking on the integration of resilience theory into policy formulation, and with a detailed section on work-life or work-family policies as an example of resilience-based policy),
- ❖ Resilience theory in social work (including an historical review of social work's inconsistent alliance with resilience theory, the newly evolving strengths perspective and the narrative and solution-focused therapies of Michael White and Steve DeShazer),

- ❖ Cross-cultural perspectives on resilience, and
- ❖ Deployment resilience (including a detailed review of literature pointing towards families developing the resilience to resist the stress of military separations).

This review does not aim to provide a synthesis of these various fields of study, but rather to bring together in one place a range of writings and perspectives on resilience and strength that have not previously been seen together in one document.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO RESILIENCE THEORY

Resilience theory is a multifaceted field of study that has been addressed by social workers, psychologists, sociologists, educators and many others over the past few decades. In short, resilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity.

The emergence of resilience theory is associated with a reduction in emphasis on pathology and an increase in emphasis on strengths (Rak & Patterson, 1996). O'Leary (1998) notes:

Psychologists have recently called for a move away from vulnerability/deficit models to focus instead on triumphs in the face of adversity ... This call for a focus on strengths parallels that of a number of other investigators in child development..., medical sociology..., and education... The potential theoretical, empirical and policy significance of the proposed paradigm shift from illness to health, from vulnerability to thriving, from deficit to protection and beyond ought not be underestimated. The precedent for this paradigm shift is growing in the scientific literature. (p. 426)

Hawley and De Haan (1996) also note a similar trend in family therapy:

In recent years there has been a movement in the family field toward strengths-based and away from deficit-based models. For example, in family therapy the solution-focused and narrative models assume that clients possess resources that will allow them to resolve their difficulties... An emphasis on resilience in clients has often accompanied this focus on strengths. (p. 283)

McCubbin and McCubbin (1992, p. 150) have identified five major developments in the field of family social work during the 1970s and 1980s, the fourth of which is most relevant here:

- ❖ There has been ongoing evaluation of the efficacy of interventions targeted at the family system.
- ❖ The revival of family stress theory has highlighted important dimensions of family functioning for intervention.
- ❖ Various family typologies have been developed to guide family assessment and intervention.
- ❖ Theory and research have been advanced to promote family strengths and capabilities, which have enhanced intervention.

- ❖ Family assessment and measurement tools have been developed for use in family research, clinical assessment and programme evaluation.

Pearlin and Schooler (1982) note that researchers have historically tended to confine their attention to pathology and problems. The advance of our knowledge of how people survive, cope and even thrive has been left largely to clinicians in the field. This has had four main effects:

- ❖ Firstly, it has created the impression that coping in the face of adversity is an idiosyncratic phenomenon rather than widespread or even normative (see also Antonovsky, 1979).
- ❖ Secondly, it has tended to locate such coping within unique individuals, thereby overlooking the possibility of "institutionalised solutions to common life tasks" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1982, p. 110; see also Saleebey, 1997b).
- ❖ Thirdly, it has elevated pathology into the high realm of 'Science', and relegated coping to the homely world of folklore (see also Goldstein, 1997).
- ❖ Fourthly, it has led clinicians, including social workers, to resist acknowledging the validity and presence of strengths in their clients. Barnard (1994, p. 136) refers to this as the Law of the Hammer, which "suggests that if you give young children a hammer, everything they come in contact with will need pounding. One of the primary 'hammers' of the human services fields has been psychopathology, and related nomenclature."

There is, of course, the danger of turning the notion of resilience into a kind of rugged, rigid, "just-shake-it-off", "don't-look-back", "Teflon-coated" resilience, which has renders the individual or system "brittle" and vulnerable to stress (Schwartz, 1997). What is advocated in the resilience literature is a kind of resilience that is compassionate, flexible and in-touch-with-life and which promotes the ability-to-bounce-back (ibid.).

The field of resilience is broad and diverse. In some aspects it is well developed and explored. In others it is still nascent. This document purposes to provide the reader with a broad overview of the entire field of resilience theory. Many notions are being drawn together here in a way that has not been done before. When a theory provided additional understanding of resilience, it was incorporated, whether or not that theory was considered to be part of resilience theory.

This review begins at micro level and historically with the individual. Resilience theory has its roots in the study of children who proved resilient despite adverse childhood environments. Antonovsky's seminal work on salutogenesis and sense of coherence is outlined. Various other individually oriented theories that have been associated with salutogenesis are then mentioned, including thriving, hardiness, locus of control and learned resourcefulness.

Secondly, the field of family resilience, which is the main focus of this document, will be detailed. Family resilience began with family stress research in the 1930's and these roots are explored. The family strengths literature that has been popular for the past thirty years is summarised. McCubbin's detailed models, theories and research on family resilience are then discussed in some depth.

The emerging field of community resilience is introduced, including the importance of social support systems, followed by a discussion on the similarly emerging field of resilience policy. Particular attention is given to policies addressing the work-life interface, which, it is argued, illustrate the application of resilience theory to the field of policy.

The place of resilience theory in social work is then explored. The historical tension in social work between pathogenesis and salutogenesis is highlighted. The recently emerging strengths perspective is outlined as well as the solution focused models to family therapy.

Penultimately, the implications of resilience theory for cross cultural research and practice are briefly addressed.

Lastly, the notion of deployment resilience in military families is explored in depth. Deployment resilience is an application of resilience theory and work-life theory in the population of military families, and addresses the question of how military families can resist the stress of work related deployments or separations.

It is perhaps important to note three issues which probably influence the content, style and emphases of this document:

- ❖ Firstly, I am a social worker. There are, consequently several references to social work in this document, including a whole chapter devoted to the place of resilience in the social work profession. In addition, I write with the paradigm of a social worker – two of the results of this are a constant search for the practice or clinical value of theory and models, and an emphasis on families and communities. I cannot

apologise for this bias since I believe in the social work paradigm. Nevertheless, I have not written this document for the sole use of social workers.

- ❖ Secondly, I live in South Africa. I have, therefore, tried to make it clear when I am referring to USA or South African literature. I have also tried to incorporate literature from other countries, such as Sweden, Europe and the UK. There is not a great deal of literature on resilience theory in South Africa, apart from the excellent work of D.J.W. Strümpher, which concentrates on individual resilience from a salutogenic perspective and with an interest in the links between salutogenesis and work.
- ❖ Lastly, I work for the South African National Defence Force as a social work researcher. This document serves as the background theoretical framework for the development of a resilience-based social work assessment technique in the military community. Consequently, there is a fair amount of attention paid, including an entire chapter, to the notion of deployment resilience – an application of resilience theory to one of the stressors of the military community. I have also incorporated some of the results of my own research into this subject over the past several years.

The scope of this review is, however, broad, and should provide material of interest to any professional working in the field of mental or holistic health.