# Resilience Theory:

# A Literature Review

with special chapters on

deployment resilience in military families

& resilience theory in social work

by

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# RESILIENCE THEORY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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# CHAPTER SEVEN: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON RESILIENCE

The place of resilience theory in cross-cultural writings is unclear. Literature on the subject is sparse and there has been no real effort to define what is meant by cross-cultural resilience or cultural resilience. Nevertheless, the notions of strength and resilience do emerge in cross-cultural literature. Many of these references have a somewhat political tone, in which writers argue that Black culture is not inherently pathological, but is determined to be pathological when assessed according to White or western paradigms (see Stevenson & Renard, 1993). These writers argue that there are various unique strengths and resiliencies in African families, many of which grew out of decades and centuries of oppression.

Undoubtedly, there is a shift in some cross-cultural thinking from a pathogenic to a salutogenic perspective. This is accompanied with a greater respect for diverse forms of resilience and the ways in which whole cultures have been resilient in the face of adversity or have even thrived – linking with the previous chapter on community level resilience (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993; Sonn & Fisher, 1998; Sullivan, 1997). The importance of cultural identity or ethnic schema has been highlighted as an important ingredient in resilience (McCubbin et al., 1998). The need for examining resilience within a sociological or power perspective has also been identified (Blankenship, 1998). There has, lastly, been some exploration of differences in resilience between cultures (Antonovsky, 1998a; Antonovsky, 1998b; Gomel, Tinsley, Parke, & Clark, 1998; Hanline & Daley, 1992; H.I. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; McCubbin et al., 1995a, 1995b; Reinsch, 1997).

Several writers have cited the importance of cultural identity as an important component of resilience in individuals, particularly individuals from minority or oppressed cultures (McCubbin et al., 1998, 1995a, 1995b). Having a healthy cultural identity requires identifying the innate cultural strengths in that culture. These strengths may or may not differ from the strengths of other cultures – the emphasis here is not comparative, but rather looking at features within individual cultures.

HeavyRunner and Morris (1997, p. 1) state, in relation to Native American cultures:

Our world view is the cultural lens through which we understand where we came from, where are today, and where we are going. Our cultural identity is our source of strength. In historical times the cultures and world views of tribal peoples were regarded by non-Indians as impediments to the speedy assimilation of the young. Regrettably, remnants of such viewpoints continue to be held by some professionals who impact the lives of contemporary Indian youth. It is critical that researchers, educators, and social service providers recognize the valid and positive role culture plays in supporting Indian youth and tapping their resilience.

A culture's world view is grounded in fundamental beliefs which guide and shape life experiences of young people. It is not easy to summarize fundamental Indian values and beliefs because there are 554 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. alone and an almost equal number in Canada. In spite of tribal differences, there are shared core values, beliefs, and behaviors. Ten are highlighted here to guide our thinking about innate or natural, cultural resilience: spirituality, child-rearing/extended family, veneration of age/wisdom/tradition, respect for nature, generosity and sharing, cooperation/group harmony, autonomy/respect for others, composure/patience, relativity of time, and non-verbal communication.

HeavyRunner and Morris (1997) argue that when these cultural values are taught, cherished and nurtured in children, these children develop natural resilience. This resilience is grounded in a healthy and respectful cultural identity.

In a similar vein, Stevenson and Renard (1993) argue that White therapists working with African American clients need to promote the "racial socialisation" of their clients (see Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 1996 for a similar perspective in social work). "Racial socialisation" is held to mean the interpersonal transmission of values about one's culture. The authors argue that therapists need to nurture racial socialisation, so as to enhance the resilience and strengths of clients. In particular, the authors identify the African American cultural strengths of "dependence on helpful extended relatives, transmission of cultural childrearing values, influence of a religious worldview, and family communication about surviving societal racism struggles, educational achievement, and Black pride and culture" (Stevenson & Renard, 1993, p. 433). These strengths provide African Americans with the resources needed to survive oppression and to develop healthy and productive family systems.

Sudarkasa (1997, p. 30), regarding African American families, indicates the importance of "rediscovering and instilling the values that made it possible for these families to persist and prevail in the past." African American families have endured great hardships over the centuries and yet have survived. Inherent in this survival is strength in the face of adversity, the foundation of resilience (Daly et al., 1996). The promotion of these values will contribute to the resilience of these cultures.

In particular, Sudarkasa (1997, pp. 32-38) highlights seven African American family values:

* ❖ **Respect.** Respect to people who are older or more senior.

* ❖ **Responsibility.** Believing oneself to be responsible for others, beyond one's immediate family.

* ❖ **Reciprocity.** Giving back to one's family and community in return for what has been received from them.

* ❖ **Restraint.** Putting one's own needs on hold in order to accommodate the needs of others.

* ❖ **Reverence.** A reverence for God, for the ancestors, for spirituality.

* ❖ **Reason.** Working towards solutions through reasonable dialogue rather than impulsive action.

* ❖ **Reconciliation.** The importance of being reconciled with one's neighbour.

Sudarkasa (1997) is not arguing that these values are present in all African American families. Rather, the author argues that these are historical values that enabled the survival of the first African families to come to America and which need to be recovered now:

> These Seven R's … represent African family values that have supported kinship structures (lineages, compounds, and extended families) that have lasted for hundreds, even thousands, of years. The strength of these values is indicated by the fact that most of them were retained and passed on in America, thereby enabling African Americans to create and maintain extended family networks that sustained them here, just as their prototypes had sustained their ancestors on the African continent. Today, in the face of circumstances that threaten the existence of these extended family structures, a revival of the values that allowed them to persist could strengthen the family and community structures on which African Americans must depend in the twenty-first century.

The resilience of African American family values is evident in a study by McAdoo (1982, p. 250) in which it was found that Black families under high stress made greater use of extended family supports than Black families under low stress. However, this pattern continued for families that had moved into a higher socioeconomic bracket – they continued to make use of extended family support and often took on a supporting role for families 'back home'.

The issue of cultural paradigm is important not only to members of various cultures, but also to researchers. The theoretical perspective of a researcher can influence the conclusions that researcher draws from the data, even from the same data, as Johnson (1997, p. 94-95) notes:

> The works of Moynihan (1965) and Hill (1972) demonstrate the critical link between data and interpretive frameworks (see Johnson 1978). Although both analyzed the same U.S. Census data, they employed different theoretical perspectives and arrived at divergent conclusions. Moynihan reported a deteriorating Black family and recommended social policies that would encourage changes in the Black family's structure and values. Hill observed the resilience of Black families and recommended social policies that could build on the strengths of Black family values and structure. Without arguing the validity of either conclusion, the importance of studying perspectives governing Black family research should be evident.

It would appear, therefore, that the resilience perspective might be valuable not only in directing the kinds of variables that are studied (strengths rather than pathologies), but also the kinds of interpretations given to research results (opportunities for growth rather than maintaining oppressive social systems).