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Conceptualising and Assessing Resilience in a Cross-Cultural Context

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Conceptualising and Assessing Resilience in a Cross-Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conceptualisation and assessment of resilience in a cross-cultural context. The ecological interpretation of resilience argues that the context of the child influences the outcomes and processes of resilience. This suggests that programmes and services looking to enhance resilience would require cultural sensitivity in order to be impactful. However, there is a lack of resilience measures capable of assessing resilience in a culturally sensitive manner. The paper provides a series of six recommendations for designing culturally sensitive and appropriate resilience programmes, drawing on the work of the International Resilience Programme and McAlpine (2010) to outline how resilience can be conceptualised and assessed in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: Resilience, Cross-Cultural, Resilience Measures

I. Introduction

Children around the world experience a wide range of adverse experiences throughout their lifetime that have the potential to disrupt their typical development. Adversity can be described as the experiences individuals face that have the potential to produce undesirable outcomes by disrupting normal functioning (Riley & Masten, 2005). However, it has been seen that despite the unfavourable and harmful outcomes related to these adverse experiences, some children who are exposed to them seem to still demonstrate more positive outcomes than others (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). Resilience can be seen as a broad conceptual umbrella, involving concepts related to positive developmental outcomes under adverse conditions (Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

The resilience paradigm aims to identify protective factors that may modify the adverse effects of risk factors and seeks to identify which mechanisms and processes are involved (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Henley (2010) points to the fact that applying the construct of resilience is complicated by questions of whether there are cultural differences in resilience processes. More recent research in the resilience paradigm has taken an ecological interpretation of the concept, seeing resilience as an outcome of interactions between individuals and their environment, as well as, the processes which contribute to these outcomes (Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011). Resilience can be seen to be a contextually and culturally influenced construct with no unitary agreement regarding the pathways to resilience, which involves risk and protective factors.

In the context of CDI's work, this would mean that developing any services and programmes aiming to promote resilience in the students of Dar es Salaam would require an understanding of how the construct of resilience can be conceptualised, and assessed in the specific context of Dar es Salaam. However, little research has been done into the construct of resilience in a cross-cultural context, leading to a rather narrow set of indicators being associated with resilience, and little understanding of how indicators of resilience may be culturally determined outside of a western context (Ungar, 2008). This essay aims to explore how resilience can be conceptualised and assessed in a cross-cultural context, drawing on the work of the International Resilience Project to understand how resilience can be promoted in a culturally sensitive manner.

The first section will focus on the conceptualisation of resilience by examining the ecological interpretation of resilience and the Differential Impact Theory. Case studies of youth programmes that aimed to affect youth resilience in different cultural contexts will also be explored. The second section will investigate how different intervention programmes have assessed resilience, in particular, exploring the measures used to quantify changes in children's resilience capabilities. The third section provides a series of recommendations to researchers looking to develop culturally sensitive resilience programmes. The last section will provide a conclusion to this essay.

II. Conceptualising Resilience

i. Protective factors

Research in resilience has often focused on identifying protective factors. These factors enhance healthy development by buffering the effects of adversity and vulnerability (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Protective factors, like the presence of healthy attachments and involvement in the community, have positive social influences and a sustained social network. Luthar & Cicchetti (2000) argues that these factors assist in the development of individual competencies, such as problem-solving skills, which in turn, promote coping and adaptation strategies. In order for youth programmes to promote resilience in youth, programmes have often tapped into these protective factors.

ii. Ecological interpretation

More recent work has introduced an ecological interpretation of resilience (Luthar, 2003). In this interpretation, resilience is seen as the product of the interplay between individuals and their environment. The outcomes and processes of resilience seem to be influenced by the context of the child. This context includes the general well being of the community and the capacity of social institutions around them, like schools, to meet the children's needs. The context also includes culturally determined factors surrounding the child, such as the values, beliefs and everyday practices associated with coping well (Ungar et al., 2007).

This ecological interpretation makes the assumptions that, since positive outcomes reflect the values held within one's community, processes that contribute to positive outcomes are also contextually determined. This is because cultural beliefs shape how people perceive, interpret and approach adversity in their lives (Ungar, 2008). However, contemporary research has

either treated culture as a confounding variable or has focused on studying how non-western cultures or cultural minorities vary in their function in comparison to the ‘mainstream’ (white, western) group (Ungar, 2008). This has resulted in a narrow set of indicators being associated with resilience, which may not be globally applicable. These indicators include self-esteem, school performance, family attachments, marriage and civic engagement.

This means that developing programmes to enhance resilience would require cultural sensitivity and understanding of what it means to be resilient in the specific context that the programme is implementing. An effort is needed to understand better the mechanisms by which children experience and determine indicators of resilience in different cultures, in order for CDI to develop effective and culturally sensitive programmes. Ways to promote resilience should remain attentive to the fact that processes involved in resilience trajectories that are beneficial to children in one context may be neutral, or even deleterious in another (Wyman, 2003).

iii. Differential Impact Theory

Ungar (2018) has recently proposed the Differential Impact Theory (DIT) to explain why intervention programmes may be more or less successful with different children. It is argued that an individual's resilience is not only latent within the individual, but also a reflection of the availability and accessibility of systemic services and supports. Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of human ecology, we can see that positive adaptive processes are influenced by a nested group of ‘systems’. Positive adaptations and displays of resilience in lower-order systems such as the family, school, or community, are compelled by the characteristics of larger systems that the child cannot change- for example, social, cultural and historical factors. While research on promoting resilience has typically focused on changing individuals themselves, practitioners looking to develop effective intervention programmes should acknowledge the role of the complex systems that surround the child.

DIT can help us understand that in order to design effective programmes and services to promote resilience, one must consider the quality of the child’s social and physical ecology, including services and supports that are available to them. Programmes demonstrate a differential impact on outcomes depending on their capacity to help children navigate and negotiate the resources they need to overcome psychological, social and structural disadvantages. Thus, CDI should refrain from adopting a ‘one size fits all’ approach towards

implementing resilience programmes, and should consider the characteristics of larger systems within which the child is nested in.

iv. Case study: *International Resilience Project*

In an attempt to examine the culturally and contextually specific understandings of resilience, the International Resilience Project employed integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to understand resilience across different communities. Tanzania was one of fourteen of these communities, all of which brought social, geographical or cultural variation to the study. At each site of study, researchers employed help from local advisory committees (LACs), who helped tailor methods and select participants in ways that reflected local norms and ethics. For example, the LACs helped identify a range of significant risk factors known to influence youth in their specific communities. The methodology in this study was designed iteratively, as LACs helped identify culturally embedded ways to gather qualitative data from the participants, such as the use of indigenous communication tools. However, ultimately, only individual interviews and focus group interviews were primarily used for data collection.

Findings from the study allowed a contextually relevant understanding of resilience to emerge. Researchers interpreted findings from all fourteen sites, and this interpretation suggested seven tensions that can help provide a conceptual map for understanding resilience across cultures. Although these tensions were found in every culture involved, each tension was observed to exert different amounts of influence on narratives presented by participants in different cultures (*International Resilience Project: Project Report, 2006*).

These seven tensions were as follows:

1. Access to material resources, such as structural provisions and basic instrumental needs
2. Relationships with family members, peers, elders, teachers, mentors, partners, etc.
3. Identity, referring to one's personal and a collective sense of purpose
4. Power and control, referring to one's experiences of caring for oneself and others; an ability to affect change in one's environment
5. Cultural adherence to one's local or global cultural practices, values and beliefs
6. Social justice, referring to one's ability to find a meaningful role in the community and social equality
7. The cohesion of personal interests and a sense of responsibility to the greater good.

Findings revealed that youths who believe themselves to be resilient, and are seen by communities as resilient, are those that successfully navigate their way through these tensions. This is done according to the capabilities of the individual and resources available to the youths from their family, community and culture. Therefore, an individual's experience of resilience is the compatibility between the solutions youth tries and how well their solutions address challenges posed by each tension, within the social and political constraints of their context. No general causal or linear relationships between tensions and positive outcomes was revealed, suggesting that resilience should be understood as the 'contextually dependent optimal resolution' of the seven tensions, as they are experienced within the individual's culture and context. These tensions were found to be dynamic and converge in different ways across an individual's life span.

From the International Resilience Project, it can be seen that, although there are global aspects to resilience, such as the presence of the seven tensions across the cultures examined, culturally and contextually specific aspects of resilience are still present, such as the amount of influence each tension has within a particular culture and context.

III. Assessing resilience

Henley (2010) highlights that another difficulty with implementing culturally valid resilience programmes is the difficulty in assessing change in resilience capabilities. Typically, youth programmes adopt a robust methodological approach to data collection. They first identify the relevant capacities and competencies associated with resilience and allow participants to complete assessment measures before beginning a programme. A post-programme assessment is also completed. The programme might also include a comparison of a group of youths not involved in the programme so that it can be ascertained whether the programme did induce a significant benefit. Quantitative measures like self-reporting questionnaires and scales may be used to gather data, allowing for data to be statistically analysed and the effectiveness of a programme to be determined. However, there are few validated assessment instruments that measure or observe resilience processes in children that refer to a rigorous conceptualisation of resilience, and even fewer are cross-culturally applicable (Henley, 2010). This essay will outline three relevant measures before examining the case study of

McAlpine, Müller, Henley, & Misje (2010), which attempted to design a novel measure of resilience.

i. Child Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM)

The International Resilience Project developed a resilience instrument that is being validated for use with multicultural youth (*International Resilience Project: Project Report, 2006*). This measure initially consisted of 58 items, including questions at multiple ecological levels—ranging from microsystem-level questions that focus on personal qualities to mesosystem-level questions about relationships and macrosystem-level questions about culture, values and customs. The current version, the CYRM-R has been further adapted, allowing for it to be used with children (aged 5-9) and youth (aged 10-23). The scale is measured on a 3 or 5-point scale, and versions with simplified language are also available for individuals with limited comprehension. The current scale consists of 26 items, and a reduced version consisting of 12 items is also available. Practitioners may choose to obtain additional information from a Person Most Knowledgeable (PMK) about the child’s life (CYRM-PMK) to supplement the information gathered from CYRM-R. Additionally, the most recent CYRM gives space for practitioners to develop 10 or more site-specific questions.

Preliminary cross-cultural consultation of the CYRM demonstrated initial construct validity and offered the promise of CYRM as a cross-cultural measure of the protective factors available to youths in different cultures (Ungar, 2008). Furthermore, Ungar (2016) has given a detailed outline of how CYRM may be prepared for implementation in order to ensure the measure remains contextually relevant to the specific community and to maximize cultural sensitivity and appropriateness. For example, it may be useful to:

1. Establish a LAC that can provide input on the research implementation.
2. Conduct focus group interviews to help develop site-specific questions.
3. Consider whether using CYRM-PMK would be beneficial or even feasible.
4. Select the most appropriate version of the measure in terms of length and language difficulty.
5. Finalize translation of the CYRM into the local language with help from LACs.

ii. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Although the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire does not directly measure resilience, it does involve closely related measures that assess factors of resilience. It is a 25-item measure that includes scales of emotional symptoms; conduct problems, inattention, peer relationships, and prosocial behaviour. The tool can capture both the perspective of the child through self-reports, as well as reports from parents and teachers. McAlpine et al. (2010) implemented the SDQ with Tanzanian street youth, trialling the first translated version of SDQ in Swahili. The SDQ has been used internationally and reported by Woerner et al. (2004) that across a wide range of cultures and languages, the SDQ seems to have excellent psychometric properties and is appropriate for use in cross-cultural settings.

iii. Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC)

The CD-RISC measures resilience as a multidimensional construct that varies according to an individual's circumstances, including context, age and gender (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Although it was developed in the US to assess resilience processes after traumatic experiences in adults, several studies have found it to be a well-validated instrument, which is reliable and possesses good internal consistency (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007; Yu & Zhang, 2007). Furthermore, an approved translation of the scale in Swahili does exist ("CD-RISC: Home," 2019).

However, few studies have established the validity and reliability of the scale in an African context. Asante & Meyer-Weitz (2014) found evidence of external validity, proposing the measure to be reliable for assessing resilience within their sample of homeless Ghanaian youth. Nonetheless, when applying the CD-RISC with South African adolescents, Jørgensen & Seedat (2008) suggest that more validation studies are needed to determine whether the scale is suitable for use within Sub-Saharan Africa.

iv. Case Study of (McAlpine et al., 2010)

Although there are several existing questionnaires and scales that assess resilience, Henley (2010) argues that a new resilience measure is perhaps needed. McAlpine et al. (2010) attempted to develop a new scale- the Resilience Competencies Scale (RSC) to assist NGO's in evaluating the impact of their work on promoting resilience in youth. This quantitative measurement instrument differentiated factors of resilience competencies as it asked individuals to rate their internal resilient attitudes, and their resilient actions, such as how they access emotional and practice support.

Researchers validated their newly developed measure through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Well-established scales such as CD-RISC and SDQ were used in conjunction to check the validity of the new assessment. The construct validity is supported, as RCS and CD-RISC were highly correlated. RCS also had a significant positive relationship to prosocial measures on the SDQ (McAlpine et al., 2010).

Researchers also encouraged the youth under study to be involved in all steps of the research process, from research design and data gathering, where it was ethically and feasibly possible. For example, questionnaires were pre-tested with five street youths before the main data collection period. Interviews and focus group discussions were also held to better understand the feelings and attitudes of street-based youths. Social workers were also made available in the instance that participants needed someone to confide in after being interviewed.

IV. Recommendations

From reviewing a broad range of definitions and conceptualisations of resilience, as well as through examining case studies such as the International Resilience Project and McAlpine et al. (2010), some recommendations can be made as to how CDI may choose to approach the task of developing culturally sensitive resilience programmes.

- 1) Luthar & Cicchetti (2000) makes a point that professionals looking to promote resilience in youth should avoid misinterpreting the construct by presenting it as a personal attribute of the individual. This can lead to blaming individuals for not possessing the characteristics needed to function well. Programmes should instead focus on fostering resilient trajectories or outcomes rather than resilient children.
- 2) Pianta & Walsh (1998) argue against programmes that claim to promote resilience by focusing on isolated skills with little consideration of the child's ecology, as this goes against an ecological interpretation of resilience. Often, programmes oversimplify the construct of resilience by choosing to target individual skills or competencies, for example, social communication, with insufficient attention to the functional utility of skills within the child's culture and context (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). Luthar & Cicchetti

(2000) warn against these 'piecemeal' approaches, as this sort of service delivery may be extremely counterproductive for vulnerable children due to the high degree of differentiation and specialisation of the programme. As at-risk children's everyday experiences are already fragmented and unpredictable, programmes should instead aim to implement comprehensive services that utilise existing resources and personnel within given classrooms, schools and communities. Moreover, the Differential Impact Theory argues against adopting a 'one size fits all' approach, as programmes will be more or less impactful on outcomes depending on their capacity to help children navigate and negotiate resources needed to overcome the psychological, social and structural disadvantages in their life (Ungar, 2018).

- 3) Researchers should aim to design their methodology iteratively and use qualitative data collection methods to inform the development of the programme. The International Resilience Project used Local Advisory Committees (LACs) and key stakeholders in each community, such as community leaders and spiritual leaders, to inform them of critical themes that are congruent with young people's positive development under adverse experiences. Furthermore, team members in each site helped identify culturally embedded ways to collect data from participants. Ungar et al. (2007) suggest that researchers should strive to understand how collectivist the culture under study may be and adjust research methods as necessary. For example, there was a heavy reliance on one-on-one interview methods that may evoke self-reflective responses and diminish accounts of the influence of family, community and culture in one's life story. In order to paint a broader conception of how resilience is negotiated collectively, it may also be useful to adopt other qualitative data collections such as focus group interviews.
- 4) Researchers can make use of the International Resilience Project's conceptualisation of the construct of resilience, which acknowledges both the global and culturally and contextually dependent nature of resilience. This fits in with the ecological interpretation of resilience, which acknowledges that culture influences how processes and outcomes of resilience. Resilience is conceptualised in terms of seven 'tensions', with resilient individuals categorised as those who are capable of successfully navigating these tensions (*International Resilience Project: Project Report*, 2006). A culturally sensitive programme might first assess which 'tension' has the most influence or relevance within

a particular culture, in order to develop a programme that most effectively promotes resilience, as defined by that culture.

- 5) The most recent version of the CYRM-R seems to be a promising tool in assessing resilience in a cross-cultural context. Ungar (2016) provides a clear and detailed manual on how practitioners can adapt the measure to maximise cultural sensitivity and appropriateness when delivering and interpreting results of the measure.
- 6) New measures and scales assessing resilience can be validated both quantitatively and qualitatively. McAlpine et al. (2010) demonstrated that the simultaneous use of well-established measures alongside newly translated or newly developed measures to help establish construct validity. Furthermore, researchers have proposed the use of a qualitative approach to examine the validity of a quantitative assessment instrument. For example, researchers can interview participants to ask about questions on a quantitative instrument. This can help ensure that they have understood the questions correctly and that the researcher has also understood the subject's true opinions or attitudes.

V. Conclusion

Implementing a culturally sensitive programme to promote resilience requires the conceptualisation and assessment of the construct to be cross-culturally applicable. This essay uses the ecological interpretation of resilience as a tool to illustrate how cultural and contextual factors influence the processes and outcomes linked to resilience. Thus, there are limitations to assuming a 'one size fits all' approach to resilience programmes, as programmes must cater to the specific culture and context it is being implemented in, in order for them to be effective.

The first section of the essay unpacked the ecological interpretation of resilience and explains how resilience programmes may tap into protective factors that buffer the effects of risk factors in order to promote resilience. The Differential Impact Theory was also used to help understand how some programmes may not work or even be harmful in specific contexts. Findings from the International Resilience Project also provided a contextually and culturally relevant understanding of resilience. The second section explored how the construct of resilience may be assessed and measured through CYRM, SDQ, CD-RISC, evaluating each measure and its ability to reliably and validly assess resilience in a cross-

cultural context. It also explores the steps McAlpine et al. (2010) took to develop its own measure of resilience in a Tanzanian context. The third section gives a series of recommendations for CDI volunteers looking to conceptualise and assess resilience in a culturally sensitive manner.

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