A Comprehensive Review of Core Resilience Elements and Indicators: Findings of Relevance to Children and Youth

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Abstract:

Resilience is core to improving Canadians' mental health. It is therefore important to expand our understanding of key resilience elements – individuals assets, relational and contextual resources - as they develop throughout the life course; as they relate to Canadian heterogeneity, including Indigenous, immigrant and refugee, African-Canadian and LGBTQ2 communities; and, in the context of chronic/daily stress as well as extreme stress, trauma, violence and marginalised socioeconomic settings. Meaning-making frameworks and processes appear as essential mechanisms in the enactment of personal agency, guiding the use of resilience assets and resources to achieve and maintain positive mental health. This brief report shares findings of a comprehensive literature review, discussing their relevance to children and youth, concluding with implications for related programs and policy.

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We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Keywords:

Resilience processes; resilience elements; population mental health; development.
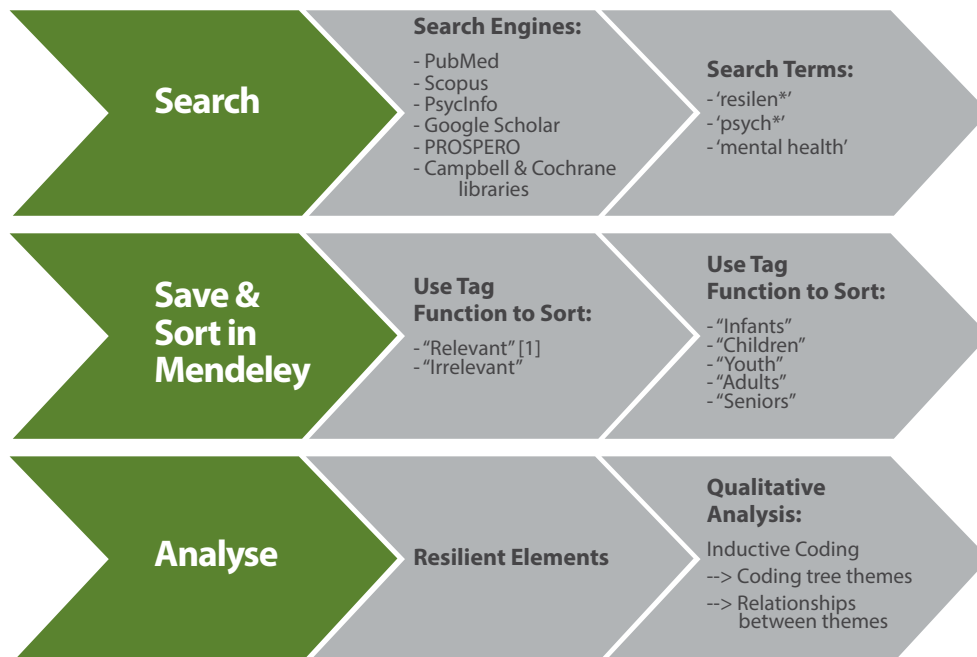
Introduction

Fostering mental health through the development of resilience resources is central to population mental health promotion (Joubert, 2009). Resilience is relevant to both the management of extreme stresses (such as violence) and developmental processes that strengthen capacity to manage chronic, daily stressors (Supkoff, Puig, & Sroufe, 2012). Consequently, we sought to refine understandings of key resilience elements promotive of mental health across the life span, accounting for Canadian heterogeneity and social disparity (see Liebenberg, Joubert & Foucault, 2017 for more detail on the review process and overall findings). This brief report shares findings of our literature review as they pertain to children and youth, concluding with implications for programs and policy (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of document retrieval

Source	Resilient Elements		
	Identified	**Selected**	**Included**
Google Scholar	529	47	34
Scopus	3402	240	146
PsycInfo	787	94	50
PubMed	732	75	46
Prospero	29	0	0
Campbell	0	0	0
Cochrane	6	4	0
Other	0	67	50
TOTAL	5485	527	326

Figure 1: Review Methods and Process

Search

Search Engines:
- PubMed
- Scopus
- PsycInfo
- Google Scholar
- PROSPERO
- Campbell & Cochrane libraries

Search Terms:
- 'resilen*'
- 'psych*'
- 'mental health'

Save & Sort in Mendeley

Use Tag Function to Sort:
- "Relevant" [1]
- "Irrelevant"

Use Tag Function to Sort:
- "Infants"
- "Children"
- "Youth"
- "Adults"
- "Seniors"

Analyse

Resilient Elements

Qualitative Analysis:

Inductive Coding
--> Coding tree themes
--> Relationships between themes

Criteria:

1. Published between January 2005 and January 2017;

2. Focus on resilience as proponent of mental health (rather than school engagement for example);

3. Elucidates resilience elements rather than for example framng a study and its findings within existing understandings of resilience.

Key Resilience Elements

Research demonstrates resilience as an interactive process; dependent on individual "assets" together with relational and contextual "resources"; occurring in contexts of acute and/or chronic stressors (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2013; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008; Werner & Smith, 1992). Individual assets include for example meaning-making processes, executive function, problem solving skills, self-efficacy and positive outlook or emotions. Relational resources include stable, trusting and nurturing relationships with family, peer groups, and significant others such as teachers, and can provide opportunities for key turning points within life trajectories, especially during adolescence (Graber et al., 2016; Helgeson & Lopez, 2010; Kumsta et al., 2010; Rutter, 2013). The importance of contextual resources in supporting both individual assets and relational resources is increasingly apparent (Tol, Jordans, Kohrt, Betancourt, & Komproe, 2013; VanderPlaat, 2016). These resources include health and educational systems, recreational resources, safe housing and community cohesion. For children and adolescents, educational environments in particular are critical resources (Masten, 2014; Sanders & Munford, 2016; Sanders, Munford, & Liebenberg, 2016), offering opportunities for personal (Greenberg, 2006; Herbers et al., 2012; Pieloch et al., 2016; Toland & Carrigan, 2011) and neurocognitive development (Baker, Salinas, & Eslinger, 2012; Blair, 2002).

Community resources provided within a cohesive community are also linked to positive outcomes (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Barbarin et al., 2006; Li, Nussbaum, & Richards, 2007; Masten & Obradovic, 2008; Pine, Costello, & Masten, 2005; Tol, Song, & Jordans, 2013; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Community resources include opportunities for cultural and civic engagement that support a sense of belonging, personal identification and cultural heritage (Evans et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2006; Jones & Galliher, 2007; LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Serafica & Vargas, 2006; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012). These resources are especially important in multi-cultural contexts (Dupree, Spencer, & Spencer, 2015; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Hackett et al., 2016; Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011; Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber, & Mooren, 2015).

Finally, service provision and related policy (Harder et al., 2015; Sanders & Munford, 2014; Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & van de Vijver, 2013) are implicated in supporting access to resilience resources.

Importantly, these three groupings of assets and resources cannot be developed nor function in isolation of one another, underscoring the interactive characteristic of resilience processes. Research shows for example, that individual assets are fostered through available and accessible relational and contextual resources (Bayer & Rozkiewicz, 2015; Belsky & De Haan, 2011; Masten, 2014; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Masten & O'Dougherty-Wright, 2010; Rutter & Sonuga-Barke, 2010). Additionally, relational resources and the social capital they hold, function as a bridge between the development of personal assets (Graber, Turner, & Madill, 2016; Helgeson & Lopez, 2010), and interaction with contextual resources (Henderson, 2012; Sanders & Munford, 2016; Ungar et al., 2007).

Similarly, contextual resources can facilitate access to important relational resources. Interpersonal relationships within educational spaces for example can expand support networks for children and adolescents (Masten, Burt, & Coatsworth, 2006; Masten & Obradović, 2006; Toland & Carrigan, 2011). Teachers can be key supports, providing mentorship, role-models, and access to social capital (Doll, 2013; Henderson, 2012; Sanders & Munford, 2016; Theron, Liebenberg, & Malindi, 2014; Toland & Carrigan, 2011).

Resilience Processes

As our understanding of resilience as a process develops, greater attention is being given to the relative nature of resources and outcomes. What experiences are seen as traumatic or stressful (Bonanno, 2012; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), how "resources" are understood and what counts as "good outcomes", are all culturally and contextually dependent (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2014; Walls, Whitbeck, & Armenta, 2016). These variations are also relevant in terms of gender (Author(s), 2012; Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007; Graber et al., 2016; Jones & Galliher, 2007; Liebenberg, Ungar & Van de Vijver, 2012).

Additionally, resilience elements feed into a cycle where internal transformations are supported. As stated in the previous section, contextual resources facilitate the development of individual assets, which in turn facilitate access to contextual resources (see Figure 2; Geschwind et al., 2010; Heckman, 2006; Masten et al., 2006; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Sroufe, 2009; Supkoff et al., 2012). Research findings highlight the importance of foundational experiences, where risks and resources faced earlier in life impact people not only at that point in time, but also their later capacity to understand, negotiate and manage stressors (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Rutter, 2006; Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006; Sarapas et al., 2011; Supkoff et al., 2012; Werner & Smith, 2001). These findings emphasize the importance of understanding how previous exposure to adversity and resilience resources, have shaped the ways in which individuals currently make sense of their experiences, and how they draw on available resources at particular moments in time as part of a continuous resilience process (Bottrell, 2009; Johnson, 2010; Masten & O'Dougherty-Wright, 2010; Theron & Theron, 2014).
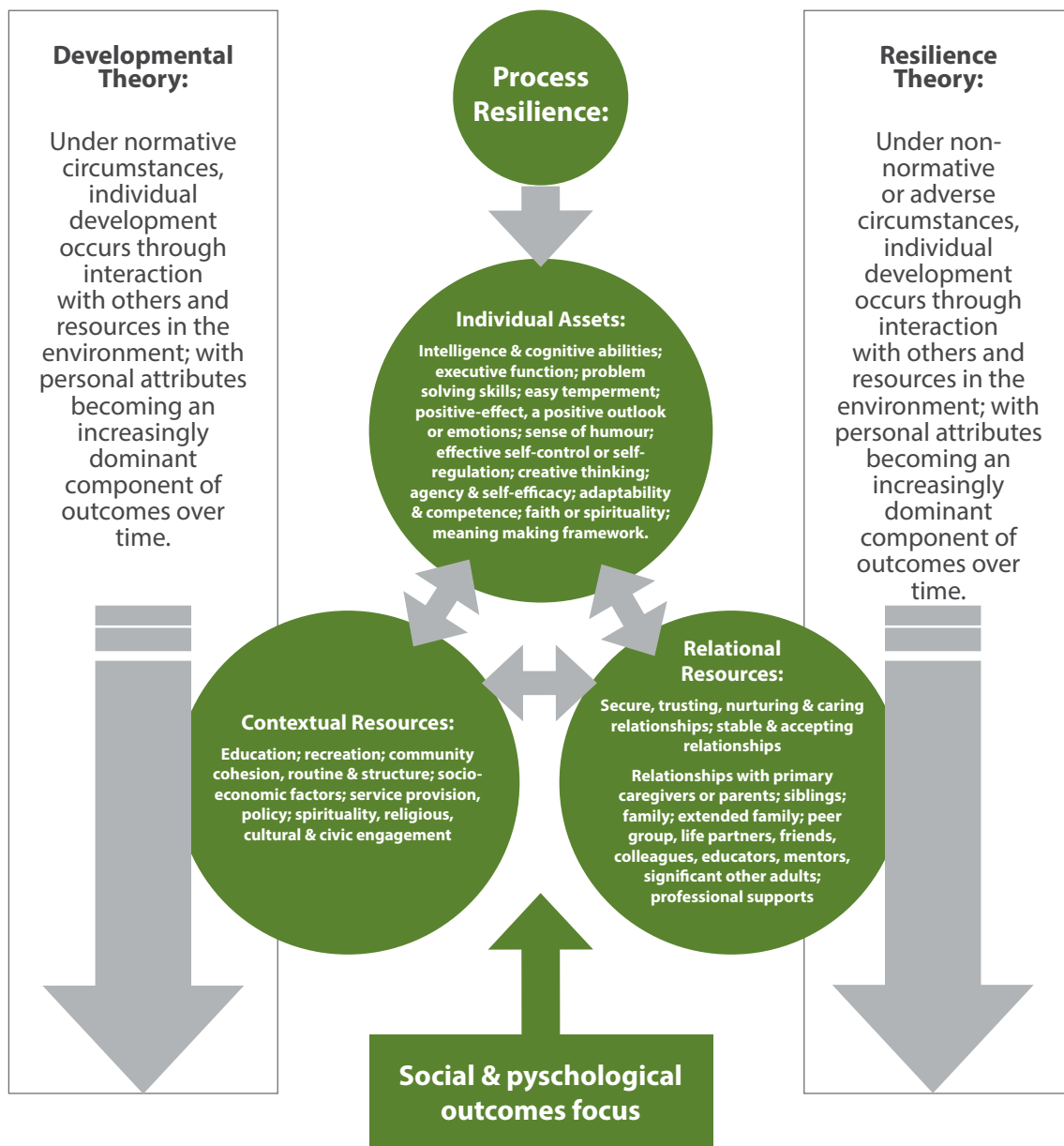
Expanding Current Thinking on Resilience

Review findings suggest that at the center of this interactive resilience process is personal agency. Our understanding of "agency" extends beyond traditional definitions as the capacity to act, and includes processes of meaning- and decision-making that shape capacity to act in a given environment (Barber, 2008; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Dupree, Spencer, & Spencer, 2015; Gone, 2013; Kirmayer, 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Meaning-making frameworks and processes shape the ways in which individuals make sense of daily experiences and choose to manage the adversities they encounter. These processes form essential mechanisms in the enactment of agency. They guide an individual's choice of which resilience assets and resources to draw on in order to manage challenges and move towards improved outcomes. These frameworks are shaped by social interactions

across the lifetime. Negative experiences can establish maladaptive frameworks and coping strategies, while positive experiences can facilitate constructive frameworks and strategies. Importantly, these frameworks and processes are flexible and can be changed (see for example, Sanders & Munford, 2014, 2016; Sanders et al., 2016, 2015).

Figure 2: Alighnment of Life Span Resilience Elements, Resilience Theory and Developmental Theory

Developmental Theory:

Under normative circumstances, individual development occurs through interaction with others and resources in the environment; with personal attributes becoming an increasingly dominant component of outcomes over time.

Process Resilience:

Individual Assets:

Intelligence & cognitive abilities; executive function; problem solving skills; easy temperment; positive-effect, a positive outlook or emotions; sense of humour; effective self-control or self-regulation; creative thinking; agency & self-efficacy; adaptability & competence; faith or spirituality; meaning making framework.

Contextual Resources:

Education; recreation; community cohesion, routine & structure; socio-economic factors; service provision, policy; spirituality, religious, cultural & civic engagement

Relational Resources:

Secure, trusting, nurturing & caring relationships; stable & accepting relationships

Relationships with primary caregivers or parents; siblings; family; extended family; peer group, life partners, friends, colleagues, educators, mentors, significant other adults; professional supports

Resilience Theory:

Under non-normative or adverse circumstances, individual development occurs through interaction with others and resources in the environment; with personal attributes becoming an increasingly dominant component of outcomes over time.

Social & pyschological outcomes focus

Implications

Our findings highlight the need for flexible policy and interventions that account for personal, contextual and cultural variation in meaning-making and related resilience resources. Additionally, findings emphasize the need for policies that promote relational practice to facilitate the development of positive meaning-making frameworks. Consideration needs to be given to the relational and contextual resources that individuals will require to develop the individual assets necessary to achieve positive psychosocial outcomes.

Accounting for individuals, meaning-making processes can ensure that crucial alignments are made between people and the resources they require. These systemic responses can powerfully impact individual meaning-making processes and the development of individual assets. Consequently, opportunities should be created for service providers to engage with young people in ways that generate relationships in which individual understanding of events and resources can be collaboratively explored. Without accounting for these subjectivities, crucial barriers to positive outcomes could be missed, along with valuable and existing resources (Carter, Bradley, Richardson, Sanders, & Sutton, 2006; Sanders & Munford, 2014). Additionally, careful attention needs to be given to contextual barriers and resources as understood by young clients in intervention strategies (Brittain & Blackstock, 2015; Guerin, 2011; Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003).

Finally, an expanded view of the individual within relational and physical contexts requires that resilience-based interventions target families and communities. Here, formal and informal community interventions that strengthen community social networks are particularly important.

Conclusion

Drawing on our previous work and review findings (AJoubert & Raeburn, 1998; Joubert, 2009; Lahtinen, Joubert, Raeburn, & Jenkins, 2005; Liebenberg et al., 2012; Sanders, Munford, & Liebenberg, 2017), we define resilience as "an interactive developmental process involving the agency, or inner capability of individuals, to call on their personal assets, engage with others and look for external resources to successfully transform adversity into opportunities to learn and thrive."

Understanding how individuals and communities interpret events, and what they believe they need to attain and sustain mental health, facilitates alignment of resources with both the meaning brought to events and existing assets and resources. Accordingly, a platform is created from which children and youth can more successfully manage challenges. Recognizing individuals as full participants in their life experiences and the centrality of individual assets such as personal agency within larger interactive resilience process, establishes an opportunity for those engaged in mental health promotion efforts to capitalize on an immense resource.

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