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[Archived] Resilience at an Early Age and Its Impact on Child Development: Comments on Luthar and Sameroff

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Introduction

For several decades now, the study of resilience has held a prominent place in our efforts to understand the relations among adversity, development and adaptation.[1,2] The papers in this collection emerge as the study of resilience enters a new and conflicted era. Above the din of critics who call for the resignation of resilience as a tautological, redundant and intellectually static concept,[3,4] others, including these authors, point to the tremendous potential for resilience research to inform future practice and research across multiple levels of analysis.[5-7]

Luthar and Sameroff provide valuable and timely observations regarding the extant research on resilience and its applications for service-providers who are interested in fostering positive outcomes for all children. Both authors highlight the multiply determined, multidimensional nature of resilience as a concept that describes better-than-expected adaptation in contexts of adversity. I will review the core ideas put forth by these authors, offer suggestions to extend and

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refine these ideas, and provide broad suggestions for future research and practice.

Research and Conclusions

Sameroff's paper speaks to the need for improved clarity in how we conceptualize resilience. He identifies key areas of concern centering on the need to demonstrate that resilience is distinct from competence (i.e. positive adaptation in the absence of adversity exposure), that emerges out of transactions within and among different levels of analysis, and that it is a dynamic and multidimensional construct. The authors' attention to resilience as a developmental process and to the need for contextual considerations in how we define and assess resilience is well taken. As Luthar rightly observes, the key question for resilience researchers is to understand how it is "that some children in high-risk conditions do relatively well, whereas others falter."

A more complicated situation emerges when we recognize, as Sameroff has, that our definition of doing "relatively well" reflects culturally embedded notions of positive and negative adaptation.[8,9] Indeed, both authors highlight the multidimensional and dynamic nature of resilience. Luthar notes that children may demonstrate competence in one domain but not in another, or at one point in time, but not at another. Sameroff extends this to emphasize that behaviours considered adaptive in one sociocultural context may prove maladaptive in others. His argument is consistent with recent findings that demonstrate how specific factors and processes may operate differently as a function of risk exposure.[10] However, his assertion that antisocial behaviour may reflect resilience in high-risk settings serves to negate the reality that positive adaptation is more than mere survival; a key aspect of resilience centers on positive engagement with the interpersonal world. With a growing recognition that resilience is a multidimensional process, attention must shift toward addressing the question of whether and how different aspects of positive adaptation (e.g. resilience, competence) relate to one another across time and context.[11]

Just as resilience must be assessed with respect to particular cultural and contextual features, so, too, must current studies of resilience extend beyond traditional single-level analyses to address interactions and transactions within and among multiple developmental systems that shape pathways toward and away from competence in the face of adversity (i.e. resilience). To this end, Luthar highlights the growing awareness of biological influences on resilience. Her work echoes recent calls for greater attention to the biological correlates of or contributors to resilience.[12,13] Beyond this, however, attention must be directed to transactions between biological and psychosocial influences on adaptation, as Luthar touched on in her mention of

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Caspi's research on gene-environment interactions.[14,15]

Contemporary resilience theory and research has shifted away from the study of individual characteristics to focus on developmental processes that engender positive outcomes.[16-18] To this end, both authors emphasize the conceptualization of resilience as a dynamic developmental process, rather than as a static trait. Luthar does this quite clearly in her endorsement of terms such as "resilient adaptation" or "resilient patterns," rather than "resilient individuals." Sameroff highlights a core assumption of a developmental process perspective in his assertion that contemporary adaptation can only be understood in consideration of both current and historical experiences. However, at other points, he seems to focus more on resilience as a characteristic or ability, rather than as a developmental process, as when he discusses the need to "increase the resilience of less competent children." Together, these researchers, to somewhat varying degrees, support the assertion that resilience reflects the operation of normative adaptive processes that enable children to achieve positive outcomes despite exposure to incontrovertible adversity. The crux of this definition is that the very same processes that engender competence in favourable circumstance underlie resilience processes in adverse contexts. It is for this reason that studies of positive adaptation (and maladaptation) across multiple contexts are mutually informing and defining.

Implications for Policy and Services Perspectives

Although some have questioned the merit of resilience as a distinct developmental concept, the literature continues to demonstrate that resilience reflects a developmental process that is distinct from positive adjustment in the absence of adversity exposure (i.e. competence).[10,19] Moreover, recent efforts to identify transactions within and across multiple levels of analysis have revealed new and exciting sources of explanation in understanding resilience processes. As our understanding of resilience advances toward a more dynamic, developmental and transactional perspective, the implications for future research and practice are manifold.

These papers encourage attention to developmental, contextual and multilevel studies of resilience as a dynamic process. In this view, resilience lies neither in the individual, nor the environment, but in the transactions between them. As discussed by Gottlieb, this relational view of causality encourages attention to the transactions between and within developmental systems that either promote or undermine resilience processes.[20] To this end, the integrative framework of developmental psychopathology holds great promise for grounding future studies of resilience

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within an inherently multilevel view of development that can incorporate research within and across multiple psychosocial and biological systems.[17] In addition to bridging research on resilience and psychopathology across multiple settings and systems, developmental psychopathology has particular utility for encouraging translational efforts between research and practice.[21,22]

Resilience is a developmental process that reflects the normative operation of basic adaptational systems in the context of current or prior adversity.[16] Therefore, efforts to foster positive adaptation for at-risk youth must move beyond traditional models of asset provision or risk reduction to scaffold and buffer core motivational, regulatory, biological and attachment systems that underlie both competent and pathological pathways.[23] The most effective intervention programs will reduce factors associated with disorder (i.e. risks), provide resources associated with positive adaptation (i.e. assets), *and* scaffold and support the operation of core adaptational systems through multi-faceted applications. Luthar's suggestion that successful interventions will strengthen core relational systems by targeting the quality and consistency of the early caregiving environment is but one example of such process-oriented interventions.

Resilience and the processes that engender it are not static. As noted by Sameroff, protective processes will vary in predictable ways across time and context. Therefore, interventions themselves must be dynamic, flexible and culturally specific to ensure that they are integrated into the structure of the target community. Effective applications of resilience research must begin at the level of the community, target multiple developmental systems and promote community participation and empowerment.[5,24] Finally, there must be a reverse translation such that practice can inform resilience theory and research. Studies that demonstrate change in hypothesized causal processes as a function of intervention and corresponding changes in predicted outcomes provide convincing evidence for theories about developmental change and continuity.[21] Time will tell if and how the study of resilience will negotiate the dual challenges of conceptual clarity and accessible applications. The papers reviewed here help guide us in responding to these challenges.

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