

Column : Family Crucial Matters*
Is resilience relational by nature?

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Resilience is a process of adapting well to trauma, threats, stressful events and life changes that varies depending on personal characteristics, social relations, coping strategies, emotion regulation mechanisms as well as physical, biological and genetics factors. It thus represents a challenge to comprehensively conceptualize it and to develop a systematic theoretical model compatible with longitudinal assessment measures of its outcomes. However recent data strongly suggest that resilience entails qualities involving relational competence and managing both negative and positive affect. The foundation for future research and empirical studies should, thus, be further examining the relationship between these constructs and their underlying structures, and refine resilience measures accounting for changes in its level that parallel changes in well-being outcomes as effects of trauma or significant changes.

A recent and innovative theoretically and empirically grounded contribution to the study of resilience proposes that the construct of resilience can be better understood as a relational competence (Giancesini, 2011a). Multiple patterns of resilience exist, but they can all be demonstrated at the relational level and examined through key relational processes that facilitate strengths and can be used to empower individual, families and communities on their own resources (Cusinato & L'Abate, 2010; Giancesini, 2009).

The study of resilience is relevant to a number of fields of study including education, business, mental health, medicine, psychology, and social welfare (O'Neal, 1999) and the construct is therefore applicable at the individual, family, group or organisational level. In the past 20 years, in fact, numerous

* Open discussion Family Crucial Matters in the Blog: <http://firblog.psy.unipd.it>.

models of resilience have been proposed (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990) as well as different operational definitions of the construct that have corresponded to a proliferation of assessment measures sometimes misused (Bonanno, in press).

Contemporary resilience research progressing beyond descriptive issues, now focuses on relational processes that imply self regulatory systems for modulating emotion, arousal and behaviour, identification and capitalization of support structures, and reduction of the likelihood of a stress response (Gucciardi et al., 2011b). It has been argued that displaying emotions, either positive or negative, elicits positive responses in other people thus encouraging social affiliation and making social resources available for coping with adversities (Gianesini, 2011b), as long as they somehow alternate each other in a wavelike manner (Bonanno, 2009). Other researchers have proposed that when hurts offset joys inevitably psychopathology emerges (L'Abate, 2011, 2011; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007) and only when feelings emerge and are shared they transform themselves into emotions, facilitating close relationships, connections and bonds which are inner resources, culturally different and contextually adaptive (Bonanno, 2009; L'Abate, 2009). Social engagement derives from needs that arise from both affective systems, as individuals seek contact for both enjoyment and alleviation of suffering (Davis, Zautra, & Smith, 2004).

During stress and adversity, “reflecting and recalibrating to reality, moving in and out of sadness, by switching to more positive states of mind, by finding joy and laughter within pain, and making sense out of it” (Bonanno, 2009, p. 195) in relationships with others allow individuals to gradually return to a state of equilibrium and resources restoration. Emotions are fundamentally functional (Ekman, 1992, 1993) and in resilient individuals they are competently used as coping strategies, allowing a broader flexibility to adjust to the shifting demands of different situation (Bonanno, Pat-Horenczyk, & Noll, 2011). Resilience as a relational competence, not necessarily comprises a higher level of material, individual and relational resources, but simply a more flexible way to modulate emotional responses and expressions, and the use a broader repertoire of behavioral strategies within relationships. The experience of emotions, in fact, always occurs in an environmental context, not always safe and predictable, where individuals process information from multiple sources, to develop adaptive responses. This complex information processing demands substantial resources but provides the individual with maximal flexibility and an optimal response at any given event.

This focus on relational competence, developmental relationships and psychosocial support, offer a useful and adequate relational developmental perspective on resilience, that consider multiple processes that may vary over time. From a practical perspective, emphasizing psychosocial support and the capacity to build relationships is worth even in the workplace (Gianesini, 2010) as individuals, families and organizational life are socially

embedded. The ability to build and sustain relationships, and the strength and dynamics of positive and negative relationships and psychosocial support are fundamental to resilience.

Consequently, the full potential for interventions can only be realized by fulfilling relational functions and thus building resilience (Kinnear, 2002). Relational Competence and resilience enhancement programs are not based on building a singular or a set of skills but on a more comprehensive, developmental, ecological and multidimensional model that support individuals in all types of relationships, and help them fulfill parental functions competently, resolve marriage disputes constructively and ensure community involvement Relationships are, indeed, the foundation of human adaptation and development, forming the basis for both social and cognitive competence from childhood on (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

We are opening a discussion on resilience as a relational construct in our Blog (<http://firblog.psy.unipd.it/>). Please, send your contribution as a comment! Thank you.

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