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Youth Resilience and Culture

Commonalities and Complexities

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Youth Resilience and Culture

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The aim of the Cross Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology book series is to spread a universal and culture-fair perspective on good life promotion. The series will advance a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural differences in well-being conceptualization. A deeper understanding can affect psychological theories, interventions and social policies in various domains, from health to education, from work to leisure. Books in the series will investigate such issues as enhanced mobility of people across nations, ethnic confl icts and the challenges faced by traditional communities due to the pervasive spreading of modernization trends. New instruments and models will be proposed to identify the crucial components of well-being in the process of acculturation. This series will also explore dimensions and components of happiness that are currently overlooked because happiness research is grounded in the Western tradition, and these dimensions do not belong to the Western cultural frame of mind and values.

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Preface

Culture is perhaps the most neglected topic in the study of risk and resilience. (Feldman & Masalha, 2007, p. 2)

In 1955 Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith began their longitudinal study of children from diverse cultural ancestries, born in America's western-most state, namely Kauai. In many ways, their related 1982 publication, 'Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth', galvanised resilience research in the social sciences. Despite the field's roots in a multi-cultural context, the irony of resilience research is that for the next two decades it would be dominated by a focus on minority world contexts, and informed by minority world perspectives.

By the twenty-first century an increasing number of authors began voicing their critique of the field's narrow investigation of children's constructive adjustment to adversity. Esteemed resilience scholars (see, for example, Boyden, 2003; Cicchetti, 2010; Masten, 2011, 2014; Masten & Wright, 2010; Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012; Ungar, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013; Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2010) emphasized that until researchers and theorists account for the complex relationship between resilience and culture, explanations of why some individuals prevail in the face of adversity would remain incomplete.

This edited volume is in many ways a response to this critique. It comes literally 10 years after the Resilience Research Centre (RRC) hosted in 2005, the first international conference that focused on cross-cultural understandings of resilience. At this conference, the RRC and its network of resilience-focused researchers from all five continents showed that resilience processes are not culturally neutral. In the intervening years, work emerging from the RRC has continued to foreground the cultural relevance of resilience processes. Studies such as Ungar's International Resilience Project (IRP), an 11-country, 14-site exploration into cross-cultural understandings of resilience, changed how resilience was conceptualised and measured (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). This is seen, most notably, in the development of Ungar's Social Ecology of Resilience Theory (2008, 2011). It also spurred the Pathways to Resilience Research Project (led by Ungar, and funded by the Social

Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the International Development Research Centre of Canada, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment in New Zealand). This mixed methods study investigated the pathways youth travel through formal services and informal supports as they navigate complex and challenging contexts. It has paid close attention to how these various resources support youth resilience processes in the culturally diverse contexts of Canada, China, Colombia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and how these processes are impacted by culture. Its findings echo the theme of the 2005 RRC conference: culture is a heavily nuanced construct and begs much greater consideration in investigations of resilience processes.

The complex import of culture to resilience is underscored by the consideration of other researchers. For example, some researchers are increasingly considering how acculturation processes influence the resilience of highly mobile youth in European and American countries (see, for example, Masten, Liebkind, & Hernandez, 2012); and/or how culturally salient values inform (i.e., promote and/or restrain) resilience processes of youth in Afghanistan (Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012); and/or the need to account for how African youths' resilience processes are informed by traditional African culture, rather than in ways that echo Eurocentric theories of resilience (Theron, 2012; Theron & Donald, 2013; Theron, Theron, & Malindi, 2013). Other researchers (e.g. Brown & Tylka, 2011; Neblett et al., 2008) have begun to document how cultural practices (such as racial socialisation) support youth resilience in race-conscious contexts such as America.

Despite this mounting interest in the role of culture in resilience processes no book has been published that focuses exclusively on resilience and culture. *Youth Resilience and Culture: Commonalities and Complexities* addresses this gap. It brings together emerging discussions of the ways in which culture shapes resilience, the theories that inform these various studies, and important considerations that should be borne in mind as researchers continue to investigate resilience. The volume is divided into four parts, reflecting these components.

Part I addresses the central constructs underpinning any theorising about resilience and culture, namely resilience, culture, the complexity inherent to each, and how this is magnified when research accounts for both. In **Chap. 1, Margaret Wright and Ann Masten** review the concepts and lexicon central to resilience, outline several models that facilitate investigation of resilience processes, and briefly synthesise what the last five decades of resilience research reveal about why and how some young people adjust well to potentially disruptive circumstances and events. Their authoritative synthesis flags how culture has, traditionally, been given short shrift in investigations of resilience. In **Chap. 2, Linda C. Theron and Linda Liebenberg** review understandings of culture and comment on the variable ways in which macro- and micro-cultural contexts promote cultural guidelines for everyday living. They conclude that classical views of culture have limited utility for explaining the complexity of how culture matters for resilience, and suggest, therefore, that culture be understood as socially-constructed and socially-shared ways-of-being-and -doing. In **Chap. 3, Michael Ungar** challenges simplistic understandings of either culture or resilience, and draws attention to the diversity

of protective processes and positive adaptation. In this process he reviews the seven tensions – highlighted by the initial International Resilience Project (2003–2005) – that continue to be reflected in emerging research findings. He explains that youths need to resolve these tensions in meaningful collaboration with their social ecologies and highlights how dominant culture, and resistance to dominant culture, informs resilience processes in complex ways.

Part II comprises ten chapters that illustrate the many different ways in which culture and resilience processes intertwine to facilitate and/or hinder youths' positive adjustment to a variety of risks (including poverty, sexual abuse, orphan-status, racism, marginalisation, physical disability, violence, etc.). Importantly, these chapters do not report systematic, cross-cultural work which typically aggregates large-scale study results to offer cultural stereotypes that can be widely generalised. Instead, each of these chapters draws on previously documented research, or current/on-going research, to demonstrate which culturally relevant resources (e.g., worldviews, parenting practices), values, and goals impact youths' resilience processes and how this occurs in variable ways. In doing so, these ten chapters show how cultural resources can sometimes be allied to, or obscured by, ethnicity, race, and religion. In short, each of these chapters provides deeper understanding of the unique, and often complex, ways in which micro- and/or macro-cultural influences sculpt resilience processes. It is our hope that these understandings will prompt follow-up, systematic, robust research that tests their generalizability.

Beginning the part with an African focus, **Linda C. Theron and Nareadi Phasha** (Chap. 4) report two instrumental case studies of black South African youths, who were placed at risk by their social ecologies, to illustrate how traditional African culture (i.e., *Ubuntu* values and practices) underscored, but also complicated, their resilience processes. This is followed by **Elias Mpofu, Nancy Ruhode, Magen Mhaka-Mutepfa, James January, and John Mapfumo's** report in Chap. 5 on an exploratory survey with 18 Zimbabwean youth that shows how traditional, extended family systems mostly facilitate resilience processes when Zimbabwean youth are orphaned.

Moving across to the South Pacific, **Jackie Sanders and Robyn Munford** (Chap. 6) report the varied resilience processes of 605 Māori, Pacific and Pākehā youth and explain how these youths' cultural allegiances shape their resilience processes and related outcomes.

Entering the Northern hemisphere, **Guoxiu Tian and Xiying Wang** (Chap. 7) report how the Chinese cultural emphasis on human interrelatedness provided 220 at-risk youths with nuclear and extended family support, as well as support from 'sworn brothers/sisters' and *tongxiang,* that mostly facilitated these youths' resilience processes.

Next, **Linda Liebenberg, Janice Ikeda, and Michele Wood** (Chap. 8) move the focus to North America where they unpack the ways in which the land/place-based culture of the Inuit supports positive outcomes for youth living in remote coastal communities of Labrador within the Land Claim area of the Nunatsiavut Government. In Chap. 9 **Davido Dupree, Tirzah Spencer, and Margaret Beale Spencer** draw on relevant studies of African American youths and integrate

Spencer's (1995) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) to illustrate that racial socialisation promotes resilience through positive racial identity and less internalisation of racism. In contrast, **Patrick Russell, Linda Liebenberg, and Michael Ungar** (Chap. 10) explore the ways in which the invisibility created by belonging to dominant cultural groups can hamper the resilience processes of youth, with white youth in Atlantic Canada presented as an example. In Chap. 11**, Elizabeth Moore and Donna Mertens** draw on studies framed by transformative theory (Mertens, 2009) to illustrate how a micro-culture of pride, mentorship, and advocacy along with a macro-culture that advocates for inclusive, quality education for the Deaf, supports resilience processes in Deaf American youth in general, and Deaf American youth of colour in particular. **Shelly Whitman and Linda Liebenberg** (Chap. 12) then explore the ways in which conflicting cultures can both undermine and promote the adaptive processes of former child soldiers moving as refugees from conflict-contexts in sub-Saharan Africa to new homes in a Canadian context, echoing many of the themes highlighted in Chap. 4.

Bringing the part to a close, with continued attention to the complexity of cultural influences, **Wendy Kliewer and Roberto Meijia** (Chap. 13) report a mixed methods study with 310 Colombian youth living in the city of Itagui to document how a culture of violence and the culture of specific *comunas* both supported and obstructed resilience processes.

Part III foregrounds the methodological complexities of researching how resilience and culture interlink, and how this impacts the ways in which youth respond to circumstances and events that threaten their wellbeing in ways that promote positive outcomes. To this end, in Chap. 14, **Jia He and Fons Van de Vijver** use their extensive knowledge of quantitative cross-cultural methods to review construct, method, and item bias that are potentiated in resilience research across multiple cultures, and the corresponding levels of equivalence in cross-cultural comparisons. Using examples from relevant studies, they overview the approaches developed in quantitative studies and how these apply to qualitative studies, before commenting on how best to combine qualitative and quantitative evidence in the study of resilience and culture. **Linda Liebenberg and Linda C. Theron** (Chap. 15) then argue for greater critical consideration when integrating innovative methodologies into resilience-focused qualitative research. In particular, they make a case for culturally-sensitive choices of inventive, qualitative approaches. Using examples from the Pathways to Resilience study, they highlight the value of culturally-congruent, visual, participatory approaches to access the taken-for-granted in person-environment interactions, and the ways in which this enhances understanding of how culture shapes resilience processes. **"Lali" McCubbin and Jennifer Moniz** (Chap. 16) round this part on research off by drawing attention to the criticality of the ethical principles of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility in studies that explore resilience, particularly when researchers and participants do not share cultural roots, and/or when resilience studies are conducted in marginalised communities. They conclude that in the absence of respectful, relevant, reciprocal, and responsible research, studies will yield

superficial and/or inaccurate understandings of how culture sways resilience, potentially furthering the marginalising effects of oppressive structures.

Part IV consists of a single, compelling chapter authored by **Catherine Panter-Brick**. In this concluding chapter, Catherine flags the dangers of researching how culture impacts resilience in simplistic, reductionist, or categorical ways. She urges future, methodologically robust, multi-systems research that takes a 'fine-grained' approach to culture, especially if resilience is to be understood as a complex, normative concept, and if the differential nature of functional outcomes, and the pathways to them, are to be meaningfully grasped. Importantly, naive or romanticized interpretations of the ways in which culture impacts resilience are derided. Accordingly, the concluding chapter underscores the way in which this collection provides an opportunity to pause and take stock of the progress, or lack thereof, made in explorations of how culture informs resilience. Importantly, while this chapter brings the volume to a summative close, it also points the way forward for future research efforts, thereby positioning this publication as a stepping stone on the path to systematically explaining why and how culture shapes resilience processes.

In summary, this book does not offer exhaustive explanations or illustrations of how culture and resilience processes interact to facilitate positive outcomes (or not). For example, no chapter explicitly addresses how youth, who are confronted by several contrasting and/or shifting cultural paradigms, navigate and negotiate such realities. Nor does any chapter speak of youth resistance to dominant or disruptive cultures and how such resistance informs resilience processes. Likewise, comment on gene X culture interactions is absent. Nevertheless, *Youth Resilience and Culture: Commonalities and Complexities* is a first and important step to sensitising researchers and practitioners in the field of resilience to the magnitude of culture in explanations of resilience processes and subsequent translation of such understandings into culturally-congruent interventions. In short, the central message of this book is that non-stereotypical, critical appreciation of the culture, and often conflicting systems in which youth find themselves, and those with which they affiliate, is pivotal to comprehending why particular resilience processes matter for particular youth in a particular life-world at a particular point in time. Grasping such particularity demands on-going, sensitive research into why and how culture matters for resilience.

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Part I
The Complex Interactions of Resilience and Culture

Chapter 1
Pathways to Resilience in Context

Margaret O'Dougherty Wright and Ann S. Masten

Following their parents' contentious divorce, a 3 year old African American girl and her 4 year old brother traveled alone by train to live with their paternal grandmother in Arkansas. Four years later their father arrived without warning and moved the children to live with their biological mother, who now resided in Missouri. At the age of eight, the child was brutally raped by her mother's boyfriend. He was soon murdered, most likely by the child's uncles. In the aftermath of this trauma, the child became mute for almost 5 years and was sent back to live with her grandmother. Following recovery of her speech, she was sent again to live with her mother, who now resided in California. By age 17 she had become pregnant, and began a precipitous slide into poverty and criminal activities, while also working as a cook and waitress to provide for her young son. As a young adult, she struggled to raise her son without training or an advanced education. Given her exposure to a multitude of psychosocial risks and struggles to adapt during her early life, one would not have predicted that she would someday become a world-renowned writer, poet, performer, and influential voice in the American Civil Rights Movement. This is the early life story of Maya Angelou.

Angelou's memoirs provide rich insights into factors that may have facilitated her recovery and remarkable turnaround later in life (Angelou, 1970, 1974, 1981). She credits a teacher with helping her to speak again, igniting her extraordinary love for books, and encouraging her to observe and write about the world around her. Other salient compensatory and protective factors that stand out in her memoirs are the steady presence and guidance of her grandmother who provided financial stability during economically perilous times and modeled incredible strength of character and resolve in dealing with numerous experiences with racism and

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discrimination. The love of her brother, vitality and support of her mother, and opportunities within the African American community to participate actively in the struggle for civil rights likely fostered her resilience as well. And, of course, Angelou also brought to these interactions the power of intellect, creativity, performing skills, a vibrant personality, and indomitable spirit.

Compelling case histories of resilience, like that of Angelou and many others, have inspired pioneering research to understand the processes that account for the capacity to recover and thrive following extremely difficult life circumstances. When researchers began to follow "at risk" children into adolescence and adulthood, they observed dramatic variations in adjustment, including cases of unexpectedly consistent positive development, or, as in the example of Maya Angelou, evidence for dramatic turnarounds later in life. Early groundbreaking studies of children facing a variety of stressful life events and psychosocial adversities (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982) led to decades of research as investigators across the globe set out to understand the phenomenon of resilience in diverse contexts. Theory and research on the role of culture in resilience was neglected in the early decades, but now is burgeoning (Masten, 2014b; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013).

In this chapter, we overview key resilience concepts and terminology, delineate various models examining resilience processes, and highlight very briefly what has been learned over the past half century about pathways to resilience. Resilience is conceptualized within a dynamic, embedded, ecological systems framework, encompassing interactions across multiple levels, from the level of genes to person, family, community, and cultural group (Cicchetti, 2013; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013).

1.1   What Is Resilience?

The terms 'resilience' or 'resilient' are now widely recognized and familiar to many in the lay public. These terms are often used by doctors, therapists, policy makers, teachers, academics, and the popular press to refer to individuals who "bounce back" after significant stress and adversity. Despite its popularity, however, the "deceptively simple construct of resilience" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 39) has been the topic of many definitional debates and its utility as an explanatory construct has been questioned. Resilience derives from the Latin verb 'resilire', meaning to leap or spring back; to rebound, recoil. It was first introduced into the scholarly literature in 1818, when Thomas Tredgold used the term to describe a property of timber, and to explain why some types of wood were able to accommodate a sudden and severe load without breaking (cited in McAslan, 2010). Forty years later, Mallet (cited in McAslan, 2010) developed a way to measure the 'modulus of resilience' to assess the ability of materials to withstand severe conditions. After many years of productive usage in engineering and physics, the term was adopted by ecologists and

developmental scientists as a metaphor for the capacity of a dynamic system (e.g., a rain forest, a family, a community) to respond to challenges and threats, survive, and continue to prosper (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Masten & Obradović, 2008).

1.2 Key Concepts and Terminology

Although definitional issues continue to be the subject of some debate, there is broad consensus on key concepts. (Masten, 2014b, p. 10) has defined *resilience* as "The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development". This definition is intentionally broad and scalable across system levels and disciplines. However, it requires further delineation in the context of application, to define the meaning of "capacity" or "adapt successfully" or "significant challenges." Research on resilience requires conceptual and operational definitions of these components, and culture plays many roles in how resilience is defined.

Definitions of resilience always consider both the nature of the threat to adaptation and the quality of adaptation following threat exposure. Threats to adaptation are typically conceptualized by a variety of terms such as *risk, adversity*, and *stressful life events*. Positive adaptation is also defined and assessed in a variety of ways, including absence of psychopathology, success in age-salient *developmental tasks*, subjective well-being, and relational *competence* (see Table 1.1 for our definition of key terms).

It is critical to remember that risk is a probabilistic term. It signifies an elevated probability of a negative outcome for members of a designated risk group, but it does not indicate the precise nature of the threat to an individual or differentiate which individuals in the risk group will demonstrate a negative outcome. Risk is often multifaceted and risk factors frequently co-occur in the lives of individuals. As a result, investigators often have focused on assessments of *cumulative risk* (Evans, Li, & Sepanski Whipple, 2013; Obradović, Shaffer, & Masten, 2012). Risk categories, such as "parents divorced," include children with widely varying experiences of pre- and post-divorce interparental conflict, family violence, economic strain, and life disruptions known to affect the well-being of children. At the same time, individual children experience even the same events differently as a function of their age, gender, development, and many other individual differences in biological, psychological, and social function. A closer analysis of divorce effects often reveals that consideration of cumulative risk, together with individual differences, provides clearer insights into the processes impacting long term adjustment among children of divorced parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

There is now a substantial body of research documenting that outcomes generally worsen, and resilience becomes less likely, as risk factors pile up and persist (Evans et al., 2013; Obradović et al., 2012). As a result, contemporary resilience research usually considers risk from a cumulative and contextual perspective,

Table 1.1 Definition of key terms

Resilience: The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to significant disturbances and continue or recover to healthy function or development.
Risk Factor: A variable associated with an elevated probability of a negative outcome for a group of individuals
Cumulative Risk: The summation of all risk factors that the individual has experienced or an index of the overall severity of adversity experienced; this can include multiple separate risk events or repeated occurrences of the same risk factor
Stress: The condition or experience of an imbalance in demands impinging on a person and the actual or perceived resources available to meet those challenges, disrupting the quality of functioning at some level
Stressful or adverse life events or conditions: Experiences that typically lead to stress responses in individuals
Adversity: Stressful life experiences that threaten adaptation or development
Promotive Factors (assets, resources): Measurable characteristics of individuals associated with better adaptation (for a designated outcome) in both high and low risk conditions; variables with equally beneficial effects regardless of risk level; correlates of positive adaptation
Protective Factors: Measurable characteristics of individuals associated with positive outcomes particularly in the context of high risk or adversity; a favorable moderator of risk or adversity
Cumulative Protection: The presence of multiple protective factors or influences in an individual's life
Differential susceptibility (sensitivity to context): Individual differences in reactivity or sensitivity to experience, associated with moderating effects of experience on individual function or development; such moderators may be associated with good reactions to positive environments and poor responses to negative environments
Developmental Tasks: Psychosocial milestones or accomplishments expected of members in a given society or culture in different age periods; these milestones often represent criteria by which individual development can be evaluated within the culture
Competence: The adaptive use of personal or contextual resources to attain age-appropriate developmental tasks

acknowledging that there will be dose-response gradients that reflect multiple risks piling up in the lives of individuals. For example, greater risk is presumably posed to individuals who experience an acute new adversity in the midst of ongoing poverty, war, or maltreatment than there would be for a similar, but isolated, acute adverse experience (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Past research on risk gradients has provided ample documentation of the adaptive difficulties that ensue with exposure to increasing levels of stress and cumulative risk exposure (Adler & Ostrove, 1999; Cicchetti, Rogosch, Lynch, & Holt, 1993; Pine, Costello, & Masten, 2005). Finally, it should also be noted that typically as risk gradients rise, assets and/or resources decline. This reflects the fact that risk factors and resources are often inversely related to each other and in some cases (e.g., low and high SES, poor and effective parenting) reflect opposite ends of the same continuum.

Positive adaptation can be defined at the level of the individual, family, community or other systems. In research on individual human resilience, the criteria for evaluating positive adaptation are often based on normative expectations for behavior or development in the context of age, culture, community, society, and