Conceptual Confusion:
Identifying the Optimal Conceptualization of Resilience for Higher Education Students

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Abstract: A rapidly burgeoning evidence base shows that low levels of resilience compromise higher education students' well-being and academic success. Resilience programs can be an effective means of helping students adapt to the personal and academic stressors they may encounter. However, the development of such programs is hindered by inconsistent conceptualizations of resilience in the fields of psychology and education. To effectively support higher education students in strengthening their resilience, it is crucial to first clearly describe the construct in the literature, as its conceptualization lays the foundation for the development of ensuing resilience programs. This begs the question: Which conceptualization of resilience is most conducive to developing resilience programs within the context of higher education? The purpose of this paper is to discuss the diverse conceptualizations of resilience and identify the most appropriate one to underpin resilience programs in higher education. A review of the theoretical literature on resilience was conducted to achieve these two objectives. Upon examining trait, process, and outcome approaches to conceptualizing resilience, the process-oriented conceptualization is argued to be the most suitable for developing resilience programs in higher education. The adoption of a biopsychosocial approach to target the various factors that facilitate this resilience process is warranted to promote advancements in practice. In addition to having practical implications for professors, support staff, and policymakers involved in student well-being promotion efforts, these findings may help inform future resilience inquiries in psychology and education.

Keywords: Resilience, Conceptualization, Higher Education, Student Well-being

Introduction

Resilience has garnered increasing empirical attention in recent years. As of September 2024, a Google Scholar search using the key term "resilience" has yielded 182,000 publications since 2023. Despite its multifaceted nature and varied interpretations, resilience is widely understood as the ability to positively adapt to adversity (Herrman et al., 2011; Masten, 1994; Zautra et al., 2010), which comprises "any negative, stressful, traumatic, or difficult situation or episode of hardship" (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 3). As higher education students are prone to elevated stress (Asif et al., 2020; Barbayannis et al., 2022; Linden et al., 2023), which is correlated with an increased risk of mental health problems and poor academic outcomes (Duffy et al., 2020), resilience has become a prominent focus of research in higher education (Brewer et al., 2019; Hamaideh et al., 2024; Price, 2023).

Resilience has been routinely associated with greater well-being and academic performance in student populations (Etherton et al., 2022; Năstasă et al., 2022). Conversely, higher education students with low levels of resilience fall prey to adversities that jeopardize their well-being and academic success (Chow et al., 2018; Chua et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2017). In light of the widespread mental health crisis across university and college campuses (Singh & Kumar, 2024), researchers have made significant strides in understanding the mechanisms of resilience and developing programs grounded in their findings to promote higher education students' ability to adapt to stress. However, studies in the fields of psychology and education either conceptualize resilience inconsistently or omit a conceptualization altogether (Bryan et al., 2019), which threatens not only research reliability and validity, but also the interventions and initiatives this research informs. Indeed, differing conceptualizations of resilience result in poorly targeted resilience programs (Forbes & Fikretoglu, 2018), which highlights the need for a conceptual delineation of the construct. This paper aims to synthesize the theoretical literature on resilience to present its various conceptualizations and determine the most relevant one for the development of resilience programs in higher education. To guide the practical application of these findings, a holistic approach that integrates biological, psychological, and social perspectives is proposed to enhance program design and implementation.

Three Conceptualizations of Resilience

While diverse conceptualizations of resilience exist in the literature, this construct has been predominantly described as a trait, a process, or an outcome. The following section will compare and contrast these three conceptualizations and present the advantages and/or drawbacks of adopting either approach to conceptualizing resilience.

Resilience as a Trait (i.e., Resiliency)

Resilience was originally framed as a personality trait (i.e., resiliency), insinuating that some individuals are higher in resilience—and therefore adapt better to stressors across time and life domains—than others (Den Hartigh & Hill, 2022). First introduced by Block and Block (1980), this conceptualization of resilience was coined as ego resiliency, which comprises a set of traits related to one's capacity to adapt to varying circumstances and environmental demands through the flexible use of problem-solving strategies. Other researchers have since adhered to this trait-focused conceptualization of resilience, portraying it as an innate characteristic that is relatively stable across time. For example, Wagnild and Young (1993), who developed the Resilience Scale, view resilience as "a positive personality characteristic that enhances individual adaptation" (p. 167). Similarly, the developer of the Dispositional Resilience Scale, Bartone (2013), defines resilience as the equivalent of psychological hardiness, a personality style. Finally, Connor and Davidson (2003), who also created a renowned resilience questionnaire, refer to resilience as a multidimensional characteristic that encompasses "the personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity" (p. 76).

A construct derived from the trait-oriented conceptualization of resilience that has been gaining increasing prominence in the literature is identity resilience, which reflects the extent to which one maintains a stable sense of identity in spite of adversity (Breakwell et al., 2022). Individuals with strong identity resilience have a high sense of self-efficacy (i.e., belief in their capacity to overcome stressors), self-esteem (i.e., self-worth and value), continuity (i.e., certainty of who they are and will remain despite change), and positive distinctiveness (i.e., adaptive self-construal as unique). Similar to a trait, identity resilience is conceptualized as a relatively stable self-schema: Individuals who have high identity resilience are predisposed to using more adaptive coping strategies to overcome adversity (Breakwell, 2021), thereby enhancing their overall resilience.

Conceptualizing resilience as a capacity that is both fixed and heritable denotes a sense of permanence, implying that one's resilience does not change with time (regardless of effort) nor across contexts. This bears some notable limitations, such as the connotation that individuals who are unable to adapt to adversity are responsible for their predicament, along with the questioning of the effectiveness of resilience interventions (Kuldas & Foody, 2022). By showcasing resilience as an inherent characteristic, the trait perspective of the construct refutes the notion that resilience can be developed and, as such, undermines all efforts to improve individuals' ability to adapt to adversity. The view of resilience as a trait also dismisses the considerable role contextual and environmental factors play in forming one's resilience (Ungar, 2011). In sum, while the trait-focused conceptualization of resilience has contributed to understanding individual differences, it also imposes constraints that may thwart advancements in both research and practice within psychology and education.

Resilience as a Process

Challenging the trait-oriented conceptualization of resilience, many researchers describe it as an ever-changing process (Bryan et al., 2019; Estrada et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018). For instance, Den Hartigh and Hill (2022) maintain that personal characteristics do not reflect the process of resilience, while Rutter (1987b) argues that "resilience cannot be seen as a fixed attribute of the individual" (p. 317), as it is contingent upon changing circumstances. From this perspective, resiliency is but one of several factors that influence resilience (Estrada et al., 2016), such as the strength and history of stressors (Den Hartigh & Hill, 2022). Resilience is therefore viewed as a fluctuating state rather than a static trait.

According to Bryan and colleagues' (2019) systematic review, resilience tends to be conceptualized along this trait-state continuum, ranging from *trait* (i.e., very stable) and *trait-like* (i.e., relatively stable), to *state-like* (i.e., relatively changeable) and *state* (i.e., very changeable). Conforming with the state-like conception of the construct, the process-focused conceptualization of resilience moves away from traditional descriptions of resilience as a personality trait. Rather, resilience is portrayed as a dynamic process of adapting to adversity (Luthar et al., 2000; Meredith et al., 2011; Rutten et al., 2013; Schäfer et al., 2022).

There is growing evidence to suggest that depicting resilience as a process is the most widely employed and accepted conceptualization of the construct. Among the fifty-two articles included in the aforementioned systematic review (Bryan et al., 2019), thirty-two conceptualized resilience as either a state or a state-like construct that is relatively changeable over time through repetitive learned adaptions with adversity. Indeed, the continuous

development of regulatory responses to adversity was discussed in a large portion of the included articles. These findings are suggestive of the potential outdatedness of the trait perspective of resilience, as well as a paradigm shift from a trait- to a process-oriented conceptualization of resilience.

Many researchers in the field claim that resilience changes as a function of numerous factors such as time (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Stewart et al., 1997) and life stages (Stewart et al., 1997), as well as one's psychological resources and the magnitude of the adversity (Estrada et al., 2016; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Reflecting the malleability of resilience, the process-focused conceptualization of the construct considers the various factors that may inform one's ability to face adversity over the life course. Moreover, conceptualizing resilience as an ongoing process highlights the contextual and temporal variability of resilience factors, which can change not only from one situation to another, but also within a single situation and across one's lifespan (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Viewing resilience as a dynamic phenomenon that is shaped by modifiable factors also denotes potential for building resilience through intervention. Notwithstanding, studying resilience as a process presents significant challenges. Longitudinal research, necessary to capture the fluid nature of resilience (Bryan et al., 2019), is complex, time-consuming, and costly. Isolating specific factors that contribute to resilience over time is also difficult, given the complex interplay of personal, contextual, and environmental variables. These challenges must be carefully considered in research aiming to investigate the processes underlying resilience.

Resilience as an Outcome

While some researchers draw attention to the process of being resilient, others emphasize its outcomes. For instance, Masten (2001) describes resilience as "a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 228). In a similar vein, Rutter (1987a) depicts resilience as the presence of positive outcomes despite risk factors, whereas Zautra and colleagues (2010) present it as the result of successful adaptation to adversity. Unlike trait- and process-focused conceptualizations of resilience, which are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive, the outcome-focused conceptualization can include elements rooted in trait and/or process perspectives, which further reinforces the widespread conceptual misunderstandings of resilience.

The outcome-oriented perspective is often paired with the process-focused conceptualization of the construct rather than the trait-oriented one. For example, Masten and colleagues (1990) view resilience as "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (p. 426). Others portray resilience as both a dynamic process *and* an outcome in response to adversity (Kuldas & Foody, 2022; Mancini & Bonanno, 2009), thereby blurring the lines between these two conceptualizations.

The principal advantage of the outcome perspective of resilience lies in its comprehensive nature, which allows for the incorporation of both trait- and process-oriented elements. This inclusive approach gives researchers the flexibility to combine more than one conceptualization of resilience when describing the construct. By the same token, the outcome-focused conceptualization often fails to explicitly state the source of resilience, leaving readers uncertain whether positive adaptation to adversity is due to personality traits, dynamic processes, or a combination of both. In such instances, it remains unclear whether resilience is regarded as changeable (and thus developable) or immutable (and thus undevelopable). To avoid perpetuating conceptual confusion, researchers are advised to overtly specify the origin of resilience when discussing the construct as an outcome. This clarity is crucial for not only the accuracy of research, but also the development of targeted interventions that can effectively promote resilience.

Conceptualizing Resilience within the Context of Higher Education

To conceptualize resilience as a trait, process, and/or outcome is an ongoing debate in psychology and education research. However, the findings of this literature review suggest that the most appropriate conceptualization of resilience would be process-focused, especially when developing resilience programs in higher education. Conceptualizing resilience as a process is heartening for students as it refutes the obsolete idea that resilience is static and, therefore, undevelopable. Standing in contrast to the trait perspective, the process-oriented conceptualization of resilience demonstrates its fluid nature and instills a sense of hope that it is not only malleable, but also trainable.

Portraying resilience as a dynamic process thus gives promise to resilience building programs, whether they are implemented preventatively (i.e., prior to stress exposure) or reactively (i.e., after stress exposure). In addition to suggesting that resilience can be enhanced through intervention, the process perspective of resilience takes into

account the biological (e.g., genetic predisposition), psychological (e.g., coping strategies), and social (e.g., interpersonal relationships) factors that collectively determine an individual's response to adversity (Southwick et al., 2014). The process-oriented conceptualization of resilience therefore adheres to a biopsychosocial approach, which offers a holistic understanding by framing the resilience process as an interactive phenomenon shaped by a web of individual, contextual, and environmental factors. While personality traits may influence one's ability to adapt to adversity, they are seen as only a mere piece of the complex resilience puzzle. From this multilevel standpoint, individuals' resilience varies across contexts and as a function of their interaction with their environment (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2012; Rutter, 1987b; Rutten et al., 2013; Southwick et al., 2014).

By acknowledging the complex interplay between personal characteristics, contextual influences, and environmental resources, resilience programs in higher education can greatly benefit from targeting the promotion of biopsychosocial factors that support students' resilience. Such factors can be divided into two categories: protective and promotive factors (Terrana & Al-Delaimy, 2023). On the one hand, protective factors are resources that yield a shielding effect from the potential negative effects of adversity (Bryan et al., 2019). These include healthy skills and abilities that are accessible on the individual and social level (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996), such as positive emotion (Kunzler et al., 2020), hardiness (Bonanno, 2004), secure attachment (Rutten et al., 2013), coping strategies (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), and family and peer support (Ponce-Garcia et al., 2015). On the other hand, promotive factors are resources that have a steeling effect regardless of the presence of adversity (Bryan et al., 2019; Sameroff, 2000). These comprise positive individual, social, and contextual elements that can generate positive outcomes or mitigate the negative outcomes of risk exposure, including assets (i.e., internal factors such as self-efficacy) and resources (i.e., external factors such as social support; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

As is no doubt apparent from the last few paragraphs, a breadth of factors can foster the resilience process. Indeed, no single factor can fully explain the complex phenomenon that is resilience (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013; Hill et al., 2018; Schäfer et al., 2022). This finding further underscores the importance of assuming a biopsychosocial stance when developing resilience programs in higher education. To optimize the outcomes of such programs, efforts should be directed toward nurturing students' protective and promotive factors through a biopsychosocial lens. By targeting a variety of factors (e.g., positive emotion, social support) that not only protect against the potential negative consequences of adversity but also promote positive outcomes whether or not adversity is present, resilience programs hold great potential for enhancing higher education students' ability to overcome the myriad stressors that may arise throughout their academic journey.

Conclusion

Conceptualizations of resilience vary considerably across studies in the fields of psychology and education. Some researchers refer to resilience as a stable trait that enables individuals to adapt to adversity, while others view it as a dynamic process or outcome of adapting to adversity. This conceptual ambiguity not only prevents researchers and practitioners from adopting a shared understanding of the construct, but also hampers the development of resilience programs. This is unfortunate because populations susceptible to the adverse effects of stress, such as higher education students, could reap substantial benefits from such programs.

Resilience initiatives could prove particularly valuable for first-year undergraduate students, as resilience may play an important role in managing the stress of life transitions (Stewart et al., 1997), such as graduating high school and starting a new academic journey. The first step in helping higher education students build resilience is for researchers to clearly conceptualize the construct in their inquiries, which lay the groundwork for the development of resilience programs. The second step is for professors, support staff, and policymakers to adopt a biopsychosocial-informed process-focused conceptualization of resilience when developing such programs. This holistic approach is not only argued to be the most favourable conceptualization to employ in the context of higher education, but also allows for the promotion of all factors that can facilitate the resilience process in students. Consistently using this process-oriented conceptualization of resilience will help address the equivocality surrounding researchers' and educators' understanding of the construct while providing a solid foundation upon which to build resilience programs for higher education students.

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