

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN EVOLUTION OF A RESILIENT SELF****Anamika, Ph.D**

Central Institute of Education (CIE), University of Delhi

Abstract

With the emergence of positive psychology, the focus on positive emotions and their role in an individual's successful adaption in the face of adverse situation has increased. The present study is a person-focused case study. The current paper is an attempt to examine the process of development of resilience in an individual who is confronting a traumatic condition which can affect the natural pathway of development. In such traumatic circumstances what are the factors involved in and how these factors are promoting or prohibiting the development of resilience in an individual. The particular interest of this case study is the role of religion in the development of resilience in the subject's life.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

The occurring or prevention of good or bad incidents respectively in our life is not in our hands but to cope with bad or traumatic events is certainly in our control. The question arises why in the face of adversity some people successfully cope with and others succumb to it. In daily life, it was always talked about individual resilience in the face of adversity. The individual resilience was an integral part of myths, fairy tales, art and literature (Campbell, 2004). This is evident from some myths that an individual was not considered a normal human being but constituted of powers of a superman (Barber & Barber, 2006). In other words an individual was assigned with lot of positive attributes. Individual Resilience is a positive and crucial factor, in the way of attaining a happy life or an individual's well-being. The presence of resilience is one factor which helps in coping with setback occurring in an

individual's life. In the present case study, it would be examined, how an individual develops the trait of resilience in the adverse circumstances that obstruct the natural pathway of development.

Positive Psychology and Resilience

Recently, with the introduction of positive psychology, a branch, in the domain of psychology, a whole new notion on happy life, and subjective well-being emerged. The purpose of positive psychology is to ensure individual development without threat or risk. Positive psychology believes in an individual's capability in successfully dealing with risks or adverse conditions arising from past experiences or current traumatic contexts. In other words, to ensure good adaptation in a risk threatened individual. Subjective well-being is defined as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life. These evaluations included emotional reactions to events as well as cognitive judgments of satisfaction and fulfillment (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2000, p.63). In the realm of positive psychology, positive emotions, positive traits and supportive institutions are the key issues of study (Seligman, and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Thus, resilience, as a positive trait, also constitutes an important theme in positive psychology to be studied and researched upon. The current case study is an attempt to examine, how the development of a resilient self took place in an orthodox religious setting. In addition to the religion, what is the role of other factors such as: family support, education, counseling and internal motivation in evolution of resilient self in an individual.

Resilience Defined

This positive characteristic of an individual, to cope effectively in an adverse condition, and ensure normal pace of development, can be termed as resilience. Resilience is being seen as a family of loosely connected phenomena involving adequate adaptation in the context of adversity (Roisman, 2005). It has been found that most adults confronted with traumatic incidents are resilient (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007). Resilience is a magic of ordinary processes (Masten, 2001). Resilience in a wider sense is a set of those skills, attributes, and abilities that enable individuals to adapt to hardships, difficulties and challenges (Alvord & Grados, 2005, p.238). Albeit there is no consensus among scholars as far as definition of resilience is concerned. But when it comes to define an individual as resilient or not, there are more or less consciences among scholars (Masten & Reed, 2005). There is a continuous debate among scholars as far as the study of various aspects of

resilience is concerned. Some scholars believe that resilience is a peculiar ability which is present in some special individuals. In contrast, some scholars opined resilience is an ordinary capability which is there in all individuals along with all other traits i.e. is an outcome of basic human adaptational system (Masten, 2001). This category of scholars has defined resilience as a group of phenomena characterized by good outcomes instead of arduous risks to development (Masten, 2001). A resilient person constantly exhibits positive outcomes in the different sphere of his life (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997). Thus, a general definition of resilience can be, it is a positive trait or family of traits, which are present in all human beings, but its effective and positive application, differs from person to person. Some will be able to get control of their adverse circumstances, others will capitulate to them.

Resilience is a positive trait which can start to be developed from childhood. In certain circumstances, it began to evolve in adulthood too. In a case study, it was found that resilience is a dynamic style of adaptation, a process, begun in infancy, in the context of a relationship, where eye contact played an important role (Eisold, 2005). In other words, there is no certain age when this trait begins to develop. During the process of emergence of resilience an eye contact can be an effective mechanism. The eye contact is not a single strategy there is a possibility of wide range of mechanism used by individuals to be more resilient. The further research can be conducted on this theme.

The present case study intends to examine an adult Mormon man, who wedded at the age of 22 and his marriage annulled within a year and a half. How he faced this trauma and adapted to this situation? During the process of adaptation what kind of problems he faced? Was there any support system available? What kind of positive emotions were at work? What kind of role, if any, the Mormon religion has played in his successful adaption? Was he really able to cope with the trauma? In this article Bonanno's definition of adult resilience is being used: The ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning (Bonanno, 2004, p.20-21). In the current attempt the subject was confronted with divorce i.e. a highly disruptive event. In such circumstances, whether the subject was able to maintain a relatively stable life in face of such trauma.

Methodology

In the arena of positive psychology two models are used to study variation in resilience, variable focused and person-focused (Masten, 2001). In variable-focused approach various variables such as potential qualities of the individual or environment are statistically measured. On the contrast, in person-focused approach different persons and there profiles are being compared to differentiate and determine between resilient and less resilient persons. The approach adopted in the present study is partially following variable-focused approach and partially person-focused. In other words, in this study various variables are considered but the analysis is not statistical. Further, the process of development of resilience an individual was explored instead of conducting a comparison among persons. Both approaches, variable focused and person-focused have their own advantages and limitations (Masten, 2001; Masten & Reed, 2005). It was attempted to delve in a vivid and complete picture of emergence of resilience in an individual. The case study focused on individual resilience, thus there is only one participant selected to do in depth study. He is 27years old. He is pursuing his Master degree in Philosophy. He is a foreign student in Taiwan. He already lived in Taiwan for more than five years. He worked as missionary and later as an English teacher in Taiwan. This is because of his missionary service which led him to come to Taiwan.

Procedure

The aim of this study is to see how the processes of resilience are at work when a person experiences a trauma or at risk. The subject of this study got divorced soon after his marriage. To analyze how he coped with this situation, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared. The questions related to his childhood, family, education, relationship with his wife, and nature of problems they had with each other were posed. Apart from questions included in questionnaire, additional questions were also posed to seek more information or clarifications during the interview. The interviewee was encouraged to share his experiences in the form of narrative as well. The purpose was to get details along with interviewee's perception towards his own positive capabilities including resilience. The interview was recorded and later transcribed. After analyzing the content of interview, certain themes emerged such as: religion's role in resilience, family support, role of education, change in physical environment, internal motivation, and counseling. These themes could be termed as protective factors as well. Protective in the sense, these factors are considered as help in an individual's well being and in coping well in the traumatic situation. These themes are treated

as unit of analysis. Thus, these themes have provided the basis of analysis for the present study. The first section of the study will deal with overall picture of the subject's life. The second section is divided into various sections based on themes, emerged from analysis of content of the interview.

Limitations

Mastan (2001) suggested that person focused approach has an inherent limitation i.e. findings from this approach cannot be generalized. This is valid in this case study as well. Another limitation can be the number of participants. This is a case study of an individual. Thus, there are fewer opportunities to compare this individual case with others. That exercise could make it more diverse. But the present case study is primarily focused on how in a traumatic situation a resilient self emerged. This study is examining various processes involved in development of resilience.

Reconstruction of the Case

The interviewee was born in California but moved to Utah when he was two years old. The reason for moving to Utah was Mormon religion because the headquarters of the Mormon Church was situated in Utah. His parents were very religious and highly educated. They valued education very much. His father was a Lawyer and mother was in the field of education. His father was very strict but the mother was not that harsh. He was very close to his mother in comparison to his father. He is of the opinion that his father was not a good communicator even though he was a lawyer by profession, and lawyers are generally considered to be good at communication. The father always got angry instead of talking patiently about a matter and prodded the son to work hard.

He joined Bergheim University. He started majoring in Computer Science. His brother was also doing the same course. His brother was married. During his first year he met a girl and decided to marry her. However, both of them had emotional problems. After they got engaged various problems arose between them. He decided not to marry her but the girl's father interfered and convinced him to marry his daughter. He mentioned, "I was finally convinced that I should marry her and God wanted me do that and so forth. And they even say things to young people that don't worry even if the relationship is not perfect, don't feel that you have everything in common as long as you have religion in common God will help you and your relationship will just get better and we just tried to believe that just hope for the best."

But this relationship did not work and after a year and half they got divorced. The divorce was not very easy because they were married in the Mormon temple and people who get married there cannot get divorce easily. The reason is that this marriage is considered very sacred and thus not easy to break. Again his father-in-law interfered and tried to convince him not to seek divorce but this time he did not listen to him. In his own words, “Actually what convinced me to go ahead and go forth when one night I was praying to God I feel like God let me know that should I do. That was a good idea. That was really we were foolish to being married at the first place and we should really cut it down. Because I felt that God approved of my decision. So I was very confident.” This feeling of approval of the decision of divorce from God helped him not to listen to his father-in-law. After divorce his wife got remarried and she was very happy with her life. He did not think of marriage again and decided that he needed more time.

The emotional crisis had affected his university education. He got bad grades and during that time he got Junior Internship at Pennsylvania University. “It was a very special summer for me good experience at Pennsylvania university.” He mentioned that, after Bergheim University, he decided to change his major from computer sciences to biology. So his internship there at Pennsylvania University was to do research on micro-organism. While he was at Pennsylvania University, he stopped going to the Mormon Church. He says that, “Being in Payne States was a very different kind of experience. So after so many years of generally being immersed in Mormon culture, it was a breath of fresh air just be somewhere that was just more like general American culture. After being for a while there I actually suddenly felt myself having doubt in Mormon religion in a way I had never before. I just basically felt like you know all that stuff isn’t really true. I did totally shattered though. I was just out of it. So I kept thinking about it for the next year during my last year in Bergheim university and ended up deciding right before I graduated that I really didn’t believe in Mormon religion anymore.” Thus he stopped believing in Mormon religion.

Results and Discussion

Individual Personality and Resilience

The mass media has always portrayed that resilient individuals have special characteristics. They are frequently described such as: impenetrable or indomitable (Masten, 2001). This earlier image of a resilient individual is transforming. Presently, scholars and especially positive psychology are attempting to change this outdated notion. They are propounding a

theory that all individuals has a set of positive emotions embedded within their personality which needs to be recognized and positively used (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli & Vlahov, 2007; Masten, 2001). The present study found that the subject's personality is not invincible or invulnerable. Along with that he was afflicted with obsessive thinking too. Even in such personal, emotional and psychological adverse circumstances, he tried various ways to cope with the situation. An intriguing finding is that the subject of the study after almost seven years' struggle yet cannot conquer over his trauma, but its intensity has been reduced to a greater extent. Thus, in a nutshell resilience is not subservient to a certain kind of invulnerable personality. An ordinary individual can be resilient by inculcating and developing positive emotions to cope with an adverse situation. Hence, an individual can ensure her/his well-being and smooth development.

Impact of Religion on Development of Resilience

Religion is a part and parcel of human life. Its impact on human being's daily life is immense. Positive psychology's life span is very short, thus not many studies on impact of religion on resilience have been conducted. So far the field of resilience itself is not vastly explored. A study on youth, religion and resilience suggested positive correlation between religion and resilience (Alcorta, 2006). This study found that participation in religious activities such as: prayer, attending the church, reading Holy Scriptures, and to serve humanity on the name of religion etc. has beneficial effects in dealing with depression and harmonizing life. These religious practices revive positive emotions among people who are facing potential trauma. Sometimes religion could become a good source of acquiring answers of questions like what is a meaningful life or a purposeful life to those who are grappling with the question of meaning of their existence. The religious faith serves as a coping mechanism (Lopez, Prosser, Edwards, Magyar-Moe, Neufeld, & Rasmussen, 2005). In another context, some scholars have discovered that there was a positive correlation between hope and religiosity among children who were at high risk (Hagen, Myers, Mackintosh, 2005). In other words, religiosity inculcates positive emotions such as hope. This hope ultimately helps them to solve problems more efficiently.

The subject of the current study was a faithful believer in Mormon religion like his parents. His surroundings stretched from school, peers, and community to the state was also dampened with the principles and fervor of the Mormon religion. He grew up in a profuse religious ambiance. This religiosity became the guiding principle and reflected in all his

decisions he made. He was not willing to be married. He was suspicious of whether that relationship could workout. But under the influence of religion he decided to get married. But soon after marriage, the couple has started confronting many problems such as: differences of opinion, emotional distress and incompatibility. To solve the set of these problems, the couple decided to visit to the Mormon temple and consulted with priest. They were suggested by the priest that their marriage took place in the Mormon temple in front of the God itself. Thus, by no means it was breakable. He suggested that they have differences of opinion but they have one common thing i.e. religion. This would work as the binding force. They need some time and everything would turn out to be positive. Unfortunately, it did not happen. In contrast, their relationship got worst day by day.

They decided to be separate instead of living together and hurting each other. Once again the subject's father-in-law intervened and tried to persuade him to reconsider his decision. He politely refused to his suggestion. Interestingly, the subject mentioned that the motivating force behind this decision was God himself. He explained, one night he was praying to God and he suddenly had intuition that God has given him the permission to his decision. Finally, they got divorced. Hence, this case suggests that religion did not work for them to remain united. Yet, it became the legitimating force to let them apart. Thus, in the present case religion did not play any significant binding positive role in the subject's marital life.

Family Support and Resilience

The family provides a physical and emotional ambiance in which children and adults attain support and security. If a family is unable to ensure such support to its members, this can result in the obstruction of harmonious development, especially in the face of adversity. Masten (2001) found resilient individuals had better parenting support. In other words, if in the family adults are capable and concerned towards a member who is facing some significant threat to development. This helped tremendously to the member of the family to grow more positive while dealing with the threat. Richters and Martinez (1993) found in their study of resilient children living in hazardous locality of Washington, DC, that their parents' capability and parenting characteristics were deeply related with resilience present in them. The family is an external factor that enhances resilience in risk threatening individual (Alvord & Grados, 2005).

The subject of the current study was attached with his mother since his childhood. He and his father could not develop a cordial relationship. He mentioned that his father was not a good

communicator and could never able to understand him. He specified that his father was a lawyer by profession but he was not eloquent with him. He was not a good student which his father never liked about him. He always expected him to attain A grade like his other siblings. Thus, subjects' academic capacity was a barrier in the way of his strong relationship with his father. During the times when the subject was thinking of getting divorce, he did not involve his parents to seek their advice or emotional support. After the annulment of the marriage too he was all alone without any parental support or protection. A possible explanation for his parents' disinterest in taking any initiative to help him could be absence of strong familial bond. The relationship with his parents further got eroded when he decided to renounced the Mormon religion. His parents were devout Mormons, they always taught principles of Mormonism to him. For them, this decision was astonishing and disturbing at par excellence. Thus, in the present case study, the family did not play any protective or proactive part in developing resilience in the subject.

External Factors in Resilience: Change in Physical Environment

An individual's immediate physical environment is family which provides support to her/him. There is a possibility of availability of compassionate relationship outside of the family too (Masten, 2001). Alvord & Grados (2005) argued that a community's effective rudiments are environment and social structures that endorse resilience. Thus, physical environment is an important factor in resilience. If the environment is supporting in the flow of positive emotions in an individual, it will help in promoting resilience. This physical environment comprises of neighborhood, school, college, university etc. Sometimes change in such environment contributes in inculcating positive thoughts in an individual who is facing an adversity. Those individuals whose belief is that emotions are malleable they can regulate their emotions (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007). Individuals with such belief certainly make efforts to transform their emotions and change in physical environment could be one of the strategies.

In the present study, the subject shares the same belief that emotions are adaptable. To cope with his adverse circumstances, he decided to leave Utah that was immersed with Mormon culture, where he used to live. He moved to Pennsylvania, which he thought was a place with mainstream American culture. This change in environment was a breath of fresh air for him. Here, he started rethinking about his religious belief and realized how incorrect it was to believe that his religion was "the right tradition and others were wrong". He first gave to visit

church regularly and gradually cease to believe in Mormon or any religion. He avowed himself an atheist. To reconfirm and strengthen his new belief, atheism, he once again came back to Taiwan. A new but not unfamiliar environment that is away from the place that caused emotional trauma. Thus, this case suggests that on some occasions change in physical environment can lead to drastic transitions. The transition could be either positive or negative; it relies on the nature of emotions and belief system of an individual.

Counseling, Positive Emotions and Resilience

Individuals diverge in their perception of emotions as malleable or fixed (Tamir, et al., 2007). This perception determines an individual's resilience level. The question emerges, how those who believe emotions are fixed, can cope with an adverse situation. How do they bring flow of positive emotions in their life, thus could be resilient. For such individuals counseling can be one option. The subject of the present study was aware that he was not fully able to govern his emotions. Hence, he decided to get counseling from an expert psychologist. After he explained his situation to the psychologist, he came to know that he is suffering from a minor form of "obsessive compulsive disorder". He was not mentally prepared to accept that he is suffering from some psychological disorder even if it was mild in form. Gradually, when he read vast range of literature on this disorder, he realized that it was true; he was suffering from obsessive thinking. Thus, counseling helped him in some way to be familiar with his psychological condition. In result of that he tried to control his temporary stress by thinking positively and being involved in various activities. He mentioned, he was not in full control of his situation but he was aware of his circumstances and development. Further, he is making effort to make his life happy and development smooth. In other words, counseling has positive correlation with development of resilience.

Role of Education in Resilience

There is positive correlation between education and resilience and with the efficient educational system; children can be prepared for the adverse situations (Pasterneck & Martinez (1996). In other words, educational system can adopt some programs that can help in development of resilience among its students. In the current discussion is centered on pursuing of higher education at the time of distress as a tool to divert the flow of negative emotions into positive ones. In the present study, it was found that during traumatic phase, the subject continued his higher education in Computer Science. After renouncing the Mormon religion and embracing atheism, he did not cease to ponder over religion. This

relentless thinking over validity and search for a true religion encouraged him to study philosophy. Finally, he transferred from Computer Science to philosophy. The study of various philosophical thoughts and theories partially clarified his views about religion. Thus, higher education has played a role of a protective factor in the subject's life and helped him to be more resilient.

Concluding Remarks

Resilience is a generic trait of all human beings. Some individuals can use this characteristic efficiently, some cannot. Thus, the role of schools, teachers, families, and psychologist becomes very important in inculcating the quality of resilience among children. This characteristic will determine their normal and smooth development in the face of adversity. The current case study is an attempt to understand the various processes and factors involved in the development of resilience. In the present study, the subject has shown fluctuation in the process of development of resilient self. In addition to that various factors were playing positive and adverse role. For example, the subject's family did not play any significant role in his coping with the divorce trauma. But, change in environment and education were remarkable factors in developing resilience. An intriguing factor was Mormon religion. Most of his life's noteworthy decisions were guided by the religion but it did never provide him peace of mind. He could never believe in Mormon religion whole heartedly. The renunciation of religion changed the course of resilience too. In other words, the Mormon self converted into a resilient self.

References

- Alcorta, C. S. (2006). *Youth, religion, and resilience*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut, Storrs.
- Alvord, M. K., & Grados, J. J. (2005). Enhancing resilience in children: A proactive approach. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36 (3), 238-245.
- Barber, E. W. & Barber, P. T. (2006). *When they severed earth and sky: How the human mind shapes myth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bonanno, G. A. (2004). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist*, 59, 20-28.

- Bonanno, G. A., Galea, S., Bucciarelli, A., & Vlahov, D. (2007). What Predicts Psychological Resilience after Disaster? The role of Demographics, Resources, and life stress. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 75 (5), 671-682.
- Campbell, J. (2004). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cicchetti, D., & Rogosch, F. A. (1997). The role of self-organization in the promotion of resilience in maltreated children. *Development and Psychopathology*, 9, 797-815.
- Roisman, G. I. (2005). Conceptual clarifications in the study of resilience. *American Psychologist*, 264-265.
- Hagen, K. A., Myers, J. & Mackintosh, V. H. (2005). Hope, social support, and behavioural problems in at-risk children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 75 (2), 211-219.
- Lopez, S. J., Prosser, E. C., Edwards, L. M., Magyar-Moe, J. L., Neufeld, J. E., & Rasmussen, H. N. (2005). Putting positive Psychology in a multicultural context. In C. R. Snyder, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive Psychology* (pp.700-714). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development. *American Psychologist*, 56, 227-238.
- Masten, A. S., & Reed, M. G. J. (2005). Resilience in development. In C. R. Snyder, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive Psychology* (pp.74-88). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pasternack, R., Martinez, K. (1996). Resiliency: What is it and how can correctional educational practices encourage its development? *Preventing School Failure*, 40, 63-66.
- Richters, J. E., & Martinez, P. E. (1993). Violent communities, family choices, and children's chances: An algorithm for improving the odds. *Development and Psychopathology*, 5, 609-627.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive Psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421.
- Tamir, M., John, O. P., Srivastava, S., & Gross, J. J. (2007). Implicit Theories of Emotion: Affective and social Outcomes Across a Major Life Transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, (4), 731-744.