The Resilient Mind: The Psychology of Academic Resilience

by Erik E. Morales

Abstract

Using six years of data chronicling the experiences of 50 academically resilient college students, this article focuses on the seldom-researched area of the psychology of academic resilience. Ubiquitous stressors such as subpar public schooling and the lack of social and cultural capital; psychosocial issues that arise during the resilience journey; and the compensatory psychological responses necessary to cope with the stress and, ultimately, thrive within the academic environment are explored in this article.

To more fully understand the cognitive and affective phenomena of academically resilient students’ mental states, this research study explored the psychology of 50 college students who demonstrated success in academia despite overwhelming odds. According to Morales and Trotman (2004, 8), academic resilience can be defined as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding.” Academic resilience, unlike psychosocial resilience, is not determined by how well-adjusted or emotionally healthy an individual might be. Rather, academic resilience is defined solely by exceptional academic achievement in the face of adversity. As a result, discerning levels of happiness are not a primary focus of academic resilience research; rather, the mental states of academically resilient individuals are.

Because the academic resilience phenomenon is complex, idiosyncratic, multidimensional, and understudied, numerous researchers such as Winfield (1991), Liddle (1994), Gordon (1995), and Conchas (2006) identified the need for further and deeper explorations of context, with a focus on resilience processes. Garmezy (1991, 419) determined that there is a “need for continued study of individual differences in response to stress . . . the person–environment interactions that make vulnerability or resilience.”
Methodology
The observations and conclusions included in this article are based on the author’s original research. Since the late 1990s, the author interviewed over 50 academically resilient college-level individuals from a variety of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Each student was interviewed a minimum of three times for over 90 minutes each time. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

A qualitative methodology, specifically the opened-ended interview, was used because the author wanted to capture the nuances and details of complex life experiences. The in-depth interview is particularly effective for obtaining this type of data (Geertz 1973; Spradley 1979; Watson and Watson-Franke 1985; McCracken 1988; Rubin and Rubin 1995). McCracken (1988, 9) wrote, “The long interview takes us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories or logic by which he or she sees the world.” Specific to resiliency, Liddle (1994, 170) wrote, “The resiliency concept, although sounding abstract, can be found in the narrative of the subjects interviewed. These respondents, with their powerful life stories, are indispensable to the evolution of the resiliency notion.”

Other means of data collection played minor roles. Copies of transcripts were used to verify grade-point averages (GPAs) and academic standing, and demographic information pertaining to where the students grew up and the schools they attended was gathered and interpreted. The students’ voices, however, were the overwhelming source of truth.

Although the primary method used was qualitative in nature, the significant size of the sample did enable the author to include quantitative data regarding how many students were engaged in certain behaviors.

Sample
The data in this study came from qualitative interviews conducted at various times with 50 college-level students determined to be resilient—that is, each student had parents with limited educational backgrounds (high school graduates or below) and self-identified as an ethnic minority (Table 1). Students were selected from a variety of higher education institutions (Table 2), and had completed a minimum of 30 college credits and had a minimum GPA of 3.0 (using a 4.0 point scale) at the time of interview.

Interviewees were recruited in a variety of ways. Some were referred by college faculty and staff members, others responded to flyers posted around college campuses. Others were the author’s students or program participants, but were interviewed only after the course or program they were taking with the author was completed.

Potential interviewees completed a Participant Identifying Data Form that was reviewed to ensure that students met the prescribed criteria. Documented proof of academic standing was requested; however, socioeconomic and ethnic status was determined based on student response alone. Interviews began with the first group of students in September 1998. The final group of students was interviewed in December 2004.
Table 1. Resilient Students’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Background (Self-Identified)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Parental Status</th>
<th>Parents’ Highest Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Two-Parent Household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American: 21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic: 20</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial: 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haitian American: 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaican American: 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyanese American: 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*HS = high school completed; 8th gr. = up to grade 8; SC = some college.*

Table 2. Resilient Students’ Institutional Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Highly Selective Private University</th>
<th>Selective Private University</th>
<th>Public Community College</th>
<th>Selective Private University</th>
<th>Grade-Point Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.356</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Completeness and data saturation were critical in conducting the research. Completeness is the principle of conducting additional interviews until the researcher is satisfied with the level of understanding for a given phenomenon (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Data saturation is defined as the point at which additional interviews contribute little to what already has been learned (Glaser and Strauss 1965). Through completeness and data saturation, the information gathered from this research was deemed accurate.

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In accordance with the work of Rubin and Rubin (1995), topical interviews were conducted, with structure provided by an interview protocol that was used with all students. The topics were the students’ academic resilience and their mental states throughout the process. All students were asked the same questions; however, follow-up questions were asked based on certain student responses.

Each interviewee underwent a minimum of three separate interviews. Each interview was approximately 90 minutes in length. The first two interviews gathered data, whereas subsequent interviews focused on specific areas of importance and concern. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. During and after each interview, notes were recorded by the author to capture his thoughts, as well as nuances not evident in an audio recording.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were distinct processes, yet were closely intertwined. Consistent with qualitative research norms (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Rubin and Rubin 1995), these two activities were done continuously until data saturation was achieved.

All interviews were transcribed, with the transcriptions becoming part of a file log. Ely (1991) described the log as a cohesive history of the investigation. Additional components of the log included field notes, personal reflections, and descriptions. These writings were used to prepare lengthier documents called analytic memos (Bogdan and Biklen 1982). From these analytic memos, the author began synthesizing his thoughts and observations.

Throughout the data analysis process and in accordance with the work of Bogdan and Biklen (1982), coding categories and concepts were created and emerging themes were identified. Major categories that arose from this research were the stressors the students faced and their responses to them. Discontinuity between the student and the school environment, as well as approaches to bridging that chasm, also emerged as significant.

Trustworthiness

For the qualitative researcher, trustworthiness refers to the assurance that the research activities are instituted fairly, and that the conclusions yielded from the research closely represent the experiences of the people being studied (Ely 1991). A variety of methods were used to promote trustworthiness including triangulation, coherence of themes, peer debriefing, and member checking. The author believes that the research presented in this article is as accurate and precise as is possible.

Researcher’s Stance

To understand the resilience process, especially the students’ inner mental worlds, the individual’s experience and interpretation of the resilience process were paramount. The
author's standard of truth was based primarily on what the participants reported. This belief served as the root of the phenomenological approach the author chose to implement.

The author was aware that his greatest potential for excess subjectivity came from his admiration of the resilient individuals interviewed. Therefore, he made a concerted effort not to focus solely on positive traits and characteristics, but instead paint three-dimensional pictures showing the students' shortcomings as well. However, the author does retain a degree of veneration for each of the interviewees and sees them as models of opportunity and hope.

One of the common denominators in the lives of these individuals was the inordinate amount of stress with which they lived.

Becoming an outstanding student is an arduous journey for anyone. However, poor ethnic minorities in America face additional burdens and obstacles, which result in excess stress. These inordinate levels of stress are caused primarily by the cultural discontinuity inherent in the resilience journey, as well as the cumulative effect of this discontinuity over time.

Cultural Discontinuity

A phenomenon that causes tension in the process of marginalized students thriving in an academic environment is that much of what they are and have been makes them a poor match for the environment into which they have entered. The academic milieu and all that it involves is drastically different from the cultures into which these students were born (Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack 2001). As Cabrera and Padilla (2004) documented in their studies on the academic success of poor Chicano students at Stanford University, understanding the foreign culture of college is an essential prerequisite to success.

This reality essentially requires that students be bicultural. The notion that ethnic minorities—particularly Blacks—in America must have two selves to be accepted in American academic society has been well documented (Clark 1991; Gandara 1993; Gordon 1995, 1996; Villanueva 1996; Morales and Trotman 2004; Nelson et al. 2006). One self can be referred to as the natural or real self. This state requires little conscious thought or strain. The individual is at ease within his or her community of origin.
The second, more artificial self requires adeptness within the often exotic world of academic culture, which essentially is an extension of White middle-class culture (Cook and Ludwig 1998; Nelson et al. 2006). This world often is unfamiliar because formal schooling, both historically and today, is a reflection of middle- to upper-middle class language, norms, and values. Therefore, to excel in academic culture requires adherence to the norms of the White middle class.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in language. Fluency in highly polished standard English is critical to academic success. If one grows up in an ESL (English as a Second Language) environment, he or she is at a distinct linguistic disadvantage. Even households that speak English are considered ESL households if a dialect, slang, or uneducated English is the norm because those children are learning standard English as a second language. Often, the only place where these students can learn and practice standard English is in school. Thus, they must change an integral part of themselves—in this case, how they speak—to fit in and flourish.

One student related the early troubles he had with a freshman composition class:

I would get Cs and Bs on all of my papers. I never got grades like that in high school. I consider those bad grades. The main problem was with the mechanics. Like most people, I wrote like I spoke, and I would get marked down for certain phrases and words I would use, like "y'all" and "where they at" and for double negatives. Once I caught on, I had to write real slow and double check my grammar and think about each line. It was a pain.

This student's anecdote illustrates the need for him to become bicultural or virtually bilingual. Because his cultural origin spoke in ways that were different from the language expected in the academic environment, he was forced to consciously change the language he used when writing or speaking in class. Even relatively simple and informal writing assignments required a significant degree of effort. The amount of effort required by this student would have been significantly lower if the academic language was essentially the same as his home language.

A gap in cultural norms between ethnic groups, particularly African Americans and academic middle-class White culture, exists (Hale-Benson 1990; Fordham 1996; Caldas and Bankston 1998; Deschenes et al. 2001). Caldas and Bankston (1998, 539) summed up the issue: "African-American culture provides young people with patterns of behavior and interests that are inconsistent with mainstream approaches to education because they are so different from those of whites." One student explained how the pressure to change and fit in creates anxiety:

I never really feel at ease here (on campus). It's like all these kids know something I don't. Their experiences are so different. In some ways, I am living a lie. No one here knows that my father is locked up. I feel that they would judge me—prison is not part of their world. It's not part of this world. But, at home, in my neighborhood, it's no big deal that my father is in prison. I don't have to make stuff up.

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The incongruence between the culture of origin and the academic culture often is more subtle. In addition, these issues are often amorphous, making them difficult to detect. For example, several resilient students, particularly the Hispanic women, had a difficult time adjusting to the competitive, vocal, and assertive ethos of academia. Often a competitive current runs below the surface in academia and, for those unaccustomed to it, obstacles can arise. Nine of the 12 Hispanic women interviewed expressed discomfort with the competitive and aggressive nature of the college milieu. One student’s memory of her public speaking class was representative of how many students felt:

My second semester I had to take public speaking and it was tough. Because I hate to be noticed, I sit in the back and never raise my hand. In this class, we had to do a persuasive speech in front of the whole class. Someone else would give a speech of the opposite view and we would have a debate. For some reason, the fact that the other speaker was a white guy bugged me. I was brought up to believe that girls were supposed to just smile and go along, to not make waves. Here I was arguing in front of the class, and I did terrible. I was nervous and I stuttered. I am beginning to sweat just talking about it now.

Isolation stemming from academic progress is another major stressor for the academically resilient. Because success for these individuals is so anomalous, they often find themselves as the only one from their specific group or origin. They can be isolated from their peers (Conchas 2006) or from their families (Rodriguez 1982). Resilient students must manage this isolation and resist the temptation to sabotage their own success—consciously or subconsciously—to return to their peer group norms and, thus, relieve the isolation. Eighty-two percent of the students interviewed reported that they struggled with isolation. One student related:

During my first semester and a half I was so lonely. Not only was I at this white bread school, but I was in the honors college, so it was even more white. After my first year, I even wanted to drop out of the honors college and get into the regular track so I could take classes with my friends, but I couldn’t or else I would lose my scholarship. Finally, I decided to become president of the Black Student Union (BSU). This gave me a lot of structured time to be with people like me. Before the BSU, it was tough.

Although that student managed to meet her needs for community without compromising her elite academic status, not all students are conscious and proactive enough to manage their academic and social needs in fruitful ways. For example, one student fell prey to his need to belong, realizing it only after he dropped out of college:

When I first got to college, the culture shock was just too much. I missed home. I missed my friends. I missed my family. I really missed the block. I did not feel connected here. I felt out of place, like it just wasn’t me. I wanted to go home after the first week, but I promised my mom I would stay at least for the year. I failed most of my classes. At the time, I don’t think I was aware, but looking back I think part of me wanted to fail so that I could go home and be with my peeps.
Constant Discontinuity

Constant discontinuity, whether obvious or subtle, creates stressful experiences for individuals during the resilience process. According to Nelson et al. (2006), disidentification is the phenomenon of an individual to completely disassociate himself or herself from his or her culture of origin. Although an extreme reaction, disidentification does occur, especially when a student has been separated from his or her culture of origin for a significant period of time. One student, who moved from public housing in the Bronx to an elite graduate school in New York’s Greenwich Village, said:

I almost never go back to the housing project. When my sisters want to get together, I tell them to come down here and we’ll meet for lunch. I even offer to pay. I don’t feel comfortable in that world. I know it’s not politically correct to say, but it’s true.

Although this particular student’s disidentification was severe and not representative of the other students interviewed, virtually all of the students were cognizant of their abilities to survive their communities of origin and become members of the statistical elite. An essential and powerful skill that the students had developed was what Chess (1989) termed “adaptive distancing,” or the ability to stand apart from distressed family and community members to accomplish constructive goals. This process required that students be strongly focused and independent so as not to be derailed from their academic progression.

In practice, this meant resisting peer group norms, remaining punctual and consistent in the midst of familial dysfunction, and creating academically conducive environments in crowded and often uncomfortable environments. For example, one student studied in the bathroom of her small New York City apartment because it was the only room with a lock. Another student stayed at school until the janitors kicked her out to take advantage of the peace and quiet and the computer access. Yet, another student dribbled a basketball back and forth from the library to keep the neighborhood guys from knowing how much studying he was doing.

When stresses are continual, a seemingly unrelenting state of stress exists. Seventy-four percent of the students interviewed reported accumulated stress in a variety of contexts. The most common theme that emerged among students was the overwhelming need to be two people at once, or to constantly switch from one person to another. In fact, 44 of the 50 students identified their abilities to be bicultural as a key protective factor. This duality often had become such an integral part of how these resilient individuals live, they were unaware of its presence. One student related:

I always thought it was funny that in the office, the only time I would really breathe and let loose was when the maintenance guys would come around and we would talk about hoops or music. It was like a brief trip home. I would laugh and smile and joke around—just be. When they left, I could feel tightness in my chest. It was like, okay, now I have to think before I speak.
The stress resulting from this splintered state generally increased the further away one’s culture of origin was from the mainstream. A parallel relation between the degree of distance from middle-class White American culture and the level of discontinuity existed. For example, poor and Black students experienced more stress than students who were Black, but not poor; and a poor first-generation Dominican immigrant experienced more stress than a third-generation Puerto Rican.

**The Burden of Race and Cultural Inversion**

This study showed that the challenge to live biculturally is particularly stress-inducing for African Americans and certain Hispanic subgroups due to their race and cultural inversion. Most of the interviewees stated that they felt the pressure to succeed so that their entire race succeeds. In fact, only four of the 50 resilient students that were interviewed did not identify being looked upon as a spokesperson for the group as a stress factor in their academic lives.

Society generally assumes that a student from a certain ethnic group—although an individual—is essentially a symbol of his or her entire racial or ethnic group. For example, he is not Earl; he is a representative of the urban Black male perspective and what he says and does is what Black, urban male America says and does. She is not Sandra; she is the inner-city Latina perspective and what she does is what inner-city Latinas do. This erosion of the self creates a powerful social magnifying glass, increasing the significance of every word, thought, and action. One student recalled:

> I remember sitting in class and this old white guy says, "Can anyone here talk about what it is like to grow up on welfare and in poverty?" The guy was looking right at me. I was the only person of color in the class, and he was assuming I would be able to talk about life on welfare and in the ghetto.

Steele and Aronson (1998) explored the potentially harmful effects of this phenomenon in their work on stereotype threat. The human toll this issue can take is illustrated by one student’s experience as the Black voice.

> Somebody printed a picture in the school newspaper of a fraternity that dressed up as the Jackson Five, in black face and all, for Halloween. A guy who I didn’t even know—a reporter for the newspaper—knocked on my dorm door looking for a comment. He came right to me and I had nothing to do with the incident. He said, "I want the black perspective." That’s how it is at my college. There are so few black folks that everything I say is a big deal.
Another source of stress for resilient students is that their success often is equated with the success of their entire group, as are their failures. An underlying thought that has long existed in the African-American community is that the academically elite had an obligation to carry the rest of the group. W. E. B. DuBois's (1903, 33), "The Talented Tenth," is often attributed as the origin of this sense of obligation:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst. Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character?

This type of rhetoric has seeped into the consciousness of African Americans and created a profound sense of duty—both figuratively and literally—to be exceptional and save others. The pressure inherent in this belief system can add significantly to the stress of resilient students.

Creating and Sustaining Positive Self-Image

Another aspect of the resilient student experience is the process of convincing oneself that one can truly compete in the academic world. Because the academic world is distinctly foreign in many ways to the student, as well as to his or her parents, resilient students often have to learn that they are good students.

Given the overt and covert ways that society ascribes negative cognitive characteristics to the lower socioeconomic classes and people of color, this negativity is often internalized. Several researchers (Oakes 1985; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, and Lintz 1996) have identified the hidden curriculum and the disproportionate placement of African Americans and Hispanics in remedial and special education courses as delivering subtle messages of academic inferiority—messages that easily can lead to negative self-images. These self-images particularly can be virile in terms of one's thoughts about one's academic competency, especially if one is of African or Hispanic decent. These individuals must assert their intelligence in an atmosphere and culture that says both overtly (Jensen 1969; Herrnstein and Murray 1994) and subtly (pop culture, tracking, hidden curricula, conservative perceptions of affirmative action, media stereotypes, etc.), that "you are not as smart."

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Obviously, these messages can take their toll. Research by Steele and Aronson (1998) exposed how negative stereotypes can adversely affect student self-concept and academic
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performance. They found that when the reinforcement of negative stereotypes was removed through controlled experiments, student performance increased. As Steele and Aronson (1998) pointed out, the chronic pressure of negative stereotypes often leads to academic struggle, which eventually can cause the student to reject the academic environment and drop out of it.

Adding to the difficulty and complexity of creating positive academic images is that, for young people in general, smart is synonymous with doing well in school. For the most part, young people do not view intelligence as a multidimensional variable. For the majority of young people, intelligence, like height, is finite—easily measured and comparable with grades as the ruler. Because many resilient students and people who look like them tend not to be bookish—in fact, doing well academically and using academic jargon is often referred to as acting White—then they are not smart. For these individuals to become smart, they must come to terms with perceptions of their own intelligence. Either they change their self-image as a result of increments of success or they retain a sense of inadequacy. Paradoxically, this sense of inadequacy often fuels their academic achievement. They are constantly seeking approbation for their intelligence and, although they may never fully believe they are smart, they do build a track record of academic success.

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One student spoke about dealing with self-doubt and fear:

Part of me always believed that black people were dumb. Even as a kid, I'd look around and see that the teachers and principal were white, the janitors black. In high school, I was the only black kid in honors algebra. I sometimes doubted I could compete. I was like, what the hell am I doing here?

For poor, minority students to achieve, they must grapple with these feelings and find ways to overcome them. Often this adds to their stress and to the difficulty of creating and maintaining a positive self-image. Like most things for these individuals, positive self-image does not come easily.

Research on self-image and self-esteem begs interesting questions. Self-image is how one views oneself including his or her strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, capabilities, and values. Self-esteem takes self-image a step further and refers to the value placed on strengths and weakness. High levels of self-esteem have been found to be especially valuable for low socioeconomic students in the process of educational resilience (Tiet and Huizinga 2002; Borman and Overman 2004).
Troublingly, some researchers share a belief that self-image is essentially immutable after preadolescence (Joseph 1994). If this is true, can the belief that one is not smart ever be changed, regardless of how many academic goals are achieved? If so, perhaps resilient individuals, at least those who have negative self-images, never wholeheartedly believe in their own abilities. For many students, continued success is an ongoing attempt to prove intelligence, rather than proof of intelligence itself. Of the 50 resilient students interviewed, 27 revealed feelings of low academic self-esteem and used their educational successes to counteract those feelings. Lerner (1996) referred to this as earned self-esteem and, for many students, this process was motivating. So, although for some students self-academic perception was not immutable, it proved to be alterable given enough success.

Needs Acknowledgment

Academically resilient students must acknowledge and accept the educational disadvantage to which they have been subjected. Well-documented disparities between schools attended by the wealthy compared to those attended by the lower classes support their realization that they are at a distinct disadvantage in the classroom.

This realization, and the accompanying action required to mitigate the disadvantage, is an important aspect of the “resilience cycle” (Morales and Friedeman 2000; Morales and Trotman 2004). Eighty-eight percent of the students interviewed felt that their precollegiate educations were subpar and realized that they must take steps to meet their academic needs.

Disadvantaged students who prove to be resilient eschew what Mickelson (1990) referred to as “the attitude achievement paradox,” or when students have high educational aspirations without the necessary educational background and a true understanding of what is required for fulfilling their educational goals. These students enter college and are quickly discouraged. Resilient students, on the other hand, exhibit a remarkably realistic and practical view of themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and their academic and career goals.

Habitus

Harker, Maher, and Wilkes (1990) identified habitus as the essence of the psychosocial dynamics of the resilient student. Habitus refers to the specific way an individual responds to a particular sociopolitical system. The habitus of resilient students requires inordinate amounts of consciousness, creative problem solving, emotional management, and steadfastness.

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Social and cultural capital are two closely related sociological concepts that are helpful in comprehending how discontinuity can manifest itself and result in individuals becoming lost in academia. Coleman (1990) referred to social capital as inside knowledge of how to
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thrive within higher level social systems. This includes familiarity with appropriate linguistic styles, cultural expectations, and knowledge on how to be successful.

Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of cultural capital is that the symbolic wealth that comes with being middle class helps connect benefits to one’s social class. From an academic achievement context, cultural capital consists of those values and experiences common to upper-middle-class cultures that are valuable in formal school settings. Students who do not have cultural capital are not the same as culturally deprived individuals. Marginalized students are not culturally deprived; they have ample culture. However, not all culture is valued in the academic milieu. Nelson et al. (2006, 1) explained:

When children are raised in a system such as a working-poor community, they acquire skills necessary to navigate in that particular environment. However, they probably do not learn the skills necessary to advance into more privileged classes. Indeed, many children from lower and working class backgrounds do not benefit from the type of social capital that most middle-class children have access to—values that encourage children to pursue higher education as a means to a comfortable life.

Pride of Resolve

Resilient students manage to succeed despite lacking the traditional assets associated with academic achievement in the United States. Students who have overcome adversity and managed to succeed reported an overwhelming sense of pride in their accomplishments. The self-images of most of the resilient students interviewed have improved as a result of survival and excellence in the academic contest. As a result, many of these individuals view themselves as leaders and are proud of their achievements and their intellectual acumen. This sense of pride usually centers on their emergence from their groups of origin and their resulting membership in the statistical elite. One student boasted:

I have a pretty good outlook on myself and the world. I am proud of what I have managed to accomplish thus far. When I look in the mirror, I can smile because I know that I am doing it. Not talking about doing it, but doing it. I am a survivor; I haven’t let them beat me down. I’m here and I’m smiling.

Implications for Future Research

Further research focused on understanding the nuances of the inner worlds of resilient students is warranted. To date, this has been a severely under-researched area, in part because it is an onerous and time-consuming process. In-depth and lengthy conversations, as well as multiple follow-ups, must be conducted. The process also is difficult because the students must trust the interviewer implicitly. Building that trust takes well-honed
interpersonal skills, as well as time. Nevertheless, obtaining this data can be extremely valuable for those interested in understanding and encouraging resilience among historically disenfranchised groups.

Some related areas in need of exploration include longitudinal views on resilience, a focus on key transition points, and an investigation into the experiences of other ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural groups. Academic resilience is marked by distance traveled over time. Thus, studies that compare student experiences over time could be extremely useful. Understanding how students experience and evolve throughout the various stages of their academic careers would provide insight into the developmental progression of the resilient psyche and allow for interventions that are stage specific.

Key transition points for academically resilient students exist. For example, many students in this study experienced significant shifts in thought and experience when transitioning from middle to high school, and again when going from high school to college. It would be interesting to know how those transitions were different for marginalized students as compared to others. Studies that examine a longer breadth of resilience, such as Gandara’s (1993) study of graduate school students who had begun their careers, would be helpful so that more transition points could be explored. Identifying and understanding transition points would lend potency to academic enhancement initiatives by targeting developmentally salient phases in students’ lives.

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, a greater number of subpopulations are moving through its educational system. Understanding how members of these groups manage to succeed is essential in promoting academic achievement among a wide variety of Americans and, ultimately, promoting a stable and equitable democracy. Many numerically noteworthy ethnic groups in America (e.g., Arab Americans, Indian Americans, Korean Americans, and Southeast Asians) have received little, if any, attention in educational resilience research. These subpopulations deserve increased attention and understanding.

Implications for Practice
Designing interventions and initiatives that reach potentially resilient students on an affective level requires a deep understanding of their possible and probable emotional states and issues. Knowing how resilient students process their academic journeys can provide educators with an affective supplement to traditional academic support systems provided to at-risk youth. Most attempts to assist marginalized youth with educational achievement are focused on tutoring or remedial class work. Although this cognitive focus is essential,
understanding emotional needs and challenges would allow for skillful implementation of affective support systems in line with students' developmental and transitional needs.

Conclusion

In an attempt to unearth major issues common to the psychological experiences of resilient students, several primary themes emerged including students' responses to stress caused by cultural mismatches, baggage imposed on students by a classist and racist society, and the resulting erosion of individuality and self-esteem. In addition, most students in this study had to grapple with the reality that their precollege educational backgrounds were subpar, leaving them ill-prepared for the academic demands of college.

Although the nuances of these challenges and the corresponding compensatory responses are thoroughly explored in the findings section of this manuscript, an umbrella concept that captures much of what the students exhibited is the notion of emotional intelligence. Goleman (1995, 37) described emotional intelligence as "abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's mood and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope." As the author has discussed in previous work (Morales 2000), emotional intelligence is a core attribute of resilient individuals and is prominently displayed in how these students have coped with the stress inherent in their academic journeys.

In many ways, these students are trailblazers. They have not been given detailed guidebooks or maps for their academic excursions. As a result, they often relied on trial and error and managed the frustration that comes with such a capricious strategy. In the end, however, through skilled management and use of dispositional, environmental, and familial protective factors, they have succeeded when so many others have failed. Perhaps the most valuable and rewarding outcome of this research is that by acting on these findings, future generations of students may not have to rely on guesswork and will receive the strategic support that they deserve.

References

Research Reports


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