

## BUILDING CHILDREN'S RESILIENCE TO PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

Roxana-Gabriela BĂLĂCEANU<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article explores the concept of resilience from a theoretical perspective, analyzing the mechanisms through which individuals manage to respond positively to adversity. Starting from the premise that there is a logical connection between the individual, cultural, and social variables involved in the development of resilience, this article provides a theoretical basis for the process of building resilience. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to provide a theoretical understanding of how resilience develops by understanding both risk and protective factors and relevant theories.

The article makes a theoretical contribution by integrating various perspectives on resilience and emphasizes the importance of approaches that view resilience beyond a simple individual or static attribute, but as a dynamic process, dependent on context, available resources, and how they are accessed.

**Keywords:** resilience, risk factors, protective factors, positive adaptation, psychosocial development.

**Résumé :** Cet article explore le concept de résilience d'un point de vue théorique, en analysant les mécanismes qui permettent aux individus de réagir positivement à l'adversité. Partant du principe qu'il existe un lien logique entre les variables individuelles, culturelles et sociales impliquées dans le développement de la résilience, cet article fournit une base théorique sur le processus de construction de la résilience. L'objectif de l'article est donc d'offrir une compréhension théorique du développement de la résilience, en examinant à la fois les facteurs de risque et les facteurs de protection, ainsi que les théories pertinentes.

Cet article apporte une contribution théorique en intégrant diverses perspectives sur la résilience et souligne l'importance des approches qui considèrent la résilience non seulement comme un simple attribut individuel ou statique, mais comme un processus dynamique, dépendant du contexte, des ressources disponibles et de la manière dont celles-ci sont accessibles.

**Mots-clés :** résilience, facteurs de risque, facteurs de protection, adaptation positive, développement psychosocial.

**Rezumat.** Acest articol explorează conceptul de reziliență dintr-o perspectivă teoretică, analizând mecanismele prin care indivizii reușesc să răspundă pozitiv la adversitate. Pornind de la premisa că există o legătură logică între variabilele individuale, culturale și

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania, e-mail: roxana.armanu31@gmail.com

sociale implicate în dezvoltarea rezilienței, acest articol oferă o bază teoretică asupra procesului de construcție a rezilienței. Prin urmare, scopul articolului este de a oferi o înțelegere teoretică a modului în care se dezvoltă reziliența, prin înțelegerea atât a factorilor de risc, cât și a factorilor de protecție și a teoriilor relevante.

Articolul aduce o contribuție teoretică prin integrarea diverselor perspective asupra rezilienței și subliniază importanța abordărilor care privesc reziliența nu doar ca un simplu atribut individual sau static, ci ca un proces dinamic, dependent de context, de resursele disponibile și de modul în care acestea sunt accesate.

**Cuvinte cheie:** reziliență, factori de risc, factori de protecție, adaptare pozitivă, dezvoltare psihosocială.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has faced numerous challenges: natural disasters, wars, economic crises, pandemics, famine, and many others. Despite these adversities, some individuals have found ways to overcome them. This capacity for adaptation and transformation is often reflected in myths, fairy tales, and cultural stories - that emphasize strength, learning, and growth. At the core of these narratives lies the concept of resilience.

Our childhood experiences, the way we are cared for and receive affection, but also the important and perhaps traumatic events we go through, mark and shape us as future adults, both emotionally and socially. It is important how we view these significant events and how we, as a society, manage to diminish the negative effects of risk factors on children. Many children live in environments that affect their well-being and development, from extreme poverty to family abandonment, various forms of abuse, school dropout, or problems with social integration and emotional instability. All of these are often linked, but some children still succeed in adverse conditions, developing resilience mechanisms, applying resilience strategies, and mobilizing both internal and external resources (family, educational, and community).

In this article, I aim to provide a theoretical basis for what resilience is, giving a brief overview of perspectives on resilience – from personality attributes to resilience as a process – discussing the importance of the environment, and presenting some theories that highlight resilience as a process. Last but not least, I will discuss child development in situations of risk and the importance of resilience mechanisms, which we might consider individual, but which are also born out of interaction with the environment.

Hrițuleac and Ceobanu (2015) point out that resilience has been around for as long as it is possible to imagine, even though the formal history of its study is relatively recent. The same author mentions that the decade between 1960 and 1970 represents the beginnings of the study of resilience, when specialists in the field of developmental psychopathology started a series of studies regarding children who could overcome severely unfavourable developmental periods and conditions without severe implications, managing to have a normal or even successful development. In social sciences, resilience is no longer considered merely a fixed

personal trait, but increasingly a dynamical process of adapting positively in the presence of adversity.

In a scientific landscape increasingly concerned with understanding processes of adaptation to uncertainty, transformation, and crisis, the concept of resilience takes on particular relevance. Understanding resilience involves not only defining a trait or outcome, but also exploring a complex, dynamic, and deeply contextualized phenomenon that is also used in various fields and disciplines. It is not just a multidimensional concept, but also a framework for interpretation that varies depending on the theoretical perspective and discipline that approaches it (Bunea, 2017). Childhood is an important stage in the development of the future adult, as the bonds of attachment, the quality of care, and the experiences we have influence and shape us, both socially and emotionally. Therefore, understanding children's needs and providing the necessary support are fundamental to harmonious development.

## **2. Conceptual framework of resilience**

Resilience is a term used in exact sciences like physics and engineering, as well as in psychology and human development, and is widely used as a concept of positive adaptation to challenges. If in physics, resilience refers to „the ability of an object to withstand tension without breaking”, or to „its ability to return to its original shape” following applied tension, such as a spring or an elastic band, resilience in the social sciences has a broader character and different meanings (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). In the social sciences, a definition close to those in the humanities is provided by Masten (2011, p. 494): „Resilience is the ability of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development”. Reich *et al.* (2010, p. 4) believe that resilience is best defined as „the outcome of successful adaptation to adversity” and that person and situational traits can identify resilient processes, but only if they lead to healthier outcomes following stressful circumstances. In psychology, resilience is viewed as a „process of coping in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress” (American Psychological Association, 2014).

Studies in the field of resilience, such as the research conducted by Michael Rutter (1993) on the development of resilience in children, provide a deep understanding of the mechanisms through which individuals and communities can overcome trauma and challenges. Masten (2001) describes resilience using the term „ordinary magic,” emphasizing that it is a common and normative process arising from the typical functioning of human adaptive systems. Therefore, rather than being a rare or extraordinary trait, resilience manifests itself through everyday protective mechanisms that support positive development.

Many specialists lament the absence of a consensus definition of resilience, as the ambiguity of the concept complicates its study. This ambiguity may also be due to the different perspectives on resilience among specialists. Some authors consider resilience as a trait or a characteristic of the individual's personality; others see it as a process that reveals the interaction between the individual and

the environment in which the individual lives, or simply as the result of the absence of mental disorders or the disappearance, faster or not, of these disorders (Ionescu, 2013). Since there are several meanings of the concept of resilience, and it has also been developed and researched in several fields, Hrițuleac & Ceobanu (2015, p. 14) concludes that „resilience can be conceptualized both as a trait and as a process, both as a response to the stress of trauma and as a process that mediates the response to stress and trauma”. Highlighting resilience as a process, Ungar (2012) states that resilience is described as a set of behaviours that manifest over time, emphasizing the interactions between individuals and their environment, particularly the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible.

Resilience is not an extraordinary individual trait that some people have, and others simply lack; rather, it is the end product of complex developmental processes involving common, positive factors that help groups of people avoid the negative implications of risk in their lives (Cutuli & Herbers, 2018). Also, Pânișoară (2024, p. 23) argues that resilience is more than an acquired personal trait or an individual characteristic of daily survival and asserts that resilience „represents a way of life that involves development, learning, psychological recovery, and adaptation following the experiences we go through, especially following failures, losses, and traumas encountered”.

### **3. Risk and protective factors in understanding resilience**

The concept of resilience is closely related to terms such as risk factors, protective factors, and vulnerability (Hanewald, 2011). Without reference to these concepts, it is not possible to understand the complex interplay of dynamics that determine children's outcomes over sustained periods of time. Risk and protective factors are characteristics of individuals, their families and communities, or the environment that either increase (the case of protective factors) or decrease (risk factors) the likelihood of a young person being resilient (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014).

#### **3.1. Risk factors**

Risk factors can be found at the individual, family, or community level and represent a context, experience, condition, adversity, or even an individual characteristic that increases the likelihood that a person will experience a form of maladaptive maladjustment (Carr, 2009, p. 395). Barankin and Khanlou (2014) categorize individual risk factors as including genetic vulnerability to substance use, mental health problems, physical health issues, low self-esteem, learning disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, poor nutrition, academic failure, difficult temperament, poor impulse control, and exposure to unsafe physical environments such as pollution and violence. Parental divorce, mental illness among parents or alcohol and substance abuse can be examples of family risk factors. Community-level risk factors may include factors such as violence in the community, high poverty, and the presence of multiple outlets selling alcohol to minors (Carr, 2009, p. 395).

In studying resilience, difficulties arise related to sampling, measurement, or the lack of universally applicable factors, as people respond differently to the same situations. A risk factor can have different effects depending on the moment and the individual context – for example, a particular child may be affected by the death of their father in one way, while the total absence of an abusive father may affect them differently, sometimes even protecting the child. Because resilience only emerges in the presence of risk, and definitions of risk are often ambiguous, this complicates a clear understanding of resilience (Ungar, 2004).

### **3.2. Protective factors**

In essence, protective factors help to protect children and young people from the negative effects of risk factors (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014). Protective factors can also be found at the level of the individual's personality, family, or community, and reduce the likelihood that a person who has experienced serious risk situations will develop problems. These protective factors can also increase the chances of positive adaptation. Protective factors contribute to a child's positive adaptation either by promoting their competencies or by decreasing the child's exposure to risks. It is important to note that a protective factor is not something that simply produces good outcomes overall, but instead reduces the effects of a risk factor (Carr, 2009, p. 395).

According to Barankin and Khanlou (2014), protective factors at the individual level include good adaptability and flexibility, a calm and adaptable temperament, a sense of humour, strong problem-solving and decision-making skills, social and communication skills, assertiveness, empathy, high intelligence, and optimism characterized by a sense of hope, purpose, and direction. Additional protective factors encompass involvement in helping others, conflict resolution abilities, good health, talents and creativity, self-discipline, as well as engagement in hobbies and interests. There are endless lists of individual qualities or characteristics of resilient people, but it has been concluded that, in addition to character and personality properties, „environmental factors, educational climate, delegation of responsibility, and the intervention of a sense of belonging also play a role” (Berndt, 2014).

Thus, important protective factors at the family level include attachment, communication, family structure, the quality of the relationship between parents, parenting style, sibling relationships, parental health, and support networks outside the family (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014). At the community level, school-related factors are among the most common non-familial protective factors in the development of vulnerable children and young people (Cefai, 2007). Resilience is about the connections we create, which is why resilience has also become an important notion for school staff (Berndt, 2014). School, both as a socializing factor and through the aims of education, can play a significant role in the process of resilience.

An important protective factor of resilience is the individual's relationship with the parent or other significant adult, concretized in the secure attachment

style. Barankin & Khanlou, (2014) state that to be resilient, young people need a strong and positive emotional attachment to a loving and caring adult throughout childhood and adolescence. In some situations, parents are absent from their children's lives, and the role of attachment figure can be taken on by another person who is important to the child – a member of the extended family, a family friend, a neighbour, etc. Attachment theory and the implications of secure attachment in building resilience are being discussed by many experts. The parent-child attachment relationship can increase coping skills important in resilience, such as optimism, self-esteem, trust in others, ability to develop social relationships. At the same time, secure attachment allows the development of an efficient nervous system following trauma, and psychologically, attachment has implications in regulating stress or developing attention mechanisms (Mighiu, Benga & Muntean, 2009).

Berndt (2014) emphasizes the idea of a shared play between personality and environment, as the sense of belonging to society, along with confidence in one's personal value and importance, as well as in one's own actions, combined with pursuing a higher life purpose, are described as positive factors that help people better face challenges.

### **3.3. Positive adaptation**

In addition to risk and protective factors, Carr (2009) also talks about the term positive adaptation, which is closely related to resilience. According to the author, positive adaptation consists of the emergence of psycho-social development outcomes that are visibly better than expected for a child exposed to certain risk factors. For example, pupils who attend low-performing schools in deprived neighbourhoods may be at risk of poor educational outcomes or developing deviant behaviours. If students achieve good educational outcomes and develop prosocial behaviours even in such circumstances, they are considered to have positive adaptation (Carr, 2009).

Risk and protective factors change depending on context and can lead to different outcomes (Walsh, 2003). Therefore, an important point to note, which also links with theories that attempt to explain resilience, is that risk and protective factors do not occur in a vacuum, nor do they exist independently of each other (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014).

Definitions of resilience have varied over time, and more recent studies provide evidence that reinforces the understanding of resilience as a dynamic process and highlights the importance of existing resources in an individual's environment and their mobilization in the process of building resilience.

## **4. Theories of resilience**

Resilience theory provides researchers and practitioners with a conceptual model for understanding how children and young people overcome adversity and how this knowledge can be used to enhance strengths and build positive characteristics in themselves (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). There are a number of

theories that explain resilience, including attachment theory, ecological theory, and constructivist theories. These three theories were selected because they emphasize resilience as a continuous and dynamic process, highlighting the relationship between the individual and the environment in which they live:

*a. Attachment Theory*

The term attachment is a complex term with a long history, and has been addressed mainly in the field of developmental psychology and psychiatry. Considered the father of attachment theory, John Bowlby conducted a series of important studies on orphaned children. Bowlby (1997) speaks of attachment as „any form of behaviour that results in closeness to a person” or maintaining a closeness to a preferred person. Ainsworth, on the other hand, is another important name in conceptualizing attachment theory. She, together with her collaborators, investigated, through the experiment known as the „*stranger situation*” (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978), how children attach. They were supervised and observed to see how they react in the presence or absence of their caregiver. Thus, four major types of attachment have been theorized: secure, insecure or avoidant, ambivalent (resistant), and disorganized (insecure). Therefore, from Bowlby onwards, we have been well educated about the importance of attachment and how a child bonds with their primary caregiver in the early months.

The benefits of secure attachment, as well as the harms of insecure (anxious) attachment, have an effect on both the child and the future adult as they are passed on. Secure attachment, however, is not a total guarantee of success in risky situations (Bunea, 2017, pp. 68-69). It may remain only a protective factor, which may not be strong enough to counteract the effects of risk factors.

*b. Ecological theory*

Research on resilience, which originated in developmental psychology and psychiatry, has focused primarily on individual factors, without paying particular attention to environmental factors. Thus, while the ecosystemic perspective is an old theme in the social work literature, it is relatively newer in terms of resilience research (Waller, 2001). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) was the first to suggest that children's development occurs within an ecological framework. Subsequently, other authors and researchers have also noted and emphasized the importance of the environment in building resilience: „I suggest that to take full account of the processes associated with resilience, we need to shift our focus. There is evidence that resilience is less an individual trait and more a quality of a child's social and physical ecology. This ecological understanding of resilience has the potential to solve both definitional and measurement problems” (Ungar, 2011, p. 1).

Ecological theories have represented a paradigm change, shifting from seeing resilience as exclusively the result of individual abilities to resilience as a process, dependent on environmental factors. They shift the concern from the individual to the social structure and focus on how the environment influences the individual to adopt certain behaviours and paths in life at the expense of others. Within ecological theories, the interest of theorists is centered on the components

of the social system of which the individual is a part, and less on the personal characteristics that the individual may possess, and attempts are made to describe a „real child living in real environments” (Bunea, 2017, p. 72).

Furthermore, resilience is not an individual personality trait. Considering the individual-environment relationship is bidirectional, people influence adverse life situations and are also influenced by them. At different times, people may react very differently to identical or similar stressors. Likewise, a particular person may be resilient in response to one adverse life event but vulnerable in relation to another (Waller, 2001). Ungar (2008, p. 2025) offers a definition of resilience that emphasizes the interaction between the individual and the environment: „In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience represents both the capacity of individuals to turn to resources that maintain their health, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these resources and health experiences in culturally meaningful ways”.

### *c. Constructionist theories*

The constructionist perspective holds that social reality is not the same for everyone, but is a social construct. According to constructionism, just as wellbeing and illness are defined by society by creating languages for everyone, so can resilience be defined. Therefore, just as we can speak of a social construct of health and illness, so we can speak of several interpretations of resilience and its components, depending on the context. Moreover, from this perspective, resilience does not only consist of socially defined and accepted positive outcomes (adaptation, well-being, competence), but also of the criteria taken into account or defined by the risk group. In other words, it is the group that defines the positive outcomes, in its own terms (Bunea, 2017).

Ungar (2004b) defines resilience from a constructionist perspective as „the outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy”. Resilience is no longer approached as a psychological trait, but instead as a narrative and relational process constructed by people through interactions with their family, community, school, and various other local institutions. From a social constructionist perspective, resilience can be understood as a construct that depends strongly on a situation that includes the individual's culture and the society or community to which they belong, as well as the specific context in which the concept is used. Therefore, resilience, as a social construct, would be highly dependent on the beliefs and worldviews of the individual or group being described and would explain why so many characteristics are used to define resilience (Aburn, Gott & Hoare, 2016).

## **5. Child development and resilience**

Risk is the likelihood of an event or course of action, usually undesired by the subject (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993). Children who succeed despite adversity have been identified as resilient, possessing certain strengths and benefiting from

protective factors that help them overcome adverse conditions and thrive (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

Resilience research shows that in early childhood, it's essential for kids to have good care and quality learning experiences, proper nutrition, and support from the community for families to help them develop positive cognitive, social, and self-regulation skills. Masten & Gewirtz (2006) speak of young children who have healthy attachment relationships and good internal coping resources as having a high chance of having a good start in life, being well equipped with the human and social capital needed to be successful when entering school and society. Typically, these children demonstrate resilience in the face of risk, and their core protective skills and relationships continue to function and develop. The most profound threats to infants and young children arise when the fundamental developmental protection systems are impaired or compromised. During early childhood, children need to have protection, secure attachment relationships with loving and competent caregivers, as well as appropriate stimulation and care. These aspects are essential for the healthy development of the brain, providing opportunities to acquire new skills and experience self-confidence, as well as learning to set boundaries and develop self-control. Importantly, these early experiences lay the foundation for resilience in later stages of life. The quality of care and support received during childhood significantly influences how youth cope with challenges and adapt during adolescence and beyond.

Barankin and Khanlou (2014), in their book *Growing Up Resilient: Ways to Build Resilience in Children and Youth*, employ a metaphor comparing young people to trees of various shapes and sizes that grow across diverse environments worldwide. Thus, in the authors' view, families represent the fertile soil and water that nourish the roots of trees, while neighbours, schools, the community, and society as a whole function as sunlight, rainfall, and interactive wildlife. Variations in tree characteristics, soil quality, and weather conditions (such as sunlight and rainfall) influence tree health and growth. Similarly, individual traits of youth, alongside familial and environmental factors, impact their development and well-being positively or negatively. Just as trees progress through developmental stages from saplings to maturity, children traverse critical developmental phases that shape their future outcomes. Resilient youth are those who grow and thrive when supportive systems – familial and ecological – collaborate effectively, enhancing their capacity to overcome adversities and achieve healthy development.

Risk and adversity, by their very definition, conjure up thoughts of something bad, often being mentally correlated with the occurrence of negative outcomes when present. However, despite this, some theoretical approaches talk about the fact that a certain level of adversity, in moderate amounts, can lead to positive outcomes (Bunea, 2017, p. 41). Resilient people can cope more easily with stress and difficult situations in life. They can learn from unpleasant experiences, grow, and become more capable and stronger. Rather than simply bouncing back,

we are better prepared than we were before to face the challenges ahead (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014, p. 15).

The individual is a social being, and from birth develops within a specific social framework and historical context. For infants, the immediate social context is normally the family, and the family in turn is broadly influenced by the physical environment – , the community, and society in general (Papalia & Olds, 2000, p. 10). Nowadays, resilience is seen more as a process in which social and family variables intervene in addition to individual ones; therefore, we cannot say that resilience is only a characteristic of the individual (Bunea, 2017). However, it should be noted that there are generally a number of traits of resilient individuals. The identifying characteristics of resilient children and youth are summarized throughout the literature as: social competence, problem-solving skills, mastery, self-reliance, and a sense of purpose and future (Hanewald, 2011).

Strictly individual, psychological qualities and characteristics are a necessary but not sufficient category of protective factors. According to Cyrulnik (2005, p. 36), for example, even the intelligence of a resilient child is fundamentally relational. He emphasizes that individual characteristics alone are insufficient for resilience; the presence of supportive relationships is essential. Without people around the child, there is little motivation or context for the child to invest effort in learning and adaptation. This view emphasizes the essential role that social connections and the environment with which the individual interacts play in cultivating resilience, going beyond innate personal traits. A broader framework of resilience could include protective mechanisms (resources, competences, talents, and skills) that are found at the individual level (individual-level factors), within the family and peer network (social-level factors), and within the whole school and community environment (societal-level factors) (Olsson *et al.*, 2003).

Resilience is not just a personal characteristic, a property, or a sum of character attributes, since, in addition to individual factors, environmental factors are also involved in the formation of mental resilience and „a personality, however strong it may be, does not survive in a hostile environment” (Berndt, 2014, p. 60). Bunea (2017) also concludes, while emphasizing the importance of the environment in building resilience, that whatever qualities a person has, if they are in a totally hostile environment lacking resources and opportunities, those qualities fail to lead to resilience. It has been shown that a child can cope better in certain difficult situations if their creative spirit is nurtured, but in an environment that totally denies them the use of their imagination, this skill can be completely useless, even when properly implanted. When we think of resilience as a process, we are talking about an organism actively interacting with an environment (Southwick *et al.*, 2013).

## **Conclusions**

Theories that emphasize the exclusive abilities of the resilient individual have long been influential in the study of resilience, but a paradigm shift is now needed to place the individual in an environment where a mutually influential

relationship is created and where appropriate resources can be identified that can foster resilience.

Resilience is the outcome of the interaction between the environment and social and family relationships, to which personality and specific individual characteristics are added. I believe that these resources cannot exist independently of each other; only their prevalence may differ. Thus, a supportive environment does not guarantee the building of resilience, just as a strong personality does not guarantee balance and resilience if the environment is hostile. At the same time, the human resources involved in the life of any individual leave their mark depending on the circumstances in which the individual finds themselves, as well as on the individual themselves and their willingness to access them.

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