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Article 22

Reaching Resilience: Protective Factors and Adult Children of Divorce

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Resilience in Adult Children of Divorce

The U.S. Census Bureau (Fields, 2003) reported that the rate of divorce among couples with children grew from 1970 to 2003, resulting in traditional family households declining from 81% to 68% of all households. Thus, today most Americans have been impacted in some way by parental divorce, their own divorce, or both. Many clients and supervisees have experienced parental divorce, and supervisors need to know how best to help them cope. In 2004, 1.1 million children lived with a parent who had experienced a divorce in the last year (Kreider, 2007). Children of divorce – even as adults – are documented to have poorer outcomes than their counterparts from intact families including more distress (McIntyre, Heron, McIntyre, Burton & Engler, 2003), more conflict with parents (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005), lower expectations for a successful marriage (Kirk, 2002), and poorer academic performance (Mulholland, Watt, Philpott, & Sarlin, 1991). Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella (1998) reported that children from intact families have a 10% risk rate, while children from divorced families have a 25% risk rate, a two and a half fold increase. Yet, the authors asserted that while the increased risk is very real and present, 75% of children of divorce do not demonstrate poorer levels of functioning. Indeed, some have even been enhanced by parental divorce and develop improved coping skills (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; McIntyre, et al., 2003; Abbey & Dallos, 2004)

Reaching Resilience Study

The *Reaching Resilience* study explored the protective factors related to the resilience of young adult children of divorce. Using Richardson's Resilience Model (Figure 1) to frame the study, the author examined the protective factors identified by the participants within the categories of individual, family, and community protective factors.

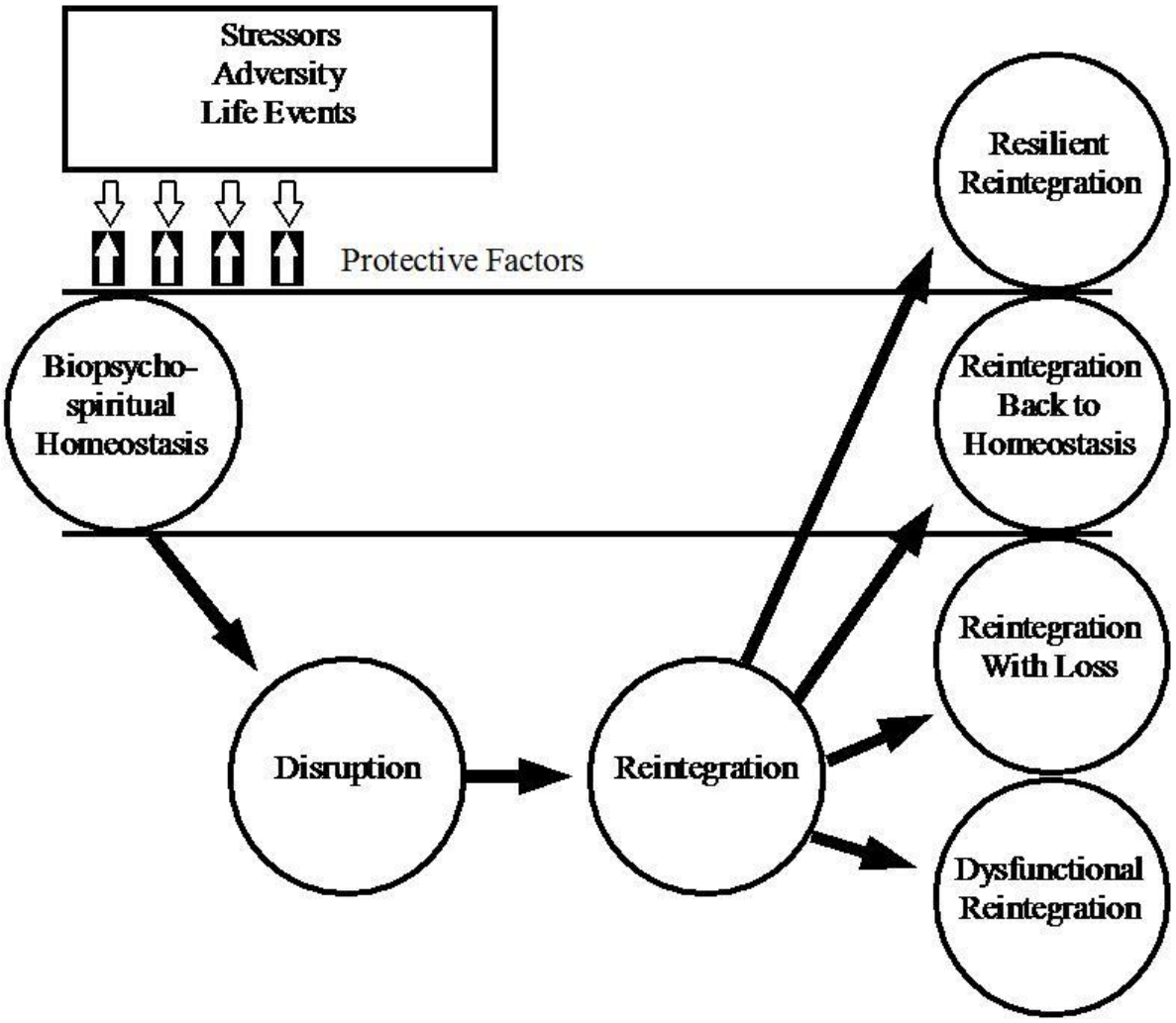

Figure 1: Richardson's Resilience Model (Richardson, 2002)

According to the model, a person began at a state of physical, mental and spiritual homeostasis. Then, a disruption occurred, which in this study would be parental divorce. After the disruption, the person reintegrated in one of four ways: dysfunctional, with loss, back to homeostasis, or resilient. This study specifically researched resilient reintegration and the protective factors that contributed to it (Figure 2).

Resilience has been defined in many ways. One definition described resilience as skills, attributes, and abilities that enabled individuals to adapt to hardships, difficulties, and challenges (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Another author defined it as doing well despite adversity (Patterson, 2002). For this study, resilience was defined as bouncing back with a general overall positive adaptation from parental divorce transition, both the event and the process. According to this definition and the Richardson model, resilience requires two things: adversity and functioning better than before.

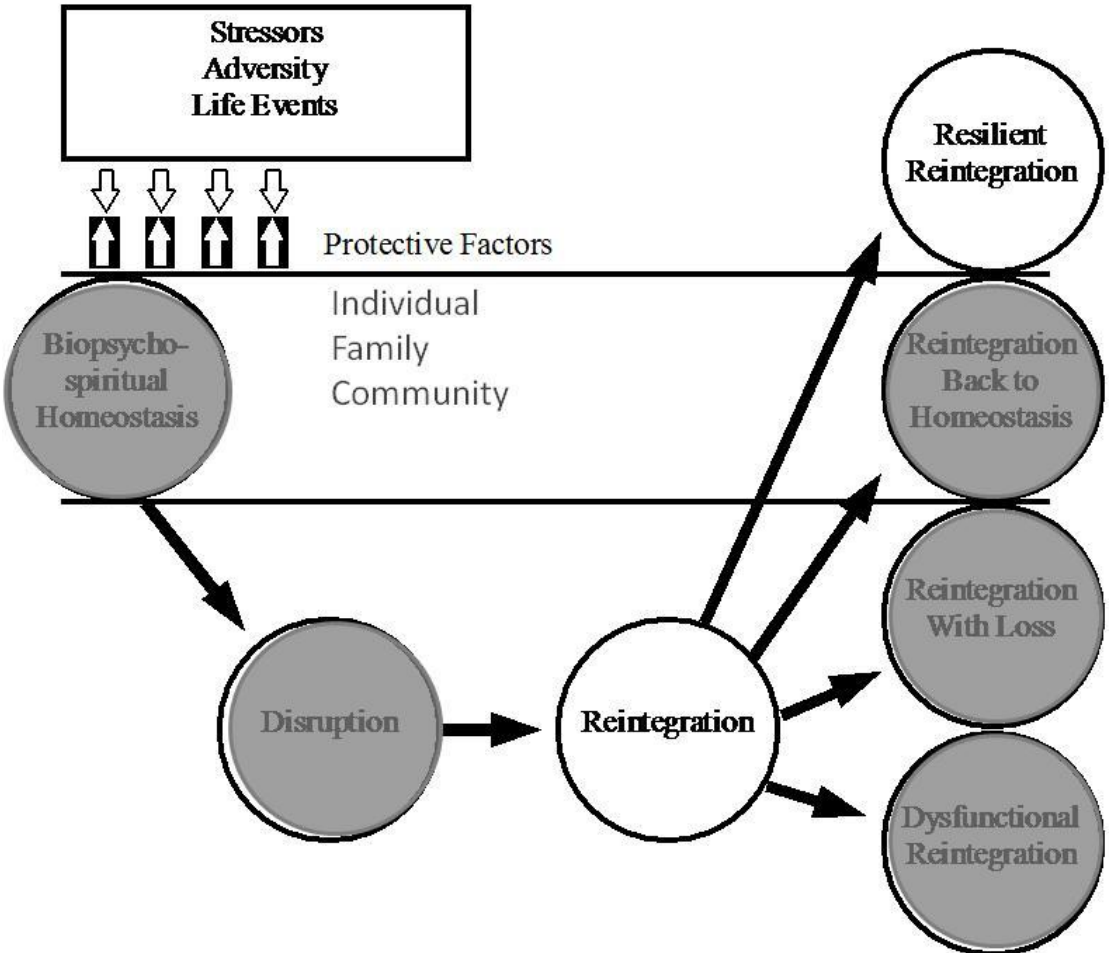

Figure 2: Portion of Richardson's Model Used and Expanded in Current Study

Methodology

Yin (1994) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. Resilience, although not necessarily a contemporary phenomenon, is a contemporary focus of research. The three categories of protective factors, then, are the boundaries between the phenomenon of resilience and the context of parental divorce. By using a multiple case study methodology, the author had a means for investigating complex social units resulting in a rich, holistic account of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). It honored multiple realities and emphasized a holistic treatment of a phenomenon, away from cause and effect explanation and toward personal interpretation (Stake, 1995).

Participants

Students enrolled in freshman level First Year Studies or English classes were given the Demographic Survey # 1 and a resilience assessment to complete as a screening

tool to determine those who met inclusion criteria. The criteria included: a) parental divorce in the last 12 years; b) scores indicating resilience on the Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment; c) aged 18-19; d) enrollment in a First Year Studies class in the spring semester of 2009 or ENG 101 in the summer semester of 2009; and e) willingness to participate in the study. Of the five students selected to participate, three were males and two were females.

Data

Three forms of data were collected and analyzed for individual and across case themes. The first type of data was a demographic survey (also used to determine which students met the inclusion criteria). Two survey questions used in the data analysis were, "What are three words that describe your parents' divorce for you?" and "How would you rate yourself after the divorce?" A second survey was later given to the five students selected to be participants. It asked the participants to describe themselves, their parents' divorce, and the difference between themselves and other children of divorce.

Second, the researcher interviewed each participant, using a transcription of the interview for data. The interviews followed a protocol based on the following two questions: 1) Some people have a hard time after their parents divorce, and some people bounce back. They are more resilient. How would you describe your experience of resilience? 2) After their parents divorce some people have a hard time and some people bounce back. How did you bounce back? What things helped you bounce back? What made you different from those who do not bounce back?

Third, participants drew two pictures, one of divorce and one of resilience, in order to quickly establish a relaxed rapport between the researcher and participant and access their hidden resources of explaining their experience. Before the interview they were asked to, "Please draw a picture of divorce," and explain their work as they drew. After the interview, they were asked to, "Please draw a picture of resilience," and explain their work.

Findings

Protective factors were categorized into three groups: individual, family, and community. Individual protective factors included character traits, personal strategies, and individual abilities that helped the participants to be resilient. Family protective factors included both immediate and extended family members. Within the community, participants identified friends and activities as community protective factors.

In this study, participants identified two dominant cognitive strategies as individual protective factors that contributed to their experiences of resilience. Avoidance helped them cope with the acute stress and intense emotion of their parents' divorce through personal activities such as reading, journaling, and videogames. One participant said, "When I was reading, I wouldn't be thinking about what was going on." This kept their minds busy and not thinking about the divorce. Reframing was another cognitive strategy that was protective. Participants simultaneously acknowledged the painful aspects of their parents' divorce, but they were able also to reframe their perspective to see how it benefited and improved them. This was supported in the cognitive coping literature. For example, a study with Japanese university freshmen found that coping by

cognitive reinterpretation and problem solving was indicative of better health and suggested that encouraging freshmen to use the two strategies in stress coping at early time points in their campus experience could promote better future adaptation (Sasaki & Yamasaki, 2007). Another longitudinal adolescent/early adult study also examined the factors of avoidance and reframing. The researchers found that the cognitive coping strategy of positive reappraisal was used most often during transition and role strain events, and avoidance during interpersonal stressors (Harnish, Aseltine, & Gore, 2000). They reported that avoidance coping was effective in resolving the stressor early on in the course of the stressor, and active behavioral coping, positive reappraisal, and use of social support were most effective later in the course of the stressful experience. Their results lent support to this study's findings that coping effectiveness, and therefore coping strategies, varied as the divorce event progressed. For children of divorce, escapism strategies when emotions were raw early in the process may not have been about resolution, but more about coping with the crisis, so they were helpful initially. However, reframing was a better long-term strategy in those who were resilient.

Family protective factors also contributed to resilience. Participants identified mothers, brothers (only one had a sister, who was younger and lived in another state), aunts, uncles, and grandmothers as buffers from the parental divorce disruption. A notable exception was that all participants omitted fathers as protective factors. Four of the participants mostly blamed the fathers for the divorce, which could contribute to not seeing them as protective factors. They also believed that their fathers had "moved on," some with new marriages and children, leaving the participants behind. As one participant said, "He lives there [in a different state] now. He have a wife and three-year-old son, so he move along… he don't wanna deal with us anymore." The literature on divorced fathers helped explain the finding. For example, the social idea that divorce is responsible for the breakdown of family values may contribute to divorced fathers not believing that they can continue to be part of a family that was not consistent with that social construction (Bailey, 2007). Bokker (2006) also found support for divorced fathers' role confusion in a review of the literature on factors that influence the relationships between fathers and their children.

Community protective factors identified by the participants included the multitude of relationships spanning from intimate friendships to teammate relationships to relationships with trusted adults to work relationships to acquaintances. The findings of this study also suggested gender differences in the types of friendships that the participants sought. The female participants found relationships that provided emotional support, and the males found relationships that provided social engagement. They all described high involvement in activities, and that involvement meant more than showing up. They were actively involved and became leaders. Again, gender differences between participants surfaced. The women described involvement and leadership in many activities: academic, band, volunteering, work, etc. The men identified one sport (a different sport for each one) that they played extensively, both in school and on community leagues. They found it helpful because by focusing on the game, they were not thinking about the divorce. Scales, Benson, and Mannes (2006) found greater community involvement was related to more engagement with nonfamily adults; higher levels of the positive developmental processes of support, empowerment, and boundary

setting; lower levels of risk behaviors; and higher levels of thriving, supporting this finding.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors

Protective factors can be divided into three categories: individual, family, and community. Based on the findings of this study, the following implications for counselor educators and counseling student supervisors working with adult children of divorce are offered.

1) The perception of the disruption is important. Therefore, encourage critical thinking, challenge faulty thinking, and foster multiple viewpoints. The goal is to move the students and supervisees from viewing the disruption as a negative event towards a more positive view of a difficult, yet beneficial event.
2) Avoidance and reframing are protective cognitive strategies. Avoidance works best with immediate, acute stress and activities such as journaling, reading, and things that occupy the mind could be helpful. Reframing is a better long-term solution, especially with chronic stress.
3) Changing relationships affect students and clients profoundly. Be aware of changes in significant relationships such as divorce, moving, leaving social supports in another city, etc. Facilitating encouraging mentor or cohort relationships may boost resilience.
4) In this study, fathers were not protective factors. Recognize that some relationships are more protective than others. Encourage potentially protective relationships and stay alert for relationships that may provide more risk.
5) Community involvement helped the participants develop multiple kinds of relationships, good friends, and become highly involved. Within academia, these can be fostered through research groups, planning committees, consultants, and group work. Outside academia, encourage student leadership in professional organizations, community events, and volunteer opportunities.
6) Gender influenced activity choices and quantity. Mentor opportunities and recognizing special talents may be protective and contribute to resilience. Facilitating opportunities for involvement may help with acute stress, but be aware that women may have a tendency to over commit.

Areas for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several areas for future research. Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) in their 25-year landmark study have documented the changing effects of divorce on children as they grow older. More research is needed to examine how influential protective factors change during the lifespan in children of divorce. Also, more research is needed to determine the effects of avoidance strategies long-term. Examining protective factors that contribute to resilience among the population of students and supervisees is also needed. More empirical studies scrutinizing protective factors are necessary. In addition, more qualitative research on resilience in

children of divorce is needed. Resilience, protective factors, and children of divorce are all areas that still need rigorous research.

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