

RESILIENCE IN ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS: FACILITATING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE

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Resilience theory applied to adult women students returning to college carries implications for the academic achievement and persistence of this growing segment of the college student population. A recent study identified the dispositional qualities that enabled adult women students to develop the resilience to achieve academic success in higher education as well as the participants' perceptions of the processes necessary to develop those qualities. The implications of the study focused on the facilitation of student responsibility for academic achievement and persistence in relation to institutional retention

Walk into a college or university classroom almost anywhere in the United States today, and you'll probably see at least a few students in their thirties or forties seated among younger ones. Adult students, those 25 and older, have been an increasing presence on college and university campuses since the 1970s. In 1998, adult students comprised 42% of total higher education enrollment; projections to the year 2010 predict an increase of 11% to 6.8 million adult students (NCES, 2000). Many adults of the "baby boom" generation, those born between 1946 and 1964, delayed postsecondary education until adulthood when increased competition in the workforce, increasing technology, and greater economic and social instability compelled them to seek higher education (Cross, 1981; Daloz, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As the perception that only young people go to college diminishes and the concept of life-long learning gains acceptance, adults will continue to be a significant proportion of the college student population.

Of all adult students in higher education, women constitute the fastest growing segment (Daloz, 1999; Harris & Brooks, 1998; Mercer, 1993), reflecting the cultural changes in American society over the past three decades as opportunities for women have expanded. The number of all women in higher education first exceeded that of men in 1979 (NCES, 2000), and by 2010 their enrollment is projected to increase

to 10.2 million, resulting in women constituting 58% of total college enrollment (NCES, 2000). Adult women students in particular, those 25 and older, are expected to comprise 24.3% of total enrollment (NCES, 2000).

Consistent with recommendations for contextual resilience research (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996; Luthar & Cushing, 1999; Masten, 1999), a study conducted in 2002 focused on adult women students in higher education in order to identify, describe, and analyze the factors and processes contributing to resilience. In response to the challenge to "delineate how potential assets or protective systems work for whom under which conditions" (Masten, 1999, p. 291), the study reported here focused specifically on the development of resilience in adult women students. The personal narratives of the participants provided descriptions of the obstacles they faced, the qualities they perceived themselves as possessing or developing in order to overcome those obstacles, and their perceptions of resilience.

RESILIENCE AS A RESPONSE TO DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS IN ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS

Entering higher education certainly compels women to take on significant risks. They must often overcome unique personal and societal

barriers, as well as institutional barriers, in order to succeed in higher education (Breese & O'Toole, 1994; Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985; Harris & Brooks, 1998; Mercer, 1993). In their new roles as students, particularly if they attend only part-time, adult women students often feel disconnected; because of family and work responsibilities, they have fewer opportunities to interact with other students and are therefore less likely to be involved socially or academically in college. In addition, they may feel self-conscious among their 18- to 22-year old classmates. Adult women students often experience dispositional barriers such as fear of change, a lack of commitment and self-confidence, and even guilt about doing something for themselves rather than for others (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Harris & Brooks, 1998; MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994).

Adult undergraduate women accomplish their educational goals if they possess—or find ways to develop—the qualities that enable them to overcome life-changing circumstances and the dispositional barriers to higher education. A combination of such qualities, often referred to as protective factors, can generate resilience, what Garmezy (1974, 1993) identifies as “manifest competence” despite exposure to significant stressors, whether great or cumulative. Two factors appear to be central to the definition of resilience—risk or adversity, and positive adaptation or competence. Among adult women in higher education, the first factor, risk or adversity, exists within the circumstances of the individual's return to education, both the events that precipitated the change and the obstacles she encounters upon returning; and the second factor, positive adaptation or competence, appears as academic achievement, persistence, and successful completion. The intervening protective factors that enable the adult student to overcome adversity in order to achieve positive adaptation are the focus of current research in resilience.

Much of the research and theory on adult learners in higher education has focused on institutional and situational barriers and how colleges and universities must change in order to minimize these barriers for adult students (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Astin, 1993; Bean & Metzner,

1985; Cross, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Tinto, 1993). However, a woman's negative self-perceptions and attitudes can pose a significant threat to her educational goals regardless of the changes that colleges and universities might implement. Thus, it is important to examine how adult students overcome dispositional barriers and develop the resilience that leads to successful academic achievement and persistence. If the protective factors and processes contributing to resilience in adult women students can be determined, then intervention to foster resilience in others entering higher education may follow.

Many adult students, particularly those from families in which neither parent has earned a college degree, may lack what Bourdieu (1977) termed cultural capital, the accumulation of knowledge of higher education that facilitates academic decision-making and adjustment to college. They often feel a sense of impostership because of the socialized perception that college is only for the young and/or very intelligent people (Brookfield, 1999; Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985; Cross, 1981; LePage-Lees, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Brookfield (1999) explained that “[i]mpostership is the sense reported by adult students that at some deeply embedded level they possess neither the talent nor the right to become college students. Students who feel like imposters imagine that they are constantly on the verge of being found out to be too dumb and unprepared for college-level learning” (p. 11). Consequently, many adult students feel marginalized in the collegiate environment. Self-consciously perceiving themselves as out of place in the youth-oriented campus life, they retreat into isolation and resist asking for assistance in making the transition to college. Such dispositional barriers become significant obstacles to an adult student's ability to persist and achieve academically.

Women are more likely than men to experience poor self-esteem and low confidence levels as well as guilt over placing a priority on college at the financial and emotional expense of their families (Astin & Kent, 1983). Some adult women express the fear that they might have gained admittance to college “through a

flake" (Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985), particularly if negative past educational experiences limit their self-confidence (Campbell, 1998). Family obligations can obstruct educational success as well. Tinto (1993) found that being married, although "generally associated with higher rates of persistence among men, . . . is often related to lower rates of completion among women" (pp. 64-65), a finding he attributes to the family responsibilities and work schedules that render women students less likely to interact with the college community. A priority on family responsibilities may cause women students to slow their progress or even to sacrifice their studies if their conflicting commitments demand a choice. If an adult woman student achieves success, she might also face the risk that her achievements can represent a threat to a spouse or partner.

Resilience, as a response that contributes to successful adaptation, can enable women to overcome dispositional barriers to academic achievement and persistence. A greater understanding of the protective factors that lead to the development of resilience can help adult women students to set and achieve higher educational goals.

The primary purpose of research in resilience has been to change one focus in the social and behavioral sciences from "a concern with individual deficit and pathology to an examination of individual and community strengths" (Benard, 1999, p. 269). Where the focus was once on studying risk factors and deviance, attention has been shifting to the positive, protective, and beneficial characteristics and influences which enable people to overcome adversity and its detrimental influences (Garmezy, 1974; Kumpfer, 1999; Masten, 1994, Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1987). Resilience is not a personality trait; rather, it is concerned with individual variations in response to risk under specific circumstances and appears to be characterized by a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence, a belief in one's self-efficacy and ability to adapt, and a repertoire of problem-solving skills (Rutter, 1987).

Contributing to the development of resilience are protective factors, individual and interpersonal competencies and resources that ameliorate

or buffer responses to adversity (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996; Garmezy, 1993; Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Johnson, 1999). In addition to external mechanisms, such as family cohesion and supportive relationships, research has identified a common core of dispositional attributes, including a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence, a belief in one's ability to deal with change and adaptation, and problem-solving abilities and positive responsiveness to others (Garmezy, 1993; Rutter, 1985; Werner, 1987). Resilience does not develop in the absence of risk or stress but rather in successful engagement with it, that is, "in encountering stress at a time and in a way that allows self-confidence and social competence to increase through mastery and appropriate responsibility" (Rutter, 1985, p. 608).

METHODOLOGY

The study of resilience in adult women students utilized a multimethod design to determine the degree of conformity between qualitative findings obtained through personal interviews and two quantitative measures of the adult woman student's disposition toward persisting in higher education: the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1987) and the Adult Persistence in Learning (APIL) Scale (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1992). The Resilience Scale measures two dominant protective factors, personal competence and acceptance of self and life, thought to contribute to resilience in adults. The APIL Scale measures factors from the Adult Persistence in Learning model (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1991), formulated to measure self-awareness, a willingness to delay gratification, clear career and life goals, and a sense of interpersonal competence as valuable in the adult student's education.

The Participants

The non-probabilistic, purposive sample consisted of 60 participants, adult women undergraduates, 25 years or older, who attended a public university in South Dakota during the 2001-2002 academic year and met the criteria for successful adaptation in higher education: a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.0,

successful completion of at least 24 semester hours (the equivalent of two full-time semesters), and a self-reported intention to graduate. Of the 60 survey packets mailed to participants, 54 were returned for a response rate of 90%. Interviews held with a representative sample of eleven women provided richer insights into the responses on the scales and also served as a check on reliability. Because the existence of adversity is a necessary prerequisite for determining resilience, those who had overcome significant adversity were selected for interviews. One single mother had attended as a part-time student on a continuous basis for 13 years; two others had cared for terminally ill husbands and then become widowed as young mothers, one with five children; one woman had two children with serious birth defects; another had returned to higher education at age 43 as a mother of three children, two teenagers and pre-teen; another had become disabled while a student. The women selected for the interviews had faced adversity and achieved positive adaptation in spite of it.

The women in the study represented many others who return to higher education in that the majority of the participants were studying education or the social sciences, typical fields for women. This finding was predictable also because their small university, formerly a teachers' college, offered degree programs in limited areas of study. The ages of the participants and the number of years between their initial enrollment and their return to higher education suggested that the women were not constrained by the once traditional notion that higher education is intended only for young people. Nearly a third had begun attending higher education beyond the age of 25; two women had begun higher education beyond the age of 40. More than a quarter had waited six to ten years between initial enrollment and their return to higher education. One woman had waited 26 years to return to college. Over half of participants indicated their current ages as between 25 and 34; another quarter were between 35 and 44. Two-thirds of the participants indicated that they were married or partnered at the time of the survey; eight were divorced; seven were single; three were widowed. Almost three-

quarters of the participants had children at home. Regarding paid employment, one-fifth indicated that they did not work; nearly a third worked 40 or more hours per week. One of the most notable findings from the demographic data was the average grade point average (GPA) of the participants: 3.17 on a 4.0 scale, confirming that adult students tend to achieve high grades (Harris & Brooks, 1998; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

RESULTS

According to their scores on the Resilience Scale, the participants perceived themselves as resilient. The mean RS score ($M = 145.65$, $SD = 13.37$) fell within the bounds of scores in previous studies with adults. Of a possible range of scores of 25 to 175, 100 being neutral, the range of scores of the current study (117 to 168) was comparable to those of other studies. In addition to Wagnild and Young's (1993) findings that higher resilience scores are associated with high morale, life satisfaction, better physical health, and less depression, it appears that higher resilience scores are also associated with academic achievement and persistence.

Within the context of the study, academic achievement and persistence defined successful adaptation, the evidence of resilience; thus, those factors that contributed to resilience in the adult student also contributed to her persistence. Of a maximum possible score of 100 on the Adult Persistence in Learning Scale, the participants scored a mean of 63.41 ($SD = 11.21$), a positive measure of persistence. Their scores on this scale and on the RS resulted in a low but positive correlation ($r = 0.40$); a subsequent test of significance yielded an observed t -value of 3.147 ($df = 52$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a significant correlation. The 0.40 correlation may have been affected by the lack of established reliability of the APIL Scale. A second possible contributing factor to the low correlation may be the wording of the items. All of the items on the Resilience Scale are worded positively, a factor addressed by Wagnild and Young (1993), who considered that the positive wording of all items may create a response set bias. On the other hand, twelve of

twenty items on the APIL Scale are worded negatively. Since participants scored lower on the APIL Scale items than on the Resilience Scale items, it is likely that a response set bias did affect the relationship between the two scales.

Obstacles to Education, Personal Qualities and Perceptions of Resilience

Key to understanding the participants' resilience were the perceptions of the students themselves regarding their obstacles, the qualities they perceive themselves as possessing in order to overcome obstacles, and their perceptions of what constitutes resilience and how it can be developed. Even though the women had known that they would be confronted with both known and unforeseen obstacles, they all had weighed their situations and made the choice to either return to or begin college classes. They sought better-paying jobs, many in order to provide for their children. Maria responded that "... getting a degree was what I needed to do in order to get a job and be able to support myself and my kids." The women sought to fulfill a delayed dream; the needs of their families or other priorities had taken precedence, and now they were pursuing a long-delayed personal goal. Donna was fulfilling a long-ago promise: "When I quit school in ninth grade, I had promised my father that I would finish school, and even though he's gone, I had made this promise." Several women had assessed their then-present situations and recognized a need for a change. Susan stated, "I would probably be doing this for the rest of my life if I didn't get an education." Feelings of being "bored" and "stuck" were commonly associated with their responses. One participant acknowledged that a need for a break from her five children had contributed to her decision to enroll in college.

Within the framework of their motivation to enter higher education--the need to change their job situations, their desires to pursue long-delayed personal goals, and their need for a change--the participants reported experiencing diverse obstacles, some expected and some unforeseen. For most of the participants, limited

finances and a lack of family support or difficulties with personal relationships were significant obstacles as they began their education. One woman said of her husband, "I had worked and put him through his college. You know, it's my turn." Another woman, describing her changing relationship with her husband, concluded, "He didn't want me smarter than him"; another whose husband had been an invalid reported that he "didn't want me away from the house . . . he told me that I was never going to amount to anything." These women spoke of feeling demeaned, emotionally abused, hurt, and angry. In overcoming the obstacle of difficult relationships, one woman entered counseling and relied on her faith, another responded that she "left them!" and a third said, "I divorced that man." Laurie came to realize that her husband's objection was his own problem: "I just decided he was going to have to resolve it himself because I was going to pursue it [a college education]."

For some, the academic demand of higher education was an unexpected obstacle, a factor that relates to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital, the accumulation of knowledge of higher education that facilitates adjustment to college. As the women met one goal at a time, however, subsequent academic challenges became more manageable. Balancing family and work responsibilities were also difficult for the participants, consistent with the findings of previous research (Campbell, 1998; Daloz, 1999; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Describing the challenge of "juggling" studies with family and work responsibilities, Jennifer summarized her changing perspective regarding her previous need to maintain a clean house: "What is more important? I mean, in two years I can clean the bathroom." Finally, the women acknowledged a lack of confidence or a sense of being out of place in the environment of higher education, obstacles consistent with the literature on adult students (Brookfield, 1999; Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985; Cross, 1981; LePage-Lees, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Betty said that she had felt "like a mamasaurus" as an older student.

Asked to describe the personal qualities that

contributed to her persistence and academic achievement, nearly every participant readily responded that she possessed determination or a similar quality, such as courage, tenacity, or perseverance. "I just won't give up. You can beat me down; I'll get back up"; "I think through the process of realizing that I can do it, I'm able to do it, and it has kind of fueled me to want to really do it"; "I keep going on . . . I don't allow things to tell me I can't do this" were representative responses. Maria, a woman who had been widowed during her early years as a student and raised her two children alone, described how she came to realize her own capabilities because of "a lot of the trials and tribulations that I went through. The tougher life is, the tougher you get. You have to or you're going to get left behind." As with every response to the question that probed what had changed the participants' original perceptions, this response reflected a common theme: All of the women had experienced difficulties, but they had made conscious choices to continue toward their goals with determination and persistence.

A sense of responsibility, self-discipline, and a desire to work hard also enabled the participants to succeed in higher education. Lisa stressed that "[e]very success builds on itself. You have to have a little success to feel successful. Then when you feel successful, you succeed at the next thing or another thing and it just goes on. Success builds on success." The women also credited such qualities as optimism, enthusiasm, self-confidence, and open-mindedness for their success in higher education. Finally, the recognition that they were intelligent, often when they had never before considered themselves to be so, was illustrated in Angela's revelation:

I remember I had a copy of my high school transcript, and I was looking at that and I was taking a class and having to do a paper on gifted kids. I looked at my high school transcripts and I saw my IQ score and I thought, I'm gifted! And you know, that's the first time that it really hit me that, oh my gosh, I could do this! I sound like I'm bragging, but you know, I felt kind of relieved, because it was o.k., it's on paper, I can do this. (June 26,

2002)

Additional qualities that helped them to overcome obstacles to their educational goals emerged from their narratives as well: religious faith, patience a desire to contribute to society, competitiveness, independence, and creativity.

Susan's story revealed a passage from the naiveté of youth to the persistence and resilience of an adult woman student as she described her pursuit of success:

When I was younger, I thought it would just come to me. When I was in my high school, where I'd see myself in ten years was that I'd be finishing my master's degree, because I figured I'd get my bachelor's. I was going to be teaching high school English, I'd be working on my master's in English, I'd be driving a red Corvette, living in Maine, and looking fabulous in turtleneck sweaters. Well, reality then slapped me with a big cast-iron pan right in the face. No, that's not just gonna happen. So then I got a little disillusioned, then I brought myself back out. . . . What brought me back around? I partied my entire senior year of high school, just assuming my parents would pay for me to go to school. They took what money they had saved for me to go to school and bought a condo. They said, "Sink or swim, baby." I lived like a Korean boat person for two years before I got the money together to go to college. When you've got five bucks and you have to choose laundry or a bag of potatoes, that's the frying pan. (July 1, 2002)

Susan's story illustrated the theory that resilience develops not in the absence of adversity, but in successful engagement with it. Her determination contributed to her ability to pursue her educational goals in spite of the obstacles she faced.

In defining their perceptions of resilience, all of the participants replied with similar responses, using such phrases as "sticking with it" in spite of adversity, being flexible and adjusting to unexpected changes, "bouncing back," "being able to overcome anything that you have to deal with," and not taking "the easy way out." Their definitions were consistent with accepted defini-

tions of resilience and included both components considered central to the construct: Risk or adversity, and positive adaptation or competence. To explain how resilience can be developed, every woman prescribed strategies for the development of the dispositions and internal resources that function as protective factors. Several described how their resilience was developed not in the avoidance of risk or adversity but rather in successful engagement with it, a finding consistent with research in resilience (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996; Garnezy, 1993; Johnson, 1999; Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990; Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1985, 1987; Werner & Johnson, 1999). The women recommended "listening to the right voices," avoiding the tendency to "wallow" in failure, staying focused on a goal, surrounding oneself "with people who believe in themselves," and gaining strength from a support system. The themes of flexibility and perseverance were consistent in their definitions. Joanne mused that there may be failure, "but is it truly a failure if you bounce back? You might have made a mistake, but as long as you don't wallow in it, it's a learned good." A similar perspective was reflected in the words of Donna, who advocated that resilience can be developed "if you just persevere and . . . stay focused on where you're going and you take these things that happen to you along the way as just stepping stones to going where you want to go." A unique perspective came from one participant who had undergone severe adversity, including widowhood at a young age, and yet had become a successful university student. As Maria noted, "Women get a lot of strength from each other. Men are their own lone island where admitting they've got a weakness to another man is taboo. . . . We [women] work best in a group because we get strength from each other."

Qualitative data from the participants' responses to the interview questions supported every quality identified in the Resilience Scale and the Adult Persistence in Learning (APIL) Scale, yielding strong conformity of the data for the study. From the interviews emerged evidence of self-reliance, independence, determination, invincibility, mastery,

resourcefulness, and perseverance, descriptors of the personal competence factor of the Resilience Scale. The participants also provided statements indicative of adaptability, balance, flexibility, and a balanced perspective of life, descriptors of the factor of acceptance of self and life (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Similarly, the participants' statements conformed to relevant factors of the APIL Scale: self-awareness, willingness to delay gratification, clarification of career and life goals, mastery of life transitions, and a sense of interpersonal competence.

CONCLUSIONS

By overcoming obstacles and successfully adapting to new experiences as students in higher education, the participants demonstrated resilience. Their scores on the two instruments, the Resilience Scale and the APIL Scale, confirmed that the participants possessed those protective factors known to contribute to resilience and those factors thought to contribute to persistence. More importantly, however, this study investigated the processes by which the women developed the protective factors that contributed to their resilience. The major finding was that as the women faced and met challenges, the success that they experienced gave them the confidence to take on further challenges. They all set goals, took one small risk at a time, analyzed and learned from their mistakes, and continued to strive toward new or modified goals. The resulting sense of self-efficacy resulted in their academic achievement and persistence in higher education.

For an adult woman student to achieve resilience, she must sense ownership of her own strengths and capabilities. She must realize, as the women of this study did, that resilience develops not through avoidance of challenges and adversity but through successful responses to them. Developing a recognition and appreciation of her own capabilities as she takes on challenges and overcomes obstacles enables an adult woman student to develop resilience. An understanding of these processes can lead to specific measures that adult women students can take to develop resilience; it can also lead others to create

interventions that move them toward recognizing the strengths they have, building upon those strengths, and utilizing them to overcome obstacles.

Postscript:

The participants wanted to offer to other adult women students their advice to encourage resilience but also their thoughts regarding the emotional costs of striving to be resilient. Angela advised, "If a person's going to quit, it's okay to do that, but do it during the good times. Don't do it during the rough times. . . . It doesn't ever feel right again in your life to do it that way." The ability to be resilient is not often recognized when one is in the midst of a trial, said Maria: "Once you overcome that, once you're on the mountain, then you'll be going, wow, I accomplished that." Paula wanted women to know that "[i]t helps you to see that what you've already accomplished is far more than what you're going toward."

In their article on handling difficulty and learning resilience, Konrad and Bronson (1997) quoted a caption that applied to the participants of this study and the message that they offered to other adult women students: "There is nothing wrong with you that what's right with you can't fix." One of the women who participated in this study wrote a heartfelt message on her demographic questionnaire: "I've had a long hard life. I hope to help someone else along their way." Another woman wrote with pride about what she had succeeded in overcoming and concluded with the message, "Thank you for letting me express this!"

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