

“Communication, resilience and the family: The known and unknown”

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Abstract

Natural disasters and traumatic events happen every day. With each ‘event,’ families are affected in multiple ways. This paper provides an overview of existing research that addresses the role that communication plays in family resilience—what is known and what is unknown.

This analysis defines the terms ‘family’ and ‘resilience’ and examines how the concept of “family resilience” is often assessed in the face of disaster or traumatic event. Family communication in a variety of circumstances is addressed, confirming the need for more research to be conducted and published as a means to helping adversity-affected families in the future.

Introduction

When a natural disaster or traumatic event happens within a family, their behaviors and patterns become altered. Many family members become incapable of functioning when faced with adversity. At a time when family members need to support one another, all too often, the family unit is affected in ways that make it difficult for the family unit to stay intact. Families, as the integral unit of the community and the major support of our children, are of vital importance in determining how communities recover in the aftermath of mass trauma. This essay intends to answer the question: **RQ: What role does communication play in family resilience?**

Family Defined

According to Patterson (2002), “a family system is two or more individuals (family structure) and the patterns of relationship between them (family functioning) (Bateson, 1972; Patterson, 1999). Jorgenson (1989), defined ‘family’ in terms of an experiential quality. Indeed, the term ‘family’ can be arbitrarily defined; however, for this paper, the term “family” will be defined as a group of people who are related to one another through blood, choice, circumstances, or need.

Resilience Defined

According to Manyena (2006), “resilience is derived from the Latin word *resilio*, meaning ‘to jump back’ (Klein, Nicholls and Thomalla, 2003)” (p. 433). “Froma Walsh (1996: 261) defines family resilience as ‘the ability to withstand and rebound from crisis and adversity’. Strong families are able to adapt to changing circumstances and have a positive attitude towards the challenges of family life. They deal with these challenges by means of communication – talking things through with each other; supporting each other in times of need and/or seeking outside support when it is beyond the family’s capability to deal with the

situation; and togetherness – pulling together to form a united front and to find solutions” (Silberberg, p. 55). Other definitions of resilience will be further discussed by the following authors: Wildavsky, Holling et al, Home & Orr, Mallak, Miletti, Comfort, Paton, Kendra & Wachentendork, Cardona, Pelling, and the Resilience Alliance.

Resilience and Communication in the Family

The majority of studies revealed that one of the factors in resilience is communication. “There is no universal list of key, effective protective and recovery factors, but a review of recent research and literature recognizes recurrent and prominent attributes among resilient, healthy families. These factors include: a positive outlook, spirituality, family member accord, flexibility, communication, financial management, time together, mutual recreational interests, routines and rituals, and social support” (Black. p. 37). It is also noted that the lack of communication is a factor for risk. With regard to the concept of disaster resilience, Manyena (2006) states, “deficient information, communications and knowledge among social actors, the lack of institutional and community organization, weaknesses in emergency preparedness, political instability and the absence of economic health in a geographic area, are all factors in generating greater risk (Cardona, 2004)” (p. 435-436).

“Walsh (2002) suggested that family resilience operates within three broad domains of family functioning: Beliefs (making meaning of adversity; positive outlook, spirituality), organizational patterns (flexibility, connectedness, social and economic resources), and communication processes (clarity, open emotional sharing, and collaborative problem solving)” (Hutchinson, Afifi & Krause, p. 24). Open emotional sharing is also known as disclosure. According to Finkenauer, et al (2004), “disclosure refers to the verbal communication of information about the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in

the past, and plans for the future (Jourard, 1971)” (p. 196). Finkenauer, et al, conducted a study to determine relationship satisfaction in families. One of their findings revealed, “families who disclosed more had more satisfactory relationships” (p. 207). Even in families where disclosure is high, the question remains: after a natural disaster or traumatic family event, would the family continue to disclose their feelings at or above the level as before the event? Walsh (2003) states, “communication processes foster resilience by bringing clarity to crisis situations, encouraging open emotional expression, and fostering collaborative problem-solving. It must be kept in mind that cultural norms vary considerably in the sharing of sensitive information and expression of feelings” (p. 11-12). It should also be noted that, “communication processes that clarify ambiguous situations, encourage open emotional expression and empathetic response, and foster collaborative problem solving are especially important in facilitating resilience” (Walsh, 2002, p. 133). The quality of communication is addressed by Patterson, (2002) who states, “the quality of affective and instrumental communication patterns within a family usually is protective because it facilitates how families accomplish core functions” (p. 356). Based on a review of family research and conceptual literature, “prominent factors of resilient families include: positive outlook, spirituality, family member accord, flexibility, family communication, financial management, family time, shared recreation, routines and rituals, and support networks” (Black, p. 33).

Parents cannot effectively help their children cope in a crisis situation without communication. “Problems and crises are inherent in all families. The ability to collaboratively solve problems and conflicts well has been shown to be a key factor in resilient families. The problem is recognized and communicated openly with all involved” (Black, p. 43). According to Vandsburger, et al (2008), “the resiliency attributes that facilitate

adjustment and adaptability include family accord (low conflict), satisfying marital communication, good relationships with other family members and friends, enjoyment of children, family and life satisfaction, enjoyable leisure, time together, personality compatibility, a satisfying sexual relationship, and agreement on family finances (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988)” (p. 21). Simon, Murphy & Smith (2005), also mention the work of these authors in the statement, “some of the more robust strengths or coping mechanisms known to help a family withstand a challenge or crisis include high-quality marital communication, satisfaction with quality of life, financial management skills, family celebrations, family hardiness, family time and routines, and family traditions (H. I. McCubbin & M. A. McCubbin, 1988)” (p. 428). Silberberg (2001) conducted a theme analysis to determine the strengths, challenges and coping strategies of strong families. They found that “some of the parents explained how, through communication or role modeling, they passed on to their children the values they considered essential” (p. 56).

The Unknown

In order to facilitate resilience within the family unit, studies need to be done that focus on the communication aspect as a strength of resilience. What are the communication processes and patterns that make resilience successful? Qualitative studies following a natural disaster would be beneficial in learning how communication functions within the family unit. “Froma Walsh presents a family resilience framework that focuses on strengthening families in the context of adversity. Her premise is that rather than studying so-called invulnerable individuals, we need to collaborate to promote resilience-based approaches to family–school partnerships, community-based efforts to support families, and other efforts to foster family empowerment” (Coleman & Ganong, 2002, p. 101). Usher,

Jackson & O'Brien (2005) note, "the types of strategic processes that are associated with family resilience are 'pulling together rather than apart; reframing the crisis in a more positive, manageable light; and seeking help' (Silberberg 2001; p. 56)"

Conclusion

The family structure is strong; yet fragile. The day-to-day demands on people test the family unit and make it challenging for families to stay together. Couple this with a natural disaster or some sort of traumatic event, the family is even more vulnerable to breaking down – to breaking apart. After review of the literature, more research is needed in the field of communication, specifically addressing its role in resilience. Communication, as previously noted, is one of the key variables that can keep a family together and it is also a key variable in what can pull a family apart. We need research focused on communication in the face of a natural disaster, traumatic event, divorce, problems with teens, low income and disabled children. While there is ample research on resilience, there is a paucity of findings that mention direction or guidance on what the communication *of* resilience should look like. What does it sound like? How are the messages best delivered? By whom? In what context? What particular words or phrases are helpful? When is the optimal time to discuss healing rhetoric? What would a typology of resilience-supportive messages look like? What type of feedback is most constructive? How do dialectical tensions play out in the communication exchanges? These questions and others warrant further investigation in order to best serve families in adverse situations.

The result of this future research should be a compilation of educational materials that can be distributed to individuals and families facing a variety of life events. Researching communication in families that have been through a traumatic event and have stayed together

and triumphed, is a first step in understanding how that can become a model for others to follow and to, ultimately, experience the vast rewards of family resilience.

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