

Building Resilience

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Abstract

Resilience is important for our wellbeing. In order to address systemic problems like homelessness we must understand how systems function and identify the various factors that contribute to building resilience such as physical wellbeing, supportive community, and purpose. Research, philosophy, and sources of ancient wisdom can all be relevant sources for building resilience.

Keywords: resilience, systems, complex-PTSD, reductionism, Ecclesiastes

1. Introduction

Let me begin with a personal story about my Great Uncle Dan. When he was 13 years old, he accidentally discharged his rifle and the bullet ricocheted, striking his arm. By the time a doctor could be summoned to their remote ranch, it was necessary for the arm to be amputated—on the kitchen table.

After he grew up, one of his friends said that he could do more with one arm than many men with two. When a passerby got stuck in a ditch, he sent a son to fetch my great uncle. Upon returning the boy told his father he had no reason to complain about having 13 children: the man coming to pull them out had more children and only one arm. Actually, many of the children were boarding there so that they could have a school.

This is the type of resilience that gets people through tough times like pandemics. It is resilience which we hope to develop in the homeless that our new university (American Theological University) will be serving.

Resilience is defined as the ability of a system to return to normal functioning after a severe disruption. In order for a system to return to normal functioning there need to be stocks and flows that restore normal throughput (Meadows, 2008, p. 17). In complex systems, such as humans in society, the multiple interactions can make it difficult to identify where to intervene to restore optimal performance. Early research on the complex behavior of systems was done by Jay Forrester (1995).

Our Research Program

In order to better understand the systems that affect the homeless we are collecting qualitative data from interviews with the homeless. One theme that has appeared in preliminary research is abusive situations as children which leads to what has been termed Complex-PTSD (Resick et al., 2012). This is partly the result of prolonged stress (Szabo et al., 2012). In systems terms these adults have been unable to develop normal stocks and feedback loops. Often they have developed addictions which temporarily alleviate pain, but create a feedback loop that causes dysfunction in terms of employment and the ability to handle normal, everyday responsibilities.

A Philosophical Obstacle to Proper Systems Analysis

At this point, it would be useful to note that a methodological problem affects attempts to determine the root cause of homelessness among other issues. Much of the success of modern science may be due to reductionism (van Riel & Van Gulick, 2019). However, certain systems, especially those that rely on a set of symbols, such as language, cannot be explained by reference to the physical structures associated with them. The information bearing system resists reduction past a certain point. On the other hand, trauma to the physical system can

affect the operation of the higher-level information system. Such ambiguities and interdependencies make root cause analysis difficult.

Meaning as a Component of Resilience

In looking at the literature on resilience, the experience of concentration camp survivors is noteworthy, particularly the observations of the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1992). Frankl survived by focusing on his hope for a reunion with his wife and the possibility of once again teaching; thus, finding purpose and meaning. Hope is a powerful source of resilience.

Points of Intervention

What we have been aiming for is a non-reductivist analysis of the various interlocking systems where one needs to establish proper stocks and flows. At the organic level, proper rest and nutrition are necessary. Maintaining the integrity of our genetic material against mutation is a factor. At the psychological level one needs to restore levels of trust and love with significant others in community to be resilient. Finally, a sense of purpose and hope needs to be developed. This requires a functional social organization that provides security and belonging. Ultimately, there is a need for a resilient ecosystem, but this is beyond the scope of our planning.

Ancient Wisdom

The problem of resilience is not new, and I have gained much insight from reading and reflecting on the ideas in the book of Ecclesiastes. We see the theme of purpose. We see the need for a relationship with the Creator whose commands enable us to be resilient. We see the idea of homeostasis or balance: do not be overly wise, but do not be a fool (Eccl. 7: 16-17). Rhythm, a word preferred by Stephen Smith (2020), who promotes soul care, is a key part of building resilience. Finally, Ecclesiastes reminds us of the value of community: “a cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Eccl. 4: 12).

May you form cords of resilience by finding rhythm, purpose, and community!

Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,

for this is the duty of all mankind. (Ecclesiastes 12: 13)

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