Conceptualizing Resiliency: An Interactional Perspective for Community and Youth Development

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In Europe and in America there is a growing recognition of the need for theory, research, and applied programs that contribute to both community and youth resiliency. This article seeks to build on previous theory and literature to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms for linking community and youth resiliency. Included is a review of youth development literature focusing on social networks, social support and the merging of these with community literature emphasizing adaptive capacities and resiliency. The literature and conceptual framework increases our understanding of the interrelationship between youth and community resiliency. From this, future research and applied program and policy that simultaneously shape youth and community adaptive capacities can emerge.

Introduction

In Europe and in America there is a growing recognition of the need for theory, research, and applied programs that contribute to both community and youth resiliency (Brennan, 2006; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). While both forms of resiliency have traditionally been seen as mutually exclusive, they are increasingly being recognized as being part of the same cohesive whole that reflects local well-being and adaptive capacities. In reality these are intimately linked, and connected in such a way that a failure to achieve one most probably leads to the breakdown of resilient capacities for the other.

An understanding of the resiliency process is important for several reasons. Over the past two decades, America has witnessed a consistent devolution of responsibility for social and other services from the government to the local level. Similarly in Europe, the expansion of the European Union has created an environment where...
established member states and their communities are being called upon to do more with less. In these and other settings, local residents, particularly youth, are expected to increase their adaptive capacities, become more resilient, and take on a larger role in achieving local well-being.

Historically, youth involvement in decision-making, problem-solving, community development, and contributions to local adaptive capacities has received only limited attention (Kegler et al., 2005; Brennan, Barnett, & Bough, 2008). When discussed, youth contributions have most often been considered in light of resiliency building at the individual level. Previous research suggests that successful youth/adult partnerships encourage youth to develop the capacity to actively serve in organizations and transition into future community leaders who contribute to the long-term success of community development efforts (Brennan, 2006; Nitzberg, 2005). Through these actions, youth develop social, life, and other practical skills/supports that help them better acclimate into society and develop the coping skills needed for resiliency. Indeed, recent trends suggest that youth have played, and continue to play, a progressively more important role in the development of their communities (Huber, Frommeyer, Weisenbach, & Sazama, 2003).

The emergence of community, social change, and agency in relation to community-level resiliency has seen significant attention (Brennan, 2006; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991). Central to many theoretical perspectives has been the mobilization of a broad-based representation of local residents to contribute to the emergence of community (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991). With the inclusion of younger residents, youth bring new ideas, resources, enthusiasm, and serve as the basis for long-term sustainable community development efforts. All are important to the resiliency of local youth, organizations, and communities to overcome the obstacles they face and to collectively plan for efforts to enhance their general well-being.

This article seeks to build on previous theory and literature to provide a conceptual framework for linking community and youth resiliency. Included is a review of youth development literature focusing on social networks, social support and the merging of these with community literature emphasizing adaptive capacities and resiliency.

Related Literature

Resiliency, most simply, manifests itself as the ability to respond or perform positively in the face of adversity, to achieve despite the presence of disadvantages, or to significantly exceed expectations under given negative circumstances (Gilligan, 2007). Such conditions can be applied to the individual level (youth) or to a broader social context (communities). Reflective of individual-level resiliency are characteristics such as cognitive capabilities, self-regulating behaviors, and social support levels. At the broader community level, resiliency is shaped by a variety of conditions ranging from social controls to the local adaptive capacities of organized residents (Brennan, 2006). Central to the latter are dense social networks and channels of interaction spanning the diversity of our localities.
A variety of obstacles and vulnerabilities are present, however, which can limit the process by which resiliency emerges. Often cited are social and socioeconomic vulnerabilities that can hinder the emergence of social support functions, interaction capabilities, and the ability to achieve resiliency (Cutter, 2003; Flint & Luloff, 2005). Mechanisms for transcending these vulnerabilities can be found in the youth and community development literature.

Youth Development

Youth development can be seen as spanning a wide range of areas, including the larger community, neighbourhoods, schools, and other contextual layers (Dolan, 2006; Dolan & McGrath, 2006). These layers play an important role by providing opportunities for youth to participate in supportive environments and positive engagement. Youth development can also be seen as representing the positive engagement of parents, relatives, friends, and neighbours in creating the programs, opportunities, and supportive environments that young people need (Hyman, 2002). Increased attention has also been given to youth identification of strengths, assets, building partnerships, and enhancing competencies contributing to empowerment and resiliency. Community youth development becomes a process that meets the developmental needs of youth, prevents them from becoming engaged in problematic behaviours, and empowers them to build skills necessary for becoming engaged citizens.

Social support from family, friends, and others is often cited as being essential to youth development and resiliency (Dolan & McGrath, 2006; Gilligan, 2001; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). It is generally accepted that social support is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon encompassing social networks, behaviours, identified roles, and other conditions (Brugha, 1995; Cutrona, 1996; Dolan & McGrath, 2006; Eckenrode & Hamilton, 2000; Veiel & Baumann, 1992). The significance of social support for adolescents is usually understood in the context of psychological well-being and its role as a buffer against stress (Gilligan, 2003; Gottlieb, 2000; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007; Tardy, 1994). The availability of social support is recognized as assisting the development of self-esteem and self-efficacy among adolescents and young adults (Harter, 1993; Axelsson & Ejlertsson, 2002), while for children at risk, positive and accessible social support networks have been identified as offering secondary protection (Belsky, 1997; Thompson, 1995). The wider community itself also plays an essential role in youth development by providing social support and a host of other positive conditions. Involvement in their communities is an important facet of youth development and community-building, and leads to effective adult–youth interaction.

Research on youth participation in their communities has found that they gain important protective factors and achieve mastery in social competence, problem-solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose, as well as important links to community (Kegler et al., 2005; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Activities such as volunteerism and neighbourhood involvement are associated with the degree of
motivation for adults to engage with youth (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2001). Such civic engagement can, in particular, set the stage for clearly identifying youth roles and their long-term participation in their communities. Equally important, young people involved in their communities become empowered to become problem-solvers, decision-makers, and committed leaders in their community in the future. Last, through the active interaction of youth and adults in the community development process, a more representative voice is provided that reflects the diverse needs and wants of the community and the organizations within it.

Youth community development professionals may liken such civic engagement to other self-actualization efforts leading to enhancing resilience. In addition, engagement and community-building activities provide not only tangible benefits, but also sources of close relationships and meaning in life that are necessary for positive youth development (Myers, 2000). Therefore, youth benefit from engagement in a number of ways that promote positive youth development.

The specific impact of community on well-being and resiliency has been the subject of a wide range of research (Barnett & Brennan, 2006; Brennan & Luloff, 2007; Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Glendinning, Nuttall, Hendry, Kloep, & Wood, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991). In recent years this area has placed considerable emphasis on “social capital” and “community agency” in promoting child and adolescent well-being (Barnett & Brennan, 2006; Bowes & Hayes, 2004; Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Jack, 2000; Jack & Jordan, 2001). Community support through social networks can act as a form of collective agency and socialization, especially where like-minded adults provide norms and sanctions concerning children’s well-being, while at the same time providing an identified role for youth in the process (Fegan & Bowes, 2004). In its absence, social isolation from community has been shown to be a critical factor in child maltreatment and a host of negatively related youth conditions (Belsky, 1997).

Development of Community and Community Resiliency

Definitions of community often include a variety of characteristics such as geography, human life dimensions, and locality oriented social actions (Brennan, 2006; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991). Yet the presence of these elements does not automatically signal the presence of community. While it is true that place and locality are important components, community is far more than a geographic location. A more accurate definition of community views locality as a place where people live and meet their common daily needs together (Theodori, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991). It can therefore be seen as a comprehensive network of individual relationships that express common interests and act to meet the general needs of the locality. However, it is only through a process of deliberate and focused actions that the diverse groups present in localities express their common interests and discover methods for achieving their common needs. This interactive process of interaction culminates in the emergence of community (Brennan, 2007; Bridger & Luloff, 1999; Theodori, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991).
Wilkinson (1991) and others view community from this interactional perspective, where the emergence of community is a dynamic process of bringing people together. This perspective is particularly useful in explaining the process leading to resiliency. All localities are composed of numerous distinct social fields or groups whose members act to achieve various individual interests and goals. Connecting these individual fields is the “community field”, which serves to coordinate and unite individual groups into purposive community wide efforts. It cuts across class lines, organized groups, and other entities within a local population by focusing on the general and common needs of all residents. Through this interactive process, an entity can emerge that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

The key component to this process is found in the creation and maintenance of channels of interaction and communication among the diverse local groups that would otherwise be directed toward their more individual interests. Through these relationships, individuals interact with one another, and begin to mutually understand general common needs. Where these relationships can be established and maintained, increases in local adaptive capacities materialize, resiliency becomes possible, and community can emerge.

This perspective does not imply that local institutions, social structure, or more formal entities are unimportant. Alternately this viewpoint by no means presupposes a utopian view of community that is devoid of conflict, self-interest, and manipulative entities. Similarly, the local economy, sociodemographics, power structures, organizations, and government are without a doubt vital to the make up of the locality (Brennan & Luloff, 2007; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). However, all of these conditions serve only as the backdrop for our lives and the relationships we have on a daily basis with other residents. Nor do they speak to the motivation of people to voluntarily come together to improve their local society and its well-being.

As residents and groups interact over issues important to all of them, what has come to be known as community agency, or the capacity for local action and resiliency, emerges (Brennan & Luloff, 2007; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991). Agency reflects the building of local relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of local people within a common territory. Agency can therefore be seen as the capacity of people to manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing locality wide issues (Brennan, 2006; Bridger & Luloff, 1999; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991). Such a condition is the cornerstone of resiliency.

While much of the attention given to building local capacities is often focused toward aggregates of adult residents, youth are an increasingly visible and active component in community development efforts. Such involvement contributes to both the development of community and the social and psychological development of the youth within it. These active youth represent the future leaders and activists that will help shape local life and well-being in the years to come. The merging of such community and youth development theory can help us to better conceptualize how both might mutually contribute to their resiliency.
Often the research on resilient communities has focused on the areas of natural hazards, economic distress, and disaster mitigation (Cutter, 2003; Flint & Luloff, 2005). In this setting, practitioners have increasingly made the important shift from a perspective of communities as helpless victims needing outside assistance to acknowledging the importance of local-level action and community capacity in mitigation, response, and recovery (Berke, Kartez, & Wenger, 1993; Flint & Luloff, 2005; Hewitt, 1998). The same is certainly true of resiliency in a host of other situations and environments. Such a shift in focus was driven largely by the recognition that local residents are better suited to address their immediate and long-term needs, as well as being intimately familiar with mechanism for achieving these. Such perspectives are important and provide direct comparisons to the community youth resiliency discussion.

A conceptualization of a framework for merging community and youth resiliency can be seen in Figure 1. The effective youth and community development are often faced with a variety of obstacles and vulnerabilities. Such conditions may often take the form of socioeconomic characteristics (depressed economies, limited employment opportunities, few opportunities for skill/educational development) as well as social vulnerabilities (diminished local capacities, stagnant channels of communication).

While these conditions fuel and influence each other, they also contribute to the need for social support and community agency. Local vulnerabilities create an environment necessitating social support to foster local well-being and community agency. Further, social support provides a basis for the interactional capacity that leads to community agency. Here, agency can be seen as an intervening condition that facilitates the emergence of resiliency to overcome local vulnerabilities that influence quality of life for youth and the broader community.

![Figure 1 Conceptual Model for Community and Youth Resiliency.](image-url)
Similarly social support and agency, while shaping resiliency, advance local well-being. By empowering youth to become part of the community development process, they are incorporated into the emergence of agency and achieve resiliency along with the wider community. Resilient communities exhibit adaptive capacities, established networks, infrastructures, and alliances that allow the community to plan for its needs and build on its strengths to achieve desired goals.

Conclusion and Application of Theory

This article was based on the premise that active communities have the capacity to improve local well-being and directly shape their resilient capacity. The literature and conceptual framework increases our understanding of the interrelationship between youth and community resiliency. From this, future research and applied program and policy that simultaneously shape youth and community adaptive capacities can emerge. Applications of theory that can contribute to the emergence of youth and communities resiliency include the following:

- **Establish and enhance local social support structures.** The promotion of activities designed to establish social networks, youth/adult partnerships, mentor relationships, and other social support functions. Included would be the establishment of formal youth mentor programs, but also the creation or enhancement of existing local youth support structures throughout the community organizations, schools, sport groups, and religious organizations. Linking such support activities and structures would also enhance their effectiveness, as well as contributing to wider community resiliency.

- **Build interactive capacities and increase venues for interaction.** Create community capacities by linking community groups and residents. Create and maintain channels of communication and interaction among all local residents, especially youth and their organizations. The promotion of efforts that bring people from different parts of the community together is vital to advancing community resiliency. Included are efforts to encourage cross-community participation and action through local business/professional associations, sports clubs, social/civic organizations, educational groups, and religious organizations. Enhancement and promotion of venues for social interaction should be seen as a priority. Such venues can take a variety of physical and social forms. Included are the establishment of community centres, town halls, parks, and other facilities open to all residents that also serve as a location for a variety of services, festivals, functions, and events. These venues could provide an environment where residents can meet, interact, and discuss general issues relevant to the entire community.

- **Empower youth to become long-term contributors to local community development.** Consider new ways to involve youth in community building and allow them to provide input in decision-making, problem-solving and action-taking activities within local organizations, non-profits, volunteer groups, youth programs and non-governmental organizations. This may include assigning youth to advisory
boards, giving them voting privileges, and serving on committees. As youth engage in more sustained positive relationships with adults, other youth, and community organizations, they will learn that they are valued citizens of their communities. If youth are empowered to become full partners in the community development process, they become more invested in long-term participation and contribution to their community. Similarly, their support networks and channels of communication and interaction are expanded. All lead to more resilient youth.

- **Present youth with opportunities for personal self-growth, skill enhancement, and leadership development.** This can occur through increasing involvement of youth with adults in active collaboration toward local community resiliency. Integrating youth into committees with adults as mentors and guides in this process will enable them to build the leadership skills and personal characteristics necessary for future adult involvement. Training in areas such as conflict management, stress management and communication skills will lead to changes in attitudes and respect as youth become more confident in their skill level. In addition, the use of asset mapping and asset-based planning would better tailor youth skills, interests, and desired skills with opportunities for community involvement and leadership.

Following an interactional perspective, which by its nature incorporates social support and the connections among a wide range of community members, the process leading to resiliency can be better understood, and adaptive capacities among youth and community achieved. The conceptualization presented in this paper and the model for understanding the connection between youth and community resiliency represents a firm basis for building future research, programs, and policies. Ultimately, resiliency reflects youth realizing that they have an important and identified role in their communities, and that their communities support them in times of trouble, doubt, and challenge. Alternately, communities that embrace all local segments of the population, especially youth, prosper and develop the adaptive capacity needed to achieve resiliency.

**References**


