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## On Cultural Resiliency

Naji Abi-Hashem

*Clinical & Cultural Psychologist, Independent Scholar, Visiting Professor, Caregiver at Large*

*Much has been written on resilience. This article will try to revisit the subject and emphasise its psycho-emotional and socio-cultural roots. It will explore the major themes, dimensions, and conceptualisations of resiliency from a communal, psychological, spiritual, existential, and cultural perspective. It will discuss the interplay among social norms, tradition, and religion and their implications on surviving, coping, and thriving. Also, it will ponder how to remain resilient in this globalised and fast changing 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article will argue that, in addition to all the other factors and mediators affecting resiliency, it is virtually a function of culture, wisdom, and generational identity.*

Resiliency is a fascinating topic. It beautifully focuses on the bright side of the human nature. It highlights the ability to cultivate hope, even during long phases of hopelessness, and to mobilise survival even in the midst of an acute stressful situation or after an extended period of despair. Although there has been a wealth of information written on the subject of resiliency, more is needed to fully appreciate its intricate nature. There is also a need to comprehend its multi-layered roots, types and functions, roles and dynamics, sources and potentials, and to explore its detailed effects, deep impacts, and broad influences. Moreover, it is equally important to understand how resiliency is similar to, or different from, other human capabilities, traits, gifts, attributes, and faculties.

Resiliency has been studied, analysed, and documented by many thinkers and observers, from various disciplines and in many contexts or psychosocial settings. However, the majority of these writings have mainly focused on the individual, familial, and environmental aspects of resilient people, who displayed rebounding ability for livelihood at several stages of their unfavourable journey. Less material is found on the cultural, communal, and national aspects of resiliency. Thus, this paper will attempt to throw an additional light on resiliency as a function of culture and to reflect on the socio-cultural mediators that shape this intriguing human

virtue, in a way that is wide, deep, and more comprehensive. Therefore, to begin let us reconsider the general and basic question: What is resiliency?

### **Is There an Adequate Definition of Resilience?**

Resiliency is a broad concept and a profound theme. It is not easily defined or readily described. There is no one precise explanation or single identification of resiliency. Mainly, resiliency refers to the human potential or spirit to positively and successfully face adversity, tolerate ambiguity, cope with crises, handle pressure, and recover from disaster or tragedy. It could be defined in simple terms or in highly complex terms. A simple definition of resiliency can be presented as something like: *bouncing back, enduring toughness, coping nicely, hanging-in-there, surviving well, recovering adequately, exhibiting strength, weathering tribulation (without cracking), being resourceful, springing forward, and overcoming*. However, the following statements represent more comprehensive and global definitions of resiliency:

“Resilience refers to the capacity of an entity or system to maintain and renew itself particularly in the presence of stressors, that is, when...challenged or threatened. Resilience can be observed as a dynamic phenomena [sic] in a variety of systems” (Neill, 2006, para. 1). It is “the

potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges” (Pooley & Cohen, 2010, p. 30). The American Psychological Association (2011) defined resilience as:

*...the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress... Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary... In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress... Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person's resilience. (pp. 2, 3)*

Using the analogy from physics and the tangible world, resilience is “an occurrence of rebounding back... the physical property of a material that can return to its original shape or position after deformation that does not exceed its elastic limit” (Webdictionary, 2011, para. 1). In addition, “resilience generally means the ability to recover from some shock, insult, or disturbance. However, it is used quite differently in different fields” (WordIQ, 2010, para.1).

Borrowing from the systems-thinking and operation, “resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks” (Hopkins, n.d., p. 37). The three ingredients of any resilience system are “diversity, modularity, and lightness of feedbacks” (Hopkins, n.d. p. 38). According to the United Nations, (2007), resilience is:

*The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner,*

*including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions... The resilience of a community in respect to potential hazard events is determined by the degree to which the community has the necessary resources and is capable of organizing itself both prior to and during times of need (para. 43).*

Can social sciences adequately account for the factors of resiliency and measure its countless qualities? Goldstein (2008) argued:

*A clinical psychology of resilience seeks... to develop psychoeducational and therapeutic measures to teach resilience. Emerging evidence suggests that resilience processes are not only effective for those who possess them innately but can be successfully taught as well. The task of creating a... psychology of the biopsychosocial process of resilience begins with an understanding of the relevant variables and appreciating and acknowledging certain key phenomena. (pp. 1-2)*

Other more technical terms to describe resiliency may include: Hardiness. Elasticity. Toughness. Flexibility. Resurgence. Invulnerability. Tenacity. Resourcefulness. Pliability. Robustness. Mastery.

### **Conceptual Considerations of Resiliency**

Although resiliency has elements of motivation, inspiration, management, and enthusiasm, it is not identical to those qualities per se. Actually, resiliency is all those properties and ingredients combined and much more. A previous common perception was that only exceptional people cope well or lucky people survive well in the face of adversity and calamity, while the rest of population struggle and suffer substantially, and at times, live with chronic symptomatology. For example, those who have experienced trauma, at any level or in

any degree, were believed to develop later Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), regardless of their background, surrounding, pre-existing condition, age, faith, personality type, innate or learned skills, sense of hope, cultural heritage, religious affiliation, or general worldview. Most probably, PTSD has been an overly-used diagnosis in the recent past. But now, conversely, that is not the case anymore, as it is more commonly agreed upon that not everyone who was exposed to acute stress or traumatic events will end up having a disorder based on the criteria found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) or in any other psychiatric handbook or classification manual. Actually, the movement of *Post Traumatic Growth* (PTG) is rapidly gaining momentum along with the emphases of the new field of Positive Psychology.

According to Pooley and Cohen (2010), the vast majority of resilience research was mainly focused on at-risk children and adolescents. Many studies looked at the factors that were causing chronic illnesses and disorders in adults and children. Other studies focused on the vulnerabilities of poor and impoverished families or on the ill-effects of hardships, as possible indicators of research outcomes – “People were deemed resilient if they did not develop problems” (p. 31). Therefore, intervention strategies and prevention programs were developed accordingly to meet these needs and counter these realities (cf. Cowen, 1994; Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Werner & Smith, 1982).

Today, it is well documented that not all of the children or adults who were considered at-risk at some point in their life history (e.g., during a devastating crisis), will develop major physical symptoms or mental-emotional problems (cf. Ungar, 2008). Resiliency is a common function of people, especially those who have the minimum requirements of connections, adaptations, associations, and regulations. It stems out of the normal rather than the abnormal traits of individuals, groups,

and communities.

Under the humorous title of “ordinary magic,” Masten (2010) described resiliency as typically arising from ordinary human capabilities rather than the extraordinary, reflecting skills, relationships, abilities, and resources of all genres. Virtually, resilience means a capacity to resist a sharp decline in attitude and functioning even though the surrounding situation may be deteriorating, worsening, or temporarily intensifying:

*In other words, resilience does not require anything rare or extraordinary, but instead requires that basic human adaptive systems are operating normally. Children and older human individuals have impressive capacity for resilience when basic protections are working... The greatest threats to human resilience are circumstances that destroy or damage these basic protections.* (Masten, 2010, p. 1).

Resiliency is in great demand today and in many areas of life – education, medicine, business, military, cross-cultural services, and etcetera. It has been included in the language repertoire of the team-building of big corporations and factories and, of course, in most of the helping professions, like coaching, leading, caregiving, teaching, counselling, and humanitarian or relief-work aiding. Many groups want to acquire resilience skills and techniques for optimum performance and production, as if it is becoming another desirable product or fashionable item in the market. However, the helping professions remain primarily concerned with the basics of the human needs and experiences, especially during unfavourable or vulnerable times and with healthy coping, survival, and functioning of people everywhere so they would remain connected with others in sociocultural rootedness, meaningful bonding, and spiritual validity.

Perhaps, with my cultural background,

clinical training, and personal reflections and observations, and drawing from my international travels, exposures, teaching, mentoring, and counselling, I have seen many people-groups in times of peace and of war, in high affluence or in utter poverty, enjoying tranquil stability or enduring severe turmoil. Therefore, I would categorise resiliency as *a rich concept and fluid energy* as well as *a socio-cultural and psycho-spiritual force* that are at work intra-psychically and inter-culturally, both locally and globally, never in a static mode but always in constant and dynamic motion (consciously and unconsciously), thrusting people forward with fervour and zeal, helping them draw high-quality *meaning* from any circumstance. Ironically, most of these people were not aware of such force working within and around them; neither would they have labelled themselves as *resilient*. Looking back, they usually become surprised that they have survived well and remained mostly unharmed or, at least, minimally damaged and bruised.

Resiliency is mobilising and utilising the best of the cultural heritage, generational wisdom, intrinsic insights, extrinsic resources, community connections, existential hope, available means and mastery skills, collective strengths and support, and internalised values and spiritualities to result in genuine *creativity in the midst of adversity*. Resiliency is best described as *cultural competency in action!* It is the combination and the accumulation of all sensible and advisable skills, transferred from one generation to the other and transported among groups across time and space, all translated into existential survival and transplanted into the deep minds, souls, and outlooks of the people, who rightly are called 'resilient' (cf. Daskon, 2010).

Resiliency is the ability to transform perplexity into purpose, inner heartache into outer helpfulness, intimidation into intuitiveness, depletion into deployment,

resigning into reframing, crippling into creativity, regression into reinvestment, hopelessness into hopefulness, retreating into regenerating, misery into mission, pain into passion, and tragedy into treasure. And that will lead us to ponder yet another key question, as we try to understand all aspects of resiliency, including its cultural properties, dimensions, and functions: What is culture? And how can we best define cultural norms, values, influences, and mediators?

### **Is There an Adequate Definition of Culture?**

Culture is a broad and rich concept. No single definition was able to capture its essence, describe its dynamics, or articulate its depths. Cultures:

*...are better felt than defined and better experienced than explained... Culture is a design of life. It can be understood as a way of feeling, acting, and believing. It is the knowledge of the community or the people group stored for future use (Hesselgrave, 1984). Culture shapes the life of the community and in return is shaped by the community itself. It is, at the same time, the cause and the outcome. Cultures have an abstract and a concrete element to them. They are, at once, tangible and symbolic, moral and temporal. They represent connectivity with the past and continuity into the future. (Abi-Hashem, 1999, p. 296)*

Cultures consist of tradition and change, stability and movement, content and process, heritage and hope. The heart of a culture involves language, religion, values, traditions, and customs (Huntington, 1996). Whatever profoundly affects the mental and emotional conditions of people – their heart, soul, behaviour, attitude, belief, memory, and worldview, directly or indirectly – is an element and function of culture.

At heart, resiliency is a function of our

*cultural self*, a concept that I have been giving serious consideration and gradually developing lately, which is different from our regular identity, self-perception and presentation, emotional composition, personal mindset and schema, intra-psychoic self, social self, ethnicity, racial identity, or even nationality. *Cultural self* is a fluid entity that reveals who we are at the core and at large, and reflects our multi- or multiple-identities. Generally speaking, it is a broader sense of self that is pushed and pulled by so many gravities and, at the same time, creating its own gravity and thus running into other far-reaching orbits. In essence, it is, who are we becoming culturally in this globalised, industrialised, materialised, digitalised, secularised, politicised, and radicalised age (cf. Abi-Hashem, 2010, 2011).

Cohen (2009) argued that there are many forms, levels, dimensions, and variability of cultures. Cohen reported that there were about 164 definitions of culture, which can be organised into such categories: broad, focused, normative, psychological, structural, genetic, and metaphorical

definitions. Furthermore, “what makes defining culture even more complicated is that there are multiple constituents of culture, such as material culture... subjective culture... and social culture” (Cohen, 2009, p. 195). According to Fiske (2002), culture is a socially constructed constellation and it can be socially transmitted. It consists of ideas, symbols, values, norms, institutions, goals, practices, and competencies.

Virtually, in each main society or region of the world, even within one small country, there are several cultural layers, traditions, depths, systems, customs, mentalities, and subcultures. These are like a beautiful quilt woven together, an artistic mosaic, or an intriguing tapestry holding all the pieces in a great formation and gluing the past, present, and future moments together, creating a rich existential reality, which eventually can be accessed and enjoyed by the old and the new generations alike. Table 1 illustrates these cultural layers, dimensions, and dynamics of resiliency.

### **Resiliency and Cultural Competency**

During the last decade or so, cultural

Table 1  
*Sample of the Types and Spheres of Cultural Resilience*

Personal-Individual Resiliency	Mental-Emotional
	Behavioural-Environmental
Relational-Interpersonal Resiliency	Habitual-Familial
	Moral-Ethical
Social-Communal Resilience	Tribal-Traditional
	Religious-Spiritual
Organisational-Operational Resiliency	Technical-Industrial
	Financial-Managerial
National-Political Resiliency	Societal-Conventional
	Geopolitical-Governmental
Global-International resiliency	Mono-cultural
	Multi-cultural
	Trans-cultural



## Cultural resiliency

competency has been highly encouraged and emphasised in all areas of professional services and interactions, both locally and globally (e.g., cultural awareness, cross-cultural skills, and multicultural sensitivity). In this paper, I suggest that we need to equally promote the cultural bases and resources of resiliency in order to counter the high tendencies of individualistic living and social disconnectivity (i.e., being removed from one's vital cultural context, sphere, and rich heritage). These tendencies are increasingly becoming characteristic of our urban, industrialised, and digital lifestyles (cf. Turkle, 2011; Weil, 2011). In other words, it is a call to re-invent and re-establish community as a cultural mediator and reserve and to revitalise and recontextualise resiliency as a cultural function and phenomenon.

Ungar et al. (2007) identified several aspects of resilience that are found across many different cultures, with each one as dependent on the other: Access to significant others, supportive relationships, and material resources in the immediate community; development of a desirable personal identity, collective sense of purpose and aspirations, and religious-spiritual beliefs; exercising control in context and the ability to introduce positive change; experience of social justice and human equality; adherence to cultural traditions, global values, and practices; having a sense of cohesiveness with others for the greater good and feeling a part of something larger than life.

### **Spiritual and Existential Aspects of Resiliency**

Spirituality is a great force of stability, inner peace, strength, and equilibrium and a major resource of healthy psychosocial functioning for a hopeful living. Spirituality often provides grace under pressure. It is a journey people take towards seeking the supernatural and celebrating the sacred. The human spirit "is more than a set of fixed traits and characteristics; it is an animated impulse

– a vital, motivating force that is directed to realizing higher order goals, dreams, aspirations" (Pargament & Sweeney, 2011, p. 58). Through the years, experts, thinkers, and scholars have assigned sacred qualities to the *spirit*, including ultimacy, boundlessness, enlightenment, higher order, authenticity, interconnectedness, transcendence, to name a few!

Spirituality is a significant motivational energy that may lead to individual or corporate growth even in the midst of existential crises or moral and philosophical dilemmas. Healthy religious faith and practice, when properly nurtured and cultivated, including spiritual struggles, will virtually lead to better awareness, development, regulation, empowerment, and maturity (cf. Pargament & Sweeney, 2011; Tillich, 1959).

Regardless of the ongoing debate about the similarity versus the differences between *religion* and *spirituality* (even if used distinctly or interchangeably), both have proven to be an integral part of the human nature and society that have powerful impact on people's developmental journey and cultural heritage. Best perceived as *religious faith and spirituality*, it is deeply rooted in the human soul, mind, family, community, history, and legacy, across time and place.

Of course, each of these terms – religion and spirituality – can be used in a generic-global sense, in a socio-cultural sense, or in a doctrinal-theological sense. However, for the sake of our discussion, we are also concerned about them as psycho-spiritual agents and faculties as well as trans-cultural resources and properties that significantly provide meaning, harmony, determination, resourcefulness, hopefulness, and resiliency in many spheres and on many levels.

Religion could mean the attitudes, feelings, gestures, and experiences of individual people in their personal meditation or solitude and of groups and congregations in their worship, devotion, and service as they present themselves to the divine and

supernatural being. In other words, as James (1997) has put it, "so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (p. 42).

According to Geertz (1973), religion is a cultural system. Many definitions of religion are to a greater degree indistinguishable from the definitions of culture and therefore are an important aspect of resilience. Tillich (1959) eloquently summarised this interwoven relationship by considering culture as the form of religion and religion as the substance of culture. He disconfirmed the dualism of culture and spiritual life. Tillich wrote, "Every religious act, not only in organized religion, but in the most intimate movement of the soul, is culturally formed" (p. 42).

### **Resiliency in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Our century is definitely characterised by many powerful trends and fast moving changes of globalism, materialism, and secularism, on one hand, and of fundamentalism, extremism, and radicalism, on the other hand. Different polarities and tensions are being felt everywhere. In many ways, our world is getting closer and smaller, yet in other ways, it is getting distant and farther apart (Abi-Hashem, 2010). All these currents and forces – social, technical, economical, political, psychological, spiritual, ideological, etcetera – are changing the meaning of our human identity, interaction, and existence and eventually changing the face of living and relating, caregiving and counselling, surviving and thriving.

Cultural assets, dynamics, and resources substantially account for the surviving ability of people and the livelihood of societies everywhere. Cultural capitals provide a psychosocial reservoir of wealth and wisdom stored within the generations as insights and practical skills and therefore naturally transmitted through many venues to enrich, enhance, and empower all human beings (cf. Daskon, 2010). Ungar (2008) concluded that

resiliency has global as well as cultural and contextual specific aspects to it. These assets, dynamics, and mediators could include, the oral traditions and stories repeatedly told, the rituals and meaningful customs, the verbal and non-verbal communication styles, the religious faith and existential hope of the community, the solidarity of people at large, the sense of dignity and honour of the clans (as modern tribes), the realistic national pride, the support of international networking, the shared experiences from the past – especially of surviving and striving, the role-models and conducts of the elderly and counsellors, the realistic views of life (that embrace hardships and struggles), the ability to tolerate pain, live with ambiguity, and endure unresolved states and conditions, and finally, fortitude and patience (with self, others, and life) as a prerequisite which normally precede true resiliency.

How will resiliency manifest itself in the near future? Where will resiliency be mostly rooted and how will it be mobilised? What are the new set-of-resources to be utilised and cultivated? And how will resiliency be mainly conceptualised in this 21<sup>st</sup> century? The answer for these questions is: We really do not know, yet! All of these phenomena remain to be seen. However, one fact will stay constant, regardless of the means, time, or place, is that the human nature has an innate goodness and desire to promote life and not death, health and not pathology, hope and not despair. Therefore, we will continue to hear accounts of survival, faith, creativity, and courage in spite of the devastations, obstacles, declines, and dark forces that are still at work in our world today. Whatever may happen to the meaning of cultures and the manifestation of subcultures, and however societies may unfold in the near or far future, resiliency will certainly remain a companion of humanity and an integral part of the journey of people everywhere.

Finally, with the fast moving of global



trends and the shifting of many basic foundations, like the meaning of our personal identity and the nature of our family, daily life, and social existence – that is, what does it mean for us to be a community, a society, or a nation, it will be fascinating to closely watch how individuals and large groups alike shall mobilise, manifest, and master the needed and vital skills of resiliency in this very changing, rapidly unfolding, and fast moving 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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### Address for Correspondence

Naji Abi-Hashem, PhD  
14054 Wallingford Avenue North  
Seattle, Washington 98133  
United States of America  
Tel: 1-206-230-4972.  
Email: NajiAbiHashem@gmail.com

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### Author Biography

Naji Abi-Hashem is a Lebanese-American clinical and cultural psychologist, independent scholar, visiting professor, and caregiver at large. He has published numerous book-chapters, journal articles, and encyclopedia entries. He is a regular presenter at national and international conventions on various topics and subjects and is an active in many professional organizations. He is currently involved in international service, writing, editing, training, networking, reflecting on world events, and building bridges and better understanding among various societies and communities.