

Faith and Resiliency

Hunter Bethea, Eric Mayo, Kacey Smit

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Dr. Darrin Griffin, Advisor

The University of Alabama

Authors Note:

Hunter Bethea, Eric Mayo, and Kacey Smit are undergraduate students in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Alabama. Dr. Darrin Griffin acted as the faculty advisor on this project that was conducted during an independent study course.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kacey Smith, Communication Studies, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35401
Contact: kesmit@crimson.ua.edu

Abstract

Resiliency has been defined as the ability to bounce back from difficult situations and circumstances. Many different elements have been found to affect an individual's personal resiliency. In the study, the researchers looked at how an individual's faith, or their affiliation with a faith-based organization, may affect their ability to be resilient. Interviews were conducted. Within each of the interviews conducted, the participants mentioned the topics of meditation (or prayer), self-disclosure and vulnerability, and the aspect of community as factors leading to their own personal resilience. The participants all saw their faith base as a major factor in the development of their personal resiliency, and considered it a resource during difficult circumstances.

Keywords: resiliency, faith, meditation, self-disclosure, vulnerability, community

Faith and Resiliency

The idea of an individual's personal resiliency has become a popular topic recently (Taormina, 2015). Researchers have found many factors that aid in a person's ability to be resilient through difficult situations and circumstances. Factors such as a person's environment, background, and personal health have been found to affect their ability to be resilient, both positively and negatively (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2015). In order to better understand the idea of resiliency, it is necessary to understand how individuals develop and draw from it. Religion and faith are often sources of refuge for hurting and struggling people. This being said, can faith also be a place of strength and encouragement to overcome adversity?

Resiliency

Resilience is "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 425) or, in other words, bouncing back from a tough circumstance. We see resilience everywhere in our daily lives, from ecosystems (Folke, Holling, Perrings, 1996), to natural disasters (Adger, Hughes, Folke, Carpenter, & Rockström, 2005), to overcoming the loss of a loved one (Bonanno, 2005). For resilience to be displayed, however, two conditions must be present. The first is a threat or actual adversity, commonly called setbacks or obstacles. Next, a person must respond positively to a threat or adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Without these two conditions, resilience cannot be displayed.

Studies have shown that many traits and actions can improve an individual's resilience, such as disclosure (Zoellner & Feeny, 2013), volunteerism (Kent, Davis, & Reich, 2013), forgiveness (Coomber, 2015), and music (Kent, Davis, & Reich, 2013). One of the most common themes of resilience is the importance other people play in increasing one's resilience

(Chaskin, 2007). Many of these different traits and actions are found in a faith-based community, which individuals often rely on when difficult times arise. This study looks to connect the idea of personal resiliency with and individual's faith-base.

Faith

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines faith as strong belief or trust in someone or something; the belief in the existence of God; strong religious feelings or beliefs; a system of religious beliefs. That is, faith is the belief of a higher power. O'hear (2013) notes that faith is the belief that behind everyday life, there is a transcending power that is unconfined by time and space. Often, people who are committed to a faith base dedicate time, resources, and energy to the pursuit of their faith. Depending on the religion or faith in question, individuals dedicate themselves for various reasons, such as heaven, an afterlife, good karma, etc. (Gervais, 2011).

Resiliency & Faith

According to Shelley Long (2011), research shows that a person's resilience is more prevalent if they engage in an active faith journey. She notes that previous researchers, such as Masten and colleagues (1990), found that those who engaged with a faith and a followed a higher power found them to be "protective factors." Long (2011) discusses how crisis moments can turn into positives for people of faith in a unique way as they participate in their faith. This can be seen as people of faith engage in steps, social support, prayer/mediation, music, self disclosure, etc., that are the same as resiliency.

Method

To ensure balance between academia and faith communities, the investigators chose to interview two professors, two campus pastors, and a university staff member working with campus ministries. This study received Institutional Review Board approval. The investigators

emailed each individual asking if they were willing to participate in the study by sitting down for a 30-45 minutes interview. Four of the individuals emailed back, agreeing to participate in the study. The three investigators met with each participant at a location and a time of the participant's choosing. The participants were not prompted of any questions before the interview so that their responses were not influenced by outside research and instead, were based on the participant's knowledge and previous experiences. Each investigator took notes on paper of the participants' comments and responses. These notes were not shared with anyone other than the other investigators to maintain confidentiality. Each participant's interview started with the following question: "What relationship do you see between faith and resiliency?" After the participant's response was recorded by hand, the investigators asked questions in relation to the participant's previous responses, making the questions different for each participant. After the interview was completed, the participants read a release form and gave verbal consent for the information they shared to discuss in this paper, using pseudonyms instead of their real names.

Participants

Lawrence, a male in his 30s, works as a campus pastor for a University of Alabama campus ministries with approximately 100 students. Lawrence has been in ministry over five years and is in his first year as a campus pastor, though he has past experience serving as a pastor at a church in northern Alabama. He is gifted in starting new churches focused on individuals who have been unchurched or de-churched throughout their lives.

Stephanie, a female, works as an instructor at the University of Alabama teaching communication courses, which she has been doing for the past four years. She also has four years of experience as a professor at another larger university. She teaches courses in oral

interpretation and interpersonal communication. She has also shown interest in teaching a course about communication and faith, which is why the researchers chose to interview her.

Robert, a male in his 60s works as an associate professor at the University of Alabama teaching religious studies courses with a department of religious studies. Robert has received multiple doctoral degrees and has been teaching college students since the 1980s. Robert has maintained an active role in his faith community over the years. Due to the nature of the courses he teaches his experiences have been appropriately shared in his classes leading the researchers to include him in this study.

Joshua, a male in his 40s, works as a campus pastor for one of the local university's campus ministries. He has masters of divinity and is currently pursuing a doctorate of theology. He has worked to develop discipleship curriculum for college students.

Results

Participant interviews began with the prompt: "In what ways do you believe a personal faith base affects resiliency?" From that point, the researchers continued the interview based on the responses of the participants, i.e. asking them to elaborate on statements made and linking ideas back to resiliency. During each interview, the researchers took separate notes on the participant responses. After all interviews were complete, the researchers compared individual notes from each interview, and pulled themes that were prevalent throughout. They found that the participants of the study had multiple ideas on how faith intersects with an individual's ability to be resilient. Among other suggestions, each interviewee stated that they see the concepts of meditation (or prayer), self-disclosure and open vulnerability, and community as influencing factors in their ability to be resilient.

Meditation and Prayer

Throughout the course of our interviews we found that prayer was one of the elements of faith and resiliency most mentioned. Each participant pointed to specific examples of how their prayer life has played a role in their healing process or allowed them to get through specific situations. When questioned about his experience, Joshua told us that prayer was necessary for his resiliency journey. He said that daily prayer and time meditating in the scriptures was essential for him. In doing these things he says that he is able to prepare for the moments he will need to be resilient going forward. Joshua says that “planning resilience for the unknown” allows him to be more confident and also allows an easier bounce back for him. He also shared with us that he participated in meditating through journaling and that that allows him to look back and find themes in his experiences thus far. This, similar to the writings of Denis (2007), allows him to find meaning in his experiences and to use them to move forward.

Stephanie’s approach to prayer is very different. In her experience she does not use prayer as a tool to get through the hardest parts of her experience, but rather she returns to it as the final element of her personal healing. This approach shows that, regardless of the placement in the process, that prayer and meditation majorly benefits the participant in their healing.

Lawrence had yet another experience that differed from the group. He spoke much of God’s calling and how mediating and listening for the vision had helped him and the students in his ministry. His experience looked much more like traditional mediation than some of the other interviewees. He found much peace in this practice and it allowed him to have a clear vision of where he was going, regardless of the harder things he was experiencing.

Robert comes from a religious background that is founded very strongly in tradition. Many of his prayer and meditation practices are done out of religious obligation. He finds his

peace and healing in them more from the comfort the consistency offers than from the spiritual nature of praying or meditating.

Each of these experiences is different for each participant, and offers different benefits. The consistent outcome, however, is that there is always a reward for those who have participated in the praying and meditating. Each individual interviewed reported back that they, in one way or another, felt that their life was better and that they were in fact more resilient because of their prayer and meditation practices.

Self-Disclosure and Vulnerability

Self-disclosure and the process of being vulnerable was a theme throughout all of the interviews conducted. Specifically, Stephanie and Joshua not only noted that the act was beneficial, but absolutely necessary. Within faith-based communities, both Stephanie and Joshua spoke to vulnerability as a healing process, and that revealing their intimate situations to others within their community brought a sense of belonging. This agrees with the process that Brown (2012) observed in her research study. Joshua stated that human contact within a “network” or “tribe” of those pursuing the same faith was essential, noting that “individuals who have the deepest sense of worth know their biggest weaknesses”. Robert, while agreeing that vulnerability and self-disclosure is a proven technique for healing past wounds, also noted that vulnerability and opening up to a faith-based community is “A” tool or resource, not “THE” tool or resource. He agreed that while being open with others can be extremely beneficial, it is not always what the individual needs at the moment. He mentioned stories of past college students who had walked through difficult situations. In reaching out to those students he made his presence known as a safe place to discuss their situation, but allowed them the space to self-disclose when they felt ready to. This agreed with Stephanie’s ideas on self-disclosure. She mentioned a very

difficult season of life, sharing that “allowing herself to be vulnerable invoked too many difficult emotions”, and that she had to “break off small pieces to deal with at a time” in order to not be overwhelmed with those painful emotions. She did, however, state that she was not able to fully heal and “let go” of the pain until she self-disclosed what had happened.

A very interesting perception on vulnerability came to light in both Joshua and Stephanie’s interviews: that their personal vulnerability allowed for others within their faith-based communities to find healing. Stephanie mentioned the mentoring aspect of vulnerability, and that she was able to relate to others who were walking through similar situations and share her healing process as an encouragement to their situation. Lawrence made the statement “what is in your heart will always come out”, explaining that in an intimate setting such as a faith-based community, it is difficult to not open up and be vulnerable with others. All of the participants agreed that they believe it is easier to be vulnerable in a faith-based setting because of the shared ideas and goals.

Community

In each of the interviews, community was brought up, with each participant talking about the importance of community to increase resiliency. When asked what students turn to when troubles arise, both Stephanie and Robert said that students turn to each other. This agrees with what MacQueen, et. al (2001) found because students share the same “social ties” and “geographical locations or settings,” especially since college students are experiencing the same types of changes, making community even more essential (Magis, 2010). This agrees with Hanson and Jensen (2015) by showing the benefits of community for individuals in similar situations. Additionally, Robert, Joshua, and Stephanie all said that though a faith community can be the type of community to help one’s resilience, it’s not the only type of community that

can. As Stephanie said, the most important thing is to “find a place to belong”, no matter what type of community one chooses to belong.

The participants talked about many benefits to being in community. Joshua mentioned that community helps people “carry each other’s burdens.” Stephanie saw this in her own life when she needed resilience because she said that being in a faith community helped her because it gave her a way to talk about the obstacles in her life, making the mourning much easier.

One thing that came up that was not talked about in the extant research was the size of the community. Stephanie said that a smaller group is essential to improve your resiliency. She said that in large communities, it’s important to find a small community within that community. This is of important note because many faith communities have hundreds of individuals in it, meaning that many people might need to continue to find a community after finding a faith community for themselves.

Joshua and Lawrence explained that one of the reasons a faith community is effective is because every member of the community is following similar beliefs or has a common mission. When individuals have that common direction, they are naturally drawn closer together.

Finally, the community can often help individuals that are lacking in their faith and resilience when times get tough. Robert referenced the many Jewish rituals that help an individual during tough times in their life. By sticking to the rituals, an individual is able to continue to pursue their faith without having to “do it alone”. As Joshua said, in times of hardship, oftentimes one’s faith can come from the community’s faith, not their own faith.

Overall, the participants’ experiences and knowledge agreed with the literature we found. However, they were able to relate the literature’s findings to their own ministries and to the college experience.

Discussion

Meditation and Prayer

Denis (2007) discusses the role religion has played in the resiliency journey for those who have felt the effects of a civil war in the tribal area of Nxamalala. Denis notes that in a majority of interviews with the effected people that prayer is represented as a key factor in their resilience. Col. Brian Rees (2011) writes about the importance of mediation for soldiers. In his writing he discusses many different forms of meditation practiced by soldiers. Meditation can be either religious in nature or not. Either way, studies have shown that there are significant benefits to partaking in mediation and prayer. Beyond the rewards associated is the fact that there is, according to Rees, no significant costs related to meditating.

Leonard Mulcahy (2007) writes about his experience with prayer and meditation. He discusses his experience, over the course of seventeen years, with mental illness and how prayer and writing allowed him to process and come out a better person. He says, “During this long journey, spirituality has given me the resilience and the capacity to bear and live with personal pain, to accept difficulties and to find meaning in my experiences.” This ability to find meaning in life, pain, growth etc. is a key factor in using mediation and prayer as a tool for resiliency. By finding the meaning behind the occurrence the individual is able to get through the harder times with a much easier bounce back. The peace that comes from the act of praying or meditating allows the participant to more actively participate in the bounce back portion of their resiliency journey.

Self-Disclosure and Vulnerability

Brene Brown et al. (2012) states that “vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center of all human existence.” This idea of vulnerability and self-disclosure was a common theme throughout our participant interviews. Vulnerability is often seen portrayed through the act of

self-disclosure: “the verbal transmission of personal information” (Derlega and Chalkin, 1977). This act of “opening up” has been found to build resiliency and overcome harmful past experiences. All of our participants agreed that there was a release of pain or stress when they became vulnerable about their most difficult experiences. This act, however, is not generally approached lightly. Christian and Smith et al. (1993) found that individuals who self-disclosed intimate information about themselves or about stressful experiences, reacted with increased blood pressure and coronary stress. This may be explained by the observation that individuals are most vulnerable when they are fearful, anxious, or if a situation is out of control (Brown, 2012). As fear and anxiety are known to increase mental and physical stress, the act of disclosing information about, or reliving experiences of that nature are prone to bring the same mental and physical stress. However, if pushed past, the benefits of self-disclosing and being vulnerable often outweigh the pain that accompanies the act. Stephanie, our female participant, stated that she “was only able to fully move on after opening up about it.”

All individuals engage in “interpersonal boundary regulation.” This means that individuals adjust and regulate the amount of self-disclosing inputs and outputs that they allow. Depending on the relationship held with the person that they are disclosing information with, individuals will regulate the amount of intimacy shared in order to keep themselves protected from the perceived threat of exposure. This adjustment to interpersonal boundaries can often be the act that defines the “type” of relationship held between individuals (Derlega and Chalkin, 1977). This speaks to the almost family-like relationships formed within a faith-based setting, as described by our participants. When they decided that their community of faith was a safe place to self-disclose, their relationships with other members of the faith base deepened. Recently, the increased popularity and use of social media has created a platform for public self-disclosure

(Bazarova, 2014). Taddei and Contena et al. (2013) explain that social media provides a space of “perceived control” over information disclosed, allowing individuals to feel more protected as they share intimate information. Because individuals are not face-to-face with their peers, they are willing to disclose deeper thoughts through the medium of a social networking site. Brown (2012) notes that vulnerability is a search for “belonging and acceptance”, and found that the individuals who admitted to self-disclosing with friends and family, also identified most as being happy with their lives.

Community

MacQueen, et al. (2001) define community as “a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings.” Communities can be used to better an individual, as evidenced through improved health (Hanson and Jensen, 2015), safer neighborhoods (Ellis, et al., 2015), and greater resiliency (Norris, et al., 2008). Community is extremely important in environments “characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise” (Magis, 2010), making community extremely important to college students as they transition from adolescence to adulthood and from dependency to independence. Community is especially beneficial for those who are in community with individuals in similar circumstances (Hanson and Jensen, 2015). What makes community so effective in improving the life of an individual is the encouragement and exchanging of ideas and experiences they get from each other, meaning that frequent and consistent contact with the community is vital for the individuals (Bellair, 1997).

Conclusion and Future Directions

When exploring the relationship between faith and resiliency, the researchers learned of the importance of faith-based communities in strengthening an individual's resiliency. Faith-based communities are important because they create a sense of community for a struggling individual and because they offer a safe space in which to self-disclose and be vulnerable. It also surrounds an individual with similar individuals that can relate to the struggles they are facing and offer encouragement and hope. Furthermore, as Robert noted, it is often with others in the same faith-based community that an individual participates in traditions. In contrast to faith-based communities, the researchers also discovered the importance of the very intimate and private practice of prayer and meditation. This teaches that while resiliency can be strengthened with the help of others, there are certain practices and disciplines that an individual can do to help themselves in times of trouble.

Because of the broad nature of this study, many new directions are opened up to explore relating to the connection between faith and resiliency. As Stephanie mentioned, it is important that when in a large community, an individual is able to find a community within that large community. Future research should explore how an individual finds a smaller community within a large community. Additionally, research should be conducted to find how prayer and meditation benefits an individual. Furthermore, studies should be conducted to find the most appropriate and beneficial times to self-disclose. By exploring these areas in more depth, researchers can learn how each aspect of this study is used to benefit an individual.

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