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Review of *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*  
by Ann S. Masten


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BOOK REVIEW

## Resilience close up

*Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*, by Ann S. Masten  
(New York: Guilford, 2014), ISBN 978-1-4625-1716-9, hardcover, 370 pp., \$75

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The notion of risk has been a mainstay of research in child development for decades. Studying and understanding risk have led to important discoveries that have informed policy and practice, particularly for children living in situations where risk is abundant. More recently, there has been attention to cumulative risk, or the idea that single indicators of risk – for example, poverty, hunger, and home insecurity – tend to co-occur. Individuals and families facing higher levels of cumulative risk are thought to have compounded problems, regardless of the risks themselves, because these multiple stressors together wear down a family's resources and ability to combat the forces of risk.

Resilience, the flip side of risk, is the focus of *Ordinary Magic* by Ann S. Masten. Although children facing higher levels of risk tend to have negative outcomes, there are some who defy the odds. These individuals are resilient, demonstrating characteristics within themselves and their environments that give them some advantages or resources to ward off the negative effects of risk. Resilience in human development received scholarly attention as early as 1985 with Michael Rutter's paper in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* entitled "Resilient in the face of adversity: Protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorders." Masten is one of a few scholars still working who have been conducting work in the area of resilience since its inception, and this book charts the trajectory of the field through the microcosm of Masten's work. As such, *Ordinary Magic* provides a comprehensive view of the past several decades of resilience research in an accessible way.

Masten has identified resilience as arising "from ordinary resources and processes" (p. 3). She notes that the interest in sources of human resilience has never been greater, as we face an ever-increasing tide of human-made and natural catastrophes, as well as rising human population and dwindling resources. *Ordinary Magic* is organized in four parts. Part 1 includes an introduction to the concept of resilience and the models of resilience. Here, Masten links resilience directly to developmental science and discusses competence in the life course. There is also coverage of person- and variable-centered models of resilience with a focus on the ways that cutting-edge research methods have been able to merge these models to take advantage of the benefits of both approaches. Part 2 is comprised of descriptions of studies of individual resilience, including studies of homeless children and those who

have suffered from situations of extreme adversity, such as natural disasters. Part 3, the lengthiest section of this book, is focused on adaptive systems such as internal characteristics and environmental supports that promote resilience. Finally, Part 4 takes us forward with implications for prevention and intervention, particularly in early childhood, and ideas for future work.

One of the most useful and interesting aspects of this volume is Masten's thorough attention to the history and development of the area of resilience research. She placed herself at the epicenter of some of the most groundbreaking research in the 1970s and 1980s and created a firsthand, front-row perspective from any emerging issues in resilience. As a result, this intimate view has allowed her to present readers with a relatively unique insight into the etiology and development of some of the more impactful longitudinal studies in the field.

Masten's account of the origins and history of the Project Competence Longitudinal Study (PCLS) serves not only as an insider's view of a highly influential study and numerous noteworthy publications but also as a detailed, real-world example of what it is like to be a critical part of a team shepherding a large-scale, multi-year study. As she describes her collaborations with Norman Garmezy and other members of a talented group at the University of Minnesota, we get a picture of the project that is detailed enough to be an excellent general overview of longitudinal study design and methodology for scholars and, especially, for graduate students learning the ropes. Through her clear and logically presented initial history of the area and the careful attention to the theoretical groundwork, we follow the collaborative and sometimes serendipitous path of a major research undertaking. Researchers familiar with large-scale longitudinal studies will see the PCLS introduction in Chapter 3 as a resonant description of how smart researchers develop good studies. The PCLS emerged from a study that was originally not even intended to be longitudinal, yet went on to produce a large, seminal set of developmental findings. Her description of the development of some of the key study features and measures also serves as an example of how careful attention to study design and data collection, in process, can help generate flexible, adaptive research strategies. She describes examples of how this approach helped her capitalize on the strengths and improve on the weaknesses of their

work – challenges that are inherent to large, long-term studies. This is a clear example of how even the best-designed longitudinal work benefits from analyses of the emerging data and thoughtful management.

A particular example Masten presented in this book is focused on one of the most interesting and complex aspects of resiliency – that of nailing down the specific criteria researchers and participants use to define *competence*. Without a clear understanding of what all the parties involved mean by competence, efforts to describe patterns of resilience within and across groups quickly become fuzzy at best. Masten and colleagues took advantage of some interdisciplinary cross-pollination via collaboration with a young anthropologist. Eric Durbrow helped the team develop a new, interview-based procedure where interviewees' descriptions of competence were sorted into factors that were then used to define the implicit criteria the group had used to judge competent behaviors/outcomes. Three broad categories of competence emerged: subjective well-being, accomplishments, and financial achievements. These factors remain central to conceptions of competence and resilience today, having demonstrated reliability and validity in many subsequent analyses. They also serve as a conceptual and methodological example of how researchers establish and maintain useful sets of constructs and measures within the inherently dynamic contexts of long-term longitudinal studies. These and other examples of measure and study development that Masten carefully describes function as valuable learning tools for graduates and emerging scholars ready to wade into similar research contexts.

Another key strength of this text is the attention to adaptive systems. Chapter 6 includes a compelling table of the “short list” of factors that consistently emerge as indicators of resilience – some factors are environmental (e.g., effective parenting, effective schools) and some are child characteristics (e.g., self-control, motivation to succeed). The fact that decades of research in resilience can be distilled into a “short list” is at once helpful and surprising. Certainly it suggests that there are specific areas that can be targets of intervention work to promote better developmental outcomes for individuals most at risk. Masten then extends the information in this short list with leading edge neurobiological research that supports some of the adaptive systems, such as attachment, executive functions, and stress regulation.

The last three chapters of the section on adaptive systems are focused on key contexts in which development occurs: families, schools, and culture. What is fascinating here is the extent to which Masten and her collaborators have been able to gain access to very at-risk children and their families, follow them over time, and gain insight into their experiences in multiple contexts. There is careful and thorough treatment of aspects in each context, without delving too deeply into any one area. An enlightening component of the chapter on cultural context was discussion of the “immigrant paradox,” where first-generation immigrant youth tend to fare better

than their offspring. The hypothesis is that there may be culturally based resiliency that is lost with succeeding generations as they become distanced from their culture of origin. Or it could be that resiliency is grounded in the exceptional qualities of the individuals who choose to immigrate.

One looming issue that seemed to surround this volume, and yet was only obliquely addressed, is that of our incomplete understanding of potential domain-specific aspects and effects of the larger social and political contexts that surround exposure to adversity. While it is clear that a detailed examination of the social and political aspects of the origins of threat covered here would be beyond the scope of this volume, there was limited treatment of contextual differences in exposure to given adverse events for different ethnic or cultural groups. Effects on adversity and resilience, for example, likely co-vary with exposure to political or economic discrimination and these potential effects appear to be key in understanding related processes. The volume describes multiple aspects and examples of different types or sources of adversity, of course, and these are useful cases for students of resilience to think about. However, as social and political systems impact the resources available to stressed individuals and communities, some critical aspects of the larger contexts of resiliency for under-represented and/or oppressed communities were only briefly or tangentially addressed in this volume.

We know, for example, that there are larger socio-political effects on individuals and social capital available to victims of adversity and subsequent effects on levels of motivation and self-efficacy, and these are likely to have causal impacts on resiliency processes. Masten's well thought through descriptions of resiliency as located in specific communities and contexts seems to beg for more detailed and in-depth descriptions of the potential differences in resiliency in contexts with varying levels of supportive (vs. stressful) social and political structures. She gave excellent examples of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of resiliency to date, and this aspect of the research will benefit from further collaborations with sociologists, political scientists, and economists who may add more detail regarding relevant contextual effects across broader arenas.

Masten's new volume is an important contribution to the field and should find a good home on the bookshelf of researchers seeking relevant history and a clear, concise overview of research in resilience and current directions in intervention from the perspective of Masten and her colleagues. It is clearly not meant to function as a handbook and that is likely a strength of the work. Using a narrower and sharper focus, Masten builds on the history and case studies she knows so well to present us with a focused, thematic discussion of the key concepts, constructs and future issues surrounding resiliency research. As such, *Ordinary magic* will also likely find its way into developmental courses, where it would be a welcome addition. Readers will benefit from following the story via the arc of Masten's impressive career and her vision for future research and intervention.