The social ecology of resilience: A comparison of Chinese and Western researches

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Abstract

Purpose of study: Resilience is a positive developmental phenomenon of regaining psychological balance under adversity. This article explores the differences on theoretical model of resilience and its social ecology influence in western and Chinese culture.

Methods: Reviewing recent researches on resilience, studied 17 English and 11 Chinese critical articles through literature analysis.

Results: Western studies on resilience have been consisted by individual characteristic, or external protective factors, and then the co-existence of the two. Now the models emphasize their interactions and ecology influence including four levels, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. Chinese literatures emphasize external protective factors in the formation of resilience, specifically individual interactions with microsystem which show significant effects and the mesosystem interactions.

Conclusions: The theoretical model of resilience has a consensus in both Western and Chinese culture, and there are significant differences on its social ecology influence. Recommendations: Resilience can be better understood when we explore further on the interaction mechanisms between individual characteristics and protective factors.

Keywords: Social ecology, psychological resilience, comparison

1. Introduction

Resilience is a psychological developmental phenomenon of regaining psychological balance under significant adversity. Ever since Werner and Smith published their research on resilience thirty years ago(Werner & Smith, 1982), most studies commonly agree adversity as a prerequisite in the occurrence of resilience, ambiguity continues regarding what is the essential factor of resilience, individual characteristic or its interaction with external protective factors. From a social ecology perspective, studies combined individual and the environment factors on four levels,
microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem interactions. This article discusses the differences on the theoretical model of resilience and its social ecology influence in western and Chinese culture from a social ecology perspective.

2. Bio-psycho-social-ecological system theory and psychological resilience

Bio-social-ecological system theory was proposed by Bronfenbrenner on children development in 1979, which suggests that the environment has major effect on adolescent development. Individuals interact with the environment and get psychological development. Bronfenbrenner suggests that the ecological system is the environment which people live in everyday and it can be divided into four levels, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem interactions. Microsystem is the family or school in which individuals face and interact with their parents, teachers, peers every day. Most studies focus on microsystem interactions because of which interact with individuals directly, so they have significant effects on psychological resilience development. Mesosystem refers to interactions among the factors in the microsystem except the individual himself/herself. These interactions determine the possibility that individuals can obtain social supports, so the quality of mesosystem is very important to adaptation and positive development when adversity appears in one’s life, which has a major effect on the development of psychological resilience. It is obvious that children’s home environment can influence their confidence and peer relationships at school. Exosystem is the institutional environment in which individuals live in, such as social services and the resources that community can provide. Macrosystem refers to the culture, policy, law which are the features of the society in which people grow and socialize. Different exosystem can lead to different processes of resilience development, more and more studies have made efforts on this level of social ecology.

The development of psychological resilience is very complicated, it is the dynamic adaptation process between individuals and the environment, different levels of social environment and the factors from different ecological system interact in the resilience process, each of them has its specific influences.

3. Western studies on resilience

Western studies on resilience begin on the case studies of individuals under significant adversities but unexpectedly well-developed in their lives. The field has always been thriving ever since resilience became an important research field decades ago. The development of resilience models have three phases: the personal traits, external protective factors, the interactions between individual traits and protective factors.

In the beginning of resilience studies, researchers believe that resilience is individual traits that make people have positive developmental outcomes(Anthony, 1987; Kumpfer, 2002; Masten, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1982). From this perspective, researchers focus on the internal factors of resilience formation, they see resilience as individual ability or characteristic, including physical features and psychological traits.

When external factors show impacts on the process of resilience, some researchers tend to focus on the resources that one can get for supportive purpose. External protective factors refer to the resources from the family and social organizations (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Hawkins have found evidences that social supports from parents or teachers, individuals’ perception of supports, and beliefs are important to good academic performance(Hawkins, 2011).

As researches on resilience revealed that external resources can be compensations when individuals cannot cope with the adversity all by oneself. So the combination of individual factors and external protective factors became the mainstream of resilience studies. Researchers believe that both internal and external supportive factors are so important that facilitate individuals have a positive development in the process of facing adversities(Masten, 1994; Rutter, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1982).

The interactive model of resilience including both individual and external protective factors describes the dynamic adaptation of how one cope with disadvantaged situations. Kumper proposed a comprehensive model based on social ecology theory and person-process-environment model. In Kumper’s model, whether one can cope
with adversities resiliently depends on the environment one lives in and the dynamic feature of the interactions among the environment, individual factors, consequences of adversity. Interactions with the environment could help children change the high risk environment to the protective one (Skinner, Matthews, & Burton, 2005).

4. Chinese studies on resilience

Resilience studies in Chinese have a short history for about ten years, according to published articles we can tell that researches have become more specific, most researches focus on three dimensions, the influencing factors of resilience development, the resilience formation process and the resilience intervention methods. The influencing factors have drawn most of the researchers’ attention and the other two have only been in the fields for a short time. We have found that resilience studies in Chinese literatures focused on interactions of individual factors and external protective factors, and most of the articles emphasized that the external protective factors’ supportiveness cannot be revealed with the absence of individual traits in the formation and development process of resilience. Chinese researchers have found that the individual traits included self-esteem, positive coping strategy (ZHANG H O, 2012), positive thinking style (FENG W M, 2011; GE G Y, 2010). In the studies of external protective factors they have revealed that the resources can be very diverse, such as supportive factors from the family, attachment style, parent rearing patterns (GE G Y, 2010; H, 2009). Some psychologists have also studied both factors, individual and external, relying on psychometric method in the need of discovering the construct of resilience (Hu Y Q, 2008; LI H L, 2008).

5. Comparison from social ecology perspective

The main difference of resilience studies in Western and Chinese literatures is the focus of different social ecology levels. Western studies have been pulling efforts on all four levels of the environment individuals live in, Chinese studies mainly focused on the interactions of microsystem and exosystem. Researches of psychological resilience in western countries stemmed from the concentration on the children development in high risk family environment of microsystem interactions. The former researchers regarded the family environment as a risk factor which impeded the healthy development of individuals. From the individual-centered research paradigm, in the same high risk environment, the main factor that leads to the difference of peoples’ healthy development is the people’s positive personality diversity (Anthony, 1987), like self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, problems solving abilities and so on. Werner, Garmezy and Rutter who emphasized the external protective factors then began to concern how family environment helped children dealing with pressures positively, and found that in microsystem interactions of high risk family environment, parents’ rearing patterns, attachment, relationship of parents and how they deal with the adverse situation are all very crucial for the shaping of the positive personality of the children (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1982). Masten’s research indicated that the interaction between individuals’ positive traits and family environment increases individuals’ ability to cope with the pressure, it was beneficial to the development of psychological resilience (Masten, 2001).

Researchers in China followed the Western perspective, the research results in Chinese literatures indicated that in the microsystem interactions, high quality relationship of parents in family improved individuals’ ability to cope with and adapt to pressures (XI, 2006), which had positive effects on the formation and development of psychological resilience.

In the study of GAN Y Q and her colleagues, they found that parents’ respect and supportiveness are the important elements for the formation and development of teenagers’ psychological resilience (Hu Y Q, 2008). This result was similar as ZHANG H Q’s study about the parent-absent children of psychological resilience. As individuals grow, their microsystem interactions expending gradually. Children’s microsystem is limited to the family system, when they grown into juvenile and post-juvenile period, schools, teachers and peers are becoming the main factors of their microsystem. ZHANG H Q also found that possessing a meaningful interpersonal relationship from peers or teachers is helpful for individuals to deal with stress, and found that parent-absent
children benefited from communication with their parents and supportiveness from their grandparents, those who had benefits mentioned above was resilient (ZHANG, 2011).

In the studies of microsystem interactions, Western researchers have focused on the resilience of children, they’ve shown that positive factors in family system could facilitate the development of resilience. Chinese researchers have investigated the psychological resilience of parent-absent children, teenagers and college students, and they’ve found more influencing factors besides family factors, such as teachers, classmates and other social support. They both suggested that positive family atmosphere, positive parents’ rearing pattern, safe attachment are important factors in the development of resilience. In the study of college students, Guo F revealed that comparing to others, students who have been growing in warm-cultured parenting environment had significant higher resilience (GUO F, 2012).

As researchers found the interactions between individual traits and external protective factors in the development of resilience, they revealed that individuals who have positive traits often grew up in a positive family. Individuals are more likely to have close friends or good teacher-student relationship. From social ecology perspective, we believe that the factors in microsystem such as family, teachers, peers, interact with each other which have been defined as mesosystem interactions that facilitate the formation and development of individual resilience. The author have done an qualitative research on resilient individuals, one of the results shows that students who have been growing in warm-cultured parenting are more likely to respect others and show sympathy in interpersonal relationships, so they are more likely to have positive and supportive experiences. Furthermore, this could lead the teachers and peers have a positive evaluation to the individual and their family, and facilitate positive communication between them and the family on the events that individual faces, so they may all together make efforts to offering social supports (Ping Wang, 2012).

The factors from exosystem, such as community and social service interact with individuals, support them and improve their resilience in the occurrence of adversity. Donnon and his colleague have revealed that social cohesiveness, community support are important external supportive resources in resilience development (Donnon & Hammond, 2007). We have found that social support from social service organizations, relatives or friends, and parents’ employers are very effective facilitators of resilience when individuals face adversities in our research on college students with low socioeconomic status. Such kind of support, either material or psychological, gives them strength and persistence to conquer the disadvantage (Ping Wang, 2012). Guangyu Ge Guangyu has studied on high school students’ resilience, it shows that there are regional disparities on the level of resilience (GE G Y, 2010), the results can be accounted for the different educational resources that the school can provide in different areas. Some studies also show that resilience level of college students who grew up in countries are much higher than those grew up in the cities (LEI W S, 2008; ZHANG, 2011), we suggest that maybe students grew up in countries have more experiences of facing disadvantages so they gradually gain more resilience. But Guo Feng and his colleagues have found that there is no difference of resilience depending on the region difference, students from the cities have less family support but higher interpersonal support (GUO F, 2012). We believe that parents in countryside have high expectation on their child so they give them more support. On the other side, students from the cities are likely know more methods to get support outside their family. Based on an interview study of college students, it appears that students from the countryside have more attention and support from government and the society as they are disadvantaged. Students from the cities are more likely have less resource or support. The significant difference of study results in this area may be related with the magnificent difference of ecology environment between cities and countries in China, the regional difference of resilience needs further attention and efforts.

Community and NGO support in exosystem is an important facilitator of individual resilience in western, people get support directly from the external environment. Differently, handful Chinese studies of exosystem suggest that Chinese are more likely to get social support from their family system, parents’ colleagues, and schools which provide government or public funding. This indicates that the collectivism have determined the exosystem interaction at certain extent in China. Recently, community, government and NGOs are becoming significant facilitators when adversities happen in one’s life, e.g. disasters or accidents (Cross, 2003), however there are few studies on resilience effects.
Macrosystem influences our lives despite we want or not, western studies already suggest that policy and law can effect psychological resilience development, Chinese researchers haven’t consider this ecological level yet. US government has improved the protection level of the under age through laws of education, labor and employment. What the government have done decreases the environment risk and has positive effects on individual resilience(Davydov, Stewart, Ritchie, & Chaudieu, 2010; Freeman et al., 2006; Harris, 2007). There is only one article that explored the effects on resilience from Confucian culture, the results showed that positive perception of adversity and emphasizing the importance of taking responsibility reinforced individual’s resilience(LI T R, 2012). After decades of the one-child policy, substantial amounts of Chinese families have only one child, they tend to have lower resilience comparing to those who have siblings. One explanation is that siblings can provide more family support and available resources (JIANG X M, 2012; LEI W S, 2008). We believe that the distinction at this point can be accounted for the difference of their external ecology environment. In the study of college students by Lei Wansheng, female students show significant higher resilience than male students, this is similar as Hannah and Morrissey ’s study (Hannah & Morrissey, 1987). Resilience level of freshmen and senior students are significantly lower than the level of sophomore and junior (LEI W S, 2008), we suggest that an possible explanation based on the consideration of the external environment, freshmen need to adapt to the new school environment and seniors must face the tough job market.

From the social ecology perspective, we’ve revealed that (1) there is no difference on the effects of microsystem and mesosystem in different countries, we all agreed that ecological factors from family, peers and schools have positive effects. (2) There are significant differences on the study of exosystem, individuals get social support from community and social services to facilitate their resilience development in western, but in China people are more likely to get social support from their family system. (3) There are four major findings on macrosystem, a) religious belief can facilitate ones’ resilience in western countries, but in China we have Confucian culture which has the same effects on individual resilience. b) Female has higher resilience level than male in both cultures. c) The only child has lower resilience comparing to those who have siblings in China. d) Resilience level have a backward U distribution, resilience of freshmen and senior students are lower than that of sophomore and juniors.

6. Recommendation

This article discusses the differences on studies of resilience formation and development processes in different cultures, Western and Chinese. There are some evident differences on the influencing factors, individual or external. But it can be hard to get further deeper comparison because of the discrepancy of the research participants, and the definition of psychological resilience. We suggest that future studies on resilience should consider more influencing factors from divergent perspective to overcome such limitations.

6.1. Social ecology perspective

Resilience is a complex structure, and there are many factors influencing the development process, further study should not just focus on social psychology factors as we already have, but also have a compensatory consideration based on the social ecology perspective. Chinese studies should consider more of the four levels of social ecology, especially the effects of community and other exosystem factors in resilience development, we don’t have any study in this area by far. And also, we should explore the role that government policy, law, culture plays in psychological resilience, i.e. how the macrosystem influences individual resilience development.

6.2. Bio-social-psychology perspective

Resilience is not just a social psychology phenomenon but also a bio-psychology process, further research should explore the biological mechanism of resilience through genetic study or event-related potential method. Furthermore, we could investigate how these three levels, bio-social-psychology, interact and influence the development of individual resilience.
6.3. Culture diversity

There is evident discrepancy existing on the influencing factors of resilience in Western and Chinese studies. Culture clearly plays a very important role in resilience development, further study should pull more effort on culture diversity and environment differences in the investigation of resilience mechanism, for example, the interactive dynamic process of individual traits and external protective factors.

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