

Resilience and Generosity- Studies in Survival

Abstract

The individual's psychological resilience - the ability to 'bounce back' or regain form after great strain – may make the difference between integration and disintegration for refugee survivors of human rights abuseⁱ. Resilience is an extensive and growing field of study: a Web-search for the term produced 332,000 hits, including a current definition: "ability to adapt well to unexpected changes and events".ⁱⁱ Research indicates various factors that may play in to the resilience of refugee survivors who are successfully rehabilitated. A sense of coherence, work or meaningful activity, the continuity of cultural practices, religious beliefs, social network, family coherence, "steeling" through earlier traumatic experience are some examples.ⁱⁱⁱ Survivors' perspectives on their own recoveries are more uncommon, however. What do *they* think has contributed most to their survival after experiences known to destroy lives?

The article reports from the pilot phase of a study of successfully rehabilitated refugee survivors of war, concentration camps, and human rights abuses, based on an analysis of their biographical narratives. In recent years the focus of research on survival has slowly shifted from 'misery' to 'mastering' – from the study of problems to the study of resilient behaviour, from risk factors to protective factors, and from therapy to efforts to strengthen competency.^{iv} The final goal for the study is to develop hypotheses, grounded in the narratives, that may be of use for the substantive area of sociological inquiry constituted by patient care and psychosocial work with this vulnerable group. Mapping agents' methods for survival and triangulating their narratives, their interpretations, and social theory are hoped to contribute to new ways of working with refugees as clients and patients.

This is a qualitative study, dealing as it does with biographical memories, thoughts, and feelings. The methodological basis is dialogue and participant observation among a population of Cambodian refugees who have made a remarkable recovery against all odds and in spite of a heavy load of traumatic experiences.

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ⁱ Michael Rutter, "Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms", in Rolf, J. (ed.) *Risk and Protective Factors in the Development of Psychopathology*, (New York: Cambridge Univ.Press, 1990).
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Aaron Antonovsky, *Unravelling the Mystery of Health*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

Helen Christie and Trine Waaktaar, *Styrk sterke sider: Håndbok i resilience grupper for barn med psykososiale belastninger*, (Oslo: Kommuneforlaget, 2000).

ⁱⁱ American Psychological Association, <http://helping.apa.org/resilience/war/html> (accessed February 10, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ Aaron Antonovsky, *Unravelling the Mystery of Health*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

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^{iv} Anne Borge, *Resiliens – risiko og sunn utvikling*, (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2003):35, my translation.