
HOW SPIRITUALITY LEADS TO RESILIENCE

A CASE STUDY OF IMMIGRANTS

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Abstract

Spirituality and religion usually influence how a person lives, how he or she reacts to stressful situations and how well and how quickly a person recovers from emotional strain. People with a spiritual or religious orientation may view a variety of life's areas as sacred and thus seek help when they feel their physical and emotional well-being is threatened. Some may view life through such a filter as the one above. They believe there is an ultimate purpose for them, and they glean hope from that belief even in the most tragic and distressing of circumstances. A spiritual or religious orientation is associated with better mental health. It can help increase self-esteem, find meaning in life, improve family and special relationships, decrease drug and alcohol abuse and lead to less sexual promiscuity. Spirituality provides a moral compass to help navigate life.

Keywords: spirituality, resilience, immigrants, study of religion, mental health

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to ascertain the exact mechanisms through which spirituality leads to resilience in the context of immigrants. In order to achieve this objective, it is important to comprehend the two concepts both lexically and as they have been defined by previous works. Moreover, it will be overtly critical to understand the spirituality-resilience nexus with a view to understanding how spirituality does influence resilience and if there exist some intervening factors. Various psychological theories of human development will also be reviewed to ascertain their applicability in explaining how immigrants acquire resilience (as a characteristic/human attribute) due to spirituality (as a social and cultural factor).

Spirituality refers to a universal phenomenon that is intrinsic to human beings and majorly manifests during certain periods in a human being's life when they seek meaning, transcendence and purpose in life. In the recent times, the constructs of spirituality have attracted research attention as being significant in cultivating resilience at a time when it is needed most in an individual's life. Spirituality, on a more general perspective, is anchored on the belief that there is more to human existence that can be conceived physically. Theoretical

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perspectives as well as empirical studies suggest that spirituality does in fact, lead to resilience by augmenting an individual's adaptability to various circumstances [1]. "It offers an existential anchor in the universal order of things that will bring about a new quality of relationships among human beings, a new quality of human mutuality, in which the human individual will cease to be a mere instrument on the path of other's success." [2] Resilience, on the other hand, refers to the ability to recover substantially from adversities of life. Similarly, resilience refers to the capability to adapt successfully in the face of various atrocities and challenges [3]. More aptly, "resilience is the capacity of an individual to grow and even develop despite being in very difficult situations" [4]. Essentially, what comes out clearly from the several definitions of resilience is that it is a process that requires an internal drive in order to be successful. Research has shown that spirituality has usually been a convenient drive for resilience. What's more, resilience is not an attribute that individuals can either have or not, it is an attribute that is acquired through learning which at times is deliberate or derived [5].

2. The spirituality-resilience nexus

In order to establish how spirituality influences resilience, it is important to investigate the relationship between the two concepts. Literature in this discipline is replete with information concerning the relationship between spirituality and resilience. There seems to have been established a consensus that there indeed exists a relationship between the two concepts only that the direction of causality is not immediately clear (Vanistendael acknowledged the general agreement on existence of the relationship between spirituality and resilience only failing to ascertain the direction of causality) [4]. Moreover, the exact mechanisms through which spirituality does impact on resilience differ among literature and circumstances. Both spirituality and resilience have been found to provide a formidable resource from which individuals can strategies against challenges in life. Essentially, in as much as most empirical works show that spirituality leads to resilience which ultimately enables an individual to overcome challenges in life, both spirituality and resilience are classified as explanatory variables so far as resources needed to sustain opposition to life are concerned. Given that resilience, in itself, is a dynamic mechanism where individuals engage their attributes and resources available to them to overcome challenges of life, it is usually derived from the interconnections between the individual and his environment of spirituality, i.e. of spiritual 'embodied narratives' [6]. Therefore, in this respect, strengthening spirituality and any connotations of it positively influences the formation of resilience especially at the interacting systems level [1, 7]. Strengthening the various constructs of resilience has also been found to affect spirituality. What we have then is a mutually reinforcing mechanism between spirituality and resilience, which are so intricately related in a way that one concept, leads to the other.

There are quite a number of studies that have investigated the relationship between spirituality and resilience. Studies, in particular, have established that there exists a positive correlation between spirituality and positive outcomes majorly attributable to resilience [1]. It has been ascertained that persistent engagement with activities that are considered spiritual usually lead to resilience, which takes time to build [8]. In an extensive survey to investigate the connection between spirituality and resilience and positive outcomes, Peres observed that individuals who engaged in spiritual activities usually ended up resilient to certain problems in the society and as a result, tended to experience happiness and more fulfilments [1]. The other controversial issue in the relationship between spirituality and resilience is the direction of causality that exists between the two concepts. A majority of researchers are of the view that resilience grows out of spirituality and that the extent to which resilience is built in an individual depends on how spirituality is taught and subsequently practiced in a society [9].

Better still, there are studies that have concluded that spirituality, instead, grows out of resilience. In this view, it is resilience that causes spirituality in individuals and it essentially is a functional characteristic of resilience, which gives dimension and practical shape to resilience [9]. In spite of these espoused connections between resilience and spirituality, some studies have concluded that the link between spirituality and resilience lacks an empirical foundation and that whatever evidence there is, it is not robust enough to show that the two concepts are indeed related [10]. However, the studies examined above show that there exists a causal relationship between spirituality and resilience thereby guaranteeing the grounding of this paper [11].

3. Linking spirituality and resilience theoretically

There are several psychological and philosophical theories of spirituality and resilience that have been advanced to explain how the concepts develop and especially their interlinkages and consequences on human behaviour and mental predisposition. This section reviews some of the theories of spirituality and resilience with a view of using the theories to explain how spirituality leads to resilience in immigrants.

4. The bioecological theory of human development

Urie Bronfenbrenner originally proposed this psychological theory of human development in 1979. It is a psychological theory that acknowledges the role of environment in influencing human characteristics and adaptive mechanisms. This theory is particularly important to the endeavour of this paper because spirituality is an aspect of the human environment and it would be vital to ascertain how it can influence resilience. The theory, which is the most popular theory of human development [12], explains how environmental factors

impact on individuals' attributes using five systems namely: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and finally, chronosystem.

The microsystem refers to the immediate human environment such as school, family, religious institutions (read spirituality) and friends. According to this theory, this environment usually has the greatest impact on individual attributes and encompasses the immediate surroundings of an individual, sometimes even including the human physiology. Mesosystem refers to the interrelationships amongst the elements in a microsystem. For instance, this may involve the relationship between the family and the religious institution. The exosystem refers to the interrelationships between the environments in which individuals are not actively engaged with those in which they play a central role [13]. An instance of an exosystem is a setting in which a student may learn how to pray not from the various religious institutions, but from a peer in class. The macrosystem squarely refers to the social, political and cultural setting of an individual. This system is however relatively dynamic compared to the other three environments since a change in a generation may alter the status quo. Finally, chronosystem implies the structure of environmental events and seasons. An example of a phenomenon in this setting is a divorce or the renewed concerns about gender roles. According to this theory, each and every stratum is complete with an array of norms, which serve to structure human behavior, and development of attributes (resilience). To the study, this theory is important since it espouses spirituality (religion) as being an immediate environmental factor, which ultimately affects human attributes (resilience).

5. The psychodynamic theory of human development

This theory of human development is attributed to Sigmund Freud. The theory posits that the internal forces and dynamics within an individual (read spirituality) are usually responsible for the human actions (resilience). This theory is relevant to this study because it espouses that human beings gradually develop by striking a balance between the internal mechanisms and the exact external requirements [14]. As for the case of an immigrant, who is the primary preoccupation of this paper, he are likely to suppress his own internal states in order to respond and adapt to the new environments. According to this theory, an individual's personality is made up of three components namely: the internal drives, the ego and the super ego. The internal drive works in such a way to optimize an individual's pleasure in the immediate environment. This however, is usually manifest in children, but the situation changes as one grows up since they come into conflict with reality leading to the emergence of ego. Ego works in a similar manner as the internal drive only that it takes into account other people's needs. Ego does satisfy an individual's need through constructive and socially acceptable mechanisms, unlike the internal drive. Super-ego is the extreme of Ego in which individuals now perceive the societal values. This theory is particularly important to the endeavour of this study as it espouses that development is a continuous process, which is determined by a balance between

individual desires and the immediate societal context. This could be critical in explaining the situation of immigrants in their new homes since the balance between their internal desires and the circumstances that confront them is what determines their level of resilience.

6. Psychosocial theory

Erik Erikson (1902-1990) developed this theory. The theory proposes that social and cultural factors usually have a vital role to play in the development process of human beings. Just like is the case with the psychodynamic theory, this approach proposes that the development process in human beings is usually determined by the interplay of three distinct constructs: the somatic, ego and the societal systems. In this classification, the somatic system refers to the individual's physiology, which is necessary for survival while the ego system refers to the processes that influence human reasoning. The sociological system entails the mechanisms through which individuals become integrated into their society [15]. What makes this theory particularly important to the objectives of this paper is the proposition that each and every individual passes through the stages of development espoused above and at each stage, individuals are faced with a unique challenge, which they have to overcome to survive [16]. The implications of this premise for the immigrants, in the foreign land, will strive to overcome challenges by adapting to their new homes gradually building resilience.

Moreover, how successful an individual overcomes these challenges eventually determines the type of subsequent developments. However, what sets this theory apart from other psychological theories of development is the emphasis of social and cultural factors in development. In the context of immigrants in foreign states, this might imply the significance of spirituality as a cultural and social factor in the development of resilience. This could particularly be interesting since they are in a different cultural and sociological setting.

7. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development

Jean Piaget developed this theory of psychological development in 1971. The theory is seen to have developed most of its concepts from evolutionary theories and social Darwinism. The leading proposition of the theory is that the "individual's cognitive structures are basically adaptations which work to make knowledge an instrument of survival in the world" [17]. In this view, the individual's intelligence is viewed as a form of adaptation, which guarantees the survival of human beings. The theory is significant for the study since it recognizes that for development to occur; there is need to strike a balance between cognitive structures and the physical world. This theory has been criticized for failing to lay emphasis on the role of social and cultural factors in the human development process. However, from this paper finds the theory

useful in the sense that the explanatory variable of the study, spirituality, is at times an individual rather than a societal factor [18]. For this reason, it has been reviewed in this section of the paper.

In summary, all the theories reviewed herein have espoused that for human development to take place, there has to be a causative factor, which in most cases has been the cultural and social factors. For the purpose of this study, the development alluded to in the respective psychological theories refer to resilience while the cultural and social factors, taken together, imply spirituality in the context of this paper. This is particularly important since there is no single theory that expressly links spirituality to resilience. The following section of the paper will assess the exact mechanisms through which spirituality leads to resilience in immigrants and use the already discussed theories to explain the various channels espoused.

8. The mechanisms through which spirituality builds resilience in immigrants

Psychologists have described the process of developing resilience as a personal journey in the sense that individuals react differently to the problems in their environment. Presented below are some of the most common ways through which immigrants' spirituality have been found to influence resilience.

Spirituality is not just a norm for immigrants, but it usually serves a therapeutic function in mending feelings of emotional injury [19]. For individuals with no families or society to fit in, they are likely to go through emotional stress and mental pain in the foreign land where they seek to establish a sense of belonging. In order to adapt to life in their foreign land, there is need to ensure that they 'heal' their internal wounds and respond to the physical challenges of life. Spirituality comes in handy as the best way to console them believing that life probably has a lot more to offer. In this manner, individuals gain strength to pursue their goals and adapt to their new settings thus resilience. The mechanisms through which spirituality (religion) leads to resilience in this kind of setting is consistent with the prescriptions of the Psychodynamic Theory, which espouses that human beings gradually, develop resilience by striking a balance between the internal mechanisms and the exact external requirements. Spirituality makes it easy to strike the balance by easing the internal mechanisms (pain).

The second way through which spirituality leads to resilience for immigrants is through strengthening of personal relationships [20]. Through spirituality, which in this sense refers more to the religious aspect of it, immigrants are able to develop and strengthen personal relationships amongst themselves and beyond since it provides a common platform as they would be sharing in the same beliefs. This serves to give the immigrants some sense of belonging, which goes a long way to enabling them, adapt to the atrocities they are confronted with. This mechanism draws from the Psychosocial Theory, which stresses on the significance of social and cultural factors in developing

resilience. Similarly, by relying on the personal relationships so developed to develop resilience, this mechanism confirms the Bioecological Theory, which prescribes that an individual's immediate environment can lead to resilience (development).

Thirdly, spirituality reduces anxiety and depression. Spirituality enables individuals to believe in a world in which every need and worry they have will be taken care of. Therefore, by engaging in spirituality, for immigrants, has the effect of gagging their anxiety and depression. More aptly, "religion cushions them from the hardships and difficulties of life, albeit temporarily" [21]. By reducing their depressions, spirituality enables immigrants to live a stress-free life which enhances their adaptive capability and by extension resilience.

Spirituality enables immigrants to maintain a positive outlook. The psychological implications of maintaining a positive outlook is that individuals live an optimistic life expecting good things to happen to them. In this mechanism, immigrants are motivated to continue their struggles in spite of the current problems in the hope that things will get better. In so doing, the gradually gain resilience by implicitly adapting to the problems they face. The individuals possess concerning the 'future' as prescribed by religion, which may not be readily available to them, enables them to survive and acquire resilience [22]. This mechanism alludes to the Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development in which knowledge makes individuals 'fit' to survive.

Additionally, religion enables immigrants to accept that change is part of living. The immigrants are usually confronted with several drastic changes immediately they arrive abroad. For instance, moving from slums in third world countries to Europe is almost a culture shock [23]. Moreover, there are certain other racial, political, social and cultural changes that individuals have to put up with. For such individuals to carry on with their lives there is need to accommodate the change not as an externality, but as part of life. In most religions, life is usually conceived as a journey complete with several intermediate transitions [24]. Applying this to real life situation enables immigrants to adopt the challenges they face as normal. This has the effect of building resilience.

Finally, and more importantly, spirituality helps immigrants to change their attitude to problems in life [25]. Religion usually has the effect of making individuals stop perceiving problems as insurmountable. Essentially, that as much as challenges abound insurgency, certain problems typical for immigrants cannot be eliminated by them, but at least they can alter their thinking [20]. This usually makes the immigrants live positively even when problems seem unbearable thus resilience. The channel through which spirituality influences resilience alludes to the *Psychosocial Theory* as well as the *Psychodynamic Theory* because it basically involves adjusting the internal drive to suit the external conditions to enable survival. The results can be summarized as on scheme below.

Mechanisms through which spirituality leads to resilience for immigrants – short scheme:

- Spirituality – problems encountered by immigrants: racism, lack of money, no family ties, culture shock, food & basic necessities and fear of deportation.
- Mechanisms - healing mental injury, strengthening personal relationships, reducing anxiety & depression, maintaining a positive outlook, accepting change as part of life and changing attitudes towards problems.
- Resilience – some problems persist, but individuals are ‘used’ to them. They resume relative normality in spite of the hitherto existing challenges.

9. Conclusion

Spirituality and resilience have come across as two intricately linked factors such that one influences the other. In this study, just like a majority of other studies in this discipline, spirituality is what breeds resilience through certain specific mechanisms which vary depending on the contexts. Generally, spirituality adjusts the internal conditions as appropriate so that it balances the external environment. Spirituality is an internal drive that determines resilience in individuals. The study focused on immigrants since they are usually confronted with so many challenges [26], but which in most cases do not deter their existence. It was only important to study how spirituality breeds resilience in their scenario. The various mechanisms through which spirituality leads to development of resilience for immigrants are many and consistent with the theoretical perspectives. What is binding is that spirituality serves to either enhance or suppress internal drives that influence resilience.

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