Resilience and marginalized youth: Making a case for personal and collective meaning-making as part of resilience research in public health

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The public health research community has long recognized the roles of discrimination, institutional structures, and unfair economic practices in the production and maintenance of health disparities, but it has neglected the ways in which the interpretation of these structures orients people in overcoming them and achieving positive outcomes in their lives. In this call for researchers to pay more – and more nuanced – attention to cultural context, we contend that group identity–as expressed through affiliation with an oppressed group–can itself prompt meaningful role-based action. Public health’s study of resilience, then, must consider the ways that individuals understand and, in turn, resist discrimination. In this article, we briefly outline the shortcomings of current perspectives on resilience as they pertain to the study of marginalized youth and then consider the potential protection offered by ideological commitment. To ground our conceptual argument, we use examples from two different groups with whom the authors have worked for many years: indigenous and sexual minority youth. Though these groups are dissimilar in many ways, the processes related to marginalization, identity and resilience are remarkably similar. Specifically, group affiliation can provide a context to reconceptualize personal difficulty as a politicized collective struggle, and through this reading, can create a platform for ideological commitment and resistance.

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Introduction

The public health research community is in a unique position to address health disparities among marginalized populations. Public health professionals have long recognized the roles of discrimination, institutional structures, and unfair economic practices in the production and maintenance of health disparities. However, researchers have overlooked the ways in which the interpretation of these structures orients people in overcoming such disparities and achieving positive outcomes in their lives. Previous research has studied resilience—the process of overcoming on-going and acute difficulties—mainly as a function of individual risk and protective factors leading to outcomes whose meanings are presumably fixed as either resilient or not. This approach neglects the differences in meanings embedded in both circumstances and outcomes, especially as these differences relate to groups whose meaning systems or values diverge from the dominant society.

This paper is a call to researchers to consider also the cultural and political context of resilience, the ways in which distinctive meaning frameworks orient actors. Although culture is often included in resilience research as a variable or factor, we suggest that too often it is used as a proxy for discrimination, and as such is presumed to be a risk factor. Instead, research must investigate the ways in which individuals – youth, in particular – interpret and adaptively respond to the discrimination and prejudice they may encounter as members of marginalized groups; and collaterally, how these interpretive constructions and reconstructions situate them as actors in the world. People's experiences of ongoing and acute hardship based on their marginalized status and group affiliation can have real health consequences – but in ways that are not uniformly negative (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006). Group affiliation can provide stabilizing resources from which youth can craft a clear cultural identity, a process that has been shown to have positive health consequences (Phinney, 1991; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007).

In this article, we will briefly outline the shortcomings of current perspectives on resilience as they pertain to the study of marginalized youth and then consider the potential protection offered by ideological commitment. Our point of departure is work emerging from conflict psychology that demonstrates how a politicized sense of identity can provide young people with ways to understand...
personal experiences of trauma as part of a broader struggle. Our discussion widens the construct of resilience and posits that it is essential to understand the multiple ways in which identity, group membership, and ideological commitment situate people’s health behaviors and mental health.

To ground our conceptual argument, we will use examples from two different marginalized groups with whom the authors have worked for many years. Both Indigenous and sexual minority youth have an extremely high occurrence of suicidality (Borowsky, Resnik, Ireland, & Blum, 1999; D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Kirmeyer, Fletcher, & Boothroyd, 1998; Meyer, Dietrich, & Schwartz, 2008; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Wexler, Hill, Bertone-Johnson, & Fenaughty, 2008), indicating group-level outcomes that are the opposite of resilience. Yet, some youth from these groups demonstrate remarkable resilience, in part, we propose, because of their identity as Native or as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT). Even though these groups are dissimilar in many ways, we find the processes related to marginalization, identity and resilience to be remarkably similar. Specifically, group affiliation can help a young person recontextualize personal difficulty as a collective struggle. In so doing, ideological commitment and resistance against oppression may foster positive health outcomes.

**Current conceptualizations of resilience**

Resilience is often conceptualized as a result of an amalgam of discrete risk and protective factors (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003; Ungar, Lee, Callaghan, & Boothroyd, 2005). “Risk” factors are experiences of acute hardship (e.g. victimization) or forms of sustained stress (e.g. poverty, historical trauma, discrimination) that have been associated with “poor” behavioral or health outcomes; resilience is then defined by those who defy the odds and show “positive” outcomes. Based on this understanding, researchers develop prevention and intervention strategies targeted at individuals considered to be at “high-risk,” and specifically aimed at increasing the “protective” factors that presumably make better-than-expected outcomes possible.

As the field of resilience research matures, it has begun to investigate the dynamic interaction of risk and protective factors (Roosa, 2000) and to acknowledge a more active role for family and community on individual functioning (Garmezy, 1987; Werner, 1993). These studies tend to measure the number and degree of risk factors and their relation to protective factors, attempting to identify specific buffering effects through individual resiliency measures (Masten, 2001).

The subtext of this literature is the idea that risk and protective factors are similarly experienced by all who share them, ignoring the influence of social context and systems of domination on personal experience and meaning (Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, & Fine, 1998). Thus, resilience research tends to neglect the heart of the matter: the value people and their communities place on various factors, especially when they do not fit within society’s dominant paradigms. Resilience research has not adequately acknowledged different communities’ meaning systems or described the reciprocal processes taking place at the intersection of personal and community meaning-making (Ungar, 2004).

In particular, developing a distinct identity and crafting a collateral sense of purpose has been found to be an important element in healthy youth development (Erikson, 1968; Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), but to date few researchers have investigated the ways that this might be important in the study of resilience for individuals who are not part of the dominant society and who may be at risk for serious health consequences (e.g. suicide, substance abuse, or depression) because of their marginalization. To the extent that power imbalances based on socially constructed categories are recognized, they are considered individual risk factors. The interpretive moment – and the possibility of individuals interpreting their circumstances and their group affiliations in protective ways – are cut off.

To sum up, research has framed resilience as a fixed state that can be assigned to a person or a group of people based on 1) a status that confers risk, such as non-dominant group membership, and 2) better-than-expected outcomes based on a matrix of time-limited criteria (e.g. graduation, self-esteem scores, absence of substance use/abuse) that are defined and allotted to participants by researchers. Thus are individuals separated into two distinct groups, those who are considered resilient and those who are not. However, we contend that resilience — rebounding after experiencing hardship—is a process involving personal and collective meaning-making and negotiation, which should not be assumed to be a steady state. Understanding the mechanisms involved in this process can widen the scope of resilience inquiry to account for the standing of groups within the dominant society and the meaning of such positioning for marginalized group members. We turn next to an example of such a process.

When “poor” outcomes indicate resilient processes

The notion of risk-then-resilience assumes a particular cause and effect rationality that is not necessarily shared by those living through the circumstances under study. This can make the positive outcomes used to define resilience problematic. If the meanings of various resilience indicators are socially produced and reflective of the dominant society, assigning a particular valence to events may lead to misconceptions when the research is focused on marginalized groups (Ungar, 2004).

For example, graduation from high school has been identified as an unequivocally positive outcome, both in its own right and as associated with other positive outcomes (i.e. prosocial behaviors) (LaFromboise et al., 2006). But the meaning of this accomplishment varies for individuals and communities. For peoples for whom schools have been primary colonizing agents—as for many Indigenous peoples—school success can be a community marker that aligns individuals with the dominating culture (Dehyle, 1992). Equally problematic, schools are often unsafe and threatening spaces for young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, which makes graduation difficult (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Gross, Aurand, & Adessa, 1988; Smith, 1998).

In such a context, leaving school or acting against cultural/behavioral regulation can be seen as acts of resistance and resilience (see critical theorists such as Freire, 1970; McLean, 1997; Ryan, 1989; Ryan, 1991). An outcome such as school leaving, defined by researchers as unfavorable, could instead reflect empowerment on the part of the individual participant, their family or community; and could be understood as exhibiting personal agency and affiliation. By intentionally embracing one’s

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1 Wexler and Burke have worked with different groups of Alaska Native young people since the early- to mid-1990s; DiFulvio has worked with lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender youth since the early 2000s.
Importantly, Erikson proposed that young people need to identify experiences in order to weigh them as more or less worthwhile. Young people with a means to evaluate and differentiate among development, proposed that young people need ideological guides. This sense of transcendence is important for young people because it provides them with a clear explanation for why they think there’s nothing better to do with their life” (p. 15).

Barber’s (2008a, 2008b) research is consistent with and extends these ideas. Coming from conflict psychology, his work with youth in war-torn Bosnia and Gaza highlights the psychological importance of establishing a sense of identity that provides young people with a way to understand their personal experiences of war. He observes that the violence of war is not experienced uniformly across conflicts, and that effect varies based on young people’s and their communities’ perceptions. For example, Palestinian youth during the Intifada had clear ways of making sense of the conflict, whereas Bosnian youth in Sarajevo did not. The presence or absence of these meaning-making structures had clear consequences for young people’s psychological health. In the Palestinian example, “the historical meaning given to the struggle was passed on continually through stories of earlier stages of Jewish/Arab conflict by the youths’ fathers and grandfathers…facilitating both personal and cultural continuity” (Barber, 2008b, p. 286). Instead of extolling the trauma of war, the Palestinian youth that Barber (2008b) interviewed expressed narratives of engagement “loaded with emotion and purpose” (p. 287). In contrast, the Bosnian youth narratives concentrated on the stress and trauma of their experiences. Without a clear way to understand the conflict within larger historical and cultural context, suffering was the essence of the Bosnian stories. “In short, the Bosnian youth were able to make no sense of the violence, but the Palestinian youth drew essential, intricate, and inspiring meaning from their conflict.” In this case, it was clear that an ability to understand the conflict (i.e. interpret, make sense of it) was a significant parameter that distinguished the degree to which youth felt injured by the violence” (Barber, 2008b, p. 289).

Particularly important are the ways in which youth perceive the logic and legitimacy of the conflict, the roles they play in it, and the ways they incorporate their experiences into their personal and social development. Most significant here are Barber’s claims that communities’ interpretations of the origin, purpose, and value of a conflict shapes the psychological and behavioral health ramifications of that conflict for young members. Simply put: Can the prevailing systems of meaning make sense of the conflict? He concludes that if young people can locate themselves in a historical context, identify with a collective purpose and play an active role to further that purpose, they will be better able to withstand hardship.

Punamaki (1996), too, has found a positive relationship between purpose or ideological commitment and psychological endurance in situations of political violence. Ideological commitment as used here provides people with a clear explanation for why they—as members of a group—are experiencing hardship (Bettelheim, 1961). This kind of collective reasoning comes with a shared viewpoint from which members make sense of and define the parameters of a specific group identity (Phelan, 1989). In this way, group membership is psychologically important because it can provide people with a shared platform from which to ascribe meaning to one’s personal struggles, and in so doing, gain a stabilizing and reassuring sense of selfhood through the affiliation.

Barber’s and others’ work is ripe for adaptation for youth populations who are not in the midst of war but are dealing with the everyday violence of oppression in different forms. It is our contention that this process has the potential to increase resilience. “Ideological commitment is psychologically important because people strive to find a meaning for traumatic events and incorporate them into their life experiences” (Punamaki, 1996, p.55). Thus, being able to make collective sense of one’s negative experiences (e.g. victimization and acculturation stress) buffers the psychological impact of those events. In situations of low-level trauma (as compared to extreme trauma in war), this understanding seems to have a strong moderating effect that reduces the levels of anxiety, insecurity, and depression, and increases individual well-being (Punamaki, 1996).

The details of this process are different for the two exemplar populations in this paper, but we suggest that the significance of establishing an affiliation with a community that supports selfhood within a larger purpose (e.g. indigenous sovereignty or gay rights) is important for supporting resilience in both. Such group affiliations can provide young people with a sense of belonging, social norms and behavioral pathways of response, and can offer them a sustaining ideological commitment (Punamaki, 1996) or sense of transcendent purpose (Damon et al., 2003). In the next two sections, we will discuss the ways in which these affiliations—and the meaning systems connected to them—could be important in promoting resilience first for Indigenous and then LGBT youth.

Indigenous youth, culture and resilience

Studies with Indigenous youth have demonstrated that purposelessness can lead to poor mental health outcomes such as depression, self-absorption, addictions, destructive behavior and difficulties with interpersonal relations (Damon et al., 2003). Bjerrregaard (2001) linked rapid socio-cultural change in the arctic to poor mental health outcomes; Duran & Duran (1995) connected historical trauma to substance abuse and violence. Responses from Alaska Native youth to the question “Why do you think people attempt or commit suicide?” (Wexler, 2009) paint a more intimate, urgent picture. “Without clearer pathways to navigate these tensions and enter Inupiaq adulthood, (young) men are left floundering.” Put more bluntly, “Men are tired of how they live and the way they live.” A different youth stated, “I’m bored and think there’s nothing better to do with their life.” (p. 15).

In contrast, numerous studies underscore a connection between Indigenous young people’s well-being and their identification and
involvement with their culture. Whereas research with American Indian people has established perceived discrimination as a primary risk factor for young people, enculturation has been found to be protective, especially in the face of race-related prejudice (LaFromboise et al., 2006). In fact, researchers have often considered the role of culture in supporting and facilitating resilience for Indigenous people facing a variety of risks (Adelson, 2000; Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, & Baysden, 2000; Roberts & Holmes, 1999; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2001). A strong sense of cultural identity has been correlated with higher levels of psychological health for Indigenous youth (Yral & Dyck, 1995; McCabe, 2007; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, & Adams, 2004). Having a positive cultural identity is believed to confer feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, connectedness, and purpose to Indigenous young people (Minore, Boone, Katt, & Kinch, 1991; Tatz, 2001; White, 2000). These attributes have been identified as protective factors for suicide (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnik, 2001; Feiner, Dubois, & Adan, 1991). Chandler and Lalonde’s (1998) groundbreaking research provides further evidence for the importance of cultural identification and action. They documented a clear link between communities’ cultural and political activities, dubbed “cultural continuity”, and their rates of suicide. Tribal communities that had more tribal activism and cultural opportunities also had extremely low suicide rates. The converse was also true, where villages without the opportunity for cultural and/or political engagement had correspondingly high suicide rates. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) concluded from this work that when young people have a clear understanding of their cultural past, present and future, it is easier for them to sustain a sense of connectedness and commitment to their future.

What these resilience studies fail to provide is a comprehensive theoretical base for understanding how enculturation protects. It is here that Barber’s work provides a useful perspective to understand how cultural identity can buffer the ill-effects of historical trauma, continued colonialism and economic deprivation. We propose that health and well-being have been associated with the maintenance of traditional culture for Indigenous peoples because the production of culture creates collective meaning, a perception of community through mythology and history, and can provide symbolic bases for mobilization (Nagel, 1994). Instead of internalizing subtle forms of oppression (Wexler, L., 2006; Wexler, L. M., 2006), a strong cultural identity distinguishes a Native young person from the dominant society and offers him or her a way to positively understand this difference. This understanding can make prejudice and injustice visible, and in so doing, makes their personal experiences of oppression relevant in a larger context, particularly to others in their community. Providing a basis for collective meaning-making is especially significant for Indigenous peoples who are dealing with historical trauma and on-going colonization (Bjerregaard, 2001; Brave Heart, & DeBruyn, 1998; Napoleon, 1995) in a society that espouses equality. Although sometimes subtle, the almost constant markers of cultural difference and collective loss make the cultural and ethnic aspects of selfhood important to many Indigenous people. Emphasizing the connection between personal and collective hardship can foster an increased sense of cultural affiliation as well as a growing commitment to furthering their tribe’s interests.

This kind of perspective invites tribal members to acknowledge larger systems of oppression that affect members of their tribe and to imagine the ways that they, as individuals, can contribute to collective betterment. This personal contribution toward a larger purpose can take many forms (e.g. participating in subsistence instead of wage-based economy, getting an education to effectively fight for sovereignty rights, or even speaking one’s Indigenous language), but its value seems to lie at the intersection between personal and collective well-being.

**Sexual minority youth, identity, culture, and resilience**

A comparable analysis of the experiences of sexual minority youth illustrates the intersection between personal and collective sense-making and well-being. As with Indigenous young people, suicide is one of the most troubling reported consequences of discrimination and victimization of GLBT individuals (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Garofolo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Paul et al., 2002; Savin-Williams, 1994). Depression and substance abuse have also been reported as critical predisposing factors for suicide among GLBT youth (McDaniel, Purcell, & D’Augelli, 2001). Young people who report suicidal thoughts or attempts are more likely to feel helpless, depressed, or abuse alcohol. For all young people in these studies, victimization was associated with suicidality. Some researchers have found that gay-related stressors such as coming out to a parent or peer harassment were associated with suicidal attempts (Rosario, Rotherman-Borus, & Reid, 1996; Rotheram-Borus, & Langabeer, 2001).

Research on health outcomes for GLBT youth, with few exceptions, has focused on a risk factor approach and the role of resilience within the population is understudied (Russell, 2005). One study did find that family connectedness, adult caring, and school safety served as protective factors against suicidal ideation and attempts (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006). However, more research is needed to understand the role of collective meaning-making and ideological commitment in mediating the social context within which GLBT youth live. Identifying as GLBT is not in and of itself is a risk factor for suicide or substance abuse, but rather the risk is associated with environmental reactions to their same-sex attraction (McDaniel et al., 2001; Remafedi, 1999). Group affiliation and ideological commitment may provide sexual minority youth a means for escaping such risks.

Sexual minority youth live in a world where heterosexuality is the dominant sexual orientation. When heterosexual identities are defined as “normal,” and recognized as the only acceptable sexual orientation, those that identify as “other” are made invisible, and may be viewed as deviant or unnatural, with the prospect of being targeted for outright violence. Whether or not they experience violence directly, the threat of violence serves to keep many individuals from acknowledging their sexual identities (Andersen, 2007). As Mason (1997) states, “Indeed there is little doubt that one of the wider social effects of heterosexual hostility is reinforcement of an already pervasive tendency among lesbians and gay men to ‘stay in the closet’ or ‘pass’ as heterosexual” (p. 27). This constant reminder of being “other” not only perpetuates the invisibility of GLBT youth, but makes for an increasingly unsafe social world.

Unlike other marginalized groups, the identity of a sexual minority youth is not ascribed at birth. The formation of individual or collective identity therefore can be seen as a process of “becoming” rather than one of “being” (Phelan, 1993). Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender often do not have family members or friends who represent “queer culture” (Garnets & D’Augelli, 1994). Negotiating the self without access to others who share similar constructions of identity is often an isolating experience. For this reason, connection to a larger social group with shared experiences is particularly important.

In the study of sexual minority youth resilience, it is important to consider the ways in which young people understand their violent and victimizing experiences as manifested in homophobia (DiPulvito, 2004). In a study on contextualizing risk and resilience among sexual minority youth, DiPulvito (2004) found that participants discussed negotiating their sense of self within an antagonistic social world that denies rights and opportunities to its members. For sexual minority youth, there is a constant negotiation of “self as different” in relation to the larger culture. To come out to friends, family or to people in new encounters requires reinforcing a status as “other” than heterosexual
such that youth often feel marginalized and disconnected, and may ultimately feel a sense of isolation so powerful as to be devastating. As Miller (1988) states:

I believe the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is isolation. This is not the same as ‘being alone’ in the more straightforward sense. It is feeling locked out of the possibility of human connection. This feeling of desperate loneliness is usually accompanied by the feeling that you, yourself, are the reason for exclusion. It is because of who you are. And you feel helpless, powerless, unable to act to change the situation. People will do almost anything to escape this combination of condemned isolation and powerlessness “(p. 7).

Unlike the literature on Indigenous youth, the connection between well-being and identification with culture has not been established. But similar to Indigenous populations, connection to one’s group identity situates the gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth within a larger sociohistorical context and provides a framework for conceptualizing their personal experiences of oppression as part of a larger collective struggle. This can potentially lead to a broader sense of purpose. Resistance against a heteronormative culture can serve to legitimize and reinforce the positive aspects of one’s sexual identity. Understanding such an intersection between personal and collective meaning-making around a marginalized identity provides researchers with a way to think about alternatives to current conceptualizations about resilience.

Connecting to others who share an experience of marginality and who engage in mutual support can be empowering to youth and may provide them with the strength and courage to resist oppression and negotiate hardships – in other words, to enact resilience. DiFulvio (2004) found that participants attributed the ability to thrive to their connection to a group focused on GLBT issues. As one person has stated:

...a lot of the members in the [group] are really important to me...because I feel like we all really agree and we’re all really fighting for the same thing, and one of those issues is homophobia and trying to combat that, and [helping others] understand coming out and trying to create that [safety]. In this group I found the 15 most accepting and receptive people you could ever be around. You could be so opposite [of] what society wants you to be or what society socializes people into believing they should be. And this group of people would just accept you no matter what. They’re the most open and the most caring. And from that I found some of my best friends.

A collective, orienting perspective may provide sexual minority youth with affiliations (Gay Straight Alliances in schools, GLBT organizations, activist events) that facilitate the process of making meaning around an identity that has been silenced and allows the youth to regain a sense of power over their lives. Organized spaces continue to emerge, with a specific intention of addressing the safety concerns of youth (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004); however, little attention has been paid to the process by which youth become involved, or the impact of such engagement on health outcomes. Additionally, there is a need for research that considers the multiple identities of sexual minority youth (e.g. race, class and gender) and how ideological commitment may play out differently for youth.

Conclusion: resilience through personal and collective meaning-making

The epidemiological research is clear that marginalized groups generally, and Native and sexual minority groups in particular, experience higher rates of negative health consequences including substance abuse, depression, and suicide. It is important to acknowledge a group’s collective experience of discrimination so that individual members of that group do not blame themselves for their hardship (Wexler, 2009). Emphasizing the collective nature of discrimination can galvanize minority groups, and can provide individuals with a purpose: to affect the structures of inequality. This underscores the connection between particular kinds of collective sense-making and resilience. Specifically, making meaning out of shared adversity creates a sense of coherence and shared purpose (Hernandez, 2002). In this way, group awareness can create a foundation for collective mobilization because it elevates personal pain into a shared arena that can encompass a transcendent purpose or sustaining commitment, both of which have been found to promote healthy youth development (Damon et al., 2003; Erikson, 1968; Hunter & Cikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Barber’s (2008a, 2008b) framework from conflict psychology provides a coherent way to approach this process. Active affiliation with a marginalized group potentially provides important meaning structures and mobilization pathways. In our examples of young Indigenous people and sexual minority youth, a synergistic relationship between self and collective meaning and interests can clear pathways to forward those interests, and thereby promote resilience. This paper invites public health researchers to think about resilience as more than discrete individually-experienced risk and protective factors. Rather than viewing resilience as a final accomplishment, seeing it as a dynamic process based upon people’s interpretations and social affiliations may provide for a deeper understanding of how these individuals negotiate hardship. This broader conception includes explorations into what it means to be marginalized so that individuals are better able to understand themselves and their experiences within a larger context. Understanding this dynamic intersection can lead to innovations in the study of resilience.

References
