

Resilience

From the PhD Dissertation Jing Wang (2003)¹, pages 23-30

D.R. Conner (1992) spent many years in the corporate world to study human response to change. His study was conducted in the U.S. initially, and later expanded to companies in other parts of the world. Based on his study, he found that resilience is an important factor in successfully implementing change. He found that resilient people remain calm in the process of change, spring back after difficulties, and become stronger after change. In order to further study human responses to change and help companies to cope with change, he established ODR, Inc.

Since international students face major change when coming to study in the U.S., resilience may be especially relevant to the discussion of adjustment issues in this paper.

Change and Assimilation Process. Conner (1992) gave a good description of change in his book *Managing at the Speed of Change*. He noted that “Never before has so much changed so fast and with such dramatic implications for the entire world” (Conner, 1992, p.3). In today’s world, changes have intensified at the personal, organizational, national and global levels. As time goes on, the number of changes increase, the time to deal with change decreases, and the complexity of changes become greater. Knowledge expansion, population explosion and ideology conflict, for example, cause “the dramatic increase in the magnitude of the changes we now face” (p.39). It may be a comfort for international students to know that their adjustment to American university life is a change process and that this change is not much different from other major changes they have to face in their life such as marriage and finding or losing a job. How do people cope with change? According to Conner (1992), people tend to exert control by at least anticipating the future. When expectations meet the perceived reality, an equilibrium is reached; when

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Abstract: This research related to the adjustment of international graduate students who study at American universities. The purpose of the study was to explore relationships among resilience characteristics and background factors, determine relationships among resilience characteristics and adjustment problem areas, evaluate relationships among adjustment problem areas and background factors, and identify resilience characteristics and background factors which significantly predict adjustment. Based on the statistical results of this study, recommendations were made to international graduate students and universities toward the improvement of international student adjustment in American universities.

Two instruments were used for this study: the Personal Resilience Questionnaire and the Michigan International Student Problem Inventory. All together 289 responses were gathered from international students from two universities.

Correlation studies, t-tests, One-way ANOVA, Tukey analyses, and multiple regression analyses were used. Statistical analyses revealed that: resilience characteristics were moderately correlated with background factors, highly negatively correlated with adjustment problem areas, and better correlated with adjustment problem areas than were background factors. Resilience characteristics, Gender, Father’s Education, and Country of Origin were strong predictors for adjustment problems with resilience characteristics being the strongest predictors. Among resilience characteristics, the strongest predictors were Focused and Flexible: Thoughts, followed by Positive: Yourself.

Based on the research findings, it appears that resilience characteristics are central to the adjustment of international students, while traditional background factors may only be secondary. International students should try to enhance their resilience and universities should provide help to them to do so.

expectations do not match the perceived reality, people have to use resources to make the adjustment. The adjustment process is called assimilation to change. Conner pointed out that assimilation, adjustment to change, may cause “reduced intellectual energy, increased psychological stress, and diminished physical stamina and health” (p.74), and an individual only has a certain amount of assimilation capacity available. According to Conner (1992), resilient people tend to both increase their total assimilation capacity available and minimize the quality of assimilation needed for an individual change. Human Adaptation: An Overview. Change is a way of life in our society, and human adaptation—“the ability to confront change in a way that maintains or enhances current levels of functioning” (ODR, 1995, p.1) becomes a critical element in productive human existence. ODR (1995) described how human adaptation to external forces had been studied from two perspectives. From the “objective” perspective, advocated by Dohrenwend and his colleagues (as cited in ODR, 1995), external events were viewed as objectively measurable stressors which exert the same load on everyone. From the “subjective” perspective, advocated by Lazarus and his colleagues (as cited in ODR, 1995), an individual’s subjective perception of an external event created the burden for the person and influenced the person’s response. Hence, adjustment to a change differs from person to person. ODR held that both perspectives contribute to the understanding of adaptation. Specifically, ODR noted that in order to study human adaptation, it is important to study both objective stimuli and subjective cognitive processes. ODR (1995) summarized different categories of stressful events, outside stimuli. Stressful events can stem from different levels: self and family, community, and national and global (Dimidjian, as cited in ODR, 1995). Stressful events can be sudden or progressive; common or unusual (Casella & Motta, as cited in ODR, 1995); or “happen” to people or be “self-produced” by people (Holmes and Rache, Epstein and Katz, as cited in ODR, 1995).

ODR (1995) also described that there are two kinds of cognitive processing: bottomup and top-down. In the bottom-up processing, the brain synthesizes different information into a schema. In the top-down processing, the brain uses the existing schema to process information. Bottom-up processing consumes more energy than topdown. In adaptation to change, people use bottom-up processing, no matter what the external stimuli are.

ODR (1995) also summarized ways to measure adaptation outcomes. Successful adaptation outcomes can be measured by high performance and competence and/or avoidance of a range of symptoms. The maintenance of high performance is given special focus by ODR. Bryant (1995) gave a good description of the term “performance” when it is used to describe change and resilience characteristics. “Performance” refers to social, occupational, educational, or personal achievement.....Social performance is the establishment and maintenance of satisfying friendships and affectionate relationships while occupational or educational performance refers to the quality and quantity of defined task performance at work or at school. Personal performance is the attainment of goals or maintenance of standards imposed on oneself” (p.1).

Cognitive Resource Approach for Human Adaptation. Kahneman (as cited in ODR Document, 1995) proposed a model of cognitive resource allocation in the study of human adaptation.

According to this model, although individuals differ in the amount of cognitive resources (e.g., intelligence), they all have a limited amount available. People use different strategies or processes to allocate their cognitive resources to the tasks they face: some of the strategies are more efficient than others. When people are confronted with an overload of tasks or use inefficient resource allocation strategies and processes, they suffer negative emotions. Edwards' cybernetic theory (as cited in ODR, 1995) helps to explain how cognitive resources are allocated. When there are discrepancies among desire and perception, an individual is motivated to allocate resources to reduce the discrepancies. The size and importance of a discrepancy decide the motivation force, which in turn decides the amount of cognitive resources to be allocated. The discrepancy reducing process is called coping. The two concepts of desire and perception of reality are important in understanding coping. People's desire refers to "any state or condition we consciously want" (p.4). People's desires are in hierarchical order with fundamental desires taking priority over other desires. Although people's desire may be shaped by such things as past experience and feedback from others, people do share some fundamental desires (e.g., self-related desires such as desires for control, for meaning and for self-realization). According to Edwards' model, people's perceptions may be influenced "by aspects of the physical and social environment, by personal characteristics, by social information, and by our cognitive construction of reality" (as cited in ODR document, 1995, p.5). People's perceptions of reality are subjective rather than objective. The more the discrepancies among desire and perception, the more important one attributes the discrepancies to be and the more resources are allocated to the goal of reducing the discrepancies among desire and perception.

Edwards' theory also explains different coping strategies. In coping with discrepancies, one may alter perception, desires, or even ignore discrepancies. Moreover, one may even make "attempts to improve well-being directly" by "engaging in enjoyable personal experience unrelated to the initial desire, turning to drugs or alcohol, and other strategies aimed directly at enhancing well-being" (ODR, 1995, p.5). Successful coping leads to adaptation, while unsuccessful coping leads to negative outcomes. Successful coping may be influenced by several factors, many of which are within a person's influence. The study of resilience focuses on the study of individual characteristics that can lead to successful coping.

Resilience Characteristics. Conner (1992) defined resilience as "the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior" (p.6). On the basis of his literature review, Bryant (1995) defined resilience as "the successful outcome of a process which is invoked by change" (p.6). He further explained that when a change enters into a person's life, "the individual's traits (e.g., optimism) and skills (e.g., time management) interact with environmental and situational factors (e.g., the necessity to relocate quickly and efficiently). This interaction produces behaviors that increase the likelihood of a successful adaptation to change" (p.6). He further explained that "resilience is illustrated by the maintenance or improvement of social, occupational, and/or personal performance following some change in circumstances"

(p.7). Instead of being a single trait, “resilience is a combination of traits that is manifested to various extents in different people” (pp.231-232).

Conner studied resilience characteristics by observing people’s reactions to change. By observing people’s response to change, Conner (1992) noted two orientations: type-D orientated—people focus on the risk part of change, and type-O orientated—people focus on the opportunity part of change. For type-D people, they are in lack of an overarching sense of purpose in their lives and find it is difficult to reorient after disruptions. Their tolerance to ambiguity is not fully developed. Since they are reactive rather than proactive to change, they do not plan for change. They blame others for the problems caused by change.

Type-O people on the other hand, have a strong life vision. “They view change, even major, unanticipated change, as a natural part of human experience” (p.237). Type-O people tend to contain the stress caused by disruption, know their limitations, are creative in using their resources, remain independent and self-sufficient, know how to tap the special skills of others, and nurture relationships. Type-O characteristics can be summarized into the following five categories: positive, focused, flexible, organized, and proactive. A positive individual “views life as challenging but filled with opportunity.” Focused people have a “clear vision of what is to be achieved,” and flexible people are “pliable when responding to uncertainty” (p.239). An organized individual “applies structures to help manage ambiguity,” and a proactive individual “engages change instead of evading it” (p.240). The Positive and Flexible characteristics can be further split into Positive (World) and Positive (Yourself) and Flexible (Thoughts) and Flexible (Social), respectively, as described in the ODR (2001) document. Although no study has been directly carried out to study resilience characteristics and adjustment to a new culture, the significance of resilience characteristics and adjustment can still be found as the relationships among these characteristics and adjustment have been studied under different terms and in different frameworks.

“Positive: The World” is people’s tendency to focus on the positive elements of the world. Although most situations have both positive and negative aspects, people may concentrate on either positive or negative elements. For people who view the world positively, they may see opportunities in a difficult situation, find solutions to a problem, and are better able to create situations that are positive. For people who view the world negatively, they may become anxious and depressed at difficult situations and are disabled to find creative solutions (ODR, 2001). ODR (1995) explained the significance of “Positive: The World” on the adaptation process. First, Isen (as cited in ODR, 1995) found that positive individuals are more likely to choose learning goals over performance goals. Dweck and Leggett (as cited in ODR, 1995) identified two kinds of goals: performance and learning goals. “A performance goal sets as the desired state a particular level of performance, while a learning goal sets as the desired state some-level of improvement over one’s prior performance” (ODR, 1995, p.7). By choosing a learning goal, the positive individual has a better chance to improve. Second, since positive individuals can identify opportunities in different circumstances, they may be able to identify better ways to achieve the

desired results than negative individuals. Third, Isen (as cited in ODR, 1995) found that individuals in a positive mood tend to have better problem solving ability, which is more likely to lead to effectiveness, success, resources enhanced processes and eventually increased performance. Fourth, “Positive: The World” protects one from the energy drain of negative emotions. ODR explained that under negative moods, resources were allocated to negative thoughts or feelings, which were not task related, and which may lead to a vicious negative cycle.

“**Positive: Yourself**” is that you believe yourself as a valuable and capable person, and that you believe you can influence the environment. Positive views on oneself enable one to build a strong foundation to fight against stress and uncertainty and provide one with confidence to endure failure. “Positive: Yourself” also enables one to take actions rather than wait passively for things to happen (ODR, 2001). From the perspective of a cognitive resource approach, ODR (1995) pointed out that the effect of “Positive: Yourself” on successful adaptation to change lay in the following two related aspects. On the one hand, when people do not have positive views on themselves, they may easily feel a threat to their esteem. Edward (as cited in ODR, 1995) pointed out that for most individuals, the goal of restoration of self-esteem was put in the priority in allocating resources. Steele, Spencer, and Lynch (as cited in ODR, 1995) also pointed out that when an individual feels a threat to their self-esteem, they may use self-efficacy and others’ supports, and even resources to defend against the threat.

Individuals with low-esteem, therefore, may need to spend a lot of resources to resolve a threat to their self-esteem, while individuals with high-esteem may be able to dismiss a threat quickly. On the other hand, individuals with positive views tend to expect future success on the basis of the previous success and to adopt learning goals.

The significance of “Positive: Yourself” on adjustment is discussed in the literature under different names. Aydin (1997) found that “Personal Control” is significant to adjustment. “Personal Control” is defined as “the degree to which individuals believe they influence the process and outcome of their life events and the extent to which they feel forces beyond their control play a role in shaping and directing their lives” (Moran & Boyer International as cited in Aydin, p.146). It can be seen that both “Personal Control” and “Positive: Yourself” both describe an individual’s confidence in self.

Focused is “having a strong sense of goals and priorities.” If one is focused on important goals, he or she can easily allocate energy to attend to these goals (ODR, 2001). Further still, with a focused goal, an individual’s attention is less likely diverted by unimportant goals and, thus, is more likely to have a simplified cognitive process to determine the relative importance of the remaining desire and perception discrepancies. Therefore, the individual does not waste resources on unimportant goals and does not use resources to rank goals according to their importance (ODR 1995). Hence, they have a better chance to efficiently use their resources to realize important goals. Without focused goals, people may put energy to things that draw their immediate attention. Therefore, it is likely that they will use resources inefficiently (ODR, 2001).

“Flexible: Thoughts” is “the person's ability and willingness to look at situations from multiple points of view, to suspend judgment while considering alternative perspectives, and to accept and live with paradoxes and contradictions as part of life” (ODR, 2001). People with flexible thoughts tend to find creative solutions to problems, as they do not jump to conclusions. ODR (1995) explained the effects of “Flexible: Thoughts” on adaptation. First, an individual with flexible thoughts tends to have fewer resource demands as they are willing to tolerate small discrepancies among desires and reality. Second, seeing a situation from different angles, an individual with flexible thoughts is more likely to find ways to modify a situation to fit his or her desires. Third, being able to view things from different angles, an individual with flexible thoughts tends to have enhanced capabilities to reduce discrepancy, and to have modified coping strategies which prevent the waste of resources by sticking to an unsuccessful strategy.

“Flexible: Thought” on adjustment is also discussed in the literature under different terms. Aydin (1997) found that “Tolerance” is significant for adjustment. “Tolerance” is defined as “the willingness to endure unfamiliar surroundings and circumstance.....It also requires an ability to withstand living conditions and surroundings that are different or less comfortable than what one is used to” (Moran & Boyer International as cited in Aydin, p.147). Comparing the concept of “Tolerance” with that of “Flexible: Thought,” one will notice that the two are closely related because “Flexible: Thoughts” enables one to adopt a “Tolerance” attitude.

“Flexible: Social” is “the ability to draw on the resources of others” (ODR, 2001). People with the characteristic of “Flexible: Social” realize their interdependence with others. Moreover, they are able to establish strong social bonds which give them support during difficult times (ODR, 2001).

The impact of “Flexible: Social” on adaptation is described by ODR (1995) in the following aspects. First, a strong connection to others gives one adequate information and feedback to set out his or her goals realistically. A goal that is unrealistically low may not motivate a person while an unrealistically high goal may frustrate a person. Neither of these two kinds of goals enables an individual to effective use of his or her cognitive resources; only realistic goals enable one to efficiently use energy. Second, a strong connection with others helps one to develop a realistic perception of the current situation. Without information and feedback, individuals can form overly positive or negative perceptions of the current situation, which is not conducive for the efficient use of resources. Only accurate perceptions of a situation enable one to use cognitive resources effectively. Third, feedback from others can initiate the process of resolving a discrepancy among desire and perception before it evolves into a bigger one. Such feedback, if actively sought, can cause many social costs. Strong bonds with other people can make such feedback easily available. Fourth, strong social relationships with others may make additional resources available. With strong ties with other people, an individual can draw on others’ abilities and capabilities which improves his or her coping strategies, and even get others’ practical support. And the emotional support from the others enables one to view oneself realistically.

Smith, Smoll, and Ptacek (as cited in ODR, 1995) found that there is a stronger relationship among stress and injury when an individual has neither personal nor social resources.

The significance of “Flexible: Social” on adjustment is discussed in the literature under different terms. Aydin (1997) found that “Interpersonal Interests,” “Trust in People” and “Social Adaptability” are significant to adjustment. “Interpersonal Interests” is defined as “the extent to which individuals take interest and enjoyment in being with other people” (Moran & Boyer International as cited in Aydin, p.146). “Trust in People” is defined as “the extent to which an individual has an attitude of faith and trust in others.” “Social Adaptability” is defined as “the ability to adjust to new or unfamiliar social situations. The ability to socialize comfortably with other people in new situations, as well as the ability to form new groups of friends are the major focuses of this dimension” (Moran & Boyer International as cited in Aydin, p.147). It can be found that the three concepts in Aydin’s research “Interpersonal Interests,” “Trust in People” and “Social Adaptability” are closely related with “Flexible: Social” because the three concepts are conditions for an individual to be able to have the characteristic of “Flexible: Social.” Hence, the concepts of “Interpersonal Interests,” “Trust in People” and “Social Adaptability” are in line with “Flexible: Social.”

“Organized” is the ability of “one to find order in chaos and structure in ambiguity, and to move beyond thought toward action” (ODR, 2001). This feature enables a person to set priorities on different tasks, concentrate on important ones, and make up plans to realize them. Organization enables one to efficiently use resources (ODR, 2001). ODR (1995) discussed the importance of “Being Organized” on adaptation. First, organization skills and the discipline of planfulness enable one to select among several possible strategies and take a series of steps within a strategy. Doing one thing at a time and knowing what might happen next save resources. Second, organizational skills enable one to set up subgoals within a task, which makes the goal appear manageable each time and enables one to allocate small amounts of resources at a time.

“Proactive” is “the willingness to act decisively in the midst of uncertainty” (ODR, 2001). Proactive people are willing to take some risks for valuable opportunities. When disruption comes, they are willing to take active strategies rather than use avoidance and withdrawal strategies (ODR, 2001). The essence of “Proactive” is willingness to take risks. ODR (1995) explained the role of “Proactive” on adaptation. First, willingness to take risks may lead to high performance through the setting up of high standards. Second, willingness of risk taking leads one to have active coping strategies, which has been found to be connected with better adjustment by Aspinwall and Taylor (as cited in ODR, 1995). The significance of “Proactive” on adjustment is described in the literature under different terms. Aydin (1997) found that proactive traits such as “Initiative,” “Risk Taking” and “Personal Control” are significant for adjustment in the U.S. culture and related that under the U.S. proactive cultural environment, proactive abilities are rewarded. “Initiative” is defined as “the extent to which individuals are able to be the first to take charge of new or challenging situations and accomplish whatever needs to be done.” (Moran & Boyer International as cited in Aydin, p.146). “Risk Taking” is defined as “the willingness to take

risk, meet challenges and cope with change” (Moran & Boyer International as cited in Aydin, p.147). “Initiative” and “Risk Taking” describe similar traits as “Proactive” because the central focuses of the two sets of personal characteristics are risk-taking and responsibilities. ODR (1995) pointed out that all of the above characteristics are not independent of each other. ODR (2001) also held that the above-mentioned characteristics apply to all change situations and different change situations may require one or several of the above resilience characteristics. Resilient people are strong in all of the seven areas, and are balanced in their resilience characteristics. They can draw upon different characteristics under different situations. People who are strong in some areas yet weak in the rest areas are not balanced in their resilience characteristics. They tend to use the characteristics in which they are strong and not to use those where they are weak. They may be able to successfully cope with some of the change situations, yet they may become less efficient at others. In general, they tend to possess less resilience than people who are balanced and strong in all areas.

Enhancing Resilience. Resilience characteristics can be enhanced. According to Conner (1992), everyone can increase their resilience characteristics. The difference among people is that those individuals who have more resilience characteristics inherently may find it is easier to enhance their resilience while people who do not have a lot of resilient capabilities to begin with may need to make special efforts to increase their resilience. One can improve resilience by understanding and respecting resilience characteristics, conserving physical, intellectual, and emotional energy against useless waste, and liberating resources. To be specific, one can improve resilience by improving weak areas of resilience characteristics and practice these resilience skills in coping with daily life change. Moreover, the guidance and support from people who are strong in others’ weak areas can help them to improve their resilience levels.

In summary, resilience characteristics are important indicators of one’s ability to deal with change. It is desirable to have strong and balanced resilience characteristics in all seven areas. And resilience can be enhanced through conscious efforts. Besides resilience characteristics, background factors such as age, length of stay, and gender also may be related to adjustment, as discussed below.

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