

Strengthening Community Resiliency

Part Two: Foundations of Community Resiliency

By John Franz and Jessica Franz-Christensen

Part One of this series provided a brief overview of the concepts that are being used to explore and enhance individual and family resiliency. In Part Two we will show how the same framework can be used to identify key factors contributing to resiliency at the community level.

Resiliency a la mode

Apollina and Father Bob pushed through the glass doors at the entrance of the Kenyon County Human Services building and stepped out into the frigid February air. They turned left and headed around the square. The snow had been packed down on the sidewalk so that Bob's black Chuckies squeaked with each stride. They went a quarter turn around the square and stopped where everyone stopped, Margie's Temple of Pie.

Unlike the ubiquitous Seattle chain, Margie's was a pastry shop that sold coffee: a daily celebration of the miracles that could be achieved through the creative combination of shortening, sugar, flour, spices, cream, and fruit. People got off the interstate and drove 30 minutes out of their way to have a piece of Margie's pie. For Apollina, one of the best things about coming back to Kenyon was being able to walk over to Margie's whenever she needed a slice of fresh-baked inspiration.

Inside it was bright and warm and smelled like childhood. At one table, four young social workers from Apollina's agency were recharging their batteries with Margie's non-GMO carbohydrates. She looked at their carefully designed bad hair, selective piercing and discrete tattoos and said to Bob, "It's a new world, at least fashion-wise. But I tell you, they are great social workers."

"Thank God for them," Bob replied as they waved to her staff and moved up to the counter to place their order. "We need all the ideas and energy we can get. But it looks like they are really going back to basics today. Are they playing with blocks?"

A tower constructed of oblong wooden blocks stacked in layers stood in the middle of the table. One by one, each social worker carefully pulled a block out of the middle of the tower and placed it carefully on the top.

"You don't get out much, do you Bob? That's a game called Jenga. You start with the blocks stacked compactly: three blocks are side by side in each layer, with the next layer set at right angles to the one below and so forth for 18 levels. Each turn someone has to take one block from anywhere in the stack and put it on top. Technically, the highest you can build it is 54 stories, with one block on each story, but it always falls down before that. The winner is the last person to place a block before the tower falls over, but mainly it's just everyone working together to see how tall they can build."

Bob watched as one of the players tapped a block with her fingertip to push it out part way, and then carefully reached around to the other side of the tower to pull it free and set it in place on top. He turned back to the counter as Margie, her cheerful face red from the ovens and her grey hair frizzing from the espresso machine, came up with their order.

“Watch out, Bob,” Margie said as she slid the tray of pie and coffee toward them. “If you’re not careful, Apollina is going to turn this into another one of her metaphors.”

“It’s too late, Margie,” Bob replied, “I’m already there. We were talking about community resiliency and this game definitely looks like an exercise in collaborative community building.”

“Hey, I’m just here for the sugar and caffeine,” Apollina protested. She demonstrated her resolve by taking a small taste of her pie right there at the counter. Then she weakened as she watched her staff continue to extend the now teetering stack.

“Okay,” she said, pointing with her fork, “Most of what we need to build our community with is already in the community – that’s why we do strength-based planning.”

Still standing at the counter, Bob joined in. “But things are constantly shifting. Milk prices keep dropping and farmers go out of business: you have to pull out another block and the tower starts to tip. If we just toss away the block – let the farm family move to the Twin Cities or Milwaukee, the community gets smaller. We have to find a way to hold things together while putting the blocks in a new arrangement.”

A young man tapped and tapped trying to find a loose block. Finding none, he pursed his lips and tried snapping one out with a smooth, quick flick of his finger. The strategy failed and the tower collapsed in a loud clatter.

“And sometimes the manure hits the ventilator and you just have to start over,” Margie said, exhausting the metaphor. Bob and Apollina laughed and headed over to their table.

Shoring up a shaky tower

As with family resilience, a community’s resilience is demonstrated when its members respond to adversity in a way that strengthens their relationships, improves their life outcomes above what would be expected in the situation, and increases the overall ability of the community to cope with ongoing challenges. Although the concept of community resiliency is gaining increased currency among community activists, except for a few notable books like “Building Communities from the Inside Out” by John Kretzmann and John McKnight,¹ most of the discussion about community resiliency is taking place in documents being posted on the

¹ Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J. (1993) *Building communities from the inside out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets*. Evanston, IL: The Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University.

Internet.² While these forums operate with a general sense of what community resiliency actually is, some researchers are working to develop a more rigorous definition for the term and a functional framework for using the concept when communities are facing social, economic, or other crises.

Developing a functional theory of community resiliency is more difficult than it seems. As with individual and family resiliency we can start by listing factors that are associated with increased risk to community functioning and those that operate protectively. But once again, that only provides a passive assessment. We need a proactive model that will help us figure out how to help our communities become more resilient, regardless of the current configuration of protective and risk factors.

In an effort to develop a more functional model of community resiliency, Judith Kulig and her colleagues at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada brought together a group of community development specialists from a variety of fields and asked them to identify some of the characteristics of resiliency and its applicability to communities. The group came up with 7 premises to guide further development of the concept:

1. That community resiliency should be viewed as a process, not a product
2. That the resiliency process includes both a reactive and a proactive aspect
3. That the process needs to be viewed on a time line that takes both immediate and delayed reaction into account
4. That a variety of factors will cause resiliency to fluctuate over time
5. That studies should be conducted to distinguish factors that can create or enhance the resiliency process in communities
6. That while individual resiliency does not necessarily produce community resiliency (because communities are more than aggregates of individuals) some community members must be resilient themselves in order to stimulate community resiliency
7. That a community's resiliency can be altered by specific interventions.³

Kulig then applied these principles in a study of a community that had demonstrated significant resiliency in the face of numerous economic crises (mine strikes and closures) and natural disasters (floods and a mountain slide that wiped out half a town). The community consisted of 5 linked towns that occupied a track 15 miles long and a half-mile wide beside a mountain in Alberta. Kulig and her team asked over a hundred members of the community to talk about the

² The National Network for Family Resiliency (NNFR) provides a variety of links and excerpts that discuss not only family resiliency but also the connections between individual, family and community resiliency. www.nnfr.org. A number of enterprises specifically focusing on community resiliency can be found on the web, such as the ambitious Visitacion Valley Community Resiliency Project in San Francisco. www.potruckscott.org/visvalley.html

³ Kulig, J. & Hanson, L. (1996) *Discussion and expansion of the concept of resiliency: Summary of a think tank*. Lethbridge, AB: University of Lethbridge, Regional Centre for Health Promotion and Community Studies. Cited in Kulig, J. (2000) Community Resiliency: The potential for community health nursing theory development. *Public Health Nursing*, (17)5, pp. 374-385, at 379.

things that contributed to their community's ability to survive. The thematic clusters that emerged from an analysis of these interviews were presented to focus groups of community members for further clarification. From this work, she developed a model with 9 resiliency strategies that communities use for recovery, maintenance, and growth in the face of adverse challenges.

Kulig conducted two further studies to test and improve her model. One looked at the techniques used by public health nurses and others who were helping to facilitate community development in several locations across a coal-mining region of Central Appalachia. (The community-based workers reported that they were most successful when they were able to help community members select development activities that were well aligned with the existing patterns of leadership and communication in a given community.) The other was conducted at the site of the original study in Alberta. This study was an observation of an attempt by the Canadian Regional Health Authority to establish a community wellness center in that area. (Essentially the community rejected the idea because it wasn't the help they wanted. The Regional Authority wanted to build a building, the people wanted services delivered out in the community, especially mental health services in response to a series of suicides.⁴)

Based on this research, Kulig came to view communities as dynamic systems of mutual relationships that are in continual flux but that maintain some degree of connection through commonly held perceptions, actions, and resources. She refined her model of community resiliency strategies by arranging the 9 competencies identified in the original study into a developmental hierarchy of three inter-related components that reflect the reactive and proactive phases of a community's resiliency response. The first component consists of strategies that help people experience their community as an entity or collective unit, and includes ways of getting along despite differences, for creating a sense of belonging and for establishing support networks. This leads to the second component, which consists of strategies that build a stronger sense of community including efforts that demonstrate or encourage community togetherness and that promote a shared optimistic spirit or outlook. The first two components result in community cohesiveness that then acts as the foundation for the third component which includes an increasing ability to cope with divisions, the improvement of community problem solving skills, the emergence of visionary leadership, and finally a proactive approach to dealing with changes and challenges.

Danilela Stehlik at Central Queensland University and Lesley Chenoweth at the University of Queensland are also working on a framework for examining community resiliency. They compared the different ways rural farm communities in Australia responded to the same challenge, namely the chronic and accumulative impact of a sustained drought, a continuing drop in farm prices, and changes in farming technology. Some communities were able to develop strategies for survival while others succumbed. The Australian model of community resiliency does not as yet include process components like those that Kulig developed, but it does address matters not found in the Canadian model, including the connections and interactions between human service providers, local government and community members, the roles of women, older people, people with disabilities, and the role of leadership in community change. For example,

⁴ Kulik (2000), *ibid.*

they found that communities with distributed leadership tend to sustain change efforts more effectively than those where all of the leadership comes from a few people.⁵

Practical applications of the resiliency models

How can these theoretical models assist people who want to help their own communities be more resilient? One of the challenges in community development work is blending perspectives. Everyone sees the issues in a slightly different light and uses a different vocabulary for describing them. Another challenge is lack of focus; everyone has their own best idea about where to start to make things better.

We believe that a functional tool for structuring conversations about community development can be created by combining the 3 core elements of Patterson's family resiliency model (described in last month's Kids Count Journal⁶) with Kulig's progression of 9 community competencies. Patterson and Kulig's concepts provide an objective array of categories for sorting out different points of view about a community's current strengths and needs. They also provide a sense of process and context to help us decide where best to anchor a response to a specific community challenge. Together, the two approaches provide a framework that will help us generate a 4 dimensional map of a community's resiliency. These dimensions are Patterns, Status, Strategies and Effectiveness. The following questionnaire illustrates how these dimensions can be used to guide a discussion among stakeholders about their community's current state of resiliency, and provide a foundation for collaborative action planning. Participants should answer these questions individually, and then compare and contrast their observations as a group.

Mapping Resiliency in Your Community

First Dimension: Patterns of community relationships. Based on your observations, how would the majority of the people in your community prefer to do things? Provide some examples if you can.

1. *Cohesiveness:* Would they prefer doing things by themselves or in small groups or would they rather do things all together or in large groups?
2. *Flexibility:* Would they rather use tried and true methods, or try something new?
3. *Openness:* Would they prefer to keep their feelings and opinions to themselves, or do they like letting one another know how they feel about things?

⁵ The work of Stehlik, Chenoweth and their colleagues in Australia is thoughtful and compelling, but difficult to find. However, a bibliography of much of their work can be found on Stehlik's website at Central Queensland University, http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/ahsfaculty/psychsoc/staff/dani_stehlik2.htm. At least one of Stehlik's papers, Partnerships in Sustainability: Human Services and Community Resiliency, can be found on-line at a couple of sites. There is a link to it in Stehlik's website.

⁶ Patterson, J. (2002) Understanding family resilience. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(3) pp. 233-246,

Second Dimension: Status of the community system. Based on your observations, what is the community's current orientation for dealing with the primary challenges it is facing? Provide some examples if you can.

1. *Adjustment:* The community seems to be able to use its current repertoire of planning and action strategies to deal with its internal and external challenges.
2. *Adaptation:* The community seems to be in crisis and searching for new ways to deal with its internal and external challenges.
3. *Transition:* The community appears to be moving from one phase into another.

Third Dimension: Strategies. From your point of view, what are some of the ways that your community brings itself together to deal with internal and external challenges? Provide some examples if you can.

1. *Interactions experienced as a collective unit:*
 - a. What helps people get along better despite their differences?
 - b. What helps create a sense of belonging among community members?
 - c. How do people create and sustain social support networks?
2. *Expressions of community as a collective:*
 - a. How do people demonstrate community togetherness?
 - b. How do people promote and share a more optimistic community outlook?
3. *Actions aimed at building community cohesiveness:*
 - a. What are some of the ways that people cope with divisions within the community?
 - b. How do people foster community problem-solving?
 - c. How do people generate, encourage and support visionary leadership?
 - d. How do people come up with ideas for dealing with change in a positive manner?

Fourth Dimension: Effectiveness. In your opinion, how well is your community doing at carrying out some of its basic functions? Provide examples if you can. In each of the four areas, list what you feel to be the two or three biggest challenges the community faces, and also the two or three most important resources the community has available to deal with these challenges.

1. *Membership:* Bringing the people of the community together and forming and maintaining community bonds.
2. *Opportunity:* Providing economic opportunity and access to needed resources for members of the community.
3. *Support:* Nurturing, educating and supporting the growth and development of its children and people moving into the community.
4. *Safety:* Protecting the safety and well being of the vulnerable members of the community.

Each stakeholder who completes this questionnaire will have her or his own idea of the shape and texture of resiliency in the community. For this process to be effective, a full and balanced range of community perspectives must be represented. Depending on the community and the concern, family members, youth, providers, shop owners, business leaders, safety personnel, educators, service clubs, churches, local associations, farmers, and others needed to reflect the scope of the community should be included in the conversation.⁷ Few, if any will have a complete picture. But by joining in a structured and objective conversation, and by sharing specific examples of situations and events to support their various perspectives, not only can a community development team gain a more comprehensive sense of the current state of the community's resiliency; it can also generate potential pathways for addressing the key challenges facing the community.

Tweaking the metaphor of help

Relaxing in the postprandial glow of their caramel-glazed apple walnut pie, Bob and Apollina watched the young social workers as they finished their last round of Jenga. Bob was the first to dive back into the metaphor of the tower of blocks as a symbol of community resiliency.

“So, if the tower is the community, we can describe its pattern of relationships at any given time in terms of their cohesiveness, flexibility, and openness, right? Cohesiveness is how well the blocks fit together, flexibility is how easy it is to move the blocks around, and openness might be how well blocks can be fit into new places. If the community is in an adjustment phase it's sitting pretty still. If it's in an adaptation phase it's wobbling all around. I guess in the case of a tower made out of blocks, the only thing we can ask about effectiveness is “how high is it getting?” External challenges could be someone bumping the tower or putting a block in wrong. Internal challenges are problems in the layout of the blocks. Internal and external resources are good player skills and good block layout. I can work out three of the dimensions. But how do we get the 9 resiliency strategies in?”

Apollina thought for a second, and then motioned the four social workers to come over to their table. She said, “Father Bob wants to know if there is any strategy involved in that game.”

A young man with a Ben Stiller haircut spoke first. “Are you kidding me? Jenga is totally about strategy. You've got two basic approaches – inside or outside. Outside is safest. You try to pull out the middle block in each row so you end up with something like a scaffold. With the inside approach you take away all the side blocks so you end up with a cross at each level. It's riskier, but you can build higher if you're lucky.”

A vaguely Cameron Diaz-ish woman added, “You also have different strategies for pulling blocks and putting them in place. But the thing is,” she said as she gave a sidelong glare toward the Ben Stiller social worker, “some people have inconsistent strategies, or just get a kick out of

⁷ Cf. Deetz, Stan (1992) *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. New York: State University of New York Press.

contradicting the strategies that the rest of the group is using. Then all the other players can do is try to compensate for what that person has done.”

Apollina looked back at Bob. “So, what does that tell you about strategies for community resiliency?”

Bob smiled at Cameron and Ben and then said, “Okay. First level is how well the players get along. Second level is how well they communicate and the third level is how well they plan together and back each other up. And all three levels are driven by the perception each player has of how the tower is doing, what it needs and the potential contribution of the other players.”

The young social workers looked from Bob to Apollina and then Ben said, “Carol Hartwig warned us about you, but she didn’t tell us you’d be coming back with reinforcements.”

Apollina smiled at her employees. “My friends, you are all my reinforcements. Think of yourselves as a human Jenga tower.”

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