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Resilience and Resistance in the Campus Sexual Assault Literature

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Many researchers have focused on documenting the consequences of campus sexual assault (CSA), but there is a dearth of research on students' post-assault lived experiences. Specifically, there is a lack of scholarship exploring how student victim-survivors of CSA may view, understand, resist, or experience resilience as they navigate post-assault life on campus. The purpose of this paper is to explore the question, "How is resilience described and defined in the literature of CSA?" To respond to this question, I explore other related but distinct concepts that appear in the literature around resilience, including posttraumatic growth, meaning-making, and recovery. Although the focus is on CSA literature, I include scholarship broadly related to trauma, given the limited research specific to resilience and CSA. As a social work scholar and practitioner, I also introduce the significance of this topic within the social work field. Finally, I briefly introduce two theoretical perspectives that have informed and guided the conceptualization of this paper, including socio-ecological and intersectional feminist theoretical perspectives. This conceptual paper was a result of preparation for a qualitative inquiry using phenomenology that aimed to explore the phenomenon of resilience among undergraduate students who had experienced CSA. Suggestions for future work are included.

Keywords: campus sexual assault | resilience | social work

Purpose

Campus sexual assault (CSA) is a significant concern across the United States (U.S.). Research on CSA reveals variation in definitions and prevalence. Definitions of sexual assault vary depending on local, federal, and tribal policies, but most state that sexual assault is any sexual contact without consent (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Institutions of higher education (IHEs) use similar language in their definitions of sexual assault except that they are specific to their campus members, including students, employees, staff, and third parties who may be engaged in various campus activities, such as volunteers or visitors.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the question, "How is resilience described and defined in the literature of CSA and, more broadly, trauma scholarship?" Although I focused on literature explicit to CSA and resilience, I expanded my question to include scholarship broadly related to trauma as well as related populations and topics, given the limited research that specifically explores CSA and resilience. Better understanding how resilience is defined allows for more focused research on other related but distinct concepts that appear in the literature around resilience. These concepts frequently include posttraumatic growth (PTG), meaning-making, and recovery.

I begin by stating my positionality as a researcher and practitioner and by describing the various social contexts that impacted the development of this conceptual paper. I then present the

literature on prevalence, reporting, and potential outcomes that victim-survivors¹ may experience within the context of CSA. This literature is important to demonstrate how the topic has been predominately researched and to introduce the dearth of research on student victim-survivors' post-assault experiences, including resilience, as they navigate their campus environment. It is through the context and engagement with the CSA literature that I approached the concept of resilience. Next, I briefly introduce two theoretical perspectives that have informed and guided the conceptualization of this paper, including socio-ecological and intersectional feminist theoretical perspectives, to engage more critically with the concept of resilience. Finally, as a social work researcher and practitioner, I engage with this topic through a social work lens and introduce, at times throughout the paper, literature relevant to the field of social work. Social work values play an integral role when analyzing and contextualizing CSA, particularly through the critical social justice lens that recognizes the dignity and worth of the individual, the importance of human relationships, and the person in their environment (National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Swigonski & Raheim, 2011).

Positionality and Context

As a White, heterosexual, cisgender female social worker and researcher, I bring and participate in clear systems of power and privilege that have framed my engagement with the concepts and research that I will discuss. I also identify as a victim-survivor of CSA and am shaped by this experience in various ways. Although I may relate and identify with some experiences that study participants have shared, I believe that each person who experiences CSA has an individual story and experience that is unique and separate from my own. As a social work researcher, it is critical to begin by stating my positionality and how this frames my engagement in this topic.

It is also essential and noteworthy to recognize the contexts that have surrounded and shaped my conceptualization of resilience and the development of the qualitative inquiry that resulted from it. My conceptualization of resilience stemmed from a qualitative phenomenology study that I designed with student victim-survivors of CSA as they shared their experiences of navigating their post-assault life on campus.

As I began my data collection in the spring of 2020, IHEs were finalizing their decisions regarding the rest of the spring semester due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also was during this time when student-led activism occurred across college campuses in response to white supremacy and police brutality for the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among many other acts of violence. Students called upon their university presidents to re-think, limit, and abolish their contracts with local police departments. It was also during this time that new social media accounts on Instagram appeared that were organized and student led, often with the handle of “black at (name of IHE)”. Students began to use these platforms to engage in conversations around issues of race and racism in ways that they argued they were unable to with their institution. Similarly, new accounts appeared on Instagram with the handles of “campus survivors” or “surviving at (name of IHE).” These accounts became a place where students

¹ I use victim-survivor, reflecting what Fine (1998) called “working the hyphen” (p. 135), to create space for individuals' multiple identities, contexts, and choice to be both a victim and a survivor, as well as any other potential label or identity/identities. Often the label of “victim” or “survivor” is placed on the individual, without recognizing whether or not the individual identifies with it. The label of victim-survivor acknowledges the dynamic, complex, and diverse experiences that vary for each individual following the trauma of sexual assault.

posted and shared their stories of CSA, with the goal of calling out their IHE and demanding change. COVID-19, white supremacy, student activism, and the backdrop of a major Presidential election and political unrest have continued to impact my thought processes, readings, and analysis of conceptualizing and resisting resilience. I never lost the struggle and resistance of studying resilience throughout all of this. I read many academic and non-academic publications, that commented on the pros and cons of the concepts of resilience and trauma, and I frequently saw aspects of this study's phenomenon on the daily news and social media.

Background

Prevalence of CSA

In Fedina et al.'s (2018) systematic review of research from 2000 to 2015, rates of CSA for female students ranged from 2–34%, with most rates being around 20%. In a study of undergraduate students ($N=1,671$) from Columbia University and Barnard College in New York City, 22% of victim-survivors reported at least one incident of sexual assault since entering college, with gender-nonconforming students reporting at the highest rate of 38%, followed by female students at 28% and male students at 12.5% (Mellins et al., 2017).

Despite these statistics, several researchers have contended that current CSA statistics are not inclusive of all student identities, including students of color, LGBTQ students, and international students (Brubaker et al., 2017; Coulter & Rankin, 2017). Also, given that some victim-survivors do not formally report CSA to campus authorities (Sinozich & Langton, 2014), CSA rates are likely higher than what is being reported (De Heer & Jones, 2017; Perkins & Warner, 2017). Some scholars have argued that research on CSA is biased toward focusing on the experiences of White, heterosexual, cisgender, female students and excludes the experiences of the entire campus community (Brubaker et al., 2017). Consequently, CSA scholarship is limited in not fully considering the impact of racial, gender, or sexual discrimination, societal oppression, and other forms of trauma that shape both the experience of CSA itself and post-assault life on campus (Coulter & Rankin, 2017; De Heer & Jones, 2017).

Researchers also have studied risk factors associated with the prevalence of experiencing CSA, such as drinking (Dir et al., 2018), hook-up culture (Mellins et al., 2017), age (Mellins et al., 2017), and prior victimization (Herres et al., 2018). In data collected from 474 college campuses by the National College Health Assessment survey between 2011 and 2015, significant campus-level predictors of CSA included campuses with higher binge drinking, younger student ages, and reports of student discrimination (Moylan et al., 2019). In another study, researchers examined risk factors associated with CSA across campuses ($N=1,423$) and found that campuses with higher liquor violations and higher proportions of males who belong to fraternities and athletes were more likely to have CSA reports (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017).

CSA Reporting

In a sample of over 4,000 female undergraduate students who had experienced CSA, 70% disclosed their assault to close relations, including friends or family, but less than 5% reported the assault to police or campus authorities (Fisher et al., 2003). Reasons for not reporting to authorities included belief that the event was not serious enough or did not warrant a crime, as well as fear and distrust of not being believed. Other scholars have found undergraduate female

students did not report CSA due to a general distrust and fear of police and campus authorities (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

Potential Outcomes of CSA

Experiencing CSA can have significant and devastating consequences for individual students, including mental health challenges, increased substance use, and academic difficulties. In one study of female undergraduate students who had experienced CSA in the past year ($N=495$), 6.4% of the participants reported a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 19.8% reported anxiety, 19% reported depression, and 8.9% reported panic attacks (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Increased alcohol and drug use (Combs-Lane & Smith, 2002) and lower academic performance (Jordan et al., 2014) have also been cited as outcomes of experiencing CSA. Some of these outcomes, including PTSD, may increase for victim-survivors who receive negative social reactions, such as not being believed or being blamed for the assault, when disclosing their sexual assault (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Orchowski et al., 2013; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). Negative reactions also may increase feelings of self-blame, guilt, shame, and internalized rape myths—all of which have the potential to negatively impact a victim-survivor's wellbeing (Ahrens, 2006; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2018; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014).

CSA and Resilience

The prevalence, reporting, and potential outcomes related to CSA depend on the campus context, culture, social norms, and policies, and researchers should consider the uniqueness of campus environments and academic institutions (Coulter & Rankin, 2017; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Martin, 2016; Moylan & Javorka, 2020). Furthermore, the previously noted research on prevalence, reporting, and potential outcomes, demonstrated that students choose to navigate their post-assault experience without always relying on the formal support of campus entities. As such, research is limited in identifying how students engage with and resist various campus systems and environments through a lens of resilience.

Most literature on CSA has focused on prevalence and prevention efforts, with less research focused on victim-survivors' lived experiences of resilience and post-assault life in the context of campus environments (Brubaker et al., 2017; Fedina et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2019; Moylan & Javorka, 2020; Perkins & Warner, 2017). Research is limited in studying how students practice agency and respond to CSA, including displays of resilience from ecological and strengths-based perspectives (Germain, 2016; Moylan & Javorka, 2020). The focus on resilience and the lived experiences of victim-survivors provides the opportunity for a unique analysis of the impact of CSA and how students navigate campus life after an assault.

The following literature review will introduce and discuss related, but distinct concepts in the resilience scholarship, including PTG, recovery, and meaning-making. Although the focus is the conceptualization of resilience as a framework to study how victim-survivors of CSA navigate their lives post-assault, the below literature review will predominately focus on studies pertaining to the trauma scholarship broadly. In trying to make sense of the ambiguity of the phenomenon of resilience, I hope to demonstrate the significance of challenging how resilience is often defined and studied in the literature. Thus, in critiquing the conceptualization of resilience, I call for future researchers to engage with critical methodologies and theoretical

perspectives to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of resilience, particularly within the context of how victim-survivors navigate campus life post-assault. Shifting the focus from individual experiences of resilience to identifying how victim-survivors resist and respond to systems of power that cause harm within the context of CSA creates an anti-oppressive framework. This shift may then lead to increasing the accountability of entire campus communities in preventing and responding to CSA and other acts of violence.

Conceptualizations of Resilience and Related Concepts

Resilience

Key Conceptual Definitions

Bonanno (2012), a researcher in the field of psychology whose focus is on grief and loss, is often cited across the resilience scholarship for his definition of resilience as, “a stable trajectory of healthy functioning in response to a clearly defined event” (p. 742). Individuals who display healthy functioning post-trauma can positively adapt to adversity and cope with minimum negative symptoms with little to no impact on their daily routines (Bonanno, 2012). According to Bonanno (2004), most individuals move through trauma without any disruption to their daily life or functioning. He described resilience as the process of an individual’s ability to maintain stability in normal functioning, where psychopathology may be initially present, but the symptoms are few and brief. For Bonanno (2004), recovery, which differs from resilience, can be defined as, “a trajectory in which normal functioning temporarily gives way to threshold or subthreshold psychopathology” (p. 20). When describing the relationship between PTSD and resilience, Bonanno and Mancini (2010) stated that initially an individual’s post-trauma experience may include some PTSD symptoms, such as intrusive thoughts or difficulty sleeping. However, Bonanno and Mancini wrote that they will then return to their baseline functioning relatively quickly, such as within a few weeks or months, with minimal experiences of symptoms. Although individuals have different experiences of trauma and resilience, resilience remains the “common response to potential trauma” (Bonanno & Mancini, 2010, p. 77) as a normal process of human adaptation in the midst of trauma or adversity.

Although Bonanno (2012) argued that the literature surrounding resilience and trauma remained limited, the varying definitions of resilience continue to contribute to misunderstandings of how to research it today. Bonanno (2012) wrote that three common approaches to resilience have contributed to misconceptions in the field. These include when resilience is viewed solely as a personality characteristic, the absence of psychopathology, or the “average levels of psychological adjustment” (p. 754). To avoid these misconceptions, Bonanno (2012) encouraged researchers to clearly define resilience and identify and describe the topic of adversity at hand. However, as this literature review demonstrates, these misconceptions and ambiguity of defining and researching resilience remain.

Steenkamp et al. (2012) applied Bonanno’s (2004) definition of resilience, as a return to baseline functioning, to their study of PTSD among adult, female victim-survivors of sexual assault. Steenkamp et al. defined resilience as both a process and outcome of “an initial period of mild symptoms and disruption in functional abilities, followed by a return to baseline functioning” and recovery as “an initial period of moderate to severe symptoms that dissipate in the weeks and months following trauma” (p. 469). The researchers collected data at one, two,

three, and four months post-assault for adult females ($N=119$) who had experienced sexual assault. Steenkamp et al. predicted that resilience would not be the modal outcome, given the severity of the potential trauma symptoms. In using Bonanno's definition, resilience was measured according to the extent of and duration that an individual may have experienced trauma symptoms, including PTSD, depression, and dissociative experiences.

Contrary to Bonanno's (2004) conceptualization of resilience, participants in Steenkamp et al.'s (2012) study reported high levels of distress and recovery, but not resilience. Bonanno (2013) responded to Steenkamp et al.'s (2012) study and argued that their results were due to their methods, sampling bias, and theoretical modeling and that it was very unlikely to find no reports of resilience. In response to Bonanno's (2013) commentary, Steenkamp et al. (2013) disagreed with Bonanno's critiques of their methods and argued that sexual assault is a different type of trauma than what he studies—meaning that the conceptualization and context related to resilience and recovery is different than grief and loss.

Ungar, a social work researcher, is also referenced for his conceptualization of resilience, which developed from a large, international mixed methods research study of resilience among children and older youth (Ungar et al., 2007). Ungar (2004) proposed what he called a, "constructionist interpretation of resilience" (p. 341) as well as an "ecological expression of resilience" (Ungar, 2012, p. 19). Ungar (2004) defined resilience as, "an outcome from negotiation with the environment for resources to define one's self as healthy amidst adversity" (p. 344). In Ungar et al.'s (2007) study, they found no singular pattern of resilience prediction and that resilience is a process and an outcome that depended on "an individual's capacity to overcome adversity" and, "the capacity of the individual's environment to provide access to health-enhancing resources in *culturally relevant ways*" (p. 288, emphasis in original). For Ungar (2008), resilience indicated recovery from trauma. Ungar (2004, 2008) also argued that resilience research needs to include an intersectional lens and capture a diversity of experiences in culturally relevant and meaningful ways as individuals navigate their recovery.

Another social work researcher, Brown (2006), developed shame resilience theory (SRT), from a grounded theory study of women and their diverse experiences of shame and resilience pertaining to a variety of topics, including body image, sexuality, motherhood, parenting, and surviving trauma. Information about these specific types of experiences was not included in the study. For Brown, the categories of vulnerability, critical awareness, building relationships, and learning how to speak about shame created a continuum through which an individual moves while experiencing varying degrees of shame and resilience.

Brown (2010) also reported that based on her review of the adult resilience scholarship five attributes of resilient individuals are commonly described. Resilient individuals tend to: 1) be resourceful and have problem-solving skills, 2) seek help, 3) believe in their ability to cope, 4) have social support, and 5) connect with others. Based on her own research around resilience, Brown (2010) added three more attributes, which she described as related to an individual's sense of spirituality, and identified them as the ability to cultivate hope, practice critical awareness, and practice vulnerability. According to Brown (2006), hope is "a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities" (p. 66). Critical awareness, "also referred to as critical consciousness and/or perspective" (Brown, 2006, p. 48), includes the ability for individuals to be aware of the connection between their personal experiences with broader societal or cultural expectations (Brown, 2010). Finally, vulnerability is the courage and openness to engage authentically with

others in various situations that are often of uncertainty, risk, or emotional exposure (Brown, 2006, 2010).

Brown continues to develop her work on resilience through research and practice in mainstream writing, although it is limited in peer-reviewed journals. Brown's work has been integrated into recent dissertations, including studies that have researched intimate partner violence victim-survivors' perceptions of service use (Scordato, 2013), sexual shame among religious women (Schmidt Siemens, 2015), and women who experience complex trauma and substance abuse (Robertson, 2019).

Finally, Masten (2011), whose research is focused on child development, defined resilience as "the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development" (p. 494). According to Masten (2014), resilience can be expressed through various pathways, such as through recovery or PTG, over the course of life development or functioning. These pathways depict resilience somewhat similar to Bonanno (2004), in reflecting an individual's "ordinary resources and processes" (p. 3) to maintain adaptive functioning.

Masten (2007, 2009, 2011) wrote that the resilience scholarship, which primarily has focused on children's risk and resilience, is in its fourth wave. The first wave, which began in the 1970s, focused on descriptors of resilience and explored different measurements and characteristics of resilience among children. The second wave explored the processes of resilience, although Masten (2011) wrote that researchers had described resilience as both a process and an outcome. The third wave looked to test experiments on resilience with the hope of increasing prevention and intervention efforts. The fourth and current wave approaches the resilience scholarship from a systems, strengths-based, and ecological approach that acknowledges and incorporates the influence of culture and context (Masten, 2007, 2009, 2011). While using the above definition of resilience, Masten (2011) described the fourth wave of research as focused on resilience as an iterative process of positive adaptation and recovery. Furthermore, Masten (2011) added that the purpose of studying resilience is to understand not only how to promote resilience but also to further understand and prevent risk and harm.

Several researchers (e.g., Crann & Barata, 2016; Murphy et al., 2009; Ullman, 2014; Ungar, 2004) assert that more qualitative measurements, such as in-depth interviews, are needed to increase the overall understanding of resilience. These scholars believe that qualitative research has the strength of providing the tools to increasingly understand and provide thick descriptions of participants' experiences, contexts, and understandings of the phenomenon of resilience. Given the varying definitions and measurements used in the resilience literature, qualitative methods might provide the opportunity to strengthen and clarify the conceptualization of resilience.

Scales and Measurements

Despite some opinions that resilience is best understood through qualitative data, researchers have developed scales to assess resilience through numeric data. Some of these instruments are the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993), the Scale of Protective Factors (Ponce-Garcia et al., 2015), and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-25) (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The CD-RISC-25 is a commonly used measure and has been shown to be both reliable and valid in measuring resilience. Connor and Davidson stated that "resilience embodies the personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity" (p. 76). The original CD-

RISC is a 25-item, self-report scale measuring the psycho-social-spiritual dynamics of resilience using a 5-point range of responses varying from ‘not true at all’ (0) to ‘true nearly all the time’ (4) (e.g., “Able to adapt to change” and “Can deal with whatever comes”). The instructions inform respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the statements as they apply within the last month and, if the situation did not occur within the past month, to still answer according to how they might have responded. Research is limited in the use of CD-RISC among CSA populations but has been used among other populations, including women who experience intimate partner violence (Anderson et al., 2012; Renner et al., 2020; Renner & Hartley, 2021). One group of researchers also derived two items from the scale that focused on social support to assess resilience as a baseline measurement among a large sample of first-year undergraduate students, specifically when examining correlates of sexual assault (Conley et al., 2017). The authors found that social support was a protective factor for both male and female students, in terms of resilience.

Posttraumatic Growth

Key Conceptual Definitions

The PTG scholarship often appears in the literature pertaining to resilience. PTG theory first emerged in the 1990s and was developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). PTG theory, also referred to as a model, has been studied and revised over the years through different types of trauma research. However, the concept of PTG, both as a process and outcome, has relatively remained the same in being defined as “positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with traumatic or highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 3). PTG is described through five domains that continue to be empirically measured throughout different studies on trauma. The domains include: 1) personal strengths, 2) relating to others, 3) new possibilities, 4) appreciation of life, and 5) spiritual and existential change (Tedeschi et al., 2018). As an individual engages with these different domains post-trauma, multiple interactions between the individual’s core beliefs, rumination, disclosure, and distress may occur. PTG becomes initiated after a traumatic experience that challenges an individual’s core beliefs and assumptions. These shifts in beliefs and viewing the world following trauma become part of the person’s growth.

Tedeschi et al. (2018) admitted that resilience, recovery, and coping are frequently used to discuss concepts similar to PTG. Tedeschi et al. viewed these concepts as distinct, but related. They stated that resilience is a concept that is part of PTG theory, but it is a separate process and outcome than overall PTG. Similar to Bonanno (2004, 2012), they described resilience as the ability to “bounce back” after adversity or trauma to baseline functioning (Tedeschi et al., p. 72). Tedeschi et al. wrote, “PTG is conceptually different than resilience because resilience describes the characteristics of people who can adjust quickly and successfully, even under the most stressful circumstances” (p. 722). Scholars also have described that PTG is a potential outcome of resilience but that not all those who experience resilience may experience PTG (Lepore & Revenson, 2006).

Likewise, in further elaborating on the difference between resilience and PTG, Lepore and Revenson (2006) wrote that resilience “refers to dynamic processes that lead to adaptive outcomes in the face of adversity” (p. 29). Lepore and Revenson also wrote, “we are concerned with understanding human resilience and a particular form of resilience, posttraumatic growth

(PTG), in the face of adversity” (p. 24). This quote from Lepore and Revenson may make a reader wonder if PTG is an outcome of resilience or, potentially, a further trajectory of resilience.

Lepore and Revenson (2006) argued that further confusion to the construct of resilience has occurred in research because it is described as both a process and an outcome and involves internal and external factors. Lepore and Revenson disagreed with Bonanno’s (2004) definition of resilience, specifically with respect to the immediate and quick recovery following adversity along with the limited potential for negative reactions following an event. Instead, Lepore and Revenson agreed with other resilience scholars, such as Masten and Reed (2002), who saw resilience as “a slowly unfolding process, evident only in retrospect and, possibly, only years after an extreme stressor has passed” (p. 28). PTG scholars have debated the element of time and disagreed with how quickly an individual either may experience resilience or PTG (Lepore & Revenson, 2006; Tedeschi et al., 2018). As such, Lepore and Revenson put forth three interrelated elements of resilience to consider in research: recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration. Recovery is the process of returning back to baseline functioning, resistance includes experiencing limited to no symptoms, and reconfiguration addresses the processes and outcomes that may include potential growth or transformation following adversity.

Some scholars have shared their thoughts and reflections on the debate of resilience versus PTG. For instance, in a literature review studying PTG and resilience, Anderson (2018) identified many similar words, such as adaption, surviving, thriving, healing, recovering, and searching for meaning. Anderson agreed with Tedeschi et al. (2018) that resilience and PTG are complementary but distinct concepts and contended that more researchers should focus on the intersectionality of these two concepts. Others have increasingly criticized PTG for being too poorly defined and not well theorized, especially in its relationship and ambiguity with resilience (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

Recovery and Meaning-Making

Key Conceptual Definitions

Some scholars viewed meaning-making as integral to the recovery process and, thus, related to resilience and growth (Altmaier, 2017; Herman, 2015; McAdams & Jones, 2017; Park, 2010). McAdams and Jones (2017) wrote, “As natural-born storytellers, human beings cannot help but make meaning out of their personal experiences. But every person makes meaning in a unique way, and within a specific social, cultural, and historical context” (p. 14). McAdams and Jones referenced Bonanno’s (2004) definition of resilience and wrote that resilient individuals might not need to make new meanings given that, by definition, they quickly return to baseline functioning without much disruption to their life assumptions. Yet, they wrote that the presence of resilience and meaning-making depends on the context of trauma. Traumatic events that cause individuals to question their sense of worth or identity, such as sexual assault, may pose greater challenges to recovery and, consequently, lead to individuals needing to make sense of their trauma differently than resilient individuals.

Herman (2015) wrote that the recovery process includes three fundamental stages of “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (p. 2). For Herman, the second stage is where the victim-survivor makes meaning of their experience through building a trauma narrative and story.

According to McAdams and Jones (2017), meaning-making is the process by which individuals assign meaning to events that shatter their core beliefs or assumptions. McAdams and Jones wrote that this process of rebuilding or reconstructing a sense of meaning following trauma can result in PTG. Therefore, resilience is the ability to “bounce back” quickly and recover following trauma, but some individuals, depending on the type of trauma, may have a different process of recovery requiring meaning-making that, in turn, can result in PTG. Yet, it is still unclear to what extent resilience, growth, recovery, and meaning-making are related and/or are different concepts.

Altmaier (2017) also viewed recovery and meaning-making as connected and that recovery is not a linear process nor the absence of trauma or mental health symptoms. Recovery is the “ultimate goal of treatment” (Altmaier, p. xi) and a process through which individuals navigate life following trauma. She agreed that it is challenging to define and fails to provide an explicit definition of it. However, according to Altmaier, recovery must include “resources” (p. xii) of connectedness, storytelling, hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment. As such, making or rebuilding meaning appears to be a core component of recovering from trauma. Similar to theorists studying resilience and PTG, Altmaier argued that trauma has the potential to shatter core beliefs, referencing Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) shattered assumptions theory, and meanings that an individual once had, leading to the possibility of new meanings to be developed throughout recovery. Janoff-Bulman (2006) wrote that both meaning-making and PTG are processes and outcomes in recognizing the complexity and depth of trauma, including positive and negative reactions that may bring new beliefs, growth, and meaning over time. Altmaier (2017) wrote,

resilient people may not need to engage in substantive sense making in the wake of trauma . . . [but] successful recovery may depend, in part, on being able to construct a sensible explanation for the meaning and significance of the trauma. (p. 9)

In his meaning-making model of trauma, Park (2010) drew from Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) shattered assumptions theory and Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) stress and coping theory. Like other models and depictions of resilience, the concepts of recovery, growth, meaning-making, and resilience become difficult to tease out. However, Park identified several different types of meaning-making, indicating that it is situational and global and includes meaning-made versus meaning-making. Meaning-made refers to the changed meaning of the trauma and changes in resulting beliefs, identity, and growth. Meaning-making is the active process of trying to reconcile previously held beliefs by re-interpreting them and identifying new beliefs post-trauma. Park (2010) acknowledged that not all individuals will engage in the meaning-making process, but argued that those who do will have more positive adjustments to trauma than individuals who do not. However, it is not clear to what extent this active meaning-making process relates to the concepts of recovery, growth, or resilience.

In further explicating between meaning-making, recovery, and PTG, Frazier et al. (2017) contextualized the trauma of sexual assault as a situational meaning, using Park’s (2010) model. Frazier et al. referenced Bonanno (2004) in defining resilience as low levels of symptoms post-trauma and defining PTG as an example of positive meaning made. Resilience, PTG, and meaning-making occur as individuals navigate their recovery process (Park, 2010). Yet, Frazier et al. warned that positive meaning-making does not necessarily indicate better adjustment or growth following trauma.

Discussion

The preceding literature review on resilience and related concepts of PTG, meaning-making, and recovery, reflects the varying definitions, contexts, and debates among researchers as to what constitutes resilience. In the resilience literature, scholars often referenced Bonanno (2004, 2012) and his description of resilience as a “bounce back” (e.g., Connor & Davidson, 2003, p. 78; Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 72) and return to baseline functioning with minimal experience of mental health symptoms that do not create a barrier for an individual’s daily functioning. Also, in developing and experiencing resilience, researchers identified common characteristics or attributes of resilient individuals, including seeking help, connecting with others, and finding support in their environment. Although commonalities are identified across the definitions and scholarship of resilience, researchers still debate various aspects of resilience. One of these aspects includes the role of time. Scholars wrote that how soon and when an individual may experience or display resilience following trauma depends on context and environment. Furthermore, the literature remains unclear and limited in identifying how resilience is similar, different, and connected to other concepts that appear in the literature surrounding resilience.

Although frequently used in the resilience scholarship, I disagree with Bonanno’s (2004, 2012) definition of resilience, particularly given what is known about the prevalence of PTSD, depression, and anxiety for individuals who have been sexually assaulted. According to Bonanno (2004, 2012), individuals who navigate their post-assault recovery while also having a diagnosis of PTSD may not be resilient, depending on if they do not “bounce back” quickly to baseline functioning. I am reminded of the collection of CSA stories by activists and victim-survivors, Annie Clark and Andrea Pino (2016), who write, “Trauma isn’t something you ‘get over,’ but you can get through it . . . there is no blueprint to ‘moving on’ from trauma, and there isn’t a wrong way to heal” (p. 158).

Other scholars, including Ungar (2004), Brown (2010), and Masten (2011), conceptualize resilience as an individual’s capacity to move through trauma in their environment in ways that promote healing. These scholars have argued that *how* an individual experiences resilience depends on their trauma, contexts, systems, environments, identities, and cultural contexts—all of which become critical points of inquiry when studying the context of sexual assault in campus environments. The focus on resilience and the strength of victim-survivors provides the opportunity for a unique analysis of the impact of CSA and how students heal and navigate campus life after an assault.

In order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon of resilience and how victim-survivors experience it, researchers have called for increased qualitative research to meet these gaps (Martin, 2016; Moylan & Javorka, 2020; Murphy et al., 2009; Perkins & Warner, 2017; Ullman, 2014; Ungar, 2004; Voth Schrag, 2017). Qualitative methods, such as phenomenology and narrative inquiry, enable the researcher to critically analyze and identify the meaning or narratives with participants who have experienced and engaged with certain phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methods also must include the use of critical theoretical perspectives to capture a more nuanced and complex understanding of how individuals move through their post-assault lives in ways that engage with and resist resilience.

Furthermore, this type of research will continue to meet the call for more research on CSA within the field of social work, along with other educators, scholars, and practitioners (see McMahan & Schwartz, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2015; Voth Schrag, 2017). In advocating for social justice, social workers also have further called for the application of socio-ecological and

intersectional feminist theoretical perspectives to study issues around sexual violence (Kanenberg, 2013; McMahon & Schwartz, 2011; McPhail, 2003; Swigonski & Raheim, 2011). Swigonski and Raheim (2011) wrote, “Both feminisms and social work are historically constituted and embody both emancipatory purpose and normative content . . . [and] are multifaceted, nuanced, complex, and often contentious” (p. 11). The values of the social work profession play a significant role when analyzing and contextualizing CSA, particularly through a critical social justice lens that recognizes the dignity and worth of the individual, relationships, and the person-in-environment (NASW, 2017; Swigonski & Raheim, 2011).

Resilience and Theory

In addition to the above scholarship on resilience and related concepts, I introduce two theoretical perspectives that have continued to inform and shape my conceptualization of resilience. Although researchers debate on the role and definitions of theory, I use the term “theoretical perspective” to reflect what Abend (2008) described as a type of theory to see, guide, and interpret a phenomenon, versus other theories that are explanatory or predictive in nature.

A Socio-Ecological Theoretical Perspective

Researchers both within the CSA (Campbell et al., 2009; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Moylan & Javorka, 2020) and resilience (Liu et al., 2017; Masten, 2011; Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar, 2012) literature have called for an increase in studying these phenomena from a socio-ecological perspective (Harms, 2015). Scholars also frequently reference Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (1977; 1979; 1995) when examining resilience from a systems-based approach. A socio-ecological perspective approaches a phenomenon from the understanding that it is situated within multiple social contexts, systems, cultures, and time (Harms, 2015). Consequently, when thinking about resilience in the context of post-assault for victim-survivors of CSA, the various systems (e.g., friends, family, work, etc.) and identities (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic class, etc.) at play not only in a student victim-survivor’s life but also within and across their campus environment (academics, campus resources, housing, policies, type of institution, etc.) need to be considered. Moylan and Javorka (2020) specifically called for several ecological considerations in the context of CSA, including service and resource availability, alcohol, athletics, fraternities, experiential learning, student demographics, policies on campus and at the local and federal levels, and other variables such as campus size, location, private vs. public, crime rates, etc. CSA scholars also have argued that applying this type of framework situates CSA within a more nuanced conversation that recognizes the complexity of diverse sexual experiences and consent (Khan et al., 2020).

Liu et al. (2017) and Harms (2015) encouraged scholars to position resilience within a multi-system model that recognizes the individual, interpersonal, and social factors that impact the core experience of resilience. Harms wrote that three core approaches of a socio-ecological perspective include acknowledging that the person and their environment are in constant and frequent interaction, various processes and outcomes occur across these systems, and that these processes and resources can help foster or hinder resilience. Harms wrote, “resilience is therefore seen as the adaptive capacity of a system” (p. 126). Similarly, for both Masten (2011) and Ungar (2012), understanding and applying ecological perspectives were integral to their definition of

resilience. Masten (2011) described resilience as “the capacity of a dynamic system” (p. 494), and Ungar (2012) called for the “ecological expression of resilience” (p. 19).

Hirsch and Khan (2020) also took a socio-ecological approach in their mixed methods, ethnographic study that researched the roles of sex, power, and assault at a large, urban undergraduate campus. They argued that it is critical to examine CSA from a systems approach and view how individuals, policies, contexts, and environments interact to shape and respond to it. As a result, they outlined three key concepts in relation to students’ experiences of sex and CSA, including sexual projects, sexual citizenship, and sexual geographies. Each of these concepts describes how students interact sexually on campus in ways that are shaped by multiple intersecting social factors, environments, and systems. Sexual projects include the reasons, motivation, and experiences that lead to sexual interactions, which can include anything from one’s identity to sexual norms to hook-up culture to how society educates and shapes the narrative of sex. Then, according to Hirsch and Khan,

Sexual citizenship is a community project that requires developing individual capacities, social relationships founded in respect for others’ dignity, organizational environments that seek to educate and affirm the citizenship of all people, and a culture of respect (p. xvii).

Finally, sexual geographies describe how the environment physically, socially, and culturally shapes both sexual citizenship and sexual projects. Resilience and CSA scholars understand the importance of seeing a person in their environment and within the multiple, diverse systems they participate in across the micro, mezzo, and macro systems (Campbell et al., 2009).

An Intersectional Feminist Theoretical Perspective

Khan et al. (2020) wrote that “A gendered framework fits within an ecological model, as gender can be conceptualized at multiple levels of analysis—the individual, relational, organizational, and cultural” (p. 143). Although Crenshaw’s (1989) and Collins’ (2003) intersectionality frameworks have been applied throughout feminist scholarship, they have been limited in the CSA literature (Armstrong et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2020; Krause et al., 2017; Swigonski & Raheim, 2011). Puar (2017) wrote, “The theory of intersectionality argues that all identities are lived and experienced as intersectional” (p. 596). Scholars have called for concepts often cited in feminist-based perspectives, such as gender, power, agency, anti-oppression, and inequality, to be recognized as multiple and intersecting across systems, contexts, and time (Deisinger, 2016; Khan et al., 2020; Swigonski & Raheim, 2011; Worthen & Wallace, 2017). Harms (2015) also wrote that scholars should recognize and examine the diverse systems of power that privilege and/or disempower individual experiences of resilience. Harms wrote, “resilience can be seen as the capacity to exercise freedom, equality and agency in the face of adversity” (p. 146). Consequently, in applying this perspective to resilience, the concepts of power, control, and intersecting identities are critical to consider in relation to an individual’s capacity and lived experience of resilience (Harms).

In applying an intersectional feminist perspective, the phenomenon of resilience is recognized as not being a singular victim-survivor experience or narrative but varies and is complex depending on multiple domains and systems of power across sexuality, gender, race,

class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989; Harms, 2015). Applying an intersectional feminist perspective provides a way for researchers to look at how an individual experiences, understands, and heals from sexual assault is shaped through gender, race, sexuality, and class (Armstrong et al., 2018; Deisinger, 2016). CSA cannot be studied without considering gender inequality and the ways that society socializes relationships, power, and gender (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). These intersecting power inequalities have produced and promoted problematic societal messages around consent, silence, rape myths, and toxic masculinity, among others (Hirsch & Khan). Hirsch and Khan wrote

A better accounting of power relations in campus sexual assault must go beyond a singular focus on gender in two ways: it must be more intersectional, and it must acknowledge the social fluidity of power—that there are forms of power where, situationally, the same person could be on either side of the equation (p. 230).

Feminist phenomenologists (Burke, 2019; Oksala, 2011) have also called for similar efforts in future scholarship focused on experiences of sexual violence broadly. In reflecting on applying intersectional feminist perspectives to sexual violence, Burke wrote, “there is nevertheless a central commitment to an account of the harm of rape as sexual domination—that is, as a denial of agency and personhood achieved through a particular gendered use of sex” (p. 10). An intersectional feminist perspective also addresses the gap in the CSA literature that is not fully inclusive of participants with diverse identities, such as gender (e.g., including only female cisgender participants). Instead, researchers should continue to expand awareness and understanding of multiple experiences of varying identities and, thus, experiences of sexual assault and resilience (Armstrong et al., 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Krause et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2017; Worthen & Wallace, 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017).

Resistance and Resilience

Harms (2015) wrote,

Resilience . . . can be seen both in our capacity to exercise our rights and in our active resistance when we encounter the abuse of power from others . . . from an anti-oppressive perspective, therefore, resilience can be seen as the capacity to exercise freedom, equality, and agency in the face of adversity (pp. 146-147).

Prior to thinking about the conceptualization of resilience, I struggled with how to name the phenomenon for which I was searching. Resilience is a term frequently associated with a variety of ambiguous and, at times, problematic meanings not only in academic scholarship but throughout public discourse. However, as a result of my engagement with the above scholarship and conceptualization of resilience, I increasingly began to think of the relationship between resistance and resilience.

As an individual experience, resilience depends on a variety of factors unique to that victim-survivor, including their choices, agency, environment, and post-assault experiences. For instance, the freedom to make individual choices becomes critical for individuals as they decide and learn what coping activities may or may not support their unique wellbeing, whether or not they decide to make a report, whom they share their stories with, what resources they seek out, what activism they might engage with, or how they try to hold their IHE and other students accountable. Harms (2015) wrote, “resistance as resilience is seen as a constructive and creative expression of power” (p. 148).

Several recent studies of CSA also have focused on the topics of agency and power in the post-assault life for student victim-survivors, included a qualitative study (Germain, 2016) and a large, mixed methods study (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). In her qualitative study of undergraduate victim-survivors of CSA, Germain identified among her findings a sense of empowerment that students experienced as increasingly supporting their individual wellbeing along with supporting other students' healing or raising awareness of CSA. Germain described this type of agency that she saw as "empowerment and defined as participation in independent or collective actions that demonstrate or amplify social, political, or spiritual power" (p. 89).

As result of realizing the significance of student victim-survivor power and control in post-assault life, Hirsch and Khan (2020) similarly called for the concept of sexual citizenship to be further explored in research. They argued that students would inevitably pursue relationships and be active sexual beings on campuses. However, as products of a society that does not necessarily support positive and healthy sexual behavior where consent is upheld, rape myths do exist, and gender hierarchies are embedded in systems of IHEs. Therefore, Hirsch and Khan's research questions focused on "why they [students] pursued sex, what they wanted from it, how it fit into their lives, and what their sexual experiences were actually like" (p. xxviii). They argued that in order to understand, address, prevent, and support victim-survivors and all students, researchers must further explore the power dynamics that create and uphold CSA as well as the power dynamics that victim-survivors engage with and are challenged by post-assault. Hirsch and Khan argued that the multidimensionality of power, particularly with respect to CSA, is gendered and reflects dimensions of social inequality, whether power is seen as a possession, privilege, or practice.

Future Research

Given the debates and posing problems surrounding the conceptualization of resilience, it is imperative to listen and learn from victim-survivors of CSA about how, when, and if they describe, define, and experience resilience, resistance, and their post-assault lives within a campus environment. Listening and learning to victim-survivors creates the potential to support students at the microlevel and for entire campus communities to strengthen policies and prevention efforts to develop a safer learning environment. It is also relevant to consider how contextual dynamics specific to university campuses may impact victim-survivors of sexual assault, specifically through the lens of resilience and socio-ecological and intersectional feminist theoretical perspectives.

Although much of the CSA literature has focused on the prevalence and negative consequences of CSA, fewer researchers have focused on victim-survivors' lived experiences of post-assault life (Brubaker et al., 2017; Fedina et al., 2018; Perkins & Warner, 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017). Specifically, research is limited in studying how student victim-survivors respond to and navigate campus life after CSA, including displays of resilience, from ecological and strengths-based perspectives (Germain, 2016; McMahon & Schwartz, 2011; Moylan & Javorka, 2020). Uncovering how students understand resilience and navigate their post-assault lives within the unique aspects of a campus environment may help us understand and address mental health or other academic outcomes associated with CSA for student victim-survivors.

Future scholarship, particularly within this next wave of resilience scholarship that Atallah et al. (2019) discussed, must engage with a more critical and nuanced understanding of resilience, within the context of studying traumas and adversities, and consider how both resilience and

resistance concepts speak to or hinder social justice and social change. In taking up and challenging the conceptualization of resilience, future researchers may begin to put the responsibility back on the individuals, systems, societal cultures, and norms that lead to CSA, trauma, and other forms of campus violence. Future researchers should critically engage with the concept of resilience in not placing the sole responsibility of moving through post-assault life on the individual victim-survivor. Instead, researchers should consider how the systems that surround the victim-survivor act as barriers or opportunities to create stronger victim-survivor supports and prevention efforts. Applying socio-ecological and intersectional feminist theoretical perspectives, particularly qualitative inquiries diving deep into the lived experiences of victim-survivors, will help to ensure that resilience research critically engages with anti-oppressive frameworks and social justice aims.

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