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Life Span and Resiliency Theory: A Critical Review

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Abstract

Theories of life span development describe human growth and change over the life cycle (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Major types of developmental theories include biological, psychodynamic, behavioral, and social learning, cognitive, moral, and spiritual, and those influenced by systems, empowerment, and conflict theory. Life span development theories commonly focus on ontogenesis and sequential mastery of skills, tasks, and abilities. Social work scholars have pointed out that a limitation of life span and other developmental theory is lack of attention to resilience (Greene, 2007; Robbins et al., 1998).

The concept of resilience was developed to “describe relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences” (Rutter, 1999b, p. 119). Longitudinal studies focused on typical and atypical child development informed theory formulation in developmental psychopathology (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000) and in an evolving resilience model (Richardson, 2002; Werner & Smith, 1992). Research on resilience has found a positive relationship between a number of individual traits and contextual variables and resistance to a variety of risk factors among children and adolescents. More recently, resilience research has examined the operation of these same factors in the young adult, middle-age, and elder life stages.

This article examines the historical and conceptual progression of the two developmental theories—life span and resiliency—and discusses their application to social work practice and education in human behavior in the social environment.

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