

Special Issue Article

Resilience in Development: Pathways to Multisystem Integration

The Ecological Resilience Framework: The Justice Ambassadors Youth Council as a model for community-based resilience

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Abstract

We present an ‘Ecological Resilience Framework’ (ERF) to demonstrate how resilience is created through the Justice Ambassadors Youth Council (JAYC) program. JAYC is a platform in which New York government representatives collaboratively learn and develop policy solutions alongside emerging adults who are criminal legal system impacted and reside in predominantly Black and Hispanic communities characterized by chronically high levels of poverty, violence, and incarceration. We focus our work on the process of developing resilience in the context of structural social inequity and injustice. We argue that resilience can best be understood in the context of the adversity to which it is a response, not as an isolated individual quality. Therefore, resilience science is at its best when it incorporates a multi-disciplinary scientific perspective, one that addresses a continuum from individual- to community- to society-level physical, cognitive, relationship, and mental health variables. To demonstrate how our ERF incorporates this approach, we outline how JAYC not only supports young adult participants in understanding their individual life trajectories and narrative identity, but also actively connects them within a diverse social network of mentors and to various opportunities that support a healthy transition to adult resilience.

Keywords: Resiliency; Trauma; Community; Social change; Political transformation

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Resilience involves perseverance of a community or individual when challenged with adversity and trauma (APA, 2022). Data have identified myriad variables that support resilience in the presence of adversity, but less commonly have interventions built capacity for resilience that encompass the full complexity of these variables. This might be because there are embedded reciprocally influential layers of environmental impacts, from proximal to distal, in every individual’s life that can either work synergistically in support of resilience, or alternatively work at cross-purposes and negate positive influences. Given this complexity, the science of resilience has been concerned with both resilience of individuals and resilience of communities, but rarely at the same time. Here we attempt to reconcile this dichotomy. We begin with a brief discussion of recent theoretical shifts in the field of developmental science and review of some of the most compelling findings from the science of resilience. We then propose an ‘Ecological Resilience Framework’ (ERF) that is designed to integrate both community- and individual resiliency within the broader context of society and that is intended to explore how to support resilience trajectories, both communal or individual, across time. Our framework indicates how resiliency can be promoted through the affirmation of healthy values, the building of life skills that foster a sense of agency, access to resources, and narrative identity

development – a process which considers not only the individual life course but also generates an understanding of the societal and community influences that can either hinder or foster resilience through opportunities, resources, and social connections across an intergenerational timeline. Finally, we examine how our framework operates through the Justice Ambassadors Youth Council (JAYC), a program intentionally designed to simultaneously foster individual-level resilience while strengthening community environments and improving societal structures and policies. JAYC asks the question: What does it take to create and sustain an ecology of resilience in young adults, especially in the context of chronic adversity?

We begin by arguing that in order to understand how environmental experience shapes any individual, one must consider the broader experiences of communities and societies in which the individual develops – this being especially true for environments of chronic adversity (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). For decades, developmental scientists measured the impact of environmental variables including poverty, adversity, socioeconomic status, and caregivers stress using tools that were often biased toward the ecology of children from dominant cultures and communities in the United States, e.g., white, middle-class families conveniently likely to visit child development laboratories (Henrich et al., 2010; Hruschka et al., 2018), as well as without consideration for the tapestry of historic and sociopolitical influences that contextualize the environmental influences measured (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Nketia et al., 2021). The narrative that emerged from the past decades of work therefore often emphasized the interpretation of data from children

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from marginalized communities with less systemic support and fewer resources as reflecting a sort of “deficit” relative to data from children who did not have the same structural challenges (see for example, Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Along the same vein and with respect to resilience, a branch of developmental science has attempted to understand individual characteristics that support predefined “positive” developmental outcomes subsequent to adversity or trauma (Condly, 2006; Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). At the level of individual resilience, researchers have focused on understanding characteristics of individuals that are resilient to adversity, and using those data to inform approaches to risk reduction and the promotion of positive outcomes in populations at high-risk for adversity. On the one hand, there is evidence that resilience is not exceptional (Bonanno, 2005; Casella & Motta, 1990); the majority of people appear to be remarkably resilient in the face of adversity, as measured by stable trajectories of physical and psychological health after experiencing trauma (Bonanno, 2005). Moreover, data also show that rather than a single route, there are many pathways to resilient outcomes (Bonanno, 2005, 2012; Rutter, 1999). Variables including temperament, coping and emotional regulation strategies, planfulness or how people think about their goals, supportive emotional and financial resources, hope and meaning, and positive emotions (see Bonanno et al., 2011, 2015) all explain some variance in predicting resilient outcomes. At the same time, much of the early literature related to individual resilience is limited in its scope, focusing primarily on an individual’s response to one singular adverse experience. Navigating the consequences of chronic, generational, and/or repetitive exposure to stresses and trauma – for example as experienced by people who are incarcerated or gang-involved – requires not only intentional forms of individual capacity building, but also the cultivation of associated community- and societal-support systems (Deane et al., 2018; Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Shaw et al., 2020).

For these reasons, the last few years have forced a shift in the approaches we use to conduct and interpret data in developmental science. Within the science of early life stress or adversity, data have supported a multi-dimensional approach where threat/harshness and deprivation (Ellis et al., 2009; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014; Berman et al., 2022), as well as caregiver and context predictability (Baram et al., 2012; Glynn & Baram, 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2021; Liu & Fisher, 2022) may shape developing brain, cognitive, and socioemotional development in distinct ways. To our knowledge, this type of nuanced approach, where a full description of the types of adversity faced by a child or community *precedes* defining what might be considered a resilient outcome for the purpose of structuring resources and policies that mitigate negative outcomes, has not been clearly defined. Humans develop survival mechanisms and thrive by continuously adapting to experiences in their lived environments, whether at home or within their communities. While a lived environment is made up of proximal events, life histories, and projected futures, these experiences can only be understood in the broader ecological contexts of community histories and societal policies, laws, public narratives, and government structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). The context becomes important for understanding not only the individual proximal experience but *how* it might impact youth from different communities and *what* behaviors might best define a resilient outcome for that youth. Moreover, developmental outcomes can take the form of immediate changes, trajectories of change, and/or long-term outcomes. A revision of the resilience narrative then must involve taking important findings from previous research and

re-examining them with the clarity offered by recent scientific and societal shifts.

A first critical issue then is how to define and measure a resilient outcome, and whether this definition also has historically appealed to a normativity bias (Hruschka et al., 2018). At a macro-level of analysis – from the racial disparities in health and survival outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic to the reckoning protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement – there has been greater clarity in the level at which systemic injustices operate to shape individuals and communities within American society (Godsay & Brodsky, 2018; Hynes et al., 2020; Zabanitoutou, 2020). With this clarity comes increased introspection and revision with respect to biases in measurement and interpretation heretofore considered standard practice (Hruschka et al., 2018). Too comprehensively examine resilience, particularly as it relates to an individual, consideration for hardships experienced during childhood should be contextualized, for example by considering adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that help to document traumatic events that happen before the age of eighteen (Crandall et al., 2019). In addition, what may be a necessary and resilient adaptation for an individual’s survival in a short-term context may simultaneously be counterproductive to thriving in a more long-term context. And, two individuals may respond very differently to the same adverse experience (Freitas & Downey, 1998). For example, the loss of a parent may be experienced differently by a youth living in an isolated single family household below the poverty line compared to a youth with multiple caregivers who can provide the stable and secure nurture in support of the child’s needs. Critically, the ability of an individual to successfully adapt to the adverse or challenging circumstances that they encounter in their life – either in the short or long term – is directly dependent on the community and societal structures and investments that limit or broaden their potential response (Hart et al., 2016; Masten, 2014). Considering the above example, both youth would be negatively impacted – if disproportionately so – by a lack of trained, culturally responsive, and affordable mental health care providers in their local community, a shortage potentially influenced by state and federal budget allocations that support mental health care training and education. In this way, understanding individual resilience outcomes requires understanding the broader context of each individual’s relationship to community and societal forms of support. Importantly, it remains key that the definition of a resilient outcome in adolescents and young adults from marginalized communities, with many challenges and few opportunities, not be based on benchmarks that define success in youth raised the privileges of white middle-class communities (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).

Second, we highlight the idea that individual resilience cannot be understood without consideration of the unique opportunities and challenges that are commonly experienced by individuals at different transitions in development (Lade et al., 2019). Indeed, data have shown that understanding how resilience might manifest in everyday experiences requires consideration of the way that age groups experiencing adversity and trauma are developmentally able to use available support resources (Perkins & Borden, 2003). We focus this discussion particularly on challenges faced by adolescents and emerging adults, understanding that the transition to adulthood has been implicated as a critical moment for both emerging forms of resilience and changes in life trajectory. Specifically, this time frame often includes important milestones such as high school graduation as well as entering college and/or the workforce that when disrupted can lead to chronic

disconnection and opportunity loss (Skemer et al., 2017). Adolescence is a critical time for weaning from the family unit and slowly learning to engage with the world as an independent person. Friendship becomes an important value, and new experiences and opportunities become available as hormones and bodies change (Guassi Moreira et al., 2018). This is a time when the developing brain grows in its connectivity, making new experiences and opportunities powerful for shaping adulthood trajectories (Casey, 2019; Casey et al., 2019). In children and adolescents, many of the same variables that support healthy development also predict resilience (Masten, 2014). These include quality caregiving, close relationships with parents, extended family or reliable adults, close friends and romantic partners, motivation to succeed, self-efficacy, and supportive schools and neighborhoods (Masten, 2014).

A third and related theme is the idea that social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Castles, 1999; Markus, 2015) in particular play a key role in youth resilience (see Hawkins & Abrams, 2007; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004), as do variables or characteristics that help to define meaningful community inclusion, such as gender identity, racial identity, and migration status (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). The drive for social connection likely derives from species-typical caregiving experience of mammals; the development of the neurobiological processes that support resilience likely reflect adaptation to the early social affiliative interaction among infants and caregivers (Feldman, 2020). Indeed, social support in the form of securely attached relationships, often with more proximal family members, is one of the stronger established correlates of resilience (Darling Rasmussen et al., 2019). Supportive family or caregiver relationships can play a critical role in teaching adaptive personal values that are foundational in knowing how to best navigate the challenges of local communities and broader social policies (Benish-Weisman et al., 2013).

This drive for social connection may also be the starting point of what personality psychologists call narrative identity, or the story of the self that integrates past, present, and future (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). Narrative identity provides meaning and has been shown to be critically important to one's perceptions of their own *capacity* and agency for resilience (Adler et al., 2015). However, narrative identity is shaped by the social context of the individual and *also* their community membership as individual-level experiences are often reciprocally interactive with group-level social cohesion. In marginalized communities, adaptive culture is the community-level development of values, goals, attitudes, and behaviors, that is itself a response to a collective history of either inhibiting or promoting socio-cultural environments (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). During the time frame of adolescence and early adulthood, individuals often seek out social connectedness beyond the family unit and through new peer group networks. While these broadening forms of social support may moderate the negative relationship between some forms of stress and resilience in the short term (Giletta et al., 2021; Wilks, 2008), they can also influence personal value formation and narrative identity in ways less conducive to a healthy lifestyle – i.e., through peer pressure to use illicit drugs (Kandel, 1985) or to become gang-involved (Adeniyi & Jinadu, 2021), or to use violence as a solution to conflict (Eisner, 2009). Again, taking a revisionist lens on how to support resilience in communities that have experienced intergenerational poverty, adversity, and systemic injustice forces a discussion of what a resilient outcome might look like when a youth seeking social connectedness and community membership is offered opportunities to join a gang network of

youth with similar experiences, versus what resilience might look like if the same youth is given an opportunity to participate in an established community-based and community-led program that offers them social cohesion and agency in shaping community wellness.

Related to this critical dynamic, social cohesion can be promoted by access to resources, community activities, mentorship, leadership development, and valuation of intercultural contact and diversity (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2010). That is, for social connectedness or cohesion to act as a positive influence for youth resilience, it must *also* be embedded in the community-level structures that enable social access and capital through consistently available and culturally responsive programs that counteract the precise adversity faced by youth living in the community. Social connectedness and cohesion then can act both as a benefit or a detriment to resilience through adaptive culture as well as social support from family and peers. As such, individual life history may drive the narrative identity that allows an individual the self-efficacy to be resilient, but the community-level adaptations to societal influences shape the context in which youth resilience can be defined and promoted (Hobfoll et al., 2015; Luthar et al., 2000).

A changing understanding of resilience

In summary, there is growing consensus about the importance of the three concepts we have reviewed in how resilience is both understood and cultivated: The critical investigation into how resilience is contextualized and measured, the importance of understanding how resilience manifests at particularly sensitive developmental time points such as emerging adulthood, and the need to view resilience as inherently rooted in social connectedness and relational resources. Our approach builds on scholarship that highlights the importance of considering how intersectional identities, systems of oppression, and cultural contexts serve as shaping factors for populations facing racism and/or discrimination (Neblett, 2023a, 2023b).

We also draw insight from a growing body of resilience research that increasingly rejects the idea that early life adversity must necessarily result in undermining predefined healthy developmental outcomes (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993). Healthy development is survival and adaptation to one's changing environment *in the moment*. As such, resilience can only be understood in the context of the environments an individual must navigate. This shift away from a deficit-approach is useful for conceptualizing how to embed resilience structures in the daily lives of young individuals navigating chronic adversity, such as gang or street crew involvement. One particular model of resilience that captures the potential for not only maladaptive but also adaptive coping strategies for adversity while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of developmental life stages is PVEST. PVEST takes Bronfenbrenner's ecological system model – the idea that there are multiple systems of nested influence that impact human development – and integrates it with an identity focus similar to narrative identity as described above (Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer, 1995). PVEST centers the importance of an individual's own perception and assessment of their changing identity as well as the cultural, communal, and societal norms that influence them. It argues that the way in which each individual interprets their own vulnerabilities and adaptations can create resilience (Velez & Spencer, 2018). As such, PVEST is also helpful for understanding why developmental time points that involve identity exploration and self-focus, such as emerging adulthood (Swanson, 2016), may be

particularly crucial for cultivating resilient choices or life directions (Masten et al., 2006).

At the same time that PVEST illustrates the importance of intersubjective experiences in regards to resiliency, there is also a growing, interdisciplinary body of literature that is invested in the relational aspect between the individual and the broader community and/or social ecology surrounding them. Work by Michael Ungar specifically considers a social-ecological definition of resilience that understands resilience as “the capacity of both individuals and their environments to interact in ways that optimize developmental processes,” and emphasizes the interplay of personal agency in navigating traumatic experiences with the ability access meaningful and culturally relevant resources (Ungar, 2013). This focus on the individual as situated within a specific environment or ecology is also reflected in literature specific to the concept of community resilience. Here, resiliency is often understood less as a fixed entity that is either gained or lost but more as an active and ongoing process “linking a network of adaptive capacities” (Norris et al., 2008) and that is “shaped by interactions between different components of a complex system” (Faulkner et al., 2018).

The ERF

What makes the ERF unique – beyond its demonstrable practical application in guiding the JAYC program – is its ability to synthesize these fundamental resilience concepts into one framework. It contextualizes resilience based on the reality of chronic adversity, emphasizes the importance of narrative identity development in emerging adulthood, and simultaneously depicts the mutually reciprocal way that individual-level resiliency both influences and is influenced by community and societal levels of resiliency. Figure 1 shows pathways that reciprocally connect individual- to community- to societal-level variables. Importantly, growth challenges faced by individuals vary across the lifespan. Infants are concerned with learning basic life skills including motor behavior, social interaction, and communication through bonds with caregivers (Feldman, 2020). By adolescence, pubertal hormones play a key role in shifting social connectedness networks to incorporate non-familial bonds as the individual prepares to transition to independence and their own reproductive capacity to caretaker the next generation, and resilience increasingly requires the ability to manage peer pressure and complex social interactions (e.g., with law enforcement in over-policed communities). The range and impact of trauma and adversity at these developmental time points will differ and as such will have divergent consequences for shaping the nature of resilient outcomes. Additionally, safety nets such as family, financial resources, adequate housing, access to mental health, and a host of other ways of addressing adversity can lead to resilience. Moreover, early experiences of adversity and resilience will shape the individual in ways that lay the foundation for how they respond to later life positive and negative experiences, or their narrative identity. We argue that individual resilience cannot be considered without an understanding of this embedded ecology of the community. Individual resilience is thus limited by, and embedded in, pre-existing community-level histories and also sociopolitical structures that can either create or limit age- and culture-appropriate *opportunities* for mitigation of adversity.

As discussed above, enriching or adverse experiences are proximal to an individual, but are indeed most commonly embedded within societal or policy levels of the person’s ecology. A young person living in a home with food insecurity may also be

living in an unsafe neighborhood and may also be experiencing poor educational quality. These experiences are likely embedded in structural differences in distribution of financial resources to their local area. Thus, structural societal inequalities either promote or restrict access to material resources, caregiver presence and well-being, and safety or threat. Together, community-level and societal-level resilience are part of an individual’s narrative identity in that they enable access to resources that allow individuals pathways to thrive in the context of adversity. In this way, the response of communities to societal inequality, and specifically if there is access to structures that support community-level resilience, influence the way in which a young person constructs their own identity to incorporate resilience. Given the data on the value of social connectedness for resilience, we argue that programs that center fostering this access to supporting community-level resilience play an outsized role in promoting cognitive and socioemotional resilience across the lifespan. Provided such access, individuals can reciprocally help to shape the resilience of the community, keeping in mind that pre-existing community history and cultural adaptations will also shape individuals’ narrative identities.

ERF in practice: the JAYC

We show the value of the framework proposed in Figure 1 by using the example of the JAYC Program. JAYC was designed on the premise that resilience must be defined by, and embedded in, community-level adaptive cultural values and in response to shared adversity and trauma that factor into community members’ narrative identities. Here, promoting resilient outcomes requires that community members build capacity together, with an emphasis on social cohesion and connectedness, alongside developing their own individual growth toward both short-term and long-term goals that are self-defined, supportive of a healthy lifestyle, and attainable.

JAYC works primarily with young Black and Hispanic New Yorkers, either themselves criminal legal system involved or closely connected to those impacted by the criminal legal system. It emphasizes building and strengthening organizational partnerships within historically underserved communities that are disproportionately impacted by gun violence, shootings, unemployment, and high levels of youth disconnect (see Fagan et al., 2002; Rosenfeld & Fornango, 2017; Holder et al., 2022). Jarrell Daniels founded the JAYC at Columbia University’s Center for Justice in 2018 after returning home from his own 6-year period of incarceration starting at age eighteen. He hoped to address the fact that young people like him often bear the brunt of community challenges such as poverty, lack of access to quality education and employment opportunities, exposure to violence or harm in the home and/or community, and discriminatory legal system practices while having little to no say in shaping the policies that most affect them. Many of the programs and institutions meant to serve young individuals like Jarrell – from re-entry programs to alternatives to incarceration to individual counseling or case management to make individual change sustainable and to give young people a stake in a desired future – fell short in addressing the broader, interconnected scope of community resilience required. In recognition of this, the youth ambassadors of JAYC are centered as both social justice advocates and experts given their firsthand knowledge of the impacts and consequences of the compounding failures of the criminal legal system, as well as the

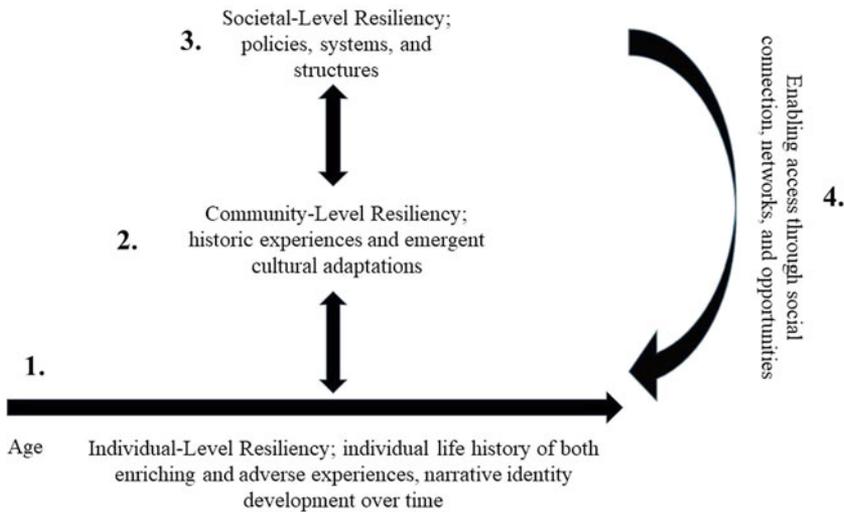


Figure 1. The Ecological Resilience Framework considers the bidirectional relationships between individual-, community-, and social-level resilience.

systems which feed into it (e.g., education, housing, child welfare, etc.).

JAYC was intentionally created to facilitate a collaborative, cross cultural, and co-educational opportunity that grounds policymakers in the lived realities of legal system-impacted youth and formerly incarcerated community members while simultaneously preparing the youth fellows to take on a broader understanding of the systems influencing their lives and how they can contribute to system change. JAYC is a 12-week leadership, life skills development, and education seminar that invites youth fellows and government agency representatives to study human development and social justice alongside one another with the goal of co-creating policy proposals by the end of the program. Four weeks of preparatory programming precede 8 weeks of in-person instruction on how individual identity and historical inequities both relate to social change processes; the seminar is led by experienced co-facilitators from prior cohorts as well as credible mentors from the broader community. All participants meet once a week to discuss difficult personal, community, and societal issues such as poverty, trauma, racial inequality, policing, and accountability for harm done – by both individuals and systems. Each week youth ambassadors and mentors also visit community centers and organizations, and city agencies to learn about their work and to get feedback on their policy proposals. At the final graduation ceremony, policy proposals are presented to a public audience that includes friends, family, past graduates, and influential decision-makers at both the community and city levels.

Fundamentally, the program recognizes that promoting individual-level resilience through positive narrative identity development requires more than individual change. Instead, it requires the intentional building of a supportive community with the knowledge, access, and social connectedness so as to engage both community and societal levels of resilience. Each pathway outlined in the ERF is also clearly represented across participants' qualitative experience in JAYC. First, it considers the individual experience and narrative identity as embedded within the broader scope of both specific communities and society, understanding that resilience is inherently contextual: What may look like negative coping strategies in one context may actually be an important form of adaptation to a specific lived reality (Payne, 2011). Second, JAYC emphasizes the unique challenges faced at different transition

points in development, focusing on the transition to adulthood (18–25) that is often overlooked, both in developmental psychological literature as well as in programmatic support or aid. This age group has an increasingly independent ability to make intentional, agentic decisions about their social relationships, income and educational opportunities, and overarching life routines but is often still closely tied to unchosen family and/or communities, as well as changing cognitive function (Icenogle et al., 2019). Third, JAYC considers the ways in which a collaborative learning community can provide social connection and help foster healthy personal values as well as narrative identity insight. In this final section, we use the words of JAYC participants to demonstrate how different elements of the program provided important structure and support that cultivate the core ideas of the proposed framework.

Pathways 1 and 2: individual resilience embedded in the community and societal context

Before the onset of full session programming, JAYC provides initial pre-programming support that matches youth ambassadors with credible mentorship and case management support as appropriate. A crucial element of JAYC that runs across all programmatic components is social connectedness through mentorship, and specifically mentorship that focuses on credibility and relatability (e.g., with relatable individuals who have similar life experiences with the criminal legal system and gang/street crew involvement) and that is intergenerational (e.g., with community elders). By intentionally matching youth participants with credible mentors and government agency representatives, many of whom share social and community identities with the youth, an opportunity for meaning making and narrative identity revision emerges through contextualization of past decisions and possible future life trajectories. For some youth, this opens up the awareness of making self-beneficial choices and commitments:

So I could say that what it [JAYC] has to offer is as a healing process, right? That's something that you have to stick with it, although it takes a committed person, right? To heal yourself. And, you know, be a little bit more structured, instead of just being like, we was out in the streets and going out there and kind of like just, you know, blindly going without realizing who really was or what is more about... It's an opportunity for yourself to realize, what can I do to better myself? You know, how can I, how can I heal my pain and trauma? (Youth Participant, 22, Male, Latino, Criminal Legal System-Involved)

Although each JAYC youth has different pre-existing relationships across their family and peer communities – some of which promote and some of which hinder access to new resources and opportunities – the creation of a shared social network for all participants goes beyond individual networking or connection building. Instead, the layered social ties that exist among youth participants, those that connect youth with government agency representatives, and those that connect youth with credible mentors help to create a cohesive Justice Ambassadors identity – one that begins to exist even before formal programming starts and that continues past graduation.

The development of these group and community identities through the pre-programming and mentorship experiences, complements the initial JAYC sessions which begin with accessible instruction on youth development and social identity, with an explicit focus on both trauma and ecological systems theory. For many of the young people, JAYC may be their first educational opportunity to discuss concepts like ACEs – particularly with individuals who faced many similar challenges due to structural racism and discrimination, disproportionate levels of community poverty and violence, and even criminal legal system involvement or impact:

I think, the topic that was really informative and impactful for me was learning more about resilience factors [ACES], and especially like learning about resilience factors while in a program with like, not only my own experience, but other youth, like justice afflicted youths with experiences that could really like speak to this personally. That was, that was really... that really hit me. (Youth Participant, 23, Female, Biracial)

By starting with these developmentally appropriate educational opportunities for understanding and contextualizing their shared experiences, JAYC participants are able to identify and explore throughout later sessions how their early life histories and social identities not only influence their own narrative identity as well as better understand how they are also impacted by more macro-level community and societal dynamics. With this comes the inherent understanding of the JAYC curriculum that individual resilience does not operate in the silo of individual history and choice. Instead, it is influenced by broader community environments, which are in turn influenced by societal-level political and cultural dynamics as represented within the ecological systems theory. By visualizing these interconnected levels of influencing factors, especially over a chronological time frame, participants are able to better visualize and cultivate their own areas of agency while also understanding the myriad of environmental circumstances that have influence on them. For example, both the youth and government representatives are asked to reflect on the various systems that interact with their lives:

The criminal justice system... We are getting enough of a perspective to look back on the eighties and nineties and say, well, that mass incarceration, that, that, that really didn't work. That didn't, that didn't work at all. We... we lost a generation of young people. We disrupted families. We warehoused a bunch of people for low level crimes... I mean, it's definitely an opportunity for self-examination, and we're not on the other side of that. (Government Representative, 54, Male, African American, Prosecutor)

Beyond similar reflections that emerge across the dialogue sessions of JAYC, the program works hard to provide its participants with diverse opportunities to learn about how seemingly disconnected processes or structures may influence their own individual lives. This includes site visits to various government agency offices as well as panel presentations by political and nonprofit actors that allow youth to connect directly with the institutions and

policymakers often implicated in their day-to-day lives; the site visits also help the youth to begin building new ways of connecting with and exploring New York City. For example, one site visit brought youth participants to meet with several different council members at the New York City Hall who explained the process of proposing and supporting bills. There, one council woman described her recent support of legislation to enhance the provision of services and protections for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. In a later group discussion, several of the youth participants reflected critically on how elements of the bill would have (or would not have) addressed the needs of the survivors within their own households and communities, including in some instances for themselves. These multi-layered conversations help to illustrate JAYC's holistic goal of balancing the promotion of individual agency and autonomous decision-making with a greater understanding of the ways in which both societal and community contexts change the scope and capacity of the type of decisions that can be made.

Pathways 3 and 4: a cycle of mutually reciprocal support and access to build resilience

At the same time that JAYC promotes individual agency contextualized within the realities of both societal and community constraints, it also fundamentally operates through the philosophy of policy-by-proximity, or the idea that those who are closest to the challenges should be those most involved in determining their solutions. Beyond simply providing the youth participants with relevant social support and resource access, JAYC seeks to engage the youth as active contributors not only in understanding the types of support and resources they most critically need but also in the planning, development, and implementation of new policy approaches and other forms of system change:

How do you create opportunities for young people to have other opportunities that belong to something? And I think that's going to require an intersectional approach with different people. And we have these policymakers who have to get out of their heads and hear directly from the young people. (Government Representative, 58, Male, African American, Staff at Department of Homeless Services)

For many of its youth participants, JAYC serves as a unique space in which they are given the time, resources, and support necessary to transform a personal idea into a powerful policy application. Early in the sessions, youth are encouraged to consider a topic or domain of policy that they feel strongly about – something that has either already deeply impacted their lives or where they have a direct experience to speak on. Participants are placed in small groups with a balanced number of government agency representatives and are provided with a step-by-step framework for identifying a community challenge important to them before brainstorming potential policy solutions as well as researching pros and cons of pre-existing policy approaches:

Like for example, we just started out with the self-reflection and stuff like that, and then we ended up turning all of that into the presentations for the end the program and it's like we just started out with these small little ideas that was just kind of being thrown out there randomly, and then we built from it, and it was like I honestly didn't even realize—from my perspective—it was happening so kind of like gradually that by the time it took for us to get to Point A, which was just throwing out those ideas, it felt like two days later that we were sitting there doing our entire presentations and I just felt like it was great to see everybody there, like really doing that you know. (Youth Participant, 20, Female, Latina, Justice-Impacted)

To go from participant self-reflection to entire policy presentations, JAYC works to leverage the power and influence of its university-community-city collaboration in order to create a thriving social network that exists above and beyond the actual programmatic sessions. First, JAYC provides a common space – usually located on Columbia University’s campus – that serves not only as a central meeting point, but also as an opportunity for the youth participants to imagine themselves as learners and students welcome within an elite, higher educational institution. Next, JAYC makes sure to scaffold each element of the program for support and accessibility – providing youth participant stipends and transportation support, including dinner in every session, and working outside of the session hours to ensure that participants’ barriers to regular attendance (such as childcare needs or court involvement) are being considered and addressed as possible. These intentional forms of structural support help to address disparities that have historically existed around who has the financial resources, time, and motivation to join educational programming. Finally, JAYC consistently highlights the value of youth voice and perspective by including them in all levels of conversation – for example, curriculum preparation for future cohorts – and through capacity building around skill sets that allow for greater communication of ideas such as practicing public speaking or even facilitator training.

Importantly, however, JAYC does not simply end by providing individual-level support to its participants, but instead asks each participant to consider how their experiences and skills can help contribute to the resilience of their own families and communities. The program empowers the youth to consider their own desires for personal change and growth while also asking how their increased access to social networks like the New York City Council or to educational or employment opportunities like an internship at Columbia University can become a platform for collective problem-solving that supports community-level resilience. In the words of one participant, the content from JAYC has enabled him “to use my past as a catapult to my future [where I’ll] educate myself to educate and help others”.

Conclusion

Several themes and findings from both individual-, community-, and society-level resilience science ground our proposed framework, namely the importance of contextualizing appropriate resiliency outcomes in the context of chronic adversity, focusing on the critical developmental time point of emerging adulthood as a profound time for intervention, and considering the relational element of resilience that spans across each level of analysis. Our ERF understands resilience outcomes through the lens of developmental transitions, social connectedness within embedded ecological systems, adaptive culture, and narrative identity. While previous approaches in the resilience literature explore some of these elements, ERF integrates them in a way that is both accessible and comprehensive.

Critically, the JAYC program provides real-world demonstration of how the ERF can help embed individual capacity within the larger context of community environmental and societal access, so as to support a diverse group of young individuals navigate compounded adverse experiences. While measuring the success of the JAYC approach faces some limitations due to its small number of participants (as of spring 2023, approximately 107 participants across five cohorts have graduated from JAYC), it is clear that the approach outlined above works. Pre-post surveys taken by the

youth ambassadors indicated not only increased feelings of individual self-agency and confidence, but also greater desire for involvement in both community and political forms of engagement as well as an expanded sense of social network connectivity. These findings are also supported by the majority of youth participants reporting the successful attainment of personally important goals within education (e.g., high school graduation, obtaining a GED, enrolling in college), employment (e.g., securing a full-time job or internship), and both family and friend relationships (e.g., improving positive communication). For youth that were criminal legal system involved prior to their JAYC participation, court advocacy and case management support provided by the JAYC program resulted cumulatively in over 40 years in sentence reduction. For the government agency representatives, preliminary findings indicate a similar increase in agency over time (specifically in relation to their professional capacity) as well as the cultivation of new efforts to leverage their influence through the creation of internship programs, additional mentorship opportunities, and post-program policy implementation support.

Though these preliminary evaluative findings are exciting, it is also worth noting the challenges of creating and implementing a program such as the Justice Ambassadors. JAYC inherently requires commitment and buy-in from individuals coming from many different walks of life, almost all of whom had experienced, or were currently experiencing, elements of chronic adversity. Consistent weekly attendance is challenging for time-stressed government representatives as well as for the youth – many of whom were navigating complex financial, housing, and criminal legal system situations. Despite a careful consideration of JAYC curriculum and skilled facilitators, moments of tension arise where participants struggled to balance honest reflection with deeply personal experiences. To carefully navigate these challenges requires leveraging not only the resources of Columbia University – in the form of financial support, case management, and peer mentorship – but also sustainable and flexible community-building. In alignment with the Ecology of Resilience Framework, JAYC empowers individuals at a critical stage in life while simultaneously changing societal policy through the growth of a shared community with greater access to resources and broader social networks.

More broadly, by emphasizing the mutually reciprocal relationship between individual-level resilience with community- and societal-level resiliencies, the Ecology of Resilience Framework highlights not only the importance of narrative identity development over time, but also the importance of access to material resources and opportunities as well as new forms of social connectedness that are embedded in community and policy structures. In the years to come, continued focus on how to best measure some of the less tangible forms of resilience that derive from the ERF – for example, the growth of social networks and connections, the creation of a 5-year life plan, the willingness to seek out mental healthcare – is merited. And, as JAYC continues to grow its own community and ideally influence other programs of a similar nature, the value of the ERF as a guiding tool should be consistently revisited and refined.

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