

# Toward a Multisystemic Resilience Framework for Migrant Youth

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## Introduction

Resilience has gained increasing popularity in migration and youth studies. As a concept widely used in a variety of disciplines and research fields, resilience offers an appropriate lens to understand the development of children and youth in the face of adversity, to identify the risk and protective factors working in concert to influence developmental outcomes, and to unveil the mechanism through which these factors operate. Recent research on migrant youth has witnessed a growing number of examples employing the concept of resilience to decode the adaptive outcomes against the anticipated negative consequences of migration and resettlement (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). However, an integrative framework that takes into account the functioning of multiple systems that foster resilience in migrant youth does not exist and has yet to be developed. It remains a key question in this field of research to explore: What constitutes and promotes resilience for the development of migrant youth, and how do these mechanisms work?

To address the previous question, this chapter first reviews the definition of resilience in different social science disciplines and seeks to develop a definition that is particularly suitable for use in migrant youth research. Following the review and refinement of a definition of resilience for migrant youth, the chapter continues to investigate how resilience has been manifested and studied in multiple systems in existing research, namely, the intrapersonal microsystem, the interpersonal mesosystem, and the institutional macrosystem, as well as how these multiple systems may interact with each other while exerting effects on the development of migrant youth. The chapter concludes by proposing a potential Multisystemic

Resilience Framework for migrant youth and envisions the implications of this potential framework for research, policy and practice.

## Definition of Resilience in Migrant Youth Research

With the original meaning “rebound,” the term *resilience* was used to describe elasticity of materials in natural sciences and then borrowed by social sciences in the 1950s. As a perfect term bridging the gap “between (dynamic) adaptation and (static) resistance,” resilience has attracted increasing attention from various disciplines (Alexander, 2013, p. 2714).

In social sciences, resilience has gained a multitude of definitions and usages across a range of disciplines. From the ecological perspective, it refers to the capacity of a socioecological system coping with external stresses and barriers in the changing environment (Folke et al., 2010; Holling, 1973). In the field of developmental psychopathology, it mainly refers to the capacity of successful coping in a stressful environment in child development, particularly with a focus on the avoidance of or resistance to psychosocial adversity (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995; Garnezy, 1991; Nigg, Nikolas, Friderici, Park, & Zucker, 2007; Rutter, 1999). From the perspective of positive psychology, resilience refers to positive personality traits such as hardiness and invulnerability (e.g., Anthony, 1974; Florian, Mikulincer, & Taubman, 1995; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As a broad umbrella concept, resilience not only refers to multiple systems (e.g., a person, a group, or a community), but has also been used to represent the interactions across different systems, especially interactions between risk and protective factors (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003). Despite no consensus on the definition of resilience among researchers in this field, it has been generally acknowledged that resilience is composed of two core components—adversity and positive adaptation (Cosco et al., 2017).

Guided by this general understanding, a large number of studies on the resilience of children and youth have been conducted to date. Although resilience remains conceptually multifaceted in these studies, its interpretations have predominantly focused on two directions—the outcome of adaptation to adversity and the processes/mechanisms that facilitates adaptation to adversity (Olsson et al., 2003). On the one hand, these studies have contributed to introducing resilience into the general conceptual map of risk and coping. Resilience has been applied in various circumstances of adversity faced by youth at-risk, including chronic adversities, trauma, migration, cumulative life events, and specific experiences (Masten & Obradović, 2006). On the other hand, much less attention has been given to variations in the living contexts wherein different subgroups of youth grow and develop.

Recent advances in resilience studies have pointed out that considerable differences exist in the adaptation process of youth in different groups and societies, both empirically and theoretically (Masten, 2014; Tol, Song, & Jordans, 2013). For instance, stresses and challenges encountered by youth experiencing migration are different from those encountered by youth experiencing abuse, violence, or other traumatic events. For youth in the context of migration, which involves significant life transitions and multifaceted changes of environment, challenges brought to children and youth as a consequence of movement and resettlement (i.e., migration)

include language and communication barriers, disrupted family dynamics, shifts in role responsibilities, broken social networks, relationship with people in the mainstream, lack of social support, and restricted access to social welfare and other services (Qin, 2006; Sodowsky, Lai, & Plake, 1991; Yeh et al., 2008; Wong, Li, & Song, 2007). These challenges have been documented in research on children and youth in contexts of both international migration and internal migration such as the rural–urban migration in China (Whyte, 2010). Therefore, migration constitutes a unique risk situation, or adversity, that is anticipated to trigger negative outcomes for youth development. However, despite the risks and challenges, some youth in the migration context adapt well. There are youths who can function better than others when fighting against the negative outcomes expected to appear as a result of migration. In other words, they demonstrate resilience in this particular risk situation. Therefore, it is the aim of this chapter to explore what fosters resilience of migrant youth by discussing the multiple systems they live with in a holistic and dynamic way. As some scholars contend, time-specific and context-specific protective factors should be identified to protect youth “in specific life contexts” “against specific risks” (Schoon & Parsons, 2002, p. 268; Masten, 2014; Tol et al., 2013). With a particular focus on migrant youth, we aim to explicate the concept and refine the understanding of resilience specifically in the context of migration and youth studies.

The adversity or risk situation faced by migrant youth can be generally decoded into challenges brought about by two transitions. On the one hand, migration involves transition of geographical and sociocultural environment from the place of origin to the place of destination. It is fraught with stresses and challenges derived from the daily interactions between the individual and socioecological systems (e.g., family, school, neighborhood) as well as various cultural encounters (Berry, 2006; Wu, Tsang, & Ming, 2014). On the other hand, migrant youth also experience a transition of developmental stage. Youth development arouses shifts in personal identity and social roles. Instability and dysfunction during this transitional period may exert negative influences on individual well-being (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). As a consequence, these two transitions intertwine with each other to place migrant youth in a uniquely challenging situation that requires both inner strength and external resources to facilitate healthy adaptation and maintain positive development.

Grounded on this understanding, to provide a definition of resilience particularly for youth in the context of migration, we define resilience as positive adaptation and development despite the challenging environmental changes and life transitions resulting from migration. Resilience refers to the process of migrant youth striving for a certain standard of well-being by constantly mobilizing resources from and interacting with multiple systems, including the intrapersonal microsystem, interpersonal mesosystem, and institutional macrosystem. The remainder of this chapter will show how resilience presents and functions in multiple systems, which leads to positive developmental outcomes for migrant youth.

## Resilience in the Intrapersonal Microsystem

From the ecological perspective, resilience in the microsystem traditionally refers to individual psychological advantages, such as self-control or self-organization (Cicchetti &

Rogosch, 1997; Moffitt et al., 2011). Such a view is still prevalent among helping professionals (e.g., social workers, nurses, psychologists, etc.) who seek to design resilience-based intervention programs for children and youth. However, it is noteworthy that the rapid development of epigenetics and neurobiology have updated resilience researchers' thinking on human adaptation to the environment (Greenberg, 2006; Liu, Reed, & Girard, 2017; Rutter, 2013). With cumulative empirical evidence from the previous two fields, there is increasing awareness that biological factors should be taken into account while studying the resilience of migrant youth. Hence, in this section, we will discuss potential intrapersonal factors protecting migrant youth from negative biological, psychological, and social consequences of the adversities experienced during the dual-transition in migration.

Emerging research on epigenetics has transformed our thinking on the mechanism by which the human body adapts itself to the environment at the most microlevel (Gershon & High, 2015). Genetic studies on resilience are relatively common in the field of child abuse and neglect. Existing literature has documented several protective gene expressions associated with positive adaptation outcomes. One of these is the oxytocin receptor (OXTR). In general, growing evidence suggests that OXTR polymorphisms are influential in affect regulation, social interaction, self-esteem, and empathy (Lucht et al., 2009; Milaniak et al., 2017; Saphire-Bernstein, Way, Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2011). OXTR DNA methylation also predicts resilience in specific domains, such as the conduct-problem domain of children aged between 4 and 13 (Milaniak et al., 2017). Other genotypes like polymorphisms of the serotonin transporter gene have also been reported to relate to resilience through moderating gene-environment interactions (Hornor, 2017). These genes help mitigate the risk/adversity encountered throughout the life course.

Advances in neurobiology suggest that resilience also manifests in one's nervous system, working in concert with genetic protective factors. Most studies on resilience in this field focus on psychological disorders like major depressive disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Initial findings on protective factors (i.e., resilient phenotype) in this dimension include dehydroepiandrosterone (reducing PTSD symptom and associated with better coping with PTSD), neuropeptide Y (functioning as a buffer against stress), Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (related to stress responses), and testosterone (enhancing positive mood and social connectedness; Rasmusson, Vythilingam, & Morgan, 2003; Rasmusson, Schnurr, Zukowska, Scioli, & Forman, 2010; Russo et al., 2012). However, despite this fast growing research field, most of these studies are limited to correlational studies. The mechanisms underlying these linkages still remain vague (Russo, Murrough, Han, Charney, & Nestler, 2012). Moreover, findings on some of the previous factors (e.g., hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis) are mixed, sometimes even contradictory (Meewisse, Reitsma, De Vries, Gersons, & Olff, 2007).

Clearly, the previously discussed protective factors in genetic and neurological dimensions provide us with a unique angle to understand individual resilience. Most of the empirical evidence was obtained from children confronted by specific adversities (e.g., child abuse). Related studies are notably scarce in the context of migration. However, considering that genetic and neurological processes may function similarly when children and youth

experience similar environmental change to what migration usually brings, they are presumably indispensable intrapersonal resources that contribute to resilience in the microsystem. In fact, the theory of neural plasticity also infers that genetic polymorphisms are likely to be associated with better adaptation to a supportive environment among migrant youth (Rutter, 2013). Much more work is needed to further explore these two dimensions.

Compared to genetic and neurological factors, psychological factors have received much more attention in the extant research. Developmental psychology contributes significantly to our understanding of resilience. A large number of studies have identified at least the following three groups of factors regarding personal characteristics/personality traits. In terms of mental features, protective factors include planning, self-reflection, determination, self-confidence, and self-control (Moffitt et al., 2011). Likewise, competence and ability, intelligence or scholarly competence, and general problem-solving abilities have also proved to predict positive developmental outcomes (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Masten et al., 1999; Werner, 1993). Among all these factors, self-esteem and positive self-image appear widely in many research findings (e.g., Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Dumont & Provost, 1999). As for cognitive aspects of resilience, mental flexibility in cognitive operations and emotional regulation play critical roles in psychological resilience (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Flores, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2005; Qouta, El-Sarraj, & Punamäki, 2001).

Concerning migrant youth in particular, the current research evidence delineating the effects of genetic, neurological, and psychological factors highlights the significance of inner resources for the fostering of resilience. A longitudinal study spanning over 20 years on youth development with a school-cohort sample in the United States found some adaptive resources as protective factors of life-transition (Masten et al., 2004). The results indicate that adaptive resources at intrapersonal dimension are crucial for the healthy adaptation of children and youth, including planfulness, autonomy, future motivation, and coping skills. Relevant to the focus of this chapter, self-esteem has also been identified as an important indicator of refugee youth's well-being (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & McMichael, 2015; McCarthy & Marks, 2010).

In summary, looking at resilience in the microsystem, genetic, neurological, and psychological factors could all play critical roles in the positive adaptation of migrant youth. Instead of functioning alone; however, these factors interact with each other. Mounting evidence has suggested that resilience is not determined by one single factor and does not manifest in one single dimension or exerts influence over just one adaptive outcome (Greenberg, 2006; Liu et al., 2017). Not only do resilience factors interact with one another, there is also complex interplay between these intrapersonal factors and the surrounding environment in which youth live. Furthermore, when a child is exposed to a challenging environment, whether these factors function in positive or negative ways may depend on the specific domain of adaptation and the interactions between the intrapersonal characteristics and the environment (Lengua & Wachs, 2012; Shiner & Masten, 2012). An increasing number of studies suggest that context moderates the impact of individual differences on adaptive function and development (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzen-doorn, 2007; B. J. Ellis & Boyce, 2011). Some protective factors in youth resilience are culturally and contextually specific (Ungar, 2008). Therefore, it is important to look beyond the intrapersonal factors in

the microsystem and take into consideration the interpersonal and institutional factors in the meso- and macrosystems to reach a fuller understanding of resilience among migrant youth.

## Resilience in the Interpersonal Mesosystem

Research in the field of migration, particularly on migrant children and youth, mostly approaches resilience in the mesosystem (the system formed when individuals interact with one another). In these studies, application of the resilience framework is often coupled with an ecological or multisystemic perspective. Attention has been given to the risk and protective factors across a range of social contexts in the ecological system wherein children and youth grow and develop, typically including the family, school, neighborhood, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004). There has also been a paradigm shift in the recent resilience literature, which encourages more focus on the strengths of an individual that can be mobilized to overcome adversity and achieve personal growth (Michaud, 2006), rather than on the adversity that creates barriers and challenges. As a consequence, research of resilience in the mesosystem has put considerable efforts into examining the protective factors that may enhance an individual's capacity to transcend life difficulties (Michaud, 2006). This focus is thus often built into theories investigating the effects of social resources (i.e., protective factors) on the various developmental outcomes of youth. One such intersection is the use of social capital theory in studying the health, education, and psychological well-being of children and youth. Much of the lead author's research on children and youth in the Chinese context of migration showcases such a research direction (Wu, 2017; Wu, Lu, & Kang, 2015; Wu & Palinkas, 2012; Wu, Palinkas, & He, 2010, 2011; Wu et al., 2014).

For example, rural–urban migration in China since the mid-1980s has featured a phenomenal large scale population flow from the rural to urban areas driven by people's hopes to seek better employment opportunities and living conditions. However, given the long-established household registration system in China, which assigns each individual a *hukou* (identity) at birth that is tied to birth place, rural migrants and their children usually have restricted access to social welfare and public services in the city because they do not possess the legitimate *hukou* status, or the urban residency necessary to enjoy welfare benefits and services in that city. For example, children from migrant families may not be able to attend public schools unless they can prove the stability of their working and living conditions in the city by presenting a considerable number of documents, or paying extremely high tuition fees, both of which are difficult for migrant families to provide. This creates a uniquely adverse situation for youth in this migration context. Moreover, despite migrating within their own country, the geographic span of China results in huge disparities in economic development and cultural norms across different regions and provinces. Therefore, the environmental changes and life transitions that migrant youths experience are no less than those found in international migration.

Wu's research applies the resilience framework, treating migration as the risk and social capital as protective factors, and investigates the influences of social resources embedded

in a range of social contexts on various development outcomes of migrant youth (i.e., educational achievement, psychosocial adjustment and mental health). Following Coleman (1990), social capital is defined as “social resources inherent in social relationships that facilitate a social outcome” (p. 302). Social capital embedded in each domain of the social ecology constitutes resilience in the mesosystem, including family social capital (i.e., the bonds between parents and children reflected in the time and attention spent interacting with children and monitoring their activities; Coleman, 1990), school social capital (i.e., relational quality between all stakeholders in the school environment, such as interactions between students and teachers, between peer groups, and communications between school and family; Roffey, 2010), peer social capital (i.e., quality of peer relationships in terms of density, range, intimacy, and level of trust) (Ream, 2005), and community social capital (i.e., social connectedness among resident adults and youths, reflected by social networks, norms, trust, a sense of belonging to the neighborhood, and civic engagement; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These various social contexts are especially important for migrant youth because the process of migration and resettlement usually involves breaking and rebuilding social networks and adapting to changed relational dynamics in all these social domains. Therefore, Wu has constructed an integrative framework to take into account social resources inherent in all of the previous dimensions, organized under the umbrella concept *social capital*, and reveals the mechanism by which these factors operate independently, jointly, and interactively. For instance, one study focusing on the psychosocial adjustment of Chinese migrant youth suggests that that interpersonal resources in all four social domains facilitate better psychosocial outcomes (Wu, 2017). Moreover, social capital in the family, school, and peer dimensions have also been found to mediate the effects of community social capital on psychosocial adjustment, meaning that one specific dimension could have an influence on other dimensions, which further leads to differential outcomes in migrant youth. In other research (Wu et al., 2011), community social capital was also found to serve as a moderator, indicating that when greater social resources are present in the neighborhood, resources embedded in the family sphere exert stronger effects on the promotion of psychosocial adjustment among migrant youth. In other words, the protective function of one social domain (e.g., family) for the adaptation and well-being of migrant youth relies on the resourcefulness and support of another domain (e.g., community). These findings provide solid evidence of the interactive nature among multiple social domains at the mesosystemic level. The next section will explore the potential main factors that contribute to resilience of migrant youth in the macrolevel institutional system.

## Resilience in the Institutional Macrosystem

Factors in the macrosystem constitute another set of critical elements essential for promoting resilience but are addressed less often in the literature, even though they may affect the sustainability of positive adaptation at the individual level (Ungar, 2018). In the context of migration, supportive social environments can act as protective factors to facilitate resilience (Correa-Velez et al., 2015; Edge, Newbold, & McKeary, 2014; Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, &

Stein, 2012). Young migrants and their families are influenced by the culture, economics, and politics of receiving societies in regard to both their short-term adaptation and long-term development (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Suárez-Orozco, Abo-Zena, & Marks, 2015). For instance, numerous studies have suggested that acculturative stressors have negative influence on the mental health of various subgroups of migrant youth (e.g., refugees, overseas students, rural-to-urban migrants, etc.), which implies a critical role for culture and related macrolevel factors in the process of migrant adaptation (e.g., Berry, 1992, 2006; B. H. Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, & Cabral, 2008; Sonderegger & Barrett, 2004; Wen & Hanley, 2015; Schachner, He, Heizmann, & Van de Vijver, 2017). For example, a longitudinal study in the United States suggests that perceiving greater exposure to acculturative stress is significantly associated with internalizing mental health symptoms (i.e., withdrawal, anxiety, depression, and somatic symptom) among urban-residing high school students with first or second generation immigration backgrounds (Sirin, Ryce, Gupta, & Rogers-Sirin, 2013). Another U.S. study on English-speaking Somali adolescent refugees also found that acculturative stressors predict greater PTSD symptoms after accounting for trauma, demographic, and immigration variables (B. H. Ellis et al., 2008). In this section, we focus on three potential protective factors in the macrosystem that may promote resilience of migrant youth: culture, policy and religion.

Culture affects the meaning system that influences resource allocation (Ungar, 2015). For migrant youth, the process of adapting to a different culture is widely acknowledged as a key variable mediating emotional difficulties (e.g., Roebbers & Schneider, 1999). Two distinct aspects of culture are worthy of special attention. First, the inclusiveness of mainstream culture matters for nurturing resilience among migrant youth. It has been demonstrated that environments that value cultural diversity are facilitative for the adaptation and well-being of migrant youth and result in their enhanced sense of belonging (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). For instance, research suggests that in a school context valuing diversity and cultural sensitivity, Latino students are more likely to engage in academic activities and have desirable academic outcomes (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). On the contrary, feeling unwelcomed or alienated by the host culture prevents migrant youth from being better integrated and better adapting to a new environment. Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder (2006) found perceived discrimination to be strongly and negatively associated with both psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Second, the concordance/discordance between the culture of origin and culture of destination also influences the coping and development of young migrants during their acculturation process. The extent to which the original and host cultures share similar values and favor similar behaviors determines whether culture-related factors will create more barriers or facilitate the adaptation process of migrant youth. Research on discordant acculturation preference between two cultural groups suggests that less discordance is associated with less in-group bias, more tolerance, better intergroup relations, and less perceived threat (e.g., Pfafferott & Brown, 2006; Rohmann, Piontkowski, & van Randenborgh, 2008; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). In sum, the inclusiveness of the mainstream culture in the host society and the concordance between the culture of origin and destination constitute one critical macrofactor in the resilience of migrant youth.



Social policy may have significant impact on the development of migrant youth too. A specific social policy could impede or promote resilience for a particular subgroup of young migrants. Some existing social policies or institutional settings contribute negatively to the development of youth with a migrant background. Taking education as an example, which plays a critical role in youth development, less positive outcomes have been reported among unauthorized migrants (in comparison to peers with authorized status) across various societies (e.g., the United States, China, Europe; Bean, Brown, Bachmeier, Brown, & Bachmeier, 2015; Gonzales, 2011; Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008; Wen & Hanley, 2015). Such negative impacts remain even after influential factors like ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) are controlled for (e.g., Hall, Greenman, & Farkas, 2010). In China, barriers to attending public schools by migrant youths given their lack of legitimate urban residency under the household registration system is an example of how social policy shapes the adaptation and development of migrants. In addition to education, the policy impact on migrant youth can also be observed in the context of healthcare. For example, in the United States, the eligibility criteria for immigrant children to be covered by the State Children's Health Insurance Program restricts their access to healthcare (Androff, Ayon, Becerra, & Gurrola, 2011). It was rooted in the increasingly punitive enforcement of immigrant policy and the welfare reforms of the 1990s, which had rendered restricted eligibility of immigrants for health insurance. Later changes in Obama's policy released the restrictions and expanded medical coverage for those previously excluded immigrant children through the issuing of a new children's health insurance bill. This example indicates that social policy can be detrimental or beneficial for the adaptation and development of migrant youth, depending on whether the policy orientation is for or against migrants.

Religion constitutes another critical factor in the macrosystem. As an abstract value system, religion per se has a significant influence on the psychology and spirituality of individuals. Considerable empirical evidence indicates that religious beliefs have positive impacts on the resilience of migrant youth at the macrosystemic level as well. First, the existence of religious faith may be critical for the survival and adaptation of young immigrant. A study comparing changes in religiosity among new immigrants with Catholic and Islamic beliefs in Germany suggests that in places with a clear symbolic boundary against migrants' origin culture, new immigrants may count more on religious stability for better adaptation (Diehl & Koenig, 2013). In Ireland, Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) conducted a qualitative study with local unaccompanied minors (i.e., young immigrants under the age of 18 and separated from primary caregivers). They point out that these unaccompanied teenagers' coping strategies toward the challenging and changing environment center on religious faith (belief in God) and is manifested in multiple coping forms. In the extreme case of asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors, when facing a challenging and changing environment with different culture and without adequate social support, religion becomes a "relatively available" and "relatively compelling" resource for coping and surviving (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010, p. 233). Furthermore, contents of a specific religion may buffer the pressure and distress brought by the migration process. For example, a study by Holleran and Waller (2003) found that religion may act as a critical source for the resilience of Mexican adolescents who migrate to the United States. For Mexican Americans, the core beliefs of their religion are

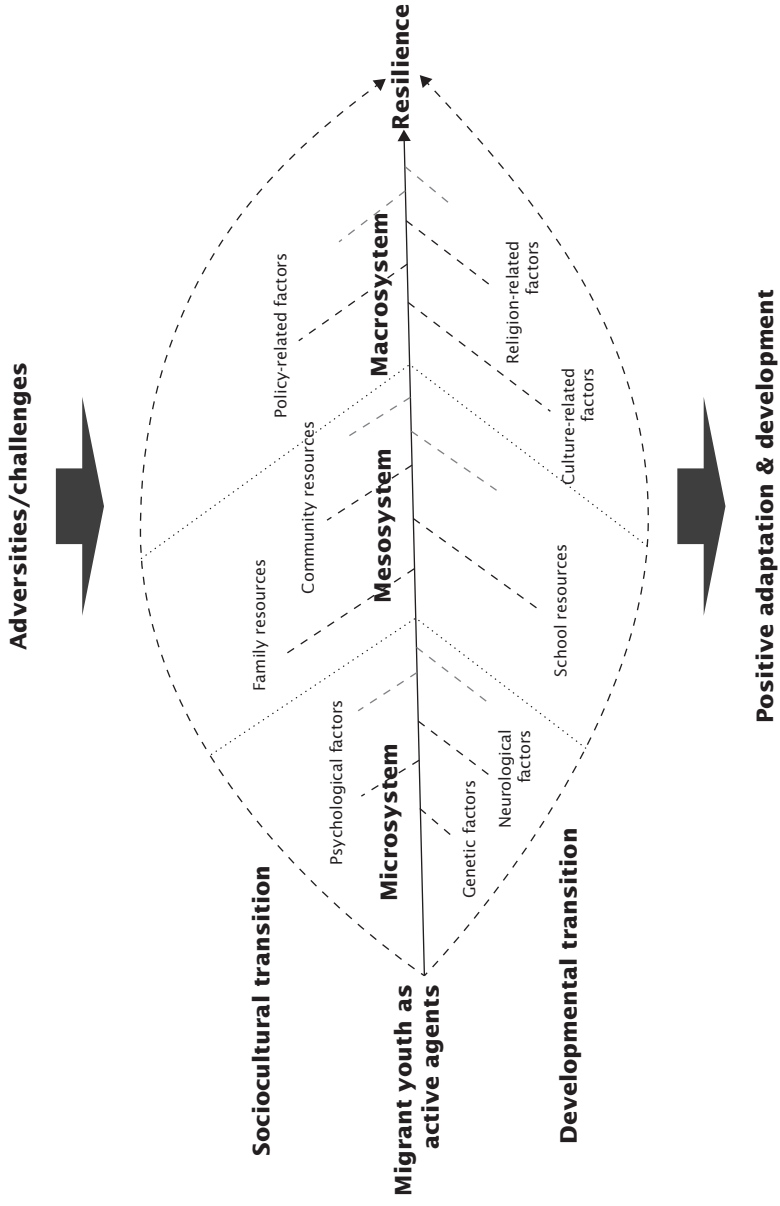
acceptance of hardship, suffering, and death as an inevitable and essential part of life, which is closely related to their attitudes toward adversities and life transitions. Another study in India found that Muslim adolescents who put their religious belief and knowledge into action achieve a high level of resilience (Annalakshmi & Abeer, 2011). It is noteworthy that religion often functions via individuals (i.e., personal faith) and institutions (i.e., churches), yet itself is far beyond the micro- and mesosystem.

To summarize, culture, policy, and religion are potential protective factors in the macrosystem that promote resilience of migrant youth. We acknowledge that this list of factors is not exhaustive. Furthermore, macrosystem factors are intertwined with one another and do not function independently (i.e., social climate and social policy are mutually dependent). Policymakers who make settlement policies are influenced by the climate in the host society, while social policies also shape the attitudes of the public toward immigrants. Likewise, religion genuinely interacts with culture, politics, and corresponding migration policies (Mavelli & Wilson, 2016). As suggested by intersectionality theory, immigrants' well-being is shaped by culture, structural discrimination, immigration policies, and the like (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). Worthy of note, the previously discussed macrosystemic factors do not always act as protective factors for migrant youth, especially given the tense climate toward certain types of displaced population (e.g., refugees) in Western countries. Attitudes toward the religion of immigrants vary greatly in different host societies, too (Foner & Alba, 2008). However, despite all these limitations, it is commonly acknowledged that factors in the macrosystem cannot be overlooked while investigating the adaptation and well-being of migrant youth. To some extent, appropriate advocacy for tolerance in areas like culture, policy, and religion might enable social institutions to become migrant-friendly and contribute to the resilience of migrant youth.

## A Multisystemic Resilience Framework for Migrant Youth

There have been previous efforts to construct an integrative framework of resilience with multiple systems and factors taken into account. For instance, Motti-Stefanidi and Masten (2017) propose an integrative resilience development framework that incorporates acculturative and social-psychological variables to investigate “who among immigrant youth adapt well and why” (p. 19). Another recent paper also calls for advancing resilience through an integrative approach and proposes a model of resilience consisting of intra-individual, interpersonal, and socioecological systems (Liu et al., 2017). These earlier proposed models, however, tend to place intrapersonal factors at the core position while underestimating the importance of other systems, thus failing to truly achieve the goal of building an integrative multisystemic framework of resilience. No resilience framework has been developed specifically for migrant youth.

Building upon what has been previously discussed, we propose a new comprehensive multisystemic framework to understand the resilience of migrant youth (Figure 20.1). This framework consists of three core systems wherein resilience could be fostered through different channels and fulfill different functions. In an effort to present the nature of resilience as



**FIGURE 20.1** A multisystemic resilience framework for migrant youth.

a dynamic process shaped by interactions with and across multiple systems, which can hardly be exhibited in the classic structure of concentric circles commonly used for illustrating ecological models (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1994), we construct a leaf-shaped figure to demonstrate the Multisystemic Resilience Framework. The figure is inspired by the photosynthesis of green plants—a process using solar energy to convert light energy (e.g., carbon dioxide and water) into energy-rich carbohydrates (Fleming & Van Grondelle, 1994). To some extent, for migrant youth, resilience is a process by which they convert the adversities and challenges experienced during their migration process into energy that helps them adapt to and develop in the host society. Compared with previous models, the leaf-shaped framework demonstrates the resilience process more intuitively and vividly, while placing the target population (i.e., migrant youth) in a specific context.

As presented in Figure 20.1, the two primary transitions faced by youth during the process of migration—namely, sociocultural transition and developmental transition—defines the scope of resilience. A smooth experience in these two transitions is associated with a migrant youth achieving positive adaptation and development or, in other words, demonstrating resilience. Within the leaf-shaped metaphor (i.e., resilience process), three core systems function like lateral veins, with protective factors branching into different systems like veinlets. The first one is the microsystem, including three clusters of protective factors—genetic, neurological, and psychological—that represent intrapersonal resources, which facilitate youth resilience. The second is the mesosystem, where interpersonal resources embedded in the family, school, and community contexts serve as protective factors to promote youth resilience. The last is the macrosystem, in which three groups of factors related to culture, policy, and religion are influential for the resilience of migrant youth. We acknowledge that this multisystemic framework does not exhaust all the potential factors in the micro-, meso- and macrosystems that may foster resilience. There are unlabeled veinlets within each system on the leaf, which represent factors not yet identified but could be added to the model as it evolves. Finally, just as a leaf needs a mid-rib to keep itself upright and stable, migrant youths themselves function as the primary agent in the resilience process.

As pointed out by Bandura (2001), the key function of personal agency is the power to act for given purposes. Wu and Palinkas's (2014) study of migrant youth in China provides an example of the functioning of personal agency while examining how migrant children's personal agency in developing and mobilizing social capital in multiple dimensions moderates the way that social capital affects their psychosocial adjustment. Specifically, instead of taking a traditional top-down view to examine the effects of family, school, and community social capital on the psychosocial adjustment of migrant children, their study emphasizes the role of children's personal agency in modifying the effects of social resources embedded in these various social contexts, where personal agency refers to children's actual efforts to generate and mobilize social resources in multiple social domains. It was shown that resources embedded in the family and school contexts indeed exert stronger positive effects on children's psychosocial adjustment when migrant children present higher degrees of personal agency. This showcases one potential mechanism by which multiple systems interact with each other in the resilience process.

Another form of interaction between systems is found in the complex interplay between multiple systems as occurs when resources in the mesosystem—say, those embedded

in the family, school, and neighborhood—promote the inner strength of individuals reflected as the personality trait of resilience, which, in turn, leads to more favorable outcomes for youth development. In other words, the microsystem of resilience serves as a mediator between the mesosystem and youth development. Wu and colleagues' (2014) research on the educational outcomes of migrant children in China provides an example of this type of cross-system interaction in resilience functioning. In that study, resources derived from the mesosystem (i.e., family social support and community social capital) promote the resilience (assessed as a personality trait) of migrant youths, which further results in enhanced educational outcomes. On the other hand, the microlevel resilience system, be it expressed as personality traits or resilient genes, may act as a moderator that modifies the function of resilience at the mesosystemic level. For instance, the interpersonal resilience resources may function most effectively for youths with greater resilience trait in protecting them from the negative influences of risk factors and promoting their development outcomes. Or, vice versa, the resilience resources in the interpersonal system work better for youths with weaker resilience trait, thus exhibiting a compensatory effect that mobilize contextual resources to combat the challenges brought about by insufficient inner strength in the face of risks. To elaborate more specifically, for example, social capital embedded in the family context may be most effective in promoting the life satisfaction of youths with greater resilience trait, while playing a less important or even nonsignificant role for youths with weaker resilience trait. It could also happen in a reverse direction. Social capital inherent in the family sphere may compensate for the insufficiency of intrapersonal resources thus having stronger positive effect on the life satisfaction of youths with weaker resilience trait. Whereas for youths who are internally resilient, family social capital may not exhibit such a significant effect. In both situations, the two different levels of systems are intertwined and interact with each other in their functioning on youth development through the youths themselves as the focal agents. Taken together, this Multisystemic Resilience Framework allows us to not only examine the impact of multiple systems, but to also take into account their intersections and interactions when exerting effects on youth development.

The last type of cross-system interactions in the Multisystemic Resilience Framework is achieved by manipulating the levels of analysis using different forms of variables representing different systems. For example, as Motti-Stefanidi and Masten (2017) suggest, the influence of SES, as a society variable, can be examined as an individual level variable if each person is given an SES score or be examined as an interpersonal level variable if giving the SES scores to schools or neighborhoods instead of individuals. By doing so, the same resilience factor can actually exist at different levels in different variable forms, which makes a unique channel for cross-system interactions in the multisystemic resilience model.

## Implications of the Multisystemic Resilience Framework for Research, Policy and Practice

As a model developed for a specific youth population exposed to unique challenging transitions during the migration process, the Multisystemic Resilience Framework contributes to the growing body of literature on resilience and has potential implications for research, policy, and practice.

First, the Multisystemic Resilience Framework advances our understanding of the complex mechanisms by which multiple systems influence the adaptation and development of migrant youths. Typical investigations of resilience focus on independent effects of a single factor, a single dimension, or a single system on youth development. The framework calls for studies that take into account the potential interaction patterns across different systems to gain a comprehensive understanding of the resilience process. The Multisystemic Resilience Framework also stresses the critical role of migrant youths as active agents that mobilize resources embedded in each system and enable the concurrent functioning of multiple interacting systems.

Second, for policymakers and advocates, the Multisystemic Resilience Framework indicates the importance of nurturing a migrant-friendly environment as the foundation to foster resilience. Traditional policy adjustments regarding migrants usually focus on resource allocation while overlooking the role of social policy in shaping a migrant-friendly climate. Policymaking might be one of the most powerful and effective means in changing and guiding a social climate to be free of discrimination, deprivation, marginalization, and alienation. For instance, it is commonly reported that public narratives portray migrants as either victims or criminals. Such narratives could be changed if more efforts were devoted to the macrosystem, directing the policy and cultural environment to be more accommodating of migrants. Building a resilient macrosystem may influence the functioning of other systems in positive ways as well. Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that the government has the potential power to foster migrant youth's agency in policy formulation (e.g., Hlatshwayo & Vally, 2014; Thompson, Torres, Swanson, Blue, & Hernández, 2019). Some policy sectors in Europe have started to involve migrant youth in immigration courts (Kanics, Hernández, & Touzenis, 2010). Increasing the participation of migrant youth in the policy process could be a potential strategy to promote their resilience.

Lastly, the Multisystemic Resilience Framework also provides some valuable insights for helping professionals in their development of intervention programs targeting resilience. Most existing interventions emphasize the importance of the microsystem in fostering resilience of young migrants, which leads to overemphasis on intrapersonal factors in program design. The intrapersonal factors are inarguably important, but not all resources in all systems are subject to change by programs with this exclusive focus. Some resources are more likely to increase (e.g., interpersonal resources in the mesosystem) than others (e.g., intrapersonal resources such as genetic and neurological factors). The Multisystemic Resilience Framework suggests that for interventions to be more effective, targeting more changeable factors in the interpersonal mesosystem and the institutional macrosystem could be a more effective strategy. Additionally, the framework also informs the development of intervention programs tapping into multiple systems in their design and utilizing the synergy across multiple systems to maximize the intervention effects. Moreover, helping professionals may also empower migrant youths to become active agents and navigate resources embedded in multiple systems for their positive adaptation and development. In a word, informed by the Multisystemic Resilience Framework, when it comes to fostering resilience in migrant youth, interventions should focus on factors beyond the individual level, initiate a chain of transformations across multiple systems, utilize the synergic effects across multiple systems

as one system changes another, and enhance the agency of youths themselves to navigate to resources in multiple systems.

## Conclusion

This chapter proposes a Multisystemic Resilience Framework for migrant youth. It first provides a definition of resilience particularly for youth in the context of migration. By developing an integrative framework and constructing a leaf-shaped model that represents the resilience process, the chapter contends that it takes multiple systems, including the intrapersonal microsystem, interpersonal mesosystem, and institutional macrosystems, to foster resilience in migrant youth. It understands resilience from a dynamic and resource-based perspective, considering resilience as fostered through the concurrent functioning of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional resources embedded in multiple systems. Moreover, these multiple systems are not independent of one another, but interact through various mechanisms to facilitate resilience-enhancing processes, ensuring youths in the challenging situation of migration achieve healthy adaption and development. In addition, the Multisystemic Resilience Framework emphasizes the significant role of migrant youths as active agents in mobilizing resources from and facilitating interactions across the multiple systems. Grounded in this integrative framework, the chapter concludes by discussing the framework's potential implications for future research, policy, and practice. We acknowledge that the proposed multisystemic resilience framework is a comprehensive but far less than complete model that does not exhaust all potential systems and factors. More factors will need to be identified and incorporated that enrich the multiple systems affecting the resilience of youth migrants. The value of this framework, however, is as a general guide and reference for research, practice and policy development related to migrant youth.

## Key Messages

1. For migrant youth, resilience refers to a process toward positive adaptation and development despite the challenging environmental changes and life transitions brought about by migration.
2. The resilience process for migrant youth is shaped by the complex interplay and synergistic effects of three interactive systems—the intrapersonal microsystem, interpersonal mesosystem, and institutional macrosystem.
3. Migrant youths act as active agents in the resilience process to mobilize resources from and facilitate interactions across multiple systems.

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