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Research Article

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle: A Concept-Driven Integrative Review of Resource Mobilization and Capacity Development Under Adversity

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ABSTRACT

People and communities in adversity often have resources that are useful but invisible, inaccessible or disconnected from purposeful action. In this article, we propose the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle (AEC) as a way to describe how personal, relational, cultural, and structural resources can be used to address a current difficulty and become capacity for future challenges. The study employed a concept-driven integrative literature review to synthesize scholarship on adaptive responses to adversity, empowerment and agency, resource mobilization, iterative feedback, and multisystem resilience. Sources were selected for their conceptual relevance and synthesized through thematic comparison and stage mapping. Analysis revealed a six-stage recursive model: Identification, Adoption, Integration, Application, Adjustment and Consolidation. Identification identifies useful potential resources. Adoption is an active decision to involve them. Integration is aligning them with existing values, relationships and practices; Application applies them to the present difficulty; Adjustment is feedback to improve a response; Consolidation is to retain learning, relationships, and capabilities for future challenges. The review also suggests that combined potential forces may, under enabling conditions, exceed the demands of adversity. This is a conceptual rather than a numerical claim, and it does not imply that internal resources are always available or sufficient. Adversity is thus seen as the condition that activates resources rather than as a positive force in itself. The AEC offers a strengths-based but context-specific framework for community development, education, leadership, personal growth and organizational change. The sequence, boundaries and practical value of the model should be empirically and cross-culturally researched.

Keywords: *Adaptive capacity, Adaptive empowerment cycle, Adversity, Empowerment, Integrative literature review, Multisystem resilience, Resource mobilization*

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Introduction

People, communities, and institutions do not respond to adversity in the same way. The problem's nature and severity matter — but that is only part of the story. The shaping of a response also depends upon whether skills, relationships, cultural knowledge, services and other kinds of support that are available can be identified and used. Resilience and empowerment research embraces this broader perspective of adaptation, conceptualizing it as a contextual process of risks, resources, goals, and action within the framework of interacting systems (Brodsky et al., 2022; Infurna et al., 2024; Masten, 2021). This article is written from this point of view. It is a search for personal, relational, cultural and structural resources that may exist but have not yet been identified or utilized. The key question is how to mobilize these resources, to deal with an immediate challenge, and then carry these resources forward as capacity for future challenges. This process was referred to as the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle.

Potential Positive Drivers are resources that are already in existence, but not yet fully recognized, gathered, or utilized, within the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle. These resources may be in different forms. Knowledge, determination and practical skills are personal resources and relational resources are built on trust and mutual support. Cultural resources can be found in shared values and practices. Structural resources can include organizations, networks and access to services. Adversity *per se* is not seen as a positive driver. It is the difficulty which necessitates finding the relevant resources and putting them into action. The framework then takes a turn to the conversion of potential into purposeful response. It does not imply that hardship necessarily results in empowerment.

This cycle begins with Identification. Today, people and organizations are thinking about the challenge ahead and looking for resources to help. These may be their own knowledge and skills, support of others, cultural strengths, services available or previous experience. Persistence may be an encouragement to continue searching for potential answers, but it is only one component of the process. Identification also requires a realistic appraisal of the

situation, that is, what resources are available, how they relate to the difficulty and whether they can actually be used.

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle has six interrelated stages: Identification, Adoption, Integration, Application, Adjustment, and Consolidation. Identification involves finding resources that could be relevant to the problem. In Adoption, resources are to be chosen by a person or group who is ready and able to make use of them. The integration process integrates the selected resources into a working response and the Application process carries that response out to solve the immediate problem. Then the response can be tailored as needed. Because tailoring is based on experience and feedback. Finally, consolidation ensures that the learning, relationships and capabilities developed thru the process are retained for future responses. These stages do not have to be sequential. Where conditions and resources permit, individuals and groups may step back to an earlier stage and re-assess the way they are going about things. This recurring pattern reflects the notion that resilience and empowerment are formed by risk, resources, goals and action (Brodsky et al. 2022).

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle does not imply that empowerment happens in a linear or predictable way. When circumstances change or an initial response falter, progress can stagnate, regress or revert to an earlier phase. Now the cycle is presented as a conceptual framework and has not yet been empirically validated. Its main contribution is to demonstrate how resources mobilized in response to an immediate difficulty can also be preserved and strengthened for future challenges. In the following sections, the ideas behind the framework will be discussed, the central constructs and stages of the framework will be clarified, and the potential applications, limitations, and directions for empirical research will be explored.

This concept-driven integrative literature review examines how available but not yet fully activated resources may be mobilized in response to adversity. It is guided by four questions: (1) What personal, relational, cultural, and structural resources does the literature identify as relevant to responses to adversity? (2) How does the literature explain the process

through which these resources are recognized and mobilized to address a present difficulty? (3) What roles do reflection, feedback, adjustment, and consolidation play in transforming an immediate response into greater capacity for future challenges? (4) How can these relationships be integrated into a cyclical conceptual framework for understanding adaptive empowerment across different contexts?

Materials and Methods

Review Design and Conceptual Scope

This study adopted a concept-driven integrative literature review approach to integrate the related works on resilience, empowerment, resource mobilization, and adaptive systems. Integrative reviews may be particularly helpful when a body of literature is varied and needs to be reviewed and synthesized to develop a new theoretical framework or conceptual perspective (Snyder, 2019). This method was suitable for the present study since the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle is derived from concepts in psychology, community development, education, leadership and organizational studies. The review aimed to disentangle the interrelations between adversity, available resources, purposeful action, feedback and capacity building. It was not intended to assess a single intervention, nor to include all studies published on these topics. The conceptual basis for the development and refinement of the proposed six-stage framework was provided by the selected literature.

Literature Identification and Source Types

The literature search followed an iterative, concept-based process. Relevant publications were located through academic databases, scholarly search engines, publisher platforms, and the reference lists of sources identified during the review. Search terms were combined in different ways and included “adversity and resilience,” “empowerment and agency,” “strengths-based approaches,” “resource mobilization,” “community resilience,” “systems thinking,” “adaptive cycles,” “feedback and learning,” and “capacity building.” Where appropriate, the Boolean operators AND and OR were used to connect related concepts or narrow the search results.

In the review, peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books were prioritized since they aided in clarifying the relationships between the main concepts of the framework. Earlier foundational works were not cited when they were not necessary to explain an established theory or model. Institutional reports and conceptual guides were selected where they provided relevant insights on community practice, adaptive management or empowerment. These materials were helpful in giving conceptual and practical context but did not have the same evidentiary weight as peer-reviewed empirical research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they provided empirical data, theoretical explanations or well-founded conceptual discussions relevant to one or more elements of the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle. The review examined literature on responses to adversity, personal, relational, cultural and structural resources, resilience and empowerment, agency and purposeful action, feedback and adaptive change, and the development of capacity for future challenges. Whenever concepts from psychology, community development, education, leadership, or organizational studies might help explain or refine the framework, it drew from those fields.

The review focused on English-language materials with sufficient accessible content to assess their relevance and credibility. Sources were excluded when they mentioned resilience or empowerment only in passing, did not help explain the framework’s core relationships, lacked identifiable authorship or institutional responsibility, or relied mainly on unsupported opinion. When different versions of the same material were found, preference was given to the original or peer-reviewed publication. Institutional materials were retained only when their relevance and source of information could be clearly identified.

Source Evaluation and Selection Process

All potential sources were evaluated for their relevance, credibility and usefulness to the conceptual aims of the framework throughout the review process. Screening was performed by title, abstract, introduction or execu-

utive summary to determine if a source discussed at least one of the concepts central to the review. Those sources that seemed relevant at this stage were then looked at in greater detail with the full text available. In this close reading, we examined whether the source provided empirical evidence, theoretical explanation, or practical insight that could clarify the relationships among adversity, resources, action, adaptation, and capacity building.

Sources were excluded when they repeated material already covered by a stronger publication, had only a limited connection to the review questions, or made claims that could not be traced to reliable evidence. Because the study was designed as a concept-driven integrative review rather than a systematic review, the search process did not maintain PRISMA-style counts of initial results, duplicates, screening exclusions, or full-text exclusions. The resulting body of literature should therefore be viewed as a purposeful conceptual selection rather than a complete account of all available research.

Conceptual Synthesis Procedure

The selected literature was analyzed by means of concept-driven thematic synthesis. Integrative reviews help by critically organizing and synthesizing the existing literature in ways that can generate new knowledge and conceptual understanding (Torraco, 2005). Each source was searched for findings, arguments or practical observations about responses to adversity, available resources, agency and empowerment, feedback and adaptation, and the development of capacity over time. Initial coding of relevant ideas used descriptive labels including personal strengths, social support, cultural resources, structural access, resource mobilization, purposeful action, feedback, learning, and preparedness.

The related codes were compared and gradually brought together into five broader areas: adaptive responses to adversity; empowerment and agency; personal, relational, cultural, and structural resources; feedback and iterative adjustment; and the consolidation of capacity for future challenges. Some sources informed more than one of these areas. The connections among them were then mapped onto the six proposed stages of Identification,

Adoption, Integration, Application, Adjustment, and Consolidation. The framework was refined by repeatedly comparing the proposed stages with the ideas found in the literature. This was an interpretive and conceptual process, not an empirical test or validation of the model.

Limitations of the Review

There are a few limitations to be addressed. The selection of sources was conceptual and not exhaustive and therefore some useful studies could have been missed in the review. It also depended heavily on available materials and publications in the English language. In addition, the work required an interdisciplinary synthesis of literature developed for different populations, institutions and settings. As such, insights from one domain or context may not carry over to another.

All interpretation, coding, and framework development were completed by the author without independent coding or an inter-rater assessment. Consequently, the interpretation and synthesis of the literature may be subject to individual interpretive bias. For this reason, the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle should be viewed as a proposed conceptual framework rather than an empirically validated process. Future research should examine both its six stages and its explanation of how responding to a present difficulty may also build capacity for later challenges. Case studies, longitudinal research, participatory inquiry, and mixed-method studies could each contribute to this work.

Thematic and Theoretical Synthesis Adaptive Responses to Adversity

In resilience research, adaptation is mostly considered a process that evolves thru the continuous interaction between people and their environments. Rather, from a multi-systemic perspective, positive adaptation is influenced by links across individual, relational, cultural, institutional and environmental systems, rather than by personal qualities alone (Ungar & Theron, 2020). So, resilience is more than simply bouncing back to the way things were before a difficulty occurred. It may be to maintain vital functions, change a strategy that doesn't work, use alternative resources, or

change conditions that no longer facilitate well-being. However, recent scholarship has cautioned against assuming that resilience or post-traumatic growth will follow adversity, particularly in the case of severe, prolonged, or structurally determined adversity (Infurna et al., 2024; Masten, 2021). This difference is reflected in the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle. It sees adversity as a situation that needs response and resilience as the adaptive work underpinned by personal, relational, cultural and structural resources.

Empowerment, Agency, and Purposeful Action

Empowerment introduces a dimension of adaptation that is related to resilience but not identical to it. Resilience often focuses on maintaining or recovering essential functioning during difficulty, while empowerment gives greater attention to purposeful choice and the ability to influence conditions that affect a person or community. Even so, both depend on the resources available, the goals being pursued, and the opportunities people have to act (Brodsky et al., 2022; Joseph, 2020). The empowerment process model developed by Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) reflects this connection by linking personally meaningful goals with self-efficacy, knowledge, competence, action, and reflection on the effects of that action. Empowerment is therefore an unfolding and iterative process, not a single decision or result. Within the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle, determination can help begin a response, but it cannot carry the process on its own. Empowerment develops as individuals or groups recognize relevant resources, put them to use, evaluate what happens, and carry useful learning forward.

Feedback and Iterative Adjustment

A systems thinking perspective provides a useful insight into why the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle is circular and not linear. People and organizations respond to changing environments so what works at one time may become less effective as needs, resources or surrounding conditions change. Feedback can point to problems and inform changes to the response by contrasting what is intended to happen with what actually happens (Crielaard et

al., 2024; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020). Research on adaptive governance adds that learning across levels may contribute to increasing adaptive capacity. This is especially important when experience leads people to improve not only their current actions, but also to reconsider the assumptions and institutional arrangements behind them (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). Within the cycle, Adjustment is the function that embodies this function the most directly. But feedback can also show a need to revisit Identification, Adoption, Integration or Application. Thus, the framework allows movement between stages rather than assuming every response will occur in a fixed order.

Consolidation and Capacity for Future Challenges

Most of the ways in which people respond to adversity begin with an effort to solve some immediate problem. But the usefulness of what remains after a challenge depends on what people or groups can build on after they overcome the challenge. Experience can refine skills, knowledge, relationships, and routines, and can also increase access to useful resources. This is supported by an integrative review of the literature on organizational resilience which shows that response to disruption can maintain, rebuild or develop capabilities. The experience can also affect actors' subsequent preparation for and response to adversity (Williams et al., 2017). Multisystemic perspectives also suggest adaptation and transformation occur over time because of interactions among different systems (Masten, 2021; Ungar, 2021). Application is about the immediate challenge and Consolidation is about keeping useful learning and capabilities for the next challenge; that is the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle. This preservation does not happen automatically. It could be dependent on reflection, ongoing practice, documentation, supportive relationships, or institutional reinforcement.

Personal, Relational, Cultural, and Structural Resources

Potential Positive Drivers, this a term Adaptive Empowerment Cycle refers to resources that may already exist that have not been fully recognized or utilized. Mere presence does not make them effective. They become valuable

only as far as they are relevant to the difficulty and whether or not they can be brought into play by individuals or groups. A skill, supportive relationship, cultural practice, community organization, or public service does not become an active driver until it is part of a purposeful response. The framework views potential as contextual rather than fixed, because a resource that is helpful in one situation may be less helpful in another situation. Conservation of resources theory does not isolate resources from each other. This shows that resources tend to be clustered, and that the environment can provide or constrain the pathways through which they are obtained, protected, and utilized (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The Potential Positive Drivers can be classified into four broad groups although the boundaries are often blurred. The personal drivers are knowledge, skills, values, motivation, confidence and past experience. Trust, family ties, peer support, mentorship and community cooperation are relational drivers. Social networks can provide information, practical help, financial resources, child care and emotional support in a crisis. Thus, people can mobilize relationships as resources, not just as social connections (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). The cultural drivers are shared identities, practices, traditions and forms of knowledge that produce meaning and facilitate collective action. Research with Indigenous peoples has shown that resilience can be rooted in collective identity, language, tradition, relationships, connection to land and locally generated knowledge. These cultural resources can shape the way people understand adversity and the ways they consider meaningful and appropriate to respond (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Structural drivers are institutions, policies, services, organizations, technologies and material resources that increase the capacities of people. The categories are not set. For example, a community network may be a relational and structural resource, while a cultural practice may reinforce identity, relationships, and collective decision-making. The value of these resources relies both on their synergistic functioning, and their availability relative to a particular difficulty (Lubbers et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2022; Silverman et al., 2023). A similar integrative logic is reflected in the Integrated Dynamic

Self-Sufficiency Framework, which proposes that sustainable community development depends on the interaction of purpose, mindset, competence, resources, and connection rather than on isolated forms of support (Narsico, 2026b). This interdependence is reflected in a well-established framework of community resilience, which defines resilience as a process that connects a network of adaptive capacities to adaptation after adversity. This explains why adaptive capacity cannot be explained by one resource alone (Norris et al., 2008). The capacities are economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence.

Adversity as a Condition, not a Resource

Here adversity is a threat, a disruption, a deprivation or constraint which requires a response. It may make existing resources and the need for them more visible, but hardship is not good per se, and does not necessarily lead to resilience or growth. Recent scholarship cautions against assuming that resilience and posttraumatic growth are universal responses to adversity, particularly because retrospective reports of perceived growth do not necessarily translate into observable positive change (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Infurna et al., 2024). The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle, therefore, contains different roles for adversity and Potential Positive Drivers. Adversity is the call to action; drivers are possible responses. But severe difficulties and structural barriers can restrict the resources that people can access or mobilize. Grasping these constraints stops the framework from putting all the responsibility for recovery on the shoulders of those who are facing adversity.

From Potential to Mobilized Resources

A resource is relevant to the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle when it begins to move from being available in principle to being used in practice. Identification starts with a careful analysis of the present problem and the resources that may be available to deal with it. Motivation and persistence may encourage this search, but are not sufficient by themselves. The resources should also be accessible, applicable to the situation, and connected to purposeful action (Brodsky et al., 2022; Morris et

al., 2022). The capability approach makes a similar distinction between having a resource and having a real opportunity to use it. What people can do with a resource depends, in part, on the personal, social and environmental conditions that enable it to be turned into action (Robeyns, 2005). If a resource cannot be accessed, accepted or coordinated, it is only a possibility. Thus, Adoption and Integration are put between Identification and Application. Together these phases explain the intentional choice and arrangement of a known resource in a practical response.

Model Development

The thematic synthesis forms the conceptual foundation of the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle. Across the literature, responses to adversity are shaped by the interaction of risks, resources, goals, action, feedback, and the surrounding context (Brodsky et al., 2022; Crielaard et al., 2024; Masten, 2021). The framework brings these relationships together in six stages. These stages describe how potentially useful resources are identified, selected, combined, applied to an immediate difficulty, refined through feedback, and consolidated as capacity for future challenges. They are intended as analytical distinctions that clarify different parts of the process, not as a set of fixed steps. In practice, they may overlap, develop

unevenly, or return to an earlier stage when circumstances change. This recursive structure is consistent with Narsico's (2026a) view of transformative processes as fluid and interdependent, in which action, reflection, and emerging insights may feed back into earlier stages and generate further adaptation. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed connections among these elements.

A central tenet of the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle is that the sum total of the forces within and around an individual, community or system can be greater than the adversity being faced even when those forces are not yet visible or active. Related scholarship supports this possibility by demonstrating how resources tend to cluster together. Their robustness, redundancy and accessibility may assist in moderating the effects of adversity (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Norris et al., 2008). This is not a numerical equation, but a conceptual comparison. It refers to the range of strengths, relationships, knowledge, services and other support that can be brought to bear. This does not mean that every difficulty can be overcome without help from outside. Resources may be unavailable, disconnected or insufficient under certain conditions. The cycle is therefore designed to mobilize as much relevant potential as possible, knowing when external help or structural change is needed.



Figure 1. The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle Model

Note. Potential Positive Drivers are personal, relational, cultural and structural resources that may already exist but have not yet

been fully activated. Their wider visual area reflects the conceptual proposition that the combined potential within and around a person,

community or system may be greater than the adversity being faced. The sizes relative to each other are not quantitative and does not imply that all resources will be available or sufficient. Application is the use of resources available to solve the problem at hand. Consolidation is the knowledge, relationships, resources and capabilities maintained for future problems. The return to Identification means that consolidated capacity may fall into the potential available in a further cycle.

Identification

Identification starts with an attempt to understand the current problem and the resources that could be used to address it. People or groups consider what is happening, what needs to be addressed immediately, what resources are probably available, and what possible impediments exist to their use. This stage may be informed by reflection, discussion, observation, consultation and resource mapping. Asset-based community development takes a similar approach in that it begins with the capacities, associations and other resources already present within a community. It also involves the identification and mobilization of these resources by the residents (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Determination may be the motive behind the search, but Identification is more than just willpower. By the end of this phase, persons or groups should have a better understanding of the adversity, the Potential Positive Drivers that exist and any gaps that will require outside help.

Adoption

In Adoption individuals or groups consciously select and adopt the Potential Positive Drivers they consider most relevant to the challenge. A resource may be available but it is not appropriate, accessible, trusted or culturally acceptable. Adoption is therefore dependent on the fit of the method to the needs, values, circumstances and capacity to act of the participants. There can also be consultation, consent and a sense of ownership if more than one person is involved. The self-determination theory sheds light on why these considerations are important. A sense of autonomy and personal value of an action makes people more likely to stay engaged. However, if they are engaged in

the activity under pressure from outside, commitment can be limited (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The immediate result from adoption is a portfolio of selected drivers participants understand and are willing to activate.

Integration

Integration brings the selected drivers together and organizes them into a workable response. A personal skill, for example, may become more useful when it is combined with trusted relationships, cultural understanding, material resources, or access to an institution. Entrepreneurial bricolage offers a comparable example. When resources are limited, people can develop practical responses by recombining the knowledge, relationships, materials, and other resources already available to them (Baker & Nelson, 2005). During Integration, individuals or groups decide how the selected resources will support one another, who needs to participate, what roles they will perform, and which gaps or conflicts still need attention. The stage therefore turns a collection of separate resources into a coordinated response that is ready for Application.

Application

Application uses the integrated resources to address the existing difficulty. At this point the planned response is in the form of actual decisions, behaviors, services, collaboration or the use of material resources. A parallel exists in implementation research where action is a function of the interaction between capability, opportunity and motivation with enacted behavior subsequently influencing these conditions through experience and feedback (Michie et al., 2011). The immediate goal is to meet the immediate need; this does not mean that long-term empowerment has been achieved. As the response starts to unfold, people and groups can begin to see what works, what doesn't, and if any unexpected effects happen. These observations supply the information necessary for the next stage of the cycle, Adjustment.

Adjustment

Adjustment judges and modifies the response in the light of experience, feedback and changing conditions. They look at what actually happened, and compare that with what they

hoped to achieve, as individuals or as groups. They think about which results were useful and which difficulties remain, and whether the action led to any unintended effects. Depending on what they learn, they might rearrange resources, reassign responsibilities, adjust timing, or rethink the action itself. Sometimes the amended reply is ready for another Application. Sometimes the process takes a step back because at this point you need different resources or strategies.

Consolidation

During Consolidation people and groups are able to retain and exploit the useful learning, resources and capabilities that have been generated from their response. This could be things like keeping a journal of lessons learned, practicing new skills, maintaining supportive relationships, establishing routines, maintaining access to services or sharing knowledge with others. The goal is to make sure that the gains do not disappear when the immediate difficulty is over. Consolidation builds on these advances, providing the opportunity to shift from a short-term response to improved readiness and ability to address future challenges (Masten, 2021; Ungar, 2021). This is not the last step of the cycle. If there is another difficulty then the consolidated capacity is part of the potential that will be identified and mobilized again.

The six stages together describe how potential can be converted into action and how action can build future capacity. The first step is to clarify the difficulty and to identify resources that may be available. Then relevant resources are selected, coordinated, and deployed. We adjust based on experience and feedback. Consolidation develops useful learning, relationships and capabilities. But this is by no means a given, and completing a cycle can mean more resources are available when another challenge arises. It calls for careful Identification, proper Selection and use of resources, an honest Response to feedback, and deliberate Consolidation.

Conceptual Contributions

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle contributes an explanation of process rather than an

other inventory of strengths or desirable outcomes. It begins with the possibility that useful resources may already exist before they are fully recognized. The framework then shows why those resources must be selected and coordinated before they can support an effective response. Within this process, Application addresses the present difficulty, while Consolidation carries learning and capabilities into future challenges. Its cyclical structure also places feedback and Adjustment within the empowerment process rather than treating them as separate activities. In this way, the AEC complements existing models of resilience, empowerment, and systems change by explaining how potential resources can move into action and later become part of expanded capacity. Dynamic-capabilities theory offers an organizational parallel by describing how organizations sense changing conditions and opportunities, mobilize responses, and reconfigure resources as circumstances evolve (Teece, 2007). The AEC applies a related logic to a broader conceptual problem by clearly distinguishing resource Adoption, immediate Application, feedback-based Adjustment, and Consolidation for future challenges.

Potential Before Activation

An important contribution of the framework is its distinction between having a resource and being able to use it. Individuals, communities, or organizations may possess knowledge, skills, relationships, cultural resources, or institutional connections that remain unrecognized or difficult to access. This process can be observed in educational settings where recognizing individuals' existing capabilities and adapting interventions to those capabilities can progressively strengthen engagement, confidence, and a sense of empowerment (Narsico, 2024). The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle therefore avoids two opposite conclusions. It does not interpret the absence of visible action as proof that no potential exists, but it also does not assume that an existing resource can be used immediately. Empirical evidence from technical-vocational education illustrates this distinction, as access to skills training can create opportunities for employment and personal development, yet training

alone does not guarantee that these opportunities will be successfully converted into employment or further economic advancement (Narsico et al., 2024). Identification considers both what may be available and what barriers stand in the way of its activation. This provides a more realistic basis for deciding which resources can be mobilized and where additional support may be necessary.

Present Response and Future Capacity

A second contribution of the framework lies in its distinction between dealing with an immediate difficulty and building capacity for later challenges. Application puts relevant resources to work in the present situation. Consolidation looks beyond the immediate response by considering which knowledge, skills, relationships, routines, and forms of access should be carried forward. The cycle therefore recognizes two possible levels of outcome: improvement in the current difficulty and greater capacity for the future. Neither follows automatically. A response may address the immediate problem successfully yet leave individuals or groups no better prepared for the next challenge if effective Consolidation does not occur.

Recursive Expansion of Capacity

A third contribution is the way the framework connects Consolidation with the beginning of a later cycle. Knowledge, skills, relationships, and other resources carried forward from one response can become part of the potential available when a new difficulty arises. As a result, individuals or groups may begin the next cycle from a different position. They may recognize useful resources sooner, coordinate them more effectively, or act with greater confidence. Even so, the cycle should not be understood as self-sustaining. Resource loss, exclusion, changing conditions, or more severe adversity can interrupt progress, and continued support from outside the individual or group may still be needed.

Conditional Transferability Across Contexts

As such, the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle describes a broad process of identifying, mobilizing, applying and consolidating resources, which may be relevant in different settings. But its transferability is a proposition to be tested

rather than an established feature of the framework. A systematic review of guidance on intervention adaptation found that to move an intervention to a new setting may require stakeholder participation and changes to reflect local norms, resources, delivery structures, and other contextual interactions (Movsisyan et al., 2019). What counts as adversity, what counts as a valuable resource and what counts as an appropriate action depend on culture, institution, and power relations. A related point is made by social-ecological resilience research, which considers knowledge, competing values and power relations as part of the way social change is understood and enacted rather than simply as external features of the setting (Cote & Nightingale, 2012). The six stages may provide a common set of questions, but are unlikely to generate the same path or outcome across all contexts. Thus, any use of the framework requires local interpretation, evidence from the setting and meaningful participation of the people involved.

Potential Applications Across Contexts

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle could provide a common language for characterizing the ways in which people or communities respond to adverse situations when useful resources are limited, dispersed, or not yet fully operational. Across fields, its value is possible without assuming that one solution will work everywhere. What is consistent is a set of guiding questions. What problem are we trying to address? What resources are available? Which can be taken, and combined? How should they be used and improved? What learning or capacity can be carried forward? The following applications are conceptual examples and not evidence of the effectiveness of the framework in these environments. Each application would have to be adapted to the context and tested empirically.

Community Development

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle may offer a pathway for participatory assessment and action in community development based on local conditions. The first step in identification would be to clarify the present problem and a map of resources that community members themselves find valuable. Adoption and

Integration The community would be involved in selecting culturally relevant resources and integrating whatever support is provided from the outside. Resources requested in this application will be used to address the concern and community feedback will fuel Adjustment. Consolidation would then help preserve useful skills, relationships, knowledge and local arrangements for future challenges. The Worth of Participatory Health Research: A Realist Review Collaboration can result in synergy between partners, enhanced community capacity, improved cultural and pragmatic fit of interventions, and benefits that extend beyond the original project (Jagosh et al., 2012). Finally, it seeks to avoid interventions that expose communities to their deficits or deliver solutions without real community engagement by focusing on the use of local resources and participation (Silverman et al., 2023; Ungar, 2021).

Education

In education, the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle might assist teachers and support staff to respond to an immediate learning difficulty, while at the same time building the learner's capacity to deal with future challenges. Identification would start with the difficulty and resources such as prior knowledge, personal interests, study strategies, peer or family support, digital access, and school services. During Adoption and Implementation, the learner and the supporters would choose appropriate resources and mix them into a feasible learning response. The Application would be directed to the current need, with feedback guiding Adjustment when the approach needs to change. A useful educational parallel is found in a review of major self-regulated learning models. These models address how learners interpret tasks, set goals, choose and use strategies, monitor their performance and use feedback and reflection to inform later learning (Panadero, 2017). Consolidation could bring useful knowledge, strategies, confidence and support connections to new learning situations. Any use of the framework for educational purposes must be culturally responsive and not place the entire burden of overcoming structural barriers on the learner (Doll & Song, 2023; Zusho & Prieto, 2020).

Leadership

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle can assist teams to respond to disruption, uncertainty or changing demands in leadership contexts. The identification would define the problem and identify the available expertise, relationships, information, authority and material resources. Adoption and Integration – Team members would be part of resource selection and coordination to ensure an effective response. The application will take that response and results, and stakeholder feedback will flow into Adjustment. Consolidation would also retain useful knowledge and working relationships and practices within the organization. This approach re-frames adaptation as a collective process and calls for leaders to create space for participation and collective learning, rather than being solely responsible for the response (London, 2023; Yu et al., 2022). This enabling role is supported by research on organizational adaptability. Leaders can build the structures and relational conditions that enable the interaction of people, ideas, and resources to produce responses to changing demands (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Personal Growth

In personal development, the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle may provide a framework for reflection and action in a challenging experience or a major transition. Identification would begin by clarifying the problem and assessing available resources including knowledge, skills, values, relationships, community support and professional services. During Adoption and Integration, the person would choose the resources appropriate to the situation and integrate them into a realistic response. The psychology of meaning-making offers a useful parallel. However, although people often interpret stressful experiences through their more general beliefs and goals, such efforts do not necessarily lead to better adjustment (Park, 2010). Application would execute the planned response, and Adjustment would assess the effects and modify them as required. Consolidation would help carry useful strategies, relationships and lessons into later challenges. Important limitations remain. The framework is not a substitute for professional care or struc-

tural help when adversity involves trauma, violence, serious mental health issues, or severe material deprivation. Furthermore, one should never assume that such experiences are automatically followed by personal growth (Infurna et al., 2024).

Organizational and Systems Change

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle could be used in larger systems and organizations to support change where useful capabilities and resources are already present but dispersed across people, departments or institutions. The identification process would begin with a description of the problem, inputs from stakeholders, and current capabilities and structural constraints. In the Adoption phase, participants would decide what resources and priorities they were willing to adopt. Then integration would combine the people, process, information and material resources together and Application would perform the response. Changes will be made based on evidence of performance and feedback from stakeholders. The consolidation will institutionalize good practices and organizational learning. Likewise, an integrative review of organizational resilience shows that organizations respond to adverse events by deploying and mobilizing critical resources, maintaining or restoring critical functions, and learning from the experience (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). However, the framework would benefit from a broader analysis of structural conditions as internal strengths may not be sufficient to overcome policy, market, institutional or power constraints (Riaz et al., 2023; Stouten et al., 2018).

Across these possible applications, the overall process remains consistent, but what happens within each stage will vary. Every setting must determine which resources matter, which actions are appropriate, and what signs of improvement are meaningful within the local context. The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle therefore offers a shared set of process questions rather than a ready-made intervention. Its value should be judged by whether it helps participants respond to an immediate difficulty, bring relevant resources into use, and preserve useful capacity for the future. This assessment must also consider structural causes and situations in which outside support

remains necessary. Comparative studies and research within specific contexts are needed to determine where and under what conditions the framework is most useful.

Summary of Conceptual Findings

The synthesis yielded four main findings. The first is that personal determination alone does not explain how people respond to adversity. Across the literature, action is supported by a wider range of personal, relational, cultural, and structural resources. The presence of these resources is not enough, however. They become useful only when they are relevant to the difficulty, accessible to those involved, and capable of being brought into the response.

Secondly, resource mobilization is not a one-off decision. Identification points to potential resources, Adoption selects those that participants are willing and able to use, and Integration brings them together into a workable response. The proposed application solves the current problem and the adjustment is based on experience and feedback to improve the response. Consolidation retains valuable learning, relationships and capabilities for future challenges. These stages can also overlap or go back to previous stages as circumstances change.

Third, solving an immediate problem is not equivalent to developing capacity to address future problems, although the two outcomes are related. A response may have solved an immediate problem but may have left individuals or groups less well prepared for what comes next, especially when useful learning and resources are not carried forward. Deliberate Consolidation can help maintain these gains, and perhaps increase the potential available when another challenge comes along.

Fourth, adversity is best understood as a condition that calls for action, not as a positive resource in itself. The combined potential forces within and around an individual, community, or system may be greater than the adversity being faced, even when many of those forces are not immediately visible. Their presence, however, does not mean that they will always be accessible or sufficient. External assistance and structural change may still be needed. Together, these four findings provide

the conceptual foundation of the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle.

Implications and Future Directions

The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle suggests several possible directions for practice, policy, and research. At this stage, however, they remain proposals drawn from a conceptual synthesis. The framework could help practitioners and decision-makers examine how available resources are brought into purposeful action and how useful gains can be preserved as capacity for future challenges. It has not yet demonstrated the effectiveness of any particular intervention or shown that it can predict outcomes for specific populations. The discussion that follows considers possible uses of the framework and the empirical research needed to assess its value.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners could use the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle to guide diagnosis and discussion rather than as a fixed intervention. It can support participatory conversations about the immediate difficulty, the resources that may be available, the barriers limiting their use, the response that could be tried, and the learning worth carrying forward. Keeping a record of what happens at each stage may also help participants distinguish between possessing a resource, being able to access it, and using it effectively. The framework further encourages practitioners to consider improvement in the present problem separately from the development of longer-term capacity. Recognizing local strengths, however, should never become a reason to withhold material assistance, professional support, or necessary institutional change.

Implications for Policy

In terms of policy, the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle highlights the distinctions between provision of a resource, access to the resource, use of the resource and protection of the resource's value over time. Programs may offer services or material support but do little if people cannot access resources, find them culturally inappropriate, receive them through poorly coordinated systems, or have no meaningful role in the process. A large review of

prevention and health-promotion programs reached a similar conclusion. It found that the quality of implementation affects outcomes and is itself affected by interactions between communities, providers, program features, organizational functioning, training, and technical assistance (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The AEC sees policies as needing to respond to immediate needs, but also to invest in local capacity, supportive relationships, mechanisms for feedback and ongoing access. Another issue with consolidation is that short term programs need a plan for how the skills, networks, services and institutional learning will be sustained once the initial intervention is completed. Support for this concern comes from research on sustainability, which shows that ongoing use of successful practices is affected by multiple levels of factors and may require continuous adaptation, organizational support, and responsiveness to changing conditions (Shelton et al., 2018). This approach should not transfer institutional responsibility to communities or be used as a pretext for reducing necessary public support.

Implications for Research

Research priorities are to determine if the Potential Positive Drivers and the six stages can be clearly identified in the experiences of individual people, communities and organizations. Participatory inquiry, interviews, case studies and observation might reveal how people understand relevant resources and how the process unfolds in practice. These approaches can also reveal whether certain stages overlap, happen in a different sequence, or are absent in some cases (Feekery, 2024; Fernández & Fine, 2024).

Once the constructs are discernible, researchers could start the development of indicators for resource recognition, Adoption, Integration, immediate Application, Adjustment and Consolidation. The established guidance for measurement development suggests a process of item generation and content validation, followed by pretesting and scale construction, and evaluation of dimensionality, reliability, and validity (Boateng et al., 2018). Longitudinal and mixed-method studies could then investigate whether a present difficulty successfully addressed contributes to greater capacity for

later challenges, and the conditions under which this occurs. Such research should also consider the role of structural barriers, access to resources, and external assistance in moving around the cycle. Most importantly, the framework must be open to modification or abandonment if the empirical findings do not support the hypothesized relationships.

Future Directions

Future work should prioritize conceptual clarity and empirical testing before training programs or digital tools are developed. The stage definitions and visual model should first be reviewed with practitioners, researchers, and the individuals or communities who may eventually use the framework. The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle also needs to be compared with existing models of resilience, empowerment, strengths-based practice, and adaptive management to determine whether it offers additional explanatory or practical value. If the framework remains useful after this review and refinement, possible tools could include a resource-mapping guide, stage-based reflection questions, an implementation worksheet, and a monitoring template that distinguishes immediate outcomes from consolidated capacity. Cross-cultural and community-led studies will be especially important for identifying where and how the model needs to be adapted. Any application involving trauma or disaster recovery should also include appropriate professional expertise, ethical safeguards, and continuing institutional support.

Conclusion

This integrative literature review, guided by concepts, synthesized research on resilience, empowerment, resource mobilization and adaptive systems, so as to explore how individuals and groups cope with adversity. The synthesis focused on five inter-connected themes: adaptive responses to adversity; empowerment and agency; personal, relational, cultural and structural resources; feedback and iterative adjustment; and consolidation of capacity for future challenges. These areas formed the conceptual foundation of the Adaptive Empowerment Cycle.

The framework organizes this process into six connected stages: Identification, Adoption,

Integration, Application, Adjustment, and Consolidation. Its central contribution is an explanation of how useful but not yet fully activated resources can be brought into action to address a present difficulty and then carried forward as capacity for future challenges. Within the cycle, Application focuses on the immediate problem, while Consolidation preserves learning, relationships, resources, and capabilities that may be useful later. The framework also maintains a clear distinction between adversity and Potential Positive Drivers. Adversity creates the need for action, while the drivers offer possible ways of responding. Finally, the proposition that combined potential forces may be greater than the adversity being faced remains a conceptual possibility, not a guaranteed outcome.

The framework is a non-exhaustive synthesis by the author and has not yet been empirically tested. Its value at this stage is to give a common language for the process and a set of questions that can help facilitate reflection, participatory planning and further research. What is needed are longitudinal, participatory and mixed-method studies to explore whether the six stages correspond with actual experiences. Such investigations should also address if the successful overcoming of a present difficulty increases the capacity for future difficulties. The Adaptive Empowerment Cycle must be open to refinement, adaptation to other contexts, or rejection if proposed relationships are not supported by emerging evidence.

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