

Building resilience in mothers caring for neurodivergent children: a multi-framework approach using personal resources and self-regulation.

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Abstract. In the UK, approximately one in seven people may be neurodivergent. Parent caregivers of neurodivergent children frequently experience elevated stress, anxiety, affiliate stigma, isolation, and reduced social support, which negatively impact their homelife, careers, and workforce participation. Employing the conservation of resources (COR) theory and regulatory mode, this PhD study sought practical approaches to improve mothers' resilience and coping mechanisms. To address these issues, cross-sectional, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 mothers. Data and results identified links between COR and regulatory mode. Key resources and four novel resource passageways, including a conceptual opening passageway, were determined. The study contradicts previous findings on long-term time investments and validates the relevance of the crossover model and the broaden-and-build mechanism for the cohort of mothers studied. Practical strategies for supporting mothers caring for neurodivergent children based on COR and regulatory mode frameworks have been identified. These findings both extend and challenge these two frameworks. Proposals to support parents of neurodivergent children expand the use of COR and regulatory mode, and the findings add to the literature by understanding how these parents handle life stressors. These outcomes could potentially aid other caregivers and employers by offering targeted guidance and interventions to bolster resilience and coping strategies.

Introduction.

Existing literature on the two psychological frameworks of COR and assessment and locomotion orientations in regulatory mode exists but is scarce. COR recognises that threats to or loss of personal resources are objectively stressful; therefore, humans are naturally motivated to protect and acquire resources. Locomotors focus on movement, progression, and goal achievement, while assessors favour evaluation and review. Neither framework appeared to consider mothers caring for neurodivergent children, the participants in this study. While not explicit, prior literature suggests that the two frameworks may work in concert, and that both may be relevant to the studied cohort through, for example, the negative effects of poor time use (Whillans and Dunn, 2019), the importance of work and colleague attachments (McTiernan et al. 2016), importance of belonging and acceptance (Baumeister and Leary, 2017), and value of practical help and advice (Freney and Collins, 2014). This brief paper focuses on the contributions of this doctoral study.

Contributions to literature

This study established a relationship between the two frameworks, recognising that mothers with a locomotion orientation also had well-resourced caravans, and those with a mixed assessment and locomotion orientation had poorly resourced caravans. As neither of these relationships has been previously established, this finding extends COR theory and regulatory mode. These results indicate that the frameworks can jointly support goal achievement, and resource protection, recovery, and gain. This suggestion of harmonious operation extends COR theory and the regulatory mode construct, contributing to both psychological frameworks.

The association between a mixed assessment and locomotion orientation with a poorly resourced caravan contrasts with prior literature, which indicates that an assessment orientation would be associated with poorly resourced caravans (Piero, 2018). Noting that everyone has concurrently operating assessor and locomotor orientations, one is typically dominant, and my findings may be explained by complementarity, which suggests that higher assessors can draw-on their locomotion capacity to support goal movements otherwise hindered by their assessor traits (e.g. Jansen et al., 2022). This result underscores and extends the concept of complementarity and collaborative functioning of assessors and locomotor orientations (Pham et al., 2023).

This study identified nine key resources for mothers caring for neurodivergent children: financial, social support, time, health, psychological, mindfulness, personal skills, and immediate family support. It also defined resource groupings, or resource caravans, of stronger, and weaker resources for the mothers. These findings

provide new insights into COR theory. Establishing key resources is significant, as they have not been previously proposed for this cohort, and they are an essential component for understanding the essential skills needed by mothers caring for neurodivergent children. The proposed nine key resources contribute to the identification of the key competencies and capacities of mindfulness, time, knowledge, and compassion (self-compassion and compassion for others), which should be the focus of support initiatives for mothers of neurodivergent children. The key resources also align with the considerable literature on the parents of chronically ill children. Additionally, the identification of five distinct resource combinations highlighted the most valuable resources for all mothers, irrespective of the quality of their resource groupings or caravans. Valuable resource caravans have not been previously identified for mothers of neurodivergent children.

The significance of mothers' resource passageways illustrates how life events and experiences shape their lives. The findings of this study corroborate previous research (e.g. Kaur et al., 2024), extending our understanding of how resource passageways, aligned to life-course, apply to mothers of neurodivergent children. My analysis developed four conceptual resource passageways that do not appear in previous literature: empowering, opening, limiting, and restricting. The concepts of empowering, limiting, and restricting resource passageways might be implied from the prior literature, but the concept of an opening resource passageway is not suggested in the existing literature, potentially providing a significant extension to COR research. An opening passageway emphasises the importance of agency, broadens our understanding, and suggests that initiatives to improve the lives of even the most challenged individuals are realistic, not merely aspirational. Additionally, the conceptual range of trajectories for mothers caring for neurodivergent children extends the concept of resource passageways.

Time constraints and the value of time have been extensively explored in COR and regulatory mode literature. Establishing that these insights are pertinent to the mothers of neurodivergent children emphasises the significance of time in the two frameworks for this previously unexamined group. Time was a crucial resource for the mothers, and it required careful management to address competing daily demands. Specific concepts regarding the importance of time for these mothers were identified, highlighting the challenges and complexities in forming, maintaining, and utilising social networks among mothers of neurodivergent children.

This study confirms and builds on the existing research on social support, demonstrating its relevance to mothers with neurodivergent children. These findings highlight the critical role of social support in providing guidance and practical assistance, supporting earlier studies (e.g., McTiernan et al., 2016). The need for acceptance and belonging was emphasised, with the negative effects of social exclusion, misunderstandings, and loss of support being particularly significant. This effect was more pronounced in mothers with fewer social connections, whereas those with wider networks better managed stress and daily activities. This aligns with Zee and Kumashiro's (2019) observation that individuals with a locomotor orientation benefit more from social support, aiding their goal achievement. Other findings underscore the value of emotional support and respite within both family and work environments.

The crossover model (Bolger et al., 1989) and broaden-and-build mechanism (Frederickson, 2000) are routinely discussed in COR research but not for mothers caring for neurodivergent children. Crossover explains the transmission of stress and positive experiences among individuals in a shared environment. My research highlights the beneficial impacts of these psychological theories on mothers of neurodivergent children and suggests a connection between COR, regulatory mode, and their roles in crossover and broaden-and-build processes.

This study developed a model to strengthen the resilience and coping of mothers caring for neurodivergent children. It emphasises the caregiver at its centre and proposes that support initiatives must develop four primary capabilities and capacities in the parents: mindfulness, time management, knowledge, and compassion (encompassing self-compassion and compassion for others). These four capabilities and capacities reflect the most strained resources for the mothers in the sample. The development of capabilities and capacities will result from bespoke programs designed to help caregivers build and improve six broad skills: time management, coping strategies, emotional regulation, compassion, social connection, and knowledge understanding and assessment skills. These six skills were derived from the most challenged resources identified in the mothers who participated in this study. These interventions must be provided in a supportive client-centred social setting and must be efficiently coordinated, personalised, and stress-free. It is envisaged that charity run, holistic drop-in centres will provide essential training and education alongside parental self-help, training, and advice, with specialist inputs including financial and legal advice, cognitive behavioural group therapy, and other appropriately efficacious psychological interventions for improving mental health and mindfulness. Facilities

will be available for mothers to have time to socialise or work in a quiet, stigma-free environment while their children are safely cared for by competent care staff. Using COR and regulatory mode to develop support initiatives for mothers caring for neurodivergent children extends the use of these two frameworks.

Challenges to literature

The findings of this study also challenge existing theoretical and conceptual models. Hobfoll et al., (1989); Lin et al., (2019) suggest individuals prefer long-term investments to gain more substantial future rewards over short-term goals with lesser returns. Mothers in my sample prioritised quickly achievable goals, challenging these findings. This discrepancy may be due to the specific challenges faced by mothers of neurodivergent children who experience significant time constraints and make particularly difficult decisions about routines and priorities. Notably, these findings were most pronounced among mothers who managed stress less effectively and had fewer resources, more challenged resource passageways, and limited support networks.

My proposed opening resource passageway underscores the significance of agency for mothers caring for neurodivergent children and challenges the traditional cumulative advantage and disadvantage theories and resource passageway assumptions that early life transitions have lasting effects on well-being (Williams and Umberson, 2004). However, this finding aligns with emerging research (Dai and Li, 2023; Li et al., 2024) showing that life can improve through evolving individuality and development. Therefore, adverse early life experiences do not necessarily predict poor future outcomes, even in mothers who have experienced significant trauma, anxiety, and depression.

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