

Resilience or resistance? Agency in the eye of the beholder

Thinking about Resilience series

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rEUsilience




Introduction

Research within the rEUsilience project focuses on labour market-related challenges faced by families, how they try to overcome them, and whether social policies contribute to what the consortium has termed “familial resilience”. In ongoing efforts to develop, conceptualise and stabilise this term in the scope of the research project, the second working paper discusses resilience as an essentially contested concept that, while omnipresent in official documents and strategies, has also attracted criticism for its use in the (social) policy sphere. In this note, we summarise these critiques, focusing specifically on resilience as it has been used in the context of poverty. We then explore the conceptual linkages between resilience and resistance. Finally, we discuss the possibility of reclaiming and politicising resilience, and we offer four conditions for developing a critical sociological understanding of the term. By focusing specifically on resilience as it relates to individuals and groups struggling financially (in poverty or otherwise) and the potential of social policy in fostering or supporting resilience, the purpose of this piece is to critically discuss the term and its uses, and to discuss its relation to “resistance”.

Background

The word resilience comes from the Latin root *re-silire*, originally signifying withdrawing from a verbal agreement (“résilier” in French) (Revilla et al. 2017, p. 89). Following its introduction into the English language in the XVII century, the word came to mean “to rebound or recoil” (McAslan 2010, p. 2), especially in the context of sin (Revilla et al. 2017, p. 90). Resilience has thus inhabited our language for centuries, its meaning mutating across time and space. In recent years it has received considerable attention and gained tangible traction (Allen 2022, p. 311), particularly in policy circles.

Resilience has been developed mainly in four fields: physics, environmental sciences, psychology and the social sciences. In physics, resilience refers to the ability of material, such as wood, to “absorb strain energy when it is deformed and to release that energy upon unloading without breaking or being disfigured” (J. E. Gordon 1979 as cited by Estêvão et al. 2017, p. 11). In this definition, resilience is thus seen as a property or attribute by which an object can recover its original function after being subjected to an external shock (Estêvão et al. 2017, p. 11). Similarly, in the environmental sciences, resilience refers to the adaptative ability of an ecosystem to absorb a shock and maintain the same functions (Holling 1973 as cited in Amery 2019, p. 365). In psychology, resilience has been studied as an



attribute of individuals allowing a person to retain emotional health and achieve goals when faced with adversity (Barnes and Hall 2013, p. 231). There, the focus has often been on children's resilience (Mohaupt 2009).

Today, resilience is studied across a range of disciplines in the social sciences, including in development studies and social policy (Mohaupt 2009). The understanding of resilience, here, seems to be more ambiguous as compared with other strands of work and the units of analysis vary from individuals to groups, families or households and societies as a whole. For Gray and Rooney (2018), who study the resilience of families, for example, the term refers to "families' capacities to overcome difficulties faster than expected, or to adapt and cope in ways that lead to greater than expected levels of well-being" (p. 4). Calado et al. 2020 define it as "a social process by which individuals, institutions or societies respond to sudden adverse shocks in a way directed at reducing damages, keeping or achieving basic standards of quality of life" (p. 81), while Hall and Lamont (2013) focus on the resilience of societies, referring to the capacity of groups to sustain their well-being (p. 13).

Resilience: an essentially contested concept

Outside of academia and in the realm of social policy, resilience has been increasingly evoked by policymakers as a relevant and desirable goal. In a paper from 2019, Fran Amery lists the government initiatives that draw on resilience as a policy objective in the UK. These can be found in the domains of education, health, crime and unemployment, where resilience "often forms a central part of the strategies for tackling disadvantage and inequality" (p. 364). More recently, the UK government has referred to the term in its 2021 consultation on a National Resilience Strategy, and Covid-19 set the scene for calls by local councils and other stakeholders to build community resilience to the pandemic and other threats (Sims-Schoutens and Gilbert 2022).

Yet the policies themselves rarely, if ever, define what is meant by resilience. Official documents in the UK refer to "building resilience" (e.g. DWP 2016, p.34 and p. 69) as though it is a characteristic that can be acquired and developed. By contrast, in a study of low-income residents of Northern Ireland, Hickman (2018) finds that resilience is understood by interviewees as an innate attribute that some people possess, and others do not – but not as something that can be taught or acquired. For American scholars Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont, resilience is better considered as a property of societies and collective entities rather than individuals. Social resilience on their account is the capacity of groups to sustain their well-being. For many other researchers, the term resilience is about more than adaptation: it should create "the potential to translate adversity into opportunity" (Glavovic et al. 2003, p. 291 as cited in Boost et al. 2020). In some versions of resilience, attributes and character are emphasised; in others, the focus is more on the practices and strategies used in dealing with economic hardship (Dagdeviren et al. 2016).

The concept seems, in fact, to be one that is "essentially contested", according to the conditions set forth by Gallie (1956). First, the term is *appraisive* (Condition I): in other words, "it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement" (p. 171). As Simin Davoudi (2012) notes: "(...) it is not quite clear what resilience means, beyond the simple assumption that it is good to be resilient" (p. 299). Next, resilience is characterised by *internal complexity* and *diverse describability* (Conditions II and III). McAslan (2010) identifies several components within the term, including "awareness, detection, communication, reaction (and if possible avoidance) and recovery" (p. 1). The multiplicity of concepts that make up resilience make it internally complex and subject to various competing descriptions. Fourth, like other contested concepts, resilience is characterised by *openness* (Condition IV); this means that it is subject to



periodic revisions in new situations (Collier 2006, p. 218). Fifth, (Condition V) according to Gallie, essentially contested concepts are recognised as such by those who use them: actors using a contested concept acknowledge its rival usages (Callorda Fossati et al. 2017). Despite the difficulty of pinning resilience down to a single meaning (Amery 2019, p. 363), many of the definitions used converge around two key common denominators. The first is the connect to exposure to risk or adversity; the second is the ability to overcome risk.

What are the critiques of resilience?

Based on this understanding, a number of interrelated critiques of using the notion of resilience in policymaking and policy research have been developed. According to those critiques, resilience:

- **Overemphasises the role of agency:** Poverty studies have been criticised on the grounds that they place too much emphasis on the structures that perpetuate poverty, potentially disregarding the role of human behaviour and agency. Against this backdrop, the study of resilience has contributed to sliding the scale towards agency on the structure-agency nexus. In the study of poverty, the recognition that people experiencing financial difficulties may have attributes or practices and strategies that make a difference in how they cope with adversity may be welcome, although some scholars consider that resilience, in turn, places too much emphasis on the role of the individual, suppressing the structural forces that constrain agency (Calado et al. 2020).
- **Naturalises a social feature:** By seeing resilience as a characteristic that some have and others lack, researchers run the risk of naturalising a feature that is deeply social and structural in nature (Estêvão et al. 2017). Indeed, the capacity to overcome difficulties – financial or otherwise – is not solely dependent on one’s willpower and ‘grit’, but rather on political, institutional and economic foundations (Calado et al. 2020) and other contextual factors that support or hinder this capacity. As Calado et al. (2020) conclude: “What may appear as a lack of resilience for certain individuals may instead be the result of a number of interacting factors such as social exclusion, the efficacy of social support, various prejudices and biases, and different social and personal problems. Conversely, for some what comes across as resilience may more accurately reflect privilege.” (p. 76).
- **Cannot be directly observed:** Related to the point above, some authors point to the difficulty in observing resilience. What counts as resilience and how can those lacking resilience be distinguished from those possessing it? According to Obrist et al. (2010), resilience is a normative concept and a “scientific construct that has to be inferred and cannot be directly observed or measured” (p. 286).
- **Depoliticises risk:** Ulrich Beck (1992) saw the concept of risk as the politicisation of danger. As the notion of risk developed, danger was no longer seen as the effect of God’s will or the threat of “natural” disaster, but as the result of political decision-making. While he did not discuss resilience per se it is possible to apply his main insights to the use of the concept. By emphasising the need for resilience, policymakers shift the responsibility away from the arena of politics and towards individuals, groups or society. Instead of seeking to reduce risk, the focus is turned to building up resilience. In other words, the objective becomes to learn to bear or manage suffering, rather than remove the causes of suffering themselves (Amery 2019, p. 367). This point is also made by Donoghue and Edmiston (2019, p. 17).
- **Overlooks its negative facets:** The ways in which resilience is framed in policy discourse is highly normative and presumes that resilience is a positive attribute or feature of groups and individuals. As Estêvão et al. (2017) point out, this “celebration of resilience” (Harrison 2013, p. 109) overlooks the costs that may be involved in shifting risks in time and space. It obscures the fact that practices allowing people to overcome hardship may be detrimental in the long-run, possibly leading to a worsening of a situation. For example, a



household's way of coping with a limited budget might be to switch from fresh fruit and vegetables to ready-made meals: while this may appear as a resilient practice in its effects, it may effectively lead to worsening health among family members (Estêvão et al. 2017, p. 20). In that sense, emphasising the agency of people in poverty and their capacity to cope with risks and shocks may "idealize" life in poverty (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin 2010, p. 695).

- ***Can serve to legitimise structural changes that harm low-income groups:*** Finally, by naturalizing a social feature, depoliticising risk and celebrating those who display resilience, the concept may serve to legitimise policies that are detrimental to low-income groups, (Dagdeviren et al. 2016; Estêvão et al. 2017) including e.g. austerity measures. When the burden of resisting and surviving despite hardship is placed on the individual, this opens the way to blaming low-income households for their failure to escape hardships (Mohaupt 2009, p. 5) and removing the perceived need for government action. As a concept, resilience can thus easily be co-opted by the "proponents of a neoconservative agenda" (Obrist et al. 2010, p. 288), specifically by "shift[ing] the emphasis from positive adaptation despite adversity to positive adaptation to adversity (Bottrell 2009, p. 334).

The critiques outlined above point to a need for rethinking the way that resilience is used in social policy research in a way that does not overemphasise individual agency, naturalise a social feature nor depoliticise risk.

Resilience or resistance?

We have already seen that the word is polysemic and the concept contested. Moreover, resilience seems to be a notion that people in poverty are not particularly familiar with themselves (see e.g. Wright 2016, p. 158) or one that they might reject outright (Bray et al. 2020, p. 8). Nonetheless, the idea that the experience of poverty or low resources involves an active struggle to overcome hardship does find resonance in the lives of people in poverty.

In a deeply participatory study conducted by researchers at the University of Oxford and the international movement ATD Fourth World in 2019, "struggle and resistance" was one of nine dimensions of poverty identified across the six countries where the research was carried out (Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the United Kingdom and the United States). The objectives of the project were to collaboratively identify the dimensions that characterise poverty, including non-monetary aspects. The methodology was based on the Merging of Knowledge framework, an approach that seeks to integrate the experiential knowledge of persons experiencing poverty with the scientific knowledge of academics and the action-based knowledge of practitioners. By following a rigorous and patient research process, the "Hidden Dimensions of Poverty" study resulted in dimensions of poverty that are co-constructed, validated by the three types of actors, and grounded in the reality of persons in poverty themselves. In a first group – deprivations – the fairly familiar privations, including (1) lack of decent work, (2) insufficient and insecure income, and (3) material and social deprivation, were identified. Next, a group of relational dimensions included (4) social maltreatment, (5) institutional maltreatment, and (6) unrecognised contributions. Finally, three dimensions were found to be at the core experience of poverty: (7) suffering in the mind, body and heart, (8) disempowerment, and (9) struggle and resistance.

In the project's international report, this last dimension – struggle and resistance – referred to "people's efforts to survive, achieve inner balance and to enable themselves, and particularly their children, to have a better life. The struggle takes different forms, many of which remain invisible to the rest of society" (ATD Fourth World and University



of Oxford 2019, p.18). Among these, the report cites creativity, willpower, compassion and solidarity – suggesting, as do Dagdeviren et al. (2016) - that resistance sometimes has a collective component.

In his ground-breaking work titled “Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts”, James C. Scott analyses what he calls the “infrapolitics of subordinate groups”. He identifies a series of disguised, low-profile forms of resistance to domination, including everyday forms of resistance, direct resistance and hidden transcripts – a less visible but powerful response to status domination (1993: 198). The key contribution of Scott’s work on resistance is to bring to the fore the hidden actions of subordinate groups, despite crushing constraints, to defend their interests. The identification of these practices opens a space in the apparently rigid dichotomy between agency and structure.

More recently, in her book from 2021, Michal Krumer-Nevo describes resistance as “an active effort by the subordinated to struggle with and to oppose domination” (p. 137), the “expression of an unwillingness to accept hardship” (p. 138). In Krumer-Nevo’s view, resistance implies *refusal or rejection* of hardship whereas resilience tends to be associated with an *adaptation to or absorption* of shock. Both are manifestations of agency, a characteristic ascribed to individuals “as autonomous, purposive and creative actors, capable of a degree of choice” (Lister 2021, p. 124), which is often bounded – constrained – due to a lack of material resources and power. In that sense, accounts of resilience and resistance both fit under what Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) call a “counternarrative” of agency and resistance that “challenges the assumed moral deficit, passivity and dependence of people living in poverty by showing the many ways people negotiate their best path of action within limited opportunity structures” (p. 694).

In practice, how can we disentangle these two forms of agency: resistance and resilience? Are they synonymous or separate? Are they mutually exclusive or reinforcing?

For Bourbeau and Ryan (2018), these two terms are not synonymous. These authors suggest that resilience and resistance are engaged in “mutual assistance” (p. 222), where resilience is understood as “the process of seeking to maintain or transform a referent object in the face of exogenous and endogenous shocks” (p. 223) and resistance, like for Krumer-Nevo (2021), signifies “organised and principled contestation of power and domination” (p. 223). Using empirical examples, Bourbeau and Ryan show how resilience and resistance can be complementary to one another, with the former often a condition for the latter. Drawing on Scott (1985, 1990), the authors analyse the ways in which poor farmers in the Malaysian village of Sedeka simultaneously adapted to shocks and changes brought about by the Green Revolution (characterised as “resilience”) whilst challenging the social legitimacy of the rich, who profited from those changes, through acts such as “false deference, pilfering, slander or evasion” (p. 228) .

On the other hand, Sims-Schoutens and Gilbert (2022) suggest that resilience and resistance may differ primarily in terms of their normative resonance: resilience tends to be viewed positively, while resistance is “equated with bad behaviour” (p. 87). This reflection leads us to wonder whether agency may be “in the eye of the beholder”; in other words, whether a practice is labelled as resilience or resistance depends upon the position from where we observe as well as the nature of the practices involved. When people in poverty succeed in “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” through conventional means encouraged by the state, the market or both, dominant groups might refer to this behaviour as *resilient*; conversely, where “subordinate groups” demonstrate agency by circumventing the rules of the game, confronting or challenging the status quo, this might be interpreted as *resistance*.



Is it possible to “reclaim” resilience?

If this proposition holds, is there scope for reclaiming and repoliticising resilience (Allen 2022), and to what extent can the concept be useful for social policy research? How can we recognise the courage and creativity of people facing hardship without romanticising poverty and without shifting responsibility away from those in power (Harrison 2013)? It appears to be a difficult balance to strike. If we are to elaborate a critical, sociological understanding of the term resilience, it seems we must do four things.

First – like resistance – we must view resilience as a process rather than merely an outcome. While resistance is connected to the verb “resist”, there is no active version of the term resilience, suggesting that it is a state or static condition. On the other hand, as Lister (2021) and Dagdeviren and Donoghue (2019) argue, and as we have already seen, both resilience and resistance are an active exercise of agency. Resistance can be observed regardless of the outcome of the agentic process and whether it leads to “success” or “failure”; similarly, we suggest to study resilience as an act or series of acts/practices rather than solely a result.

Second, previous research on resistance may teach us to broaden our perspective of the acts and practices that we study in our understanding of resilience. Looking beyond conventional routes employed by individuals or groups to adapt despite hardship or poverty, we might discover acts of “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985 as quoted in Lister 2021, p.149), which could include forms of fraud, quitting oppressive low-paid jobs, but also psychological resistance, where people in poverty struggle to maintain a positive identity despite shaming (p. 154).

Third, and related to these first two points, we must seek to understand resilience not as an attribute, but as a practice embedded in a social environment. When resilience is studied as a characteristic that some individuals have and others lack, this perspective tends to overlook its political, institutional and economic foundations (Calado et al. 2020), including the resources available to the groups and individuals studied. In his research on resilience, Rutter (1987) considered the interaction between individuals and their social environment (Revilla et al. 2017). Similarly, we suggest analysing resilience as a practice that takes place within a given context and set of constraints, and especially to observe the interactions between this practice and policy: in other words, how do policies support or hinder resilience?

Fourth and finally, we must nuance the “heroic notion of resilience”, as Estêvão et al. (2017) suggest. We must acknowledge that some forms of coping are detrimental in the short- or long-run. In this respect, the typology developed by Dagdeviren and Donoghue (2019) is useful. The authors distinguish between absorptive, adaptive and transformative agency; the former two include actions that are potentially damaging, and where individual autonomy is constrained by structure. According to these authors, only the third type of agency (transformative) corresponds to positive resilience, or “beating the odds” (p. 563).

Conclusion

We are, as Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont put it, “sceptical about the efforts of some governments to find in individual resilience the solution to social problems” (2013, p.2) and we recognise the risk of using the term, without going so far as to consider the concept obsolete or unusable. In this article, we revisit resilience and seek to understand how it relates to “resistance”. We suggest that whether practices are interpreted as resilient or resistant



may depend on the observer's positionality and the nature of the practices themselves. By broadening the manifestations of agency that we observe to include Scott's "weapons of the weak" and by studying resilience as a process underpinned and constrained by institutional, political, economic and cultural resources, we may be able to reclaim and politicise the concept.

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