Bridging the Literatures of Family and Social Resilience: Reflecting on a Scoping Review

Thinking about Resilience series

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Introduction

In recent years, the concept of resilience has become increasingly important for understanding how families and communities respond to social challenges. Academic literature often highlights 'resilience' as a way to explain why some families fare better than others under similarly challenging circumstances, with a focus on agency and adaptive processes. Rather than focusing on what families lack, resilience research highlights the ways families actively cope with and overcome adversities.

The concept of resilience is also increasingly visible in policy discussions at the European level, to address a variety of social issues, especially in response to crises such as COVID-19. The European Commission's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), for example, was launched to promote inclusive growth, economic cohesion, and job availability (European Commission, 2024). Similarly, the High-Level Group on the Future of Social Protection (European Commission, 2023) underscored social resilience as a key factor in navigating long-term challenges and emergent crises.

As resilience becomes more prominent in both academic and policy contexts, it is crucial to investigate how the concept is understood and framed, particularly in relation to structural inequalities and policy implications. The policy-focused interpretation of resilience often overlooks micro-level inequalities following macro-level shocks and instead emphasizes broad societal resilience and the capacity to cope with crises like COVID-19, highlighting a gap in how resilience is incorporated into the policy sphere.

Findings from a Scoping Review: Family vs. Social Resilience

The rEUsilience project conducted a scoping review to analyse the differences and overlaps between how the concepts of family resilience and social resilience are used in the academic literature, and what topics are studied using these concepts (Bawati et al., 2024). This *Thinking about Resilience* piece reflects and builds on the key findings from that review. Specifically, our scoping review of empirical studies on family and social resilience aimed to map how these fields define and apply resilience in order to understand the extent to which structural inequalities are acknowledged. We focused on four constitutive elements of resilience: (I) the *unit* of resilience, (II) the *definition* of resilience, (III) the classification of *types* of resilience, and (IV) the particular themes or *topics* of the risks, explanatory factors, and outcomes studied.

We focus here on one key finding from the scoping review that points to a potential opportunity to bridge the family and social resilience literatures with respect to addressing structural inequalities. Family resilience literature, in particular, tends to focus on individualised responses to adversity within families and among family members, often overlooking the broader socio-structural factors that contribute to family vulnerability. This literature highlights resources within the family, such as effective parenting practices or strong family functioning, as critical for positive outcomes related to health, well-being, and child development. For example, some studies examine how low-income families manage transitions, such as children entering kindergarten (Coba-Rodriguez et al., 2020), or how economic hardships impact families during key developmental stages, such as adolescence to early adulthood (Conger & Conger, 2002). While these studies acknowledge that families face significant adversities, they tend to position resilience primarily within the family's capacity to overcome these obstacles. This perspective reflects a broader expectation that individuals, in particular those in vulnerable positions, should navigate adversity with limited external support (Calado et al., 2020).

In contrast, social resilience research more frequently addresses socio-structural inequalities, particularly when focusing on outcomes related to poverty and exclusion. For instance, studies have investigated how marginalized youth (Bolzan & Gale, 2011; Fahlberg et al., 2020) or women facing domestic abuse and poverty (Williams & Mickelson, 2004) demonstrate resilience with the help of community resources. These studies highlight the importance of external support, such as social services, community organizations, and supportive networks, in fostering resilience, combined with the role of agency. Yet, the family as a unit is rarely at the centre of analysis within the social resilience literature. This gap highlights an opportunity for integrating the unique experiences and challenges of families identified in the family resilience literature. Although studies within social resilience at times examine poverty and social exclusion, they tend to frame these issues in terms of community or individual resilience rather than focusing specifically on family structures. Thus, while social resilience literature is more attuned to structural inequalities, it could benefit from a more detailed understanding of how these inequalities impact families.

Bridging Family and Social Resilience: Benefits for Policymaking

What could policymaking gain from bringing two branches of resilience literature? Three key learnings come to the fore:

1.) More nuanced insights for policy interventions to design policies that cater for familial needs while tackling broader societal issues that hinder resilience.

Building on the need to bridge family and social resilience perspectives, integrating these two fields will make resilience research more relevant to policy discussions. Specifically, resilience research could benefit from an integrated approach that considers structural inequalities and the role of policy in supporting resilience for families. While family resilience research emphasises internal resources and agency, it tends to overlook the systemic barriers that limit family capacities to cope with adversity. In contrast, social resilience literature, while more attentive to structural inequalities, typically does not centre the family as the unit of resilience.

2.) A comprehensive approach to integrating a dual lens in policy design by recognising individuals within family and families within society.

This gap suggests a need for a more comprehensive resilience framework – one that recognises the interconnectedness of individual agency, family resources, and structural support systems. Such a framework could offer more nuanced insights that inform policy interventions aimed at fostering resilience. For example, policy measures could be designed to strengthen family resilience by addressing structural issues such as poverty and social exclusion. Supporting low-income families with young children, for instance, could involve not only family-focused programs but also broader initiatives to improve access to social services.

3.) A basis to tie different layers of society and systems to enhance the capacity to foster resilience.

Some studies within the resilience literature already point toward the importance of addressing structural inequalities in relation to families. Vazquez and colleagues (2023) explore the intersection of violence and poverty, highlighting how resilience-promoting efforts must include targeted support for at-risk families. Similarly, Bolzan and Gale (2011) focus on marginalized youth, suggesting that community resources play a critical role in fostering resilience and that interventions should address the macro-level factors affecting these individuals.

These studies, we argue, suggest that resilience should not be treated solely as a family or individual trait but should consider the broader social policies that either support or undermine resilience at the family or individual levels. Bridging these perspectives could promote resilience frameworks that recognize the combined influence of family resources, agency, and structural constraints or supports.

Conclusion

The rEUsilience scoping review of the literatures on family resilience and social resilience (Bawati et al., 2024) revealed the need for resilience research to adopt a more holistic perspective that acknowledges the interplay between agency, family dynamics, and structural factors. Current resilience frameworks often place too much responsibility on families themselves to overcome adversity, overlooking the societal constraints that limit family resilience. Moving forward, family resilience research could incorporate structural inequalities more explicitly, and social resilience could focus on families more often, offering the groundwork that can guide policy measures to support families more effectively. By shifting towards a policy-informed resilience framework, resilience research can contribute to a broader understanding of how families navigate adversity within a context of structural inequalities. This approach complements current policy discussions by recognizing that building resilience requires supportive external conditions. In doing so, resilience research can better serve as a foundation for policies aimed at reducing inequality and supporting families as cohesive social units when faced with adversities.

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