

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RESILIENCE

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1. Introduction

Resilience is a relatively new addition to the social sciences (e.g. Rose, 2007; Akter and Mallick, 2013; Sapountzaki, 2012; Martin and Sunley, 2015). It has been transposed into the field from the natural sciences to help describe and explain how subjects respond to major and unexpected negative events, such as (natural) disasters, various trauma, hazards and crises. It has a long history in physics (Gordon, 1979), psychology (Eitinger, 1964; Werner, 1977), and ecosystems research (Holling, 1973). Most recently it has begun to be used in an attempt to explain how individuals and families can withstand and overcome hardship, and in some cases even thrive despite the adversity they face (Hoggett, 2001; Mitchell, 2013). Central to these literatures is the importance of positivity and agency; the notion that the individual is capable of taking control of their situation and overcoming the odds through employing multiple practices, such as savvy use of resources, networks and support structures.

The concept is still embryonic in the social sciences, and conceptual development is ongoing. Nevertheless, the notion of resilience has been adopted enthusiastically by a number of policy organisations, institutions and political actors. Billions of dollars have been invested into deploying the concept in a development context (Bene *et al.*, 2015). It has found favour with governments, think tanks and I(N)GOs because of its focus on individual agency as a response to various crises and shocks (e.g. ODI, 2016). The UK's Department for International Development defines resilience as 'the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses... without compromising their long-term prospects' (DFID, 2011: 6). The OECD use a similar definition of resilience, understanding it as 'the ability of households, communities and nations to absorb and recover from shocks, whilst positively adapting and transforming their structures and means for living in the face of long-term stresses, change and uncertainty' (OECD, 2014: 6).

The central theme, then, is the ability to take control of one's circumstances and excel with limited resources, in terms of moving beyond simply surviving. This clearly aims to afford significant agency to those in hardship, rather than seeing them as passive victims (e.g. Royce, 2009; Lister, 2002). However, as a concept in its infancy in social science, it requires critical appraisal and further development. This chapter contributes to that critical process by focusing on current understandings as exhibited in the existing literature (section 2), exploring what is necessary for resilience and the contexts in which resilience flourishes or flounders (section 3), and outlines a tentative concept of resilience that answers these concerns (section 4).

2. A critical engagement with the related literature

The use of the notion of resilience for the study of poor households in times of crisis requires a revision of the vast research and theoretical development produced in the poverty research literature. The pertinence of this task is made clear when one considers, on the one hand, the growing tendency in the social sciences to use the notion of resilience to characterize and/or explain the behavior of poor households and groups and, on the other hand, the growing literature on resilience approaches studying the effects of large scale economic shocks on poor communities and populations (Rose, 2007), such as the Great Recession that followed the 2007/08 global financial crisis.

Resilience approaches have tried to gain their place in poverty studies by defining themselves in opposition to what they deem the “traditional approaches” to poverty. According to this criticism, poverty studies define individuals and communities mostly according to the “deficit model”, by assuming that individuals are passive victims of the hardship they face, proving impotent to change the structural forces that condition their agency (Canvin et al., 2009). In sharp contrast, resilience approaches focus their attention on individuals and practices that turn external constraints into opportunities. In accordance, it engages in the collection and analysis of narratives of overcoming setbacks or of coping with poverty in a better way than expected (e.g. Harrow, 2009).

Such criticism of poverty studies requires closer scrutiny. For starters, the claim that poverty studies concentrate solely on the vulnerable dimensions of social actors is highly disputable. Indeed, we can safely argue that these studies looked at poverty as a sociological problem that can be identified, measured and understood in its relation to other institutions and social structures. These include, for instance, concepts as absolute poverty (Rowntree, 1901) and relative poverty (Townsend, 1962). Models of analysis have also been developed to capture the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon. These were first put forward by Walker (1897), when discussing the relation between industrialization, law and some behaviors of the working classes. Later on, Room (1989) developed a definition of poverty as the deprivation of access to income, work, education, health and housing, while Sen (1999) proposed the inclusion of non-monetary indicators to offset their predominance in the construction of poverty indices and, more than this, proposed an approach based on the notion of “capacities” that focused on people’s agency.

In fact, it is possible to turn this criticism on its head. The resilience literature tries to set itself apart by bringing back agency into the study of poverty. Yet, such effort often results in a tendency to overemphasize the individual whilst suppressing a range of structural forces that act upon him/her and constrain agency. In this vein, resilience approaches seek to collect strategies and practices for the construction of a repertoire of attributes and capacities to respond positively to hardship and shocks (Batty and Cole, 2010), while showing little concern for the material and structural conditions required for the positive use of these resources. This is also the case with the natural and social risks involved in these strategies or practices

(Sapountzaki, 2012) or the outcomes of coping strategies that do not result in positive wellbeing (Arnal, 2015).

This is particularly marked when we analyze the conditions, status and objectives of individuals' involvement in social networks and other contexts of collective participation. Poverty studies explore how deprivation of material resources has negative consequences on people's ability to engage in participatory and citizenship institutions, producing social exclusion (Paugam, 1991), which reduce the quality of life and affect the social cohesion of societies (Levitas et al., 2007). In contrast, resilience approaches, while looking to social networks as one of the main resources that individuals must activate when they face hardship to overcome it, reduce the analysis of the conditions for participation to the development of positive attitudes and behaviors (Batty and Cole, 2010). To be sure, there have been calls to incorporate issues of social power and rights more concretely into frameworks of resilience (Walsh-Dilley *et al.*, 2016); for some this is directly related to politics, participation and power relations (e.g. Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013). But this still remains a severely underdeveloped aspect in resilience approaches.

Many of the resilience approaches, particularly those which take on the “heroic” meaning of resilience (Estêvão et al., 2017), have promoted an interpretation of poverty in which the burden of responsiveness is centered on the individual agency instead of the structural factors (Hickman, 2018), implicitly eschewing the role of society and the state in solving or mitigating the phenomenon. Poverty studies by contrast, have developed theoretical models that consider the conditions of existence of individuals and families in relation to their position in the class structure, which in turn relate to the modes of economic production of societies (Bourdieu, 1993; Sen, 2009). Thus, to understand the set of objective and subjective constraints that produce poverty, one needs not only to understand the place of poor individuals and households on the class structure, but also to understand the socioeconomic model that set the conditions for said social structure. It was by following this perspective that the Welfare State has developed mechanisms and instruments to combat poverty, attacking what is considered to be the main areas of vulnerability of individuals and households (e.g. illness, unemployment, physical or mental incapacity, aging, etc.), thus reducing their exposure to hardship (Ranci, 2009).

Neglecting to sufficiently account for social and structural factors in the development and analysis of resilience leads to four major problems, as outlined by Dagdeviren *et al.* (2016). The first is an *identification problem*. 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. The second is the *intermittence of hardship*. Escaping poverty does not guarantee a life free of poverty (Seccombe, 2002: 386). People can ‘move on, but they fall back’ (Canvin *et al.*, 2009: 241), which can only be explained if resilience is *not* understood as a permanent personal attribute, but rather as a process dependent upon social as well as individual factors. The third problem is the *masking of the detrimental effects* of the practices involved in the processes of resilience. The sometimes significant focus on individual

agency in resilience, which can lean towards understandings of resilience as ‘ordinary magic’ (Masten, 2010), can mask the potential various detrimental effects of responses to hardship, such as burnout (Harrison, 2013), mental and physical health, and social exclusion. In addition some households thought of as resilient have to make detrimental decisions, such as foregoing heating or food in order to save money – neither of which are sustainable practices. Finally, the fourth problem is the potential for the *legitimisation of an ideological agenda*. Significant focus on the individual when combined with ignoring or suppressing social and structural factors can help fulfil an ideological agenda that ‘depoliticises and shifts responsibility... away from those in power’ (Harrison, 2013: 99). In this sense, emphasising the ordinary magic of individuals removes focus on the central role played by social and institutional support structures in developing and maintaining resilience, justifying regressive social policies (MacLeavy, 2011; Klein, 2007). Resilience approaches, while increasingly recognizing the links between institutions and individuals or social structures and social practices, still fail to actually integrate them into the models of analysis (Dagdeviren *et al.*, 2016).

This is not to say that resilience approaches – particularly the more recent ones, which integrate the role of structures and do not disconnect the individual from his/her conditions of existence (Dagdeviren *et al.*, 2015) – may not provide a contribution both to the poverty and to the Welfare State debate, insofar as they can go beyond approaches of vulnerability (Béné *et al.*, 2015). Recently, increasing academic research has been dedicated to analyzing how subjects and families use and manage their resources in contexts of hardship and economic contraction, allowing us to understand, for example, what resources individuals use to support themselves, which social networks they have access and turn to and which constraints they face while trying strategies for survival and/or to turn their situation into a positive one (Patrick, 2017).

Such strategies are, so, much more than individual. ‘Because of its institutional context, social resilience is defined at the community level’ (Adger, 2000: 349). By highlighting the community, Adger establishes space, which is composed by ‘the diversity of the ecosystem as well as the institutional rules which govern the social systems’ (Adger, 2000: 354), as a core dimension for social resilience, together with the social and economic dimensions. Also, as Milne and Rakine (2013) argue, resilience is an explicitly social phenomenon as well as having economic elements. It incorporates interaction and integration, the development of strong social networks, and processes for acquiring and deploying relevant skills, resources, and support.

Theoretical development on resilience opens the space for the usefulness of these approaches in the understanding of the effects and responses to social and economic shocks on societies. The concept of resilience has proved to be useful for understanding the immediate effects, reactions and consequences of unexpected and sudden shocks on the living conditions of individuals, families and communities, and also the strategies and practices put in place by those social actors to cope and overcome their altering situation, contrasting with the long-term structural approaches of poverty studies. In this sense, the concept of resilience should not be used for studying more long-term hardship – even if it

must take into account longer-term trajectories of poverty and hardship. Its focus should be, rather, the major natural, social, personal, economic or political adversities that affect people's livelihoods, and how under these conditions individuals and families adjust their ways of living and their practices to cope and/or transform their living conditions and opportunities.

The concept of resilience should be designed to provide a framework for responding to shocks, rather than incremental change. It is also important to differentiate large-scale systemic crises from individual shocks and traumatic events. Events such as illness, death or separation are significant, but the event and impact largely remains contained to the individual and immediate networks, and can be dealt with largely through individual action and intervention or through the existing regular social welfare mechanisms. Larger social crises inevitably require action at the social and political level, since the existing individual assets, common or public resources and/or welfare mechanisms are not able to provide answers in the same way or scope they previously did, at least in a way that changes positively the long-term living conditions of individuals, households or communities.

In sum, resilience approaches find a rather new object of study: the analysis of the survival and adaptation processes of individuals and households in contexts of unexpected adversity. By integrating the social and multidimensional nature of the phenomenon of poverty, these approaches can foster a deeper understanding of the relations that are established between the structural forces and agency capacities in these contexts.

In this regards, resilience should thus not be understood as a personality trait of individuals that allows them to thrive when the odds are against them or an individual attribute of survival and heroism – not least, because this lends itself towards identifying people as resilient and non-resilient. This would bring with it a series of normative claims that are not productive for improving households' and families' ability to withstand socio-economic shock and long-term sustainability and prosperity. In addition, such an essentialist take on resilience is not very helpful analytically, as people may be resilient in one domain, but not in another, in a particular occasion and not always.

3. What are the ingredients of a socially and structurally informed resilience analysis?

We claim that resilience has strong social foundations. In many cases, trajectories of resilience can be seen to exert a level of path dependence (Dagdeviren et al., 2015). There are three interrelated structural factors where this can be clearly seen. The first is the *political foundations of resilience*, which are dependent on how power relations, participation and representation enable and constrain, generate or diminish households' resilience during and after various shocks. European austerity programmes act as a prime example. There is an overwhelming amount of literature that argues austerity was counterproductive in the post-crisis period and did more harm than good, particularly to those on low and middle incomes (e.g. Blyth, 2015; Skidelsky, 2014). Austerity in fact increased poverty and stalled recovery in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain (Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014). As shown in the analysis of the impacts of the European Crisis among households, significant numbers

suffered widespread job loss or increasing insecurity, and a rising cost of living, in order to contribute towards stabilising macro-level financial and banking systems.

Austerity has been demonstrated to be a political choice rather than a necessary measure. It is, in the words of Blyth (2015), a 'dangerous idea'. Its ascendancy can be attributed to the strength of neoliberal thought, as manifested through the strength of corporate interests relative to union influence for example. The hegemony of this ideology (Capucha et al., 2014) furthered the interests of capital at the cost of the wellbeing of labour, organised or otherwise. This has important implications for the path dependency of resilience. As previously discussed in chapter 3, in many cases vulnerable groups need to become resilient due to systemic shocks that come about as a result of the actions of capital, such as in the recent financial crisis. In attempting to negate systemic shock, responses that stabilise capital are prioritised over ensuring the wellbeing of vulnerable citizens, justified usually through arguing that if the current system is allowed to fail the wellbeing of all citizens will be even more damaged (e.g. Aalbers, 2013).

Resilience requires well-functioning and responsive support mechanisms that ensures those in vulnerable situations have the resources and wherewithal to prepare for crisis before-the-fact or withstand it after-the-fact. More broadly than this, it requires policies that help counter power structures that favour heavily those already in privileged positions.

The second element is the *institutional foundations of resilience*. This includes markets, law, regulatory bodies, social, economic and political freedoms, social protection, public services, and even the media, and their role in supporting or constraining resilience in times of crisis. The institutional framework of labour markets and financial markets can both create and counteract shocks. By extension they also weaken or strengthen resilience. A well-regulated financial system can provide an essential service through responsible and productive lending, enabling households to prepare for or weather shocks. This sits in contrast to recent lending practices that have prioritised profit and (almost) completely dismissed social and economic responsibility. Yet the mechanisms involved in stabilising financial instability and crisis had a significant individual impact, particularly for those whose homes were repossessed.

Likewise, labour markets are usually main factor in defence against economic shock, whilst also being the cause of many household shocks. In less universal or developed welfare states for example, where access to essential services such as quality healthcare and education is mediated and policed by one's consumer power, households can become increasingly more vulnerable in less prosperous times. This is particularly so when attention is drawn away from addressing crises in order to focus on gaining or maintaining access to these essentials. Therefore such systems of social protection and development should be seen as essential and crucial elements of any programme of resilience (e.g. Bene *et al.*, 2015).

The third element concerns the *economic foundations of resilience*, which interact strongly with its political and institutional dimensions. Here the focus is on the distribution of assets, resources, wealth and income and the implications of this on resilience. The current market model favours heavily top earners (Picketty, 2014). Indeed, rising inequality can be seen as

contributing to the financial crisis (e.g. Wisman, 2013). The crisis caused the wealth share of middle income groups to collapse, whilst wealth continued to be further concentrated within an increasingly smaller elite group. This implies that in times of crisis those who are more at risk of facing hardship and deprivation are competing for an ever smaller pool of resources with which to build resilience. Economic resources can include financial systems such as credit and savings, non-mercantile assets like gift and redistribution networks and self-production of goods or services; or technical means of production, such as agricultural tools or computers (Estêvão et al., 2017).

The importance afforded to these elements and their interrelation does not negate the fact that resilience, although systemic, is experienced and enacted at the individual level. To capture this adequately there needs to be an appropriate theoretical framework that is able to locate this individual experience of resilience within and in relation to broader structural and social forces. Bourdieu (1984; 1993) can provide a heuristic framework. For Bourdieu, individuals' trajectories and life experiences have strong influences on personal and social action. These practices are (re)produced on the basis of objective and subjective conditions in the space in which they are located. The distribution of various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) shape the conditions of this social space, which are played out through social, economic and cultural interaction and socialisation. These processes produce the *habitus* (internalised structures generating structural dispositions for action) of actors. *Habitus* involves relatively stable and robust ways of thinking and acting, and largely shared among people of similar social, economic and cultural standing. This creates a distribution of resources, risks and power differentiated by social group (e.g. class).

These differentiations can be seen, for example, through the narratives and experiences of the 'old' and 'new' poor during and after the financial crisis (Dagdeviren *et al.*, 2016). This study demonstrates that access to cultural, social and economic resources allow those with higher incomes to largely avoid and overcome increased risk of hardship in crisis situations. However, transitions do still occur between socio-economic groups in times of crisis, especially when previously well-off families are ill prepared for the pace of the increase of cost of living, for example, or the growing instability of the labour market, which can lead to rapidly deteriorating living conditions. A central point is that the 'new' and 'old' poor have different experiences of hardship and different strategies to deal with it. A 'crisis' will look different for the former and the latter. For example, as evidenced in the chapter on biographical and longitudinal aspects of resilience, seeking formal assistance is difficult if one has no prior experience with the system and procedures, or even feels ashamed by the dependent situation. Those who have for whatever reason had more contact with the system will have caches of knowledge, experience and support networks to draw upon in order to help with their situation.

Actions therefore tend to follow particular routines. These impacts upon social processes can influence one's conditions, depending on if these actions tend toward conformism or action that is more likely to disrupt circumstances. Social stratification, class and social rules generally are experienced as objectively existing and provide 'appropriate' ways of acting in different situations. At critical junctures, such as when a crisis hits, individuals and households

will respond based on their dispositions alongside their position within the broader social structure. This involves the family, social networks, social and political organisations, social and political participation, and varying access to social transfers and essential services.

According to Dagdeviren and Donoghue (2017), for example, cutting back on expenditure has been particularly prevalent amongst low and some middle income households across Europe. In cases where social protection systems were inadequate, support from family and faith-based organisations became more important. Stigma was apparent in participants' experiences of the welfare system, but was also apparent in some of the cases involving faith-based and family networks. The major difference being that for the former the stigma was externalised and formalised, and used as a disincentive, whereas the stigma felt in relation to family, charities such as foodbanks, and faith-based networks in some cases created a sense of failure on the part of those seeking help. In some cases participants would cut back on food to the point of causing hunger, or would forego necessary medical treatment, clearly reflecting severely constrained agency. Participants' limited options for increasing income, particularly during the downturn, led to unsustainable but unavoidable levels of debt for many.

4. Outline of a critical concept of resilience

Benefitting from this theoretical framework, we can put forward a critical notion of resilience. Resilience should be understood 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. Thus, resilience should not be understood as a characteristic that is innate and prevalent in some chosen individuals, nor operates in a social or environmental void. Instead, resilience is a social phenomenon shaped by both social structure and the natural environment.

The existence of a shock, no matter the size and duration, is a distinctive feature of resilience processes. These processes are activated either when individuals, institutions or societies undergo a shock which alters and constrains their objective conditions of existence, or when this shock causes the reconfiguration of social structures. Shocks may come from localized or biographical events, such as an accident that leads to some incapacitation, a death in the family or a loss of a job. But often shocks originate from – or at least occur in the context of – wider changes in the social structures, namely on macroeconomic structures, in the cohesion of social systems and in cultural norms and standards. We are thinking here of events such as economic crisis, natural or man-made disasters or wars, which have the potential to seriously affect the living conditions, routines and dispositions of people, households and groups.

Shocks may also motivate the processes of institutional (re)structuring, such as those associated with labour market regulation policies, redistribution of income, education and training, health and housing policies, all of which affect the scope of opportunities for individuals and households. Thus, shocks and their consequent effects have the potential to affect social structures, creating a new and unique social and economic context for individuals and institutions alike.

In these types of contexts, individuals and social groups devise strategies and practices to react to the new situation by mobilizing resources and attempting to shift (or share) risks and losses in time, space and across social structures (Estêvão et al., 2017). The household dynamics provide an example of this. As evidenced by the empirical collection under the RESCuE and the analysis of socioeconomic strategies, in the contexts of mass unemployment, such as those occurring in Southern Europe during the post-2008 Great Recessions, pensioners become the mainstay of their families through money transfers, food gifts and payment of bills for children who either lost their jobs or suffered significant wage cuts, increasing their available material resources. However, the risks of hunger, lack of housing and indebtedness of children (and grandchildren) are being shifted to parents and grandparents, and converted into another risk of poverty for the elderly.

Unlike living organisms and their environments, or inert materials, whose resilience is a consequence of attributes determined by their physical and biological constitution, social resilience processes result from choices made by reflexive actors with different dispositions, which shape the choices they make when confronted with situations of hardship. These processes are not included in this or that individual, household or social group, but are instead variables depending on the capacities and powers possessed, which include the perception of available resources and the evaluation of the consequences of their alternative use. Access to resources that allow recovery from crisis situation or to live with them in order to maintain or improve living conditions is a central issue.

Thus, the devising of such responses will be decisively framed by two closely related factors: on the one hand, on the experiences, capabilities and resources incorporated by the agents (e.g. formal education, professional experience, informal knowledge and competences, etc.); on the other hand, on the framework of institutions and policies in which the individual is embedded (e.g. family, networks of friends, local governments and the welfare state). The interplay between these two kinds of factors will either boost or hamper the availability of and access to social and personal resources and the ability to transfer or share risks and losses associated with the shock.

Yet the relationship between resilience processes, on the one side, and social structure and the environment on the other side, is a double-edged sword. Resilience processes actively contribute to the reproduction and transformation of the social structure and environment. On the one hand, resilience processes draw on finite stocks of resources that may not be easily (or not at all) replenished or whose exploitation may imply significant personal, social and/or environmental damage. On the other hand, they can make use of power relations and mechanisms of social inequality, thus contributing to their reinforcement.

This can be illustrated with a few examples related to households' dynamics derived from RESCuE's empirical data. A family's home budget adjustment efforts may result in a less varied diet – such as switching from fresh food items, like fruit and vegetables, to ready-made meals or “junk food”, or in parents, mostly mothers, reducing their food intake in favour of their children. This may have the undesired consequence of declining health among family members. Increased reliance on extended family networks to provide for services hitherto supported by paid or state-provided services – for instance, childcare - may lead to burdening

extended family members and result in increased tensions and eventual breakdowns in family relations.

In sum, the development of a critical perspective of resilience, moving away from heroic perspectives, aims to shift the resilience debate from a narrow perspective focusing solely the individual and individual actions to the social and politics, more specifically to the creation of conditions that allow individuals and families to transform their way of life, in a manner that lessens their hardship and reduces their social vulnerability. Thus, resilience is unavoidably related with certain types of outcomes. Adaptation processes lead to resilience when they lead to an outcome where individuals or social groups find a new balance of acceptable objective and subjective conditions of life and dignity, not succumbing to poverty and/or social exclusion, nor worsening them. This means coping, overcoming, struggling, and changing between alternative life strategies and solving problems. It is not just about surviving. Surviving, in this sense, means being the subject of hardship and accommodating oneself to it in a passive manner. Resilience implies a process of mobilization of energies and power incorporated in personal and group previous experience and accessing resources inscribed in social structures and institutions (ranging from family and community to welfare state and labour markets) to overcome in some fashion the impacts of the shock, invest in alternative ways to achieve standards of wellbeing, cope with the new constraints, or, at least, deal with new risks and to adopt an active relation with them.

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