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Sociologies of Resilience

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Abstract

The Global North lineage of the concept resilience has ranged from security studies, and other discussions that focus on individuals becoming responsible for getting through difficult times. The critics have pointed to the ways in which the state and other institutional culpability for creating crises is wiped out through this neo-liberal individual-responsibility focused approach. Even refugees, whose lives devastated by war and other human made conflict, traditionally seen as deserving of humanitarian aid, are being asked to develop resilient, individual-level solutions to the crises that envelop them. Sociologists are also aware of resilience that develops through activism and protests, including shared meaning-making where resilience is an ingredient of resistance. This paper outlines these strands of scholarly conversations. It also looks at the concept of resilience from the perspective of knowledge hierarchies and emphasizes the need to expand our methodologies to become more sensitive to multiple ways in which resilience is expressed around the world without the use of this English-rooted term

Keywords: Resilience; beyond neoliberalism; resistance; knowledge hierarchy; silences

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Sociología de la Resiliencia

Resumen

El linaje del concepto de resiliencia en el Norte Global abarca desde estudios de seguridad hasta otras discusiones que se centran en la responsabilidad individual para superar tiempos difíciles. Los críticos han señalado cómo este enfoque neoliberal centrado en la responsabilidad individual elimina la responsabilidad del Estado y otras instituciones en la creación de crisis. Incluso a los refugiados, cuyas vidas han sido devastadas por la guerra y otros conflictos antropogénicos, tradicionalmente considerados merecedores de ayuda humanitaria, se les pide que desarrollen soluciones resilientes a nivel individual para las crisis que los rodean. Los sociólogos también son conscientes de la resiliencia que se desarrolla a través del activismo y las protestas, incluyendo la construcción compartida de significados, donde la resiliencia es un ingrediente de la resistencia. Este artículo describe estas líneas de debate académico. También analiza el concepto de resiliencia desde la perspectiva de las jerarquías del conocimiento y enfatiza la necesidad de expandir nuestras metodologías para ser más sensibles a las múltiples formas en que la resiliencia se expresa en todo el mundo sin el uso de este término de origen inglés

Palabras clave: Resiliencia; más allá del neoliberalismo; Resistencia; jerarquía del conocimiento; silencios

Like many other disciplines, Sociology shows patterns of concepts that arise, are adopted, often in global North countries, distributed around the world, and then they are replaced with other concepts. Resilience is in many conversations currently, so in this brief paper, I will discuss two facets of the sociologies of resilience. I start with a brief overview of the pathways through which resilience has been developing in the Global North. Then I turn to the larger question of knowledge hierarchies, especially the knotty problem of articulation of concepts in hegemonic languages like English, while the same core idea, identified or described through other local imaginaries, remain silenced or at the margins of academic discussions¹.

Inception and pathways

There has been a slow but steady growth of discussions about resilience social science publications. Many of the authors attribute the inception of this concept to discussions in ecology and onto social ecology (Bourdeau 2018, Pavićević 2016). In his discussion of a genealogy of resilience, Philippe Bourbeau (2018) points out that the discussions

¹ My own positionality is that I was born and brought up in India and I am a first generation migrant to the United States. I am fluent in Bangla or Bengali, my mother tongue; I am equally fluent in English, the language of my work and place of residence. Hindi is my third language though I am less fluent in Hindi compared to the other two languages. So my own knowledge of the world and discussions is limited to these languages though I make a persistent effort to read what is published in English in other countries. While I have family connections to Spanish-speaking individuals, my linguistic level is not sufficiently developed for academic discourses. For this article, please note that I mean English language publications when I talk about Global North publications.

emanating from ecology and social ecology roots have been negatively appraised by critical social theorists who complain about its closeness to neoliberal rationality of governance (also see Kruger 2019). The concept emanates from multiple paths, including psychology, criminology, biology and social work. Even a cursory search for resilience themes yields resilience related to building, food, such as stockpiling food during COVID (Benker 2020) or resilience through developing friendships (Kulpa and Ludwin 2020). The social science and policy emphasis is broadly on individuals adapting to and/or surviving through difficult conditions.

Kruger (2019), Reid (2013) and others focus on neo-liberal governmentality and the meanings emerging through security studies, where resilience—individual level responsibility to adapt to hard times—becomes the mantra that erases the culpability and responsibility of larger entities to correct the factors causing the “*hard times*” and the repeated and multiple crises that envelop and threaten the survival of the groups. David Chandler summarized this phenomenon: “*The more resilient we are the more fully developed we are as neoliberal subjects*” (2016, 15). Kroger’s argument is for sociologists especially to study governments as enablers and organizers of resilience, that is to focus on institutions and social and economic resources that are managed by the state that enable or obstruct resilience. Embedded in this argument is the idea of people making claims upon the state and having the political position and access to be able to make such claims.

Reid (2013), among others has discussed the ways in which biopolitics of development has come to include resilience as a key theme. Reid points out that the militarized, racialized ways in which the hierarchies have been maintained between the “*developed*” and “*underdeveloped*” populations have relied on a strictly macro-economic model of development. More recently the growing strength of sustainable development models and development-as-human-freedom models have challenged the economic model. Nonetheless, Reid argues that the neoliberal economic model is appropriating and manipulating the terms of the sustainable development model for its own purposes, using resilience as its bridge. Writing from their position in the global South, Priya Singh and Paula Banerjee (2024) pointed to the same shifts; the use of supposedly new approaches towards development or peace or humanitarianism simply covers up the unpalatable truth that both humanitarian and development aid have rapidly diminished leaving vulnerable populations to “cope” on their own. Even though the United Nations defines resilience as “*the capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazard, to adapt by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure*” (UN 2004:chapter 1, S.1,17), in practice, resilience is delinked from the structural conditions in which people are embedded, as individuals and groups are made responsible for their own future (Purkayastha 2024).

Nowhere is the impact of such shifts of thinking more evident than in the case of refugees. Over the years Sari Hanafi (2010, 2012, 2014) has studied refugees in Lebanon; he has examined the shifts in discourse about the need to provide humanitarian assistance to forcibly displaced persons to moving them towards economic self-sufficiency. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) policies describe this change as a strategic shift. Based on the cases of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Uganda, Clark (2021) argues that in some cases vulnerable individuals, in the aftermath of major conflicts, try to harness natural or community spaces to promote their well-being, though depending on the degree of stigmatization, these spaces can exacerbate vulnerability and act as barriers to resilience. Forcibly moved people, enclosed within camps, distanced from the resources

of the society in which they are housed, are expected to develop resilience to survive. However, Njiru (2015) has starkly described how people look for solutions in camps, including, in the absence of other opportunities, children being drawn into pathways of exchanging sex money.

As sociologists we are also aware of social movements and group and community engagement in changing conditions; resilience is woven through these discussions of activism, engagements and protests. I provide two examples of this genre of work. Based on her work on Palestinian women Caitlin Ryan (2015) has discussed the importance of thinking about how communities and groups engage in their own resilience building because resilience itself is a tactic of resistance employed collectively and strategically to adapt to protracted conflicts and chronic adversity. Similarly, in her work on ‘Conceptualizing resilience as a dynamic, communal and political,’ Mandy Lee examined how protesters in Hong Kong built resilience through innovative tools of struggle. In a context of repression of speech, they used blank papers as their signs of protest, as a way of avoiding the wrath of the state, while “co-constructing” shared meanings even when no words are uttered or written.

Resilience, Silence and Knowledge Hierarchies

The brief overview above points to different sets of conversation in the Global North where resilience emerges as a concept. In this section I will turn to the question of the positioning of resilience in the global South discussions. Clearly, as the leading-edge theme for the Venezuelan Congress, scholars are discussing this concept. But an English language search in the North does not yield any of these conversations. In an earlier publication, Vrushali Patil and I (2018) had written about the ways in which searches within institutions and on the “open” web are guided by algorithms that inevitably prioritize Global North conversations. We also showed how a transnational assemblage of groups and institutions in the Global North continue to uphold a knowledge hierarchy where the traces of colonial ideas as well as the objectives of Northern entities, media, think tanks and governments tend to relate to and draw upon the discourse of entities which are familiar to them, explicitly and implicitly upholding Global North hegemony².

However, in practice, societies and groups that endured hundreds of years of colonization and continue to exist beyond those years of repression and control, demonstrate resilience. Like Mandy Lee (2025) pointed out, these societies have built shared meanings even through apparent silences, and resilience has been inextricably tied to resistance. I would argue that we don’t need to use the term resilience to understand its constitution; indeed

I will provide one example to illustrate this point. The resistance to British colonization in India was fought through multiple home and public fronts over many decades, including through the development of new literature to ignite the imaginations of people who were fighting the British. One such poet was Kazi Nazrul Islam. In a Bangla poem³, widely recited and sung as inspiration, in the first half of the 20th century, he wrote:

2 I have a chart describing the entities in a chapter on knowledge hierarchies (Purkayastha 2021).

3 This is a very imperfect translation. Bangla readers will identify this poem as “Durgom-giri-kantar maru...” There is a significant literature building resilience and resistance against colonization, and Kazi Nazrul is one of several revered savants of that era.

The mountains are inaccessible, the desert is vast, the path forward is dangerous, and we have to cross it through the darkness.....

Our tiny boat is floundering amidst stormy seas, our people are drowning.

Who will step up as the leader and guide this frail boat to the distant shore?

Who has the courage to walk along with the people who bear the scars and pain of decades of cruel deprivations?

Who can say people are drowning, my mother's children?

The future calls you!

Here, it is clear that Kazi Nazrul issues a call to a society and its leaders, about resilience and resistance in the face of colonially-induced adversities. The Bangla version of this poem does not use any equivalent of the word "resilience." Yet I would argue that the imageries of need to cross mountains and deserts, to survive stormy seas, all indicate a call for resilience. The journey is described as long, the hazardous conditions described in the poem also indicate changing factors that are likely to wear down resistance, and the call is for getting through the long period and the obstacles that make the sheer survival of the group an open question.

Since similar meaning of resilience likely exist in a variety of languages and shared meanings within societies, then it brings sociologists to a critical question. Methodologically, can we study silences? If we are to understand resilience, we need to go beyond the imageries articulated in English, and instead of relying on words and concepts alone, we have to delve into the imageries and meanings of what is being articulated.

A related discussion can help to explain this need to get beyond imageries of English. In her critique of restorative justice, Leanne Simpson's writes:

Justice is a concept within Western thought that is intrinsically linked to settler colonialism. Indigenous thought systems conceptualize justice differently. We have experienced four centuries of apocalyptic violence in the name of dispossession in the part of the Nishnaabeg nation I am from and live in. White supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy have targeted and continue to murder, disappear, attack, criminalize, and devalue our bodies, minds, and spirits. Several of the plant and animal nations we share territory with have been exterminated. "Justice" to me, in the face of all that, means the return of land, the regeneration of Indigenous political, educational, and knowledge systems, the rehabilitation of the natural world, and the destruction of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. "Justice" within the confines of settler colonialism gets paralytically over-whelmed in the face of that. So, I don't think about justice very much. I think about resurgence and movement building. (2017, 20–1).

Two points in this quotation illustrate the confines of knowledge hierarchies I am attempting to articulate. First, key words come with lineages. Just as Simpson talks about justice, resilience has a lineage in the global North. We need to think about resilience as more than its current Northern lineage. That implies turning our efforts towards deeper understanding of societies that survive within significant adverse conditions—nation-wide

or in specific locations, to unravel how they did so. Resilience of groups in different forms will have to be the object of enquiry. We also have to consider that resilience is not a linear process; it might occur episodically. Another point Simpson emphasizes, *resurgence* and movement building are important to consider, in our quest to understand resilience.

Conclusion

We have to understand resilience beyond the Global North conversation. We have to consider resilience as it emerges through shared meaning-making. We have to learn to see well beyond exact words and identify the conditions and practices of that constitute resilience. Resilience is about survival for people and groups, it is equally about everyday resistance to the conditions that threaten their survival and ability to build lives of human dignity. Resilience reflects human endeavor, in varied forms and expressions, to attain human dignity and to build and maintain relationships.

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