Foundations of Societal Resilience

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Thanks

Today I would like to share some thoughts with you about resilience. The Faculty of Social Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has established a research institute for Societal Resilience (ISR). I thank Leo Huberts for inviting me to share ideas with you, without my being in a position with formal authority in the ISR. I thank the ISR theme leaders and colleagues for helpful texts and discussions. I hope this lecture gives you something useful to discuss and chew on as we enter the new year.
First let’s talk about what we could mean by resilience. At first I had trouble thinking about the concept but I have come to like it. An example helped me.

**Thinking about resilience**

The stream of refugees arriving at the gates of Europe poses new challenges to Europe, in many areas: humanitarian assistance, citizenship, poverty, inclusion, access to education, and jobs. The stream of refugees also raises important questions for philanthropy. How will Europe deal with these challenges? How resilient is Europe? Will governments, nonprofit organizations and citizens be able to deal with this challenge?

**Resilience in the ‘refugee crisis’**

In the refugee crisis, you can discern questions for each of the four themes of the ISR: (1) governance, (2) diversity and inclusion, (3) communication, organization and interconnectedness, and (4) care and welfare.
An emerging topic

Perhaps it is a mere exposure effect, but I have come to like the concept of resilience. It appeals to our tendency to empathize with those in need and sympathy for the underdog. Oh, how terrible is the misery that people are in, and how glorious their revival. Don’t we all want people in trouble to get well soon? The phoenix to arise from the ashes? We stand in awe witnessing how people transform misery into something good.

We are not alone in our focus on resilience. It appears in the National Agenda for Science. The national plea for the social sciences by the deans adopted the concept. And the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) recently discussed it. It is not clear to me where the increasing popularity of resilience comes from, but its origins are unlikely to be Dutch. The concept is also popular in the US and the UK. The Rockefeller Foundation has made creating resilience into one of its funding priorities. Resilience also figures prominently at the HopeLab, which tries to catalyze the development of mobile apps that cultivate human resilience. The concept of resilience also appears frequently in Horizon 2020 calls for proposals about sustainable solutions to societal challenges, e.g. about personalized medicine and sustainable agriculture and food systems, mobility for growth in urban areas, greening the economy, cyber security, the internet of things, and smart and sustainable cities.

Our job

Our job as academics is threefold: to criticize concepts, to examine empirically, and to probe policy. We should be aware of the conceptual origins of resilience. We should treat resilience not as a moral imperative, but as an empirical question. And we should think about the consequences of promoting resilience.

Two definitions of resilience

Societal resilience refers to the response of systems to adversity that promote the well-being of its units. In the definition of the Rockefeller Foundation, resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities and systems to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of stress and shocks, and even transform when conditions require it.
I define resilience as the mobilization of resources for the improvement of welfare in the face of adversity.

**Rubber band, trampoline, sand**

The metaphors that come easily with a concept like resilience spark the imagination. A rubber band jumps back to its prior state even after exposure to high levels of tension. How can we be like the rubber band?

Or are we like trampolines that allow jumps only until we hit the bottom?

Are we like the sand on the beach, bearing the marks of passersby, morphing back to our original state only when the sea washes away the footsteps?

**From metaphors to research question**

Such physical metaphors are misleading. They suggest that resilience is in the material, and can hardly be changed.

We prefer not to believe this. Humans are able to shape their own future. No matter how challenging our problems, no matter how severe the adversity that we have to deal with, we can deal with it. Or at least we would like to study the conditions that enable humans, groups, societies, institutions to deal with adversity effectively to renewed prosperity. We would like to produce knowledge that enables us to make choices. That is a resilient response.
The societal relevance of resilience

Why do we need to be resilient? Is it because of an increasing prevalence and severity of adversity? Do we have more natural and man-made disasters and victims today than we used to? Thanks to all of our efforts to regulate and reduce risks it seems that we are much better at preventing deaths and illnesses than we used to be. Child deaths, lethal traffic accidents, homicides and violent crime are all declining. But there is something going on with collective safety nets to deal with adversity. Our sensitivity to adversity may increase precisely with a reduction in adversity. A highly visible man-made disaster is the refugee crisis as a result of violent conflicts. Climate change is likely to increase the severity of natural disasters even further in the near future.

As always, new research programmes meet with skepticism. Perhaps in a few years we look back at the ISR and think ‘ah, resilience, it was all the rage in 2015’. At this very moment the timing seems a bit off. We are going to study resilience at a time of recovery. A sceptic may also find it a peculiar coincidence that we talk about resilience at a faculty and university that is facing reduced state funding and imposes budget cuts while the country as a whole is finding its way up again. In fact, our own university may be a nice place to study resilience. We are all participating in a natural experiment: some elements of the faculty may prove resilient and others are not. But I am not going to delve deeper into this puddle of mud or stir the cauldron of misery. Let’s focus on the positive side of things. What can we learn about resilience from academics?

The current state of research on resilience

The advice I give to students in the graduate school who embark on a dissertation project is to depart from a safe harbor of a recent literature review or meta-analysis. Well, here we encounter a piece of adversity. On Google Scholar you will get 1.3 million results for resilience, but with respect to theory, the ISR must start pretty much from scratch. There is no commonly accepted theoretical foundation upon which research on resilience can be built. Previous research on resilience is
fragmented across a diverse set of disciplines such as rural economics, disaster studies, and developmental psychology.

Despite the lack of a theoretical consensus resilience is a topic that would be ideal for an interfaculty research institute at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. How humans survive and thrive is a social question, involving both psychological and economic aspects. A common form of adversity is economic, and resilience involves psychological strength. Resilience could even be a concept that connects the social sciences with the life sciences. It seems to me that resilience is a characteristic of actors in evolution.

**What resilience is not**

Resilience is not just the ability to withstand adversity or change by not changing at all. Resilience is not just hunkering down like a turtle and sitting it out. Neither is resilience a strategy based on a rational computation and acceptance of risks as in the example of a consumer choosing not to pay for insurance. Those who survive adversity by avoiding it cannot be said to be resilient. Neither can those who are flexible and passively absorb shocks be called resilient, because they do not change. The resilient actor adapts to new situations and grows.

**Resilience requires**

Think about the definition of intelligence. It is often defined as the individual talent to deal with adversity – problem solving ability. Individuals are resilient when they are able to learn from mistakes.

But dealing with adversity also requires non-cognitive skills: creativity, a long term orientation, the will to survive, the ability to cooperate with others, the desire to make the world a better place, a sense of community and social responsibility – the feeling that we are in this together. Resilience requires will power, perseverance, self-esteem, creativity, a proactive attitude, optimism, intrinsic motivation, inner strength, a long term orientation to the future, willingness to change for the better, risk-taking, using the force of your opponent. The positive psychology business has also picked up the term, connecting it with happiness and the growth mindset. Isn’t this a nice list of the ideal citizen? Caring, self-reliant, responsive, and smart.
Prospects for a broader research agenda

Resilience is not an immutable trait of individuals, a matter of luck in the genetic lottery. Thus far, the search for specific genes in complex phenotypes such as resilience has proven futile because they are linked to thousands of genes in complex interactions with each other and with environmental characteristics. And searching for genes is not our business. Collaborating with psychologists and epidemiologists we could search for environmental factors that moderate the influence of genes. Such an approach bears great promise for an interdisciplinary research institute on resilience.

How to study resilience

But our own focus here at the Faculty of Social Sciences should be at the societal level – both in terms of the problems as well as the solutions. We should study collective adversity, and the collective response to adversity. Climate change, terrorism, obesity, economic crisis, mass immigration, rising health care costs. What makes us deal effectively with adversity, be it of a material, social, and psychological nature? What can we do as societies to survive these challenges and thrive?

The questions for research on resilience require social scientists to study not only the response of individual citizens, but also of social systems: informal networks of citizens, social groups, nonprofit organizations, nations, and supra-national institutions. How are resilience-related traits visible in the responses of groups and systems to adversity? How can resilience among organizations be fostered? How do nonprofit organizations build and on resilience of target groups? Resilience is a very useful concept that can be applied to all societal challenges of Europe.

A resource perspective

The resilience of systems requires the availability of resources that facilitate recovery and subsequent thriving. Those resources can be accumulated, and come in the form of material resources, financial resources, human capital, social capital, cultural capital, and psychological strength. Resilience is building warehouses with blankets, ready to be distributed to those in need.
Accumulation and mobilization

*Material wealth and human capital* are necessary conditions for social systems to survive and thrive again. Studying resilience we will find evidence for Matthew effects. Since we have all read Karl Marx the further accumulation of material resources by the wealthy in this post-financial crisis era is not an intellectual surprise that requires explanation.

A more important and scholarly interesting factor is the successful mobilization of resources of others through *social networks*. We should ask questions on cooperation and organization.

Finally, we should pay attention to the role of *cultural capital* – non-material and non-social resources that can be accumulated and that make actors productive. The attitude towards resilience, the growth mindset. What are the social conditions that create a growth mindset? It seems that a little practice may help. Perhaps resilience attitudes of organizations can also be built in a similar way. Some municipalities force welfare recipients to work in jobs that do not increase their job chances. This enforcement of resilience is likely to be counterproductive. But other programmes might actually work. Why some programmes work better than others seems an interesting question to me.

The classic welfare state was a system that created resilience for society as a whole, reducing the need for resilience among individual citizens. The modern activating welfare state requires resilience among citizens as a condition for support. Welfare state support becomes like the highest level of Maimonides’ ladder of charity to the needy, “to strengthen his hand until he need no longer be dependent upon others”.

Audience listening to Willem Trommel
The politics of resilience

Creating a moral imperative for resilience seems a good choice of a strategy for leaders who exploit their subordinates and need them to stay put. If you have a problem, deal with it. If you cannot, it must be because you are not resilient enough. We see the morality of the jungle here: those who survive, have earned it; those who do not, have not done enough. In the individualist perspective, victims are blamed to distract attention from the choices that leaders could have made to prevent adversity.

It is no coincidence that the concept of resilience also appears in a political discourse that also includes reduced government efforts in the provision of collective welfare. Here in the Netherlands the budget cuts to nonprofit organizations in the field of arts and culture that the ministry of Education, Culture and Science announced in 2012 were explicitly guided by a request for increased entrepreneurship, creativity and autonomy. Almost one fifth of the cultural organizations previously subsidized by the ministry have not been able to respond to this call in a way that enabled them to survive – they have gone out of business. At the same time, we see that the larger museums in the metropolitan areas are doing very well. It is no surprise that these institutions were not so much affected by the budget cuts and have been able to attract more donations and raise commercial income. Resilience guides the political goal of a lean state with lower taxes.

The organization of resilience research

At the ISR, resilience is studied in four groups of researchers. I would like to take a tour along the four themes of the institute, revisiting the theoretical elements of resilience. Consider the 3 level ABC matrix below, in which resilience in specific policy fields is viewed from the micro-level of individual citizens, the meso-level of organizations, and the macro-level of countries, both in terms of conditions and outcomes.
Advertising the ISR

This matrix is not very helpful from a funding perspective. It makes more sense to depart from policy fields and societal challenges. We have two themes at the ISR that clearly constitute policy fields: diversity and care. In addition to these two policy fields, we have two cross-cutting themes: governance and organization.

We have no subgroups dealing with (1) Security and Justice; (2) Science, Culture and Education; Research and Innovation; (4) Entrepreneurship and Economic Development; (5) Inequality; (6) Transport and Mobility; (7) Agriculture and Energy. There is a lot of resilience to be studied in each of these areas. And we do have specialists in most of these fields in the Faculty. Again, for some of these themes it is obvious that we need to work across the boundaries of our current Faculty, and many people already do so. I think it would be wise to make these specialists visible to funders.

Diversity and inclusion

The Hague and Brussels clearly have an interest in research on intergroup relations, ethnic and religious diversity, tolerance and human rights. The construction of community under conditions of diversity and attitudes toward diversity constitute important topics to study. The diversity and inclusion theme neatly aligns with the Horizon 2020 framework programme calls for research on societal challenges related to diversity. On the one hand diversity may undermine societal cohesion and trust. On the other hand, diversity in teams increases creativity. There seems to be a trade-off between increasing innovation and decreasing cohesion, labeled the ‘progressive’s dilemma’. I think it would be very interesting to study the conditions under which diversity can lead to both
innovation and trust. The activities here at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam as part of the Community Service programme could be excellent cases in point.

**Care and welfare**

Institutional funders will also have much interest for care and welfare. With increasing longevity, people are exposed to adverse events for a longer period in their lives, in the areas of health, employment, and social relations. The extended exposure increases the utility of resilience and hence the utility of knowledge about resilience. The ageing population increases the demand for care, a sustainable pension system and social support networks, especially with the decentralizations that we have talked about earlier. We should revisit the founding ideas for the Talma Institute: the capacitating citizens approach of Hemerijck. Again, a multidisciplinary approach would be most fitting here, as questions of a medical nature and public finance issues arise.

But even within the limits of our current approach, we can make progress by asking questions about *value change*: how citizens internalize the value of resilience; about *behavioral change*: innovative forms of solidarity; and about *policy change*: which forms of governance are most effective in creating resilience.

Which groups of citizens need particular attention because they lack the resources to be resilient? We should also investigate the consequences of the increased call for resilience. How do citizens themselves solve the need for care? Research has shown that the flexibility of informal helpers is often close to its maximum. Informal care comes at the expense of health, social participation and volunteering.

**Governance**

The key question in the governance theme seems to be what mode of governance is best able to deal with societal problems and needs. New forms of governance are developed to deal with increasingly complex problems. A loss of trust in government is posing a challenge for effective governance. What are the effects of the decentralization of care to local authorities? And of inclusive decision making, local participation, cross-sector collaboration, co-production and public-private partnerships?
In addition to questions on the resilience of governance I suggest it would also be useful to ask questions on the governance of resilience. What is the best mode of governance to create resilience? Whenever a disaster victimizes people, the public desires an elimination of the suspected cause. An often observed first response is a call for more and better regulation. But what form should this regulation take? Permits for those qualifying to a set of quality standards? Policing of rule breakers? Preaching about good and bad behavior? Promise elicitation? Which type of regulation or combination of types is most likely to create resilience, and produce sustainable solutions to societal problems? A case in point is the reform of regulation of charitable organizations in a ‘validation system’.

**Communication, organization and interconnectedness**

In my view, this theme examines the influence of social capital on resilience. The key question I think is *Under which conditions do forms of cooperation and information in social networks create resilience?* It seems that social networks can be excellent resources that enable people to deal with adversity. In fact, one of the measurement instruments of social capital included in surveys, sometimes called ‘resource generator’, asks about the resources available to respondents through their social connections. In addition to the networks of individual citizens I think an important question for the ISR could be how interorganizational networks facilitate resilience. This question is not only important for scholars in organizational science, but also in public administration (and economics, if we think outside the box of the faculty).

**How political speech affects resilience**

In addition to the exchange or availability of material goods through social networks, the communication of information can be a crucial factor in resilience. How do social groups and leaders communicate about responses to adversity, and to what effect? What is the effect of communication about the magnitude of social problems and the strategies to deal with adversity? German prime minister Merkel
famously said ‘wir schaffen das’ when talking about the stream of refugees entering the country as immigrants. Dutch prime minister Balkenende was criticized for his negative presentation of the economy. Did the former approach create support for immigration and the latter slow down recovery of consumer confidence in the economy?

Conclusion

Let me conclude. I think the concept of resilience bears great promise, as long as we are resilient. To fulfill this promise, we should do four things. First, we should be critical about the conceptual origins and the political discourse in which the term appears. Second, we will need to create a theoretical foundation for a set of testable hypotheses. I suggest we think from the resources that resilience requires and produces. Third, we need to be prepared to work across boundaries of academic disciplines. And fourth, we will need to advertise our expertise. Let’s get to work!