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Researching "Resilience": Reflections From The Field, Past And Present

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Abstract

In this discussion, Sabrina Ahmed and William McGowan look forwards and backwards, respectively, at two research projects focused on the knotty, contested, and ubiquitous concept of "resilience". While McGowan's research into survivors of political violence and terrorism has come to an end, Ahmed's empirical work looking at the impacts of security and counter-terrorism policies on the refugee community in Bangladesh is still in motion. In this discussion, the two researchers reflect on how they both grapple with this idea of resilience as researchers, at the beginning and ends of their respective research journeys, including the ways they approach their fieldwork. Touching on a variety of topics, from vernacular understandings of security, to bringing differing degrees of professional experience to bear on their current understandings of resilience, the piece is written as a back-and-forth dialogic engagement with the subject, making for a lively and readable contribution. Although focusing on resilience specifically, the piece will be of interest to anyone thinking through questions of epistemology, methodology, and method from a variety of disciplines more broadly.

Background to our discussion

Reflecting on the experiences of working with this idea of 'resilience' in our respective projects, we talked at length and together arrived at three key themes that resonated for us in shared, yet distinct, ways. Firstly, that history and historical precedents shape and mould the people we are today and the kinds of practical action that may or may not become assimilated into the burgeoning discourses of 'resilience' around us. For Sabrina, this revolves around refugees in Bangladesh, while for William this revolved around survivors of political violence and terrorism in the UK and Ireland. William recently published a book entitled *Victims of Political Violence and Terrorism: Making Up Resilient Survivors* (McGowan, 2022) on this very topical yet contested subject. Secondly, that this discourse is itself mediated partly through language and typically driven by contemporary ways of understanding the self. And thirdly, that within this discursive framing of human traits there exists a clear contradiction, a paradox, which simultaneously casts populations, sometimes even the same population, as both 'vulnerable' (to which they must build sufficient 'resilience') and yet dangerous or 'risky' (against which they must resist, again somehow using 'resilience') – on the schizophrenic characteristics of security interventions, see Aradau (2004). In the next section, we will say a little about each in-turn, where we reflect on our understanding of 'resilience' in our respective research contexts.

In Conversation about 'Resilience': from Global North to Global South

SA: What made you write this book and would you elaborate on your epistemological approach?

WM: My research into 'resilience' started life as a PhD project back in 2014 and I eventually wrote this work up into the book (McGowan, 2022). Its subtitle, *Making Up Resilient Survivors*, is a nod to the work of philosopher Ian Hacking (1995; 2002), whose notion of 'Making Up People' became an extremely useful way for me to try and tease apart what 'resilience' might mean when applied to a group of political violence and terrorism survivors seeking the support of fellow survivors at a small, dedicated non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the UK. Hacking has used this overarching approach to research disabled people, children with autism, pregnant teenagers, people with 'multiple personality disorder', and many more phenomena besides. He draws on a number of philosophical and sociological traditions to explore how people negotiate information about themselves as *particular kinds* of people. Knowledge about who we are, or who we were, or who we might be, is constantly changing and evolving, in part because we never have the luxury of stepping outside of ourselves while making sense of it. This is why Hacking (1995) talks of 'looping effects' of human kinds. They are human kinds because we are talking about people and their behaviours, identities, or narrated experiences, rather than *comparatively* more stable phenomena from the natural world ('natural kinds').

The looping effect refers to how knowledge and information about who we are as people soon become outdated. As people behave in new ways, so too must information about people change. These are enmeshed. Human behaviours drive change in the information and knowledge (or discourses) we have of ourselves, but changing information, knowledge, and discourses also effect changes in how we behave. Utilising this framework for thinking about resilience, I realised how fraught it would be to make judgements about 'being' in the worlds of my participants (their ontology – their reality, as experienced by them) simply based on what they told me about themselves, as many studies drawing on interview data and ethnography tend to. Of course, we can sympathise, empathise, and always attempt to understand lives other than our own, but that isn't really what I mean. As an empirical sociologist, partly influenced by (but not effectively executing!) principles from phenomenology and ethnomethodology, I would argue that these can only ever amount to approximations, to more or less compelling descriptions, which readers (in the case of my book) have little ability to challenge or reinterpret for themselves in any particularly transparent way. This is not me trying to diminish my research but I do think we should be realistic and modest as social scientists about the extent to which we can legitimately claim to 'speak for' our participants and their experiences.

Simply deciphering how other people feel is not a simple matter at all, of course, but at least knowing that the ways we know ourselves *as ourselves* is not static brought some sort of respite against the struggle that is finishing a PhD. Sometimes you just need a

way through. Anyway, my point in the book is that whether we like it or not (I strongly tend not to), 'resilience' discourse is now ubiquitous in a range of local settings, and this furnishes practical opportunities for people – in this case, 'survivors of terrorism', but we could think about this in a whole host of other contexts – to engage with, and sometimes to embrace, certain ideals about how they could live. Does that make sense? How about your project?

SA: This is interesting what you just said about knowledge and discourse, which are again subject to change and interpretation. For this reason, I think considering history is important to understanding resilience in a given context. For my PhD project, I was and still am trying to understand resilience within a community that has been historically persecuted by their state, does not have any official citizenship in their own country, and does not even possess a formal refugee status in the country they are living in currently. In August 2017, more than one million Rohingya refugees fled across the border into Bangladesh to escape a deadly military crackdown by the Myanmar government (Zaman et al., 2020: 1). In early 2018, while I was working with the UN in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, I found myself inwardly questioning how they were going to survive in what we used to call 'relocation shelters' – waterlogged floors, plastic sheets as walls, and four poles to support the tarpaulin above their heads. It was during the cyclone and flooding period; we were relocating them from a landslide-prone camp to a safer camp, known back then as the 'Camp 20 extension'. This "safer camp" was built after clearing thousands of acres of forest and levelling up hills that were once one of the key migration routes for elephants. Standing there in my gumboots, which were at least 4/5 inches below the ground, asking myself what will happen to these families after dark, I was asked by one Rohingya teenage mother if they are going to get a "chala" – a bamboo sheet for the floor so that she can sit and lay with her children. That was when it struck me. I thought they must have some in-built strength, perhaps akin to what we might call "resilience".

Against this backdrop, Rohingya refugees are dealing with the past trauma of military persecution, murder, rape and gender-based violence, the ongoing crisis in the camps, including competition over food and natural resources, disease, organised crime, camp politics, targeted measures from the law enforcing agencies, among many other uncertainties. Before attempting to develop our understanding of resilience within the population who are living in these camps, we must ask ourselves "what does resilience refer to" (Brassett et al., 2013: 221)? Why does this history matter so much?

WM: Yeah, I think that's really important. One critique often levelled at resilience discourse is that it replaces tangible, material support with moralising calls for self-help and a positive mental attitude (see, for example, Harrison, 2013). The way I have phrased this is an oversimplification, but the shift to 'building resilience' certainly resonates differently depending on existing levels of material support and the historical precedents this discourse dovetails. In the UK, 'resilience' seemed synonymous with the post-2008 crash and subsequent austerity agenda, in which the government massively shrunk local council budgets while encouraging them to think creatively, spend thriftily, and

adapt accordingly. Critics frequently contrast this with the post-Second World War social welfare consensus – in reality, a short-lived period of around three decades.

SA: In Bangladesh, the practical manifestation of 'resilience discourse', for example through the work of non-state interventions, NGO work, and international aid, similarly implicates the country's economy and contemporary state formation. Here the word seems synonymous with other ambiguous slogans of the international NGO industrial complex, such as 'sustainable development', 'peacebuilding', or 'self-sufficiency' (Fernando, 2011: 274). Communities located in the Global South, such as refugees living in Bangladesh, might find it odd when the government attempts to apply this term, either to 'build resilience' in a crisis, or to invoke the term 'while in fact pursuing other objectives' (Hardy 2015: 91), without knowing the contested historical background that placed the particular community in that particular crisis. Yet, they are unlikely to see it as something new, given their tacit knowledge of post-colonial, global inequalities. This is one of the reasons I am drawing on a post-colonial vernacular approach in my upcoming ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD where I will be engaging with the Rohingya refugee community in their language, while working in the same camps with them. For me, at an immediately interpersonal level, researching resilience, besides all other similarly contested concepts and discourse, raises a crucial question: how do you know when people are talking about the thing you call resilience unless they use the word 'resilience' themselves?

WM: Yeah, this was certainly an issue for me – decisions concerning language and the degree to which I introduced 'resilience' to the research setting, or else attempted to look for its natural occurrence in text and talk. One way is simply to look for human traits in response to adversity, whether they are spoken about explicitly, observed during fieldwork, or which seem to cohere with the supposedly desirable traits known as 'resilience' found within policy documents, therapeutic manuals, or any other source of discursive knowledge. This is one sort of methodological compromise I reached in the book anyway.

SA: For me, from my previous experience of working in the development sector in Bangladesh, I have seen national and international NGOs distributing translated handouts (from English) among the flood-affected community to 'tick the box' for understanding their level of "resilience". The Bangla translation of "resilience" means "tolerance" in English, which does not carry the same connotation. Asking someone to be able to adapt, bounce-back, or cope, while problematic, at least implicitly admits the reality of their adversity. Asking someone in dire need of help to be tolerant, arguably performs an even more pacifying role. Survey questionnaires like that, where the local community ticks the boxes without fully understanding the meaning, are widely used to measure "resilience", amongst many other similar ideas, by NGOs. This is something to consider when, as academics, we work with non-English speaking communities in different countries across the globe. Is "resilience" something that can be measured or evaluated this way? Shall we try to measure it anyway? As I will be working with the Rohingya community who speaks neither English nor my language (Bangla), in my opinion, it is better to engage the vernaculars discursively to recognise their perception

of "coping mechanisms". Linguistic knowledge is therefore important for academics who want to develop a discursive understanding of any contested topic such as "resilience".

WM: Yeah, so reframing your language to better describe the actual thing you want to know more about – in this case, literally how the refugee community are being treated, how they are suffering, and how they are surviving?

SA: Yes and so methodologically, in my view, ethnography (including but not limited to ethnographic observation and interviews) has to be the key approach to understanding a community and their daily experiences without imposing alien topics by handing over abstract survey questions.

WM: We previously spoke about this idea of a dialectic between simultaneously so-called 'risky' and 'vulnerable' populations, especially in relation to your case study. Can you say a bit about that?

SA: I think this theme is perhaps more relevant to security and terrorism discourse. The Rohingya community are concurrently dubbed a "security threat" and "vulnerable" to different threats (for example, terrorism and criminal recruitment, amongst others) by the policymakers and law enforcing agencies in Bangladesh. This is problematic as, firstly, contested phrasing like this creates a discursive negative identity of the community in question by labelling them as "threat" related to the thesis of "suspect community" in the UK context (Hillyard, 1993). Secondly, labelling them as "vulnerable" is accommodative to develop "security infused" (countering-)terrorism policies (Pettinger, 2020: 135) targeted towards the Rohingya community which securitise the refugee population – either from the threats or as threats. To 'securitise' means presenting something as an existential danger, typically driven by powerful elites who stoke the fear of such danger using language to turn a political problem into a threat to security (Buzan and Weaver, 1998). A similar dialectic is applicable to "resilience" in this securitised setting. For example, when scholars and humanitarian actors make recommendations such as "promoting social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, reduction of tensions, and enhancement of resilience between the host and refugee population" (Olney, 2019: 10) – it is important to consider a few things from a critical point of view – how shall we measure the promotion of "resilience" in such securitised context? How can we ensure that these resilience-focused policies will not create further anxiety and fear between the host and the refugee communities where the latter is already labelled as a "security threat"?

Concluding Thoughts

Our engagements with the idea of resilience have oscillated between two extremes. On the one hand, resilience might be thought of as an ordinary way of describing human strength in the face of adversity. However, as we have discussed, this common conceptualisation among policymakers, academics, practitioners, charities, and self-help moguls is inherently moulded in English-speaking and typically Westocentric contexts. On the other, resilience functions as a metaphorical and euphemistic way of enunciating hegemonic values among civil society.

Neither verbal and written language, nor any other communication of values, is capable of containing human activity in advance and so 'resilience' may have little, or lots of relevance in practice, depending on local and sequential activity, as both past (McGowan) and present (Ahmed) PhD projects alluded to here surely attest. One of the themes running through McGowan (2022) is that both the usual advocates of 'resilience' discourse and their usual critics frequently miss the mark in this regard. One group bestows way too much importance on it, while the other often ignores its real manifestations because it isn't a discourse they wish to promote. As ever, it is at the intersection between these normative ideals that people live their everyday lives.

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