

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo

Resistance is Resilience

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"You need to be more resilient."

This is the oft-heard admonishment thrown at those who find themselves struggling in a world that daily demands more of individuals while offering little humanity in return. Strange how more often than not, the person being admonished has already shown more resilience than the person administering the admonishment.

Those workers who say this have likely become desensitized to how much resilience it takes just to hear them say it, without responding in ways they would use their power to classify as "escalation".

To survive the slings and arrows of life is challenge-enough. To struggle, seek help and then survive the omnipotent, omnipresent messaging that our very struggle leads us to be defined as less-than-human transforms each breath, each heartbeat into acts of survival-resistance.

Whatever "r" word we might choose to find some meaning in, recovery, resilience, resistance re-whatever-next, we will find some new self-appointed authority telling us we cannot use it because some other group has co-opted that term for their own evil purpose.

Breathing, surviving, living, finding and forging our own meaning, acting in our own lives, finding our way to live through each day is survival, is resistance, is resilience, is re-whatever you want it to be because it is yours.

And, with every act of resisting, we become more resilient and, in time, and we find ourselves connecting with others similarly engaged: struggling, learning and sharing experiences

with each other as equals. So, our individual resistance-resilience becomes, naturally, organically, messily, something of a collective survival too.

This emerges not by diktat of someone claiming domain over our lives but because it is what happens whenever we stumble into or create conditions in which it can.

For me, whoever is telling me what words to use or not to use about myself and my experience, regardless of what authority they claim, they are engaging in the same act: claiming power-over me and my life. That is something that necessitates resistance - and that is as fundamental as Isaac Newton's Third Law, namely: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. (Newton 1726).

Every individual who resists and begins to find their way changes in small ways the landscape in which we each find ourselves. This makes it easier, again, in small ways, for those of us feeling alone in our struggle to see ways we might come to feel less alone. When we too are ready to take our steps, we add our contribution to that too.

It's all in "The Game"

True, organizations funded to support those who have been disabled by, for instance, mental health diagnoses have adopted with equal zeal both the latest r-word craze focus on "resilience", and "boiler plate" "best practices" from business schools that convert and codify an individual's life struggles into "SMART goals" that can be aggregated and number-crunched. Individual struggle thusly codified as organizational "outcome" demonstrates to the "higher-ups" that they are dealing with "the problem" as they formulate it: the need for more individual resilience. And the managers get promoted higher up.

Thus, to criticize this version of "resilience" as some product of "neo-liberalism" does not even require serious thought. This is "The Game" the all present invisible hand, and the central character in HBO TV series *The Wire*, David Simon's portrayal of how "raw, unencumbered capitalism"—devalues human beings" (Talbot, 2018).

Yet, even this narrow, one-eyed view of resilience can be a useful survival idea but even the most resilient substance or body eventually destructs or buckles under pressure of overwhelming external forces. There are though, many other ways to look at resilience.

The danger of a single story

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells memorably of the danger of a single story (Adichie 2018) especially when that is a story told by others about us. When we take all our ideas from the same place we lead ourselves down a dimly-lit blind alley. Equally, we limit ourselves when we choose to see every idea through the same lens.

Whether we take on the single story that we are fed or whether we reject an idea out of hand because someone tells us that an idea is forbidden to us because it has been co-opted to serve some dominant narrative, we limit ourselves to peering through the narrow lens others would insist that we must peer through. Accepting this we disable ourselves and each other from fully seeing, we choose to limit our ability to see other possibilities.

More fool us

It might well be that neo-liberalism has become so pervasive that it has indoctrinated within us in a preferred, one-dimensional idea of "resilience" – but if we accept that as the only meaning then more fool us. I reject the so-called neoliberal idea of resilience but, equally, I reject

it as a single story of resilience and I invite you to do likewise: doing so is itself an act of resistance and resilience.

Even from my own life, I have a handful of perspectives on resilience from which I draw. By sharing some of mine I invite you to share some of yours - the more there are the more resilient we can be.

What I learned about resilience in engineering test rooms

I started my working life in engineering, where I first learned about resilience. Like stress, resilience is a concept adapted from engineering and applied to "the human condition", and as such is less than perfect but also of some use.

In metals and other inanimate objects resilience is measured and calculated in SI units - Joules/m³ and understood as the ability to absorb energy under elastic deformation, and then later release that energy, and return elastically to [something like] original state. A spring, or a rubber ball, are obvious examples.

In humans, resilience remains but an idea, an abstract concept we can use to the extent it is useful and discard or leave aside where it is not. We are neither springs nor rubber balls.

No doubt some PhD candidate somewhere is researching how to measure human resilience as the capacity to absorb societal bullshit, hold it within us and bounce back for more on a zero-hours contract and with our best greeter-smiley face forward.

DESTRUCTIVE TESTING

As I witnessed many times in test rooms with those words on the doors, a rigid material or object resists external forces, stands stiff, strong, unyielding with little or no deflection or deformation until it topples or cracks, or spontaneously shatters or even explodes.

A ductile material or object absorbs energy and deforms or bends plastically – is deformed and has its shape changed such that when the external force is removed the new shape is retained: what gets bent stays bent.

Both properties are useful in different circumstances, or even in combination, and undesirable in others. Which property or combination is best is a matter of suiting the circumstances: engineers and designers will choose materials from available options and combine them to offer a blend of strengths. As we move through life we find ourselves needing similar options, different combinations of responses.

I learned a few years ago that if I can only be happy if things were just so, then I'd better get used to spending a lot of time being unhappy. I choose differently. I've yet to encounter a situation in which rigidity of thinking is more useful than resilience or flexibility of thinking.

But, even the bendiest, most flexible material when subjected to repeated loading and bending, will eventually crack.

On "Bouncing Back"

Resilience is often spoken of as "bouncing back" and for me, one song became something of an anthem.

I get knocked down

but I get up again

you ain't never gonna keep me down

- Chumbawumba: "Tubthumping" (YouTube, 2018)

But there is so much more to resilience than the bounce - especially the idea that bouncing right back quickly- and we must ask:

Q: What is it we're bouncing back to, exactly?

Popping back into engineering, resilience – or springiness - is a feature of the suspension system in a car. A suspension that returns too quickly is very stiff, gives a harsh ride, and without damping will overshoot, bouncing us down the road giving an uncomfortable, even dangerous ride. Suspension systems will be designed to operate within a range that balances comfort, handling, and safety.

Likewise, for us, bouncing back too quickly will return us to the same exhausting life-circumstances that knocked us down. Returning to the same situation that led to us breaking down is not a recipe for a sustainable outcome.

Being human is not a fixed state

We are not the static lumps of metal I saw tested to destruction in engineering test rooms. Being, and especially being human is not to be a thing in the world. We are not only body-in-the-world but also self-in-the-world; and self-in-relation-with-the-world; and self-in-relation-with-others as they are self-in-the-world. We are made of Stardust, Self, Soul, and Spirit in-and-of-the-cosmos.

And we are constantly changing. Even the cells in the hand with which I type this are not the same ones as years even months ago. To be human is to change, to move, live, and grow, have desires and ideas about our lives and who and what to be.

"I'm gonna grow, now and never stop"

-The Human League.

It might be true for a spring, or a car suspension, or a resilient floor, that bouncing back means a return to original state, form or shape, but applying the concept to humans we need to be a bit wiser. For us, return or bounce "back" means not back to some frozen state but back to being able to move, back to a dynamic relationship with the world, back to being able to live in the world in a meaningful way – whatever that means for the individual and in their social, cultural context.

Resilience in Nature

For me, the best notions of resilience come from nature and there is no better example than trees: some withstand hundreds of years of storms, climate change and even a few decades of abuse by humans.

This comes partly from the branching both above ground but also in the roots through the many connections formed with the earth of which the tree is part, in which it is anchored and from which it derives sustenance and support.

When part of a tree's branch or root system is damaged, it can survive because it's very branching nature offers resilience.

Grass, too, is hugely resilient, the resilience of a single stalk is remarkable, but by clumping together, is able to withstand assault from wind, weather, wildlife - and us. Even when stalks have been completely flattened and damaged, grass can come back next year the rhizome beneath the surface is another resilient adaption of evolution.

Nature is replete with examples of resilience that can inspire us as well as help us shake off the idea that resilience is a solo project: colonies of bees, ants, even our shared home the earth itself - might just be the most powerful example of resilience, and will be here long after us.

We can choose to complain about limitations of being trapped in someone else's single story about resilience - or else we can choose to learn, to listen to and embrace other ideas, from each other, from other cultures, from nature. Doing so brings us together and connects us: and connectedness is resilience.

When we share our ideas and stories as acts of generosity we broaden our understanding and invite others to join in, and importantly, we invite the healing power of listening.

As Margaret Wheatley describes listening is healing and draws us together, connects us, deeply. Conversely, not listening is an act of fragmentation and "fragmentation is the root of all suffering". – Listening only for the opportunity to interrupt and tell each other what to think is, assuredly, even more so. (Margaretwheatley.com, 2018).

Sharing and listening bring us together and emphasize our interconnectedness taking time to for this is itself an act of healing and resilience.

Resilience as interconnectedness

For me, true resilience comes from interconnectedness and interdependence. Like grass we have a degree of individual resilience, but much more together. In our great delusion, we create ourselves as masters of the universe yet lose sense of ourselves as participant in nature.

Indigenous peoples all over the world offer us many examples of remarkable resilience. Their very survival, despite hundreds of years of self-identified "civilized" folks trying to destroy them and their ways, is evidence of that and so much more.

As Renee Linklater describes, "The resiliency of Indigenous peoples is often derived from cultural resources that generate strong contributions to community capacity building in relation to healing practices and health research." (Linklater, 2014).

I believe we owe a huge debt of gratitude for Indigenous peoples' survival despite our best efforts over centuries and for many reasons, including the selfish reason that we might begin to learn from their example. For all that a loud few try to use their power to proclaim that resilience is a neoliberal construct, resilience predates it as a powerful idea in many healing traditions.

Even in the recent industrialized, human-made world of technology, we have many examples to broaden our horizon: perhaps the most resilient thing we have thus-far created is the internet with its multiple connections, redundancies, and mass of interconnectedness. It too offers ways we might think of resilience.

Resilience even in an individual requires connection to, and connectedness with, resources. If the situation or environment in which we find ourselves lacks resources to support resilience, then "bouncing back" will only bounce us right back to the situation that knocked us down in the first place.

Like a metal object being repeatedly bent, eventually, we will "break" too.

Now, I'm no academic, so I look upon the game of standing on some high point and lobbing intellectual hand grenades at each other both from some distance and with some amusement. Outside the rarified world of "studies", my experience has shown me how meaning emerges not from papers critiquing other papers but as emergent property of the complex messiness of life- all of it.

I've witnessed this in situations ranging from large organizations and multidisciplinary teams, to small groups of homeless men surviving life on the meanest of streets, three decades working with dialogues with many forms but each creating for each other space in which we can hear many voices, many languages, many ideas, some not involving words and text. When we make such space for many perspectives we allow new understandings, new connections, new meanings evolve and emerge, not so they can be written about by an individual claiming right-of-ownership but so they can be used to make sense, in our own lives and also in shared sense-making, of what has happened, what is happening, and what we might do next.

Dialogue: creating spaces in which resilience can emerge

For almost three decades of work informed by ideas about dialogue from David Bohm, Peter Senge, Bill Isaacs, Margaret Wheatley, and lately by ideas from the work of Mikhail Bahktin I have seen how these ideas can fit and work together. In business, Government departments, with large multidisciplinary teams, in community, in peer support groups and hearing voices groups and cafes, and working with homeless men struggling to stay alive on the

streets, I have witnessed many forms of dialogue sharing qualities of sameness that include being able to be heard and a willingness to hear each other.

A Bohmian approach to dialogue (Bohm 1996) emphasizes dialogue as "flow of meaning", the importance of the "container" we create in which dialogue can take place, and the need to become aware of how thought itself limits and shapes our thinking. Peter Senge (Senge 1990) and William Isaacs (Isaacs and Senge 2006) focus on patterns, self-disciplines, and identifiable skills that we can learn and hone through practice and reflection.

Bakhtin's ideas inform the basis of (Finnish) Open Dialogue (Seikkula, Hoffman and Arnkil, 2006) a form of "treatment" for the kind of experiences that are often classified as "psychosis". Bakhtin highlights four essential components of "The Dialogic", necessary interdependent qualities for dialogue to emerge:

- Polyphony - in particular seeming to privilege it above three other qualities Bakhtin set out as equally essential.
- Heteroglossia - many languages and terminologies, expressions, and no "right" language given privilege above others, and none denied.
- Chronotype - fluid and nonlinear interconnectivity of time-space.
- Carnival - both the latter doing much to create "a container" or environment necessary and to disrupt or cut through linear, rational and logic-based understandings imposed by institutions of power and their preferred single story.

Now, I don't know how dialogue becomes "treatment" but would surely be useful in slowing down any rush to judgement, and also, it seems to me that if we had more dialogue in our discourse in the ways that Bohm and Bakhtin point us toward, then perhaps fewer of us might find ourselves struggling such that we need "treatment" in the first place.

What might we learn from difference?

Two decades ago I learned the power of a single question from an approach I trained in, Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland and Scholes 2007): I have come to think of it as "the soft systems question":

"how many different perspectives can we identify [upon this situation] and what might we learn from each?"

To ask this question is to rupture any notion that there can be a single story, that anyone gets to decide for everyone else how to make sense of their own lives.

Interconnectedness of individual and collective resilience-resistance

David Denborough shows how individual stories of despair and desolation can be retold in ways that reveal the strength of the person who has shown themselves to be so resilient that they survive to tell (Denborough 2008). Each story re-storied, double-storied and thickened is a story of survivals, skills, knowledges, values, of how the teller found these useful, of where we learned and who from, of how awakening to that connects and reconnects us with collectives, like family community, with our culture, histories, and larger traditions. This might not be with your own scope or understanding of resilience but it is the stuff of mine - and mine is as valid to me as yours is to you. This is the very stuff of human resilience.

"Starts with diversity of individuals' skills, knowledge and values, locates these within history and then in collective tradition and culture becomes more richly collective and more clearly linked with cultural contexts." (Denborough, 2008)

Resilience as connectedness, community, and the Cosmos

In the end, resilience goes far beyond the capacity of an individual to take endless crap and bounce-right-back, stay on career-track, on life-track in a system designed to exploit to breaking point all but the very few of us.

Resilience, true resilience, is resistance. Resilience is connectedness and interconnectedness in individuals and in the communities that we build together.

Carl Sagan, introducing his TV series "Cosmos" told of how "We are made of star stuff".

Reminding ourselves of our place in that can remind us just how connected we are, and also remind us to be humble too.

Resilience can be found within and around us, in and of our connection with the earth, the Cosmos and everything in and of it.

Bounce that.

Kevin Healey

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