POSITION PIECES

Relations as Immunity
Building Community Resilience

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Abstract

Resilience—a term that originated in mathematical ecology—now commonly refers to the ability to thrive in the face of trauma and adversity. This Position Piece reflects on both the charisma and political lability of resilience in the early 21st century. On the one hand, resilience is easily compatible with neoliberal discourses that demand that individuals protect themselves in the absence of state or community support. On the other hand, resilience can be an important corrective to narratives about the damage caused by trauma, focusing attention on our innate ability to heal. We argue that the ambivalence of resilience requires theoretical and empirical attention to both the wider appeal of the term and the situated definitions deployed by diverse actors. In particular, we look at the rise of the term 'community resilience' popularised by academics, community leaders, and activists, which seeks to avoid the pitfalls of the neoliberal definition of resilience and argues that strong interpersonal relationships can support health equity. Despite the ambivalence of resilience, we find "community resilience" to be promising in a time when collective visions of health and immunity are desperately needed.

Keywords

Resilience, Neoliberalism, Biosociality, Immunity, Relationality.

It's 2022; two years into a pandemic that has laid bare the deep inequalities in San Francisco, my home of eight years. I'm walking through the Mission district—a neighbourhood famous for its historic Latinx community, culture, and activism, and now also infamous for its rapid gentrification, driven, in large part, by Silicon Valley's tech industry. I walk past a new mural depicting queer Latinx musician La Doña with a defiant expression, looking down at me, unsmiling, with impeccable red lips and bold brows, her large gold earring brushing the collar of her windbreaker. The word 'RESILIENT' is emblazoned in large capital letters in San Francisco Giants' black and orange. I wonder: what does it mean to be resilient in the Mission in the face of such conspicuous income inequality and gentrification?

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It's 2017; the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to come, but the war in Syria is ongoing. I'm at a conference in London, talking to a biomedical researcher who conducts epigenetic studies on children in refugee camps in Lebanon. He samples their blood to determine epigenetic changes that may or may not be related to trauma experienced during the war or forced flight. But that's not all he wants to do. 'I want to find biomarkers for resilience. Why is it that some children are so traumatised and some are pretty okay? What is that difference?'

Figure 1. Mural in the Mission, San Francisco, USA. Twitter post from @SFGiants, July 23, 2021.

Resilience is a term that has garnered significant attention in recent years. As our anecdotes show, resilience travels in and through different contexts in science, medicine, and society. Its uses and meanings are ambivalent to say the least. On the one hand, resilience is often portrayed as a positive characteristic of people and communities; an indomitable spirit in the face of hardship; something to be proud of and strive for. On the other hand, it seems that, increasingly, racialised communities, refugees, and other vulnerable people are being asked to be resilient in impossible circumstances. As La Doña herself said in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR): 'When is this tech bubble or when is this industry gonna leave

us? We're holding on; we're trying to do our community work and raise our kids out here, but it's near impossible' (Garcia-Navarro and Guerra 2020).

Resilience: A short history

Resilience is a term with origins in 1970s mathematical ecology and computer modelling. In these fields, resilience refers to the ability of complex systems to respond and adapt to change or to return to equilibrium after a disturbance (Morita and Suzuki 2019). In the 1990s, resilience became a prominent concept in child psychology and education. Based in studies that show children can thrive in spite of extreme adversity, resilience is defined in this literature as 'the capacity to withstand and recover from experiences of psychological adversity or to maintain effective functioning despite adverse circumstances' (Hiver and Sánchez Solarte 2021, 205). Today, these definitions have merged and transformed, and are now employed across many domains, from climate change policy to urban planning, in education, disaster prevention, security studies, social work, and development. For instance, we can see traces of both 1970s systems theory and 1990s child psychology in this representative definition of resilience offered by the Stockholm Resilience Center: 'Resilience is the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop. It is about how humans and nature can use shocks and disturbances like a financial crisis or climate change to spur renewal and innovative thinking' (2015). As it is increasingly recognised that adversity, stress, and crisis are the norm and not the exception, this new definition of resilience has entered the zeitgeist as a capacity to be celebrated and cultivated in individuals and social-ecological systems.

Resilience has also attracted increasing attention in the biomedical sciences. Drawing on approaches from environmental epigenetics and neuroscience, researchers argue that it is essential for societal wellbeing to understand which molecular factors underpin social, emotional, and biological resilience. In biomedical contexts, resilience is understood as a trait that can be measured through the right biomarkers and that can become a predictor of who will succumb to the effects of hardship and who will not. In practice, however, epigenetic studies on resilience are scarce: rather, researchers have mostly focused on studying the damage to health and wellbeing caused by early life adversity, which is easier to model and observe in animal experiments. Resilience, here, becomes an aspiration—researchers want to study it but do not yet know how.

In this Position Piece, we discuss the popularity of resilience at this historical moment and explore how dominant understandings of resilience comport with logics of neoliberal individualism. Drawing on our fieldwork in the U.S. Pacific Northwest and California (e.g., Müller and Kenney 2021), we then discuss how

resilience is being redefined by critical social workers and community-based organisations as a communal achievement, rather than as an inherent property belonging to individuals or systems. In conversation with other contributions to the Special Issue, we consider how these emerging definitions of community resilience can lead to novel framings of interpersonal relations as a type of biosocial immunity. As immune logics often foreground the biological individual (see e.g., Martin 1990), this understanding of resilience challenges us to imagine immunity as a collective capacity that is simultaneously biological and social. At the end of the Position Piece, we propose 'relations as immunity' as a concept that has the potential to support equity and collective care. First, however, we begin with a critique.

Resilience: A neoliberal value?

The undeniable charisma of resilience raises our suspicions. Why should vulnerable people, non-human organisms, and the biosphere itself be tasked with the obligation to be resilient, when the problem is in fact that corporations, investors, and governments benefit from structural violence? As UK-based sociologist Katy Wright explains, resilience goes hand-in-glove with neoliberal austerity logics:

> The emergence of resilience in policy has been closely linked with neoliberal agendas in which resilience tends to be framed in terms of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, and is tied up with agendas of abandonment and responsibilisation of citizens in a context of state withdrawal and cuts (2021, 1–2).

The erosion of the welfare state in a climate of increasing privatisation of and divestment from social services and public infrastructure has engendered a policy interest in building more resilient citizens. Resilience has, in many ways, become one more name for the imperative to pull yourself up by your boot straps—a neoliberal value that places demands on the vulnerable and requires nothing from those in power.

The more pronounced the structural violence and the scarcer the resources, the more likely you are to see this type of 'resilience' in active circulation. Education researcher Kevin L. Clay notes how resilience is deployed in the context of ongoing divestment from majority Black public schools in the US: 'the language of "resilience" is employed to encourage Black youth to withstand structural poverty in order to achieve academic success' (2019, 91). Clay argues that praising the resilience of Black children turns our focus away from the root causes of educational inequity in the US, which include institutionalised racism, white flight, exclusionary housing policies, and the chronic underfunding of public education.

When resilience is defined as individual grit, 'exceptional' students are celebrated, while those unable to 'overcome their circumstances' are further marginalised (idem, 104–5). Meanwhile, those in power are let off the hook:

> The unintended (or intentional) impact of promoting grit is that we absolve the state from addressing educational inequity and place our collective gaze on young folk to endure the trauma of having to be gritty to rise above centuries-old injustice (idem, 105).

While it is important to acknowledge the agency, creativity, and vitality of children living in difficult circumstances, it is imperative that it does not come at the expense of silently endorsing the inequity that continues to demand resilience from the most vulnerable, again and again.

Resilience has increasingly become touted as a solution to climate change and other forms of environmental violence, leaving the global south and communities with the least resources in the global north to bear the brunt of ongoing environmental crises that enrich and enable the wealthy. The question becomes whether communities affected by environmental violence are or are not resilient, rather than how to address 'the global and local histories that create inequity, political marginalization, and environmental injustice' (Barrios 2016, 29). In the face of the uneven distribution of environmental risks, Dr Mona Hanna-Attisha, a prominent paediatrician instrumental in exposing the lead crisis in Flint, Michigan, refuses to ask kids to be resilient: 'Surviving life's hardest blows should not be celebrated—or expected. Recovery and reconciliation require reparations and resources. To expect resilience without justice is simply to indifferently accept the status quo' (Hanna-Attisha 2020).

Resilience without an attendant commitment to the equitable distribution of resources does nothing more than perpetuate structural violence, while putting the burden to 'bounce back' onto the most vulnerable. Within a climate of neoliberal austerity, individual solutions are often framed as the only reasonable (read: affordable) solution to structural problems. In the face of micro- and macro-aggressions of everyday life under capitalism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism, we continue to ask people to grow a thicker skin, rather than consider the possibility of creating a gentler world. As long as individual solutions and self-responsibilisation are framed as the only possible response to crisis and precarity, resilience will remain in cahoots with divestment, abandonment, and austerity. Or, as a group of academics who were caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic recently put it: 'fuck individual resilience' (Ahn et al. 2021).

Toward community resilience

Yet despite its compatibility with neoliberal values, resilience may still beckon. Resilience has been an important corrective to narratives that focus on harm caused by adversity, shifting attention instead to our innate ability to heal and support one another through difficult times. Centring resilience can help researchers—including those in medical anthropology—to avoid the pitfalls of damage-centred research (Tuck 2009) and the pathologisation of marginalised communities to focus instead on people's agency, strengths, and desires for change. However, in order for resilience to do a different kind of political work, it is necessary to move away from resilience defined as individual grit or as the quasi-magical ability of 'systems' to bounce back. Dr Hanna-Attisha argues that building resilience should begin not with individuals, but with social welfare policies such as basic income, living wages, universal healthcare, and parental leave:

> This is how we begin to transform the concept of resilience from an individual trait to one that describes a community—and society—that cares for everyone. Rather than hoping a child is tough enough to endure the insurmountable, we must build resilient places—healthier, safer, more nurturing and just—where all children can thrive. This is where prevention and healing begin (2020).

Rather than being an inherent property—e.g., 'children are resilient' or 'an ecosystem is resilient'—this definition of resilience is a collective achievement, which requires ongoing care labour, collective action, and investment of time and resources. Increasingly, researchers are using the term 'community resilience' to describe this kind of collective response to chronic and complex community trauma (e.g., Penkler et al. 2020; Attalah, Bacigalupe, and Repetto 2021; Sousa and Moss 2022; King et al. 2022). Those who insist on defining resilience as communal understand how structural violence leads to the uneven distribution of life chances and they increasingly articulate resilience with demands for social justice and health equity.[1] Rather than maintain an unequal status quo, 'community resilience' can include transformative political action such as grassroots organising, activism, and mutual aid. In this model people are not parts of resilient systems, but actively organise as a community to advocate for their needs and personhood in an inhospitable social and political environment; they are care workers and agents of change. Understood in this way, community resilience is not a supplement to neoliberal austerity that allows divestment from marginalised communities to go

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1   Stuart Hall defines articulation as a historically contingent link between two disparate elements or practices that must be constantly renewed or the connection can disappear (113–114, footnote 2). Here we describe those who strengthen the connection between resilience and social justice in the face of those who link resilience with neoliberal individualism. As these definitions of resilience are currently competing for attention, it is unclear which articulation (if any) will prevail.

unchallenged, but stands as a challenge to those who profit from everyday violence and the compounding disasters of late industrialism.

Community resilience in practice

In the absence of significant federal or state funding for addressing childhood adversity, community leaders in the US are seeking new ways of building and supporting community resilience. In Walla Walla, Washington, for instance, community leaders set out to create a fully trauma-informed community, enrolling all public services in the county, from schools to juvenile justice to public libraries (Longhi et al. 2021). At the heart of this approach are NEAR Science trainings, which are based on the results of the CDC-Kaiser ACE study who might be interested. The CDC-Kaiser ACE study was a large epidemiological study carried out in the mid-1990s by PIs Robert Anda and Vincent Felitti that showed that adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs) are strongly correlated with negative health outcomes in adults. NEAR Science trainings were established by Robert Anda's organisation ACE Interface; non-profits and community leaders attend a seminar at ACE Interface and return to their communities to conduct their own NEAR Science trainings for local schools, agencies, businesses, and communities. In the NEAR Science training, attendees are taught about the biological impact of ACEs and how to transform organisations to best support children and adults with ACEs. NEAR stands for neuroscience, epigenetics, ACEs, and resilience. And resilience is central to their messaging. Although the science itself often focuses on the damaged caused by ACEs, NEAR Science trainers have rebranded this literature as the 'Sciences of Hope' because they believe that this research can empower communities to build resilience and break intergenerational cycles of harm. Through careful narrative choreographies, the trainings avoid the biological determinism of much of the peer-reviewed literature on early childhood adversity, which tends to focus on key windows of epigenetic plasticity in utero and in early life (Müller and Kenney 2021). Instead, the NEAR Science trainings argue that strong relationships, supportive environments, and social-emotional skills can help children with ACEs to avoid potential negative physical, behavioural, and mental health outcomes.

Resilience in the NEAR Science trainings is framed in relational terms. They often repeat the adage that a positive relationship with 'one caring adult' can cultivate resilience in a child (see Figure 2). Interpersonal relationships are understood as protective, for both people and communities. This emphasis on relationships has helped build important bridges with the restorative justice movement—an alternative to punitive justice, which focuses on building, maintaining, and repairing relationships. Restorative justice maintains that punitive justice often adds more harm to harm—it responds to the harms of disobedience, violence, and crime by

harming the perpetrator, but does little to actually address and repair the harms that have been done. Restorative justice instead suggests that we can respond in ways that focus on mending relationships and repairing harm, holding the perpetrator accountable by actively contributing to a restoration process and by committing to social-emotional learning to address the root causes of the harmful behaviour.

Figure 2. Microsoft Power Point slide from the presentation 'Trauma-Informed Strategies for Elementary' delivered by Jodi Grove at the Beyond Paper Tigers Conference, Walla Walla Washington, 2017.

Although the long-term effects are still unknown, one important outcome of trauma-informed approaches to education has been a reduction in suspensions and expulsions in schools (i.e., punitive discipline). When behaviours are framed as an effect of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—i.e., as biological responses to prior or ongoing stressors—punishment no longer appears to be a reasonable solution. Instead, trauma-informed schools teach students the skills to self-regulate, develop social-emotional skills, and respond differently to stressful situations in the future (Müller and Kenney 2021). Restorative justice has been one of the key tools that schools have drawn on in their efforts to reduce punitive discipline. As experiences of punitive discipline have been found to be highly correlated with adult incarceration (e.g., González 2012), these changes in school culture are promising interventions into the US school-to-prison pipeline. When Black children receive disproportionate punishment in schools, they become more vulnerable to adult incarceration in a climate in which the majority of incarcerated people in the US are Black and Latinx. Thus, these efforts to build community resilience are articulated with a desire to change the status quo in the US, where disproportionate punishment is the norm. While these efforts can, and indeed

should be, joined by other explicitly anti-racist and decolonial strategies to create equitable schools that support and empower all children, a significant reduction in punitive discipline is an important step in interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, which can have material effects on the lives of racialised children.[2]

In Walla Walla, Washington, 'community resilience' is used to refer to the shared goal of addressing ACEs in the community. By framing resilience as a collective achievement that is made through supportive interpersonal relationships, Walla Walla and a growing number of trauma-informed counties in the US have sought to shift the locus of responsibility from individuals onto institutions and services in the community. While this constitutes a promising change under the banner of 'resilience', these initiatives cannot be successful without resources. At the Beyond Paper Tigers conference in Walla Walla in 2017, a local elementary school principal reported how she had transformed her school culture completely using mostly free materials and some donated items. At the end of her talk, the principal asked the audience for help with a problem she was working on: at the free and reduced breakfast programme at her school, the children were always served sugary cereal. She wanted to offer eggs and beans wrapped inside a tortilla, so that children had plenty of protein to start the day. However, she could not find the resources or political will to make the change. Here, we again encounter the ambivalence of resilience—even community resilience—in a climate of neoliberal austerity. On the one hand, passionate people are coming together to solve communal problems in novel and creative ways; on the other hand, without the resources to support their efforts these programmes may not be sustainable in the long term.

Relations as immunity

Community resilience gives us a novel way of thinking of interpersonal relations as a type of biosocial immunity. This is a potentially radical concept of immunity as it moves away from a privatised immune system to acknowledging how our health depends on our relations to others and to our social and material environment. As Emily Martin observed, traditional representations of the immune system rely on the figure of a discrete self that is protected from hostile invaders: 'in virtually all scientific literature on the immune system is the distinction between self and nonself, a distinction that is maintained by a defence based on killing the nonself' (1990, 414). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that communal conceptions of immunity—such as herd immunity—have been historically less popular and less

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2   Alternatives to punitive justice such as restorative justice do not always affect disproportionate punishment by race. Scholars stress the importance of actively anti-racist (Romano and Almengor 2021) and decolonial (Tauri 2022) approaches to restorative justice, as well as a focus on student empowerment and leadership in restorative justice circles (Coker and González 2022). It is important to note that these new approaches are not a panacea but are one step in addressing the negative effects of punitive discipline in schools.

well understood than individual conceptions of immunity. In the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, we found that the importance of vaccinating to achieve herd immunity was difficult to communicate to those who refused COVID-19 vaccines. It seemed impossible for some to fathom how their own private medical decisions could impact the immunity of others. Memes popped up on right-wing social media with messages such as, 'don't forgot to wear a thick coat this winter, so the person next to you doesn't freeze to death' (see Figure 3). It's clear that we have a lot of work to do if we want people to believe that health extends beyond the limits of our own skin.

Figure 3. Covid-19 anti-vaccine meme. Origin unknown. Accessed by the authors in March 2023.

Because of its ability to contribute a heterodox lexicon of shared immunity, we'd like to suggest that resilience is not completely bankrupt, though it remains ambivalent or, perhaps more accurately, multivalent. Although it is attractive to neoliberal policymakers looking for cheap solutions to climate change, pandemics, and other forms of slow violence and acute crisis, researchers, community leaders, and activists are advocating for a concept of community resilience that recognises the power of positive relationships to protect the most vulnerable, while simultaneously critiquing and seeking to change the circumstances that lead to that vulnerability. Whether we make demands on the state for the equitable distribution of resources or build strategies for community self-determination and collective care (Spade 2020), community resilience offers us new ways to think of health and wellbeing as collective rather than individual. In a pandemic age, when it is clear that the cult of individuality does not serve public health, grabbing hold

of a charismatic term and conscientiously reworking it may be a viable strategy for popularising more radical and collective visions of health and immunity.

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Martha Kenney wrote the first draft of this article. Ruth Müller added insight from her research. Both authors edited the manuscript to produce the final version.

Ethics statement

The views expressed in this article are the opinions of the authors.

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