

Narratives of Resilience: How People Overcome Adversity

Asiimwe Kyomugisha T.

Faculty of Business, Kampala International University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

Resilience is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, enabling individuals and communities to navigate and recover from adversity. This paper examines resilience as a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. By examining theoretical frameworks, personal and collective narratives, and empirical studies, this work highlights the role of storytelling in resilience-building. The study draws on narratives from various socio-cultural contexts, including conflict zones and communities affected by social upheaval, demonstrating how meaning-making and collective support foster resilience. The paper also discusses the implications for education, policy, and future research, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches to resilience training and intervention. Ultimately, understanding resilience through narratives provides insights into overcoming hardship and promoting well-being in diverse contexts.

Keywords: Resilience, adversity, personal narratives, cultural narratives, psychological coping, meaning-making, trauma recovery, community support.

INTRODUCTION

Stress and tragedy are inevitable parts of the human experience. From personal daily setbacks to shared trauma, individuals and communities learn to cope, survive, and thrive in the face of adversity. Although resilient outcomes are harder to achieve in the face of severe stress such as childhood abuse or chronic hardship, even in the direst situations, individuals may recover and find “relative resilience.” The nature of resilience is multifaceted and can be understood through dynamic interactions among many factors, such as genes, epigenetics, stress-response systems, the immune system, neural circuitry, and culture. Resilience operates both to combat the development of mental illness and to promote a state of thriving and well-being. Further, while researchers want to quantify resilience, it is important to remember that resilience is not just a trait that a person has but a dynamic process manifested in successful coping and adaptation when faced with trauma or significant stress. Even so, researchers from numerous disciplines have deepened their understanding of resilience and developed effective means of nurturing or training it on individual and collective levels. The world is currently in the midst of a global health emergency triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand individual and group responses to tragedy, the present review uses the pandemic as a case example. Informed by recent advances in studies of resilience, this review seeks to understand resilience as a complex and active process shaped by one’s neurobiological profiles, exposure to trauma, political, economic, and cultural contexts, and opportunities for training. Relying on this multi-faceted framework, it is relevant to consider the COVID-19 pandemic and suggest a set of practical recommendations to help populations around the world cope with and recover from the global tragedy of the disease [1, 2].

Theoretical Frameworks

Narratives of resilience: how people overcome adversity - Introduction This paper presents thematic analyses of six narratives of resilience that were gathered in Sierra Leone. These analyses offer an insight

into the form and context of these stories of survival and recovery following the civil war. A consideration of theoretical contributions with apt South Asian and Sahelian data is offered first. Instead, the benefits of a wider dialogue between process-based and 'narrative' conceptualizations of resilience are outlined. Also, the Relationship between collective narratives and personal growth is examined using predominantly Sahelian data. Subsequently, thematic analysis reveals how dominant myths, which concurrently invalidate trauma responses, inhibit personal growth. Despite this, shared representations of simultaneity may open up spaces in which alternative trajectories regarding the course of traumatic events and their aftereffects could be more easily spoken. Hence, fledgling stories of resilience tend to converge around the war's escalation, the flight to Guinea, and subsequent crises. Moreover, the predominance of 'timely help' as facilitating these trajectories points towards the silencing of other – and often more participating – narratives. The challenge is then set to explore how more empowering social representations of agentic recovery could be cultivated. Moreover, such stories – and a wider psycho-educational project aimed at challenging such biologically deterministic perceptions of trauma – could provide an indigenized contribution to the burgeoning field of 'local interventions and supports in developing countries', particularly in settings of prolonged conflict [3, 4].

Personal Narratives

At a crowded backyard barbecue, a sweet puppy named Gertie waddles among a handful of well-behaved children and an unruly pack of adolescents. She is everywhere, a bumping reminder of a husband's repeated, unconsidered betrayal. At home later, running bath water camouflages a silent howl of sudden realization. It was a cold November day, gray and unremarkably bleak. For three months, a marriage of twenty-five years shows no hint of a crack. By sundown, the network of lies is so overwhelming, she drops to her knees, a primal keening ripping through her. Children scramble to her side with fear and puzzlement. Gertie puts a protective paw on her hand, suddenly and miraculously out of thin air. The existence of a gift of writing is a compulsion to spin a story from the meager circulars that bind a memory. Such circulars stitched the tale of a former self to someone that looked a lot like her but bore little resemblance beyond skin and bone. A unique filigree ran through her soul in the wake of family dispersion a generation back, spooling across oceans and continents. She was American, a country that embraced brashness, whereas the filigree obliged her to tread softly and bow her head to the past. Proud both of her new home and ancient legacy, she walked a fine, exacting line. So, when skulking shadows demanded silence against her tumult in that fleetingly intimate back alley, it was natural to heart the bruise-visaged stranger as she'd been taught. Who refused to slip beneath the survivor mantle and weaves anew their history, a lifeline marred and salvaged by an era of terror? The valley keeps its secrets in whispering grass stalks bowed at the flint-hard soldier. Dire billows consume the insurgent youth as a benevolent gaze fixates on impending martyrdom – a waltz only seen in shadows of grey. Smirking faces grow close, marking their flesh with unearned scars in retribution for an unreachable freedom. Squeezing through the torturing halo of bone-deep terror, he sidles up to her, a faintly tilting nail pained on his lips. "I am no one," she answers. "They keep saying that I'm nobody," like a mantra grimly recited to the failing cradle of her sanity. A Song of no-name – they declared urchinously. She was something else entirely. Majid, the harbinger of unfathomable serenades forecasting her valediction [5, 6].

Stories of Individual Resilience

Reborn in Adversity - From Chapter: Postponing When She Waited for Doctor Brown. 1979 was a notable year in Darwin. The previous year's Big Wet had led to a productive Dry, with lush knee-high grass in our un-mown yard and coral trees flourishing. Our family faced a mix of triumphs and dysfunction, evidenced by Justin's tales of Esther performing awkward dances in the backyard, once interrupted when she fell into the chicken pen. I remember when Tutu left Esther with Matt; he put Esther in a compromising position, leading to Tutu's horrified reaction upon her return. That year should have been joyful since Mum got sick after giving birth. Kathleen and I did our best to help during her hospital stay. Tutu took care of us, while Dad attributed Esther's illness to neglect. This pattern of blaming and storytelling was common, with Dad recounting instances—like Tutu taking Esther out in a torn nappy—as reflections of parental failures. Their stories often criticized one another's parenting, possibly as retaliation for real or perceived shortcomings. Interestingly, these stories were shared in Dad's calls with David, hinting at a struggle over blame and authority. The presence of earlier neglect stories in the neighborhood raised questions about broader societal fears around Indigenous families. Tutu was blamed for Esther's violent behavior, which Mum later highlighted as a reflection of their

parenting legacies. In analyzing resilience narratives, university students' responses to child abuse stories showed a reluctance to acknowledge the damaging effects of adversity. Respondents tended to deny the negative impacts of childhood trauma while simultaneously acknowledging positive traits in the protagonist of an abuse story. These insights prompt further reflection on how qualities perceived as resilient may reveal what is lacking in a character's life. The implications of these findings for understanding resilience are crucial to further studies [7, 8].

Cultural Narratives of Strength

In the course of human affliction, one may ask, "Why me?" This often points to an awareness of deeper societal and cultural notions of inequity and the need for meaning-making - even if societal attitudes and injustices seemingly confirm these ideas. From a broader perspective, it becomes important for both sufferers and authorities to confront culturally conceived assumptions of strength, as these ascribe certain individuals and groups to positions of power and inevitably marginalise others. Inadequate contemplation of these inherent notions of strength and weakness in cross-cultural responses to 'panic' human affliction may only serve to further entrench status-quo ascription of the same. After the workshop, we were asked to look out for 'Narratives of Resilience'. These stories would illustrate how people come to terms with and learn and recover after human affliction. Although the noticing of these cultural narratives was a preset task, none were volunteered. Thus began this study, critically engaging with the stories told by Inter-Religionists of their afflictions during the civil war, suffering and pain afterwards. The endeavour also seeks to engage with the war stories of Survival's and Fighters and the more recent narratives circulating massively following the game. The other Remembrance Project on Amputees, War Victims and some new venues planned around Truth and Reconciliation. What is attempted here is essentially a meta-analysis of a two-year-long ethnography complemented with recent RUF stories told by 'returnees', as they give stronger insight into the stories and mythologies circulated in the villages [9, 10].

Factors Influencing Resilience

Resilience is a term becoming more common to describe individuals who can successfully overcome adverse environmental and life circumstances. The purpose of this study is to add to the researchers' understanding of resilience by examining important predictors of resilience. These predictors are defined as individual characteristics, life-changing experiences, and social systems that are outside of familial social supports that help to increase one's resilience skills. Over centuries, people have been trying to define the relationships and processes that would create resilience in an individual. An important aspect of these social relationships is that they may function as social systems that bolster or buffer the relationship between the individual and their environment. Without supportive relationships in the home, school, or community, children will encounter enormous risks that may be too difficult to overcome. Furthermore, resilience is not an innate personality trait but a complex and developmental process. Individuals may be more or less resilient at different points in their lives depending on the presence of a variety of personal, behavioral, and social factors. The resilience process is thought to be aligned with developmental stages; the emotional response to risk and protective factors changes as individuals move through different life stages [11, 12].

Resilience In Different Contexts

For years, humanitarian responders have stressed the need to understand the nuanced reasons for people's suffering and its complex social roots. While research on mutual support during crises exists, there is limited exploration of how individuals identify their distress sources, especially in politically motivated violence and forced displacement. This paper presents the experiences of suffering and healing from displaced individuals in Aceh, Indonesia, aiming to fill this knowledge gap. It starts with an overview of studies on social factors in distress, describes the research methodology used, and shares significant life narratives illustrating the hardships faced by these individuals and the support they received. Suffering is deeply embedded in complex social structures that require thoughtful understanding to alleviate distress effectively. Personal resilience can partially explain variations in experiences, but the concept of 'resilience' in Western discourse and humanitarian efforts presents challenges. The study identifies four types of adversities: loss of a loved one, trauma, social issues, and more. Participants rated their distress and the likelihood of various responses, such as avoidance or seeking help. Many opted for avoidant strategies. Variability exists in individual responses, with trauma from racism and rape viewed as most distressing. Other significant incidents included job loss and legal troubles, paralleling the most distressing events. Age differences emerged, with adolescents and young adults reporting more distress over conflicts with friends compared to adults [13, 14].

Role of Narrative in Resilience

Meaning-making of difficult events and experiences is considered to be important in the process of coping with and adapting to adversity. Particularly, the narrating of such experiences, or the report of storytelling about them, both to oneself and to others, is regarded as a crucial mechanism of processing difficult events, allowing the narrator to express and articulate what has happened and thereby assign meaning to these events. However, the concept of narrativity is considered to work not merely through the telling of stories but also through the living of stories; that is, the everyday activity and agency that contributes to the maintenance or alteration of personal narrative identity. The extent of congruence between the storied telling of a new direction in life and lived experience is shown to contribute to psychological resilience through well-being and self-esteem. The life stories of women in a community storytelling project who are living with the impacts of Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war are analysed. These findings suggest that it is not the individual's firm belief in any created meaning that drives personal growth. Instead, it is the context-sensitive relationship between the dominant social narratives and individual meaning-making processes that determines the trajectory of the stories told. Importantly, the personal stories emerging from this relationship can sometimes work against growth. Rather than individualizing distress and recovery, these findings articulate moments of growth and trauma in narratives that also contain stories of depression, denial, and regression. The implications of this research request a commitment to valuing the inextricable role of social context in conceptualizations of distress, resilience, and growth following adversity. It is noted that there is an unmet need to establish ways of offering support to individuals and communities that fully consider the role of social context. The paper concludes by exploring the relevance of such social content to the planning of services, training programmes, and continuing clinical practice [15, 16].

Empirical Insights and Illustrative Examples

It is not always such a step-by-step progressive process. Life events can happen in quick succession, disrupting anything that looks like equilibrium. Sometimes haziness dominates a person's sense-making, such that what might look like progress in one's blog can be tempered by a sense of stagnation or control. Finding ways to cope can require an internal reorientation that is difficult to portray. Both the procrastinator's blog and E.L.'s attempts at poetry include numerous references to turning inward; scavenging a small windstorm of thoughts, feelings, and impressions; a sense of not knowing what to write; and seeking a certain kind of serenity. If one is privileged, the dominant narratives that structure 'coping processes' will be supportive of exploration and resistance. In West London, an exploration of some curious healing projects existed with people who were clinical professionals scratching their heads and admitted that really, they could not explain it either. Indeed, after a decade of fieldwork and three visits with no ethnic links, admissions of the emotional impact of a Ugandan drumming session reveal the shock unaltered from subsiding one's cultural tour. In 2000 B.C., the Isrealites died from the 10th plague, losing their firstborn sons. Pharaoh tells them that they put up their tents for three days. They're okay. when they're dead, they give them first burial. This can be a blessing or a curse. Now, reverberations affect 50% of older mothers in some British cities. Every night is the same nightmare for Tavi. It's about the body parts floating in the Thames. They're all her kids; her and Bozo make it in a bag. In the morning, she has a miscarriage. The Dwight sticks it in a bag utensil. They don't know what to do with it, so it goes in the fridge where the milk and bread are. They don't know to call the funeral people or ambulance. Both mean bad things [17, 18].

Educational Approaches to Resilience

Narratives of resilience: how people overcome adversity is from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together research in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and English literature. James Menzies built the psychological framework, as tough thriving on an understanding of resilience primarily as a series of personal traits and attributes. This is then compared to the dominant contemporary version of resilience in philosophy, tough-mindedness. The concept of resilience in education incorporates both a positive developmental model and academic resilience to hardship. Focusing on school resilience and using faith as the philosophical framework, blindness consequences of such models of resilience are assessed within the context of ethics in education. A psychological model of school resilience is proposed that tries to accommodate such blindness consequences. The article suggests that this model is made more plausible by considering literature and earlier contemporary models of resilience in education that also acknowledge ethical issues. An alternative psychological model of resilience is proposed in response. The

article does not aspire to solve these issues in a final or even a complete manner, but generally promotes a more thorough debate as to the value of resilience among educators [19, 20].

Future Directions in Resilience Research

The second decade of the 21st century presents an opportunity to take stock of new and emergent knowledge in the field of resilience research, to reassess what has been learned about resilience from qualitative (narrative) studies, and to establish promising new directions for research on resilience shortly. In the last 10 years, over 100 diverse and discipline-spanning studies in scholarly journals have used qualitative and narrative methods to better understand how people respond to or grow from adversity. The number of these studies has increased each year, doubling since 2012, with 40 appearing in the first 3 years of this decade. Most of the studies unconventionally came from medical, psychological, and social work literature. Except for a small number of reviewers with backgrounds in these fields, a substantial number of researchers typically focused on resilience from other disciplines have likely ignored them. While many other reviews have assessed and collated findings from quantitative measurements of resilient traits and outcomes, the findings and implications of these narrative studies are likely to offer more nuanced and deep insights about resilience. As the range of human endurance to trauma is indomitably vast, it may be imprudent to wait for adversity to fully test personal resilience. In the same way that households, businesses, and communities prepare for natural disasters by identifying vulnerabilities, practices for action, and methods to recover (or preempt) quickly, individuals may harvest greater resilience before adversities occur. This paper is in service of this mission, offering synthesized findings and methods from research that may serve as preparation—befriending people who have endured and made sense of crises. While a survey of findings does not encapsulate the breadth and complexity of either narrative resilience research studies or adversity experiences, this paper appraises and presents consistencies across a variety of narratives of adversity and resilience, leveraging shared experiences to hint at strategies any individual may adopt in the betterment of their personal resilience ergonomics [21, 22].

CONCLUSION

Resilience is not a static trait but a dynamic process influenced by an interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. This paper highlights how narratives—both personal and collective—serve as powerful tools for making sense of adversity, fostering recovery, and shaping individual and societal resilience. The role of storytelling in resilience-building underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches in supporting those who have experienced trauma. By integrating resilience training into education, community programs, and policy initiatives, societies can create more supportive environments for individuals facing hardship. Future research should continue to explore the impact of resilience narratives across diverse populations, ensuring that resilience strategies remain inclusive and adaptable to varying cultural and social realities.

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