

## Resilience is in the Ordinary

### **Or: Five things a PhD student learns about resilience.**

“Resilience – what a beautifully relevant topic”, I am thinking while my statistical analysis tool is open on my laptop screen and my cursor is patiently yet spitefully waiting for a command - not even an interesting one, but just any command really. Even though quantitative analysis methods are supposed to be inherently objective and unemotional, I become painfully aware that I, on the other hand, am not. More so, my PhD journey has made it undeniably and painstakingly obvious to me that beyond all abilities I imagined being important, resilience may be the *one* crucial thing that you need to succeed in academia.

Resilience and the ability to “bounce back” (of course, preferably always stronger, better, and wiser than before) appears like the post-Covid 21<sup>st</sup> century superpower, the hack to a successful business, career and maybe even to a happy life. It looks shiny at first glance, and yet upon a closer look I realize that I am not quite sure what it actually means, how to safely obtain or build it and whether or not I now have to master yet another skill. So before adding it to my to do list straight away, I decide to take a closer look.

### **Resilience is diversity.**

To start my investigation, as a true burgeoning researcher, I firstly look up what knowledgeable people think it is. Some say that resilience requires two interacting components – firstly, you need to be exposed to serious risk experiences, and secondly you need to come out of them relatively psychologically positive<sup>1</sup>. This, to me, sounds like the individualist definition of a psychologist – familiar and logical, but also falling somewhat short. Is it really that ‘simple’ and clean? After a conversation with a medical student, I catch myself reflecting on their personal understanding: resilience comes to those organisms that diversify, while the one’s that specialize are more at risk to fall victim to adverse circumstances. So, is resilience the capacity to leverage the strength of diversity? If that were true, then this sounds very familiar to what Peter Drucker himself identified as one of the key tasks of managers, writing that “[m]anagement must, indeed, become the instrument through which cultural diversity can be made to serve the common purposes of mankind”<sup>2</sup>. Then, *is* resilience at its core simply successful management?

Funnily enough, resilience itself might not just spring from diversity, but also manifest in quite different ways, depending on which area one focuses on. Margaret Wright and her colleagues<sup>3</sup> found in their research on resilience in mothers who are child sexual abuse survivors that resilience in one area (e.g., being a mother) might not consistently manifest in other areas of life (e.g., suffering depression). I catch myself thinking about my mother, who to me is one of the strongest and most resilient people I know. I have seen her stand up

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<sup>1</sup> Ungar, M. (2013). Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture, *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 14(3), 255-266.

<sup>2</sup> Drucker, P. (2011). *Technology, Management and Society*. New York: Routledge, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, M.O., Fopma-Loy, J. & Fischer, S. (2005). Multidimensional assessment of resilience in mothers who are child sexual abuse survivors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29, 1173-1193.

gracefully after being knocked down so many times. Yet, some of the very strengths – her unconditional persistent love, her ability to fight and her capacity to speak her truth – that I believe got her through her most challenging times, have simultaneously been those things that also cost her the most and had a part to play in the challenges she had to face. So maybe there is no linear, absolute, and singular capacity for resilience, but perhaps you always trade in weakness for strength?

Resilience resides in diversity and, at the same time, is diverse and multifaceted itself.

### **Resilience is systemic.**

If practicing resilience is, in fact, management, then one can learn about resilience from Peter Drucker himself. In essence, he argues that management needs to ask two key questions: “What *is* our business?”, requiring an empathetic understanding of the consumer and astute, strategic calculation of the market, and “What will our business be?” or rather “What *should* our business be?”, asking managers to anticipate and actively create the future of their endeavor<sup>4</sup>. This is mirrored in more academic debates which outline that organizations have different types of resilience: the first two are *planned* and *adaptive* resilience<sup>5</sup>, which pretty much are in line with Drucker’s thoughts. As such, management, and resilience both encompass navigating current shocks, and actively planning and preparing for potential future challenges. Drucker and the researchers also agree that, in order to achieve these tasks, organizations and managers need resources (Drucker specifies human-, financial-, and physical resources), productivity or collaboration, and social responsibility or organizational culture. Is resilience then the product of resources, networks, ideas, and values?

My academic review, however, identifies a third type of resilience that may be worth the attention of astute management philosophers, like Drucker himself: *everyday* resilience<sup>6</sup>. This type of resilience does not respond to acute shocks, but instead is a capacity to adapt to chronic stresses. Other scholars draw on district health systems in South Africa and Kenya to distill some strategies of how to build this everyday resilience: “the leadership offered by multiple managers” and “a combination of strategies that become embedded in relationships and managerial routines, drawing on wider organizational capacities and resources”<sup>7</sup>. In other words, it’s about a plurality of leaders and strategies (which is somehow reminiscent of the diversity point made earlier). However, only implementing diverse processes might not do the trick. “While stable governance structures and adequate resources do influence everyday resilience, they are not enough to sustain it. Instead, it appears important to nurture the power of leaders across every system to reframe challenges, strengthen their

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<sup>4</sup> Drucker, P. (2001). *The Essential Drucker*. New York: HarperCollins, 20-28.

<sup>5</sup> Barasa, E., Mbau, R., & Gilson, L. (2018). What is Resilience and How Can It Be Nurtured? A Systematic Review of Empirical Literature on Organizational Resilience, *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 7(6), 491–503.

<sup>6</sup> See above.

<sup>7</sup> Gilson, L., Barasa, E., Nxumalo N., Cleary, S., Goudge, J., Molyneux, S., Tsofa, B., & Lehmann, U. (2017). Everyday resilience in district health systems: emerging insights from the front lines in Kenya and South Africa, *BMJ Global Health*, 2:e000224, 1.

routine practices in ways that encourage mindful staff engagement, and develop social networks within and outside organizations”<sup>8</sup>. I suspect that Peter Drucker would be pleasantly intrigued to bring these theories into conversation with his own management ideas – after all, they do put the human aspect of organizational resilience right back at the center.

To me, what sticks out about these ideas is that rather than highlighting heroic instances, in which champions have built incredible strength and ultimately overcome unparalleled challenges, this idea of everyday resilience highlights the uncelebrated, the ordinary and the commonplace acts of resilience. It also speaks to the fact that resilience does not just manifest in those that we celebrate as successful winners, but in those that face struggles every day and overcome them, unacknowledged and unfamed.

Resilience can be found in the center of a system, and at the same time on the very sidelines.

### **Resilience is both privilege and liberation.**

After reading around a bit, my researcher self is surprised by the fact that there seems to be broad consensus that resilience is something positive and worth striving for. There are very few things that you come across as a researcher that are seen as singularly positive – most often the answer to the value of something is the scientifically divine and academically wholehearted: “it depends”.

And yet, thinking through the idea of resilience, the seeming absence of bitter notes makes me suspicious. If resilience is how a system survives being threatened, could it not be the very tool which protects oppressors and keeps inequality in place? Who decides what is to be “better” in the bouncing back-idea? And, if resilience comes to those that have resources to invest and diversify, is resilience at the end of the day not the same as privilege? Maybe it is even more harmful, as the responsibility for not ‘having enough’ resilience easily gets ascribed to the individual.

At the same time, as a radically constructivist systemic therapist, I was taught that transformative power lies not necessarily within the physical realities of life, but in the way we construct our reality and make sense of the world around us. Therefore, a core tenant of successful therapy is the focus on (and the activation of) a person’s resources (i.e., ‘strength orientation’)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, when a client has a problem, I assume that they are the expert for themselves, and thereby empowered to deal with their problem – then my job becomes to invite them to ‘look around’ for personal resources in ways or in places they have never looked before. The idea is that by (re-)activating resources within them, they see the problem in a new light and thereby can think of new ways to develop solutions. To me, this attitude is a deeply respectful and empowering one, because it leaves the executive power with the person experiencing the problem, not with me as the unknowledgeable outsider. Therefore, I have been trained to work under the assumption that every person (and every

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<sup>8</sup> See above, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Sutton, J. (2021, July 19). What Is Systems Therapy? 7 Theories & Techniques Explained. *Positive Psychology*. <https://positivepsychology.com/systems-therapy/>

system for that matter) has the capacity to find and develop resources within itself, and consequently to be resilient. As a systemic therapist, I think that resilience is an unprecedented force of empowerment.

Resilience is obliged to ask the questions “resilience for whom?” and “what for?”.

### **Resilience is female, resilience is human.**

I am realizing that instead of learning resilience from the great thinkers, mythological warriors and renowned business tycoons that have been celebrated for their strengths, I should also be looking for those that are knowledgeable in empowerment.

Down in my research rabbit hole, I stumble across a paper which explores resilience of women surviving childhood maltreatment. For the interviewed women survivors, “becoming resolute”, the authors write, “was a process of developing decisive agency and a steely willfulness in refusing to be defined by or focused on one’s abuse history. It develops through [...] discovering, increasing, and exerting one’s self-determination; and recognizing the abusive past as deadly.”<sup>10</sup> Reading about these women, I feel deeply moved, at a loss of words and at the same time connected to the power of what it means to be a woman.

As Rihanna so famously said: “There’s something so special about a woman who dominates in a man’s world. It takes a certain grace, strength, intelligence, fearlessness, and the nerve to never take no for an answer”<sup>11</sup> – this sentence resides on a yellow sticky note right next to my laptop screen and has accompanied me through one or another low point during my PhD-journey. I have to admit, while I celebrate the strength that is communicated in her idea of forging your own path elegantly, what I value most about this quote is that it makes me feel connected to a legacy of women’s experiences and it gives me the feeling that I have the power to define what it means to be strong and resilient.

In my years of engaging with feminist thinkers and activists, and with stories of women, a central thing I have learnt is that freedom is as much a condition that is placed upon you, as it is a choice that you have to make yourself. Nobody can take away that choice from you, even if some will never stop trying. The American author Helen Keller, who lost both her sight and her hearing when she was 19 months old, writes in her *Essay on Optimism*: “If I am happy in spite of my deprivations, if my happiness is so deep that it is a faith, so thoughtful that it becomes a philosophy of life, - if, in short, I am an optimist, my testimony to the creed of optimism is worth hearing”<sup>12</sup>. To me, there is so much profound wisdom in the fact that resilience is a choice. What’s more, resilience does not mean achieving a goal that was set by someone else, but rather finding one’s own authenticity and choosing the goals that one wants to achieve oneself. “It’s not about being perfect. It’s not about where you get yourself

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, J. M., Roman, M. W., Thomas, S. P., Travis, C. B., Powell, J., Tennison, C. R., Moyers, K., Shoffner, D. H., Bolton, K. M., Broyles, T., Martin, T., & McArthur, P. M. (2009). Thriving as becoming resolute in narratives of women surviving childhood maltreatment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79(3), 378.

<sup>11</sup> Rihanna Takes Flight (2017, February 8). Harper’s BAZAAR.

<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a20446/rihanna-amelia-earhart-photo-shoot/>

<sup>12</sup> Keller, H. (2022). *Optimism – An Essay*. Wrocław: Amazon Fulfillment, 1.

in the end. There's power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice"<sup>13</sup>, as Michelle Obama has so beautifully written.

Resilience is born in adversity, but it spreads only when we respect and uplift.

### **Resilience starts within you.**

When it comes to resilience (according to a famous male child psychiatrist), there is apparently two ways the whole thing can go. Either exposure to adversities sensitizes you even more for your own vulnerabilities, or it strengthens and 'steels' you and decreases your vulnerability<sup>14</sup>. Before I continue, I have to disclaim at this point that the psychiatrist writes much more differentiated than what I make him appear here. And yet, to me this idea somehow exemplifies the assumption that vulnerability and resilience are caught in an eternal battle – and you cannot have one when you have the other.

When I read or hear the word "vulnerability", my brain immediately takes up the opportunity to visit one of my favorite celebrity personalities (at least a celebrity in my world): Brené Brown. If you don't know her, I urge you to take 20 minutes and watch her talk on the power of vulnerability. As an emotion scientist herself, she writes about cultivating a resilient spirit in one of her book chapters. She says that there are four things that are essentially required for such a resilient spirit<sup>15</sup>: 1. Cultivating hope. 2. Practicing critical awareness (particularly in such a manufactured world). 3. Letting go of numbing and taking the edge of vulnerability, discomfort, and pain. Because if you numb the bad emotions, you numb them all. And yes, leaning into our vulnerability requires courage and it's not easy. And yet, she so fittingly states: "Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light"<sup>16</sup>. Her fourth point, 4. Cultivating spirituality, may be an important part in giving people the confidence and trust to embrace their vulnerability wholeheartedly.

In his own way, Peter Drucker also advocated for an authentic practice of self-reflection, including accepting one's weaknesses, in one of his most famous essays on "Managing Oneself"<sup>17</sup>. Instead of "making incompetent performers into mediocre ones"<sup>18</sup>, he advocates for self-critical analysis through feedback to determine one's strengths and weaknesses. This allows one to develop true excellence. At the same time, knowing yourself, your weaknesses, and strengths, also comes with its own pitfalls. Drucker calls on his readers to "discover where your intellectual arrogance is causing disabling ignorance and overcome it"<sup>19</sup>. He refers to the dangers of being clear where one is strong and where one is weak, and thereby using this clarity as an excuse for not putting in the work to realize your full potential. So, knowledge of both your ability and vulnerability can make you resilient only when you

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<sup>13</sup> Obama, M. (2018). *Becoming*, New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 421.

<sup>14</sup> Rutter, M. (2012). Resilience as a dynamic concept. *Development and Psychopathology*, 24(2), 335-344.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, B. (2018). *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Center City: Hazelden Publishing.

<sup>16</sup> See above, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Drucker, P. (2008). *Managing Oneself*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Classics.

<sup>18</sup> See above, 10.

<sup>19</sup> See above, 6.

preserve a spirit of curiosity – or, in other words, when you succeed in respecting yourself while not taking yourself too seriously at the same time.

Resilience is humble in relation to strengths and welcoming in relation to vulnerability.

## **Epilogue**

Resilience is not a plug-and-play superpower (which many want it to be) and not a depersonalized solution in itself, but instead an invitation – an invitation to step into the uncomfortable and, by doing so, to celebrate and to value those parts that make us vulnerable and human. Resilience is not just brute and linear strength, but it's multidimensional and inclusive wisdom. Resilience is not about reaching a predefined milestone or end-goal, but it's about engaging in a process of growth.

With that thought, I am re-opening my programming software feeling a new wave of courage – because by opening the program and engaging in the process, I have already done the hardest part of the journey.