

Worlding the Intangibility of Resilience: The Case of Rice Farmers and Water-Related Risk in the Philippines

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Summary. — Agricultural livelihoods are resilient when capable of enduring and overcoming socio-environmental stressors. The “Sustainable Livelihoods Approach”, popularized in development programs, frequently targets farmer capacities to cope with and recover from loss and damage by (i) enhancing tangible capitals (e.g., ecological, financial) and/or by (ii) reducing socio-institutional constraints on entitlements and opportunities to access those capitals. While this two-pronged approach can reduce damage to production or expand the range of livelihood activities available to farmers, it often positions tangible capitals themselves as the central and objective means for building resilience. The recent “social turn” is a call to theorize resilience’s intangible and non-material dimensions (e.g., subjective, emotive, and relational forms) as emergent from specific local social-cultural-ecological contexts. Drawing on in-depth field research with rice-farmers in a region of the Philippines experiencing water-related risks, we analyzed several situated “intangible” narrations of resilience, with a focus on emotive and affective indicators. Farmers narrated their courage to get back up following loss and damage as well as their optimism, faith, and hope for brighter futures in farming and in life. These emotions flowed from their affective relationships with the cosmos (naturalizing life’s hardships as cyclical), themselves (strong belief in their own capabilities to persist in times of hardship), and the Divine (faith in God’s power to protect hard-working families). Our results contribute to the “social turn” in resilience literature in two ways. First, we highlight affect and emotion as indicators of farm livelihood resilience. Second, we suggest narrations of resilience are constituted through farmers’ particular “worldings”, or constructions of reality where knowledge, belief systems, and relations, are lived and enacted on an everyday basis. Situating oneself in local contexts can illuminate sources of intangible resilience otherwise hidden from top-down approaches, while engaging “worldings” can help render these intangible sources intelligible within their contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A global effort is underway to build “resilient” agricultural livelihoods. Initially developed in engineering, manufacturing, and child psychology, the concept of resilience is increasingly central to intervention at the intersection of development and environmental change (e.g., Alexander, 2013; Barrett & Constan, 2014; Béné, Newsham, Davies, Ulrichs, & Godfrey-Wood, 2014; Tanner *et al.*, 2015). Detailed in the literature review below, rural development programs have often focused on building capacities for agricultural activities, or livelihoods, to withstand socio-environmental stressors and persist after loss and damage either by (i) enhancing tangible capitals or asset bases (e.g., climate-proofed crop variants, water infrastructure, resource management skills) and/or (ii) by reducing formal and informal socio-institutional constraints on peoples’ means (entitlements, rights, opportunities) to access those capitals (e.g., Chambers & Conway, 1992; Jones & Tanner, 2015; Obrist, Pfeiffer, & Henley, 2010; cf. Sen, 1981). The International Fund for Agricultural Development (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2015), as one example, adopts this two-pronged approach, recognizing that those “who suffer from various forms of marginalization based on age, gender or ethnicity are the least resilient, resulting in, inter alia, more precarious tenure of productive assets and more limited access to financial risk management tools” (p. 2). This framing, crucial in its own regard, views capitals or assets as objective, observable, and universal indicators for building resilience to socio-environmental change (e.g., Jones & Tanner, 2015). Central to this paper we argue, in line with other authors, that assessing resilience primarily using asset-

based indicators has the potential to overshadow a broader set of processes that serve agricultural livelihood resilience (e.g. Baldwin, Smith, & Jacobson, 2017; Brown, 2014; Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Darnhofer, Lamine, Strauss, & Navarrete, 2016; Dwiartama & Rosin, 2014; Herman, 2015; Marshall, Park, Adger, Brown, & Howden, 2012). This argument can be placed within an emerging set of scholarship that signals a:

“... shift away from the notion that the central concepts—adaptive capacity, resilience, and well-being—can be objectively measured by a set of quantifiable indicators to a much more complex, nuanced view that understands them as comprising subjective, relational as well as objective aspects”.

[Brown & Westaway, 2011, p. 335]

These ideas are core to the recent “social turn” in resilience—a conceptual evolution advocating that context-specific socio-cultural processes complement commonly ascribed indicators and indications of resilience (Brown, 2014). Among other contributions, Cote and Nightingale (2012) argued researchers should derive principles of resilience from specific social-cultural-ecological systems rather than

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prescribe objective and universalized indicators on people and places. Such an orientation can allow practitioners to “see” alternative dimensions of resilience, including intangible and non-material aspects that exist and inhabit specific worlds (Chambers, 1995; Cote & Nightingale, 2012; cf. Estrella & Gaventa, 1998; Haraway, 1988). This approach as well as the identifiable dimensions of resilience that flow from it are likely to exist outside the perceptual apparatuses of conventional livelihood and resilience schools and thus, serve key roles in resisting hegemonic frameworks at the intersection of development and environmental change. As such, recognizing diverse manifestations of resilience that may not be easily appreciable from Western pathways that ascribe how one becomes “resilient” serves broader goals of decolonizing knowledge and resilience practice.

From our work with smallholder rice-farmers facing irrigation and other social-ecological risks in Bulacan (Central Luzon, Philippines), we highlight emotion and affective relationships as key intangible indicators of agricultural livelihood resilience. We understand affect as the transpersonal capacity of a person to be affected through relationships with human and non-human entities, such as the Divine, places, or the land (Anderson, 2006). Relationships are not merely one-way projections of identities or beliefs onto human and non-human components; a relational appreciation animates these components and grants them agency, giving rise to expressions, feelings, and emotions for farmers (Anderson, 2006). Emotions are the physiological experiences and cognitive processes, central to how people interpret, process, and act in relation to diverse lived worlds (Bondi, 2005; Davidson, Smith, & Bondi, 2012; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Morales & Harris, 2014; Seyfert, 2012; Sultana, 2015). As we find, farmers’ complex emotions of courage, hope, and faith are not simply conditioned responses to some environmental hazard, but emerge from and elaborate their affective relationships and connections with the cosmos, the Divine, and themselves. Critically, we suggest such relationships are constituted by farmers’ particular “worlds”—lived realities that are not merely cultural interpretations of *the* environment but alternative ontologies through which knowledge, belief systems, and relations are enacted on an everyday basis¹ (Blaser, 2009, 2013, 2014; cf. Bankoff, 2003; Boelens, 2013; Yates, Harris, & Wilson, 2017). “Worlding”, learning from and building upon a situated resilience framework, allows resilience scholars to identify intangible indicators of resilience and crucially, render them *intelligible* within the lived and enacted social frameworks that constitute a person’s reality, or world (Blaser, 2013). Worlding thus endeavors to disrupt the characterization of resilience and vulnerability by Western development scholars as principally involving different types of capital and access-oriented governance arrangements.

Taking a step back, the “social turn” has elaborated that cultural systems, and political and power structures profoundly shape decision-making and resilience-based strategies in socio-ecological systems (e.g., Adger *et al.*, 2008; Curry *et al.*, 2015; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013; Marshall *et al.*, 2012). These contributions have pushed resilience scholars to abandon early functionalist models in cultural ecology where the environment was treated as the overriding factor driving social dynamics and organization (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2003; Fabinyi, Evans, & Foale, 2014; Olsson, Jerneck, Thoren, Persson, & O’Byrne, 2015). Recent work highlights socio-psychological factors (Eakin, York, Aggarwal, Waters, & Welch, 2016; Elrick-Barr, Thomsen, & Preston, 2016; Truelove, Carrico, & Thabrew, 2015) and “more-than-human” actants, including people, plants, places, and liveli-

hoods as indicative of, and central to, resilience (e.g., Baldwin *et al.*, 2017; Dwiartama & Rosin, 2014; Herman, 2015, 2016). Others including Berkes and Ross (2013) argue for “community resilience”, which brings together indicators in social-ecological governance and material capitals, in addition to a range of underappreciated social and psychological indicators that exist at local and granular scales (e.g., social networks, people–place relationships, values and beliefs, and positive outlooks).

Our work in the Philippines directly builds on this work and the “social turn” in general by applying Blaser’s (2009, 2013, 2014) worlding framework to resilience scholarship and practice. Recognizing that multiple valid realities exist, a focus on worldings provides a standpoint from which to sense, theorize, and understand historically under-theorized social dynamics, which emerge from lived realities. Worldings is one response to the divides between moderns/non-moderns and nature/culture that has enabled “moderns” to dismiss non-modern conceptions of social-ecological change as “cultural” and corresponding lived practices as inappropriate under the singular objective reality that exists “out there” (Blaser, 2009, 2013; Sundberg, 2014; Yates *et al.*, 2017; Yeh, 2015). The implications of this framework is that resilience strategies are enacted and lived from the worlds in which people inhabit, and as such there are multiple, not single paths as well as diverse and often unacknowledged means for becoming or being “resilient”. Worlding resilience thus seeks to complicate and disrupt powerful circuits of knowledge in state and transnational bureaucracies—exactly those that the “social turn” (*viz.* Cote & Nightingale, 2012) criticizes for universalizing certain realities and determining normative (capital-centric) response pathways (cf. Kuus, 2015; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013; Peck, 2011; Welsh, 2014). It contributes to broader efforts to decolonize knowledge, scholarship, practice, and broader circuits in development thinking (Theriault, 2016; Yates *et al.*, 2017). To begin, we trace conventional thought behind resilient livelihoods theory and practice, with attention to the small but growing subset of scholarship that has thus far served to highlight intangible aspects of resilience, notably in agricultural settings (Section 2). We then present our study site and methods (Section 3) before moving on to the combined results and discussion informed by the worldings perspective (Section 4).

2. AGRICULTURAL LIVELIHOOD RESILIENCE: FROM CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS TO THE INCLUSION OF AFFECT AND EMOTION

In the 1970s, Buzz Holling (1973) drew on studies of predator–prey dynamics to theorize resilience as the capacity of an ecological system to withstand and absorb disturbance and retain its structure, function, and identity (cf. Gunderson, 2000; Peterson, Allen, & Holling, 1998). Shortly thereafter, Vayda and McCay (1975) extended Holling (1973), suggesting resilience involves being flexible enough to respond to disturbance and survive (cited in Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2003). Adger (2000) later applied resilience to social systems as “the ability of communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure”—a definition we adopt as an end-goal in framing agricultural livelihood resilience practices in our Philippine case (p. 361). Sustainability science and socio-ecological systems research further extended resilience as the transformative capacity of an actor or system to achieve and sustain “desirable” constructs or outcomes, such as continued farm-based livelihoods, under dynamic contexts of environ-

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