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What is equitable resilience?

Nilufar Matin, John Forrester, Jonathan Ensor*

Stockholm Environment Institute, Environment Department, University of York, YO10 5NG, United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

Resilience has attracted criticism for its failure to address social vulnerability and to engage with issues of equity and power. Here, we ask: what is equitable resilience? Our focus is on what resilience does on the ground in relation to development, adaptation and disaster management, and on identifying critical issues for engaging with equity in resilience practice. Using techniques from systematic reviews, with variants of equitable resilience as our key search terms, we carried out an analytical literature review which reveals four interconnected themes: subjectivities, inclusion, cross-scale interactions, and transformation. Drawing on this analysis, we find that 'equitable resilience' is increasingly likely when resilience practice takes into account issues of social vulnerability and differential access to power, knowledge, and resources; it requires starting from people's own perception of their position within their human-environmental system, and it accounts for their realities and for their need for a change of circumstance to avoid imbalances of power into the future. Our approach moves beyond debates that focus on the ontological disconnect between resilience and social theory, to provide a definition that can be used in practice alongside resilience indicators to drive ground level interventions towards equitable outcomes. Defined in this way, equitable resilience is able to support the development of social-ecological systems that are contextually rooted, responsive to change and socially just, and thus relevant to global sustainability challenges.

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1. Introduction

Equity is concerned with how the *moral equality* of people can be realised. It places focus on the needs of those disadvantaged by relations of power and inequalities of opportunity, and how these barriers to human flourishing can be identified, understood and addressed (see for example, [Rawls, 1971](#); [Sen, 1999](#)). From this perspective, the apparent failure of resilience to attend to the distributive and power dimensions of environmental and development problems is a serious limitation of the concept for analysis and practice. Authors such as [MacKinnon and Derickson \(2013\)](#) and [Fainstein \(2015\)](#) argue that resilience runs the risk of passivity, favouring the already advantaged and privileging existing social relations. Further, [Folke et al.](#), in a seminal paper setting out a social-ecological systems (SES) definition of resilience, recognise that, within the SES conceptualisation of resilience, "complex social dynamics, such as trust building and power relations, have often been underestimated and the view of social relationships simplified" ([Folke's, Hahn, Olsson, and Norberg, 2005, p. 462](#)).

[Folke's et al. \(2005\)](#) influential and widely cited definition states that resilience is the capacity of SES "to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" ([Folke et al., 2005, p. 443](#)). The limitations they recognise, arising from the treatment of the 'social' in resilience, have subsequently been noted from many perspectives. For example, in situations with goal and power conflicts ([Jerneck and Olsson, 2008](#)); when considering the nature of institutions as part of any resilience building initiative ([Sjostedt, 2015](#)); or in designing processes of community participation around adaptation interventions ([Bahadur and Tanner, 2014](#); [Bahadur, Ibrahim, & Tanner, 2013](#)). For Hayward, the depoliticised language of resilience is not helpful in challenging "the drivers of social and economic change that threaten to destabilize our climate, increase social inequality, and degrade our environment" which require "rather less resilience and more vision for compassion and social justice, achieved through collective political action" ([Hayward, 2013, p. 4](#)).

For these reasons, while the practical application of resilience in international development and humanitarian contexts is a central concern for donors, policy makers and practitioners ([Béné, Newsham, Davies, Ulrichs, and Godfrey-Wood, 2016](#); [Elmqvist, 2017](#)), questions surrounding the definition and operationalisation

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: john.forrester@york.ac.uk (J. Forrester), jon.ensor@york.ac.uk (J. Ensor).

of resilience persist. While critical literature has done much to point out valid problems with both the meaning and the use of the word ‘resilience’, it has little to offer practitioners other than to point out that – from various disciplinary standpoints – resilience is a divisive rather than an integrating concept which needs to be “emancipated” from the natural sciences (Welsh, 2014, p. 21).

However, despite any apparent conflict between resilience and social theory, there is a burgeoning literature seeking to address social science critiques. Much of it is broadly consistent with the SES perspective offered in Folke et al.’s (2005) definition (see Ross and Berkes (2014) for one example). In 2012, Cote and Nightingale critiqued SES resilience – as it is practiced – using a “social theoretical lens”. According to them, although useful, the SES approach is found to be “inadequate in part because it repeats the weaknesses of earlier approaches in risk and hazard science that overemphasized the role of physical shocks and undertheorized that of political economic factors in conceptualizing vulnerability” (Cote and Nightingale, 2012, p. 478). Notwithstanding these caveats, they strongly support the role of the concept of resilience in bringing together academic disciplines to help understand the ‘messy’ nature of SES, and also helping to find a middle ground between science and practice.

Resilience researchers have sought to supplement current resilience thinking with other more socially grounded theories. For example, Adger (2006) and Walsh-Dilley, Wolford, and McCarthy (2016) advocate for a rights-based approach; Brown and Westaway (2011) put forward human development and wellbeing approaches; Pelling and Manuel-Navarrete (2011) propose combining resilience with Giddens’ theory of power; Tschakert (2012) explores political ecology; and Tanner et al. (2015) find a livelihood perspective helpful in strengthening resilience thinking. Béné, Newsham, Davies, Ulrichs, and Godfrey-Wood (2014), Béné et al. (2016) suggest that a more ‘organic’ way to bring power and agency concerns more systematically into resilience thinking is to incorporate them directly into the conceptualization of resilience. In recognising the diversity of these contributions, Brown concludes that “a much greater engagement and reflection on social dimensions” (Brown, 2014, p. 114) has emerged within the resilience literature, while Weichselgartner and Kelman suggest that to overcome the sometimes narrow focus of resilience we need to foreground “the question of social transformation” (Weichselgartner and Kelman, 2014, p. 262). For Pelling, O’Brien and Matyas (2015), bringing transformation into resilience has the potential to disrupt inequitable development trajectories.

1.1. Equitable resilience

This paper makes a cross-disciplinary and analytical review of sufficient literature related to resilience to be able to contribute to the above debate and move past positions of polarisation, examining if and how resilience thinking in practice has addressed equity in the context of intersecting development, disaster risk management and climate change adaptation. In taking this approach, our aim is to develop a “middle-range theory” of equitable resilience (Geels, 2010). In common with Olsson, Jerneck, Thoren, Persson, and O’Byrne (2015), we advocate this approach in recognition that the “systems ontology” at the centre of resilience plays a role as a barrier, rather than as a bridge, to social science (see also Brand & Jax, 2007; Turner, 2010; Welsh, 2014). Likewise, the ontologies of social science ‘grand theories’ do not easily allow for integration and contextualisation, and often unravel in application (see for example Betz, 2016). Thus, rather than attempting to supplant, or transcend, one paradigmatic (‘grand’) theory with another, we find it more useful to accept that there are theories that have greater explanatory power at the grand-level, and theories that operate better at the “middle-range”,

between “the all-inclusive systemic efforts to develop a unified theory” and “the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day to day research” (Merton, 1968: 39, quoted in Kang, 2014). Indeed, the defining point of middle-range theory is that it is empirically testable. By working towards theory at this level, we can better serve the interests of development and disaster risk policy and practice stakeholders, who engage with the world through the lens of particular problems in particular contexts (Kang, 2014). As Kallis and Norgaard (2010) point out, middle-range theory does not need to constantly refer back to grand-level, so it can operate independently of the argument and debate between grand-level theories (such as those between resilience theorists and their critics within the social sciences).

Attempts to operationalise resilience in development and disaster risk management have for the most part focused on identifying critical components that can be acted on in practice (e.g. Béné et al. (2014); Plummer & Fennell, 2009; Berkes & Ross, 2013; Kruse et al., 2017). Bahadur et al. (2013), for example, offer ten resilience “characteristics” from literature focused on resilience in social, ecological and socio-ecological systems and applied to climate, disaster and development contexts. These indicators or components of resilience include ensuring multiple forms of diversity; securing effective governance and institutions; and addressing uncertainty and change. Our aim is to develop a definition of equitable resilience that can be used alongside resilience indicators such as these, in a given context, to drive ground level interventions towards equitable outcomes: we refer to this as *equitable resilience in practice* (Fig. 1). We recognise that there are different definitions or perspectives on resilience within the literature. Among them, we are focusing on those that address SES, in the context of development, risk, inequality and power within social systems. In keeping with our focus on the middle-range, we focus not on the concept of resilience *per se*, but on what it does on the ground in relation to our fields of focus (development, adaptation and disaster risk management and reduction). Equally, our intention is not to supplement one resilience theory with other socially grounded theories. Rather, we look to the literature to identify critical issues for engaging with equity in resilience practice. We aim to contribute to an understanding of what ‘equitable resilience’ means, in particular by bringing critiques of multiple conceptualisations of resilience together to find a common ground (Fig. 2). In so doing, we are drawing on resilience literature that has engaged with equity, to draw out insights and enable their systematic treatment in practice. Our analysis leads us to conclude that ‘equitable resilience’ can be defined as a form of human-environmental resilience which takes into account issues of social vulnerability and differentiated access to power, knowledge, and resources. It starts from people’s own perception of their position within their human-environmental system, and accounts for their realities, and of their need for a change of circumstance to avoid imbalances of power into the future.

1.2. Method

Our analytical review of the literature uses techniques informed by the cornerstones of systematic review: explicit and transparent literature sampling, selection, and approaches to analysis and synthesis (see, Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). We followed a four step process: first, determining research questions to guide the review; second, developing a search protocol (i.e., targeted databases and search terms) to explore literature databases; third, screening the results of the literature search based on their relevance to the research questions; and fourth, conducting analysis and synthesis of the remaining literature. We adapted the systematic review methodology in stage three (screening) to funnel-down through

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