



Unpacking resilience policy discourse



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 September 2015

Received in revised form 1 April 2016

Accepted 14 May 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Resilience

National policy

UK

ABSTRACT

There are an increasing number of articles and publications that attempt to define resilience in the face of numerous drivers of risk. Most of this work has tried to identify the values and virtues that are encompassed within a resilient approach in relation to the fragile relationships between the social, natural and built environments (including, for instance, abilities to prevent, react, transform and adapt). However, much less attention has been paid to identifying the practical implications of these values and virtues once a paradigm of resilience has been adopted. In order to address this gap, this study examines what institutions in the UK have actually done when they attempt to enhance resilience. Instead of defining what resilience is, this paper focuses on what local and national governments and other stakeholders do when something is called (or is attempted to be made) 'resilient'. The analysis of 30 key policy documents, a review of 20 formal meetings of a Local Resilient Forum, and 11 interviews with stakeholders confirm that different (and often competing) understandings of resilience co-exist; but this work also reveals that two rather different approaches to resilience dominate in the UK. The first responds to security risks, based on a protectionist approach by the State, the other responds to natural risks, and prescribes the transfer of responsibilities from the State to other stakeholders. The analysis illustrates the extent to which resilience has become a highly complex, malleable and dynamic political construct with significant implications for the ways in which policy is enacted and enforced, often with unexpected consequences.

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1. Introduction

The concept of resilience captures the ability of a system to rebound or resume its original form after a stress or perturbation. In the 1970s resilience was associated with two distinct areas: the natural world and ecosystems, and the inner (psychological) world of individuals. A third application of the concept, associated with managing risks and threats appeared later, and is now closely linked to security and emergency planning as it incorporates the idea of 'robustness' (Welsh, 2014).

Due to its capacity to bridge both prevention (proactivity) and response (reactivity) to hazards, and its capacity to evoke the idea of 'bouncing back', the concept of resilience has become widely adopted in both policy instruments and academic research agendas. In academic debates, most attention has been given to the definition (e.g. Johnson & Blackburn, 2014) and the development of models of resilience (Christoplos, 2014). In practice, governments and other institutions have adopted the term in policy documents and strategic plans aiming at enhancing resilience in the built environment and society. However, lack of commonly accepted definitions and models has inevitably led to tensions in decision-making and intense debates in academic literature

(Chmutina, Lizarralde, Dainty, & Boshier, 2014; Lizarralde, Chmutina, Dainty, & Boshier, 2015).

Decision-makers and most scholars recognise that individuals, social groups, buildings and cities are – or have the potential to become – resilient. Nonetheless, it is known that the current notion of resilience frames a variety of ethical approaches in areas as diverse as ecology, architecture, urban planning, engineering, and human geography. Institutions and academics have thus devoted much energy and time to define the values and virtues that are to be honoured (and achieved) by adopting a resilient approach. Even though obvious differences exist between some of these approaches, most of them rhetorically assume that a resilient individual, agent or system has the ability to:

- Anticipate an event and its effects;
- Proactively react;
- Manage risks;
- Cooperate;
- Respond after the event to mitigate effects;
- Transform and/or adapt.

However, this list raises some questions: What are the consequences of identifying these attributes as existing or desirable? What attitudes and policies follow when stakeholders and institutions aim at developing (enhancing) these ideals? In his paramount publication "On the

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Genealogy of Morality” Friedrich Nietzsche argues that Western conceptions of moral ideals have been constructed upon the interests of religious or political elites — questioning classical conceptions of ethics that attached moral values to pure reasoning (Nietzsche, Clark, & Swensen, 1998). He thus questions the value of institutionalised virtues and ideals. Following this tradition of ethical scepticism, this paper examines the attitudes and practices that are motivated by a ‘resilient’ approach, putting particular emphasis on what happens when institutions in general – and the State in particular – adopt the resilience paradigm in urban and national policy in the UK. The aim of this paper is not to introduce another definition, to argue the value of the existing ones, or to describe the characteristics of resilience, but instead to discuss a set of concerns that may act as a common denominator when it comes to trying to reify resilience. Such exploration will allow examining the multiple consequences of adopting different representations of resilience.

2. Do we know what resilience is?

Resilience has generally been defined in two ways: as a desired outcome, or as a process leading to a desired outcome (Kaplan, 1999). Bahadur, Ibrahim, and Tanner (2010) conducted a comprehensive literature review in order to demonstrate how resilience is conceptualised and characterised, and concluded that while the term is widely used, its meaning is increasingly ambiguous. Funfgeld and Mcevoy (2012) argue that “resilience is not used in an exact, defined way, but more as a versatile (and seemingly fashionable) umbrella term, which loosely expresses some of the conceptual underpinning” (p. 326). Joseph (2013) argues that “resilience does not really mean very much and whatever meaning it does have changes depending on the context” (p.47). Another tendency is understanding resilience in a binary way: it is seen as an all or nothing concept (Bourbeau, 2013), thus ignoring the scale of resilience.

Shaw (2012) proposes that no matter what the definition is, resilience involves three elements: the ability to absorb the stress and retain functionality; the ability to “self-organise”; and the capacity “to learn, to change and to adapt”. This suggests that the tensions are inherent in the construct of the ‘resilience’ concept. Yet, when discussing how to achieve resilience, it is important to consider the following (Vale, 2014):

- Resilience of what?
- Resilience to what?
- Resilience for whom?

Whilst the definitions of resilience are multiple and often conflicting, what is clear is that the term resilience is increasingly used to signify a particular state of being, or set of processes to bring about a state of being. In other words, rather than recognising the malleable nature of the term, and the ways in which it is continually shaped by discourse (Alexander, 2013), it is increasingly mobilised to represent and/or to justify a cause of action.

2.1. Resilience and political approaches

Striving for resilience is often seen as an agenda that fits perfectly into the neoliberal state (Chandler, 2014) that ‘venerates decentralisation, contextualisation, autonomy and independence’ (Haldrup and Rosen, 2013, p.143). Evans and Reid (2014) see resilience as a neoliberal project and a doctrine that institutions in power use to manipulate – and eventually dominate – vulnerable sectors of society. Whilst liberalism is about hands-on implementation, the approach of neoliberalism is more towards hands-off facilitation: in a neoliberal state relocation of authority – and simultaneously of responsibility – from the centre to the periphery takes place.

Joseph (2013) points out that resilience under a neoliberal state stresses self-awareness, reflexivity and responsibility, and encourages the idea of ‘active citizenship’ (p. 42) where people do not rely on the State but instead take responsibility for their own well-being, which

leads to preparedness and awareness. Chandler (2014) argues that resilience operates on the level of ‘unknown unknowns’, suggesting that the outcomes only reveal causality after the event and thus are impossible to know beforehand.

Foucault (2007) emphasises that security is composed of a multiplicity of bits and pieces (techniques, machinery, practices, objects, people); and as these elements change, so does the concept of security. Neoliberalism works through the social production of freedom (Foucault, 2008), but although the State steps back and encourages individuals to act freely, it still intervenes into civil society by opening up new areas in which society can act (Joseph, 2013). As Sage, Fussey, and Dainty (2015) reveal, resilience policy and practice comprises a composite of circulatory mechanisms that scale political agency in relation to events. Overall, these perspectives point to the inevitable tensions between liberty and security that the resilience discourse reveals, thus highlighting the lack of policy neutrality (as the policy is forced to lean one way or the other).

2.2. How is ‘resilience’ promoted in the UK? Overview of the resilience agenda

Since 2001, there has been a dramatic change in the purpose and organisation of ‘civil protection’ in the UK: in place of the Cold War model of civil defence came a model with increased connections with society and full of interdependencies as a result of globalisation and impacts of new emerging threats (Mann, 2007). It was acknowledged that the Civil Defence approach was poorly suited to deal with the ‘complex emergencies’ and ‘new security challenges’ of the 21st century (Smith, 2003, p. 414; Zebrowski, 2013), whereas the ‘resilience agenda’ was seen as a proactive response to a ‘fast changing and complex world’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p. 10). A series of disruptive events in the early 2000s such as protests on the transport networks, the foot and mouth disease outbreak and severe flooding events also highlighted the need to restructure the existing security approach, which, when it came to the local level, mainly focused on emergency response rather than more proactive activities associated with reducing the underlying risks (Bosher, 2014).

The resilience agenda goes hand in hand with the security agenda in the UK. Since 2000 a number of resilience policy documents have been mobilised due to security concerns, as well as security policy adopting the language of resilience. A good example of this is the UK government’s response to international terrorism and domestic radicalisation. It has generated a renewed interest in localism, with the aim of helping to build community resilience – and therefore address the radicalisation challenge (Coaffee & Fussey, 2015). However, whilst the security agenda has traditionally been highly centralised, the resilience agenda retreats from ‘grand planning’ and offers ‘a legitimate path for disengagement’ (Haldrup & Rosen, 2013) by becoming a ‘facilitator’ instead of a ‘builder’ of strengths.

Fjader (2014) points out that resilience contributes towards the security goal of the State, but at the same time resilience and security differ as security is ‘preventive and proactive in nature, aiming at protecting the State and the citizens against threat’, whereas resilience is ‘a combination of proactive and reactive measures aiming at reducing the impact but not preventing threats as such’ (p. 9–10). This is further emphasised by Corry (2014) stating that the main difference between traditional security (e.g. Clarke, 1998) and resilience is that former focuses on a specific threat, whereas latter attempts to address uncertainties: ‘[it] makes little sense to “defend” against catastrophic climate change, pandemics, economic meltdowns, or even certain kinds of terrorism, insofar as security concerns such as these are based primarily on uncertainty, are located in the future, and often lack clear adversaries’ (p. 1). It is understood that the traditional security approach still has a role to play; but at the same time, there is a need to ‘take a broad view of the systems that we depend on’ rather than following the ideological imprint of a bygone age’ (Evans & Steven,

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