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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RESILIENCE IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract: In current public discourse, resilience is often presented in a positive light, as an inner strength and the capability to adapt to adverse situations. Furthermore, throughout the study of resilience, numerous models and lists of strategies for enhancing it have been developed. There are less visible aspects of resilience, and these can be developed through language and social perceptions specific to rural contexts. The values, norms, and behaviors characteristic of certain communities or historical periods can shape, process, and redefine the resilience process. Consequently, an idealized perception of resilience can give rise to ambiguous interpretations. In certain situations, there is a risk that what some call „resilience" may, in fact, translate into resignation, survival, or adaptation to undesirable living conditions. Thus, this article, using a theoretical approach, seeks to clarify how resilience is constructed, in relation to context and the meanings that individuals ascribe to this process.

Keywords: resilience, rural areas, violence, social construction, language

Résumé : Dans le discours public actuel, la résilience est souvent présentée de manière positive, comme une force intérieure et une capacité à s'adapter à des situations difficiles. De plus, au fil des études menées sur la résilience, de nombreux modèles et listes de stratégies visant à la renforcer ont été développés. Il existe des aspects moins visibles de la résilience, qui peuvent être développés par le biais du langage et des perceptions sociales propres au milieu rural. Les valeurs, les normes et les comportements caractéristiques de certaines communautés ou de certaines périodes historiques peuvent construire, façonner et redéfinir le processus de résilience. Par conséquent, une perception idéalisée de la résilience peut donner lieu à des interprétations ambiguës. Dans certaines situations, il existe un risque que ce que certains appellent « résilience » se traduise, en réalité, par de la résignation, de la survie ou une adaptation à des conditions de vie indésirables. Ainsi, le présent article, en adoptant une approche théorique, cherche à clarifier la manière dont la résilience se construit, en fonction du contexte et des significations que les individus attribuent à ce processus.

Mots-clés : résilience, milieu rural, violence, construction sociale, langage

Rezumat: În discursul public actual, reziliența este adesea prezentată dintr-o perspectivă pozitivă, drept forță interioară și capacitatea de adaptare la situații de adversitate. Mai mult,

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de-a lungul studiului rezilienței s-au dezvoltat numeroase modele și liste de strategii de sporire a acesteia. Există fețe mai puțin vizibile ale rezilienței, iar acestea pot fi construite prin intermediul limbajului și al percepțiilor sociale specifice mediului rural. Valorile, normele și comportamentele caracteristice anumitor colectivități sau perioade istorice pot construi, prelucra și redefini procesul de reziliență. Prin urmare, o percepție idealizată a rezilienței poate da naștere unor interpretări ambigue. În anumite situații, există riscul ca ceea ce unii numesc „reziliență", să se traducă, de fapt, prin resemnare, supraviețuire sau adaptarea la condiții de viață indezirabile. Astfel, articolul de față, folosind o abordare de tip teoretic, caută să clarifice modul de construcție a rezilienței, raportat la context și înțelesurile pe care indivizii le oferă acestui proces.

Cuvinte-cheie: reziliență, mediu rural, violență, construcție socială, limbaj

1. Introduction

When examining the national reality, it can be observed that rural Romania is frequently associated with a long list of social and economic challenges, such as high levels of poverty, limited access to healthcare and quality education, high rates of illiteracy and school dropout, limited employment opportunities, and many other risk factors. These challenges arise from various causes, sometimes interconnected, and often occur simultaneously, which is why managing crisis situations becomes increasingly difficult. On the other hand, statistics at the national level also reflect the reality facing rural areas, which are often at the top of the rankings regarding crisis situations. For example, according to Eurostat (2025), at the European level, Romania ranks first in terms of the number of students leaving school early, with the dropout rate reaching 16.8% in 2024, and the highest rates are recorded among students in rural areas. With a deficient educational system, poverty bordering on subsistence, family disorganization, risky family behaviors (alcohol consumption, violence, drug use, etc.), and countless other crisis situations, the lives of people in rural areas are constantly affected.

At present, in a broad sense, it seems that resilience has become the answer to the crisis and to most problems. An individual's ability to adapt to stress and persevere, which was originally a topic of interest for health professionals, now seems to represent „a universal call to action in an age of uncertainty" (Diprose, 2015, p. 44). The concept of resilience has become increasingly prevalent in recent decades, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and is applied across various fields, ranging from the natural sciences to the social sciences, developmental psychopathology, social work, and sociology. Although the term resilience is relatively new and was initially applied in research on child development under difficult living conditions - where M. Rutter (1993) made preliminary contributions - today resilience is increasingly discussed across various fields. In recent decades, the work of author Ann Masten has made significant contributions to our understanding of resilience. She is also the author who created the term „ordinary magic" (2001) to emphasize the normality of resilience, which involves nothing extraordinary, but only ordinary things.

2. Social constructionism

The concept of social constructs and social constructionism as a research paradigm is primarily represented by Berger and Luckmann (1971), who developed the idea of the social construction of reality. Simply defined, as the authors themselves note, but in a way that anyone can understand, reality is „a quality of phenomena that we recognize as independent of our will" (Berger & Luckmann, 2008, p. 9). Part of what this definition implies is the presence of objectivity, since everyone's reality is something that exists independently of our will, lies outside of us, and is available to anyone (Allan, 2006).

The key principle of social constructionism is the idea that everything we know about the world, including our understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought and is not grounded in an observable external reality. Thus, social constructionism recommends that we adopt a critical and sceptical attitude toward the way we understand the world (Burr, 2025, pp. 222 - 223). To give meaning to our existence, we invent concepts, frameworks, and models that we also continually test and modify as we gain new life experiences. However, there is also a historical and cultural dimension to this construction, since we do not construct our interpretations of the world in isolation, but within a framework and a series of practices, meanings, and language that are already shared (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197).

Social constructionism focuses on language and the things we construct through our words. However, rather than focusing on language as a means through which we express our cognition, language is conceived as the central point of social action. For example, in the case of tragedy and related concepts (trauma, loss, and mourning), social constructionism assumes that these are socially shared experiences that are imbued with meaning through discourse. Thus, rather than investigating how an individual is affected by what might be characterized as trauma, loss, or tragedy, attention is directed toward how such an event or situation is constructed through language (Francis, 2010, p. 51). Consequently, language is more than a means of expression; it is also a form of action and can have implications and relevance in the study of resilience.

3. The challenges of today's rural areas

The rural environment, often idealized yet also criticized, is a space most frequently defined in terms of its differences from the urban environment, which in turn raises conceptual difficulties and ambiguity. Thus, in relation to the urban environment, the rural environment is understood as „a space closer to the coordinates of the natural setting, with reduced human intervention" (Mihalache, 2020, p. 19). Defining it also through direct comparison with the urban environment, Mărginean (2006, p. 153) considers the rural environment to be an open space with „an area for habitation and activity under natural conditions."

Mihalache (2020, p. 13) notes that „the current rural environment presents a heterogeneous framework shaped by divergent characteristics and perspectives." He identifies three major stages of rural development based on a retrospective analysis of the processes of village transformation over the past three decades. Thus, the first stage is the 1990s, which was marked by profound crises, successive reforms, and inconsistent measures regarding economic restructuring. The second stage covers the period from 2000 to 2007 - corresponding to the period of adaptation to the new social and economic reality following the fall of the communist regime, during which years of economic growth were also recorded. The third stage is the period after 2007, when Romania joined the European Union – a stage marked by the implementation of the common agricultural policy and increased investment in infrastructure. If we look at these three stages, although the changes appear favorable, rural areas have continued to present a series of „critical points" (Mihalache, 2020, pp. 13-15), and these critical elements are discussed in the specialized literature by various authors.

Mărginean (2006, p. 156) provides an analysis of the Romanian rural environment with regard to living conditions and identifies a number of limitations of the rural environment, such as: *the isolation of some settlements* - certain areas are located in hard-to-reach places, have poorly maintained roads, and lack transportation options; *the deficit or lack of resources*, particularly in small settlements, where the population lacks property and has limited opportunities in the labor market, most often due to low levels of education and skills; *shortcomings in ensuring access to public utilities* or *poor coverage of social services* (education, social work, health).

On the other hand, studies on quality of life highlight the negative impact of rural areas on well-being, as poor infrastructure (roads, sewage systems, gas supply, running water), low-quality public services (healthcare, education, culture), and a limited and unattractive job market all affect the quality of life for people in rural areas. Furthermore, due to a lack of opportunities for growth and self-fulfillment, young people tend to migrate to cities or even other countries in search of a better life, a trend that depopulates villages and gradually leads to a decline in the economically active population, as well as to population aging through an increase in the proportion of the elderly population (Iftimoaei, 2021).

Vulnerability takes various forms in rural areas, and more often than not, social crises overlap and create effects that profoundly affect the entire rural population. Over time, rural Romania has undergone reorganizations that have required new responses to emerging challenges. Zamfir & Mihalache (2019, p. 46) state that „the Romanian village today finds itself in a new situation, with new problems," and that current problems are „multidimensional socio-economic issues." In this context, it becomes of interest how individuals and communities as a whole respond to and cope with problematic or even overwhelming situations. Consequently, the challenges facing rural areas require a constructive response, which in turn gives the discourse on resilience a complex and timely dimension.

4. Methodology: qualitative document analysis

In accordance with the methodological principles of social science research, this article employs a qualitative document analysis method to examine discourses on resilience in rural areas from the perspective of the constructionist paradigm. The term „social documents" refers to any object or text that can provide information regarding the social phenomenon or the individuals under study (Scârneci, 2006).

The selection of the literature was based on criteria of authenticity, credibility, accuracy, and representativeness (Bowen, 2009). Thus, data were collected from scientific databases (Scopus, CEEOL, Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar) using keywords such as „rural environment," „resilience," and „social constructionism," and by selecting recent research articles and book chapters. In addition, specialized books on the constructionist paradigm, rural areas, and resilience were consulted, and Romanian statistics were analyzed to provide a realistic and up-to-date picture of the Romanian rural environment.

The analysis of the literature was conducted using a critical approach to how resilience is understood, as its definitions can vary depending on the chosen theoretical framework or even the period and context in which it is studied. Moreover, the rural environment has undergone changes over time and exhibits characteristics that can influence the social perception of resilience.

5. Constructionist considerations on resilience in rural areas

In the field of psychology, resilience can be defined as „the process of adapting in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress" (American Psychological Association, 2014). Muntean and Munteanu (2011) identify several types of resilience: individual, family, community, and even societal. Early studies focused on individual resilience, but over time the area of research has expanded to include families, communities, and even societies.

Just as with the concepts of trauma or grief, the constructionist paradigm may also be relevant in researching terms such as violence or resilience. Thus, crisis, resilience, violence, or the rural environment can also represent social constructions shaped by specific contexts, periods, mentalities, and experiences within social relationships and interactions. Ungar (2004, p. 352) asserts, from a constructionist perspective, that „resilience is the result of negotiations between individuals and their environment to maintain a self-definition as healthy." Furthermore, according to the author, the risk and protective factors of resilience are contextual, and their relationship is complex and chaotic.

The characteristics of the constructionist paradigm can be easily applied to understanding resilience and can offer an explanation for the ambiguities surrounding the fact that individuals who grow up and experience similar situations nevertheless end up responding differently to stimulations and having different life trajectories. The social environment presents its own reality, from

which the individual selectively takes in a certain part through continuous negotiation and dialogue. Thus, the perception and understanding of reality are closely linked and depend on the culture to which we belong, the language used, and the context in which a particular event takes place. Consequently, people act differently when exposed to the same stimuli, as they process information differently, analyzing it based on their prior experiences (Mireanu, 2021). The rural environment, with its own specific characteristics and norms, contributes to the social construction of resilience and shapes the perception of crisis as well.

One study aligned with the constructionist principles of resilience is that conducted by Tsirigotis and Łuczak (2018), which involved a target group of 52 women aged 30 to 65 who were victims of domestic violence. The study's results show that resilience can be shaped by the social context in which victims live, as well as by the type of relationships they have with the aggressor. Although most participants had a higher education (which may encourage them to seek help from institutions), the violence they experienced led to a decrease in the victims' positive coping resources. The conclusions highlighted that the factor with the greatest impact on resilience was the identity of the abuser. Thus, in order of severity, the most harmful influence on resilience was violence committed by the father, followed by violence committed by the husband, and finally, abuse by an intimate partner. This distinction explains the circumstances behind each type of relationship, as perceived by the victims. It can be understood that in relationships governed by social norms or even religious rules (father, husband), women may feel a sense of dependence and obligation, which weakens their resilience by increasing their feelings of entrapment and resignation. Conversely, if resilience was found to be higher in non-marital relationships with an intimate partner, then the pressures associated with the relationship were also reduced, making it easier for victims to consider a possible escape from the abusive relationship (Tsirigotis & Łuczak, 2018).

There has been criticism of resilience as it is understood both globally and individually. Diprose (2015, pp. 49–53) outlines four ways in which he believes resilience fosters habits of resignation rather than resistance:

1. *Enduring precarious living conditions* – the incidence of reported cases of mental illness has risen alongside the popularity of resilience. Even though resilience consists of the ability to cope with crises, individuals can only endure uncertainty to a limited extent, and under these conditions, resilience may idealize the lives of those struggling to survive, whom the author refers to as „the privileged and the poor."

2. *The establishment of social inequalities* – there are many factors, besides resilience, that can make a difference in people's lives: place of birth, education, support from family, friends, or the state in general, the local economy, health and social services, climate, income, health, housing, safety, and the love received and felt. Therefore, it would be a mistake to pit those with all the advantages against those with all the disadvantages.

3. *Delegating responsibility* – resilience is often necessary, but not all problems can be solved simply by using this term, and it would be wrong to internalize everything. Thus, we cannot forget the victims while celebrating the survivors, as some events overwhelm people, and we can all be responsible for change. „Combining personal transformation with social transformation risks limiting itself to the former and falling far short of a society's potential" (Diprose, 2015, p. 53). If resilience focuses only on the abilities of individuals and the community, it risks shifting the responsibility for well-being and change onto citizens, who become responsible for their own destiny.

4. *Postponing demands for change* – individuals' hopes and unsatisfied demands are not abandoned, but merely postponed; thus, resilience can encourage the temporary acceptance of losses and limited success.

Walker (2020) argues that there is a difference between the misconception of resilience as „bouncing back" and viewing resilient systems as learning systems, where the individual's ability to adapt, change, and reorganize while coping with disruptions comes into play. Thus, a resilient system, rather than recovering to look and behave exactly as before, remains the same but learns from the disruption, with the aim of better coping with a similar disruption in the future.

Recent empirical studies on rural areas confirm the need for a proper understanding of resilience and support the social constructionist aspects of it. Research on resilience in rural areas generally focuses on the differences between urban and rural areas and addresses the concept of community resilience. Community resilience refers to how communities cope with adversity and their ability to adapt to new social circumstances by utilizing their own resources, structures, and governance mechanisms (Yang, Feldman & Li, 2020). Recent studies on perceived resilience show that rural communities are less resilient than urban ones, as urban communities rely on greater economic capital (infrastructure, a diversified economy, greater economic capacity, and access to public services), while today's rural communities are losing ground due to migration and the weakening of social ties, which diminishes their resilience (Zhang et al., 2023). This is also evident in the local context, as today's Romanian rural communities tend to differ from those of the past in terms of social distancing and neighborly relations. A study on mentalities in today's rural areas, conducted by Crihan (2009, p. 271), highlighted that the importance of neighborly relations, as a form of social solidarity, is declining compared to the traditional rural environment, and that we are witnessing an increasingly deepening process of alienation between individuals.

Regarding how individuals living in rural and urban areas define resilience, an American study about how prepared communities are for natural disasters showed that there are no major differences in how resilience is understood between the two areas. Thus, resilience was most commonly defined as „recovery" (23% in urban areas and 22% in rural areas) or „bouncing back" (16% in both rural and urban areas) (Kapucu, Hawkins & Rivera, 2013). Consequently, it can be observed how

individuals' subjective perceptions shape the way resilience is viewed and, by extension, influence strategies for responding to adversity.

Another study of farmers in Australia (McManus et al., 2012) demonstrated, from a constructionist perspective, the importance of people's perceptions of the physical environment, their sense of belonging to the community, and employment opportunities in building resilience. Thus, the study concludes that policymakers should pay particular attention to farmers' perceptions as well as to how these perceptions change over time in order to identify rural areas' potential for resilience in the face of major, interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges. On the other hand, policymakers should focus not only on improving physical infrastructure but also on elements of social infrastructure (collective action, building social trust, leadership, etc.) to enhance community resilience (Zhang et al., 2023).

Conclusions

The constructionist paradigm may offer a solution to the ambiguities surrounding the contradictions of resilience. Depending on the context, values, or norms, the discourse on resilience can vary, creating a risk that certain behaviors may be misinterpreted and accepted as normal, even though they are not aligned with a state of optimal well-being. In this context, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of resilience, the various meanings it can have, and to specify the paradigm through which resilience is viewed and studied.

A clear distinction must be made between common and scientific knowledge, and civil society must be informed about the risks of superficial knowledge so as not to fall victim to their own misconceptions or those of the community. To increase the resilience of communities, decision-makers should also take into account structural and economic measures aimed at improving quality of life and access to services, as well as social factors (social relationships, trust in the community, attachment to the community, the role of key individuals, etc.) which can be engaged in every community to support individuals. It must also be understood that the responsibility lies not only with those affected by the crisis, but also with society as a whole to minimise risks through prevention, to respond in an informed and appropriate manner in crisis situations, and, last but not least, to create the necessary space for people to be able to access appropriate resilience mechanisms and resources.

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