

RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY: COMPETING SOCIAL PARADIGMS?

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Abstract

Over the past decades has been developed an extensive debate around a new concept: that of resilience. Through our study we highlight the routes of the resilience impact on social work, in relation to vulnerability. Vulnerability, seen as a key paradigm in social work, is now rivalled by a postmodern approach, which emphasizes the ability of individual, of a group, of community, to cope, to adapt, and to transform. The main route is the one that change a problem focused approach to the one of transformation. From a relatively stable characteristic, as the first specialists believed on this issue, resilience is now addressed through researches that highlight the importance of the context, of the time, age, gender, and cultural experiences, in a multidimensional perspective. As a general feature, developed in different contexts, resilience is studied in these second and third generations of researches, in relation to different target groups and social situations. Despite a major interest now enjoys, resilience remains a complex concept, difficult to be harmonized in a global culture. Along with vulnerability, sometimes in competition with, resilience continues to develop as an important new paradigm in social protection.

Keywords: social work, vulnerability, social paradigm, coping, resilience, empowerment, transforming.

Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies a été développé un vaste débat autour d'un nouveau concept: celui de la résilience. Grâce à notre étude, nous soulignons les routes de l'impact de la résilience sur le travail social. Vulnérabilité, vu comme un paradigme clé dans le travail social, est désormais concurrencée par une approche postmoderne, qui met l'accent sur la capacité de l'individu, d'un groupe, de la communauté, pour faire face, d'adapter et de transformer. La route principale est celle qui change une approche axée sur le problème à celui de la résilience. D'une caractéristique relativement stable, que les premiers spécialistes croyaient sur cette question, la résilience est maintenant résolue par des recherches qui mettent en évidence l'importance du contexte, du temps, de l'âge, le sexe, et d'expériences culturelles, dans une perspective multidimensionnelle. Comme une caractéristique générale, développé dans des contextes différents, la résilience est étudié dans ces deuxième et troisième générations de recherches, par rapport à différents groupes cibles et les situations sociales. Malgré un intérêt majeur bénéficie désormais, la résilience reste un concept complexe, difficile à être harmonisés dans des espaces et cultures mondiale. Avec la vulnérabilité, parfois en concurrence avec ça, la résilience continue à se développer comme un nouveau paradigme important dans la protection sociale.

Mots-clés: travail social, la vulnérabilité, paradigme social, l'adaptation, la résilience, autonomisation, transformation

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Rezumat

Pe parcursul ultimelor decenii s-a dezvoltat o amplă dezbateră în jurul unui nou concept: cel de reziliență. Prin studiul nostru evidențiem trasee ale rezilienței, cu impact asupra asistenței sociale, în relație cu vulnerabilitatea. Vulnerabilitatea văzută ca paradigmă cheie în asistența socială, este concurată acum de abordări postmoderne, care accentuează abilitatea individuală, de grup, comunitară, de a face față dificultăților, de a se adapta, de a se transforma. Traseul principal este cel care schimbă o abordare centrată pe probleme cu una a transformării. De la o caracteristică relativ stabilă, așa cum o considerau primii specialiști care au abordat această temă, reziliența este abordată acum prin cercetări care evidențiază importanța contextului, timpului, vârstei, genului, experiențelor culturale, într-o perspectivă multidimensională. De la un interes pentru o trăsătură generală, dezvoltată în diferite contexte, reziliența este studiată, în aceste două, respectiv a treia generație de cercetări, în raport cu diferite grupuri țintă și situații sociale. În ciuda unui interes major de care se bucură acum, reziliența rămâne un concept complex, dificil de armonizat în spații și culturi globale. Alături de vulnerabilitate, uneori în concurență cu aceasta, reziliența continuă să se dezvolte ca o nouă paradigmă importantă în domeniul protecției sociale.

Cuvinte cheie: asistență socială, vulnerabilitate, paradigmă socială, coping, reziliență, empowerment, transformare

1. Introduction

The vulnerability theme has appeared in the social sciences a few decades ago, creating numerous pro positions, and controversy. With similar attitude was met, promoted or criticized the theme of resilience. Both terms have applicability and recognition beyond social sciences. Vulnerability, risk and resilience, it becomes a series of links in addressing social, economic, ecological, natural disasters and humanitarian aid (Șoitu 2014).

We start from the premise that vulnerability should be the center of any paradigm of resilience (Bene *et al.* 2012, p. 17). Replacing vulnerability by resilience in social protection would waste specialists working for decades to develop the conceptual frames and transforming practices.

2. Conceptual background and arguments

In social literature the term “vulnerability” is used interchangeably with other terms and phrases, such as “being at risk” and “in a difficulty”. An individual is vulnerable when he is in a situation of social, economic or psychological need, when marginalised, when in a context of social inequity or exclusion, when neglected. This option – of naming the situation an individual is in – is considered less discriminatory and more empathic, and thus it has increasingly been used by the specialised literature, by welfare policies and by legislative documents.

From another perspective, to discuss and to write about resilience is never more appropriate than in these postmodern times. From a relatively stable characteristic –

as the first specialists believed that addressed this issue – resilience is studied increasingly more complex through research that highlights the importance of context, time, age, gender, cultural experiences (Wilkes 2002), in a multi-dimensional perspective. The interest on resilience evolved from a general feature that is developed in different contexts, to one analyzed, in these second and third generation of research, in relation to different target groups and social situations.

With a latin grass roots, resilience expresses: a size characteristic of the behavior of materials under shock requests, or simply: a property of a metal that alloy to withstand shocks (Mark 2000). For the purpose of the American Psychological Association (2010), resilience is a personal resource that allows individuals the opportunity to face the negative effects of stress and provides inner strength to face adversity.

Some attempts at clarification the two terms – vulnerability and resilience -have been made from a psychological, social (welfare), healthcare, environmental and legal point of view. Lately, increasingly more numerous specialists have become interested in the issue of vulnerability: psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, social workers, demographers, pedagogues, economists, ecologists, geographers. This interest was the basis for interdisciplinary, comprehensive and global approaches.

Beyond the academic environment, documents of the United Nations (2012), World Bank, governments of European, American, Australian states propose and support policies on resilience. The World Bank, for example (2011, p. 5), aims to help countries to move from fragmented approaches to practical, coherent, inclusive, and productive systems and in line with labor market and social protection.

In fact, the roots of vulnerability can be traced to the study of natural disasters and of their effects in the area of public health and epidemiology, later on to the psychology of individuals with special needs, of individuals with disabilities, and to the wider domain of social development. From this starting point, vulnerability has been interpreted as the expression of the connection between three factors: *risk, the response to this risk and the results of this response* (Alwang *et al.* 2001 *apud* Zaidi 2014, p. 5). More to the point, we talk about the vulnerabilities of people when they face a certain risk, then we take into account the response or responses for the management of this risk and the results of this response process in terms of losses. Conceptual patterns have evolved, presenting the vulnerability of older people as a route that begins with the exposure to a) a certain risk, b) goes through the actual threat posed by that particular risk, c) the people's coping capability, d) and ends in the low quality of results or the losses they incur (Chambers 1989, *apud* Zaidi 2014, p. 5).

Vulnerability has been studied in relation to quality of life, with isolation and social exclusion, with discrimination based on various grounds, including age, resulting in the identification of *vulnerabilities* in relation to an individual, in this

particular situation in relation to an individual, a situation, an event. Vulnerabilities are identified in relation to the groups consisting of people living alone, isolated, without a family, without offspring, in environments that do not provide access to basic social and healthcare services, in polluted environments, in impoverished areas. Vulnerability comes from an exposure to contingency and stress and from the difficulty of coping with these. We can thus talk about an *intrinsic* vulnerability, which consists in the absence of the resources required for coping with a threat or a risk, and about an *extrinsic* vulnerability, consisting in risks, shocks, stress (Chambers 1989, p. 33). The absence of resources may take the shape of an inability to cope with difficult situations in such a way that the latter are mitigated or that the losses at the individual's level are diminished. Individuals are vulnerable when they cannot make a decision, when they cannot cope with a situation in an optimal manner because they are weakened physically and/or mentally, too poor or too dependent (economically) on others, socially or/and emotionally dependent on others, or taken by surprise by a particular event. The awareness rising with regards to the other vulnerabilities of the people who use social services and of the barriers that exist the moment they seek support for accessing them, can be a step towards the future and towards social investment.

By comparison, resilience emerged from the surprising findings of the study called Minnesota Risk Research Project (Garmezy 1991; Garmezy, Masten and Tellegen 1984). The study sought to identify informational and intentional risks on children with schizophrenic parents. Results of the study show those children, now adults, as warm and competent people, having their own families and jobs, being well integrated into society. Other studies, such as those of Rutter – on general resilience (1987) or on institutionalized children from Romania (1998) – and on children of parents coming from Hawaii and Asia (Werner and Smith 1992, in Smith-Osborne 2007) have opened the way for new studies on resilience constructs. Early studies, in the ninth decade of the twentieth century, have attempted to identify the characteristics of resilient people; the following were focused on identifying the acquisition process of resilient qualities (Wilkes 2002), and now, in the "third generation", there is a current for understanding resilience as the driving force of all living and lifelong things and values (Richardson 2002).

Resilience is like the vulnerability, a social construct, a multidimensional concept, influenced by individual personalities, by the the family of origin, by the social context and the culture of origin (Ryff and Synger 2003; Windle and Markland 2008; Yang *et. al.* 2015).

Resilience conceptual scheme – 3D – developed by the authors in the field (Bene *et al.* 2012, p. 11) supposes the coping capacity, the adaptive capacity and the transformative capacity. Each of these three capabilities can lead to different results: persistence, progressive adjustment and transforming answers. The responses also depend, not only on the personal resources but also the external factors as: intensity of risk, shocks or events, and cumulative previous experiences.

The study of resilience is still in a process of emergence: we can find it in studies focused on the individual, family, and community organizations, on cultural spaces; on studies focused on opinions, perceptions and personal practices (Ryff, Singer 2003), but also on assessment of resilient qualities, using validated scales, on different populations of the world (Windle and Markland 2008; Smith-Osborne 2007). The results of these studies highlight the role of personality, but also the environment, on a path that begins with defense mechanisms, continues with new behaviors, adaptive and then, with the development of resilience (Rak 2002). The clarification route covers the differences between insight strengths developed as a result of risks and resilience approach, regardless of operating risks (Patterson 2002).

3. Some discussions

A recent study launched by the Institute of Development Studies and its Center for Social Protection, Great Britain, (Béné *et al.* 2012) responds to the new boom of resilience through a rhetorical title: *Resilience: New Utopia or New Tyranny? Reflection about the Potentials and Limits of the Concept of Resilience in relation to Vulnerability Reduction Program*. Beyond the many explanations of the relationship between: resilience and sustainability of development, resilience and adaptive preferences, resilience and strength, this study has useful views on the resilience and vulnerability. The challenge comes from the fact that there is still no universally accepted definition for either of these two terms.

There are also very close definitions of the two concepts: if we will understand, by vulnerability: „the characteristics of a person or a group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard” as it is defined by Blaikie *et al.* (1994, p. 11), then this approach is very close to the definition of resilience (Béné *et al.* 2012). There is, then, areas such as the development, which calls for return to vulnerability in the process of building resilience. The common point is the response to an event and the effects of this response on the person or group. Come here in question, the ability to respond, to use resources, the adapting capacity and the recover ability. In some understandings, resilience implies a fourth stage: the transformation.

Despite a major interest now enjoys, resilience remains a complex concept, difficult to be harmonized on global cultures. The difficulty comes from the antireflective use of resilience, in various social and political contexts. The vulnerability has, instead, a conceptual history focused on social actor in the changing process. In trying to build resilient systems or resilient cities, there is the danger to lose the sight of conceptual earnings of vulnerability in relation to the elements of social justice and power sharing; such risks are common to other new areas and paradigms, such as social economy (Asiminei, Șoitu 2014). On the other hand, resilience fills the vulnerability thinking gaps on systems approaches

(Gallopín 2006). Social interactions, personal and social investments on development, are better highlighted by resilience. There are still unclear differences between the „ability to recover after a shock” and the „ability to adapt” of a person, a group or a system. Similar viewpoints of specialists are recorded instead on the level of manifested resilience; it may be: on the individual, on the family level, on the community level, on a system of a company (Béné *et al.* 2012, p. 11).

Resilience paradigm are guiding now researchers and practitioners to positive factors that can support individual coping, adapting and transforming strategies and empowerment (Zimmerman 2013; Ionescu 2013; Șoitu 2013).

Better ways of capitalizing the links between vulnerability and resilience, on social protection and intervention, are still emerging. One possible scheme is being developed by the Institute of Development Studies from GB (2012), which takes into account: protection measures, preventive and promotion of social protection (developed by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004; World Bank 2011), which adds transformative dimension. The final aim is to develop a comprehensive analytical scheme: on the short term: the reduction of the vulnerability impact, and on the long term: reducing of structural causes. Such objectives are reported to results, in a way that reduced vulnerability is reflected on the specific transformative capacity of resilience.

4. Instead of conclusions

Beyond the study of traits, a phenomenon, a way of being and to deal with problems, to overcome them, writings about resilience can argue economic and social changes. The research results that ”measure” resilience in different cultures and contexts can serve as prerequisites for intercultural adaptation, as strategic points for development of professions focused on human interaction. For some people, resilience becomes one healing process that allows in-depth simplicity, and efficiency understanding of things and life. Along with vulnerability, sometimes in competition with, resilience continues to develop as an important new paradigm in social protection.

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