

Revisiting 'resilience' in light of racism, 'othering' and resistance

WENDY SIMS-SCHOUTEN and PATRICIA GILBERT

Abstract: In this commentary the authors analyse how the concept of resilience can be and has been applied to Black, Asian and minority ethnic families and communities in ways that are biased, stigmatising and pathologising. They argue that current definitions of resilience need to be redefined and reconceptualised, particularly in settings dominated by White middle-class voices that define what 'positive emotions', 'successful traits' and 'coping mechanisms' entail. Here, through racism and flawed perceptions and interpretations of resilience and 'othering', members from ethnic minority communities are defined as in need of resilience support, whilst at the same time their experience of structural racism, e.g., in relation to mental health support, social/health care practices and school exclusions, is being erased. Instead, the authors argue that resilience can also mean 'resistance', i.e., resisting bad treatment and racism, as well as reflecting agency, identity and ownership of one's own life and choices within this. Reframing resilience thus means taking account of multifaceted and interactive effects of personal, material, institutional and political factors that impact on behaviour, wellbeing and resilience, as well as acknowledging that the way in which 'behaviour' is received is by default flawed, if this is largely informed by an oppressive White middle-class viewpoint.

Keywords: othering, racism, resilience, resistance

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Introduction

'Resilience' defined as 'the dynamic process that leads to positive adaptations within the context of significant adversity' has become a popular term in research and practice across disciplines, with a focus on the benefits of 'positive emotions', 'successful traits' and coping mechanisms in adapting to life, despite great odds.¹ Moreover, the phenomenon of resilience has been adopted in everyday language with a focus on 'making people more resilient' or the 'need' to become more resilient. This is reflected in references to 'resilience' in the UK government's 2021 consultation on a National Resilience Strategy, seeking to strengthen the nation's 'ability to anticipate, assess, prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from known, unknown, direct, indirect and emerging risks' and its promotion of community resilience as part of the national security strategy.² The UK government's promotion of community resilience was also evident in the Covid-19 pandemic, with stakeholders (e.g., local councils, health/social care) calling for efforts to strengthen health promotion programmes and ultimately help build community resilience to Covid-19 and other threats.³ Ethnic minority groups, especially members from Black and Asian communities (BAME) groups in the UK were identified as some of the most affected groups, resulting in a range of BAME resilience recovery groups being established.⁴ As academics and members of the Racial Equality Council in the UK, we were invited to be part of such a group run by a local authority in the south of England.

In this commentary we critically analyse how the concept of resilience can be and has been applied to Black, Asian and minority ethnic families and communities in ways that are biased, stigmatising and pathologising. We argue that current definitions of resilience need to be redefined and reconceptualised, particularly in settings dominated by White middle-class voices that define what 'positive emotions', 'successful traits' and 'coping mechanisms' entail. The link between the concept of resilience and neoliberal individualism has been problematised in diverse areas of practice: from disaster relief to social work, engineering to education.⁵ These critiques highlight the fit between neoliberalism and ideas of individual responsibility, with the potential to further disadvantage specific groups and ignore structures of power and inequalities. While these critiques have focused on the limitations of resilience as an empowering concept, anti-racist scholars and activists have highlighted resilience as a necessary response by racialised minorities to minimise the impact of systemic white supremacy.⁶ These studies focus on the processes by which individual, family and community resources are enacted to counter the experiences of racism, such as the pathologising of mixed-race families, negative experiences and 'underachievement' at school, and damaging stereotypes of black masculinity. In their exploration of various conceptualisations of resilience, Shaikh and Kauppi⁷ include those deriving from psychology and incorporating themes such as personality traits, stress resistance, adaptability and recovery from trauma, and those stemming from sociology and focusing on agency, resistance and survival. Shaikh and Kauppi

note both the eurocentrist epistemology of resilience research and a lack of focus on social and economic policies which shape and are shaped by resilience.

Defining and problematising resilience

The term and concept 'resilience' was first used in research published in the 1970s by Emmy Werner and her colleagues, based on a project with a group of children in Hawaii, who lived in poverty and had parents who were alcoholics and had mental health problems. Werner and her colleagues found that two-thirds of the children growing up in these circumstances exhibited 'destructive' behaviour and one-third demonstrated more 'positive' traits – Werner called the latter group 'resilient'. Since then significant research has been undertaken with a focus on resilience, mostly centred on 'positive emotions', 'successful traits', and coping mechanisms that allow people to be more or less resilient in the face of adversity.⁸ Currently there are four broad 'waves' of resilience research and theory, each building on the other – the first wave focusing on the individual and descriptions of resilience and related methodologies, the second wave adopting a developmental systems approach to theory and research, the third wave focusing on interventions directed at changing developmental pathways, and the fourth integrating multiple levels and systems (epigenetics, biological and cultural).⁹ It could be argued that by incorporating culture and social ecological aspects of resilience, the fourth wave has come some way in (at least) acknowledging the crucial role of community and culture in making sense of resilience, including with a focus on health resources and experiences.¹⁰

At present resilience research is (still) largely located within a eurocentrist epistemology, with little insight into social and economic policies which shape and are shaped by resilience and lack of engagement with anti-racist scholars and activists. Instead, it is through racism and flawed perceptions and interpretations of resilience and 'othering' that members of ethnic minority communities are defined as in need of resilience support, whilst at the same time their experience of structural racism, e.g., in relation to mental health support, social/health care practices and school exclusions, is being erased.¹¹ Here, through 'self-other' distinctions, claims of not being racist gain legitimacy, and discourses of race, difference and 'low resilience' are seen as constituting common-sense knowledge.¹² Self-other distinctions are central to social and temporal spaces and identities, and research shows that specific social groups (such as members of minority ethnic communities) are often presented as the 'other'.¹³ 'Othering' is achieved through three distinct representational pathways: through representational absence, through representations of difference, and through representations of threat.¹⁴ As an example, a few years ago the Race Equality Council was asked to get involved in the case of a mixed-race girl who had been suspended from her school due to 'aggressive behaviour' towards staff and fellow students. Yet, on closer inspection, it turned out that this young person had experienced racist bullying (centred on her appearance, skin colour and hair) for a number of years,

which was not dealt with, despite her asking for help from teachers several times. When she had finally had enough and resisted the racist bullying by disengaging and shouting back, she was labelled as out of control and in need of a resilience building programme. From this vantage point, it could be argued that resilience can also mean 'resistance', i.e., resisting bad treatment and racism, as well as reflecting agency, identity and ownership of one's own life and choices within this.¹⁵ Yet, in light of dominant constructions of resilience, resistance tends to be viewed negatively and equated with bad behaviour, positioning the victim of racism as the 'other'. This highlights the need to revisit and redefine resilience, as well as take seriously the methods and strategies employed by people from diverse communities to express resilience, in light of racism and bias.¹⁶

In the next sections we will critically analyse 'resilience' in light of the quandary between 'absence' (under-representation, and lack of engagement with the voices/experiences of members from ethnic minority communities, highlighting a need for a critical focus), 'difference' (stigmatic labelling, e.g., in relation to ability, character and self-control) and 'threat' (in relation to 'bad behaviour' and 'undesirable traits').¹⁷ First we will discuss the concept's absence, under-representation and 'othering' in resilience research and practice, i.e., how members from ethnic minority communities are often under-represented and their voices are absent from key debates about 'resilience', support and wellbeing. Following on from this we will address the concepts and notions of 'difference' and 'threat', followed by revisiting and redefining resilience in light of this. The sections will be guided by a critical discussion of research and practice, with support from interviews with ethnic minority communities undertaken in the south-west and south-east of England between 2018–2021, as part of a study into their perceptions regarding social care, social services and education.

Absence, under-representation and 'othering'

The kids touching (name) hair – there's always kids touching her hair and messing about with her hair and they – we don't see that as a nice thing. You shouldn't do that, you should maybe ask first or something. And they tried to say [oh] but it's because they like her' and I – I'm saying 'no but that's sort of racist' But it's all about saying 'no' without getting angry I guess 'cause (name) didn't like it, it's a bit rude. She used to say 'I'm not a dog'. [laughs]

(Mother of a mixed-race teenage girl)

The above quote is an example of 'absence', 'under-representation' and 'othering' at play, and how this results in a person being side-lined and ultimately treated as lacking in resilience. By saying that 'they like her' in response to her, perfectly acceptable, complaint about other children touching her hair, this young person is labelled as making something out of nothing, a need to be more resilient and suck it up. Moreover, by equating the 'touching of hair' with 'being liked', the popular

narrative of 'kindness' (e.g., slogans such as 'be kind' can be seen across schools in the UK) is effectively being used to curtail any claims of racism here. Rather, by not engaging with this 'kindness' this young person is treated as lacking – in her understanding, her tolerance, but also her resilience.

A number of studies have looked at the problems faced by minority ethnic families, where social services or education providers are inadequate or inappropriate to their needs. For example, research on childcare services across ethnic groups highlights that families are more likely to be unsatisfied because they do not receive a service, than to be dissatisfied with a service they have received.¹⁸ Moreover, research on education and attainment in the UK consistently highlights a number of inequalities in relation to teacher support, expectations, language barriers, socioeconomic disadvantage and institutional racism, affecting children from a wide range of ethnic minority communities.¹⁹ In addition, Black Caribbean pupils are nearly four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion than the school population as a whole and are twice as likely to receive a fixed-period exclusion.²⁰ Thus, 'absence', 'under-representation' and 'othering' are key threads here.

During one of the 'BAME resilience' meetings organised by the local council that we attended, a representative from an Alzheimer's charity asked why it is 'so hard' to get members from 'BAME communities' to engage with the support and services offered. Our response, namely that members from ethnic minority communities may look for help in their own family and/or community first, and may be reluctant to look for external help, either due to 'shame' or lack of trust in said agencies (something that is also supported by research)²¹ was dismissed and met with the response that this is the same for White families. Thus, the concept of 'BAME resilience' embodies ignorance and inherent racism, not only through the construction of 'BAME' groups as lacking and in need of transformation, but also through treating this group as one group, on the one hand, with 'White' on the other, thereby failing to acknowledge, as well as celebrate, differences between different groups and ethnicities.

Moreover, by focusing on 'competencies', 'capacities' and 'positive' functioning, the term resilience has become something of an accusation against those who are perceived as not having the 'right' competencies and capacities.²² Here it is worth drawing attention to the process-outcome debate in resilience theory, with some theorists focusing on the processes involved in resilience (e.g., the capacity to adapt or adjust)²³ and others solely centralising the outcomes (e.g., achieving positive outcomes).²⁴ Yet, in light of the way in which 'adjusting/adapting' and 'positive outcomes' are defined here, it is clear that this can only lead to a rise in 'othering', absencing and under-representation and, as such, facilitate racism and stigmatising practices. Rather, a focus on agency and structure is needed in order to shed a light on three connected components: adversity, outcomes and mediating factors. Here there is a need to engage *with* people, rather than *about* people, in order to make sense of how these components feed into perceptions, behaviours

and outcomes. Without this, there is not only the danger of 'absenting' or 'othering', but a further danger of actively viewing people as 'resistant' and a threat.

'Resistance' and 'difference' as threatening

They say 'oh you're shouting' or they said that when you were talking to them, you were shouting, you're raising your voice. We're Caribbean they don't realise that Caribbean people have a very high pitch tone!

(Black female)

There was another black lady, her son had been taunted and called the N-word, and she kicked off at the school, and they told her that they will call the police to get her arrested.

(Black female)

She has shouted at me in the corridor and said to me my son will not be able to participate in a nativity Christmas play because he is a Muslim. I have never started at her whether he is Muslim, Jewish, Christian or whether he can or cannot play part in the play, so I was really in shock because there were a lot of parents around. She was holding out the reception door, so there are a huge amount of people and there to shout at myself and expectedly put me in the shock and I didn't know what to say to her.

(Moroccan female)

One of the key characteristics of post second-world-war politics was that 'being racist' became problematised, with the great majority of people unlikely to use the term 'racist' to describe their own or others' biased views.²⁵ Since then, the Brexit debate has deepened divisions in society to such an extent that, for an army of far-right activists, any 'difference' is now perceived as threatening.²⁶ This is also reflected in the quotes above, where, instead of addressing the upset that the taunting of her son and the use of the N-word has caused, a mother is told that they will 'call the police and get her arrested'. Here, behaving 'differently' (either by 'kicking off' in response to racism, 'shouting', as in the first quote, or by being Muslim, as in the third quote) is perceived as 'threatening'. Yet, in light of the trauma associated with racism, it could be argued that 'difference' and resistance are simply strategies of resilience that are being employed and need to be acknowledged.²⁷

It is situations such as those quoted above that feed into narratives around 'good'/'bad' behaviour and 'poor'/'strong' resilience, influenced by pre-specified linear models of resilience that centralise specific predictors to a specific outcome, rather than engaging with how individuals make sense of such incidents.²⁸ Thus, there is a need to open up the debate about what resilience actually entails, and how to make sense of real-life complexities for members from varying cultural

and ethnic communities, by incorporating a relational rather than merely a linear worldview. As Burack et al. highlight, such a relational worldview encompasses 'the context, the mental, the physical and the spiritual'.²⁹ This suggests two things: a) the need to understand and make sense of the worldviews of members from a wide range of ethnic minority communities; and b) the need for more minority ethnic researchers to be engaged in resilience research.³⁰

Here it is also important to acknowledge 'resistance' as a form of resilience, i.e., an exercise of agency in adverse social contexts. This is not something new; for example, Bottrell researched the experiences of young people on a public housing estate in Sydney and asked the question, how much adversity should resilient individuals endure before social arrangements, rather than individuals were targeted for intervention?³¹ Here, resistance needs to be viewed as the mediating process of resilience targeted at challenging the adversity, rather than accommodating to it. Recognising the value of resistance contributes to social justice by redefining marginalised and social excluded individuals as people endeavouring to overcome adversity, racism and bias.³² A focus on agency and structure is important, with agency reflecting the power that individuals exercise over their lives and social environment, and structure the macro systems that constrain the choices and opportunities of individuals.

A need to revisit and redefine resilience

When they [social services] came into our life I explained to them that I don't feel well in myself, I was on all this medication and I was getting some support. Well they called in an adult social worker and when she first met me she said to me 'from what they said to me, I thought I needed to be aware of you', you know they said 'this one's really tough and – and really tricky so we pulled in our most experienced social worker' and she said 'you're lovely really aren't you?' and I was like I dunno I think so, and she was like 'you're just really hurt' and I was like 'yeah' like. I used to shake, I was such a mess, I was really not in a good way.

(Black female)

In this final section we wish to reiterate the need to revisit and redefine resilience, especially in light of the inherent bias and racism associated with concepts such as 'BAME resilience'. As can be seen from our discussion above, current definitions of resilience are exclusive and more akin to compliance, dominated by White middle-class voices determining what 'positive emotions', 'successful traits' and coping mechanisms entail. It is clear that resilience research, starting with Werner's research in the 1970s, is largely 'about' people, rather than 'with' people, and marked by 'absenting', 'absences' and 'othering'.

Voices from a range of communities are absent from and under-represented in resilience research and practice, including from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the UK, as well as from global contexts. This is despite the wealth

of anti-racist research that centres the role of resilience in achieving against the odds, particularly in relation to education, and which highlights ways in which communities can be resilient in the context of discrimination and racism. For example, a study on sources of resilience among immigrant Muslim women facing adversity after the events of 9/11 shows how the mass media were distorting the realities of Islam as well as altering the public image of Muslim identity.³³ The research highlighted that the main contributory sources of the women's resilience was their Islamic religion, together with collective supportive relationships both inside and outside their families. Specifically, spiritual beliefs as well as cultural contexts play a key role in resilience and related behaviours. Wright, Maylor and Becker³⁴ use the concept of 'community cultural wealth', developed by Yosso³⁵ to investigate the resilience shown by young black men who have been excluded from school. Wright et al. show how the young men have been able to 'turn around' the expectations placed on them, re-engage with education and achieve successful personal and educational outcomes by utilising 'aspirational', 'resistant' and 'familial' capital. Rhamie,³⁶ in a study of African Caribbean educational success, found that the opportunity to develop resilience was pivotal in the different educational outcomes experienced by the research participants, all of whom had had negative experiences in school. Those who were educationally successful, despite having their learning impacted by racism and stereotyping, had developed resilience in the form of protective factors stemming from family and community support.

Yet not only are voices from a range of communities under-represented in this field, the focus on 'strengthening' and 'building' resilience in ethnic minority communities pathologises these communities, suggesting that they do not already develop resilience and are in need of transformation.³⁷ Instead, definitions of strong and poor resilience are established which can lead to blaming members from ethnic minority communities for not coping in an oppressive environment.³⁸ Moreover, by constructing behaviours and responses as 'threatening' and 'different', such as in the quote above (*'from what they said to me, I thought I needed to be aware of you'*), the focus is largely on a reductionist, moralistic and isolated notion of the individual, who is blamed for their 'bad' behaviour, rather than on large-scale social structures.³⁹ In practice, this, once again, translates into one-sided exclusionary assessments and judgements locating 'problems' in the individual and their community, ignoring the dynamics in the immediate social context.⁴⁰ Thus, the need to revisit and redefine resilience.

Only when individuals and communities are heard, taken seriously and their needs engaged with is it possible to truly make sense of what resilience entails and what support is required to facilitate the development of resilience in different social and cultural groups. Rather than embracing a form of 'colour blindness/evasion', often wrongly applied in certain 'inclusive practices', there is a need for a race-conscious approach to transformation.⁴¹

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