

## **What difference does ‘resilience thinking’ make?**

‘Resilience’ is becoming an increasingly mainstream concept, appearing everywhere from policy documents to corporate advertising, from the literature of peacebuilding and development NGOs to sports coaching, from management literature to local community initiatives.

As with any such concept, it is in danger of meaning all things to all people. And as with any such concept, it has started to attract a fair amount of critique. Critical analyses of the ‘resilience’ concept have raised concerns about it being used in ways that depoliticise, that do not pay sufficient attention to issues of power, inequality and disagreement, and that reinforce rather than question neoliberal economics and politics. There is concern that ‘resilience’ becomes a demand for stoicism and uncritical adaptation in the face of adversity, limiting or silencing discussion of the causes of the problems people face.

Much of this emerging critique of resilience focuses on what might be called ‘resilience from above’ – the efforts by governmental or international agencies to incorporate resilience thinking into policy and practice (e.g. disaster management). At the same time, however, ‘resilience’ has also served as inspiration for many engaged in attempts to foster creative alternatives to an inequitable and unsustainable status quo ‘from below’ – and if you’re reading this, this may well include you.

This is an invitation to engage in reflection on what ‘resilience’ has meant to you, and on what it means to you now: What has been helpful about ‘resilience thinking’? What has been problematic? How has it informed your thinking and practice? What kinds of activities has it encouraged/ discouraged?

For us, these questions have been prompted by the framing of a workshop on ‘Political Action, Resilience and Solidarity’ that is due to happen in London this September. As some of our writing and teaching has been related to resilience, we wanted to take this as an opportunity to consider how people who have found the concept helpful or inspiring have engaged with the idea of ‘resilience’, what difference it has made to their thinking and practice, and whether/how this has included political action. We are hoping that looking at how people have used the concept will help us identify the positive qualities of ‘resilience thinking’ that might be lost if the concept is discredited. At the same time, thinking about its limitations might sharpen our awareness of how the concept can be used to consolidate inequitable and unsustainable systems and practices, and thus to consider how we might respond to such uses of ‘resilience’.

We would like our contribution to the workshop in London to come out of conversations with and between people who have, now or in the past, found ‘resilience’ a useful concept. As we do not have either funding or much time for this piece of work, we’re hoping that some of you will feel able to contribute via an online survey that we have set up. Alternatively, we’re also happy to arrange face-to-face conversations with people who live close to us, or to talk via skype with those who don’t.

We will share our reflections on what emerges with all participants.

We thought it might be helpful to start with a few simple questions. These are intended as a starting-point, so please don’t feel limited by them.

1. When and how did you first come across the concept of ‘resilience’?
2. What does ‘resilience’ mean to you now?
3. What have you found helpful about ‘resilience thinking’?
4. What differences, if any, has the concept of ‘resilience’ made to your thinking and/or practice?
5. Has there been anything that has troubled you about the concept of ‘resilience’, and/or about its increasing use in a wide range of settings? Have you seen/heard it used in ways that you think have

been problematic?

6. As well as resilience, what other key concepts/values matter to you? How do you think they relate to resilience?

If you can answer these questions via our survey, please go to:<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/JXTHQZG>

Please also feel free to forward this to anyone else who you think may be interested!

If you wish to discuss with us more directly, please email us at the following addresses:

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Many thanks for your help!

Ute and Rhys Kelly

#### **And for those of you who don't know us...**

Who we are (and why we're interested in resilience)

We are both part-time lecturers in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, married, and parents of two boys (currently 9 and 10). We're also trying to develop a two-acre plot we're renting near our home in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, primarily for food-growing.

For a while now, our academic and educational work has been motivated by a need to find honest and constructive ways of responding to the ecological and energy crises that societies are facing now and into the future. In thinking this through, we have been inspired by – among others – Wendell Berry, Kevin Anderson, the Resilience Alliance, permaculture concepts and practices, creative ways of responding to conflict, and the many people working on constructive alternatives on the ground. We have benefitted from conversations with a range of people working in the broad fields of ecological and/or community resilience - including Thinkspace participants. We have experimented with different ways of engaging students and colleagues in Peace Studies in critical conversations about these issues too, mostly through participatory dialogic and deliberative processes in our teaching. We have included permaculture in our curriculum in Peace Studies, and some of our students have benefitted from internships with the Permaculture Association in Leeds. We have also engaged with the transition movement, both locally to us and through a collaborative research project that involved us alongside other academics and the Transition Network.

One of the things we have found helpful about the concept of 'resilience' is the attention it draws to the intersections between social and ecological systems, thus embedding human activities in particular places and material realities. We have also found it a helpful lens through which to consider our personal and working lives, as well as what we are trying to do on our piece of land (though we are still a long way from feeling resilient!). As part of these reflections and our experiences, though, we have also become acutely aware of the ways in which larger systems and power structures limit the possibilities for building resilience at more local levels – raising questions about the relationships between resilience, power and resistance.

We thus saw the questions raised by organisers of the workshop as an interesting prompt to rethink the potential and limitations of 'resilience' as a concept and way of thinking. We very much hope others will feel stimulated to share their thoughts and experiences with the concept with us and look forward to your contributions!