Defining 'resilience'

A working paper

The term 'resilience' is becoming more and more important both in popular scientific literature and in the scientific context of different disciplines though we're mainly talking about psychology. This growing interest can easily be proven by looking at the increasing number of publications and the number of research groups like the Resilience Research Centre in Halifax/Canada, the Lifespan Resilience Research Group at the Edith Cowan University in Australia and the Resilience Research Group of the IFZ in Salzburg/Austria discussing the topic resilience.

This paper is intended to be a working paper and as such it's not the ultimate outcome of a long lasting research process with definite results rather than a stimulating impulse on a psychological issue from an analytic philosopher's perspective. The aim of this paper is to find a working definition for the term 'resilience' and to discuss emerging difficulties in the process of getting there. We will thus concentrate on a mere definition rather than a whole concept of resilience which will be done in my dissertation.

Our starting point is the question what cognitive and psychological marks a resilient person has or trains to overcome or cope with an irksome situation (e.g. divorce, loss of job, loss of a loved person, end of a relationship etc.) in contrast to a non-resilient meaning a vulnerable person. Though there's not the one and only list of such marks in resilience research varying from just a few up to 40 marks, we can agree on the following seven leaving space to add, remove or replace some of them.

In other words: **What characteristics mark people who will thrive in the face of risk factors or adversity as opposed to those who succumb to destructive behaviors?** This is according to Glenn Richardson the question raised in the first wave of resilience research where it's all about the "phenomenological description[s] of resilient qualities of individuals and support systems that predict social and personal success".¹

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1) **Optimism**

What is meant by being an optimistic person? An optimistic person

- expects more good things from life than bad things
- knows/believes² that obstacles are conquerable
- knows/believes that she can influence the course of her fate
- knows/believes that no depression lasts forever and every crisis will go by
- considers difficult situations as challenges not as problems.

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² The question we would have to answer is: Does the person know this or believe this? At least popular science literature is not very accurate in its terminology.
From this we can learn that an optimistic person limits or qualifies a crisis in its time and local dimension and does not get carried away in "always" and "everything" accusations. On the other hand we do not mean to completely ignore all negative and unpleasant aspects. An optimistic person must be able to distinguish between overdrawn wishes and reasonable positive expectations. A commonplace in philosophy is to differentiate between descriptive (‘x is black’) and prescriptive predicates whereas prescriptive predicates can be divided into normative (‘x is permitted’) and evaluative (‘x is good’) predicates. The problem with prescriptive predicates is that it's hard or impossible to find generally accepted definitions (plus we might get metaphysical problems). What's good for me doesn't mean it's good for you! The phrase 'An optimistic person expects more good things from life than bad things' leads us to the question: Who decides what are good things and bad things? The answer must be: I am the one who decides what good things and bad things are. But this also means that a major point of being optimistic or not is my attitude towards life and how I see things. This is under my control and thus changeable.

2) Acceptance
A resilient person is said to accept things as they are. Such a person
- knows/believes that it's senseless to worry about things which are out of her control
- does not repress her feelings or emotions or tries to escape from them (which would be the common reaction to a blow of fate) but works them up
- accepts things as they are, but does not put up and go along with anything defenselessly
- accepts change as the principle of life; nothing stays as it is - both good and bad times.

To be more accurate I would have to include the time dimension. Of course a resilient person does not necessarily accept a disaster in an instant. On the contrary it can be a helpful and important coping strategy not to accept a situation for some time but then to do this in an adequate (whatever this will mean) period of time.

Accepting things but not taking everything defenselessly might easily lead to misunderstandings. How can you accept things but still fight what hurts you? Maybe the time dimension helps us out to first fight the situation (not defenselessly) but then accept it in the later. But why should I fight something and then accept it? This does not go along with point one not to worry about things which are out of my control.

If you accept change as the principle of life it also means on the metaphysical dimension that everything is constantly changing and "flowing". In further discussion we have to think about the possibility of applying and/or extending Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory to this metaphysical dimension.

3) Solution orientation
A resilient person is said to be solution oriented. Such a person
- tries to find one or more possible solutions for the problem/crisis rather than being problem oriented
- does not think about the circumstances that led to the situation (e.g. Freud's psychoanalysis would be such an approach)
- understands solution orientation as orientation towards the future whereas problem orientation

3 Being "optimistic" to win the lottery is not the meaning of optimistic we are using here since the positive expectation is based on an overdrawn wish.
4 In further elaboration I will include the discussion of appraisal theories e.g. the one from Jäger/Bartsch.
means orientation towards the past (but problems in the past are ought to be left behind → acceptance)
• knows that it's necessary to have a clearly defined, realistic and achievable goal to be able to orient oneself towards the future/a solution. When you have a goal you can actually arrive somewhere. Without a goal you are in a passive mode and experience emptiness, stagnancy and dissatisfaction.

Finding a solution in a situation of crisis is naturally not easy (otherwise it wouldn't be a situation of crisis) also because you don't know if the solution will work and where it will lead you. Thus you are insecure, you lack courage and self-confidence. You are not in control of the situation anymore that you would know what to do and where to go (we could think about a term like "ability to be out of control", German: "Kontrolllosenfähigkeit").
To give at least some additional information we can mention that solution orientation could be understood as not being a technique applied to a problem rather than being a basic fundamental attitude towards life. Then the problem becomes a chance and doesn't stay a problem. Solution orientation implies flexibility and creativity also having a quote from Albert Einstein in mind: "Man kann ein Problem nicht mit derselben Denkweise lösen, mit der es entstanden ist." This is also connected to Steve de Shazer's theory that problem and solution do not necessarily have to be linked (also see Gregory Bateson and Milton Erickson).

4) Self-regulation
A resilient person is said (to be able) to regulate oneself. This includes aspects like
• self-motivation and self-pacification
This does not mean that such a person is always in a super good mood and tirelessly busy. It rather means the ability to build up oneself over and over again.
• self-discipline and self-control
This means to take responsibility for oneself but does not mean to end up in over control like being in an emotional straitjacket. We are not talking about repressing emotions but about regulation of those. This works on the basis of the thesis that we are not slaves of our emotions/feelings, which we would have to prove on another battlefield.
• self-strengthening and coping with stress
This simply means to call on your one's strengths rather than putting oneself down and constantly thinking about your shortcomings.

5) Responsibility
A resilient person is said to take responsibility. Such a person
• takes responsibility for what is under one's control but does not take responsibility for what is not under one's control, because nobody is responsible for everything that happens in the world.
• takes one's fate in her own hands, because the person has the belief that we are the driving and decisive force in our lives
• is convinced of (at least a form of) the concept of self-efficacy (Albert Bandura) and thus knows/believes that she can overcome irksome situations by herself (see the connection to the former point).

The issue of taking responsibility is linked with the question of guilt. A resilient person would leave the victim hood. A non-resilient (thus vulnerable) person would put herself in the role of the victim and take responsibility for things she's not responsible for and thus cannot be guilty for.
6) Network orientation
A resilient person is said to be network oriented. Such a person
• has/ builds up and takes care of a network of family members and friends.
• knows/believes that you are weaker and more vulnerable without close people around you. The aspect of confidence and trust in other people and in life generally gets important at this point.

A "good" network could consist out of a few very good friends, some ordinary friends and many lose acquaintanceships. The people within your network should be from different areas and serve for different purpose (one is a good partner for job problems, another one is able to help you with marriage problems and a third one is a good drinking buddy), whereas quantity doesn't say anything about the quality of your network.
This last point very much raises the question of the moral status of a network. Is it just about the usefulness of people for a special purpose as a means to an end or are we talking about friendship, solidarity and loyalty? Another negative aspect of the phenomenon "networking" is the exclusion and marginalization of others.

7) Future planning
A resilient person is said to plan the future (→ solution orientation). Such a person
• sets oneself realistic goals and tries to prevent difficulties
• knows/believes that not everything can work out and that not everything is controllable
• knows/believes that alternatives and flexibility in future planing increase the chances of success
• does not delay deeds because of anxiety
• is reconciled with one's past (→ acceptance) because the sight of the past influences the sight of the future

In the sense of saving results we can summarize the following:
● Psychology does not give us a generally accepted list of marks which characterizes a resilient person and thus makes her identifiable.
● Each of the marks themselves would have to be characterized and explained more exactly to know what is being meant. Also I myself just mentioned those and gave a short explanation.
● It would be unprofessional just to analyze each mark in its single and individual dimension and not to bear in mind that whatever chosen marks will interact, influence and feed back with each other. Thus a decisive question now is: How do the marks interact?
● How can we make a definition out of what we have so far?

Let's discuss the following definition proposal (which will need further explanation afterwards) to answer the last question:

A person x is at time t relative to situation s resilient iff

1) x is optimistic (relative to s & t?) and/or ?5

5 This "and – or problem" will be discussed below because what I wrote down above is not a correct definition.
As I mentioned already above my definition proposal needs further explanation. Let's begin with the **definiendum** 'a person x is at time t relative to situation s resilient'.

• The phrase 'a person x' narrows my definition proposal to single persons (however then you want to solve the problem of how to define the term 'person' is not my main concern here). This limitation I do at this point just for reasons of simplicity whereupon we should not forget the possibility that a concept of resilience could be applied to a two-person relationship (in the strongest case a love attachment), a group, a society, a nation or even the whole world population but also to institutions in which you will find persons acting in the role of agents of the institutions.

• Adding the term 'at time t' expresses that resilience is not something a person just has and will necessarily have for a lifetime like a strong dispositional character trait but it is an ability (Germ.: Fähigkeit) which more or less has to be learned or acquired and kept up or exercised. This also means that this ability can be unlearned again.

• Let me make a small note regarding the terms 'ability' (Fähigkeit) and 'character trait' or for a better use in my following example 'attribute' or 'capacity' (Eigenschaft). I am talking of an ability when a person knows how to ski, how to swim butterfly or how to do the taikyoku shodan kata in karate. In contrast to that I would speak of an attribute of a person when she's athletic. Let's keep it that simply for now and not get into questions whether an ability can become an attribute or a non-exercised attribute can fade away.

• Including time t in the definiendum also raises the question (especially if you work empirically) when resilience shows up meaning when you can measure it, diagnose it or locate it. When you through lived an irksome situation an you coped with it "well" it's easy to diagnose somebody as resilient (e.g. "How did you cope with difficult situations?" "Do you have the feeling you can handle upcoming difficulties [well]?" ). The problem arises when you have a person who is in the middle of the coping process and currently through lives the coping phase of being depressive or shows depressive marks. How do you then want to distinguish a person who is depressive and will stay depressive (and thus is not resilient) from someone who just through lives the depressive coping phase but will recover and thus show resilience? We can widen this problem even by having in mind that e.g. Frederic Flach states that persons who temporarily show depressive marks can be more resilient (because they work up the crisis) than others who do not get depressive at all which I would call resistant. In terms of psychological health Flach would describe a resilient but maybe temporarily depressive person as healthier than an untouchable resistant person.

• The phrase 'relative to situation s' shows that our person x is in a meta-position relative to situation s rather than being resilient in a situation s. This means person x reacts upon a situation s. By using the term 'situation s' we have to clarify whether we are talking about types of situations or tokens. A type of situation is e.g. getting divorced (in general) because maybe you get divorced 4 times during your life whereas a token of situation is when you talk about a special divorce from a certain woman.
(e.g. Gisele Bündchen) some years ago. If we prefer to use 'situation s' as a token we can take out time t from our definiendum since it's already included in using situation s as a token.

- Also we have to clarify what kind of situations we are talking about. Are we talking about all situations in general or more specifically just about situations of crisis, meaning irksome, difficult situations for which our person x does not have an adequate coping strategy available (a crisis is a situation for which we do not have a working coping strategy, whereas a situation can be difficult but we have a solution available - then it wouldn't be a crisis in my sense).

This much just to find out what our definiendum should look like, that is to say what we actually want to define. Let's move on to the definiens. To simplify our discussion I will use situation s as a token that we can leave out the aspect of time t:

- When we want a resilient person to be optimistic, does that mean that this person is generally an optimistic person relative to all (or most) situations or do we want our person x to be specifically optimistic relative to our situation s. This somehow brings up the question whether optimism itself is an ability or a dispositional character trait, which then would complicate the process of defining an ability through dispositional character traits.

- The same issue arises for all other mentioned marks too. Do we just have to accept s or any situation and when can you diagnose this? During your depressive phase? Do we have to be solution oriented just relative to s or in general? Self-regulation is probably something you do more in general than just relative to a specific situation. Do we have to take responsibility in general or just relative to s? And so on...

- The second issue that arises with our definiens is the "and – or problem". Let's start slowly with a common place in philosophy. We commit a definition error if our definition is too wide (in other words: our definition is not adequate); our definition is too wide when the amount of the objects fulfilling the definiens is bigger than the amount of the objects fulfilling the definiendum (or which we want to be in the definiendum). This definition error happens when I connect the seven above mentioned marks with 'or'. Then I can read (in simpler terms) 'A resilient person is optimistic or accepts s or is solution oriented or regulates oneself or...'. Although we know that the logic 'or' is not an exclusionary "or" like the 'either, or' meaning that a resilient person can show all marks, the definiens would already be fulfilled if our person shows only one of the seven marks. This would mean that a person who is e.g. only optimistic but shows contrary behavior in all other six marks would be considered as resilient in our definition. ...This of course we do not want!

- On the other hand we commit a definition error if our definition is too narrow. A definition is too narrow if the amount of the objects fulfilling the definiens is smaller than the amount of the objects fulfilling the definiendum. This definition error happens when we connect the seven above mentioned marks with 'and'. Then we can read (in simpler terms) 'A resilient person is optimistic and accepts s and is solution oriented and regulates oneself and...'. The term 'and' expresses that a person has to show all seven marks to be considered as resilient. But maybe we want to call a person already resilient if she shows "only" six marks. Thus we would exclude objects which we want to have in our definiendum. The definition is too narrow and thus inadequate. ...This we do not want either!
The problem stays and I do not have a solution for it. For a definition it does not help us to say, we will call a person resilient when she shows e.g. five out of the seven marks. And even if you'd tried it (which is not possible for a definition) you'd have to answer some questions like: Which five marks out of the seven does the person have to show or can it be any out of the seven? Still we haven't discussed the issue of the interaction of the different marks. Does each combination of any five marks have different interaction schemes or how does it work?

The second wave

What we did so far was to try to find a list of exemplary resilient marks (the first wave of resilience research) and discuss this from a philosopher's perspective. Let's move on to what Glenn Richardson called the second wave of resilient research: “The second wave of resiliency inquiry was a pursuit to discover the process of attaining the identified resilient qualities.” The question we want to answer is: How are the resilient qualities acquired?

To answer this question we should take a look at Frederic Flach's proposed law of disruption and reintegration which in easy terms says that our "biopsychospiritual" homeostasis has to be disrupted or has to break down that we can reintegrate it or build it up again.

- By using the term 'reintegration' Flach means 'to reintegrate resiliently' which means to actually experience some insight or personal growth through the crisis and to attain a new, higher and more complex biopsychospiritual homeostasis as before. Resilient reintegration strengthens our resilient marks and our strengthened resilient marks ease future resilient reintegration.

- But the term 'reintegration' can also mean 'to reintegrate back to the (old) homeostasis' which just has the aim to reconstruct or rebuild the old circumstances. To take an example: If we lost our job and tried to reintegrate back to the old homeostasis we would mainly think about how to get our old job back and not look for other alternatives.

- 'Reintegration' can also mean 'to reintegrate with loss' which means that we recover from an irksome situation but instead of having experienced personal growth and strength we have lost some of our motivation, drive or hope.

- In the worst case the term 'reintegration' means 'to reintegrate dysfunctional' which means that we do not see another solution than e.g. drug abuse and/or destructive behavior.

So let's keep in mind that Flach means 'to reintegrate resiliently'. But for the sake of preciseness I want to take a closer look at Flach's argument for stating this law of disruption and reintegration and reconstruct it more formally. Flach says:

All living structures have a biological homeostatic force to keep themselves in a condition of

relative coherence. This potency keeps up the status quo or rebuilds it (reintegrates it) when it has been disrupted or disarranged.

We can take the body temperature as a good example. The normal body temperature is between 36°C and 37°C. If it's cold where we are our body will start shivering automatically to build up more energy and keep up the body temperature or we'll start sweating and thus cool down our body if we are on a 10 kilometer run.

Crucial at this point is that in this case Flach – who is a psychiatrist though a medical doctor – thinks of this biological homeostatic force as a reintegration back to the old homeostasis since our body reconstructs the "old", normal body temperature. This will not be the case when he talks about the psychological dimension.

The pattern of biological homeostasis can also be applied to the constitution of our personality (psychological dimension).

All living structures have a psychological homeostatic force to keep themselves in a condition of relative coherence. This potency keeps up the status quo or rebuilds it (reintegrates it) when it has been disrupted or disarranged.

In this case Flach does not speak of reintegration back to the old homeostasis – which we will see shortly – but of resilient reintegration. Thus the question pops to our minds whether Flach is not mixing up categories and is trying to use a phenomenon on the biological dimension to copy it onto a psychological dimension while not using the terms in the same meaning. Let's leave it at that...

For reasons of completeness we should also mention that the pattern of biological (and psychological) homeostasis can also be applied to the constitution of our society (social dimension) but this is not of interest for us now.

Upon all living structures works the force, potency or the pressure of change. This also means that the force of change works upon the force of homeostasis. There is a universal conflict between change and homeostasis or stability or balance.

Let's abstract from the metaphysical issue for now whether it's (scientifically) adequate to postulate a psychological homeostatic force and a universal force of change. We know it'll be problematic!

Flach says that it is essential, inevitable and necessary by nature that everybody will face such situations of adversity, stresses and strains and internal and external life prompts. Arguing for that Flach states that there are eight homeostatic structures in life (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, marriage, parenthood/single life, maturity and seniority) and it's naturally necessary to go through these. In that way it is more or less justified that he uses the term 'law'.

A person x resides in its psychological homeostasis (or in the extended version: in its biopsychospiritual homeostasis) iff the person has adapted physically, mentally and spiritually to a set of circumstances, living conditions or situations in life whether good or bad.

It is possible that a person x looses its biopsychospiritual homeostasis iff the person's
homeostasis has been disrupted by (in general) the force of change. The person loses its psychological balance, because she is not (yet) adapted (whether good or bad) to the new living conditions.

Of such a breakdown or disruption of one's homeostasis Flach says that it is necessary to be able to reintegrate, rebuild, restructure or reorganize your psychological homeostatic structure (maybe in other words: your personality). Further, maybe it is counterproductive for our mental health and personal maturity if we do not have to suffer in turbulences. Our living structure has to be disordered (law) and the disruption has to go along with pain (law). Thus we could also think to add some kind of vulnerability to our list of characteristic resilient marks which is interesting enough that the supposed contrary could be included in that list. Flach further, every time we have to learn something important which contradicts one of our loved assumptions, there has to be a disruption of our homeostasis. In other words:

The process of reintegration is for all living structures a task by nature to discard overage perspectives and perceptions for the benefit of new and more complex homeostatic structures, which are more adequate and suitable for our current and future life.

Speaking of changing living conditions and of adaption the thought of evolution is not far away. To make just a few remarks we should distinguish between biological, psychological and social or cultural evolution. The main reason to do this is to get clear that biological evolution targets on the survival of the individual or the race. Social or cultural evolution targets, I would say both on the aspect of survival (just think of Helmuth Plessner's Law of the Natural Artificiality of Man or Thomas Hobbes' bellum omnium contra omnes and the necessity of the construction of a powerful state) and on the other hand also on the aspect of the good or prosperous life. Still minimally remaining the aspect of survival on the dimension of psychological evolution (a depressive person might commit suicide) it though does play a minor role and psychological evolution is much more about bringing up the good life. In further elaboration I will also take Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's thoughts about evolution and complexity into account.

In the sense of saving results and to answer our second question how the identified resilient marks are or can be acquired we can summarize the following:

• "Resiliency then became defined as the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors."


• "Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors." (American Psychological Association).

• The way I want to use the term 'resilience' is that it is actually connected to some kind of personal growth and not "just" to recover or "bounce back" from an adversity. The APA uses this terminology
but I think a major point of a final concept of resilience gets lost otherwise. Also the German word 'Stehaufmännchen' might be misleading because it does not cover all aspects I'd like to have included.

The third wave

Following Glenn E. Richardson's article the question answered in the third wave of resiliency inquiry is: What and where is the energy source or motivation to reintegrate resiliently? And to mention it right away I do not want to follow this direction because of several reasons which I will mention shortly but not in detail since the purpose of my article is not to discuss Richardson's thoughts but to find a working definition for the term 'resilience'.

• If we ask the question 'What is the energy source to reintegrate resiliently?' and we then answer "The energy force that drives a person from survival to self-actualization may be called [...] resilience" then we haven't won anything. The energy force to reintegrate resiliently is resilience is circular and doesn't have any explanatory significance. The question we should face up to should be something similar to: How can we activate and/or strengthen the energy source to reintegrate resiliently? whereas we should mention that this discussion is always based on the hypothesis that there is such an energy force and that it is somehow necessary for resilience which is another issue to discuss. Also the question arises whether “resilience is a capacity in every soul”. If it is a capacity in every soul, then my question becomes even more important of how to activate this capacity and why it is not being activated in many cases.

• Secondly I want to mention that an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach – which Richardson says is the flag of the third wave – is good, helpful and promising. But also, and this is just a first impression, interdisciplinarity does not mean to just throw everything together and make it compatible somehow. I am asking myself if we are not overshoooting the mark having phrases like “The energy or force that drives a person from survival to self-actualization may be called quanta, chi, spirit, God, or resilience” and “[...] whether that force is called chi, collective unconscious, energy, oscillations, motivational force, neuropeptides, spirit, human essence, or resilience.”

The question how to activate the energy source to reintegrate resiliently already refers to the practical applications of a concept of resilience and also to the consequences or implications of resilience. Therefore it is e.g. an interesting question whether resilient people actually feel the need to be altruistic (Richardson).

As a third expanding definition proposal we can thus discuss the following:

A person x is resilient iff
the person x has the ability to cope with (future) irksome situations in a way that person x experiences some kind of personal growth and/or fortification.

11 Ibid.
Thus to summarize briefly we have been thinking about what characteristic marks a resilient person has, what the process of acquisition looks like (maybe in a broader sense we can say where it originates from) and in a third step what the implications are. This would give as a definition for the term 'resilience' in three parts each from a different perspective.

In further elaboration it will be necessary to think about the limits of resilience. Going back to Flach's analogy we see: We do have a biological homeostatic force to balance e.g. our body temperature. But this is valid only to a certain extend, if I am naked in the Arctic my biological homeostatic force won't keep me alive very long for all that. Also we can think about where the limit for resilient reintegration after catastrophes is. The variation there will probably be higher from person to person (than our freezing to death limit).

References

