



THEME 02

The resilience paradox

RESILIENCE

CORONA

PARADOX

All over the world, citizens, policy-makers, entrepreneurs and governments are asking themselves how they can become resilient. The corona crisis seems to be leading to an apotheosis of this popular ideal that has become prevalent in our society in the past decades. The notion of resilience therefore teaches us something about the spirit of the times and the way we relate to the world and ourselves. There are valuable aspects to the ideal, but dangers lie in the unilateral fixation on resilience.

Our observations

- There is no clear definition of the term resilience. As is elaborately discussed in [this article](#) by correspondent Lynn Berger, it's become a key concept in all sorts of domains and used to refer to [several different things](#). A very generic description would be that resilience is the ability to continue to function as usual during times of adversity. When further specification is required – and this is where disagreement generally arises – the state of equilibrium (homeostasis) of a system is emphasized. Resilience is about optimal temporary adjustment to an external stressor (allostasis) with the subsequent rapid recovery of the original homeostasis or the establishment of a new homeostasis.
- The term resilience has long been popular in psychology and mental healthcare. In [psychological resilience](#), the emphasis is on mental defensibility: the ability to successfully respond to significant setbacks, traumatic events or other stressors. Mentally resilient people are able to adapt well and quickly become their old selves again.
- In ecology, resilience originally referred to an ecosystem's ability to adapt to severe disruptions in climate, such as enduring drought or heavy rainfall, without losing its equilibrium in the long run. Nowadays, the possibility that ecosystems can eventually become stronger or reach [new states of equilibrium](#) is more frequently highlighted as well.
- Resilience also plays an increasingly large role for entrepreneurs, investors, economists and overseers. They regard resilience mostly as the ability to respond adequately to downward cycles, loss of demand or recession. Since the financial crisis, banks are regularly subjected to stress tests to establish their resilience. And organizations are focusing on the redundancy and buffers of their balance, diversification of the [value chain](#) and strength of [cash flows](#), under the guise of resilience.
- Authorities around [cities](#) and countries are [not impervious](#) to the ideal. All around the world, [chief resilience officers](#) are appointed, tasked with ascertaining whether their city is in fact resilient. Rotterdam, for example, recently launched its strategy for becoming a [resilient city](#).

Connecting the dots

A crisis is making the call for resilience more urgent, but resilience was on the rise in our society long before the corona crisis.

First, this rise and popularity of resilience can be understood as an inevitable side effect of a different way of looking at the world. Resilience goes hand in hand with a world view characterized by [complexity and uncertainties](#). This world view is the result of a [scientific transformation](#) but is also linked to the processes of globalization and the real or subjective threats of natural disasters, economic crisis and terrorism. Resilience is part of perception of life in which we feel [as if we're in a permanent state of crisis](#). In our hyperconnected, complex and uncertain world, unexpected dangers and disrupting events always loom, making the call for resilience all the more urgent.

But we haven't just changed our perception of the world, we've also come to view ourselves in a different light. After WW II, the ideal of resilience mainly gained popularity due to psychology and ecology, but it also has roots in the biological thinking of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For Darwin, adjustment to living conditions was of course already one of the most important drivers of evolution. And in the early twentieth century, there was [renewed interest in the self-regulating ability](#) of organisms in relation to their environment. To survive, systems may temporarily become unbalanced due to external influences, but they also have a natural inclination to restore equilibrium. Scientific insight into this mechanism has allowed us to help "nature's" self-regulating system to bounce back. This applies to our own bodies, but this point of view has also proved valuable in understanding, for example, a political or economic "body". This new understanding of ourselves and the world has made it possible for us to remain healthy during uncertain times, because we increasingly understand *how* to deal with stressors without having to predict or control the future. With a resilient system, it doesn't matter what happens, it can stand a bit of turbulence. We can learn mental skills that increase resilience, apply the right liquidity buffers to companies' balance sheets or increase the biodiversity of an ecosystem, to enable these systems to better absorb shocks and restore themselves to a state of equilibrium (homeostasis) or [even emerge stronger from the battle](#).

The ideal of resilience therefore undeniably have valuable aspects. But in the past years, there has been increasing criticism of the term, because it's become a buzzword, used with abandon, often making it unclear what exactly the term refers to and how to measure it. Besides this debate about its definition and its overly loose application, there are a number of more substantial points of criticism.

The resilience of individuals, for instance, is not always

beneficial to the community or the world. This became clear in a [study](#) into the emotional consequences of extreme weather Lynn Berger refers to. This study shows that persons that are resilient are less inclined to do something about the causes of extreme weather. Scientists have dubbed this the resilience paradox: individual resilience may be at odds with the resilience of a group or community and can even [thwart](#) it. Resilience and indifference are therefore dangerously close on the same continuum.

Another objection to resilience comes from, among others, psychologist Paul Verhaeghe. He has pointed out that the ideal of resilience is frequently employed by policymakers, organizations and psychologists to increase individuals' resilience, without due consideration of [individuals' societal context](#). If a work environment leads to chronic stress, it's convenient for organizations to increase the resilience of individuals. However, if they succeed in containing the burn-out epidemic, they will be less inclined to investigate the potentially unhealthy nature of the working culture. Health becomes largely one's own responsibility. This also results in a resilience paradox: resilience goes hand in hand with systems thinking, but at the same time, it can also be [counterproductive to finding systemic solutions](#).

Finally, there is the more cultural-philosophical criticism that resilience may also contribute to a hostile or tense, distant stance towards the world. By constantly focusing on our own resilience, we come to regard the world and the other more often and more consistently as a hostile source of danger, uncertainties and potential stressors. We find ourselves in a [permanent and rather stressful state of alert](#). Healthy protection against the world could then descend into unhealthy [isolation from the world](#), causing us to detach from others and the communities we belong to.

Oddly enough, this excessive protection actually makes us vulnerable and our [mental health](#) may suffer from this, as shown in a study into the effects of [overprotective parents on children](#). It results in another resilience paradox: protection from one thing makes us vulnerable to other things. We endow ourselves and our children with a protective shield, but this makes it difficult for us to achieve intimacy, build trusting relationships and it makes us vulnerable to depression and other mental illnesses.

Resilience is a valuable and interesting concept – especially during the current corona crisis. But it's important to practice moderation in working on our resilience and not to lose sight of the pitfalls of unilateral fixation on this popular ideal. A one-sided focus on resilience during the corona crisis can also lead to indifference, further individualization of care and a hostile and distrusting relationship to each other in our everyday lives.

Implications

- **We arrive in a difficult period of the corona crisis where the resilience paradox is clearly visible. The first phase of urgency and common spirit is behind us, but we are far from normal. In the "new normal", social distancing is making us as society resilient in the short term, but we risk a lot for the long-term in terms of mental health. For instance, loneliness is bad for the immune system and an isolated life reduces life expectancy drastically.**
- **The corona crisis reveals the resilience paradox is prevalent in the economy as well. Since the financial crisis, the attention for the stability of the financial system has grown. Banks which become to big make the system vulnerable, i.e. the too big to fail mechanism. Nevertheless, the economy as a whole is currently struggling with the same problem. Big companies have – to guarantee the preservation of existing jobs – an implicit bailout in their operations. The focus on stability of these companies in normal times is making us vulnerable during economic turmoil.**