



# Narratives of Resilience: Coping with Adversity

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## ABSTRACT

Resilience is more than an individual trait; it is a narrative deeply embedded within cultural, social, and historical contexts. This paper explores how resilience is narrated by individuals coping with adversity, with a particular focus on Sierra Leone's post-conflict recovery. Drawing from storytelling sessions involving diverse groups including ex-child soldiers this study examines how societal norms, cultural worldviews, and personal beliefs interact within resilience narratives. It analyzes the theoretical foundations of resilience, coping mechanisms employed by young adults, and the role of support systems. Case studies highlight the complex ways resilience is culturally framed and personally lived. Challenges in resilience discourse, including misconceptions about resilience as a stable trait, are also addressed. By applying narrative theory, this paper illuminates how personal experiences of trauma are woven into socially constructed stories that enable healing and adaptation. Ultimately, it argues for a dynamic, context-sensitive understanding of resilience that embraces individual agency while acknowledging systemic influences.

**Keywords:** Resilience Narratives, Coping Mechanisms, Cultural Context, Sierra Leone, Post-Conflict Recovery, Trauma and Healing, Narrative Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

Resilience often features a narrative aspect, recounting how individuals overcome adversity. Narratives reflect perceptions and provide rationale for thoughts and behaviors. This paper explores the influence of social observations on narratives of trauma and distress, specifically concerning resilience in Sierra Leone. It questions the cultural messages and societal norms surrounding resilience and whether individual stories align with cultural worldviews. Discrepancies may arise from personal beliefs that conflict with cultural norms or touch on pressing societal issues. Resilience is contextualized within culture, influenced by broader factors beyond individual experiences. Sierra Leone, emerging from a brutal ten-year civil war marked by violence and exploitation, initiated a project aimed at addressing trauma on a societal level through storytelling sessions involving diverse groups from rebels to youth. Evaluations considered social context, but subsequent analysis focused on individual narratives. This paper features a resilience story from a seventeen-year-old ex-child soldier, highlighting how social context shapes the narrative's form, style, and content. What cultural messages and societal norms are present in these stories? How do discrepancies between personal and cultural worldviews affect resilience narratives, particularly when addressing intense societal themes? [1, 2].

### Understanding Resilience

Resilience has become a catchword in children's services, primarily referring to building children's fortitude to withstand disadvantage and thrive. At its best, asset-focused work that bridges risk and resilience research harnesses the presence of children's risks to create a safe developmental trajectory. At its worst, however, this work cultivates evasive silos preventing joined up systems children's services from identifying and ameliorating chronic, damaging social conditions. Governments in the developed world are implementing resilience-building policies to accompany significant financial expenditure on preventative approaches. More often than not, such services require individuals, families, communities and agencies to demonstrate resilience to secure assistance, implicitly obscuring the responsibility of

systems to be collectively resilient. This chapter mobilises a range of critiques of recent resilience talk and practices to inform culture-specific understanding of resilience. Resilience is variably defined. Most typically, it is the property of systems to withstand disturbance or continue to develop despite such perturbations. It describes how a system recovers from adversity. The aim has been to shift the focus of inquiry from defining the properties of “bad” or failing systems to exploring the factors, processes and conditions that protect individuals and systems from breaking down. Accessing the so-called resilience literature is modeling to understand how to create the conditions and processes that support an effective response to change. While frequently discussed as an individual attribute, resilience is also conceptualised as the product of social processes. This extends to the agency of parents and professionals to create safe spaces for children to develop resilience or mitigate risk. In these contexts, resilience is a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Building a comprehensive resilience-based research agenda is difficult to achieve in practice. Furthermore, when models of resilience are empirically probed, methodological tensions arise between researchers and practitioners. In child services, resilience is often measured using some combination of risk and protective factors. However, an ongoing tension exists with how to distinguish between risk and protective processes. Protective processes ameliorate the impact of risk, whereas risk processes elevate the likelihood of developing a problem. Necessary reliance on attributes often conflated as the anchors of resilience complicates an integrated approach. An implicit challenge to mainstream discussions of personal agency and the legitimacy of access to resources further limits a holistic operationalization of resilience [3, 4].

#### **Definition of Resilience**

Psychologists define resilience as the ability to adapt positively in the face of adversity, rather than as an extraordinary achievement. It often involves bouncing back from challenges and threats. Research on resilience, which began in the 1970s, focuses on the risk factors individuals face and the protective factors that help them adjust positively. This shift arose when researchers observed that “at-risk” children could adapt healthily, leading to a new direction in health studies. Antonovsky proposed the 'salutogenesis' model, focusing on wellness origins instead of disease causes. Resilience encompasses various domains, including psychological, social, ecological, and even corporate resilience in competitive contexts. Definitions vary significantly across academic disciplines, with psychology viewing resilience as both a trait and an outcome linked to adaptation and coping with adversity. Resilience scales measure these traits by examining the risk factors ('r') experienced and protective factors ('p') that facilitate positive adjustment. A study of early adolescents highlights how they cope with significant life events and the influence of peers and teachers as protective factors in this process. Additionally, it assesses the congruence between resilience research in psychology and coping research in education [5, 6].

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This section provides an overview of resilience and coping definitions used in this research project. Resilience is defined as an outcome variable related to posttraumatic well-being, while coping refers to processes and strategies for managing stress. The discussion concludes with contextual factors impacting coping strategies, highlighting the need for consideration of these factors in understanding, research, and intervention. Resilience research has grown significantly in the last two decades, overshadowing posttraumatic growth as a central topic in trauma studies. However, this proliferation of interest has also led to criticism surrounding the term's use, as it often serves as a catch-all for anything perceived positively in the aftermath of adversity. The term frequently refers to external contextual factors, confusing when applied outside similar settings. Zeidner and Endler advocate for a person-situation model to clarify post-trauma resilience, distinguishing it from the psychological concept of coping. The varied interpretations of 'resilience' in literature can obscure critical nuances that are often overlooked in contemporary discussions about resilience. Although explicit definitions of coping are scarce, the consensus defines it as a process for managing stress. There are differing opinions on whether discrepancy should be the central concept in defining coping, where coping mechanisms emerge in response to disturbances threatening the organism's integrity. A schedule of responses to this discrepancy forms, which is tested against reality; if ineffective, new coping methods may be developed. Alternatively, avoidance of distress through concealment, lack of confrontation, or irrelevant thoughts may be viewed as automatic or repressive defenses [7, 8].

#### **Coping Mechanisms**

As young adults, we have observed and experienced a multitude of situations that have shaped us. Some now seem rather mundane, while others had an impact on our future decisions, our relationships with peers, family, or professors, or our mental health. Facing adversity makes us realize that developing identity is a process, not just a product of who we are now. It forces us to analyze the motives stemming

from an experience that affected how we perceived our “normal” lives and how it altered social interactions or expectations for ourselves. Each story is personal, specific, and solidified by memories. Growing up with addiction, anxiety, or trauma has implications across the development spectrum, but for this document, attention will be given to periods of young and emerging adulthood. This documentation will evaluate various narratives of adversity and the resilience stemming from that experience through the lens of participant interview excerpts and applied academic theory. The young adults who participated in this project ranged in age from 18 to 23. Adversity narratives were wide-ranging and touched on themes of personal and familial loss, precarity, trauma stemming from social conditions rooted in mental illness or poverty, family dynamics, health issues, the journey of immigration and its societal implications, intimate partner violence, and recovery from drug addiction. Engaging with these narratives made it clear that adversity looked different for everyone involved—overall circumstances, experiences emerging from those circumstances, and how individuals perceived and provided meaning for their experiences. Meanwhile, each narrative examined a person’s vulnerability stemming from adversity. Society places expectations for young adults emerging from hopeful and equivocal circumstances to navigate the world and become “successful.” However, growing up with addiction, mental illness, or trauma is not the expected narrative and is not accounted for in what young adulthood looks like. As these narratives unfolded, it became evident how shared experiences and feelings coming from adversity, coping strategies stemming from that resilience, and ongoing coping were parallels in all cases, though the details were unique [9, 10].

### **Narrative Theory**

Narrative theory explains how individuals understand experiences, particularly those that disrupt normal expectations of safety. The once-difficult experiences transform into resilient stories, which can be analyzed through three tenets: story, person, and context. Resilience is framed as discourse—a narrative unfolds an experience over time, incorporating causal elements, plots, and characters shaped by perceptions of storytelling. Variations in narratives appear in both oral and written formats. Analyzing narratives goes deeper than mere structure, focusing on the formal traits that grant narratives agency, like tropes that enhance emotional impact. Narratives also reflect social constructions. Individuals are multidimensional, shaped by roles, identities, histories, and experiences that arise from interactions within various contexts. This understanding embeds people in cultural frameworks, navigating through ignorance of their cultural norms. Resilience is interpreted based on socially constructed identities, which inform how experiences are understood and valued. People engage with stories of resilience as individuals and within broader cultural narratives, influenced by competing resilience discourses. Analyzing the narratives of resilience within the context of personhood helps uncover their evolving nature over time and across situations. Furthermore, narrative theory posits that resilience is contextually embedded. Experiences are not isolated; they rely on historical, social, and discursive frameworks. A comprehensive understanding of any narrative involves recognizing both the narrative itself and the situational factors surrounding its telling. Narratives exist within a broader landscape of cultural, social, and political discourses regarding resilience, shaping how these stories are conceptualized and communicated [11, 12].

### **Case Studies**

As communities worldwide are impacted by conflict and natural disaster, there is a growing body of research focusing on individual resilience following traumatic experiences. However, there remains an apparent lack of research on the mechanisms that aid African resilience following adversity. The data collection and analysis process involved gathering and interpreting qualitative data from participants. Factors that assist in the maintenance and development of resilience following experiences of adversity were highlighted. In-depth interviews were conducted with six subjects. These individuals, selected as a result of their experiences in Africa, discussed a traumatic or adverse experience and then related how those experiences have contributed to their present-day resilience or coping skills. The proposed concept of resilience, the development of a semi-structured interview guide, and the interpretation of results with the assistance of a qualitative data analysis program were outlined. Finally, the implications of this study for nursing and the limitations of qualitative research were discussed. The above-mentioned excerpts provide a brief overview of this paper’s research study as a whole and information about why it was important to identify the various factors contributing to this particular population’s regrowth following experiences of adversity. The first paragraph serves as an introduction to the remaining sections. A literature review summarizing the research related to various factors contributing to resilience and coping globally is included. The remaining sections discuss the methods of data collection and analysis employed in the research study. Participant profiles, as well as themes derived from participant responses,

are presented. Finally, the strengths and limitations of this study are discussed, and nursing implications are presented [13, 14].

### **Challenges to Resilience**

Despite increasing awareness about resilience as a dynamic process, the concept is still frequently misinterpreted. Some prevailing misconceptions about resilience, its processes, and outcomes will be unpacked, drawing on current evidence. A careful consideration of these challenges may guide researchers in their work with resilience and may inform policies and interventions to promote positive adaptation among youth and their families. Resilience is often misconceived as a stable outcome or trait that can be possessed by certain individuals or contexts. The term is frequently used to characterise people or communities in ways that assume that they exhibit resilience regardless of time, situation, or context. Also prevalent is the assumption that resilience must be accompanied by the absence of risk exposure or negative outcomes. Resilience is best understood as a process of negotiating for resources to promote positive adaptation in contextually defined environments. Resilience is a process of setting or negotiating for relevant resources so that positive adaptation to significantly adverse experiences is possible. The negotiation for resources must be at the level of the competency of the actor and for them to be of probable utility. A process is constituted by a series of connected events or actions, whereby these transitions are governed by interpersonal and contextual factors. Despite the multitude of cross-cultural definitions, resilience processes typically consist of the negotiation for resources in contexts that are intermittently supportive and adverse. Such resources advance a positive or protective adaptation to adversity. Resilience is contextually defined, either by the standards of the reference group or against the aggression of the adversities faced. Individual behaviour must be understood against the challenges, changes, and inputs to mankind's biological system since the early days of humanity [15, 16].

### **The Role of Support Systems**

Supportive relationships provide social support, affection, and nurturing, while current or future jobs can offer integration and discourage delinquency. Reducing stigma towards emotional issues and being aware of stressors like poverty can aid individual coping. Social rejection can harm self-esteem long-term, but improved ties with popular peers can help mitigate this in supportive schools. Connections with peers who reject negative behaviors act as protective factors. Emotional encouragement involves expressing care, affection, and comfort, which supports students' coping by recognizing and labeling their emotions, aiding caregivers with strategies for emotional support, and equipping friends for peer assistance. Providing emotional reinforcement may come positively with encouragement, without major issues needing resolution. Cognitive guidance supplements coping skills by helping individuals assess stressors, solve problems, and avoid avoidance strategies. Teaching new coping skills through modeling, rehearsal, and feedback can be effective; for instance, showing videos of peers solving problems and encouraging similar strategies. Emotional guidance focuses on managing reactions to stress, which can be either supportive or undermining. Supervisors may promote diet and exercise and offer relaxation classes to alleviate anxiety and enhance resilience. On the contrary, minimizing distress or providing misleading information can hinder coping. The sequential model suggests that selected coping strategies reflect previously available options. Interpretative biases may lead to inaccuracies about oneself and one's problems, with external locus of control beliefs fostering a sense of helplessness in troublesome relationships [17, 18].

### **Resilience In Different Contexts**

Discussions on resilience after war connect endurance and broader structures of social dominance, emphasizing the socio-political environment and narratives. Resilience and resistance are co-creative, rooted in local to global contexts. Resilience discourses construct their recipients while reflecting narrators' cultural contexts and power dynamics. Narrators utilize their creative subjectivity to reorganize social discourses based on their needs, making resilience narratives coherent and transformative. Scaling up as a metaphor in global health and external contexts shifts representations of resilience from socio-cognitive to affective. Indeterminate yet life-affirming spaces emerge, sharing norms and resources for collective resilience while revealing global feelings of policy disillusionment and vulnerability. Emphasizing biographical resonance, particularly empowering widowhood, has fostered collective action in various contexts. Coping with risks is primarily a psychological task; resilience rhetoric focuses on improving personal control over one's mind and experiences. An agile, self-moderating mind should avoid overestimating trauma and instead actively create and upgrade resilient worldviews and actions [19, 20].

### **Promoting Resilience**

In contrast to the perspective of “resilience as a common trait,” some researchers favor the “multisystemic resilience” viewpoint. Resilience, being diverse, cannot be examined uniformly across various topics. Understanding the complex processes leading to favorable outcomes in adversity is challenging. Examining protection and risk factors and their impact on resilience is more straightforward but arguably less engaging. A deeper, multisystemic comprehension of resilience dynamics could promote positive adaptations in challenging situations, guiding communities in addressing specific adversities such as violence, health crises, or poverty. Efforts to enhance resilience in children and families should consider the various contexts that foster resilience. Research on protective factors necessary for children’s adaptive functioning amid adversities needs to account for factors from micro to macro levels. Children facing severe psychosocial issues are impacted by various stressors. Resilience likely emerges from both alleviating these stressors and fostering positive adaptations through available resources. Studying the diversity of risk, adversity, and protective factors—and their interactions—is essential for creating multi-level interventions to support children, families, and communities against external stressors [21, 22].

### **Research Methodologies**

**A Narrative Approach: How a Spontaneous Narrative Methodology Emerged.** This research is grounded in collective narratives, but fieldwork unveiled a complementary narrative methodology. Initially, documentary screenings of personal stories addressing adversity were sought to stimulate community dialogue about pandemic response resources. The aim was to use these narratives in a discussion group, but participants opted for public screenings due to swift moral debates on hero construction and story consumption. The focus shifted to how people cope, emphasizing resilience rather than embedding beneficial personal tales in collective memory. This led to a realization: the surprising elements of these stories related more to their portrayal of “normal” lives than extraordinary occurrences. A desire to retell some inspirational narratives emerged. Delving deeper, these narratives encompass greater meaning beyond mere experiences. They reflect a narrative of survival and resistance, collectively aimed at countering adverse forces. To explore how these narratives unfold, two methods of retelling were identified. The first involves everyday narratives focusing on communal persistence, while the second employs public storytelling, featuring “I Fall Down, I Get Up” narratives alongside a trigger-finding slideshow promoting community safety and participation. This final text discusses these interconnected narrative forms designed to evoke and embody safety and participation. It invites future collaborative narrative events, fostering similar community engagement [23, 24].

### **Future Directions in Resilience Research**

Resilience is the ability of individuals or communities to positively respond to adversities. Rapid environmental changes can create new risks, posing threats to health and well-being. While some communities adapt successfully, others struggle. Research on resilience examines factors in both community environments and individual psychology, drawing from diverse fields like psychology, public health, social work, and anthropology. Various concepts such as acceptance, adaptation, and self-efficacy contribute to understanding resilience. Narratives of resilience often emerge from horrific events, emphasizing learning, coping skills, social connections, and advocacy. While studies from low- and middle-income countries are increasing, they remain underrepresented in resilience literature. Collaboration between low- and high-income regions is common but may also result in hegemony in definitions and methodologies. As health risks are both culturally universal and specific, addressing the needs of communities is essential to overcoming challenges [25, 26].

### **CONCLUSION**

Resilience narratives are not mere recounting of survival but are active constructions shaped by cultural norms, societal expectations, and personal agency. In contexts such as Sierra Leone, where collective trauma intersects with individual experiences, narratives of resilience reveal both alignment with and deviations from dominant cultural worldviews. Understanding resilience as a dynamic, culturally embedded process rather than a fixed trait offers a richer, more nuanced perspective on coping and adaptation. Personal resilience is intertwined with social support systems and collective memory, and it is influenced by broader socio-political structures. Addressing misconceptions about resilience and focusing on narrative, context, and systemic factors enables the development of more holistic, effective support systems for individuals and communities coping with profound adversity. This study underscores the importance of listening to and valuing diverse stories of resilience as critical pathways to individual and societal healing.



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