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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Pandemic: The Idea of Social Resilience

By Norman Vasu

SYNOPSIS

The impact of COVID-19 has exposed challenges to the concept of social resilience as a guiding principle steering how society can respond positively to crises.

COMMENTARY

IT IS almost three months since the spread of COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). There are many lenses with which the scale of this cataclysmic event may be understood. For example, its impact may be understood through sobering metrics such as the current global death toll of [368,100](#); its negative impact on [global economics](#); its [destroying of social trust](#); and its impact on deteriorating [mental health](#) and increasing [domestic violence](#) to name a few.

Given the scale of the political, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, this may be an opportune time to think through the manner in which social resilience has been conceived as a guiding principle through which society can respond to crises positively.

Social Resilience Defined

The concept of resilience has been employed in varied fields of research in the physical sciences. Understood broadly, resilience refers to an entity's ability return to its original state after exposure to external shocks. There are multiple examples of the term's applicability to the material world.

For example, it is applied to describe a motorcycle's helmet ability to store and return energy without experiencing permanent distortion as well as the capacity of critical infrastructure to remain functioning after a cyberattack.

Beyond the material world, over the past decade and a half, a growing research has emerged that applies the adjective 'social' to resilience. By doing so, the desire here is to conceive social resilience as a guiding principle for how society is to be organised to respond positively to a crisis.

In the research, a positive response to crisis is to return to 'the way things were' post haste or a rapid adaptation to the crisis where society, in modern parlance, arrives at a 'new normal'.

COVID-19 and Social Resilience: Three Issues

The ongoing experience of the outbreak has exposed three significant issues to be thought through for social resilience to continue to offer utility as a guiding principle to overcome crises.

Returning to normal or a new normal?

The challenge of COVID-19 has perhaps resolved the paradox within the concept of social resilience. The paradox in social resilience lies in its equal end states of striving for a return to normalcy while also being accepting of adaptation and change. In the sense of the former, it signifies toughness and resistance.

In the sense of the latter, it also represents suppleness and flexibility. Hence, social resilience encourages, on the one hand, society's strive to overcome challenges with its tenets and institutions – the 'normal' – remaining intact. On the other hand, social resilience also promotes society's ability to cope with a demanding situation by modifying in innovative and novel ways.

The virus has shown resistance to change demanding for a return to normalcy is doubtful at best. Instead, if social resilience is to continue to be a guiding principle of worth, societies should accept change as inevitable.

At the risk of committing the [predictive fallacy](#) of assuming how things *should* be *will* become the norm, it can be stated it is highly likely that behavioural changes such as social distancing, the wearing of face masks, and the different degrees of monitoring of movement instituted owing to the virus will become the 'new normal'. Unlike Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, heels cannot be clicked to return to the comfort of an unchanged past.

Different elements of resilience do not work together

The reaction of members of society have shown that there is a possible friction between individual resilience and social resilience. For example, the hoarding of [food](#) and [toilet paper](#) in the early months of the pandemic was, as distasteful as it may be to state, a sign of [individual resilience](#). Individuals who conducted such actions were

performing somewhat reasonable [mimetic isomorphism](#) – the mimicking of behaviour at times of uncertainty.

They were aping the action of others as they viewed such action essential for survival in a crisis. However, their action impacted negatively upon society as a whole, especially the [vulnerable](#). Hence, while intuitively, the resilient individual and the resilience of society appear interrelated in a positive manner, it should be appreciated that the relationship is not one of linear addition.

An increase in the number of resilient individuals may not lead to a corresponding increase in social resilience. Instead, there is a need to balance an individual's ability to be resourceful and adaptable to challenging circumstances with a community's ability to do the same.

Social resilience is exhausting

With the idea of bouncing back to normalcy promptly or adapting to a new state quickly, time has always been an important element of the principle of social resilience. Indeed, the length of lockdowns to halt the spread of the virus has brought to the fore how social resilience is intimately linked with time.

With a growing [frustration of lockdowns](#) and its [debilitating effects](#) around the world emerging, the epidemic has uncovered how social resilience is a finite behavioural and attitudinal well that cannot be drawn from indefinitely.

While most have accepted the positive benefits of an adherence to lockdowns, these lockdowns have brought to light the limits of collective endurance. [Lockdown fatigue](#) has emerged as an issue in society and this fatigue suggests effective measures to a crisis have to adjust to the level of compliance society at large is willing to endure.

Moving Forward

Does the concept of social resilience as a bulwark against crises weather the COVID-19 storm? Arguably, it does. At its crux, social resilience offers hope in the form expressed by Albert Camus in *The Fall*, “sometimes, carrying on, just carrying on, is the superhuman achievement.”

While society undoubtedly has to carry on, what is required is a reconsideration of how the principle of resilience should be understood. The principle does not offer a panacea to all issues as change cannot be resisted, resilience is multidimensional, and the ability to conform to the demands of being resilient is finite.

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