

# *Psychological resilience for climate change transformation: relational, differentiated and situated perspectives*

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## **Psychological resilience for climate change transformation: Relational, differentiated and situated perspectives**

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### **Highlights**

- Psychological and sociological perspectives on mental health responses to violence and trauma provide novel insights into individual transformation for climate change
- The ability of an individual to transform their thought patterns and behaviours in the context of climate change is likely to be differentiated, because it is layered on existing histories that influence current day resilience
- Individuals cannot transform by themselves, rather the ability to transform is relational and dependent on external resources
- Being resilient is stressful and for individuals with the most serious histories of trauma becoming resilient may, itself, be transformational
- Arguments framed around gender have wider implications for understanding resilience

### **Abstract**

Responding to climate change requires radical transformations in social, political, economic and social-ecological systems. Recent research has argued that individuals can drive transformations at scale through changes in beliefs and values that affect political action. We draw from sociological and psychological perspectives on mental health outcomes among survivors of violence and abuse, taking a gendered approach, to show how potential for individual transformation is differentially constructed through personal life trajectories and intersectional social relations. We also argue that being resilient and transforming is stressful and involves significant personal costs. In integrating this psychological perspective, we suggest a more equitable way to define the individual's role in, and their responsibility for, sustainable societal-scale shifts for climate change.

### **1. Introduction**

Transformational responses to climate change are those that challenge the underlying political and economic structures to produce systems with radically different characteristics, rather than working within business as usual. While the objective is clear, there is still very little literature on the *how* of transformation. This paper draws on psychological understandings of resilience, utilising findings from those working with survivors of violence and trauma, to further understanding on how to encourage and support the difficult psychological work that will be involved in driving transformational responses to climate change. Here we address both transformational adaptation that address the root causes of

vulnerability (e.g. Pelling, 2011), and transformations within the political economy for emission reductions to meet the 1.5 degree target of the Paris Agreement (e.g. O'Brien, 2018; Leichenko & O'Brien 2019).

The role of subjective factors such as world views and ideologies, and personal reflection in driving that change, is particularly understudied (O'Brien, 2021). There is a growing body of work that invokes *conscientização* (Conscientisation; Freire 1970) as a lens on the need for individuals to first recognise, and actively resist, unsustainable societal, political, economic and other systemic norms (e.g. Blackburn 2018; O'Brien 2020). Conscientisation is critical reflexivity, and through this process people can become agents of, rather than barriers to, change (O'Brien 2018).

In this paper, we draw lessons from psychological understandings of resilience to inform the transformational adaptation agenda, particularly one which centres on the individual as an agent of change. We do so through cross-disciplinary engagement with psychological and sociological scholarship on resilience. Specifically, literature analysing the everyday contexts of domestic violence and mental health responses amongst survivors of gendered violence and trauma. To date, there is limited integration of psychological understanding of resilience in climate or sustainability scholarship, and even more limited understanding of its gendered dimensions (Jordan 2019).

Thus, our findings point to violence against women as one form of pre-existing trauma that creates an uneven baseline for transformations in the face of a changing climate. However, research on psychological resilience to stress and trauma also provides a lens through which to understand the capacity for, and enablers of, personal transformation under difficult and oppressive conditions. First, psychological understandings of resilience remind us that people are already coping with a range of stresses and individuals may already be showing resilience to past (and ongoing) traumatic events. Calls for transformation must acknowledge the variable baseline on top of which future transformations are layered. Second, psychological readings of resilience indicate that for individuals with severe histories of trauma, the process of becoming resilient could, itself, be transformational. Third, the body of research provides insight into how people under high levels of stress and trauma can transform their thought patterns and, thus, their situation.

## **1. Background**

### *Resilience to climate change*

Across multiple disciplines and sectors, resilience is used to describe the ability of people, communities and whole systems to return to normal functioning after a shock. The 'systemic meta-stability' objective of resilience has made the concept a core framing for responding to the challenges of climate change (Grove & Chandler 2017; 79), and the biological roots of resilience thinking mean the concept lends itself to sustainability objectives. However, there are limits to understanding social systems according to the principles of evolutionary biology (Béné et al 2018).

Further, the broad application of resilience has been criticised due to the ambiguity it generates and its uncritically positive normative stance (Biesbroek et al 2017). The concept has legitimised the transfer of responsibility to individuals as part of a wider neoliberal

political economy (Chandler & Reid 2016) and its emphasis on recovery and ‘bouncing back’ is overly conservative, preoccupied with protecting the status quo rather than challenging underlying power structures (White and O’Hare 2014). However, resilience is an interdisciplinary concept that is widely articulated in other fields. The concept has particularly strong traction in psychology, describing an individual’s ability to maintain normal psychological and emotional functioning during and after traumatic events (Bonanno 2004; Nath and Pradhan 2012; Bourbeau 2018).

#### *Transformation for climate change*

Transformational adaptation is a progressive alternative to resilience within climate change adaptation, focusing on structural change and challenging power dynamics that reproduce exposure and vulnerabilities to climate risks (Mustafa 2003; Kates 2012; Fazey et al 2018). It sits at the opposite end of the spectrum from forms of adaptation that involve resisting, coping with, and accommodation to, change and stress (Bene & Doyen 2018). O’Brien (2018) mapped out three interrelated loci for transformation to meet the 1.5 degree Paris goal: practical action that involves changing behaviours and technical responses, political action to address structures and systems that prevent that change, and personal action that shifts world views and ideologies to change how people view systems and structures. In the context of psychology, transformation represents the ability of individuals to change how they see themselves in relation to their environment, and use the resources (people, networks and services) around them to leave their situation.

However, the concept of transformation is not without its challenges. Questions remain on how to define ‘systemic change’ at an everyday scale and issues surround who decides on the type of transformation that is desirable (O’Brien 2012, Blackburn 2018). Further, transformation loses traction (and is vulnerable to co-option) if it calls for aspirational objectives without mapping meaningful pathways to their achievement (Blythe et al 2018).

#### *Violence against women*

Whilst men are also victims of inter-personal violence (e.g. Dutton, 2012), women are more likely to experience repeated and severe forms of abuse including, but not limited to, sexual violence. Women experience higher rates of repeated victimisation and are much more likely to be seriously hurt (Walby & Towers 2017; Walby & Allen 2004), or killed, than male victims of domestic abuse (ONS, 2019). Further, women are more likely to experience higher levels of fear and are more likely to be subjected to coercive and controlling behaviours (Dobash & Dobash 2004; Hester 2013; Myhill, 2017).

Violence against women, including sexual violence, occurs in contexts where unequal gender norms, racism, social class inequalities, and discrimination based on sexuality, negatively influence the social conditions in which people live (Moletsane & Theron 2017). Globally, social norms supporting violence as a means of conflict resolution, and the unequal relational and societal position of women, are associated with violence against women and girls (e.g. Le Masson et al 2019). Further, discrimination based on women’s perceived status in society may undermine abused women’s resilience by negatively impacting on their willingness to disclose violence experiences and seek help (Yoshioka et al 2003; Morchain et al 2015; Opondo et al 2016).

*Gendered psychological resilience and climate change*

Violence against women is an everyday risk and chronic stress that will be worsened by the impacts of climate change (e.g. Schumacher et al 2010). The negative impacts of climate change disproportionately affect women due to social hierarchies and pre-existing vulnerability (Arora-Jonsson 2011), and disasters and slow-onset climate events have been associated with increased rates of domestic violence (Stork et al 2015). Violence against women can result from situations where men rely on negative coping mechanisms, such as alcoholism, when unable to meet social norms of providing for the household and when experiencing feelings of helplessness and lack of control (First et al 2017). Psycho-social support has become a key dimension of disaster and humanitarian response; acknowledging that without individual resilience, initiatives to rebuild communities and livelihoods cannot be sustainable (Murphy et al 2018).

Yet, Jordan (2019) demonstrates that resilience is inadequate for understanding gendered responses to climate stress in Bangladesh, highlighting the inability of the concept to incorporate intersecting identities and power relations. Thus, there are pressing reasons to look at climate change transformation from the perspective of the particular experience, and strengths, of women. A feminist lens has previously highlighted the roots of structural inequalities and shown that effective transformation should consider intersecting and gendered vulnerabilities (Tschakert et al 2013; Resurrección et al 2019). The relational, differentiated and situated understanding of resilience that emerges from a gendered analysis also has wider relevance to understanding how other forms of social difference and marginalisation, such as race and class, affect resilience.

## **2. Psychological readings of resilience**

*Resilience is shaped by personal history*

Childhood experience of abuse has a profound, cumulative impact on lifetime health and development (Capaldi et al 2012; Strine et al 2012; Young et al 2020) and is a leading risk factor for women's revictimization later in their lives (Walker et al 2017). Foundational experiences are key to understanding resilient outcomes in survivors as assets and resources gained, and risks faced earlier in life, impact the individual's capacity to negotiate and manage stressors (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013; Masten & Cicchetti 2012). This, in part, may explain the unequal distribution of transformative potential among survivors of violence and abuse.

Further, research shows that violence, abuse and impaired mental health interact in a vicious cycle whereby violence and abuse lead to negative psychological outcomes that, in turn, place women at greater risk of victimisation (Oram et al 2016) which is likely to negatively impact on their resilience. Similarly, previous experiences of violence and abuse significantly increase the likelihood of women entering a future violent relationship (Carbone-Lopez et al 2012; Neustifter & Powell, 2015), with exposure to violence and abuse from multiple partners escalating the risk for adverse mental and physical health consequences (Classen et al 2005), hence impacting on women's resilient outcomes (e.g. functioning).

*Resilience as an affective personal experience: resilience as stress*

When people encounter traumatic situations, a number of adverse psychological effects are frequently experienced such as anxiety, depression, acute stress reactions and post-traumatic

stress disorder. For some these emotional responses are evident for many years, whilst for others they dissipate relatively quickly, indicating resilience (Norris, Tracey & Galea et al 2009). The absence of psychopathology after traumatic exposure indicates resilience (Galatzer-Levy et al 2018; Yoshioka et al 2003). However, appearing outwardly to cope is not a reliable indicator of resilience as, for example, high stress and high social competence among young people are correlated with high rates of depression (Luthar et al 1993).

Psychological resilience is, therefore, better defined good mental health following adaption to trauma or other adversity rather than coping itself. Some individuals following trauma they may experience what is known as post traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004; Lerner & Blow 2011), where they end up 'better' than prior to the trauma. Thus, it is important to identify factors that foster resilience without emotional distress. Psychology has identified factors that maintain emotional distress. For example, a tendency to engage in repetitive negative thinking such as worry about the future or mulling over negative aspects of the past (Samtani & Moulds 2017). Repetitive negative thinking, in turn, is maintained by, among other things, a tendency to interpret ambiguous information in more negative or threatening way, rather than in benign (neutral/positive) ways (Krahé et al 2019). Given this, lower levels of repetitive thinking and more benign interpretations may also foster resilience.

#### *Resilience is relational*

Literature interrogating the resilience of women affected by violence demonstrates that resilience is constructed not only by individuals, but by the characteristics of their environment and their relationships. Here, psychological resilience is a dynamic process resulting from individuals having the competence and self-efficacy to interact with their environments to promote mental wellbeing or protect themselves against the influence of adverse risk factors. This creates a virtuous cycle, whereby the support gained allows individuals to increase their competences, which in turn allows them to interact more effectively with the wider context (Liebenberg & Joubert 2019; Supkoff et al 2012). Data from women in shelters identified that abused women need both individual agency and external resources (e.g. advocacy services, or safe havens) to sustain them during and after their decision to leave their abusive relationships (Gopal & Nunlall 2017; Sanders & Munford 2016; Sanders et al 2012).

External resources can enable victims to not fall back into the cycle of abuse, lower the risk of re-victimisation and assist in the recovery process (Smallbone et al 2013); in contrast, lacking family, social and community support may explain why some women stay in abusive relationships (Hyland 2014) and fall victim of cycle of abuse and re-victimisation (Smallbone et al 2013). The turning point in the lives of women who have experienced violence, the moment they move from being a victim to a survivor - depends on the support and resources, the women have accessible to them (Duma 2016) and on social context that allows communities to be more or less supportive (Machisa et al 2018). Hence, transformative resilience can only be understood in the context of the ability to access, navigate and negotiate support and resources (Ungar 2015; Moletsane & Theron, 2017).

#### **4. Implications for transformation**

This review has three implications for climate change transformations research. Firstly, it suggests that individuals' capacity to transform in the face of a changing climate is neither



inherent, nor even, but differentiated. Rather, histories of trauma add a pre-existing burden to some individuals more than others, meaning the capacity for climate resilience or transformation is unevenly distributed. Second, psychological perspectives show that the state of 'being resilient' should not be understood as a comfortable one. Rather, being resilient requires being able to accommodate and live with stress. Third, the review extends the growing emphasis in climate change research on individual transformations, by emphasising the impossibility of individual transformations in a vacuum of social support. Here we discuss the implications of these findings for two areas of sustainability research: transformational adaptation that addresses the root causes of vulnerability and transformational mitigation that addresses emissions reduction at the structural level.

#### *Transformational adaptation*

Disasters and adaptation research has clearly demonstrated that the 'resilient' individual cannot be separated from their social, historical, cultural and spatial context (e.g. Taylor and Peace 2015, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002, Paton et al 2010). This includes significant literature on gender, disasters, climate change and vulnerability, showing how vulnerability is differentiated by the intersection of class, household dynamics, and pre-existing roles and responsibility (Odiase et al, 2020; Jordan, 2019).

Existing climate adaptation research has, however, paid less attention to how past experience generates different psychological outcomes. This is crucial to understanding current day resilience, as negative experiences in the past can undermine well-being throughout a person's life, their ability to respond to current stresses and trauma, and the capacity to envision alternatives for themselves (Rutter, 2012). Therefore, for individuals who have experienced severe trauma in their past, developing psychological or emotional resilience may itself be a transformative process. In such cases, resilience and transformation may not be opposite ends of a continuum, as is often suggested in adaptation research, at the scale of the individual. Further, the costs of being resilient on emotional wellbeing, as highlighted in section 3 on *resilience as stress*, may mean that, at times, breaking down - not being resilient - becomes the necessary, and ultimately more transformative, response.

Critics of resilience argue that the concept places excessive responsibility on the individual, (Chandler & Reid 2016). The influence of support networks gives resilience an intrinsically dynamic quality – just as a person's web of social relations is constantly shifting, so is their state of resilience. Hence, a person's resilience is not an internal, intrinsic quality but an external, socially contingent one. Not recognising the importance of the social context when determining what outcomes are defined as resilient (Ungar 2003) may reinforce the idea that resilient people are somehow intrinsically remarkable and extraordinary (Masten, 2001: 227; Mantovani et al 2020).

#### *Transformational mitigation*

Literature on psychological resilience provides a new way of understanding personal transformations and reflective learning for sustainability. Psychological resilience, through the support of networks, allows women to transform their situation. Sustainability research has placed growing emphasis on conscientization of the individual in driving wider societal shifts. This includes personal changes in attitudes, ideology and beliefs that creates a social consciousness ready for the changes required to mitigate or adapt to climate change (O'Brien



2018). Pelling et al. (2015) include ‘the individual’ and ‘behaviour’ among their seven activity spaces framework (drawing on Harvey (2010)). As O’Brien observes, “the relationship between consciousness and individual and collective transformative action has been largely ignored” (2012; 672). However, there is a danger here of reproducing the individual responsabilisation we have seen already with resilience.

The literature highlighted in the preceding section shows that people can not only be resilient against trauma (abuse and trauma), but also on their situation and change those situations despite constraints (leave abusive situations). However, networks are crucial, emphasizing relational contexts. Individual transformations as fundamentally co-produced by, and with, systemic change. Thus, it is essential that calls for individual transformations do not distract from calls for wider systemic change, and that individual and systemic transformations are conceptualised as co-evolving, rather than discrete. Any calls for individual transformation ‘in the self’ must be contextualised within the broader historical, social, cultural, and importantly, psychological context. This includes the need to transform the social conditions, characterised by unequal gender norms, that make it possible for violence against women to occur.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper draws on psychological readings of resilience to extend climate change and sustainability scholarship. Climate change will lead to increased anxiety and stress as individuals are forced to cope with increasingly pervasive climate impacts; these stresses will interact and magnify existing and historical trauma. Existing trauma and anxiety may also limit the ability of people to engage with processes of conscientization to reimagine their role in society and alternative climate change futures, limiting the potential of individual as a sphere of transformation. Thus, the ability to engage with different thought patterns and mental models will be differentiated by psychological well-being, and transformation may place excessive burden on some. However, psychological and sociological research on women living with, and processing, trauma also highlights ways in which we might support individual transformations. This review of psychology research on resilience, in the context of violence against women, shows the crucial role of relationships and community resources in building competencies that enable people to change their situation, and sustain that change. Finally, research shows us that emotional resilience, for example, can be transformative in those who have previously not been able to cope. Conversely, emotional responses such as anxiety or acute stress responses, can form part of a resilient response to change. Thus, the analysis deepens understanding of the personal costs and complexity of transformation at the individual scale, extending scholarship on individual-scale transformations.

## **6. Acknowledgements**

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