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RESILIENCE, A KEY INTERDISCIPLINARY CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE

Daniela CATAU VERES¹

Abstract:

Resilience is an increasingly present term in contemporary media and scientific discourse. The understanding of this term is achieved by placing it in the immediate linguistic context and by identifying other terms of the lexico-semantic field in which the term resilience falls. In this sense, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, which allow addressing and understanding the complexity of the modern world and the present, could support us in our quest to explain and understand this term with a complex semantics and applicability in several fields of life and science.

Keywords:

Resilience; transdisciplinarity; contemporary discourse; crisis; interdisciplinary research.

I. Introduction

An increasingly present term in contemporary media and scientific discourse, nationally and internationally, is resilience. The understanding of this term is achieved by placing it in the immediate linguistic context and by identifying other terms of the lexicon-semantic field in which the term resilience falls. These terms support the clarification of the contextual meaning and the identification of the type of discourse to which it is associated. In this sense, we believe that interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, which allow addressing and understanding the complexity of the modern world and the present, could support us in our quest to explain and understand this term with a complex semantics and applicability in several fields of life and science. Moreover, we point out from the outset that

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resilience is associated with a context of crisis, and this essential detail inevitably leads us to associate the resilience of the lexicon-semantic field of “adaptation” or “resistance”. This fact justifies the transdisciplinary analytical approach, which offers a solution to the need to know the contemporary world that is going through various changes, sometimes radical, from a social, political, environmental, legal, psychological, medical, etc. point of view.

So what relationship can resilience establish between the sciences? Can this term be a bridge between sciences, as transdisciplinarity is considered in the contemporary epistemological approach? What contribution can transdisciplinary research have in understanding a concept that belongs by definition to physics? What transdisciplinary methods are available today for researchers concerned with understanding the term resilience? What is resilience and how does it contribute to the knowledge of the world and life? In what areas does it apply and with what results? What are the limits of resilience and what controversies can this term produce in its understanding and application?

II. Analysis of contemporary discourse from an inter- and transdisciplinary perspective

If interdisciplinarity, as a scientific approach, means a transfer of methods from one discipline to another, offering an innovative epistemological perspective on the domains of life, transdisciplinarity comes to confirm the need for an approach from different angles of the world. Considered a “scientific and intellectual position” (De Coninck, 1966, pp. 1-7), transdisciplinarity aims to understand the **complexity** of the contemporary world, a term proposed by the Swiss philosopher and psychologist Jean Piaget in the 1970s, and the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin. In Piaget's conception, transdisciplinarity would contribute to the achievement of the unity of knowledge, by situating this analytical approach at the border between sciences, disciplines and specialists, facilitating a dialogue between them. This dialogue is evoked in the 80s by the Franco-Romanian philosopher Basarab Nicolescu², the founder of transdisciplinary methodology, who invites researchers to overcome classical, fragmentary and limiting thinking, proposing a transdisciplinary vision of research through three methodological

² Basarab Nicolescu was the founding president of the International Center for Transdisciplinary Research and Studies (CIRET) in Paris, the founder and director of the “Transdisciplinarity” collection published by Editions du Rochers (Monaco), of the “Science et religion” and “Science, société, spiritualité” collections by Curtea Veche Bucharest, interested in the role of science in contemporary culture and the relationship between art, science and traditions.

axes: the existence of levels of reality and perception, the logic of the included third party³ and the complexity. Through the transdisciplinary analysis, it is favoured to slip a term from one scientific field to another based on the principle of **analogy**, with the necessary precautions, in order not to reach **epistemological confusions** that have as source a misuse of a **nomadic term** by forcing its semantics.

Regarding the term *resilience*, the transdisciplinary approach clarifies the semantics of the term, starting from its basic meaning and reaching its application in several areas of life. Lately, there is a **frequent presence** of this term in scientific publications in the field of law, literature, public health, philosophy, psychology, politics and religion, which are as many spaces for discussion and meeting of people wishing knowledge and self-knowledge. Transdisciplinarity responds to this **scientific diversity** as a form of knowledge and as a research methodology, or as a **platform for the democracy of scientific debates**.

III. *Resilience* as the link of transdisciplinary epistemological chains

The term *resilience* (from the Latin *rescindere*, meaning the action of cancelling, or terminating a contract) is borrowed from the modern world in physics, where, according to dictionaries, the term refers to the property of materials (metals or alloys) to withstand shocks. In the second half of the twentieth century, the term became popular in the international scientific world, first in psychology in the 1980s, thanks to the work of two American school psychologists, Emmy Werner and Ruth S. Smith⁴. They define *resilience* as a **biological, psycho-affective, social and cultural process** that allows a new development after a mental trauma. John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1978), an American psychologist, will complete the understanding of this term through the *theory of attachment*, proposing the notion of “attachment scheme”, arguing

³ The concept belongs to the Romanian philosopher, established in Paris, Stefan Lupascu, contemporary with Cioran, who was influenced by philosophical thinking and artistic creation transposed into the theatre of the absurd. Stefan Lupascu explains the term “logic of the included third party” or State T, through the prism of “**the principle of contradictory complementarity**” and the existence of a **logic of contradiction in explaining reality**. (Lupascu, 1947, pp. 29-30)

⁴ Werner and Smith begin a study in 1954 on a group of children in Hawaii, presenting high psychopathological risks due to difficult living conditions (no family, no access to education, exposed to misery, disease and violence), potentially doomed to develop mental disorders. After over thirty years of supervision, the two psychologists found that a number of these children were able to develop normally, due to individual qualities and conjunctural opportunities. The results of the study appear in 1971 in Werner, E. E. (1971), *The children of Kauai: a longitudinal study from the prenatal period to age ten*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii.

that a person's resilience to traumatic life events is strongly determined by this complementary concept, referring to the maternal figure or a substitute for it.

Today, this term is gaining ground in Europe, where resilience institutes are developing, as in the Netherlands, resilience universities as in Germany, but also overseas, especially in Quebec, where scientific publications on this topic frequently appear (Tisseron, 2003). In France, Boris Cyrulnik⁵ imposes himself as a specialist in resilience, seen as a series of protective attitudes and creative source, favouring the development of faculties that allow the mental transformation of a being who has gone through a physical suffering or strong emotional shock.

The term resilience has penetrated many sciences, such as computer science, legal sciences, ecology, anthropology, medicine, its definition highlighting minimal semantic features of sememe⁶ *resilience*, which are found in all areas where the term appears, supplemented with specific information, after case. Thus, due to the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach of the term *resilience*, we find that at the base of the discourses that record occurrences of this term, are epistemological chains that unite different disciplines, and *resilience* is an important link within them. This **semantic nomadism** is based primarily on at least a minimal unit of meaning contained within the *resilience* sememe, which appears in all discourses and guides the meaning of reading the term, namely the idea of “resistance” and “adaptation”. Thus, is formed the transdisciplinary epistemological chain psychology - ecology - political science - legal sciences, where resilience is explained by **semes** such as: capacity + regeneration + recovery + measures + environmental protection + law regarding the capacity of the environment to regenerate and the contribution of people and of societies in this regenerative process.

Another example could be the epistemological chain that associates disciplines such as psychology - victimology - criminology, where resilience presents the following semes: capacity + restoration + emotional balance +

⁵ Boris Cyrulnik, a French neuropsychiatrist, psychoanalyst and psychologist, himself went through traumatic childhood experiences related to the history of the Holocaust, orphaned, manages to be reborn after a bitter childhood and becomes passionate as an adult about life and the living universe. A passionate researcher, he is attracted by the biology of affection, by the power of verbal and non-verbal language, but especially by the transdisciplinarity so necessary in understanding human development, the complexity of relational systems and human psychology. He is the author of several articles and works on resilience, among which we mention: *Les nourritures affectives*, PUF, Paris, 1978, *Les Vilains petits canards*, Odile Jacob Publishing House, 2001, *Un merveilleux malheur*, Odile Jacob Publishing House, 2002, *Ces enfants qui tiennent le coup*, Hommes et Perspectives Publishing House, 1998, etc. (Cyrulnik, 1978; 1998; 2001; 2002)

⁶ In semantics, a sememe represents a bundle of minimal memantic features (called seme), which have as formal correspondent the lexeme (Dubois, 1994)

understanding + psychological mechanism. Of course, the analysis of this chain is much more complex due to the notion of “mental trauma” that includes and presents the following semes: abuse + educational violence + sexual violence + aggression + social discourse + threat, the last two semes referring to “society's view which generates the feeling of shame, an internal suffering caused by others”, as Boris Cyrulnik (2003) calls it. The complexity of the analysis of the term *resilience* in this chain also comes from the perspective of associating another link that refers to possible solutions proposed by specialists for healing. Thus, the epistemological chain would be completed with another link: art. Obviously, the list of resilience semes would also include minimal units such as: defence mechanism + literature + autofiction + storytelling. Boris Cyrulnik states that resilient children usually become great creators, turning their wounds into works of art, they often become writers or actors, and others become involved in humanitarian works as adults, become educators for street people or undertake in-depth psychology studies.

Speaking of the connection of resilience with literary artistic creation, Cyrulnik refers to the resilient virtues of literature by entering the writer in an “autobiographical pact” with a cathartic function (liberation from fear or any psychic burden), referring to Philippe Lejeune, the creator of the notion of “autobiographical pact” in literature. In fact, Philippe Lejeune defines in his book *The Autobiographical Pact* (Lejeune, 1975, p. 28) the notion of autobiography as “a retrospective story in prose that a real person makes starting from his own life experience, emphasizing individual life, especially the presentation of his personality”. It is a kind of tacit contract to tell the truth, assumed by the writer in relation to his readers. In the history of literature, many writers have entered into this pact to free themselves from the burden of the past, especially from the suffering accumulated in childhood, as a result of the various abuses, deprivations or violence they have experienced. We quote here only one example from the French literature of the 20th century, the writer Marguerite Duras, who, through literature, managed to overcome the childhood traumas produced by colonialism, by a violent family, even going through incest. Therefore, the discourse on resilience presented through this transdisciplinary epistemological chain includes key terms from several discourses: artistic, educational, legal, psychological, medic.

Between psychology and socio-economics an epistemological chain is formed in which resilience is composed of semes such as: capacity + intrinsic + enterprises + organizations + communities + to find + balance. The transdisciplinary epistemological chain of psychology - medicine is based on semes such as: relationship + with physical endurance + healing phenomena

+ spontaneous + sudden + recovery. The epistemological chain psychology - informatics highlights the following common senses of resilience: quality + system + to continue + to work + despite + malfunctions + in the system. In the transdisciplinary epistemological chain of physics - psychology, the common senses of the notion of resilience are the following: capacity + of materials + to find + the initial state + after a shock + or pressure + continuous.

We therefore observe that whatever the transdisciplinary epistemological chain we form around the notion of resilience, it applies to a system capable of reproducing itself, based on both its own resources (psychological, physical or artistic), and on some external impulses, the resilient subject thus managing to adapt to living conditions. The diversity of areas in which resilience appears as a nomadic term, based on semantic analogies, is impressive and can only be understood through transdisciplinary research.

IV. Terminological associations and new concepts

Due to the nomadism of the term *resilience* in various areas of life, associations of terms that include resilience frequently appear in various media or scientific discourses. This is the case of the presence of this term in social discourse, where the concept of “social resilience” appears, in association with other phrases such as “failed institutions”⁷, “race for efficiency”, “disintegration of society”, “balance of societies and people”, “the constraints of gross necessity”, „adaptive sorting of societies”, etc. By the presence of the term *resilience* in psychological and medical discourse, we find terms such as “positive psychology”⁸, “self-esteem”, “risk situations”, “personal well-being”, “life project”, “empathic look”, “valuing attitude”, “affective structuring”, “neural resilience”, “social determinants”, “personal development”.

In the discourse of politics, economics, ecology, even finance (Lanteigne, 2020), *resilience* is associated with another key term, “sustainability”, giving rise to concepts such as “systemic resilience”, “natural resilience” and “social resilience”, “ecological resilience”, “sustainable development”, “pollution”, “strengthening mechanisms”, “rapid qualitative

⁷ The term appears in an article in French (“institutions défailantes”), entitled “La résilience – notes de lecture” written by Claudia Samson (Samson, n.d.).

⁸ The term “positive psychology” (current of “humanistic psychology” - Carl Rogers) refers to research in contemporary psychology that aims to study and encourage positive emotions, which allow the reconstruction of being by experiencing the joy of living. The innovation of this term consists in identifying those things that produce happiness, developing the capacity to love and to be loved, dancing in the sense of actions, being responsible for what we can change and resilient to what cannot be avoided.

change”, „adaptability”, “general well-being”, “moral sense”, „social support”, “continuity of ecosystems”, “ability to resist”, “regeneration capacity”, “resilient communities”. Also in this field, terms such as “public policy” or “recovery and resilience mechanism” are required, mentioned very recently in international press articles and on the European Union's website (European Commission, n.d.), which refer to recovery measures taken at European level for Europe reconstruction after the crisis caused by Covid-19. These terms are supported at the level of discourse by elements of the lexical-semantic field associated with the crisis and recovery, such as: “NextGenerationEU tool”, “incentive package”, “reconstruction of Europe”, “crisis caused by COVID-19”, “a Europe more ecological, more digital and more resilient”, “flexibility mechanisms”, “current realities”, “future uncertainties”, “budget for the period 2021-2027”, “solidarity society”, “social and solidarity economy”, etc.

In legal discourse, resilience is associated with terms such as “clinical victimology” which refers to other concepts such as “developmental or resilience guardian” and “assisted resilience” (Ionescu, 2011), without forgetting the terms in the field of arts, with cathartic function on the being, such as “the autobiographical pact” in which the writer enters (in which a victim metamorphoses in search of resilience) or the term “continuous artistic activity”, evoked by Boris Cyrulnik. And last but not least, resilience is present in the scientific discourse aimed at education, here it favours the co-occurrence of terms such as “overcoming”, “personal difficulties”, “educational resources”, “emancipatory mission”, “intrinsic strength of students”, “Strengths”, “weaknesses”, “rebuilding confidence”, “student entourage”. All these terms can be studied by referring to psychological discourse, closely related to education.

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⁹ Boris Cyrulnik is at the origin of this concept which designates the ability to recover from a shock of an individual who learned in childhood and adolescence to love in a framework characterized by happiness and respect for the other, in a system that proposes several sources of emotional attachment: mother, father, grandparents, cousins, family friends, etc. According to Boris Cyrulnik (2003).

V. Conclusion

Due to the recurrence of this term in multiple areas of life, it can be the basis of a rich innovative inter- and transdisciplinary research, inviting to dialogue and methodological exchange specialists from different disciplines, to find solutions adapted to various problems of contemporary society characterized by complexity and unexpected transformations. At the same time, resilience specialists warn of an overexploitation of the term in various discourses by using it based only on semantic analogy, there is a risk of forcing meaning in context, only to reach the so-called “superficial interdisciplinary ecumenism”, which erases essential distinctions between sciences, producing a dangerous scientific reductionism, under the pretext of unifying the sciences¹⁰. In addition, the over-mediatisation of the term leads to its trivialization and to a wide use in the current language, being able to lose the deep psychological meaning. This could lead, as the resilience specialist Serge Tisseron warns, to a “social desirability” (Tisseron, 2003), in which any person affected by a trauma *should* be required to know a resilient path. In this way, resilience becomes a term with antagonistic meaning: resilience can mean “vector of hope” and at the same time takes on a character of exclusion and guilt, if someone fails to prove resilience in its evolution.

However, resilience occupies a special place in contemporary scientific discourse, and combined with clinical observation and research, could give rise to innovations that explain contemporary phenomena in various fields, while bringing appropriate solutions. And the inter- and transdisciplinary scientific approach would fully contribute to the discovery of perhaps unsuspected resources that would lead to new social policies and the adequate training of resilience specialists. This would favour, as Michel Manciaux points out in the article “Resilience, a look that makes you live” (Manciaux, 2002), “communities that support each other, more empathetic professionals, more willing to listen, discuss and collaborate with communities, with volunteers and associations, decision makers more informed and closer to the citizens, a more solidary society”.

¹⁰ This criticism in the use of the term “resilience” is formulated by Dominique Collin in an article entitled “Attila passe, l’herbe repousse”, published in the magazine L’Agora, vol 7, no. 1 of 1999, dedicated to the notion of resilience (Collin, 1999).

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