MIGRATION AND RESILIENCE

EXPLORING THE STOCK OF KNOWLEDGE
REVIEW OF LITERATURE: 2000 - 2016

By Marshia Akbar & Valerie Preston

May 2019

Executive Summary

YORK U
UNIVERSITÉ
UNIVERSITY

*Marshia Akbar is a post-doctoral research fellow in the Department of Geography at York University.
**Valerie Preston is a professor in the department of Geography at York University and principal investigator for the BMRC-IMRU Partnership.

BMRC
IRMU

Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Executive Summary

The term 'resilience' generally refers to the capacity of individuals, communities and systems to survive in the face of stress and shocks, and even transform when conditions require (Hall and Lamont 2013). Although, migration is almost always associated with disruptions and challenges, the application of the concept in relation to migrant settlement and integration is comparatively recent (Falicov 2005). In this context, a deeper understanding of how various risk and protective factors as well as social institutions contribute to migrant resilience is crucial for developing effective policy and practice. The literature review documents current debates and research findings regarding migrant resilience to achieve three goals: 1) to compare and evaluate various theoretical approaches to resilience, 2) to identify measures of resilience, and 3) to assess the small literature that focuses on resilience in relation to migrant integration. Special consideration was given to literature that provides critical insights into theories and measurement of resilience, and uses the concept of 'resilience' to analyze migrant experiences. The review drew on journals, books, reports and websites published between 2000 and 2016.

Major Findings

A. Resilience: Definitions and Theoretical Approaches

Current definitions of resilience are shaped by two major theoretical approaches: social-ecological resilience and social resilience. The social-ecological approach emphasizes the adaptation processes of individuals, communities and regions in relation to external threats (Adger 2000; Cretney 2014; Luthar 2006). Scholars point out that the social-ecological approach is agent-centric and neglects the influence of social structures, institutional inequalities and power relations (Adger 2000; Joseph 2013; Leadbeater et al. 2005; VanderPlaat 2015). In contrast, the social resilience approach stresses the transformative capacities of individuals and groups in dealing with challenges and recognizes how power relations and social justice concerns may shape resilience. Many contemporary scholars have used this approach to understand the experiences of people who are marginalized due to institutional racism and sexism (Leadbeater et al. 2005; VanderPlaat 2015). Many scholars argue that few empirical case studies reflect the transformative approach inherent in social resilience (Adger 2000; Cretney 2014; MacKinnon and Derickson 2012).

B. Indicators and Measurement of Resilience

Multiple indicators are used to assess and monitor the resilience of various social entities. Researchers have developed around twenty different resilience scales to evaluate levels of resiliencefor various age groups (young, adolescent and elderly). The selection of indicators is shaped by how resilience is conceptualized and defined, the availability of data and the socio-environmental contexts of social entities. Despite their widespread use, some scholars argue that indicators are selective and their interpretation is based on general assumptions about how social, environmental, economic and political systems work (Ahern et al. 2006; Schipper et al. 2015; Windle et al. 2011). As such, indicators do not fully reflect the experiential aspects of resilience. Reflexivity is emphasized by critical scholars (Windle et al. 2011) who argue that researchers need to be aware of the short-comings of resilience indicators and acknowledge the challenges of capturing the dynamic characteristics of resilience.

C. Migration and Resilience

To examine migrant resilience, studies often analyze how migrants draw on motivational aspirations and resources to deal with discrimination and other adaptive challenges related to accessing employment, education and affordable housing (Thomas 2013; Michail 2013; Lester & Nguyen 2015; Lee 2005). In general, various personal traits (self-esteem, motivation, optimism, intellect, coping skills, and competence) and many collective resources (community pride, ethnic networks, cultural practices, spiritual and faith-based networks) are recognized as protective factors that strengthen migrants' capacity to overcome challenges. Critically, this body of work highlights the extensive support networks within migrant families and communities that help them overcome settlement challenges. With a few exceptions (Voicu and Comşa 2014; Simich et al. 2012; Maiter and Stalker 2011), the responsibilities of government and non-governmental organizations are not emphasized in the literature. Diverse methods, both quantitative and qualitative, are used to investigate the links between objective and subjective understandings of individual and collective forms of resilience (Gray et al. 2015; Michail 2013; Xia et al. 2005). Although most studies are grounded in the social approach to resilience, empirical analyses emphasize the adaptive capacities of migrants rather than their transformative and participatory capacities.

Conclusions

The review highlights three themes in research about migration and resilience:
- The complexity of the social and institutional dynamics inherent in theoretical notions of resilience,
- The lack of consensus about the best indicators and scales for measuring resilience, and
- The small number of studies that use resilience to investigate migration and settlement challenges.

While the concept of social resilience is complex, ambiguous and multifaceted, it allows for potentially fruitful perspectives on the understanding of human actions in the face of challenges. One of the strengths of the concept of social resilience is that it emphasizes the embeddedness of social actors within specific social and institutional contexts. As such, the concept possesses real potential for addressing power relations and institutional inequality. To strengthen a critical approach to social resilience and its applicability in migration studies, researchers need to engage in an intersectional analysis and incorporate the subjective experiences of diverse individuals, groups and institutions. Adopting a mixed method approach would allow researchers to address variations in resilience and pathways to resilience that arise from diverse types of adversities and varied transformative capacities. Future research also needs to take account of how hegemonic discourses can dictate interpretations of migrant resilience.