

Resilience as a concept from a cultural historical perspective

Anne Edwards May 2010

Seminar Two

A Vygotskian/cultural historical view of human thinking and acting recognises that concepts are cultural constructions which we place on the world to make sense of it as we go about our lives. Concepts therefore:

- are refined as we test them in use in and on the world; and
- need to be useful to us in the work we do.

Research within the cultural historical tradition tends to use concepts to examine the object of study that is 'person in practices'. When taking this focus it recognises that people are both shaped by and shape their worlds through a continuous process of internalisation and externalisation. The practices they inhabit shape them, but they also act on the practices and shape the practices. This dynamic of internalisation and externalisation presents a dilemma for researchers, as the object of study i.e. the person in practices is never static; rather the relationship between person and practice continuously changes.

The concepts that are used to make sense of what is happening need to be relevant to the dynamic in two ways. They need to:

- capture what is going on so that the concepts can be refined as we get better understandings of the object of study; and
- have some utility in the world i.e. be useful to the people in the practices and help them make better sense of what is going on.

I am taking for granted that there is a dynamic between practices, institutions and the wider political world; but my main focus is the meso level of practices I've just outlined. So how does resilience help with an understanding of persons in potentially disabling practices? Note that for me resilience is not the object of study, but is the concept through which we can examine the object of study and which may be refined in use.

The term resilience is usually used as a way of describing within-person qualities that arise through the benefits of the right kinds of social support. These qualities allow people to cope with adversity. Some of the critiques of resilience from some sociologists argue that we need instead to look to whether the context is being adapted to enable the vulnerable to function normally within society. Most recent government policy has been focused on the former strength-building view of resilience; though initiatives such as neighbourhood renewal have included elements of the more sociological perspective. A cultural historical view of resilience as a concept is different from both of these perspectives as it tries to capture the interaction between person and context (i.e. person in practices in contexts).

It attempts to provide a lens through which we can see the changing relationship, between person and potentially disabling practices, that arises as people externalise i.e. act on their worlds and shape them. From this perspective resilience is evident when the person is able to act on and shape the practices even in a very small way. In my work on the Children's Fund simply being listened to and their ideas being taken seriously by adults helped children to position themselves differently in the practices they inhabited with those adults, to plan and to make decisions. Resilience here was a continuous feature of relationships within these practices.

In this sense resilience is quite close to agency and even closer to the idea of relational agency that I have been working with. But I think it is analytically more than agency, as it focuses on the dynamic between person and potentially disabling practices. Resilience from this perspective describes what arises in a dynamic or dialectic between person and practices that reflects the evidence that the person is acting on and reshaping challenging circumstances in their lives so that they can propel themselves forward.