

Interactive comment on “Conceptualizing community resilience to natural hazards — the emBRACE framework” by Sylvia Kruse et al.

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This conceptual paper makes an important contribution to ongoing academic discourses on how resilience can meaningfully be applied to the social realm, by providing a conceptual framework for community resilience to natural hazards. The article and the framework presented therein draw on extensive and engaged scholarly work involving in-depth case studies in five countries. The framework combines commonly utilised and readily observable conceptual building blocks, such as different types of community resources and assets, with aspects of discourses on social learning, governance and responsabilisation that have been critically examined in the increasingly vast literature on resilience and its social relevance. To this end, the paper not only makes a meaningful conceptual contribution, it also is of a highly integrative and synthesis-

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ing nature that successfully attempts to join up key aspects of otherwise fragmented academic discourse.

Any attempt at characterising an amorphous idea such as resilience is faced with significant theoretical and epistemological challenges. In essence, it is much easier to criticise existing interpretations of resilience and their lack of rigorous theorisation than to come up with an alternative conceptual model that is cognisant of the theoretical and practical challenges of (social) resilience concepts, yet at the same time pragmatic and applicable to different situations. Any such model needs to both capture – and explain – at least some of the conceptual breadth that make resilience so attractive for ubiquitous use in the first place, while also being specific enough to make it more than just a loose (subjective) collection of fragmented conceptual ideas. The framework presented in this paper goes a long way towards this integrative goal, by embedding the relatively well defined and more readily observable domains of actions, learning and resources and capacities within broader contexts and boundary conditions that highlight the role of governance, social, economic and political change, and disturbances.

A further challenge – and arguably a more significant one – is that of doing justice, in theoretical and empirical terms, to the notion of community resilience. Community resilience inherently refers to a collective quality, even though the unit of analysis may be an individual household or person. Hence, the framework needs to achieve two things at once: provide a conceptual frame for a social, relational interpretation of resilience while at the same time critically examine ‘community’ as that social context to which resilience, with all its strong engineering and ecological connotations (see Davoudi et al. 2012), is being applied. A ‘community resilience’ framework therefore always is, in part, a transposition of ideas that originated in the natural sciences into the human social realm – an intrinsic challenge that the paper could have discussed in more detail upfront.

In the context of this conceptual transfer into the social realm, epistemological questions arise, such as to what extent do the authors take on a constructivist perspec-

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tive that highlights and problematises, for example, the coding of power differences in politicised languages and knowledges of resilience? To what extent is a more positivist perspective appropriate in this research context and perhaps inevitable, given the underlying project objective of ‘characterizing and measuring resilience of European communities’ (p.5)? While the reader gets to appreciate the authors’ awareness of different epistemological perspectives through, for example, the discussion of resilience as a normative versus analytical concept, much of this important epistemological reflection and argument seems to be hidden ‘between the lines’ in the text. A brief, more upfront explanation of the underpinning ontology that has guided the endeavour to characterise community resilience would have been desirable, in my view – especially given that the framework decidedly is about ‘community’, a term that sociologists in particular have debated, deconstructed and subsequently used to re-theorise emerging social dynamics for several decades. Here, a stronger and more critical review of existing interpretations of the term community, including the associated potential of co-optation of heterogeneous, place-based communities into political agendas under the optimistic and potentially ‘homogenising’ collective guise of community resilience could place the emBRACE framework on a more solid socio-theoretical footing. This would demonstrate more visibly that the framework is not only informed by (social) theory but also reflective of the ontological and epistemological challenges inherent in any attempt towards measuring and quantifying abstract social constructs.

Despite this, the framework manages well to straddle the fluid boundary between specificity and complexity, within the broader assumption that community resilience is in fact something that is ‘knowable’ and measurable with empirical social research methods. This balancing act manages to avoid an overly mechanistic (‘engineering’) interpretation that deterministically reduces resilience to a readily measurable, analytical category of community functioning. At the same time, however, it avoids falling into the trap of relegating community resilience to idiosyncrasy that evades any analytical grasp. This balance is achieved by discerning concrete ‘domains’ of action, learning and resources and capacities that are bounded by contextual enablers and constraint. Here,

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the framework strongly resonates with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework – a conceptual connection the authors have acknowledged and described in detail.

This integration of individual-subjective and collective-institutional dimensions at community level on the one hand and contextual boundary factors on the other hand provides for a balanced, heuristic approach that leaves plenty of (necessary) room for refinement and adjustment of the framework for application in different social and political settings. If anything, a more detailed description of the two extra-community frames and their respective boundaries would likely help better guide and facilitate the process of adjusting the framework to different contexts.

As a researcher interested in questions of equity and justice, I can't help wondering what happened to the ambition and need stated at the beginning of the paper to shed light on the role of power when analysing community resilience. The paper goes to some length to explain processes of top-down responsabilisation, as a way of governments exerting power over their citizens through a resilience framing. Yet the framework does not seem to provide much-needed guidance on how to examine power struggles inherent in local resilience processes (e.g. in the civil protection actions introduced in the 'actions' domain), beyond a brief discussion of socio-political resources and capacities that seems to reflect similar arguments included in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. Given the dominance of unresolved questions of power and politicisation inherent in discourses and practical applications of 'resilience thinking', the framework could add truly innovative ideas from critical social and political theory into contemporary disaster risk management thinking, e.g. by providing more concrete conceptual guidance on power issues; by directly drawing on concepts of power to ascertain who benefits most from social protection measures and why; who is involved in processes of social learning for resilience and who is excluded (and why so); and by highlighting in more detail how the disaster risk governance context itself is a manifestation of power struggles taking place between different levels of government and between governmental and non-governmental actors – often with negative impacts on community

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resilience.

Lastly, further information could be included on the relative role that deductive framework development played in creating the framework, as opposed to that of inductive processes used by drawing on case study findings. Such expanded discussion could also include – space permitting – a few more examples from the case studies to back up and illustrate conceptual claims made in relation to the relevance of certain characteristics of the framework.

Overall, this paper makes a timely and comprehensive contribution to emerging thinking on community resilience and, in particular, its intrinsic connection with, and dependency on, multiple spheres of regulatory and decision-making context. I see the framework's key strengths in its ability to broadly guide more specific conceptual approaches for exploring particular aspects of community resilience and in its ability to conceptualise resilience as an evolving quality (rather than a bouncing back to a status quo) in which social learning features prominently as a driver of change. Community resilience as portrayed by the emBRACE framework is inherently about learning and evolution – an idea that reflects recent academic debates and seems entirely appropriate given that communities are constantly in flux and required to adapt to various forms of social, economic and environmental change.

Specific comments:

p.2, l.7: What do the authors see as the main problem here - that community is under-theorised or that there is little guidance on how to measure resilience? These are two separate arguments and both can be refuted on the basis of evidence from the literature (there is ample discussion about 'community', in particular in sociological literature, and there is more and more technical work emerging on 'resilience assessment') - but aren't the critical questions to ask: what is 'community' and can 'community resilience' in fact be measured? The authors seem to inherently assume that there are affirmative, constructive answers to both questions, but even so these are still important and valid

questions to ask as part of such a substantive, conceptual contribution as the one presented in this paper.

p.2, l.12: I can be argued that precisely this definition, as widely used as it is, perpetuates a narrow view of socio-ecological resilience that does not take individual or collective, subjective and wider contextual factors into account.

p.3, l.23: Would be good to state here the authors' goal with regard to disentangling (or otherwise dealing with) the integration of analytical and normative aspects of resilience.

p.4, l.27: Might warrant further discussion: Can resilience be a theory of change? Is this what the framework is trying to be in part? Is this only vaguely specified because resilience is inherently vague and it is thus impossible to come up with a general theory of change for/of resilience?

p.5, l. 12: It is not clear at this point in the text whether, at the time the case studies were implemented, any particular concept of community resilience was applied (given a first sketch was deduced from the literature).

p.7, l. 3ff.: In relation to the discussion of financial and some of the other capacities and resources mentioned, a critical question to ask is: how/why are these capacities and resources particularly relevant for community resilience, as opposed to being essential for sustaining a livelihood per se (as stipulated by the SLF)?

p.7, l.28ff.: I am not sure if the choice of terminology here is optimal – summarising all possible community resilience actions under the two headings of civil protection and social protection. While these terms are commonly used in different countries, this is conceptually problematic in that a focus on protection conveys a top-down desire to focus on maintaining a given status quo rather than viewing resilience as a transformative idea. I see these two categories as somewhat ad odds with the notion of learning. In addition, in my view there is a marked tension between the language of social protection and responsabilisation that the authors may want to address in the

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text.

p.12, l.9: Here, more detail would be useful on how the (draft?) emBRACE framework helped unearth the role of contextual factors in relation to individual resilience. In other words, how was the framework (as opposed to other analytical frameworks that take contextual factors into account, such as the SLF) useful in querying these aspects?

p.12, l.21: To what extent is this a feasible and fruitful research agenda? If the types of relations are case specific, does it make sense to develop typologies?

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