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A Research Agenda for Social Networks and Social Resilience

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Originating in ecological debates, the concept of resilience has become increasingly prominent in social science over the last ten years. This is perhaps not surprising given the multiple challenges to the survival of our societies—and indeed species—that have acquired increased urgency over this period, lending the question with which the editors open this volume, “How resilient is society?”, a chilling resonance. The aim of the book, pursued over the eighteen contributions which follow the editors’ Introduction, is to consider some of the many facets of that pressing question, focusing in particular on the relevance of social networks. The book seeks to consider both the importance of social networks for debates on resilience and the potential importance of the concept of resilience for network researchers. It succeeds admirably on both counts.

As the different contributions to the volume demonstrate, “resilience” can be defined in different ways. Its meaning is contested. The gist is that resilience captures the capacity of a system to withstand and/or recover from a shock of some sort, whether endogenous or exogenous. However, in one of the analytically stronger and more interesting chapters, focused substantively upon international trade, James Hollway suggests a useful conceptual schema which distinguishes resilience from three further, related concepts. Resilience, he notes, derives from the Latin *resilire/resilio*, which means “to rebound.” It captures the capacity of a system to recover, relatively quickly, from a shock or crisis that might initially impede its functioning. This contrasts on one side with “robustness”, which captures the capacity of a system to continue to deliver in spite of shocks, and on the other with “responsiveness,” which captures a system’s capacity for transformation, such that it is changed by crisis, perhaps considerably, but nevertheless survives. Finally, “fragility” characterises those systems which collapse under the impact of shocks.

Hollway's chapter, which draws a number of further useful analytic distinctions (e.g. between the resilience of nodes, of ties, and of whole networks/systems), is one of a number that treat (whole) social networks as the systems whose resilience is in question. This not an entirely new question for network analysts, where, for example, the impact upon functioning of removing nodes (in either a random or targeted way) has been addressed in various contexts, and I was a little surprised not to see more discussion of this work. Kerstin Sailer and Xiaoming Li refer to Mark Newman's work on resilience in their very interesting chapter on space and resilience, but they were the only contributors to make such links. Sailer and Li also make the important point, again drawing upon Newman, that the contribution of particular network/spatial configurations to resilience very much depends. The structures and channels which allow life-saving information to flow quickly and efficiently through a network may afford a deadly virus the same advantage. The same structural properties can both help and hinder resilience.

Michele Barnes' chapter, substantively focused upon climate change, added an interesting conceptual and methodological twist to this focus upon the resilience of (networked) social systems by proposing the use of multileveled network models to capture hybrid systems, involving interaction both within and between social and ecological systems. And Camille Roth did something similar for socio-semantic systems, which involve interaction between social and semantic systems. Perhaps inevitably, given the brevity of all chapters, these authors bracket the statistical complexities of multi-level network models, but in both cases this cleared the way for fascinating conceptual accounts which push the boundaries and therefore stand out amongst the contributions.

Not all contributions took the network itself as the system whose resilience was in question. Others were focused upon the role which social networks, understood for the most part as the ego-nets of particular individuals, can play in enhancing human resilience in the face of: e.g., ageing (Lea Ellwardt), marginalisation (Miranda Lubbers) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Robin Gauthier and Kelly Markowski). The broad conclusions of these chapters, that social networks do make an important, mostly positive contribution to resilience, will come as no surprise to readers familiar with the literature on social support. The case is well-made, however, and these chapters demonstrate both how much network research has already contributed to our understanding of resilience—albeit using a different vocabulary—and also how important it is to consider personal networks when reflecting upon the resilience of human populations.

As a whole this is a very interesting collection, which should contribute to both the resilience and the social network literatures. All of the chapters are well-written, clearly focused and concise, making each an excellent entry point for considering the particular facet of resilience it addresses. In most cases I think the contributions are best considered as entry points rather than substantive contributions. They introduce concepts and relevant bodies of literature, sketching out possibilities but going no further. However, that was the point. The title of the book is *A Research Agenda for Social Networks and Social Resilience* and that is exactly what it offers: an agenda for others, alongside many of its own contributors, to run with and build upon.

As a final point I should add how pleasing it was to see the huge range of applications of social network analysis on show; from political systems and social movements, through crime and labour markets, embracing gender and ethnicity, to food security and the environment. And it was great to see these substantive concerns and contributions take centre stage. There is very

little methodological discussion in these chapters and that will be lamented by some but we say a great deal about methodology elsewhere and it was very refreshing to see authors take a step back and reflect upon why and how networks matter in relation to such fundamental issues.

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