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Anthropological Bases of Resilience: Narrative Self-Construction as a Protective Factor in Resilience

Antropologiczne podstawy odporności psychicznej:
narracyjna autokonstrukcja jako czynnik ochronny
w odporności psychicznej

KEYWORDS

anthropology,
resilience,
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education

ABSTRACT

Resilience as a construct is a relatively recent phenomenon that has now grown in importance, especially in new educational and pedagogical proposals that focus on prevention against possible risky behaviours. As a result, over the last few decades, approaches to resilience have undergone a transformation that goes far beyond this change in its conceptual conception.

In this paper, we bring together two aspects that are considered fundamental to understanding resilience as a human capacity, leaving aside how it may be applied. There is a clear need to base resilience on clearly anthropological aspects that, suggested by philosophical anthropology, can help us to see that this capacity is the fruit of human nature itself.

It is at this point that anthropology joins narrative self-construction in the development of the internal *logos*. Those anthropological traits are undoubtedly those that can help us to understand how a person can make themselves through their own internal dialogue in clear interrelation with their environment. Based on this personal growth, they will be able to develop aspects of their own personality that will help them to overcome adverse situations and even, in very extreme cases, traumatic situations.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE ABSTRAKT

antropologia,
odporność,
pedagogika,
edukacja

Odporność psychiczna jako konstrukt to stosunkowo nowe zjawisko, które obecnie zyskuje na znaczeniu – zwłaszcza w nowych edukacyjno-pedagogicznych koncepcjach skupiających się na zapobieganiu zachowaniom ryzykownym. Dlatego też, w ciągu ostatnich kilkudziesięciu lat, zmiana naszego podejścia do odporności psychicznej stała się o wiele głębsza niż zmiana zaledwie koncepcyjna.

W niniejszym artykule omówimy dwa zagadnienia fundamentalne dla zrozumienia odporności psychicznej jako cechy bardzo ludzkiej, bez rozważania jej zastosowań. Istnieje wyraźna potrzeba odniesienia odporności psychicznej do aspektów typowo antropologicznych, które – jak sugeruje antropologia filozoficzna – mogą pomóc nam dostrzec, że ta cecha wynika z samej ludzkiej natury.

Właśnie w tym momencie antropologia łączy się z narracyjną auto-konstrukcją w rozwoju wewnętrznego *logos*. Takie antropologiczne cechy niewątpliwie ułatwiają nam zrozumienie tego, w jaki sposób osoba może siebie tworzyć poprzez własny dialog wewnętrzny skorelowany ze środowiskiem zewnętrznym. Na podstawie takiego rozwoju człowiek może tworzyć różne aspekty własnej osobowości, które pomagają stawić czoła trudnym, a nawet – w skrajnych przypadkach – traumatycznym sytuacjom.

Anthropological bases of resilience

To speak of the anthropological bases that support the concept of resilience requires us to pose a question that we have been trying to answer throughout the history of humanity. This age-old question is: “What is a person?”

This question is so complex that it has not been possible to provide a definition of what a human being is, apart from the anthropological traits that define them and help us to understand them. That is why we need to find an anthropological definition that includes a more or less explicit explanation, not only of what a man¹ is, but also of what he *can* be. The idea of what a person is and what he can be opens up the great range of the potential that human beings carry within them, in their essence, in their very nature. In this context, we must also include the influence of intimacy, happiness and destiny (Cuadrado 2003: 21).

These affirmations help us to understand the difficulty involved in reaching a general definition of what a person is. That is why we must study the dimensions that

¹ *Man* is understood throughout our whole research as *person*.

constitute man, essentially speaking, forming the whole being that he is in himself, from the standpoint of his personal self-consciousness. This study leads us to discuss questions such as his biological nature, which brings us to consideration of the instinctual. We must also consider human being's immanence, which also includes their knowledge and their most intimate thought, as well as their desire or, what is the same thing, their will. Their way of communicating this intimacy to others, through language, dialogue and behaviour. Their creativity, the result of their ability to imagine. Their freedom, as a capacity that enables them to realise themselves as a unique and absolute being. All this, while never forgetting their contingent nature, limited in space and time.

It is indispensable to take these elements that define the person into account if we want to approach the idea of resilience as something that goes beyond a mere concept, formulated in the field of positive psychology, to reach an understanding of how some people are capable of overcoming adverse situations and can even obtain learning from such experiences.

Taking the definition of resilience as "the capacity of a person or group to develop well, to continue projecting themselves into the future, despite destabilising events, difficult living conditions and traumas that can at times be severe" (Manciaux, Vanistendael, Lecomte, Cyrulnik 2003: 22), we can establish a clear link between this capacity and the anthropological bases that make resilience possible.

Resilience is approached from the personal level, although it develops systemically from the social and from personal interrelation. For this reason, it requires a series of aptitudes and attitudes that must converge simultaneously in order to enable people to confront difficult situations and even traumatic events.

In this context, the personality plays a very important role. The personality is formed by elements of biological and genetic origin that undoubtedly affect the way people behave. To all these elements must all be added factors that result from learning from the environment in which the subject develops. Temperament and character are key to understanding the multiple and varied responses that can be given to everyday situations. Finally, we must also add freedom to these factors that help to shape the personality. Accordingly, the elements that constitute a person and aspects linked to the environment in which we live, along with the decisions we freely make, are inseparable considerations when it comes to analysing the development of resilience.

In this context, we should not refer so much to the question "What are we?" since, as mentioned, the answer is evident; we are human beings. Rather, the question should be "Who are we?" This leads us to explore the unique and unrepeatable way of being that of each and every one of us has. It is in this sense in which we affirm that we are *someone* and not *something*. It is at this point that we find ourselves before the concept of the person.

Man is more than mere human nature, since he is neither a concept nor an idea. They are a reality, a specific being with their own capacities and their own limitations. A person is a being who seeks, beyond the apparent, the truth and the beauty. A person seeks goodness more than what is useful, and what is eternal above what is temporary. A person is, moreover, a being that takes material shape in a body with physical characteristics that define them and also make them different from all other people. And a person is also a being that makes themselves because, for a human being, to live is to construct one's own life (Barrio 2010: 32).

A person manifests themselves to others through their own anthropological dimensions. The most important dimensions in this context, as José Ángel García Cuadrado notes, are: self-awareness, intimacy, dialogue, freedom and devotion.

These are the main personal and anthropological dimensions that enable us to understand why resilience, as capacity, as potential, finds its point of support in the human beings and their strengths.

Self-awareness transcends knowledge as cognitive capacity and applies rationality to the inner self, enabling us to achieve self-knowledge. This internalisation enables a person to recognise their own value, to create a positive image of themselves and to recognise themselves as being worthy despite the circumstances that they may be living in or have lived in. Self-awareness also enables them to manage their emotions, their affections, and to develop self-esteem as a key element in the development of intrapersonal intelligence. A person gains awareness of themselves as a subject of their own acts and experiences (Cuadrado 2003: 140).

This self-consciousness enables a person to enter into their own intimacy. It is within the framework of this intimacy that we find all the elements that make us what we are, within the framework of our immanence. Intimacy is what only we know and what often makes us one person and not another. In it, we find our fears, our desires, our frustrations, our joys..., in short, everything we feel and experience in our most private self and which we only disclose to those people we decide to share it with.

It is within the framework of this sharing of, among other things, our intimacy, that dialogue takes shape. In this dialogue, we can distinguish the internal dialogue of oneself with oneself, that internal *logos* that enables us to construct an image of ourselves. We also find dialogue with others, and which enables us to abandon our intimacy and open up to other people. Language is created through dialogue that is the protagonist of intersubjectivity, of the relationship with the other. In it, we find thought made concepts and words, that of the speaker, but also that of the listener. Language also conveys the intimate, the personal, feelings and affections. All this occurs, moreover, within a cultural context in which thought made word acquires a particular meaning.

Freedom is another key dimension, anthropologically speaking, on which resilience is based. Freedom enables us to choose who we want to be through the decision making that shapes our vital development. Man is able to construct his own biography of making himself, achieving self-realisation through his actions, by being the protagonist of his own life (Cuadrado 2003: 143).

Freedom cannot be understood without understanding the will as the rational tendency that moves us to action. To be real, freedom must be voluntary. It is through reflection and knowledge that the will understands what is good for a person. It is based on this understanding that it enters freely into action. Similarly, freedom is the materialisation of will; it is what transcends thought and becomes action.

To this freedom we must add that inner freedom which allows us to want something, even if this something cannot be materialised. In this context, we find what is known as freedom to want, freedom of thought that can drive us, or not, to enter into action. The very concept of freedom reveals the reality of people faced by the fact that there are certain social and cultural aspects that that we cannot choose. We do not choose to be born into a particular time, into a particular social and cultural context or into one family environment or another. These elements are given to us, and it is based on them that the person can exercise their freedom.

In the context of resilience, freedom can be understood as our capacity to feel ourselves free as we recognise that we have the capacity to confront adverse situations which result from the biological, social and cultural elements that we have been given by circumstance and, against all odds, overcome these situations and even learn from them.

This freedom enables us to overcome the immediate and to establish bonds with others that can help us grow as people, fostering the development of our strengths from the perspective of resilience. These bonds are formed because it is part of human nature to relate to others. A person does not learn, grow, develop their full potential, alone. We need others in order to develop our powers, our capacities and our strengths. The encounter with the other is crucial to the development of resilience. This encounter generates a relationship that is seen, very often, as a give and take that materialises through love, the natural bond between people.

All these personal dimensions can also be educated, bringing our second nature into being. This is the nature that transcends the instinctive, the innate, what is given to us by our genetics or our biology.

Education allows us to grow as people in the realisation and fulfilment of each and every one of these dimensions. As a result of this growth, besides our strengths and personality traits, elements will also emerge that psychologists consider to be protective factors in resilience.

Protective factors in resilience

Protective factors are those internal and external elements that can assist with the positive development of a person.

We speak of protective factors for resilience as opposed to what would be risk factors. By protective factors we mean all those elements that can help a person overcome difficult situations through their own capabilities. Here, then, the emphasis is on personal capacities and strengths as opposed to elements that may limit development and render a person unable to overcome certain circumstances. Risk factors may be particular environments, situations and personal aspects that can cause emotional destabilisation.

However, the line that separates the two factors is so fine that it is sometimes crossed, and it can even be difficult to decide whether a particular factor is a risk factor or a protective one.

Not only that but, in resilience, risk and protective factors may even interact, given that “experience and research show that this distinction is often artificial, even if only because the same factor can be a risk or a protective elements according to the context, the nature and the intensity of the stress, the person and even the period of life of one single individual” (Manciaux, Vanistendael, Lecomteand, Cyrulnik 2010: 23).

On this point, resilience “does not mean either lack of risk or total protection. Nor is it acquired once and forever” (Manciaux, Vanistendael, Lecomteand, Cyrulnik 2010: 23). We can adopt a totally open attitude to resilience, because it does not limit personal capacities and, as mentioned previously, a risk factor can lead a subject to develop other strategies. Similarly, since it is not an innate factor, but is developed through capacities and personal and environmental situations, resilience can also be learned.

In our analysis of factors, whether protective or risk factors, we must distinguish between elements of a personal nature and social, family and environmental considerations. This enables us to see how a child may use their own internal resources or have a family or school environment that can help them in their personal growth and in overcoming trauma. The main anthropological bases are implicit to the development of these capacities, since the child is using the potentialities available within the context of their personal being. A key element, one that is often repeated in different contexts, is the encounter with a person, a resilience tutor, as Cyrulnik would call them, whether their father, their mother, a close acquaintance, a teacher, a friend... In short, someone they can interact with and create an environment conducive to resilience. This encounter may mark the start of a change that will gradually develop into a promising future in which different strengths can even generate feedback. What we can find is that possessing self-confidence facilitates the acquisition of skills while,

at the same time, the development of different skills can boost the development of self-confidence (Vanistendael 2010: 233).

The basic issue is not so much to study protective and risk factors in resilience as such, but to study resilience construction strategies, which should not be generalised but can provide inspiration for the formulation of valid strategies in other contexts and situations. We should bear in mind that all these strategies seem to be clearly linked to interaction between people and with the family, social and/or cultural environment. The encounter with the other seems to be key to building resilience (Vanistendael 2010: 237).

As we can see, then, resilience is not something unmovable, nor something that develops immediately. However, it is not mere adaptation to circumstances, but a desire for construction or reconstruction, a process that must begin with the recognition of one's own strengths through confidence in others and in oneself. This is how self-esteem, a key competence in the entire process, is generated.

From the anthropological standpoint, self-esteem is among the personal and internal resources available to people. Self-esteem falls into the sphere of introspection and self-knowledge. This is also a personal competence that enables a person to consider themselves valuable and irreplaceable. To have a realistic view of themselves, aware of their strengths and weaknesses, but always with the will to learn and grow as a person. This is, in short, what enables us to see the dignity of a person as an aspect of their personal self, anthropologically speaking.

Possessing a healthy sense of self-esteem enables a person to truly know their capacities and strengths.

To speak of self-esteem is to speak of self-assessment. Valuing oneself means being aware of:

1. Having a personal capacity that we can understand to signify "I can." This positive opinion of oneself is what enables us to face problems.
2. Having a personal value that we can understand to signify "I am worthy." This affirmation shows that we are aware of our personal dignity and, therefore, will make us aware of the right that we have to be happy or simply to live, depending on the situation in which we find ourselves.

Self-esteem depends on confidence, but not only on self-confidence. The confidence that others place on the person is also a key element in the development of this competence. The confidence that a person awakens in the other reaffirms the person in their own strengths, in their own possibilities, in a future in which they deserve better conditions. It opens up hope in the future. A resilient person feels that they deserve to hope for a better future, because they know that others have confidence in them. In short, we can affirm that "self-esteem requires someone to love you, which means

that every creative relationship requires respect for the other and a refusal to turn them into an object” (Fuch 2010: 288).

This confidence also requires a clear conscience and self-knowledge of one’s personal capacities and strengths. In the context of this self-knowledge, the inner *logos*, the narrative self-construction that the person makes of themselves, is a key element.

This internal discourse makes it possible to navigate through life, imbuing it with creative possibilities. It makes it possible to open up to the world and establish a life project.

Narrative self-construction as a protective factor in resilience

Having reached this point, we should note that one of the great difficulties that we encounter when making an in-depth analysis of a protective factor in resilience like inner dialogue, which enables us to face or even reconstruct ourselves before a complex situation, is precisely the fact that there is no general opinion about what resilience *is*, exactly.

When we talk about resilience, we talk about a capacity, a process, even a result. Obviously, this makes understanding and subsequently analysing the concept difficult. Accordingly, we join Vanistendael in affirming that what is important is not so much the concept itself and the way it is defined according to different English or French interpretations that have appropriated the term, but rather the fact that “the reality of resilience is very real.” This is because we are aware of both well-known and anonymous people throughout the history of humanity who have experienced really complex, even traumatic situations, and have been able to overcome them, or at least to live with them. It is precisely recognition of this reality that enables us to go beyond the concept and its interpretations.

These life stories are the best way to understand and assimilate the concept of resilience, what it means to be resilient. However, the formulation of life stories depends necessarily on preparation of the person to do this. The process begins when man becomes aware of the adverse situation he faces. He is able to objectify himself as a subject of adversity and, recognising his own reality, is capable, through their will, of seeking alternatives that will enable him to overcome this situation. Human beings are capable of establishing strategies that enable them not just to accept the circumstances but also to fight against them. That is why resilience is not merely resistance against adversity, but also has a constructive side in the case of children, or an element of reconstruction in the case of adults.

However, as we have mentioned, this construction or reconstruction will only be possible when the main elements that form resilience converge. These elements fuse generic personal traits and each individual's personal way of living. That is to say, to make resilience possible, we have certain capacities that are given to us both by our biological and instinctive dimensions and by the components of our personality, as well as by the social and cultural environment in which we find ourselves. There are resources and factors that may be the same in all people. However, each individual will develop them according to their own, personal way of being.

Dialogue is a key factor in these elements for creating resilience. In this context, we refer both to dialogue that is generated by personal interaction and each individual's inner dialogue. In this dialogue, the key is to see, not the limitations, but the capacities, the resources, the strategies..., in short, the strengths.

This personal recognition through internal discourse and interrelation with others should give fruit in the form of the development of a positive and real image of oneself.

In the context of this discourse we find a self-knowledge that, in the final outcome, is nothing more self-discovery, which is not the same as inventing oneself. What the person is, they already are in essence, with their qualities and strengths. Through the internal *logos*, a person is able to see who they are.

The word must be healthy and, on occasion, it must cure. This is made possible by the emotional character that language can have as representation and symbol of feelings and emotions. Language can enable us to express all the concerns that are generated through introspection. In this way, an autobiographical account is formed that enables us to become aware of who we are, whatever the adverse circumstances that we have been forced to live through.

Thought and language interact in the development of the biographical account. It is, precisely, the reflective nature of language, internal language, which enables us to look into ourselves and to undertake resilient self-construction in response to adversity.

The formulation of this resilient autobiography can also be assisted by personal knowledge or reading of the biographies of resilient people, or even reading stories or accounts that convey positive messages with regard to complex situations. We remember Anna Frank, for instance, whose diary and testimony infused a harsh reality with hope. Or Tim Guénard, whose testimony stresses the need to set ourselves goals that can give meaning to life when they do not seem to exist, and even though these goals may not be wholly acceptable, socially speaking. We can also look at characters known to all from traditional tales. In short, an endless list of life stories depicting situations with different degrees of difficulty that are finally accepted and at times overcome,

as the protagonists learn to live with their reality, their circumstances at times even enabling them to learn and enrich their personal development.

All these stories, both true or fictional accounts, are narratives, often autobiographical, which highlight good living practices that are, in fact, resilient practices. These narratives can help the writers to see and feel themselves as the creators and protagonists of their own stories and, simultaneously, the authors and narrators of their lives.

Although resilience is unlikely to emerge in solitude, each individual should be able to recognise their own strengths, because only in this way will they know who they are and who they can become. Only in this way can we meet the challenge of showing that there is more to us than meets the eye as we seek our destiny and a much better future than may seem to await us at first.

To give meaning to life as a result of knowing who one is, is something that Viktor Frankl achieved, precisely, through logotherapy. In an extreme situation – his life in concentration camps – he was able to construct a narrative, to set himself a goal that enabled him to stay alive. If it is to come into being, resilience must be accompanied by life goals, so that the most terrible experiences become bearable and even generate learning.

To give meaning to life entails thinking about what we want from life, what we expect from it or, perhaps more accurately, what life expects from us (Frankl 2004: 101).

Only when we give meaning to life are we able to adapt our personal attitude to that meaning, in such a way that everything focuses on it. The meaning that each and every one of us gives to their life becomes the motivating and necessary support for resilience. A person must discover what the meaning of life is for them, and to do this they need to recognise their own identity.

If this occurs, we can hope for people who are more fully prepared to recognise both their own strengths and those of others. And all this will occur thanks to human nature, the source and origin of all the possibilities that life can offer. We should remember that this process forms part of the answer to the question we asked at the beginning, “What is a person?”, to which we can well add another, “Who is a person?”, because “the person I am is something that I cannot share, because it is what makes me unique and unrepeatable compared to others who share my same nature” (Villarroy 2014: 126).

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