Children's Accommodations for Resilience in Uncertain Times

Julie Spray (Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis)
julie.spray@wustl.edu

Eleven-year-old Pikau was my first friend in the New Zealand primary school where I did fieldwork. Kind and sensible, she would spend lunchtimes with me—although she never had lunch. When asked why she wasn't eating, she would say she wasn't hungry.

When I stopped asking, Pikau eventually volunteered that she didn't have lunch, telling me it's hard for her parents to care for her. School was tough too; she'd been bullied for years. After her father intervened, the bullying masqueraded as jokes, with plausible deniability.

She told me about another girl, also bullied, who was cutting herself with knives and scissors, but Pikau had sworn not to tell.

I asked her, "Do you cut yourself?"

"I just threaten myself," she replied. "I threaten myself, saying I want to run away, I want to die."

But she would also hurt herself by snapping a rubber band around her wrist. She said it helped, "but I'd be bleeding a lot when I get home, and I'll just…put toilet paper on it, and I didn't care."

Situations like Pikau's, and young people's coping with them, have been increasingly framed in scholarly and public discourse in terms of resilience. In the COVID-19 era, concerns about children have been met with a predictable refrain: children are resilient. As a mantra, it

Illustration of Pikau at Tūrama School by Julie Spray

reassures adults that the uncertainties we fear are not harming our kids—at least, not permanently.

Originating from engineering, the term "resilience" describes a capacity to absorb force and return to original form. Notions of resilience were popularised in psychology fields, where scholars sought to reframe deficit views of young people's failures by instead focusing on the factors that allow young people to succeed despite adversity (Panter-Brick and Leckman 2013; Masten 2001). This positive valence, however, means the concept of resilience can be uncritically applied in public discourse to gloss over the consequences of children's adversity, leaving unexamined the costs of everyday coping strategies.

I learnt about children's coping practices, and the way adults converted these into narratives of resilience, during 13 months of fieldwork at "Tūrama School" in Auckland, where I worked alongside 120 children aged 8-12 (Spray 2020). These were lives of uncertainty, where high rates of poverty, family violence, illness, and death created unstable foundations for childhoods. School staff, while fiercely caring for children, would commonly characterise children as resilient or adaptable.

Like Pikau, many children were undernourished. The charity KidsCan offered "spare lunches," but children saw these as stigmatised. Consequently, one teacher commented:

> "…the kids adapt. My year five and sixes have adapted really well. There was a time when I would make them have a spare lunch and now it's they would rather go hungry than have lunch."

Indigenous scholars have pointed out how narratives of resilience can serve to justify the unjust by placing responsibility on the marginalised to be resilient (Penehira et al, 2014). Here, the way teachers deployed the resilience concept veiled hungry children and their inadequate provisioning. Emphasising children's "resilience" allows this teacher to reconcile abandoning her attempts to make them eat—children are adapting to poverty and social stigma by 'choosing' to go hungry. As with our reassurances during COVID-19, resilience discourses can serve to protect *adults* from their own helplessness against children's suffering, rather than reflect actual processes of children's coping.

Investigating processes of resilience

Socio-ecological models of resilience investigate such processes of coping by positioning children as navigating risk and negotiating resources within the possibilities of local ecologies (Ungar 2012; 2011). This model of resilience has been applied to large-scale, mixed-methods studies for broad comparisons across contexts (Panter-Brick 2014). While few studies have yet capitalised on ethnography's unique possibilities for understanding resilience within socio-ecological frameworks, contextualised attention to children's daily practices may challenge assumptions about what resilience looks like. Children may be provisioned with spare lunches, but claim they're not hungry, or snap rubber bands until they bleed. Just as concepts of risk and vulnerability do not capture these forms of resourcefulness, resilience does not adequately conceptualise the way that children's coping can be both functional and harmful.

Accommodations for resilience

'Self-harm' describes deliberate, self-inflicted injury such as cutting, burning, or scratching. These behaviours may accompany suicidal thoughts, but people who self-harm describe the practice as a tool to alleviate anxiety, stress, or low moods. Its inclusion in psychiatric manuals

as symptoms or disorders has medicalised and pathologized self-harm, reinforcing the practice as a socially recognised idiom of distress (Steggals 2015).

At Tūrama School this was a secretive practice among children, and as an adult ethnographer I caught only a very partial view, becoming aware of groups of girls self-harming in at least three classrooms. Yet self-harm was also a social practice. Pikau told me about her bleeding wrists because this made her invisible suffering visible; other girls showed me their scratches on the playground. Through these signifying wounds, unseen feelings were translated into culturally recognisable, embodied expressions of suffering.

Panter-Brick (1998) borrows the term "accommodations" (Frisancho 1993) from the human growth literature to conceptualise the costs and benefits of coping. "Accommodations" originated to oppose the "small but healthy" view (Seckler 1980) which hypothesised that children's stunted growth caused by undernutrition and infection was a beneficial adaptation to poor environments. In criticism, scholars showed that deficits in growth come with costs, including permanent effects on cognitive development. Stunting is therefore an accommodation, not an adaptation—bodies sacrificing in one domain to cope in another.

Viewing children's practices as accommodation, therefore, means acknowledging that while self-harm may not match adult ideas about what children should be doing, it is nonetheless functional—enabling suffering to be expressed, shared, and validated. The trade-off is new vulnerabilities: the physical risks, and social impacts of scarring, stigma, or in this case, the school's intervention. Unsure of their approach, staff contacted children's families, and in one teacher's words, explained the behaviour as "naughty little girls" who were attention-seeking and playing copycats. There was little recognition of the conditions producing this practice or the potential need for alternatives to fulfil the same function.

The positive valence of the word resilience, therefore, can serve as a narrative gloss for the costs of children's coping, while obscuring the functionality of practices typically considered indicators of poor resilience based on normative adult values. Thinking in terms of 'accommodations for resilience,' however, allows us to attend more closely to these practices and trade-offs, and this is critical to understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on children. If children are accommodating, not adapting to the upheaval of COVID-19, then the costs of their resilience may appear in different domains, at later life stages, and compound with other adverse events (Felitti et al. 1998). To evaluate these trade-offs, we also must understand the meaning and function of children's practices in context, and from children's perspectives. Moreover, attending to the costs of resilience makes apparent that promoting resilience is not an alternative to addressing the conditions that children are having to accommodate. Finally, we must keep critical of how resilience discourses during COVID-19 may be working to protect *us*, rather than children.

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Author contact: Julie Spray (Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis) julie.spray@wustl.edu