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Autor: Schafer, Markus H. / Pylpiv Shippee, Tetyana / Ferraro, Kenneth F.

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When Does Disadvantage Not Accumulate? Toward a Sociological Conceptualization of Resilience

Markus H. Schafer, Tetyana Pylypiv Shippee and Kenneth F. Ferraro*

1 Introduction

Sociologists have long been interested in the study of inequality, but systematic consideration of how inequality accumulates over the life course has drawn renewed attention in recent decades from scholars studying a variety of topics including stratification, aging, health, and criminology. Given sociological interest in recurring inequalities, scholars are intrigued by and seek to understand how inequality accumulates. The maxim that *disadvantage accumulates* has guided most of the empirical research and theoretical statements about cumulative inequality (Dannefer, 2003; DiPrete and Eirich, 2006; Ferraro et al., 2009). Sociologists anticipate that structural forces constrain life chances and that early disadvantage will result in additional disadvantage (although this is a limited conceptualization of cumulative inequality). While it is reasonable to expect that disadvantage will accumulate across the life course, how does one explain when it does not accumulate? We believe answering this question is critical to the development of theories of cumulative inequality and for empirical research on accumulation processes.

Explanations for why disadvantage does not accumulate are varied but tend to center on discussions of counterbalancing effects of accumulating advantage (Ross and Wu 1996), compensatory mechanisms (Ferraro and Kelley-Moore, 2003), activation of resources (Link et al., 2008; Smith, 2005), divergent trajectories (Carstensen and Mikels, 2005), and resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). Although resilience is often used by psychologists to describe how people are able to effectively cope with stressors, we develop a sociological conceptualization of resilience that *addresses other mechanisms for stopping or reversing the accumulation of disadvantage and incorporates both the individual and the social world.* Drawing from cumulative inequality theory, we seek to (1) identify conditions under which inequality in status domains (e.g., wealth, occupational life chances) or health (e.g., functional ability) does not accumulate and (2) explicate how resilience is important in this process of offsetting the disadvantages of poverty or poor health. In doing so, we call attention to oversimplified interpretations of cumulative disadvantage and emphasize the role of human agency in theories that address cumulative inequality. Clearly, there are multiple potential

* Department of Sociology, Purdue University.

reasons for why disadvantage may not accumulate in the life course, but our focus here is on resilience, the volitional, purposive set of responses undertaken by actors who perceive their condition to be undesirable.

From the outset, it is important to be explicit that our emphasis is on how individuals recognize their conditions because resilience, as we construe it, is an agentic, purposive response to the structural realities of cumulative inequality. Indeed, we see resilience as an important intersection of agency and structure in a theory fairly comfortable with the latter but largely inattentive to the former. To be sure, there are ways to counteract the accumulation of disadvantage that do not stem from the agency of the actor (e.g., state policies or resource flow through social networks). But as we shall discuss later in this paper, action undertaken by others to combat one's adversity very often works in tandem with an individual's own resilient responses.

2 Oversimplified conceptualizations of cumulative disadvantage and the emergence of cumulative inequality theory

As sociologists, we expect to see the results of inequality manifested over the life course, and there is ample evidence that it occurs. At the same time, what constitutes evidence for cumulative disadvantage? If we observe inequalities in children and find that they persist into adulthood, is that evidence of cumulative disadvantage? Or is it only in cases where the magnitude of the disparity grows that we would describe it as cumulative disadvantage? Dannefer, a prescient scholar of cumulative advantage and disadvantage, emphasizes "interindividual *divergence* in a given characteristic" (Dannefer, 2003; p. 327, emphasis added). Thus, would simple persistence of a disparity observed early in the life course qualify as cumulative disadvantage? According to Dannefer's conceptualization, probably not. Rather, one would expect to find a *compounding* of status hierarchies, and this must be observed across individuals – by studying "a set of social dynamics that operate on a population, not individuals" (Douthit & Dannefer, 2007, p. 224). Unfortunately, however, reports of persistent inequalities or related adversities are often interpreted as evidence of cumulative disadvantage (e.g., De La Roca, 2006).

From a slightly different perspective, what type of evidence is necessary to refute assertions that cumulative disadvantage has occurred? If there is evidence of a *beneficial* effect due to an early disadvantage on subsequent well-being, does that mean that cumulative disadvantage did not occur? Or might that be evidence of some type of resilience? At a somewhat more abstract level, do we want to use outcomes – presumed to be "final" – as the only evidence for detecting cumulative inequality? Or should we privilege the process of responding to events or condi-

tions defined as adverse in our study of cumulative inequality? We believe that the latter approach holds great promise, especially because of how it would facilitate the development of effective interventions.

Unfortunately, many scholars have too liberally applied the concept of cumulative disadvantage to describe instances where negative events or conditions are related to unfavorable outcomes later along the life course. This has occurred frequently in studies linking early life characteristics with health in later life. As Zimmerman et al. (2006) observe, scores of studies on the influence of specific factors on health over the life course are interpreted as evidence for cumulative disadvantage (e.g., childhood experiences, socioeconomic status, life events, social support). It is our contention, however, that such an omnibus conceptualization of life course inequality does little to advance our understanding of accumulation processes and the ways in which to interrupt the cascade of disadvantage. What we need are theories and empirical research on the processes by which early disadvantage leads to a range of outcomes – both negative and positive – as well as when early disadvantage is unrelated to status attainment or well-being in later life. Dannefer (1988) earlier noted that varied trajectories can result from similar forms of disadvantage, but interpretations of cumulative disadvantage since then have frequently incorporated all forms of negative effects due to early adversity.

Our articulation of *cumulative inequality theory* is an attempt to give more explicit attention to how inequality accumulates, including varied outcomes from similar events or exposures, and how life course trajectories are modified (Ferraro et al., 2009). Cumulative inequality theory integrates elements from several theories, including cumulative advantage/disadvantage (Dannefer, 2003; O'Rand, 1996), life course (Elder, 1998b), and stress process (Pearlin et al., 2005). The primary objective of cumulative inequality theory is to identify and explain the mechanisms underlying differentiation between status groups over time. Diverging from earlier formulations of the process, however, cumulative inequality theory not only implies a widening disparity in outcomes over time (Ross and Wu 1996; Willson et al., 2007), but it specifies how risk factors associated with disadvantaged conditions actually influence the diverging trajectories. Multiple risks may add up or exacerbate each other within a single life domain (e.g., family, work), across life domains, or both. As an example, work-based stresses both spill over into family life and accrue with or multiply existent health problems. To better understand why disadvantage does not accumulate, particular attention is given here to two axioms of cumulative inequality (CI) theory: (a) *life-course trajectories are shaped by the accumulation of risk, available resources, and human agency*, and (b) *the perception of life trajectories influences subsequent trajectories.*

We assert that the study of cumulative inequality should be anchored in the interplay of structure and agency. This dialectic is important to the interpretation of stimuli as adverse as well as to the actions undertaken by persons confronted by

what they perceive as an unfavorable event or condition. By focusing on the mutual relationship between structure and agency, we better understand that people have a remarkable capacity for resilience amidst trying circumstances, but that resilience is a set of social responses nested in the structure of social life. That is, social systems generate and maintain obdurate inequality, yet people interpret their conditions, acting and reacting to realign their changing reality with their preferences. The framework from which our case is built begins with the assumption that agency is the interplay between our habits, judgements, and imaginations in the confrontation of problems (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Our framework is also undergirded by the realization that social structural patterns (including inequality) are ultimately an aggregation of sustained person-level interactions (Collins 1981), including the capacity to be resilient. To highlight the importance of the structure/agency dialectic, we begin by differentiating adversity from disadvantage and delineating important aspects of each to better understand how resilience can develop.

3 Inequality, adversity, and disadvantage

Though the field of sociology has at its disposal a wide array of concepts and theories which attune scholars to negative events and circumstances surrounding people's lives, researchers rarely elucidate the characteristics of these events and conditions that either elevate the possibilities for continued trouble or allow for the development of resilient adaptation. In the broadest sense, inequality may be seen as an uneven distribution of resources, risks, hindrances, and/or opportunities in a given time and context. When negative events and conditions compound over time, cumulative inequality occurs, but individuals may also be able to adapt in resilient ways. Although terms representing inequality are often used interchangeably, distinguishing between adversity and disadvantage is an important step in explicating how resilience occurs. We define *disadvantage* as an unfavorable position in a stratification hierarchy. By contrast, *adversity* is *perceived* misfortune which manifests either through an event (calamity) or a condition (disadvantage). Both terms represent risk factors for additional disadvantage, but adversity means that the actor is aware that the situation entails some risk. With disadvantage, one may or may not be aware of potential risks – it is simply a position in a hierarchy. If, however, one's position is perceived as unfavorable, disadvantage is viewed as an adversity. Our view of resilience requires that a person respond to an event or condition that is considered unfavorable. Hence, resilience is a response to adversity.

Several other clarifying remarks about adversity are in order. We emphasize the importance of subjective evaluations of adversity because people negotiate the meaning of adversity in diverse social contexts, and what is perceived as calamity by some may be considered a normal part of life by others (e. g., Edge and Rogers,

2005). In addition, the two types of adversity we describe (events and conditions) are related to one another along a continuum. At a certain point, repeated adverse events cease to become isolated, discrete calamities and become a disadvantageous condition. Of course, this formulation could be construed as a tautology; i.e., people are in a disadvantageous condition so they are exposed to more calamities, but when people are exposed to a set of calamities we observe that they are in a condition of disadvantage. Our response is twofold.

First, there may be reciprocal effects, but longitudinal research would be needed to identify the temporal order involved. Furthermore, because the transition from event to condition is a process, its progression has much to do with how negative events are interpreted and integrated into one's lifestyle, again drawing attention to the importance of subjective evaluations of adversity. Second, there are situations where adverse events are borne not out of a preexistent disadvantageous condition, but out of the unpredictable and random nature of social life (e. g., a spouse dies a tragic early death at the hands of Somali pirates while on a Mediterranean cruise). From a subsequent string of associated, clustered adversities (e. g., conflict with children over family role realignment, distractions at work) can emerge a disadvantageous condition.

To further elaborate on these considerations, CI theory draws attention to the concept of *exposure* for understanding how resilience develops. Life experience may be seen as a series of exposures, and we identify four aspects of exposure that are important to the study of resilience: (1) onset, (2) magnitude, (3) duration, and (4) dimensionality. Because resilience is ultimately a counteraction of adversity's harmful potentiality, each of these four aspects are important for understanding whether a person will likely be resilient and the types of responsive action needed to exercise resilience.

3.1 Onset of exposure

Cumulative inequality theory emphasizes the onset of exposure to risk factors as a key predictor for the accumulation of disadvantage. Onset is important for at least two main reasons. First, the duration of exposure to risk factors is, in part, a function of onset. Second, onset at certain periods of life may be especially consequential. For instance, research on the early origins of adult health reveals that childhood is a critical period for establishing biological and developmental processes that will influence health for years to come (Singh-Manoux and Marmot, 2005).

For the purposes of this essay, however, we are concerned with those instances when the actor identifies the event or condition as adverse because we argue that the perception of misfortune is central to a purposive resilient response. Conditions may pose considerable risk, but resilience requires that the actor first recognize the condition or event as unfavorable in order to *act* in such a way as to initiate behaviors to offset its potentially noxious effects.

At different points in time, individuals may respond very differently to similar forms of adversity (i.e., stressors). We posit that early exposure to situations defined as adverse is likely to have a greater effect on personal adjustment than similar exposure later in life, especially if the exposure lasts for a longer period of time. For instance, as opposed to persons who first experienced sexual abuse in mid-life, childhood sexual abuse raised the risk of entering prostitution and being victimized (West et al., 2000). The early exposure to this adverse experience has the power to *redirect* a life trajectory. We contend that adversity that begins early in life, especially if it continues for a long period of time, may lead to other problems and challenge the expression of resilient adaptation. On the other hand, later-onset adversity can also present a considerable challenge by leading to negative outcomes with low likelihood of resilient adaptation, though late onset adversity is less influential in re-directing life trajectories. More generally, we identify three basic processes when people perceive adversity: (a) unfavorable outcomes due to the adversity, (b) redirecting one's life to avoid continued risk-factor exposure; or (c) a combination of the two.

3.2 Magnitude of exposure

Exposure to events and conditions also differs in *magnitude* or severity (in medicine, this concept is often referred to as dose). Some events are deeply vexing, requiring considerable readjustment, while others are largely annoying but not viewed as ultimately important in one's life. To illustrate this principle, Clark et al. (2000) found that as the degree of neighborhood disadvantage (e. g., welfare dependence) increased from low to moderate to severe to very severe, the presence of family dysfunction among inner-city families increased from 23% to 40% to 58% and to 78%, respectively.

Scholars studying life events often judge marital disruption, especially due to spouse's death, as the event requiring the most readjustment. In the vast majority of cases, death of spouse is an adverse event, but context is always important. If the death followed a protracted and debilitating illness, the meaning associated with the death of spouse would be qualitatively different than if the death was accidental. It is even more difficult to judge how a person perceives events such as retirement, which may be extremely positive or negative for the person. In each case, subjective understanding of adversity's magnitude is important because it will shape resilient responses.

3.3 Duration of exposure

Duration of exposure refers to the length of time after onset that the person is facing the risk factor(s). Duration of exposure to adversity may be short-lived or more prolonged. We conceptualize singular adversity as a life event (e. g., verbal berating, rape) that is regarded unfavorably and, in the more serious cases, precipitates a "fight

or flight" response. These singular events may require considerable time for social and personal adjustment, but the event itself occurs fairly quickly. It is possible, however, that singular events recur. In these cases, although each instance is short-lived, recurrence often leads the actor to view it as an enduring form of adversity – a condition of enduring hardship (i.e., disadvantage). Repeated incidents, as with child abuse, can produce trauma; individuals may learn to adapt to the recurrent adversity or may internalize negative self-perceptions and fall into self-blame. For instance, Terr (1990) found that children exposed to repeated abuse may begin to perceive themselves as "bad" children who deserved the abuse, therefore developing a "futureless" attitude that led to a sense of hopelessness in other areas of their lives.

The consequences of the adversity may be long- or short-lived, but the duration of exposure is important for understanding how people react to the event and whether their set of responses will be one of resilience. Explicit attention to duration focuses attention on accumulation processes over the life course. It is reasonable to expect that constant exposure to the same stressors may be more difficult to overcome than a one-time exposure. Nevertheless, how does the person view recurrent forms of adversity in his or her life? Are there meaningful thresholds of accumulation? Does exposure to day-to-day stresses (e.g., living in a poor neighborhood) compound linearly? Although one might expect such a pattern, there is evidence that exposure to adversity may reach a "ceiling," beyond which further problems produce relatively weaker effects. For instance, McNulty (2001) reports that after a certain level of economic deprivation, neighborhoods cease to be seen by residents as disorderly or stressful. Prolonged adversity is also challenging because of the potential for its diffusion into other areas of one's life; if so, resilience may become more difficult to achieve because ameliorative action must be taken in multiple contexts.

Viewing onset, duration, and magnitude together, one can readily see that the consequences associated with any form of adversity are hard to judge without the other elements. High magnitude may be consequential in shaping the life course regardless of duration, but events or conditions of low magnitude probably have to last for a longer period of time for them to have a discernible effect on the life course.

3.4 Dimensionality of adversity

Another tenet of CI theory is that if an individual confronts adversity in one context, he or she will likely face related adversity in other areas of life because of the systemic character of resource distribution across domains of life and experience. A child growing up in a poor, single-mother household faces economic disadvantage but also is likely to experience lower life chances in education, health, and other areas – and these may continue to build throughout his/her life and threaten the possibility of a resilient response. Cumulative inequality theory maintains that exposure to multiple risk factors poses a greater threat to individual adjustment than exposure to

only one type of disadvantage, especially when the actor judges the situation to be adverse. For instance, Rutter (1979) found that children who were exposed to only one type of disadvantage within their families (e. g., marital discord) fared as well as children who were not exposed to any; however, children who were exposed to four family-related risk factors (e. g., poverty, marital discord, overcrowding, paternal criminality), were ten times more likely to develop psychiatric disorders.

Hazards or low status are often sufficient to generate inimical outcomes, but the likelihood of such outcomes is probably greater when the actor views the situation as adverse. Taken together, the onset, duration, magnitude, and dimensionality of adversity combine to influence the likelihood of resilient response. Although we expect that resilience is less likely to occur when adversity is enduring, severe, and affects multiple aspects of a person's life, there are instances of resilient adaptation even in these circumstances. Below, we outline a conceptualization of resilience in the face of adversity.

4 Processes of resilience

In asking the question posed in our title – when does disadvantage not accumulate? – it is important to address how adversity manages to be such a formidable foe in the life course as well as how people counteract its menace. One of the ways in which the accumulation of disadvantage does not occur is through a constructive adaptive response: resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). We agree with those who see resilience as a dynamic *process* by which people overcome *or* do not succumb to adversity, and we agree with those who oppose using the term solely as an intrinsic trait that people possess (Luthar et al., 2000).

In most cases, resilience requires the activation of resources, both social and non-social. In the face of adversity, actors face three related phases to maintain or enhance their functioning: (1) recognize their condition as unfavorable, (2) perceive that action can and should be taken in the face of adversity, (3) and activate resources – either their own or someone else's – to adapt to adversity. We propose that this three-part process of resilience is invariant across time and place, but that cultural contexts influence and modify all aspects of the process, from the definition of situations as either adverse or benign to the prescribed courses of action in response to unfavorable circumstances to the types of resources one employs.

4.1 Recognize condition as unfavorable

Central to our argument that people themselves – the actors within the social systems that generate inequality – are important for understanding the processes of cumulative inequality, is the proposition that people interpret themselves in meaningful comparison with others. In order for a person to consider him or her-

self as facing adversity, he or she must view the condition as undesirable. Though some adversities are universally perceived as undesirable (e.g., it is hard to imagine someone interpreting pestilence, famine, or unexpected blindness as anything but misfortune), other events may or may not be considered inimical.

As an intriguing example of the latter instance, consider the shifting cultural understandings of gender and social equality. Feminist scholars often locate gender inequality in macrostructural terms, identifying dimensions such as "women's relative access to formal employment opportunities and rewards" (Dunn et al., 1993:71). By contrast, some women see differential opportunity structures as normal and unproblematic, and may see advantages to the limited avenues of experience uniquely open to them (e.g., mothering children). Furthermore, their social networks may be limited mostly to families in which at-home mothers are the norm, making traditional conceptions of motherhood an accepted social norm. From a structuralist conception of cumulative inequality, gender-stereotyped treatment (beginning in early childhood, resulting in different family and career choices, and culminating in lowered earning potential and status) would represent a disadvantage cascade. Should aspirations, values, and desires be ignored, however, such an accumulation of disadvantage may be wrongfully attributed to an individual's life trajectory. We believe that care is needed when identifying perceived adversity, because the concept relies upon a reference group, and it is not always clear which is the preferable reference group.

People evaluate their condition on the basis of important others; reference groups are the place where people understand themselves as disadvantaged. In short, perceived adversity is in the eye of the beholder. Of course, problems people face often go undetected yet pose considerable risk (e.g., lead paint exposure, radiation from power plants, poisonous chemicals in the water supply). These risks, while damning to life chances, do not offer opportunities for a resilient response, strictly speaking, because they are by their very nature undiscernable insults.

Fresh attention must be given, therefore, to the social construction of disadvantage and adversity, at the level of both public discourse and for specific people in relation to their social contexts (and most importantly, at the intersection of these two levels). The reason that this is relevant is that the conception of a desirable existence is so infinitely diffused and fragmented that any attempt to interpret, define, or mathematically calculate constructs such as adversity or cumulative inequality is nearly meaningless apart from the meaning that actors impute to their situation. The recognition that social conditions, such as inequality or disadvantage, are a social problem is a process mediated through the institutions of public discourse and the conflicting interests interwoven in these institutional networks (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). These discourses, carried out by media, politicians, interest groups, and others, help define and materialize abstract concepts such as inequality, disadvantage, and adversity. At the level of individuals, inequality cannot be understood

apart from the configuration of actors within the social structures mentioned above. Thus, we must first focus on whether conditions are defined as major adversities, minor setbacks, trifling annoyances, or petty matters (i.e., magnitude of exposure). Likewise, it is nonsensical to talk of resilience if people see nothing defined as hardship or adversity with which to cope or from which to bounce back.

4.2 Perceive that action can and should be taken in the face of adversity

When problems are defined as such, adversities can be surmounted or endured if people perceive that action can and should be taken. It is easiest to see this process at work when adversity is generalized. Goffman (1974:21) invoked the term *frame* to refer to the "schemata of interpretation" used to make events and situations meaningful in people's lives; and the use of frames has become a central concept in the sociological study of social movements and collective action (Benford 1993; Snow et al., 1986). Of course, the notion of the frame is akin to interpretive work done in defining one's situation as unfavorable (described above); but in the immediate context, frames are related to the propensity to *undertake action* in the face of adversity. Indeed, collective action to redress a perceived grievance is expected to the degree by which frames among different social actors are aligned (Snow et al., 1986).

Under conditions when adversity is spread among many people, what we term *generalized adversity*, groups ascertain whether it is worthwhile to push for change. In the process of social interaction, rationales and justification for action – also known as vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) – become available for people to use as frames and enable them to articulate and embrace the goals of the group (Benford, 1993). Benford (1993) identifies vocabularies of (1) severity, (2) urgency, (3) efficacy, and (4) propriety as key stimulants for collective action. As people make judgments about the nature of the adversity and their ability to bring about change, they use linguistic and discursive devices to interpret their shared reality and to identify potential courses of action. These processes take place in the context of social networks, and they illustrate the ways in which social actors see adversity not solely as personal problems but as larger issues (Mills, 1959). Resilience to a generalized adversity, then, often takes place within the context of collective action.

Yet the principles of framing issues to decide an appropriate response are also relevant to *individualized adversity*. One person may feel fatalistic about his or her condition, while another person feels that a parallel problem is "under control." Two persons in identical life conditions will also differ in their receptivity to resource activation; one person quickly seizes hold of his or her social networks and takes advantage of an inflow of material or non-material assistance, while the other may downplay or underestimate the efficacy of readily available or latent resources. When adversity strikes, people use frames to contextualize their own individual responsive action. Sometimes the frames are aligned with others who see their state

of being in a similar light and the frame alignment eventuates in collective action; at other times, frame alignment with others is not as likely because the adversity is less generalized and more individualized. In these situations, people may seek frame resonance with a generalized other – a symbolic abstraction that is understanding of one's condition and/or challenged by a similar set of circumstances.

Drawing from CI theory, we contend that many people in disadvantaged situations continue to believe that they can make the best out of their situation; hope means that things can be better. Indeed, a recent study finds that people who face the highest levels of adversity in their childhood actually tend to have the most optimistic picture of their trajectory of life satisfaction (Schafer and Ferraro, 2008). Other empirical examples abound, such as Jews resisting the Nazis in the Polish ghetto in Warsaw during WWII even when their death was assured (Einwohner, 2003). Nevertheless, there are some plausible reasons that people will not use frames that resonate with an imperative to invest motivation, time, and strength to activate their resources.

Cultural values, or one's worldview, are a fundamental reason that people may not invest motivation, time, and strength to activate their resources. Evaluations about whether the unequal distribution of life chances is an unfair problem or a reality of life come from conceptions about meritocratic and distributive justice, a set of operative assumptions directing attributive norms (Rubinstein, 1988). Cross-national differences in assumptions about justice, for instance, underlie the contrast of support for economic orders (Western democracy versus socialism) in postcommunist Eastern European states (Kluegel et al., 1999). Put in the forgoing terminology, a perception that one's misfortune is *warranted* often closes off a set of potential frames for ameliorative action availed to those who see their hard luck as an affront to their deserved rights. Infused with a sense of injustice, the latter set of individuals present themselves as the injured party, assuming a sympathetic ear and an obliging hand. Tacit resignation, on the other hand, would not be expected to spur help-seeking behavior for resource activation, although it may lead to more individualized frames emphasizing self-efficacy for the improvement of life trajectories.

Two other illustrations help to show how cultural values are associated with the availability of life trajectory improvement frames. As one example, conservative Protestant religious ideals influence how people utilize their material resources, shrinking long-term savings and limiting the ability to pull themselves out of a condition of poverty (Keister, 2008). Broadly speaking, people whose religious values are not in sync with the cultural goals of material acquisition or earthly comfort may exhibit lifestyles that seem counter-productive for improving life trajectories. Second, consider what appears as fragmented and incoherent shards of culture abounding in the modern city (Hannerz, 1969). Ghetto inner-city life often seems deeply problematic and undesirable to middle-class Whites, but the multiplicity of

cultural scripts available to poor Black youths indicates that pursuing conventional, middle-class forward-looking pursuits such as education and financial savings is not always the choice pathway for Black youth (Harding, 2007).

Another reason that people may or may not invest motivation, time, and strength to activate their resources is rooted in the life course and based upon perceptions about the trajectories of one's biography. Carstensen (2006) shows that a sense of time and the perspective of one's place within a socially meaningful span of time (e. g., time left in college or time left alive) play an important role in motivating behavior. Essentially, people engage in a cost-benefit analysis of allocating time and resources, and as they age, it becomes less important to obtain novel information or new experiences. Greater emphasis, however, is placed on preserving existent social resources such as established relationships. Perhaps some people see the expenditure of time and energy to resist adversity as not worth it when they perceive their life to be waning and choose to instead brace themselves for the consequences with the help of their loved ones. Culturally-based cognition is at the root of these life course evaluations.

As an alternative to the psychosocial calculus invoked in Carstensen's theory, a life course explanation also suggests that people may not activate their resources because of the availability or non-availability of *power* as a function of their structural position in social relations. People who are either very young or who are very old often have less decision-making power because others often speak on their behalf. Children who face misfortune rely on the benevolence of their parents or caretakers to activate resources on their behalf, and often depend on these significant others to identify and define the situation itself as unfavorable. Adults who are very old often cede their autonomy to others via legal arrangements such as power of attorney; whether this act is strictly legal or deeply symbolic, it represents a shift in power relations. All else being equal, young- and middle-age adults usually have the greatest power in social relations and thus embody the highest potential for autonomously activating resources to modify their life trajectories.

Finally, the most-explored and richly developed explanation to account for why certain people believe that action can and should be taken stems from psychological attributes. A rich literature in psychology sheds light on the construct of resilience and why people will activate their resources in hopes of improving their state of being. Though psychological traits are commonly assumed to be ontogenetic – or arising from within individuals themselves – people's personalities and dispositions are more accurately the product of social experiences and genetic variation (Schnittker, 2008). It is beyond the scope of this article to weigh the respective contribution of each factor in each of the traits associated with resilience, and we grant that personality traits are a legitimate and appropriate level of analysis without getting entangled in causal puzzles concerning their origin and constitution. From the findings of psychologists, we know that higher levels of IQ and positive emotionality

are related to resilient responses to adversity (Fergusson and Lynskey, 1996; Masten et al., 1999), and part of these associations likely owes to the fact that smarter and more composed people may be better at activating resources to improve their life trajectories. Those high in characteristics such as hardiness, self-enhancement, and repression also have a better shot at resilience (Bonanno, 2004), though it is unclear to what extent those traits are specifically related to the activation of resources and to the social cognition processes related to frame selection (Link et al., 2008). Therefore, while psychologists have been invaluable in laying the groundwork for understanding resilience, there is a wealth of sociological constructs capable of broadening the scope of resilience into a more wholistic concept. Summing up, we have thus far argued that in order to be resilient, people perceiving their lot to be troublesome must utilize frames that permit responses conducive to improving their life trajectories. These frames are generally thought of as catalysts for collective action in the face of a perceived generalized adversity, but they are also necessary for more personal responses to individualized adversities.

By prioritizing these agentic processes, we illustrate the problem of resilience among people with little social power. Even if all people were to universally regard certain events as adverse, the availability of particular frames for adaptive responses are not equally available to people across various points of the life course. This demonstrates that the timing of adversity in the life course matters because of frame availability. The availability of frames also depends on the repertoire of cultural assumptions a person brings to bear on "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986). Also, we have illustrated the problem of resilience for people under conditions that do not lend themselves to attributive assumptions. If life chances are affected by diffuse, unidentified, or otherwise insidious means, people will find it more difficult to select precise frames to actively change their life trajectories. Randomness, chance, and the lack of a clear source of adversity make frame selection tricky.

4.3 Activate resources

Once people have decided that a situation is unfavorable and that they can and should take action to counteract the adversity – either individually or collectively – the final step is the activation of resources in order to modify life trajectories. Although psychologists often see resilience primarily stemming from traits such as IQ and personality (as well as in the context of favorable opportunity structures such as a nurturing home life and a supportive community), sociologists focus on social context, networks, and resources (Link et al., 2008). These aspects of social life are in some part circumscribed but are also modifiable and adaptable to maximize favorable outcomes for the individual. It is this process of activation that is central to a sociological conception of resilience.

We see resource activation as the means by which already available resources are *reconfigured* to meet a challenge or as the means by which previously unavailable compensatory resources are *mobilized*. Thus we identify two distinct processes: resource reconfiguration and resource mobilization.

Our use of the term *reconfiguration* is very similar to the developmental psychology principle of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes and Baltes, 1990). This perspective posits that a fundamental truism of human development is the act of minimizing age-related losses and compensating with strengths developed through developmental processes. Though all sorts of objects can be used for adaptive purposes, our theory mainly focuses on those resources that are traditionally most salient to sociologists – social relationships, economic resources, and status.

How are such resources reconfigured? Wealth, prestige, and power, the three core elements of modern class stratification, can often be helpful towards desired ends, whether directly or indirectly. In times of peace and calm, these resources can be targeted at achieving high levels of life satisfaction, satisfying social relations, and a healthy lifestyle. In the face of duress, however, these resources can often be reconfigured to bring the individual back to a level of homeostasis. The human organism responds to threat via the sympathetic nervous system – blood pressure is raised, appetite is suppressed, and pupils are dilated – and this response is to reconfigure energy to face a potential threat. Likewise, people can reconfigure socioeconomic resources to minimize damage or overcome a potential threat to the desired life trajectory.

Social relationships can also be reconfigured in times of adversity; consider the term *social capital*, and the sense of flexibility implied by it. Just as firms can allocate financial capital away from investment and the means of production in order to avoid or remedy problems, so can one's social networks be reconfigured in order to counteract or compensate for adversity. When facing adversity, people often select relationships to activate based on perceived utility to confront a threat. Relationships that have greater ability to assuage a problem are emphasized, while relationships less centrally related to a particular deficit may be divested of time and energy.

The reconfiguration of resources is also shaped by the nature of the adversity. Some singular adversities occur suddenly and unexpectedly. A singular adversity that is limited to one domain makes resilience easier, as people can adjust their social worlds after the adversity has subsided. Recurrent adversities, however, that are not domain-specific can trigger other forms of adversity across various aspects of life. In these cases, resilience is much harder to achieve. For instance, a self-employed contractor who experiences a sudden workplace injury and finds himself unable to work, pay for his children's college education, and exercise his body would experience accumulating disadvantage in financial, family, and health domains, and this could spread to other domains as well.

Resource activation is also dependent upon whether the adversity is localized within one person's experience or more generalized among a larger social unit. Because individualized adversity is by definition limited to one person, more of the burden of resource activation typically falls on the individual in these cases. Though help may come from outsiders, the degree to which adversity is individualized makes it increasingly important for the person to reconfigure whatever resources are available. When the adversity is more generalized, social relations and resources are sometimes activated either with less reconfiguration effort by the individual or even without the direct assent of the agent. People sometimes even just "go along for the ride," enjoying the benefit of available resources without having to contribute much activation effort themselves (i.e., the Free Rider problem [Olson, 1965]).

Though mobilization can take place by itself, it often works in concert with resource reconfiguration. Because social networks are typically the pipelines by which resources are mobilized, agents must often reconfigure their social resources to maximize the flow of available resources. Take as an example the man whose pension funds have evaporated because of a corporate accounting scandal; he may be able to derive the benefit of resources to deal with his situation that exist outside himself (mobilization), but he must reconfigure his social resources in order to tap into them.

This process of reconfiguration in order to achieve mobilization has increasingly become the case in the modern neo-liberal state in which risks are not shared, but handled almost exclusively by individuals (O'Rand, 2003). Rather than the state serving as a general institution whose resources can be mobilized in times of trouble, the onus is placed on individuals to adapt to adversities, whether as individualized via the loss of a job or a chronic health condition or generalized as an economic downturn or destructive hurricane. In more comprehensive welfare states, less reconfiguration work is demanded of the individual.

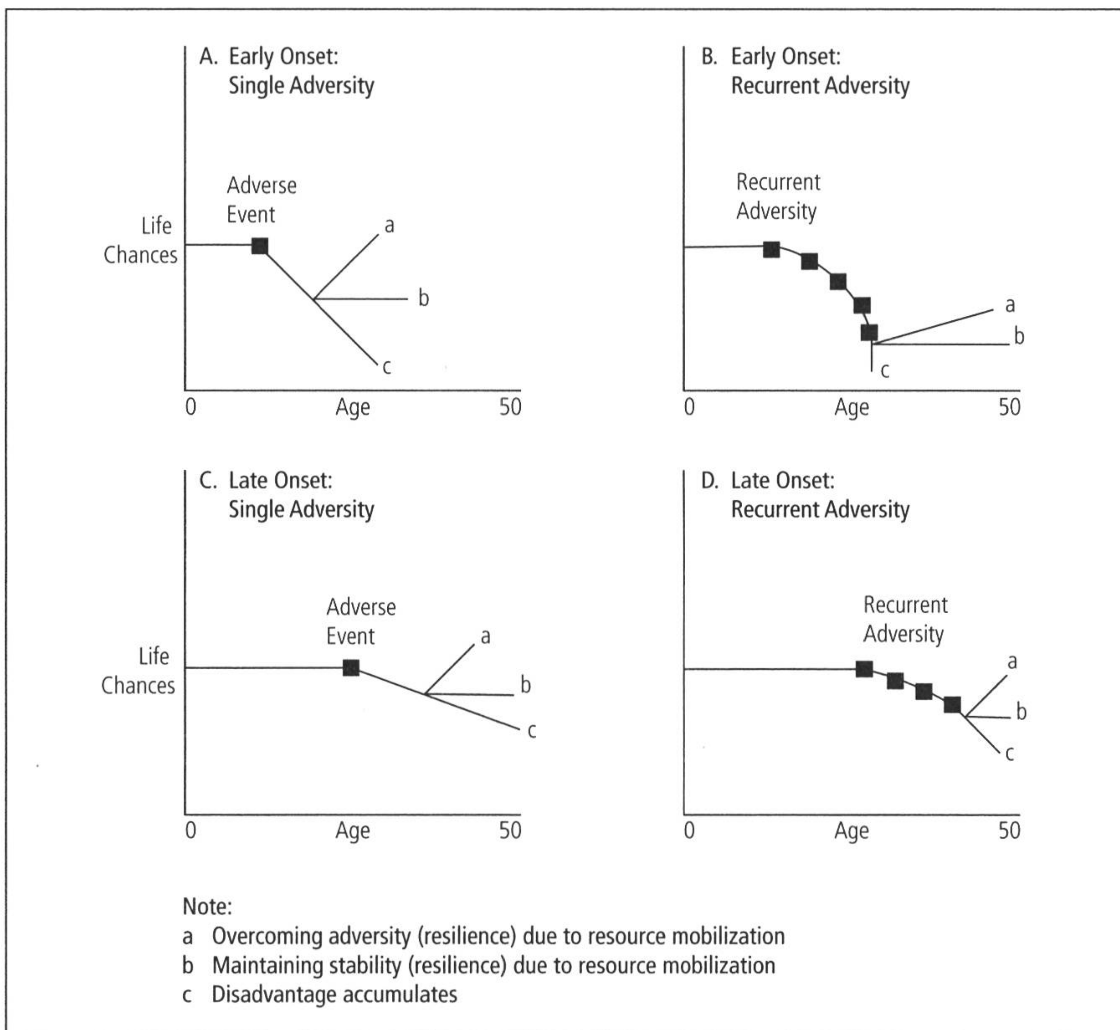
When analyzing mobilization, it is important to recognize that there is great heterogeneity in the resources that people have to reconfigure. A family with a large savings account will be more financially able to meet unexpected job loss than will a poor family. A working woman with many close friendships will be better suited to handle the desertion of her husband than will a sickly and isolated woman. A youth with well-respected parents will probably fare better in the court system and still have a better shot at attending college after being caught in juvenile mischief than will a minority youth from a neighborhood fraught with deviance.

Resilience, then, is partially a product of *how social advantages are configured prior to a bout of adversity*. Individuals can reconfigure their social worlds to counteract adversity or slow the accumulation of disadvantage, but if there were few social or material resources to re-arrange, disadvantage has a ready nook in which to deposit. In short, resilient responses are subject to structural forces in stratification hierarchies. In addition, if people have weak or limited social networks, resource mobilization

will be less likely. Resilience is most likely when resources are reconfigured and mobilized in response to a perceived adversity. Resilience is less likely to occur when either (or both) forms of resource activation are not employed.

Figure 1 is a heuristic representation of resilience processes, bringing together the elements of duration and onset of adversity, as well as the concept of resource activation. The first graph (labeled A) refers to the early onset of a singular adverse event. This could, for instance, represent people who were sexually assaulted as children. Graph B also depicts early-onset adversity, but as a reccuring form (e. g., sexual abuse continued during adolescence). Graphs C and D display two forms of late-onset adversity, again differentiating singular and recurrent forms. Similar examples can be used, i.e., adult women may be assaulted once, or alternatively

Figure 1: Heuristic Representation of the Relationship between Onset and Duration of Adversity and Resilience in One Trajectory



could be subjected to repeated victimization. As the Figure shows, different forms of adversity can pose different threats to life chances, but resource activation can redirect life trajectories. These processes, however, are partially dependent upon timing in the life course.

Within each graph, we identify three adaptive responses to depict anticipated outcomes, herein referred to as life chances. We identify overcoming adversity as *a* – a response that is widely acknowledged as evidence of resilience. We assert, however, that *b* is also an expression of resilience, because simply maintaining life chances or some valued object is often a highly desirable outcome when faced with adversity. Finally, *c* demonstrates when disadvantage accumulates. Returning to the example in graph A, a teenage girl may be sexually assaulted, but her parents, church, and peers provide emotional and other forms of support. We expect that two possible responses can occur as a result of this infusion of resources. First, the trauma is overcome, resulting in a rebound of life chances (line *a*). Second, social support helps her continue successfully on her current (already reduced) trajectory without *further* decline (line *b*). However, if resources and support are absent, she may engage in self-destructive behavior and exhibit lower educational and socio-economic achievement, further decrease life chances over time (line *c*).

5 New research directions and implications

Where does this conceptualization of resilience leave us? We propose at least three new directions for research that can be garnered from this attempt to bring the concept of resilience to bear on theories of cumulative inequality. First, though our treatment of adversity and resilience may have appeared to suggest that life chances are approximately equal at birth and that adversity visits all persons alike, it is obvious that individuals vary widely in their condition before adverse events strike. Future research should determine the means by which people in different social conditions are *exposed* and *adapt* to adverse conditions.

Second, we have identified a general approach to resilience, but lives are filled with dozens of domains and their respective trajectories. Future research should examine whether resilience in particular life domains can spill over into other domains, or whether resilience processes tend to be more limited. Scholars are concerned with whether disadvantage diffuses across domains, sometimes referred to as stress proliferation, but we need to better understand if resilience mounted in one domain also permeates other domains of functioning. In common vernacular, "experience is a teacher," but we wonder whether the problem-solving capacity is transferred across life domains.

Finally, we argue that adversity and adaptive responses to it fundamentally involve interpretive processes; thus, future research should identify a wide range of reflective evaluations which people use to make sense of their life chances. We believe that people are actively involved in evaluating their life trajectories, and these judgments are critical in understanding whether resilience emerges in the face of adversity (Ferraro et al., 2009). Along the same lines, future research could explore the reflective evaluations involved with ineffective resilient responses; many times people may perceive that their condition is undesirable, recognize that ameliorative action should be taken, and yet be unable to reconfigure or mobilize the resources needed to adapt. Perceived failure and inefficacy may breed fatalism and reduce agentic responses to future adversities.

In addition to these new avenues for research, understanding the social processes behind successful resilience can have important practical implications in a number of arenas to help build policy directives that can prevent the magnification of inequalities. For instance, policy initiatives for troubled youths can both emphasize realistic awareness of disadvantage as well as offer opportunities for greater community involvement (e. g., in church groups or schools) to widen the web of resources they can tap. However, addressing fundamental conditions of inequality optimizes the likelihood that individuals can surmount adversity when it surfaces.

6 Conclusion

As Dennis Wrong (1961) implored sociologists to avoid an "oversocialized" conceptualization of humanity, we similarly feel that many recent discussions of accumulating disadvantage have left actors out of the process. We see both as being overly determined by social forces. Wrong was concerned with functionalist characterizations of people as consensus seekers, and some scholars use cumulative advantage/disadvantage theory in ways that treat the consequences of disadvantage as inexorable. We argue for human agency in both situations.

Until now, most treatments of cumulative inequality in the life course have largely assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that disadvantage leads to further disadvantage. We have attempted to examine the inverse – what happens when disadvantage does not accumulate – thereby privileging the roles of human agency and resource activation.

Of course, our formulation of resilience cannot account for the multiplicity of reasons that disadvantage does not accumulate – it is but one explanation and leverage point for future research. Though this is a very small step in the attempt to answer the question "when does disadvantage not accumulate," we see virtue in

utilizing sociological concepts such as frame resonance, resource mobilization, and social networks alongside the perspectives birthed and nurtured in parallel academic fields, especially psychology, to better understand resilience.

Metaphorically, when the deck is stacked against a person, it is hard to win the game. Some people begin life with great cards; others with cards that have limited utility. Nevertheless, some persons who face very low odds of success actually overcome them. How is it that this occurs? Some might argue that it is largely intelligence; high psychological functioning enables a person to overcome the odds. Others may assert that it is a personality with a strong will, but we asked what broader sociological processes are at work alongside these personal character attributes.

Our contention is that resilience involves a recognition that one's social condition as unfavorable, a perception that some action can and should be taken to improve life trajectories, and effective resource activation. All of these processes involve and prioritize social interaction, making our emphasis distinct from more psychological conceptions of resilience, yet maintaining an important regard for human agency. It is our hope that future research on cumulative inequality will integrate a more complex and nuanced understanding of how people adapt to difficult events and circumstances.

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