

How to make the resilience concept more resilient?

Thoughts about legitimacy, conceptual clarity, tasks, priorities, and attitudes towards liberalism and democracy

Comments by Christoph Demmke

Is resilience important and useful? (Brian Castellani) – is it new, a legitimate concept ?

- a) It was always the responsibility of public administrations to be resilient, to serve the citizenry and the state and to protect both. Also, countries may work without governments (for a while), but never without public administrations. Thus, public administrations are more important than most people believe (instead, when talking about PA, they find the issue boring and politics more interesting). Their very purpose was and is to be resilient.
- b) In the past, most past public management reform concepts were conceptualized with the purpose of creating more resilient public administrations.
 - NPM in order to respond to inefficiency, state failure, and bureaucratic dysfunctions
 - Governance theories in order to respond to the negative effects of hierarchical top-down steering and silo-thinking
 - Post-NPM reforms in order to address value conflicts, provide public value and respond to market failures

So far, these considerations concern the past...!!!!

Today, countries are faced with many (complex and wicked) crises at the same time, potentially even life-threatening crises. Public administrations need to react to these challenges and to quickly changing and emerging crises. Today, crises require more integrative and complex responses and public administrations need to be prove for new forms of resilience and be adaptive, fast, and responding to complexity, too.

Thus, resilience has always been a legitimate concept. However, today, resilience is more important than ever before !!!

Thus, I agree with Brian Castellani: Resilience is a legitimate, **potentially important and useful concept** (“it is getting some of the key things right”, it can “stifle conceptual innovation”).

But.....!!!! (Brian Castellani)

- a. It is also a “policy mantra”, “resilient to what, for whom, and at what costs?”, “loses analytical bite” (unclear), “a normative ideology”, “vulnerable populations bear the adaptive burden” etc.
- b. **It is a popular concept yet “its popularity masking its conceptual ambiguity”** (all quotes are Castellani, 20 November 2025).

How to make the concept of resilience itself more resilient, and how to enhance conceptual clarity?

- a) The resilience **should not set itself apart from traditional public administration thinking. Resilience and complexity thinking should establish simple dichotomies and distinguish themselves from traditional theories. In fact, there exists no traditional or old public administration theory. Instead, these concepts should be adaptive and learning concepts and learn from past theories in the field of public administration, sociology, political sciences and moral philosophy etc!**
 - a. The history of public administration theories (but also of sociology) – alone - is particularly rich and “complex” (it is not only about Max Weber and “bureaucracy”). Consider theories about bounded rationality, unintentional consequences, paradoxes, risk society, silo-thinking, side-effects of reforms, dialectics of reforms etc. Herbert Simon, Robert Merton, Ulrich Beck, Christopher Hood, Christopher Pollitt etc., but also consider studying the “*Leviathan*” (T. Hobbes), the *Frankfurt School* may be useful....
 - b. Likewise, the history of PM reforms is also a history of fashions, trade-offs and failures. Until today, ever-new reform fashions come and go like the fashion shows in Paris, Rome, or Milan. Thus, also resilience risks **being just another new fashion and then – fail!** However, it may become a useful concept if it learns from failures of past PM reforms.
- c. **Gaining more clarity and offering more added value could also be accomplished by, for example, offering answers to some – so far – unanswered questions and challenges:**
 - a) **The concept itself is not sufficiently “integrative”.** It should consider the effects of other ongoing major reform trends in the field of public administration reform (such as downsizing, restructuring, and deregulation) and how they influence resilience policies. (take, as example, current austerity policies in Finnish public administration).
 - b) The concept should clarify its main purposes.
 - a. Is the concept offering solutions **to those (vulnerable) people and groups being affected by crises?**
 - b. **Or, is it offering solutions to the functionality of systems**, for example, the military system, security, data protection, healthcare system, the social

welfare system, the financial markets, the climate, and the value systems—in short, the functionality of our societies?

- c. **How does the concept of resilience deal with value conflicts?** (for example, is security believed to be of overriding importance? if so, what about the importance of data protection?).
 - d. **The concept of resilience should be in line with complexity thinking. How does it deal with disciplinary thinking?** (for example, **what about attitudes towards administrative law?**, How important is (administrative) law in this concept? Or is law perceived as an old-fashioned concept, because it follows a disciplinary path?)
- c) **The concept of resilience seems to be unclear as regards attitudes towards politics, liberalism, and democracy.** Is it pro authoritarian thinking, the “Leviathan”? – a state in which security and protection are the overriding values? Or, is the concept supporting and communicating the view that liberal and democratic states respond better to complex societal challenges than authoritarian states (and, precisely, because these systems are more complex and more interested in complexity thinking (Harri Jalonen))? How does it address the problem that more people link (increasing) complexity with the fear of state incapacity and, therefore, want more clarity, order, and “simplicity”? Thus, less complex thinking!

"For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." (H. L. Mencken)

(Phrase in the E-Mail box of my colleague - Esa Hyyryläinen)

Sources

- Brian Castellani (November 2025), Using Complexity Science to (Re)Think Resilience in Public Administration, UVA, Power Point, 20 November 2025
- Brian Castellani & Lasse Gerrits (2024), The Atlas of Social Complexity, Edgar Elgar
- Harri Jalonen (2025) A complexity theory perspective on politicoadministrative systems: Insights from a systematic literature review, International Public Management Journal, 28:1, 1-21, DOI: 10.1080/10967494.2024.2333382