

# 'An ecological approach to resilience is essential'

Louise Roper hears from her University of Liverpool colleague Kate Bennett, about widowhood, resilience, and an upcoming gerontology conference. Read more in the online version.

## Tell me about your research on widowhood and resilience.

In 2010 I published my first paper on resilience and older widowed men. In this work I identified men who were and were not resilient. For some men, resilience came gradually; for others it came following a turning point; yet others remained vulnerable. Unlike previous research on resilience, it was clear that whilst for some men resilience was driven by an internal process, for others it required external agency. In the former case it might be that men themselves decided that they need to take an active role in society. Some men required someone else, or some system, to move them onto the path of resilience.

The clearest example, in terms of my theoretical developments, was a man who was on a self-destructive path until friends and a supportive housing officer were able to intervene and find a new place for the man to live. This literally saved his life. And it seemed to lead him into a resilient widowhood.

The work also highlighted the importance of differentiating between the experiences of bereavement and widowhood. A person might be resilient in both, but I had theorised that some people might be resilient in bereavement but not in widowhood. Recently, work I have done with Swiss colleagues using longitudinal data, which is under review, suggests there is empirical evidence to support this theory. We went back to the original widows to see what had changed with respect to resilience and what had prompted that change. We found that there were some widows who had stayed the same, some who had become resilient. But there were other who had once been resilient, or were at least coping, but now were vulnerable. This suggests that whilst they may have dealt well enough with their bereavement, they may be struggling with the experience of being widowed.

## So widowhood is a gendered experience?

In part. Some of the experiences of widowed people, and indeed other bereavement experiences, are common. However, there are differences between men and women. In my work I have learnt not to compare men and women in the same analysis. Instead, my preference is to look at men and women independently of each other. The reason for this is because the social



contexts of men and women, especially older men and women, are different. The social construction of their experiences is different. Older men's experiences are influenced by hegemonic masculinities for example. The way they talk about the emotional aspects of their experiences are discussed using masculine ideologies. On the other hand, women's experiences are discussed often within the language of the feminist movement, and they are able to speak more openly about the emotional toll of their experiences.

## You published a paper in 2017 on the experiences of Chinese widows in the UK. Were their experiences similar to other widows from the UK?

I have an interest in gender, but also other social influences and in intersectionality. So the paper you are referring to examined the experiences of older Chinese widows living in Liverpool. These women were all migrants to the UK, and the interviews were all conducted in Cantonese. The experiences of these women were similar in many respects to interviews with other widows in the UK. However, there were other differences, which included the influence of Chinese spirituality, filial piety, and the influences of long separations from their husbands, and the many changes that they had experienced both in Chinese and British society.

**Resilience is also a major interest of yours. People might think resilience is something that lies within the individual, but you say it is more multifaceted than this?**

From my early work through to much more recent work, I am clear that resilience is an outcome which is dependent on more factors than those that lie within the individual. For example, community and family factors are key – that was evident in the paper I published in 2010, as were societal factors. More recently, in the Swiss studies of resilience in widowhood it is clear that both intra- and interpersonal factors are important in facilitating resilience in widowhood.

**Why do you think resilience research has exploded in recent years?**

It is curious how resilience has become both a hot topic in research but also in the popular imagination. Why, when people are faced with life challenges such as bereavement, dementia, trauma, do some people seem to cope, others flourish, and yet others struggle? Combined with this, within psychology at least, is an emphasis on positive psychology and a move away from a risk and vulnerability view.

These are positive reasons for an increased focus on resilience. Less positive, in my view, is the political climate of austerity and a neo-liberal view which argues that people are responsible for their own health and wellbeing: that if they are unable to cope it is their own fault. I am strongly opposed to this approach. For me, an ecological approach to resilience is essential. Gill Windle from Bangor University and I developed a model of resilience that we published in 2011. This approach argues that whilst there are individual resources which contribute to resilience, communities and societies also provide resources which are key to facilitating resilience. This is important – individuals may fail to become resilient if the community does not facilitate opportunities to adapt.

**Can you expand on the community and societal level resources which facilitate resilience?**

People are social animals and generally don't live and behave in isolation (although they may be isolated). We live in communities and have, or have had, families. We need social support to a greater or lesser extent. Thus, community resources, and our local communities, are important factors in facilitating resilience. For example, families can both help and hinder resilience. They may provide companionship, emotional and practical support, but their efforts to support their loved ones may hinder independence and hinder resilience. The availability of social support may be a facilitating factor, but where there is a discrepancy between 'actual' and 'desired' it may hinder resilience. Living within a wider supportive community, with friends and opportunities for social participation, is likely to promote resilience.

At a societal level, availability, and willingness

to access, health and welfare services are important factors in resilience, as are cultural and environmental resources. Respite care, for example, is an important factor in the resilience of older dementia carers but it is not always available and even when it is available carers may not be willing to access it. Further, the reasons why people may not access respite may be due to individual, community or societal factors. So we can see how resilience is best understood within an ecological framework.

**This is reflected in the theme of the 2019 British Society of Gerontology conference in July, 'Resilience in local communities'. Why are local communities important for building resilience?**

The conference is being hosted in Liverpool, where local community and the sense of community are very important. There is a strong sense of identity which binds the people of Liverpool together through thick and thin. At the same time, the city has experienced, and continues to experience, social inequalities. These impact on health and wellbeing. Older people are at the receiving end of much of the social inequality. One might describe the city and its people as resilient. However, resilience is dynamic: people and places may be resilient for a long time, but then some unexpected event, policy change, funding crisis comes along, and it becomes the straw that broke the camel's back. It's crucial, therefore, that researchers, scientists, practitioners and policy makers do what they can to work towards eradicating inequalities and promoting health and wellbeing, and building in resilience into people and communities.

**What are you hoping to see/achieve from this conference?**

We want to use the conference as an opportunity to involve local representatives and organisations and showcase the wonderful work that is being done in Liverpool to contribute to resilience in local communities. This will be something new and exciting for this year's conference.

Ultimately I'd like the conference to be a platform for furthering the ageing agenda, by providing space for people with all sorts of interests in ageing to come together and feel inspired. It is only by being innovative and resilient within our own community that we can work towards eradicating the inequalities experienced with ageing.

**And you think Liverpool is a good place to 'live well and age well'?**

Liverpool is a great city. The people are really friendly and welcoming. There are things to do, whatever your interests: theatre, cinema, music, football. I'm a Manchester lass, and was a bit unsure of coming to live in Liverpool as a rival city, but I've always been made to feel welcome. I love the diversity, the University and its vibrancy. I've been here nearly 20 years and don't expect to leave any time soon.