

Embodied resilience: A phenomenological perspective

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ABSTRACT: Background: From a phenomenological perspective, our body is the "from-which" we face the world. Vice versa, our body is affected by occurrences in our surroundings. Embodied resilience is understood as a quality of the dynamic relationships between our affected body and what happens in our surroundings.

Objectives: This article explores the following question: How is resilience experienced bodily and how can we strengthen resilience and foster social relations?

Research design: The data consists of ten in-depth interviews, personal observations and reflexive dialogues with the research team on the lived experiences of the participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is applied, and relevant literature is outlined in the discussion and the findings are presented.

Findings: We discovered three intertwined experiential dimensions of embodied resilience: the experience of (1) sensing: becoming aware of what bodily happened; (2) connecting: looking for resources; and (3) responding: moving towards a new equilibrium.

Discussion and conclusion: Lived, embodied experiences play an important role in the dynamic process of resilience. The body helps us resonate with the world we live in. We recommend researching further how an affective touch can enhance embodied resilience and foster social relationships in organisations.

Keywords: affective touch, body awareness, haptonomy, resonance

Introduction

"C'est par mon corps que je comprends autrui..."
[It's through my body that I understand the other...]
Merleau-Ponty

Since 1973, the notion of resilience has become widespread and appears in a large variety of academic disciplines, including psychology and the humanities. It was the Canadian ecologist Holling who introduced the metaphor of a (metal) spring bouncing back after it had previously been bent or pushed (Holling, 1973; Bhamra & Burnard, 2011; Davoudi et al., 2012). In those years, in the humanities, the understanding of resilience was based on the idea that one could "bounce back" to a steady state after this state had been disturbed (Coutu, 2002). Over the years, however, this dominant paradigm shifted towards a more relational-phenomenological approach. We refer to an extensive literature review, where we conclude that resilience can be understood as a quality of the dynamic relationships between the affected body and what happens in our surroundings (Elbers & Duyndam, 2018). In the literature section, we will briefly summarise the existing research in the area and do the theoretical unpacking of the concepts employed.

This article is born out of reflections within our research team on how we have experienced impactful, life-changing moments, such as the birth of a child or the death of a family member. We noticed how various events had disturbed the balance in

our lives tremendously and how these perturbations were intensely bodily experienced. Remarkably, we agreed that our bodies also seemed to guide us on our way "back". We became curious. What was the nature of this lived, embodied experience of bouncing back? And how is resilience experienced in an organisational setting?

One of the board members of a Dutch insurance company showed interest in the experiential aspects of resilience and volunteered to actively collaborate in this research. He expected the research to potentially provide insights on how to enhance individual and corporate resilience. The company, with over 14 000 employees, has an active HR department which is strongly focused on such topics as corporate vitality, resilience and personal development. In this article, our journey starts by exploring the lived, embodied experiences of *individuals*, employees of the Dutch insurance company. In a subsequent phase of the research, we will focus in more detail on the (impact of the) *organisational context*, about which we will report in a separate article.

In the methodology section, we will elaborate on the research method, i.e. interpretative phenomenological analysis. Subsequently, we will present our empirical findings and summarise them in the conclusion. In the last section, a theoretical framework is outlined, based on existing academic literature on resilience and embodiment.

Methodological approach

Conducting research on the lived, embodied experience of resilience requires a research method that accurately reflects the research goal. In our considerations, we felt that the objectives could not be fully achieved by merely describing the emotions of the participants. We searched for a methodology that would give us the opportunity to actively connect to the direct, lived and embodied experiences of resilience of the participants. We were inspired by the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which highly values the intersubjective and embodied experiences of respondents and researchers (Finlay, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). In this type of research, layered understandings of a phenomenon emerge from an intersubjective hermeneutical process of mutually experiencing and reflecting, engaged in by both researcher and participant (Valle & Halling, 1989; Van Manen, 1990; Finlay, 2006).

We organised ten in-depth interviews as a valid sample size in phenomenological research to reach saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). The open, non-structured interviews took about two hours each and were held in a separate room at the company's offices. Participation was on a voluntary basis, with the option to leave the programme at any time. Everyone signed an informed consent form, in which the use and storage of data and confidentiality was explained and guaranteed. The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. To ensure that the transcriptions accurately reflected the experiences as lived by the participant, the transcripts of the interviews were sent to the participants for a member check, as well as to get consent for the textual and structural description of their lived experiences. In doing so, we aimed to contribute to the credibility of the analysis (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). All participants confirmed that the collected data and their phenomenological description resonated with their lived experiences and the contents of the interview. From the start of the interviews, we deliberately refrained from presenting fixed definitions of resilience to the participants. In the first place, this was done because the academic world lacks an agreed-upon definition of resilience (Elbers & Duyndam, 2018), and because we intended to offer the participants maximum space to verbalise their lived, embodied experiences during times of severe adversity. To reveal how this "out-of-balance" period is experienced, we invited participants to reflect on a particular moment in their lives where they had met (severe) adversity. We encouraged participants to offer us a rich, lived and embodied description of their situations, including all their emotions, thoughts and feelings at that particular moment. Immediately after ending the interviews, the first author, kept notes of his own observations (and his own embodied experiences), which were added to the transcripts, thus precisely illustrating the course of the interview. Verbal and non-verbal elements were included, like subtle pauses, changes in intonation and emphasis on words or occasions. The (lived, embodied) observations of the first author that were added to the transcripts were discussed and evaluated in the research team.

Following the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the interviewer carefully and repeatedly read the transcripts and grouped meaningful statements into themes, which were then exchanged and discussed among the members of the research team several times, searching for different angles, feelings and meanings in order to capture the essence of the

embodied experience of resilience as closely as possible. In this analytical process, the researchers also engaged with the data not only cognitively, but in an embodied manner too, making use of their senses and reflecting upon these experiences in the process of analysing the data (Finlay, 2006). Multiple themes (meaning units) emerged from the data, while continuously "bridling and bracketing" our own suppositions (Finlay & Eatough, 2012, p.177). We did this by critically reflecting on our assumptions in a personal diary report, looking inward as well, to see how we possibly affected the outcomes of the research and vice versa. The interviewer also reflected upon his personal circumstances, privileges and facets of his identity to clarify how the interviews were affected by these influences. To do this, a number of different writing formats for journaling – like email correspondence, memos, diary-like narratives, audio recording and voice notes – were used, especially immediately after every interview (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). In the next stage, the research team gathered and shared their emerging understandings of the meaning of embodied resilience in order to reflect upon them and refine them. In this process, we explored convergences, complementarities and dissonances within our analysis in order to amplify dependability. We searched for connections across emerging themes and looked for patterns across the individual cases (Smith et al., 2009).

This study is exploratory. We did not strive for abstract generalisation in this research. Instead, we focused mainly on the potential transferability of the data, meaning that the findings could be translatable from one group to another or to other contexts or settings (Smith et al., 2009). Ultimately, we identified recurrent themes that we will now describe in our findings section as dimensions of the phenomenon of resilience.

Findings

In this section, we present our phenomenological findings. Quotes or sentences from the conversations are anonymously presented to illustrate experiences of embodied resilience. Participants shared very personal, intimate moments of adversity in which they lost balance in their lives. Remarkably, although the interviews were conducted in the workplace, participants selected – without exception – situations from their private lives. They extensively elaborated on their process of finding a new balance between their surroundings and themselves. The interviews were open and, like a dance, we mutually searched for the right words to describe the various layers of experience regarding the events (Finlay, 2006). This was not merely a mental exercise, but a continuous movement of both living through and reflecting on the embodied experiences of participants in the events they described, as well as the embodied experiences of the researcher in that moment, coming forth from the intersubjective empathic connection with the participant:

Participants reflect on their experience while simultaneously experiencing the research relationship. Researchers, in turn, experience moments of intersubjective connection as they try to empathize with, and iteratively make sense of, participants' reflections on their own lived experience. At the same time, researchers seek to interrogate, reflexively, their own embodied experiencing (Finlay, 2006, p. 2).

We noticed that *what* happened (the verbal reconstruction of facts and data) and *how* it happened (the lived, embodied experience) were presented as two sides of the same coin. Nonetheless, focusing on the latter, we discovered three particular, intertwined dimensions. We emphatically present these dimensions as being *non-linear*, i.e. they sometimes show themselves simultaneously, and in other situations they switch and change places during the process of being or becoming resilient.

We found that all participants experiencing embodied resilience were

- (1) sensing: becoming aware of what happened bodily;
- (2) connecting: looking for resources; and
- (3) responding: moving towards a new equilibrium.

We will now describe these three dimensions that shed light on the embodied, lived experience of the participants.

Sensing: Becoming aware of what happened bodily

Our research hypothesised that embodied resilience can be understood as a quality of the dynamic relationships between the affected body and what happens in our surroundings. Most participants report having experienced a certain sensitivity and attentiveness in their bodies to changes in the environment that they described as *opening* or *closing* from the world around them. We discovered that becoming aware of the body and this process of opening and closing is an important part of getting in touch with what is alive in the surroundings. One of the participants described this immediate physical reaction as her alarm system. Her body seemed to warn her about a yet unknown danger. We found that participants facing adversity sensed the immediate reaction in their bodies, even before they became conscious of it. This feeling was often accompanied by a feeling of loneliness, vulnerability and disconnection and was described by the respondents as getting "out of balance". Confronted with severe adversity, participants said that they somehow "closed" (their bodies) from the world outside, as if they could protect themselves from the threat that they experienced. This closure showed itself by changes in muscle tension, breath, body temperature and heartbeat.

I could feel a nagging pain in my stomach. I had convulsions, was completely unable to eat. Some people will maybe eat more in such a situation, but I couldn't swallow the smallest piece of food. This emotion, it impacts your whole body. Immediately, I got backpain again. Yes, this stress crawls under my skin, into my body. In this period, I learned that I had totally ignored my own needs (Respondent 3).

Conversely, as we were told by the participants that the body has the ability to open up and by that contribute to a feeling of safety, power and connection. Some of the participants were surprised by the strength of their bodies and the energy they experienced, despite the severe adverse circumstances that they had encountered. Women in labour, children or parents looking after their sick relatives for days and days, patients enduring painful treatments: to their surprise, they proved to be stronger than they had ever expected.

I am a single mother with three children. My own mother is so important to me, because I work fulltime and she

helps me out, almost every day. When I was pregnant with my second baby, my mother got a stroke. If you had told me that she would be in the hospital two weeks before the delivery, I would have been scared to death. Ow, and...I almost forgot to tell you: my teenage sister just delivered a child, being a child herself and I also had to take care of her. Imagine my situation: pregnant, visiting my mother every day and at the same time looking after my own family and sister. Yet, I felt so strong. Unbelievable! (Respondent 1).

Opening and closure, instantaneously sensed bodily as a "like" or "dislike", alter on a regular basis, thus providing the participants with primary yet unstructured valuable information. Through retrospection, participants vividly remember (warning) signals of their body. They feel their stomachs, lower backs, muscles, legs, shoulders and skin, and notice a change in blood pressure, breath or temperature. It was remarkable how detailed the experiences were described and how convinced participants were that signals from their bodies had a direct relationship with the happenings in their lives. A participant, deeply worried about the well-being of his adult son, said:

So, what I want to say is this: no wonder my breathing gets faster and faster. It is the ongoing care of our handicapped son that affects our lives... (Respondent 10).

Another participant describes what he experienced during the time he was struggling with a deep depression:

My body tells me when I'm in a situation of stress. I can feel it in my chest, my voice becomes louder and sounds much higher. Sometimes I even collapse. Or I start to sweat (Respondent 9).

A young mother who lost her first child during her pregnancy shares:

The loss of my baby. I can feel it here [points at her heart]. I have a heartache. It really hurts... (Respondent 2).

Vicariously, for me as an interviewer (first author), the feelings and emotions of the participants were observable during the interviews. I could easily empathise with their pain and confusion, and I was also able to experience the opening and closing in my own body. Even before the moment, for instance, that one of the participants shared her grief over the loss of her baby, I felt very sad and tears burned in my eyes. In other occasions, I experienced goosebumps, anxiety or a nervous feeling in my stomach. Exchanging my feelings with the participants proved to be a valuable source of knowledge.

Connecting: Looking for resources

Once the disturbance of the steady state was sensed and noticed, participants started to search for resources that might be helpful to restore their lost balance. I noticed from the respondents that happenings in our surroundings lead to an immediate physical reaction. Pre-reflexively, i.e. before thinking or judging, participants report on bodily experience changes in the environment. At some point, they start looking for helpful resources to restore the lost balance by (re)connecting to themselves or to significant others. Many participants connect to something deep down inside: a "silent (innate or tacit) knowledge" or an "inner voice". This "inner voice" differs from a

rational, cognitive judgement that divides the world into "good" or "bad". In their specific situations, participants experienced a clear embodied, wordless notion of "what is helpful or not". Whether in a marital breakdown or suffering from health problems, somewhere, deep down in their bodies, they simply *knew*. This evaluation of "helpful/not helpful" appears to be directly connected to the experience of bouncing back (or forward) and, through that, finding a new balance. Connecting to this inner voice enhances (or restores) the feeling of safety and connection to themselves and helps them stand their ground in times of confusion and chaos, as if they were "touching base". By connecting to this source, participants experience a tipping point.

A young mother lost her baby during her pregnancy. Looking back on this heart-breaking loss, she is astonished by her inner strength:

I was pregnant for 27 weeks, and then things went completely wrong. In the night, I couldn't see anymore, I had a terrible pain in my belly and ten minutes later I was in the hospital. Things went very bad. With me and the baby. She finally died before she was born. I didn't even see her, because my sight was blurred. They brought me to intensive care where I stayed for five days, fighting for my life. My kidneys didn't work anymore, and doctors were afraid that I would also die. Strange enough, when I woke up from my coma, I felt so quiet. Of course, I was very sad about my baby, but also glad that I had survived. Sometimes I think: "Who gave me the strength to survive all this?" But if you are in the middle of it...the power, well, you just get it. Sometimes, people say: "I admire you." But I just got it (Respondent 2).

The embodied experience evokes a large variety of emotions that were somehow seen as an invitation from their bodies to react to the disturbance that initially caused the embodied experience. Another young woman finally walks away from her mother after she discovers that the relationship with her mother was poisonous, something she had already experienced bodily over the years:

My mother is very, very demanding. She feels that she has the right to claim all the time she needs because she's my mother. That has always been the case. We, my father, my sister and I are accustomed to her behaviour, but it now has to stop. I went to see a psychologist because I developed health problems. She [the psychologist] told me that we had changed places over time: my mother behaves like a child and I feel overly responsible for her. I'm always alert, avoiding quarrels and awkward situations. Finally, at a certain moment, I decided to end the relationship to recover from this ongoing leak of energy... (Respondent 3).

Sometimes, the inner voice is too strong to ignore. It calls for action and is considered to be a guide in times of confusion. One of the participants vividly remembers that at the age of 17, she was hanging out with friends, smoking drugs and drinking beers. At that time, she had endured difficulties at home, having an addicted, violent father:

We had a great afternoon. We were together with a bunch of friends. I'd used drugs that afternoon and was stoned as hell. When I woke up, I felt extremely restless. I thought: "Why? Where am I? I don't want to be here; I have to go home! Help, something is going wrong, I have to go"...They took me home and entering our home street, I saw this police car. The policeman told me my father had just had a terrible accident and that he was fighting for his life. That same day, he died (Respondent 5).

Reflecting on this painful moment of her life, she reveals that in those days she learned to trust this inner voice. Despite the absence of clear, rational arguments to go home, she relied on the wisdom of her body, as she puts it. It also helped her in other adverse situations, as she illustrated in our conversation. Years later, her personal life has positively changed, but at work she sometimes feels influenced by the negative emotions of clients and co-workers. Again, her body gives her the signal "not helpful" when she is being confronted with the negativity of her colleagues:

Nowadays, at home I'm happy and always positive. I make fun and everything goes well. At work, however, people are always complaining. At first, I try to react in a positive way, but after a while, my mood changes. It feels contagious. I find this very hard... (Respondent 5).

The message of the "inner voice" is sometimes hard to hear or accept. One participant, a fanatic sportsman, seriously injured his left shoulder and had to stop his successful career as a table tennis player. In the first months, he reports, he simply ignored the injury and played as if nothing had happened, despite all the pain. He went to see several doctors and therapists, but after some months, there was still no recovery. Almost desperate, he changed therapists and again nothing happened. Finally, after more than three years, he discovered an imbalance in his body and mind. He then realised that his strong will had a devastating impact on his body:

I'm a go-getter. I have to be strong. After all the training I've been through...I want it back! It's not only the shoulder that hurts. It's mental, you know. The pain is mental (Respondent 4).

To validate a message from the body, one participant went to visit his family doctor. He felt depressed and guilty about something that had gone wrong at work. Feeling guilty, isolated and overworked, he visited his general practitioner, who gave him "permission" to stay at home. After this consultation, his need for understanding and support was being met and he experienced relief and hope.

I went to my manager to make things clear and when I came out of the meeting, I felt guilty again. I couldn't stop thinking and I had a terrible pain in my chest. Then, when I worked at home the next day, I went to see the home doctor and told her the whole story. She said: "You're not allowed to work now". I had no idea. I was so glad she advised me to stop immediately (Respondent 9).

After having sensed a disturbance in their balance, participants (re)connected to themselves or to significant others, which

makes the process of finding a new balance relational and dynamic by nature. Encouraged by the signals from their bodies, participants took action to respond to the disruption that had caused the trouble.

Responding: Moving towards a new equilibrium

As said earlier, in case of severe adversity, the first signals from the body regularly lead to a feeling of closure, loneliness and isolation. Most participants initially experience this body closure to be protective and tranquillising. Somewhere in the process, however, most participants experience a tipping point, a strong desire to reconnect to their surroundings. They actively respond to the signals from their bodies and "others" become involved. The ability to express feelings and emotions seems to contribute to a feeling of safety and connectedness. To engage in finding the right words enhances the mutual feeling of connection and softens the lived experience:

Yeah, I have the feeling that our talk has been useful to me. It may sound funny, but yeah... I can put some things more into perspective now. Also at work... (Respondent 7).

Listening ears and a strong shoulder to cry on positively affect their well-being and help them to finding a new balance. In general, participants noticed that (human) connection was helpful to withstand a troublesome situation. In the interviews, they refer to relational qualities as belonging, safety, trust and support to describe the role of others in relation to their experienced resilience. Being among significant others is experienced bodily as tranquilising, soothing and restful. Participants appreciate the practical or emotional support from colleagues, want to talk about daily events, wish to be seen (and appreciated) as a person and to go beyond company targets. This desire is reciprocal: to see and to be seen are two sides of the same coin, illustrated by one young woman:

I have a colleague; we go along {get along? Or is there some other meaning?} very well. When she comes into the office in the morning, I can immediately feel: don't bother her, she needs some time of her own, you know. She has to let off steam first. After half an hour, she opens up and then I can safely talk to her. I simply know, because I know her. She's more like a friend (Respondent 3).

Trust was mentioned as a powerful resource for finding a new balance in several interviews. Trust is often connected in the interviews to the experience of solidarity, reciprocity and mutual exchange. Participants report that the atmosphere and resilience of the team are directly related to their sense of trust. The absence of a trusted person is often seen as being isolated and unsafe:

There was a lot going on, those days. The team was fragmented. Some people worked hard, and others were chatting all the time. Well, I didn't feel comfortable in this situation. I felt lonely most of the time. I somehow withdrew from the team and then the manager complained that she couldn't reach me. Suddenly, I became part of the problem and was almost fired... (Respondent 8).

It takes courage to take alternate action. Stressful moments narrow the mind, as it seems. Many of the participants find it difficult to change their "normal", regular behaviour before they consider alternatives. They report experiencing a fight between their bodies and their minds. Changing the way we "normally" behave is obviously accompanied by uncertainty over the (new) outcomes. Also, embarrassment seems to play a role for our participants: it takes courage to present a problem, dilemma or "weakness" in front of colleagues. For some reason, they hang on to their (public) image, i.e. the way they want to be seen by others. One of the participants found out during the interview that it is a true relief to share feelings of helplessness or grief. The sportsman, hindered by the injury to his shoulder, reveals:

Now, I realise I also felt a lot of grief. I don't easily talk about that, you know. It's about a sad moment in my life, that painful period. You know what? It's emotional [...is silent for a minute]. But anyway, at a certain moment you have to move on [has tears in his eyes] (Respondent 4).

One of the participants experienced a significant change in the relationship with his manager when they got out of their "normal" company surroundings and went for a walk together:

My manager and I, we had had big troubles in the past. But now, the situation is much better. For example, last Monday, we had an appointment to talk about work. He invited me for a walk. I thought: "What's happening?" Then we went outside for a walk and for me it felt totally different. It was a relief. We didn't talk about work at all. It felt so good (Respondent 9).

The support of colleagues was highly appreciated and was mentioned several times. In difficult times, participants experience comfort in knowing that others are keeping an eye on them. It replaces the potential isolation that comes with adverse circumstances.

One certain moment, well, I...I had to step back and all of a sudden, I realised that my children were always with guest parents. And here at work, I didn't perform too well. It made me so sad, I could feel it in my body. For a moment, I thought: "I can't do this alone", you know. But fortunately, my manager took over and together we made a plan for how to deal with my situation. Everything has changed in a positive way now. I'm so grateful to her... (Respondent 1).

Discussion

Our study reveals that the embodied experience of resilience can be articulated by three intertwined dimensions that are all related to our capacity to feel and to connect to the world in and through how we are: sensing, connecting and responding.

Sensing enables us to immediately experience what happens in the world around us. Sensing implies more than just "being physical". Through sensing, we pre-reflexively experience (disturbances in) the world. By *connecting* to internal and external resources, we actually become aware of the situation that we are engaged in. After our body has caught the attention, connecting brings us intentionality and direction. The immediate and implicit knowledge is now connected to our emotional,

cognitive and energetic abilities. *Responding* means experiencing the urge to actively "bounce forward". From an embodied state of being, by sensing and connecting to embodied knowledge, we can optimise our capacity to simultaneously experience and judge a situation and, by responding, find the balance that we have lost in any possible direction.

Interpreting the findings from a theoretical framework

In this section, we aim to better understand the phenomenological findings from the interviews by examining them through the reading of a selection of relevant academic literature on resilience and on the bodily condition of human experience. To capture how we bodily experience disturbances in our surroundings, we will briefly elaborate on the image of humanity, presented by the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2009) and on the signalling function of our bodies. Finally, to illustrate the dynamics and relational aspects of the experience of resilience, we connect our findings to the resonance theory of German sociologist, Rosa (2019).

Embodied resilience

The notion of resilience is widespread and has numerous definitions. The earliest definition of resilience originated from a positivistic paradigm (Holling, 1973). The notion of resilience originates from the natural sciences, using the metaphor of a (metal) spring bouncing back after being bent or pushed (Holling, 1973; Bhamra & Burnard, 2011; Davoudi et al., 2012). Subsequently, the concept of resilience emerged in various paradigms and scientific disciplines, such as ecology (Walker et al., 2004; Berkley & Gunderson, 2015), psychology (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000), social ecology (Carpenter et al., 2001; Walker et al., 2002; Ungar, 2011), disaster management (Paton et al., 2000; Bruneau et al., 2003) and organisational behaviour (Horne & Orr, 1998; Hamel & Valikangas, 2003; McDonald, 2006). Applied to the human sciences, resilience was originally seen as a personal capacity or trait that could be learned and taught (Coutu, 2002). From this perspective, being resilient is seen as a matter of knowledge and skills, and it is considered to be transferrable from the teacher to the student, from the trainer to the trainee and from the manager to the employee. However, academic literature reveals that interventions built on these principles have a minimal and decreasing effect over time (Britt et al., 2016). Britt et al. (2016) also stipulate that regarding resilience as an individual personal character or trait has a dangerous side effect: it is easy to blame the "victim" for not being resilient: he or she should have tried harder (ibid.).

In the humanities, so far, we lack an agreed-upon definition of resilience (Elbers & Duyndam, 2018). The single use of the rational cognitive approach fails: humans are less malleable, predictable or controllable than sometimes supposed. After all, we are not metal springs. Nowadays, a growing number of scientists embrace the phenomenological-relational paradigm, considering resilience as a dynamic, interactive process between individuals in a specific context (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011; Elbers & Duyndam, 2018). It is Masten (2015, p. 10; emphasis in original) who says: "resilience can be defined as the capacity of a *dynamic system* to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability or development", thus moving from an individualistic towards a systemic approach.

In this paradigm, resilience is supposed to be a process that ends in a new balance, thereby abandoning the image of the spring bouncing back to the original, pre-disturbance state. Shaw (2012, p. 309) illustrates the paradigm shift by using the term "bouncing forward" as an alternative discourse, thus choosing for the possibilities of life, not just survival.

Aranda et al. (2012) propose an interesting third approach of resilience because of their analysis of missing fundamental concepts like subjectivity, identity and the body. From "found" and "made" resilience, they coin the term "unfinished" resilience. They critically challenge the notion that resilience is intrinsically or inherently good, or that its promotion is a benign or beneficent activity. As Ungar (2011) notes, to reveal the normativity of much resilience research means continually asking: "Resilience for whom and for what purpose?"

The human body as the "from-which" we face the world

We have seen that in the humanities the notion of resilience has evolved from a capacity or trait to a dynamic process that is bodily experienced. This dynamic process is non-linear, has no prefabricated design and is the result of an entangled relationship between the individual and his or her environment. At this point, we introduce the role of the human body from a philosophical perspective. Our body is taken here as the "from-which" we face the world, as French philosopher Merleau-Ponty teaches us. He regarded the human body as the primary locus of knowing, actively engaging in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2009; Romdenh-Romluc, 2011). Our body, Merleau-Ponty (2009) explains, displays a so-called "body-scheme" which gives us the notion and the feeling of our body as a whole and which has a memory of the reality we face in our lives. Being directed to the world, the experiences of all people, situations and objects in our daily lives are "embedded" in our body. Our body, Merleau-Ponty concludes, is pre-conditional for our connectedness to the world around us: the relationship between the body and the world around us is "one of embrace" (Allan et al., 2015, pp. 861–884).

The body is equipped with a high sensitivity and attentiveness to internal body signals (e.g. muscle tension, heartbeat), overall body states (e.g. having pain, being strained or relaxed) and to the bodily response to changes in the environment or emotions (e.g. the acceleration of breath when anxious) (Price & Thompson, 2007). Thanks to this sensitivity of our body, we are able to respond to even the smallest changes in our surroundings. Functioning as an "alarm system" through a large variety of emotions, the body monitors the state of our well-being, safety and connectedness to the world, and calls us to action when the steady state is disturbed (Damasio, 2000; 2006; Frijda, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). The term *neuroception* is sometimes used to describe a neural process outside awareness, neuro-biologically programmed to detect features in the environment, including behavioural cues from others, that indicate degrees of safety, danger, and threat to life (Buckley et al., 2018). In addition, *interoception*, i.e. the sense of the internal state of the body, has been proposed as key to resilience as the accurate processing of internal bodily states promotes a quick restoration of homeostatic balance (Haase et al., 2016).

Resonance and resilience

At this point, now that we have described the intimate entanglement of our body and world, we want to move to the concept of resonance, derived from the resonance theory of the

German sociologist Rosa. We consider his theory useful to better understand the embodied and dynamic process of resilience. As human beings, Rosa explains with a sound metaphor, we have the strong desire to resonate with the dynamic, living world around us. Resonance can be defined as a form of world relation in which subject and world meet, balance and influence each other (Rosa, 2013). Unfortunately, Rosa says, we do not always experience a harmonious embodied relationship with the world we live in; in our modern times, we often experience being alienated and shut off from resonance with the world. According to Rosa, all the great crises of modern society – the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy, the psychological crisis – can be understood and analysed in terms of resonance and our broken relationship to resonance with the world around us. The main problem with our disturbed relationship with the world lies in the acceleration that takes place due to changes in the speed of modern social life: technological acceleration, social change and the pace of life (Rosa, 2019).

Although Rosa, as a sociologist, describes resonance on a societal level, his theory of resonance can also be applied to a personal level (Rosa, 2016). It basically articulates the fundamental relationship between the world and our affected bodies. From our personal lives, we may all remember moments of resonance when we were listening to a beautiful piece of music, enjoying a stunning natural view or having a religious experience: we were intimately touched in the heart, and experienced being part of something bigger, a wholeness. "Through our emotions for the subject, the object or the totality that has moved us, we react to it emotionally with body and mind by reaching out to it, and experience self-efficacy in this encounter" (Kristensen, 2018, p. 183). In this dynamic and fluid relationship, there is "something present", something potentially resonating. Now, Rosa asks, what is the nature of this "something"? How does it feel? Is it dangerous and threatening, or is it inviting and maybe even seductive? Does it offer us safety and support, or is it neutral and dumb? According to Rosa (2013), this relationship can be experienced in at least three different ways: as resonating, as neutral, or as hostile. In the last mode, the relationship is cold and void. To experience resonance, the human body has the capacity to open and to close. We know, as Rosa writes, that an instrument can only produce a sound when the sound box is sufficiently closed. On the other side, it must be open enough to receive a stimulus from outside. We can (only) experience resonance where we actually and actively reach (or touch) others. Then, our presence is answered instantaneously and mutually transformed into something new. Resonance is the reciprocal experience of answering and being answered.

From the interviews, we discovered that during the process of being or becoming resilient, the participants experienced three intertwined dimensions: sensing, connecting and responding. These three embodied experiences are supportive of finding a new balance after our steady state has previously been disturbed. Creating or finding that new balance can be understood as becoming resonant again. By *sensing*, we bodily signal that our steady state is being disturbed and our resonance is at stake. Experiencing goosebumps, a change in body temperature or in the way we breathe are important warnings from the body. The alarm system goes off even before we can judge the situation. Then, by *connecting*, we search for resources that can help us to evaluate the disturbance that we encountered. At this point, this process of connecting is still predominantly physical: we

listen to our inner voice that values the situation as "helpful" or "not helpful". Or, in terms of Rosa: to be resonating, neutral, or hostile. Then, by experiencing emotions, our body invites us to come into action: by *responding*, we actively seek a way to recover the balance we lost, to resonate afresh.

Evaluating current, academic literature on resilience, embracing the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty to the human body and understanding the embodied experience of resilience as a form of resonance, we conclude by putting the pieces of the puzzle together. In an accelerated world, as Rosa teaches us, we easily become alienated and isolated from the world around us. Participants in our research experienced the same alienation and isolation in times of severe adversity. The relationship between the subject and the world then becomes (temporarily) void or even hostile. It is the embodied experience of both adversity and resilience that form the very basis in the process of "bouncing forward". We understand that the human body is preconditional for our "being in the world" and that our capacity to feel is crucial in the process of being or becoming resilient.

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