

Bouncing around in a turbulent teaching environment: Teaching and researching resilience for public administration

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced surprised governments worldwide to act fast and decisively, often revealing lack of preparation for this kind of situation. However, such crises are expected to occur far more frequently than ever before. To keep societies prospering, governments, administrations, and civil servants will have to adapt quickly and effectively—and hence need to develop the required capabilities (e.g., appropriate policies, strategies, knowledge, skills). To deepen our understanding of appropriate action in face of crises, resulting consequences for stability and required, demanded or enforced behavior of people, we propose the concept of resilience. Resilience, we argue by way of five propositions, helps articulating the underlying dynamics in society and its administrative systems in order to allow for a sustainable incorporation of the long-term perspective in the short-term strategy, particularly in times of disturbances and temporary perturbations.

Keywords

Resilience, education policy, teaching strategy, responsiveness, adaptation

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COVID-19 has turned our worlds upside-down, from normal to extra-ordinary to *New Normal*.¹ Public administrations acted in various ways to manage the ensuing crisis, from very strict lockdowns in Austria to open bars and restaurants in Sweden. Within the diverse government regulations, hospitals, NGO's, companies, citizens, and universities took their own measures, ranging from immediate closure to trying to stay open delivering services in innovative ways. Most universities responded quickly to the new rules imposed by their respective governments and provided online teaching, proctored exams (possibly violating the GDPR) or other versions of exams at home. Actually, professors hesitant about online teaching were suddenly forced to make video clips or live stream their lectures. Despite a strong conviction among academics that there is no adequate substitute for the social component of teaching, students interacting and debating, some universities are already evaluating to provide lectures digitally for the whole year (e.g. Cambridge University; Farrelly, 2020). More generally, ideas of sustaining the 1.5-meter-society and never returning to the pre-corona state are buzzing around, whereas others are trying their utmost best to return to the pre-corona ways of doing activities. In search for a concept to shed light on these contrasting views of appropriate action in face of crises, resulting consequences for stability in/of society and required, demanded or enforced behavior of people, we propose the concept of resilience (Boin and Lodge, 2016; Dawoody and Marks, 2012; Gunderson, 2000; Holling, 1973; Wildavsky, 1988)

There are different, even competing, definitions of resilience.² By and large, resilience is defined as the capacity of a system to quickly resume critical functions that were affected by a shock to the system (Ahern, 2011; Boin and Lodge, 2016: 293). As systems are multi-layered, complex and interconnected, focusing on the resilience of particular parts of a system to specific disturbances may cause the (larger) system to lose resilience in other ways (Berkes and Ross, 2013; Folke et al., 2010). As such the challenges for effective and legitimate governance rise. According to Duit (2016: 364) “[a] resilient public administration consists of multiple organizational units in non-hierarchical networks with overlapping jurisdictions and cross-scale linkages; it has spare capacity to use in times of crisis; it relies on multiple types of knowledge (e.g. scientific and experience-based) and sources of information; it encourages stakeholder participation; and it uses trial-and-error policy experiments and social learning to keep the policy system within a desirable stability domain.” This means that, no matter what policy area, there is a need for more holistic, robust, inclusive and responsive public administration (Duit, 2016).

Without taking a normative position in the debate between advocates of returning to the pre-COVID-19 state or the advocates of the new normal 1.5-meter-society, resilience helps articulating the underlying dynamics in society and its administrative systems and provides substantiation for new questions and perspectives. As such, resilience can prove itself as a powerful and valuable concept. Hence, we put the following propositions up for discussion:

Proposition 1. Administrative systems need to (re)define their resilience approach.

Public administrations would benefit from developing an elaborate concept of resilience that meets the context-specific requirements. To improve the resilience of the

system, a commonly shared understanding and awareness of its means and goals is crucial: What exactly are the features of a resilient public administration? How can civil servants of all hierarchical levels evaluate if their own working environment is resilient?³ However, the concept of resilience might challenge the culture and collective mindset of the respective administrative system. Hence, risk management and disaster plans are not enough: Taking the governing logic of the system into account when reflecting on its resilience is vital—and too late in times of crises. In any case, resilience will be in a relationship of mutual tension with other guiding principles of an administration (especially efficiency goals).

Public administration research is to provide theoretical concepts as well as empirically grounded knowledge to support PA-practice (Proposition 2). Furthermore, PA university programs are required to cater to these needs—do we live up to this demand (Propositions 3 and 4)?

Proposition 2. More theoretical and empirical research concerning resilience in PA is necessary.

To analyze (public) administrations, institutions, organizations, and society, it is relevant to understand the concept in all its diversity. Researchers as well as professionals need to be capable of dealing with this diverse notion and understand its implications when applied in the analyses and assessments of the dynamics of resilience. While other research communities have developed a tradition in exploring the concept of resilience, more research on resilience both theoretically and when applied to public administration is needed to clarify how it differs from the SES (social-ecological systems), the psychological or sustainability variations in order to develop more robust and responsive administrations [see for instance the special issue by Boin and Lodge, 2016; and specifically Duit, 2016].

Furthermore, for professionals to grasp the concept resilience (what is it, what are characteristics, what is context, and how does that influence the resilience of the systems under investigation), universities are called upon to deliver appropriate programs and teaching designs. If we accept the need for professionals and administrations to understand the concept, it is relevant to create more knowledge about the concept through learning from each other. From a teaching and learning perspective, one obvious question pops up immediately: do public administration and management programs teach the complexity-based resilience, and is it applied to case studies? What do we know and teach about resilience as a phenomenon manifesting itself in administrations and society? Hence, two related propositions:

Proposition 3. Integration of resilience in PA curricula needs to be strengthened.

Proposition 4. Knowledge about the diversity of complexity teaching (specifically resilience / risk / adaptation / responsiveness) should be strengthened.

In view of the research challenges discussed, integrating the resilience-concept in a program is not as straightforward as it seems at first glance: Should resilience be a—the?—core of a program or is it to be addressed in selected courses, or would a special course be sufficient? Are full master programs offering complexity informed courses to understand

and provide the tools for analyses of holistic, robust, inclusive and responsive administrations as per Duit (2016)? Notwithstanding the different possibilities of putting resilience in the curriculum, the teaching outcomes pursued regarding resilience must be clarified: Will students be equipped with a proper understanding of the concept and the ability to apply it to analyze administrations, organizations, et cetera? It is also worth exploring how much of this complexity of public administrations dealing with perturbations is being taught in public administration and management bachelor and master programs. Will students be better equipped, or have they changed their perceptions regarding the (implicit) concepts of what is normal or stable or a constant changing stability, and what is the role of perturbation as well as the nature (appropriateness) of solutions/measures?

So far, we have purposefully skipped the attention to one last afterthought about the responsiveness of educational policies and how universities and programs behave owing to COVID-19. Is there any adaptive capacity or do we want to return to the old equilibrium as quickly as possible? Universities providing PA programs—like organizations in other policy fields—need to reflect on their context-specific concept of resilience.

Proposition 5. Nationals policies of education, universities and PA programs need to understand and reflect the implications of their resilience perspective.

The article started with the notion of the professors being confronted with new ways of teaching they thought previously impossible and universities moving into the direction of only online teaching, whereas others want to climb back into the classroom as quickly as possible and have face-to-face interviews for their research. The notion of resilience and all its related elements can help facilitate the debate about what the future for university teaching can (or maybe should) be. Not only teaching complexity informed resilience to have more robust and responsive administrations, but also what it can mean for learning, teaching, didactics, testing and research. The most relevant lesson that can be learned from resilience is that it may be wise to incorporate the long-term perspective in the short-term strategy. This way, bouncing back may mean a new temporal equilibrium that keeps the core activities alive, that is providing students a relevant public administration and management curriculum that is able to sustain in the longer run with the ability to incorporate new temporal perturbations.

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Notes

1. CNN composed a series called “Our new normal, in pictures” to show how much daily life has changed during in the course of the pandemic (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/20/world/gallery/new-normal-coronavirus/index.html>).
2. The term was coined by Holling in 1973 who defined it from an ecological perspective as “the persistence of relationships within a system and [. . .] a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist” (Holling, 1973: 17). Furthermore, he contrasts resilience with stability, defined as the ability of a system to return to its previous state after a disturbance. Since then, resilience has been further developed in the ecological sciences, but also in health and psychology where resilience is the ability of individuals to recover from adversity (Berkes and Ross, 2013: 6), as well as in organization studies (Kantur and Iseri-Say, 2015; Välikangas, 2007).
3. We are aware that this also includes resilience on the individual (psychological) level. As the micro-level is not the focus of our discussion paper, the resilience of individuals might be considered as one of the features of a resilient system.

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