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## Resisting resilience: disrupting discourses of self-efficacy

David Webster and Nicola Rivers

School of Humanities, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK

### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the turn towards discourses of resilience within Higher Education, and its shared conceptual space with notions of 'grit' or the promotion of a Growth Mindset. Of particular concern is how these discourses reinforce simplistic conceptualizations of students as 'millennial snowflakes' in need of 'toughening up'. Whilst acknowledging the realities of student anxiety, and engaging with the precarity of employment within the sector, we contend that discourses of resilience threaten to mask systemic issues in favour of promoting individual change. By interrogating these seemingly benign discourses we seek to highlight the neoliberal underpinnings of narratives of resilience.

### KEYWORDS

Resilience; neoliberalism; snowflakes; millennials; precarity; higher education

### Introduction

This paper offers a critique of contemporary narratives of resilience within Higher Education. We develop the beginnings of a conceptual framing for Higher Education that resists and rejects 'resilience talk' in favour of a more ambitious, optimistic and communal discourse. In the conversations that led to this paper, it became clear that discourses of a frequently ill-defined notion of 'resilience' are not only gaining currency within Higher Education, but are also deeply enmeshed in wider socio-political issues and rhetoric. As such, any discussion of the educational use of resilience requires reference to the influence of neoliberalism on Higher Education; what has been referred to as the 'uberfication' of the university (Hall 2016) which links to the promotion of education-as-training narratives, and individualizing discourses that advocate viewing the self as a unit of currency, or promoting the adoption of self-help ideologies. Deborah Britzman's conception of 'difficult knowledge', as a key educational theory, provides a backdrop for our concerns. She takes seriously what psychoanalysis says about human emotions and challenges educators to see that what is present in the classroom is a full human, not a mere collection of cognitive functions (Britzman 1998). Her work is a corrective to the notion that what we need is a 'toughness', or rejection of the fuller human range of emotions in a learning situation, and indeed any other. What we offer here is a critique of the discourses of resilience and an evaluation of, and incipient alternative to, the apparent truism that Universities should actively and explicitly seek to cultivate 'resilience' as an attribute of its graduates and staff.

However, despite our reservations about the advancement of resilience discourses and training within Higher Education, there is no question that both students and academic staff are under intense pressure and facing challenges related to precarious employment contracts, unstable housing and uncertain career prospects. Indeed, there are claims that we are facing a global mental-health epidemic (Anguita 2014). This claim has relevance for anxiety disorders in young people and, with regard to Higher Education, fits the precariously employed academics, particularly within the American Higher Education system, who are even sleeping in their cars to save money (Gee 2017). As such, we arguably have a moral duty to equip students and academic staff with the best resources or 'resilience' to deal with the harsh challenges of the so-called 'real world.' To a degree that is persuasive, and of course many of us working in the University sector want to help our students and colleagues cope and thrive; this is in part why discourses of resilience have flourished. However, borne out of a concern for the welfare of students and colleagues is the worry that the turn towards an uncritical narrative of 'they need to be more resilient/tougher/less soft' does them no favours. In fact, at worst, such narratives of resilience can feed into toxic cultural discourses that position current generations of young people as 'snowflakes' who are easily 'triggered', and similarly, of academia as populated by overly 'left-wing' academics who are capitulating to the apparently unreasonable demands of an increasingly entitled student body (Peters 2017). This is particularly evident in debates surrounding the issue of free speech and so-called 'no platforming' on university campuses. Students are paradoxically simultaneously characterized as both lacking the emotional resilience to engaged with opinions that may offend them and also presented as powerful or 'resilient' enough to bend university policy and academic practice to their will.

The world beyond the academy is equally entrenched in resilience discourses. There is a notable association between that entrenchment and the corporate embrace of things such as 'mindfulness,' or *McMindfulness* (Hyland 2015) as many Buddhism scholars frame it. Indeed the University of Cambridge explicitly links the two, offering mindfulness training as a means of attempting to increase the resilience of their students (University of Cambridge Research 2015). Mindfulness draws on arguably efficacious meditative techniques from Buddhist traditions, but seeks to locate them as discrete, secular, and semi-clinical interventions. Its seeming mix of 'ancient Wisdom', Buddhism's benign public perception, and claim to offer drug-free solutions have been some of the factors in its wildfire-like spread into popular and corporate culture. Like resilience training, mindfulness is presented as a way to increase individuals' abilities to cope with the multiple demands of contemporary living. However, some have raised warning flags, with David Forbes describing its deployment in education more sceptically, suggesting that 'Mindfulness is a neoliberal disciplinary fist in a cashmere-lined leather glove.' (Forbes 2015)

## A neoliberal context

Discourses of resilience both within the context of Higher Education and beyond function in ideological tandem with a neoliberal shifting away from communal understandings of the self towards the promotion of individuals as sole, discrete, autonomous

agents. In their detailed paper, Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie offer a broad, powerful definition of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is, as we see it, a loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to safeguard individual, especially commercial, liberty, as well as strong private property rights [...] (cf. especially Nozick 1974). This conviction usually issues, in turn, in a belief that the state ought to be minimal or at least drastically reduced in strength and size, and that any transgression by the state beyond its sole legitimate purpose is unacceptable. (Thorsen and Lie 2007)

In this sense, we have neoliberalism as a political, economic notion, but common usage has extrapolated this to capture its sociological manifestations. Key to the association of resilience discourses with neoliberalism is Ralph Fevre's (2016) notion of the cognitive individual.

The economic account of neoliberalism sees the state following the trend so powerfully advocated for in Robert Nozick's influential Nozick (1974), arranged for the maximal freedom of the individual subject, so that freedom is conceptually twinned with a sense of maximal personal responsibility. This is typified throughout the account we offer here in terms of resilience discourses as part of a broader cultural narrative where we are seen as able to thrive or fail as a result of our own individual actions, traits and determination. The minimal state of the neoliberal subject has as a prerequisite, a meritocratic character so strong that we need no social or political change to be undertaken at a structural level.

### Precarity and meritocracy

If McMindfulness has become synonymous with a certain kind of higher-level management thinking and training then, at the other end of the spectrum, 'Mcjobs' have come to typify the low skilled, low paid and low security work associated with the rise of the 'new precariat' (Choonara 2011). However, despite the apparent newness of these precarious forms of employment, low skilled and low security work is clearly not a new phenomenon, and certainly there is a classed dimension in the recent turn to addressing precarity in academic writing; namely that precarity has shifted from predominantly effecting working class men and women, to also impacting on the so-called 'squeezed middle' and highly educated leading to increased attention to this phenomena. As Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010, 234) has argued '[p]recariousness is one of the defining experiences of contemporary academic life'. Indeed, in the UK parallels have been drawn between the now infamously exploitive employment practices of the retailer Sports Direct, and working in academia with vice-chancellors accused of 'importing the Sports Direct Model into British Universities' where working conditions are increasingly characterized by 'zero-hours contracts, temp agencies and other forms of precarious work' (Chakraborty and Weale 2016).

Yet, rather than address the numerous socio-political factors influencing both the proliferation of this kind of work, and the human cost to those employed under such conditions, discourses of resilience shift the focus from challenging these conditions to merely surviving under them. Resilience then becomes, as Sara Ahmed has noted: 'a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies

to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it; so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased' (Ahmed 2017, 189). As such resilience can be seen as promoting compliance rather than supporting human flourishing or wellbeing. Key to the understanding of resilience as a conservative discourse is acknowledging the risk that, as universities increasingly turn their attention towards employability encouraging students to work on furthering their individual levels of resilience, we are discouraging them from imagining a world of work that doesn't insist they make stress their friend, or viewing themselves as part of a collective that could together work to challenge harmful working practices.

Implicit in the centring of individual resilience as a key factor in happiness or success is the notion of meritocracy; that those who work hard enough, or are prepared to shoulder the most pressure, will eventually succeed, whilst those who seemingly lack resilience will not. As Jo Littler has argued:

meritocracy today, in its neoliberal form, tends to endorse a competitive, linear system of social mobility and to function as an ideological myth to obscure inequalities, including the role this discourse of meritocracy itself plays in actually curtailing social mobility. Its myth of mobility is used to create the idea of a level playing field that does not exist. (Littler 2017, 50)

Yet within discussions of employability and discourses of resilience, little attention is paid to why some groups or individuals may seem less resilient than others, or why some may need to be more resilient in the first place. This clearly has implications for those already structurally disadvantaged whose experiences of employment or 'success' will be marked by complex intersections between gender, race, (dis)ability and discrimination. According to such narratives then, the comparative lack of black women Professors working at UK universities could be erroneously attributed to an assumed lack of resilience in comparison to their white male counterparts. In such an example, not only does the focus on resilience belie the complexity of intersecting factors hindering the recruitment and promotion of black women academics, it also surreptitiously shifts the blame for this situation from the wider structural forces constraining black women's opportunities to make the women themselves the problem. Whilst on the surface then resilience can be presented as a seemingly empowering discourse, promoting the role of individual agency in affecting success, the subtext of this is that failure is also the fault of the individual. Where this is not the case, such as at Brighton University's Centre of Resilience for Social Justice, and resilience is presented as a means to tackle social injustice and inequalities, the focus nonetheless remains on adapting the individual to cope with outside pressures in order to negate their effects, rather than seeking to eradicate these pressures in the first place. As such, even at its most benign, resilience is always reactive rather than pro-active. In focusing on what an individual can do to change themselves, the promotion of resilience tacitly assumes social inequalities to be fixed, highlighting, as Ahmed has suggested, the deeply conservative underpinnings of the discourse.

## **Narratives, models and modes of resilience**

Although we are predominantly interested in the phenomena of resilience in the context of Higher Education there are broader uses of the term 'resilience.' These relate, for example, to the ability of banking infrastructure or other large institutions to deal

with market turbulence, or ecosystems whose survival or ability to adapt to changing environments is attributed to an innate or in-built resilience. As one of the myriad attempts to offer a definition of resilience, Békés (2002), captures something of the fluidity of the term whilst retaining a sense of its origins:

Resiliency is a flexible resistance capability, or a reaction ability of a certain system, e.g., an individual, an organisation, or an ecosystem where it is possible to adapt successfully to very strong, continuous or even shocking external influence. The origin of the word comes from the Latin verb “salire” (jump): “re-salire” means to jump back, to move back, to move backward or forward, but not to break. This expression was originally taken from engineering physics.

The most common usages, however, and certainly those used within the context of Higher Education, seem to derive their metaphorical power from the idea of the resilient individual. Yet despite questions over how resilience is defined, what seems to predominate in the UK Higher Education context, and educational contexts more widely, is not so much debates about the core meaning of the term, but varying models and frameworks, each professing to offer resilience training seemingly free from the neoliberal framework we have highlighted here.

There are a plethora of such models sharing many common features and a pervasive ethos, all similarly aligned with the belief that increasing resilience in individuals is unquestionably a good thing. While some models may seem to take on-board criticisms of contemporary understandings of resilience, they nonetheless remain wedded to the term, and as a result, the broader discourse. The George Mason University’s Resilience Model has 5 features: Positive Emotions, Social Support, Meaning in Life, Coping, and Physical Wellbeing. Similarly, business psychologists Robertston Cooper have a 4 key-component model: Confidence, Purposefulness, Social Support, and Adaptability. The Resilience Doughnut, for example, initially an Australian based model, which predominantly focuses on children, offers a number of training programmes aimed at increasing resilience and well-being at schools and in the workplace. One intervention the UK based branch offers is aimed at 8–12 year-olds who are experiencing anxiety and claims to develop ‘solution focused skills towards optimistic thinking’ (<https://www.resiliencedoughnutuk.com/intervention-programmes>). Although the model features 7 factors: work, partner, skills, family and identity, education, friends, and community, perhaps unsurprisingly, the individual remains at the centre. As such, although these conceptualisations of resilience do admit a wider social context, the primary focus remains the individual as the unit of currency; the subject that they seek to amend, enhance or protect is the neoliberal self.

The models tend to focus on increasing or developing fairly benign features or character traits – such as people having better coping mechanisms, more confidence, being socially embedded, and a variety of such qualities, notable in that they are things that no one could disapprove of. Whilst we are not arguing here that possession of such qualities is inherently problematic, we are particularly concerned that, in promoting resilience as the answer to ailing student mental health or wellbeing, we may in fact increase the pressure on students by obscuring the socio-political factors influencing increased student anxiety in favour of offering a deeply individualized solution. Furthermore, although each model refers to the importance of the wider, social environment, what remains both constant and questionable across each offering is the insistence on the agency of the individual and their ability to influence or control socio-political circumstances.

A feature of a recent advertisement aimed at students and offering resilience training at our institution was a set of bullet points, one of which said that the session would enable you to 'make stress your friend'. This, either consciously or not, references the much-viewed (4.9 million times, at the time of writing) Ted Talk by Kelly McGonigal *How to make stress your friend* (McGonigal). In this video, mindfulness advocate and popular-health psychologist Dr McGonigal argues that it is not stress *per se* that is the problem, but the way in which we react to it. She is very explicit about this, even referring to those who would have us use techniques to reduce our exposure to stress as part of the problematic 'stress-reduction industry.' Her view of resilience both encapsulates this view of stress as a potentially benign force, and the core self-help ethos of self-intervention and its efficacy. McGonigal asserts:

My personal definition of resilience is that you not only have the courage to grow from stress, but also that you play an active role in deciding how stress changes you. If you know what your values are, you can transform your experience of stress. Instead of asking, "Why is this happening to me?" you can ask, "What now?" and "What for?" and "What next?"

What seems to have seeped from her work into the broader culture is this notion that we should not 'bust' stress, or avoid its sources, but rather reorient our attitude such that we are able to harness stress to our own ends, and use it as a catalyst to propel us towards our goals.

Such an approach seems to both, firstly, overestimate the abilities of most of us to marshal our psychological resources and deploy them with such a targeted, tactical efficacy, and secondly, to simplify the issue of stress, and treat it as an naturalized environmental factor, rather than a function of historical, social forces. The current generation of students are the inheritors of decades of stress simultaneously noted as an epidemic by the World Health Organisation and others, and at the same time being lionised by a series of management-speak-heavy trends in how contemporary generations are encouraged to see their relationship to work. A glance at the Results-Only Work Environment literature (Nguyen 2017), which both claims to liberate employees and potentially blur work/life borders and demands a 'whatever it takes' attitude to work, emphasises this attitude towards the supposed potential of harnessing stress as a source of motivation. The notion that 'stress', a complex, potentially fatal, blight can merely be repurposed strikes us as naïve at best, and a toxic neoliberal sham at worst.

Yet there is no shortage of examples of those embracing attempts to harness the power of stress and increase individual resilience. The University of the West of England (UWE) has a large section of its Student Health and Well Being online provision devoted to resilience training. It tells students 'How you can invest in your mental health by developing your emotional resilience skills' (accessed 01/08/2017). The page goes on to further frame this in economic terms of 'investment' by using the term 'mental wealth':

The reality is we all face the challenges that life brings and depending how well we are equipped to face those challenges is dependent on our mental wealth. Like all other assets they need investment and management.

Cardiff University similarly offered a resource to staff in the staff well-being blogging area of its on-line presence. Entitled 'Becoming a Resilient Person – The Science of Stress Management' (Lynch 2015 accessed 01/08/2017), and Queen's University Belfast has gone so far as to name a whole area of its Student Guidance provision *The Resilience and Well Being team* (accessed 01/08/2017).

## The triad of resilience, growth mindset and grit

It is clear that resilience as a concept does not operate alone. Rather, it shares conceptual space not only with mindfulness, as noted above, but also with two other key notions, one which suffuses the wider cultural context, and another which is more specific to education. These are 'grit', and the 'growth mindset'. The latter of these is something of an educational phenomenon which has quickly established itself, replacing earlier panaceas such as learning styles. The concept of a growth mindset emerges from the work of Stanford Psychologist Carol Dweck (2007). Dweck argues that people fall into one of two categories with reference to how they understand their own intelligence, defined as their *mindset*; they either have a fixed mindset, or a growth one. Of the fixed mindset, she says:

Believing that your qualities are carved in stone – the fixed mindset – creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character – well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. It simply wouldn't do to look or feel deficient in these most basic characteristics. (10)

The alternative, the growth mindset, is when we see our abilities as open to growth and change:

This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way – in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments – everyone can change and grow through application and experience. (10)

While the growth mindset may seem to oddly bifurcate human self-understanding – presumably we all have a mix of views about the various skills and abilities we possess – what is undeniable is that it became the fad-de-jour in educational circles. Books were published as fast as they could be commissioned, with Dweck's own work, Dweck (2007), becoming a million-copy bestseller. Consultants offered workshops, and teachers pondered how they might ensure their charges were left not only with increased knowledge and skillsets, but perhaps more importantly, with the appropriate mindset. Our inclusion of it here though is with reference to the underlying implication that your achievements are related to your ability to *fix yourself*, or as Alfie Kohn (2014)(2015) subtitled his *Salon* piece that addresses the phenomenon of the growth mindset: 'How a promising but oversimplified idea caught fire, then got co-opted by conservative ideology.' Kohn notes the overlap between such ideas and 'self-help' culture, suggesting: 'Dweck's work nestles comfortably in a long self-help tradition, the American can-do, just-adopt-a-positive-attitude spirit' (Kohn 2015 2014). Crucially, in terms of aligning the concept of a growth mindset with our concerns about neoliberal, individualizing discourses of resilience through which structural inequalities are naturalized or assumed static and the focus is on the individual adapting, Kohn stresses that the growth mindset mobilizes a distinct perspective whereby the 'tradition has always been to adjust yourself to conditions as you find them because those conditions are immutable; all you can do is decide on the spirit in which to approach them' (Kohn 2015 2014). As such, one of the ironies implicit in education practitioners promoting the importance of developing a growth mindset is that: 'the more we occupy ourselves with getting kids to attribute outcomes to their own effort, the more we communicate that the conditions they face are, well, fixed' (Kohn 2015 2014, no page).



Not only does this assessment of a so-called growth mindset overlap with our concerns surrounding resilience, it also aligns with its more culturally pervasive cousin, *Grit*. Self-help gurus like the Grit Doctor, and positive psychologists like Dr Angela Duckworth, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016), construct a narrative largely coherent with the growth mindset and resilience ethos, whereby thriving in the world is a matter of self-adaptation. Success is achieved, as in Duckworth's title, through *passion*, and *perseverance*. Conversely, this seems to imply that those who fail to thrive do so as a result of their lack of effort; and that the successful (however we might choose to define that) have achieved their status as a result of trying harder, better, and with more grit, than others. Equating success, or indeed failure, solely with individual character traits or efforts whilst neglecting to account for the influence of socio-political or environmental factors, represents a fundamental methodological error, or as Kohn argues, a 'fundamental attribution error' claiming there is 'a tendency to pay so much attention to character, personality, and individual responsibility that we overlook how profoundly the social environment affects what we do and who we are' (Kohn 2014). Furthermore, such claims to the central importance of individual character traits in influencing peoples' experiences and life chances demonstrate a high degree of social privilege and are not politically neutral. As Kohn suggests:

The more we focus on people's persistence (or self-discipline more generally), the less likely we'll be to question larger policies and institutions. Consider Paul Tough's declaration that "there is no antipoverty tool we can provide for disadvantaged young people that will be more valuable than the character strengths...[such as] conscientiousness, grit, resilience, perseverance, and optimism." Whose interests are served by the astonishing position that "no antipoverty tool" – presumably including Medicaid and public housing – is more valuable than an effort to train poor kids to persist at whatever they've been told to do? (Kohn 2014, no page)

On occasion, you encounter the triad in close proximity as in a report from a University's Student Services division which asserts that:

A growth mindset is crucial to the development and maintenance of student resilience and can help a student make the most of the conditions and environment in which they are situated. Closely related to the concepts of grit and delayed gratification, growth mindedness enables a student to set goals and develop a sense of comfort in waiting for longer-term results to be achieved. It is also argued here that being growth minded is central to a student's ability to embrace failure and learn from it. (McIntosh and Shaw 2017, no page)

This report also goes much further, proposing the notion of 'learned optimism'. This concept is in danger of crossing the line between excessively strong positive thinking and the wish-fulfilment promises of *The Secret* (2006), which advocated for the possibility of changing the world by the power of thought and through the 'law of attraction.' This hugely successful book and associated franchise again operates through insisting on the apparent power of the individual to shape and affect their reality.

A further subset of student resilience is the notion of 'academic buoyancy' (Smith 2015). It is a powerful image. Circumstances may dunk us under, but we keep popping back up, as such 'academic buoyancy can be viewed as a positive psychology version of resilience' (Smith 2015, no page). Again, this is a notion that is very much focussed on the idea or

belief in the efficacy of self-transformation as the key to success. For example in debates about why the assessment feedback given to students is often ineffective, in that they persist with the same errors in future work, some have sought to blame the student for not using the feedback properly. In these cases students are framed as being insufficiently tough to cope with criticism or lacking the buoyancy to recover from harsh-but-fair criticisms, and instead responding with defensiveness. For example, Alex Forsythe and Sophie Johnson's article 'Thanks, but no-thanks for the feedback' (2017) argues that: '[g]enerally, students are fostering self-defensive behaviours that fail to nurture remediation following feedback' (Forsythe and Johnson 2017, 850). Their paper then seeks to explore 'the implications for students who engage in self-deception, and the ways in which psychologists and academics may intercede to help students progress academically by increasing their self-awareness' (Forsythe and Johnson 2017, 850). There is seemingly no sense that, if feedback is not working, you might change the content and format of your feedback, rather than assume the fault lies with defensive and unreflective students. Likewise, in 'The role of assessment feedback in developing academic buoyancy' (Shafi et al. 2018, 415–427) the Five Factors of Academic Buoyancy, identified as: internal locus of control, understanding the grade, being forward looking, being improvement focused and being action orientated, are all work the student needs to engage in, transforming the perceived problem which is how they respond to feedback. The actual artefact at play here, the feedback itself, seems to exist as socio-political factors do in the wider discourse of resilience, as an invariable fact of nature.

What has emerged here demonstrates the pervasive, ideological penetration of these notions. Indeed, it is possible to view the 'resilience/grit' discourse as a pervasive, hydra-like, ideological phenomenon that is running amok in educational discourse, influencing all aspects of student engagement. The zest with which such ideas are taken up in educational settings is a dual function of the noble desire of educators to grasp at anything that might serve to improve the outcomes for their students, and also that we are located in a neoliberal temporal phase in which, if individuals can only fix themselves, they could then thrive. This is fundamental to the purchase of the family of resilience narratives: we are in a harsh, precarious circumstance, and only via an intervention in our self, can we navigate the dangerous seas of the contemporary world.

## Millenials and student shaming

In an academic context then, students are assumed to need resilience training because they are perceived as too soft. As noted in the introduction to this piece, with regard to the context of Higher Education, millenials are also negatively associated with the proliferation of so-called 'safe spaces' on University campuses and trigger warnings, furthering the view of them as generation 'snowflake.' The term 'snowflake,' is currently used as a means of disparaging a generation who are assumed to be preoccupied with a self-indulgent sense of their own uniqueness or specialness. It stems from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, a cult-classic in which Palahniuk writes: '[y]ou are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone, and we are all part of the same compost pile' (Palahniuk 1996, 133). This encapsulates not only the supposed need to disabuse a generation of their sense of uniqueness, but also an attack on utopianism. Palahniuk's notion of snowflakes then feeds into numerous

cultural tropes surrounding students (they are frequently characterized as lazy, whiny or lacking) and linked to the pernicious and dismissive discourses surrounding an entire generation of so-called 'millenials'. Commonly associated with those born between the early 1980s and late 1990s, millenials are described as the 'me, me, me, generation' and presented as 'lazy, entitled, selfish and shallow' (Stein 2013).

The use of trigger warnings or the provision of safe spaces on university campuses has been a source of some contention with numerous academics, and indeed students, on both sides of the argument either decrying their presence or advocating their worth. Those arguing against the utilization of trigger warnings or the creation of safe spaces frame their critique within the bounds of protecting 'free speech,' suggesting that both trigger warnings and safe spaces highlight the emotional fragility of students. Writing in *the Atlantic*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (Haidt and Lukianoff 2015) argue:

The current movement is largely about emotional well-being. More than the last, it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into "safe spaces" where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. (no page)

They suggest that not only does this curtail freedom of expression on campus, but also that, counter-intuitively, it could actually be harming the mental health of students. In Lukianoff and Haidt's terms, students are hyper-sensitive and placing emotional well-being over academic freedom. In short they are lacking resilience. Lukianoff and Haidt suggest that what will really benefit students is exposure to what 'triggers' them. Of course, implicit in this suggestion is the assumption that students are not exposed to triggering or upsetting situations on a daily basis.

As with the discourse of resilience, framing their solution in neoliberal terms associated with working to change the self rather than adapting the institution, Lukianoff and Haidt suggest:

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control. One of the great truths taught by Buddhism (and Stoicism, Hinduism, and many other traditions) is that you can never achieve happiness by making the world conform to your desires. But you can master your desires and habits of thought. (Haidt and Lukianoff 2015, no page)

Debates over the parameters of so-called 'free speech' and apparent student sensitivities also play-out around the idea of 'no platforming.' For example, in a recent case at Cardiff University, a petition was launched that sought to prevent feminist, Germaine Greer, from giving her lecture, 'Women and Power: Lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.' Started by Rachael Melhuish, the petition focused on Greer's previously published misogynistic views about trans women. They argued:

While debate in a university should be encouraged, hosting a speaker with such problematic and hateful views towards marginalised and vulnerable groups is dangerous. [...] Universities should prioritise the voices of the most vulnerable on their campuses, not invite speakers who seek to further marginalise them. (Melhuish 2015, no page)

Despite these concerns, Greer's talk did go ahead however this did not prevent the debate from being framed as an attack on academic freedom and free speech. In fact, Cardiff University was claimed to be a 'hostile environment for free speech' (Williamson 2017) by self-styled libertarian, and increasingly alt-right magazine, *Spiked*. Students, and universities that capitulate to them, thus are presented as the problem. As Sara Ahmed (2015) has asserted: '[t]he idea that students have become a problem because they are too sensitive relates to a wider public discourse that renders *offendability* as such a form of moral weakness (and as being what restricts "our" freedom of speech)' Somewhat paradoxically then, the combination of emotional fragility and moral weakness are presented as both powerful and overly demanding.

### Vulnerability as the solution

Before we can make sense of possible alternatives, we need to attain clarity around our rejection. Do we simply want to establish a qualitative typological distinction between 'good resilience discourse' and its more negative forms, which more clearly embody the problematic issues raised here? Or is our discomfort more inclusive, and encompassing? On one hand there are clearly circumstances where being more, rather than less, resilient has benefits for the individual. We can envisage a spectrum upon which differing manifestations of this narrative sit, from the most crass, shallow and problematic, to more nuanced, psychologically plausible, and humane. Nonetheless, we take the stance that all of these positions exist as reactive, pessimistic responses to the world.

The most positive, socially engaged, inequality challenging model of resilience discourse still finds its roots in thinking that the world's harshness, its hostility to the individual, is so profound as to be taken as a fact of nature. The contemporary resilience advocate goes beyond Thomas Hobbes' famous account of the state of nature as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes 1651/1968, 186), and seems to believe that society can do nothing to mitigate this wretched circumstance. We want to transcend the naturalistic fallacy that contemporary socio-economic realities are fixed points in a constellation of adversity that each individual has to navigate. We want to cultivate the imagining of more positive solutions to the world-as-we-find-it. Even the most well-intentioned, efficacious and benign resilience discourse is fundamentally a reactive failure of the imagination.

What are needed then are ways of thinking about our students not so mired in such individualist tropes. The resilience model of students sees them in perpetual lack: at fault. This is neither healthy nor accurate. Instead, we need to be open to broader ways of engaging students, of thinking about their lives, what levers they really have to effect change, and where we, the rest of us, might have some responsibility in having fashioned the world (and its occupants) which has come to pass. In seeking to recalibrate the lens through which we conceptualise the student experience, and to value rather than eliminate vulnerability, it is necessary to think about our role as educators. This requires a pedagogical praxis rooted in modelling our own vulnerability, concerns, and also how we, the students, and other scholars, find our collective places in an

educational endeavour conceived as a collective and social good, rather than merely as a means of individual advancement.

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