On 16 March 2020, approximately two months after the first US case of COVID-19 was reported (21 January 2020), the White House issued a behavioural directive to slow the spread of the coronavirus: ‘15 days to slow the spread’. Seventeen days later, on 2 April 2020, a new directive commanded: ‘30 days to slow the spread’. Two issues are implicit in these dual directives. First, the mandate for social distancing tears at the social fabric that affords people support and comfort in distressing times: ‘Throughout human history, people have generated almost all of their solidarity face-to-face, by physical co-presence. This has been disrupted’ (Collins, 2020, p. 1). Second, the goal post was moving further and further out, 15 days became 30 days, and now, indefinite, pushing the resolution of the crisis into an indeterminate future, raising the anguish of a never-ending pandemic.

The still-raging coronavirus has had widespread and negative impact. Yet, surprisingly, in the midst of this misery, we see the emergence of signs of positivity, optimism, and resilience. Since March 2020, business publications, such as the Harvard Business Review, have published articles that encourage building resilience in individuals, teams, leaders, and businesses. Businesses, such as the professional services firm Deloitte (on their website), similarly urges ‘Combating COVID-19 with Resilience … calling for both empathy and action to guide your people and businesses through uncertain times’. This focus on the positive appears to contrast with conventional wisdom indicating that, in the face of threat, people tend to experience rigidity. Exploring the flowering of such collective resilience, when it is perhaps most unlikely to bloom, is the focus of my essay. Here, I use ‘collective’ in the sociological sense to refer to a relatively large group of people that share a sense of common interests or identity and that transcends the individual level of
analysis. Collectives can be informal, e.g., crowds or loose associations, or formal, e.g., organizations or nation-states.

Resilience, simply put, is ‘the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions’ (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003, p. 95). Resilience is predicated on the ‘propensity to make meaning of terrible times’ because it is through meaning-making that ‘people build bridges from present-day hardships to a fuller, better constructed future’ (Coutu, 2002, p. 50). If meaning-making is so central to resilience, it warrants exploring how we foster positive meaning in the midst of a pandemic.

Here, I suggest three possible research pathways for collective resilience; each has a different touchstone: institutions, community, and individuals. The first, Cultivating Institutional Trust, explores how trust (rather than mistrust) is essential in unlocking institutional resources, both tangible and intangible. The second, Coming Together as Community, focuses on how the perceived connections among people in a collective can enable the flow and sharing of resources. The third, Role Modelling Resilience by Calling out the Heroes, holds up those individuals for emulation and inspiration who embody institutional values and thus signal resilience.

**Cultivating Institutional Trust**

When people trust in institutions – as sources of reliable information and desired resources – they can access those assets to build resilience. Institutions embody values, and those values can be harnessed in processes of positive meaning-making. Yet, when the reverse is true, i.e., when institutions do not fulfil the purpose of those values and inculcate mistrust, confidence erodes and their ability to serve as a resilience resource evaporates.

Institutional mistrust arises and proliferates when institutions are perceived to be subjugated to political interests; rather than fulfilling their value proposition, institutions instead become a repository of inaccurate information, scant resources, and narratives that seem at odds with the truth or reality of a crisis. The result is a collapse of faith in, and the de-legitimation of, focal institutions such that what has been previously taken-for-granted is now questioned. Doubt and disdain extend to governmental and non-governmental agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the amorphous media, even ‘science’, and they become suspect for their own truth-telling abilities. Institutional trust evaporates. The effect is not to build collective resilience, but rather to erode it, as communal and partisan division increases and trust-repair efforts can prove challenging, even after the crisis passes. Just as the global pandemic may have exposed the deficit of trust, that trust will need to be re-earned in the post-pandemic era to cultivate resilience.

In the COVID-19 crisis, growing mistrust in institutions is evident, particularly for the Center for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC, ‘long considered the world’s premier health agency… is no longer the reliable go-to place… Here is an agency that has been waiting its entire existence for this moment… And then they flub it’ (Lipton et al., 2020). These injuries to institutional trust diminish the resource potential of the CDC and, in turn, its ability to promote resilience. In the international arena, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the media exploited their positions of power and authority to politicize the pandemic; this brought tremendous local and international division, including social and political friction.
Regarding institutional trust and mistrust situations, future researchers might consider pursuing the following questions: What kinds of institutions generate trust and what kinds generate mistrust in the midst of crisis? How might the boundaries between trust and mistrust shift—or remain static—for an institution over the course of a crisis? How, if at all, are injuries against institutions repaired? What are the kinds of institutional resources, both strategic and symbolic, that can be appropriated in fostering trust and collective resilience? Can collective resilience be not only a reactive modality to recuperate from a disaster, but also a pre-emptive modality to offset and combat forces that bring division and friction?

**Coming Together as Community**

Under crisis, interpersonal networks of connection often emerge, face-to-face or in virtual reality over social media. The effect is to create a sense of communal solidarity that enables people to envision themselves as members of a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ that is ‘imagined because the members of even the smallest nation never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson, 1983, p. 6–7). Moreover, if those interpersonal connections are of high quality, no matter how brief or distant, they can energize and enliven people, fuelling collective resilience.

In a research project underway (Lockwood and Glynn, 2020), we found that an imagined community formed and played an important role in recovery following the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings. One badly injured survivor of the bombings, Mery Daniel (quoted in Swan, 2014) noted how community was a clear and potent source of resilience: ‘We are strong, we are here, and we are going to fight this. We’re going to stand together; we’re going to help each other’. Although people gathered in person to commemorate, protest, and simply afford condolences to each other, they also took to twitter, using social media, to create a sense of imagined personal connections. The rallying cry of ‘Boston Strong’, itself ‘a proud mix of resiliency and defiance, an attitude rooted in local culture… [was] intertwined with a sense of recovery’ (Boston Globe Editorial, 18 June 2018), became a hashtag that was widely used. One tweet, in the immediate aftermath of the bombings was emblematic of community: ‘Whoever did this to Boston, did it to make us weaker, to give in. But little do they know, it only made us stronger’.

Building on this line of thought regarding imagined communities suggests several questions for future researchers. For instance, in crisis, how do communities emerge and enable collective resilience? In crisis, what is the role of social media, and what is its effectiveness, in fostering the kind of community that can enable collective resistance? How enduring are these virtual communities once the immediacy of a crisis passes? What are the resources that flow in the connections structuring such communities, as networks of empathy, advice, instruction or mobilization?

**Role Modelling Resilience by Calling out the Heroes**

In the immediate aftermath of the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings, then Boston Mayor Deval Patrick had a public strategy of focusing on the positive: ‘We called the heroes out’
(Lockwood and Glynn, 2020). Intentionally, he along with other public officials focused attention on the people – often every day, ordinary people – whom they saw as heroes making a positive impact; simultaneously, they tended to downplay the perpetrators. Heroes were medics, police officers, first responders, frontline workers, marathon runners and spectators, along with ordinary citizens who rushed to the aid of those in need. The effect was to highlight the good over the bad, and the positive over the negative. The heroes functioned as symbols or role models for resilience.

We see this happening in the COVID-19 crisis; frontline and backline workers, from health care personnel to grocery clerks, have received an outpouring of attention, accolades, and appreciation. In a provocatively titled article, ‘Will coronavirus change how we define heroes?’ (Sims, 2020), Zimbardo, better known for his Stanford prison experiments exposing authoritarianism and evil, commented: ‘Now we’re perhaps recognising that we should be willing to give what is, after all, a title of great honour to many more people who are genuinely putting themselves at risk, which is clearly the case for healthcare workers in particular now. Risk like this was never in their job description. What’s more, they’re doing it every day. That’s heroism with a capital H’.

Such observations on calling out the heroes stimulate several research questions for scholars. For instance, who are identified as the heroes in the coronavirus pandemic? Are these individuals heroes with a capital H or with a small h? How are they celebrated as heroes? How do their stories resonate with the circumstances of the crisis and with the people affected by it? How is attention to, and the boundary between, the perceived negative (the crisis) and the perceived positive (the heroes) perceived and regulated? How does the identification of such heroes contribute to collective resilience?

In closing, I offer this essay as an exploration of how collective resilience can arise even in the worst of circumstances: a global pandemic that has adversely affected millions. Resilience can be a source of positivity, optimism and hope, and guide the kinds of behaviour to help overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19. I have identified three research pathways for collective resilience, but they are by no means exhaustive. People and communities will find other pathways to resilience; my hope is that this essay may spur future researchers to identify new possibilities, to good effect.

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