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## Resilience through leisure?

Ethnographic findings on an ambivalent relationship\*

*Abstract:* Resilience has recently become an expansive concept in political, economic and scientific fields. The normative and ideological dimensions underlying this concept and the resulting cultural effects have hardly been the subject of empirically grounded research in cultural studies so far, although resilience discourses have long been materializing in everyday and living environments. Using the example of courses that promise actors a life with more leisure, this article asks how ideas of resilience are communicated, made plausible and critically negotiated in this specific field. To what extent is the increased attractiveness of the concept of leisure as a specific form of the qualification of temporal experience related to ideas of a resilient self? How are ideas of a fundamentally deficient self in need of optimization expressed here, and what kind of solutions are being sought for which social problems? The article assumes that both the concept of leisure and that of resilience cocreate, on a discursive level, the problems, challenges and crises to which they respond.

*Keywords:* resilience, self-optimization, leisure, work-life balance, body concepts, mindfulness, blurring boundaries of work

A man jogs across a zebra crossing. We see him in his living room at home, with his wife and children at the breakfast table. A woman is trimming a plant in the garden with a chainsaw, another woman can be seen at a dance class. Someone is barbecuing, another person is at soccer practice. So far, these are very familiar situations. However, all those portrayed have one thing in common: their everyday life is depicted as disturbed. They are each wearing a desk around their hips, are fused with it, which results in all kinds of turbulence. A vase crashes against the desk, a football bangs against a head, a desk gets caught in the front door. The otherwise romantic scene of a couple on a park bench is seriously disrupted because the attached desk creates a bizarre distance, and the partner has to stretch out her hand a long way in order to create at least a little physical closeness across the desk.

This scene picks up on omnipresent lifeworld experiences that interdisciplinary work culture research has problematized with the keyword of *Entgrenzung*, the dissolution of boundaries (Gottschall and Voß 2003; Herlyn et al. 2009; Schönberger 2003;

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Schönberger and Springer 2003). It originates from a prevention campaign by the Swiss Insurance Association SVV.<sup>1</sup> A tremendously funny video joins all these scenes. With background music that prepares for slapstick, the main protagonist introduces himself in the video. He states that he has an important job. But he immediately qualifies it as “pretty important, more or less.” Nothing works without him, so work is always with him. While he tapes his laptop to the mobile desk, he comments from the background that it is important to separate business and leisure. The cleverly made film takes up the motto “leisure is better without an office” in an extremely humorous way. Leisure time, it states, is increasingly work. And this is highly detrimental to our health.

The campaign works so well not only because it humorously draws attention to what is interpreted as a serious social problem. It also works because it picks up on a lifeworld experience in which predominantly medium and highly qualified people, first of all, increasingly interpret themselves as a project of their self (Glaser 2016) and in which, secondly, the problematized dissolution of work boundaries is becoming more and more effective. While the insurance association frames this dissolution of boundaries as a health risk, scientific analyses go many steps further. The corresponding social diagnoses (including Bude 2018; Han 2012; Illouz 2009) point to inescapable human arts of governance that transform us – as the sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (2016) has elaborated from the perspective of discourse analysis and governmental theory – into an entrepreneurial self, and which are inescapable because they have inscribed themselves deeply and mostly unreflectedly into our interpretations of self and world.

Against this backdrop, the insurance association evokes an extremely powerful concept that has been receiving enormous popularity in science and society in recent years – that of resilience. Admittedly, the insurance association’s campaign does not explicitly use the term resilience. It is more about the health effects of the dissolution of boundaries of work with the aim of reducing possible costs for the treatment of resulting illnesses. However, one can argue that the underlying ideology of the campaign is based on ideas that are most closely associated with the concept of resilience. The campaign does not address the actors who could change political governance mechanisms and ensure a balance between work and leisure time. Instead, it addresses the resilience of individuals who have to deal with the challenges of the boundless world of work and are supposed to become resilient. The advertising campaign paints a powerful picture that, as the sociologist Stefanie Graefe puts it, negotiates resilience as a new ideal of personality and lifestyle (2019: 9). This image is powerful above all, because, out of a multitude of possible courses of action, such as reducing working hours or becoming involved in trade unions, it privileges a single one that focuses on the personality and lifestyle of the subject. The film is not just about a better balance between leisure and work: it is about motivating the individual to mobilize his or her own (defensive) powers

1 Prevention campaign of the Swiss Insurance Association (<https://ausschalten-auftanken.ch/filme/>; accessed February 18, 2020).

or develop them in order to cope with various challenges better. Responsibility is, thus, situated in the respective acting subject, while, at the same time, there is no longer any question about the social conditions that cause the challenges in question in the first place – for example, the experience of the dissolution of boundaries or overload in the world of work. In this reading, resilience is downright reactionary, in that the existing social conditions (and, thus, always positions of power) are codified and perpetuated. It is about adaptation and not change.

Something similar can also be observed for a rapidly growing leisure industry, which the following article aims to examine from a micro-perspective. To a certain extent, this industry picks up on the social need for a better work-life balance noted by the Swiss Insurance Association and markets it cleverly. The empirical basis of the following contribution is provided by a cultural studies subproject conducted within the framework of the Freiburg Collaborative Research Centre 1015: “*Otium. Boundaries, Chronotopes, Practices,*” which uses an ethnographic approach to examine various course offers that promise to restore the subjects’ fitness for the challenges of the present by taking recourse to the concept of leisure.<sup>2</sup> The courses that were ethnographically studied took place in very different settings: from time-out in a monastery to courses on so-called forest bathing to mindfulness courses. Not all courses operated with the German term *Muße*, which evokes connotations of complete freedom from obligations and objectives, but all of them referred to the concept by wanting to generate self-determined action and a freedom from constraints that were supposed to lead to freedom for the self-purposeful use of temporal resources. In doing so, they all articulated a specific diagnosis of self and society in which ideas of resilience were always called upon. The connection between leisure and resilience is by no means obvious at first glance: leisure is the historically ever-changing qualification of a temporal experience. According to the definition proposed by the Freiburg CRC *Otium*, this is characterized by the fact that it enables experiences of freedom, allowing for self-determined action. If, on the other hand, it is used instrumentally, as in the courses mentioned above, it can become – whether intentionally or rather incidentally – a vehicle for conveying ideas of resilience. One could even argue that while the courses teach us how to have more leisure in our everyday lives, they also popularize notions of resilience. The courses promise, for instance, that one can learn to experience leisure in one’s free time or even during work, but, at the same time, they convey that such perceived leisure can strengthen one’s power of resistance in order to deal better with stress and all kinds of

2 Funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) – project number 197396619 – SFB 1015. The empirical research that forms the basis of this article was conducted by Inga Wilke M. A. The research project, excerpts of which are used for the analysis below, was not explicitly aimed at questions of research on resilience. Nevertheless, the question of the levels of meaning and ideologies associated with the concept of resilience proved to be indispensable in the course of the ethnographic research process because the concept and the ideas behind it were repeatedly and prominently articulated in the interviews.

everyday challenges. Simultaneously, such courses rarely and never radically criticize the causes that lead people to seek more leisure in everyday life in the first place. The leisure marketed and conveyed in the courses is understood as a suitable instrument or therapeutic agent; but ultimately, as with resilience, it is also about adaptation and not about a fundamental change (e.g. of working conditions). The idea that is popularized here is that leisure can only be achieved through corresponding work on the self. It is about adapting one's own lifestyle, which is supposed to lead to more leisure, and less about the question of why experiences of leisure are prevented these days. Indeed, one has to ask whether the diagnosis that we have largely forgotten how to experience or practice leisure is correct. Do people today no longer have leisure? In any case, this diagnosis seems to make leisure an attractive commodity. Leisure is also attractive because it articulates the promise of experiencing freedom. This distinguishes it structurally from resilience, which means less freedom for the actors than the continued good functioning of the subject against the backdrop of assumed crises. By contrast, it is difficult to imagine that courses could be marketed similarly well if they were to operate explicitly with the concept of resilience.

At first glance, leisure is a seemingly harmless matter. It is linked conceptually to the use of time by elites; it carries with it the ballast of the educated bourgeoisie insofar as in the history of the term, certain social groups were denied the right to leisure (Gimmel and Keiling 2016; Hasebrink and Riedl 2014; Soeffner 2014: 34). Leisure, however, is an immensely political topic (Dobler and Riedl 2017), as the concept of leisure is currently being used to negotiate fundamental social questions that also appear in political discourses (e.g. in current debates about the universal basic income). Arguing following Bourdieu, one could say that leisure has also been used to legitimize the time regimes of the elites. Historically, and continuing into the present, certain social groups have been explicitly excluded from experiences of leisure. This does not mean that these groups did not have these experiences, but rather that they were denied them on a discursive or programmatic level (e.g. in ancient Greece, where the slaves were not supposed to have leisure).

The following contribution asks about specifically situated understandings of resilience – and it does so on two levels: On the one hand, it asks how ideas of resilience are conveyed in the context of the ethnographically studied courses, and how they are also critically reflected upon. On the other hand, it works out from a cultural studies perspective how course participants themselves articulate ideas of resilience and negotiate them critically and autonomously. The aim is to show how leisure is used in an equally goal-oriented way to create a resilient self. So, what role do notions of resilience play for actors in this field? The article proposes that the goals of personality development and lifestyle associated with the concept of resilience are not conveyed unquestioningly or uncritically, at least in the field studied here, but that social actors also engage with them in a critical manner. It, thus, expands the scientific diagnoses

on the concept of resilience that are oriented at discourse analysis by including an ethnographic and cultural studies perspective.

## **Resilience as an object of cultural and social studies**

Social science literature has deconstructed the concept of resilience as a powerful instrument of control based on discourse analysis and governmental theory considerations (Bröckling 2017: 113; Hall and Lamont 2013). Following Ulrich Bröckling's work, the sociologist Stefanie Graefe, for example, also assumes that resilience is, on the one hand, a buzzword and, on the other hand, a key concept of the present. In her words, it is, thus, a figure of thought which – under certain circumstances even where there is no explicit mention of resilience (yet) – influences established perceptions of reality, problem-solving models, and instructions for managing oneself and others and suggests their revision. She emphasizes that resilience as a *transformative* paradigm not only prepares us for a present that is uncertain, inscrutable and, therefore, also threatening in principle, but also provides us with the means to cope with this situation (Graefe 2019: 21). This can also be applied to the subject of this article: there is no mention of resilience in the courses, yet they diagnose a crisis-ridden present in which experiences of leisure are hardly or no longer possible. Figuratively speaking, they popularize ideas of resilience, *inter alia*, because leisure is supposed to help in dealing with the challenges of the present. Experiences of leisure are supposed to make subjects more resilient.

The criticism here is obvious (Neocleous 2013): the concept of resilience argues with crises and social, ecological or other challenges which it simultaneously generates, at least on a discursive level. When orders are destabilized and this is subsequently interpreted as a crisis in social discourse (through the so-called financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.), the calls for increasing the resilience of systems or individual actors become louder. In this respect, crises catalyze, accelerate or intensify discourses of resilience. Since one can obviously argue very plausibly for the necessity of resilience in such social contexts, calls for resilience confirm diagnoses of crises. From a social constructivist point of view, it can be argued that resilience produces diagnoses of crises on a discursive level. When applied in this way, the question is whether social reality is actually as crisis-ridden as it is interpreted in, for example, political (one example would be the so-called refugee crisis) or economic (the so-called financial crisis) discourse. This in no way denies that people perceive the present as crisis-like. But how – and this is an important scientific question – do diagnoses of crises originate in the first place? To what extent and for which actors is the diagnosis of a crisis also a powerful resource? Who benefits – economically, politically or socially – when certain social developments are perceived as crises?

The course offers discussed below also demonstrate the assumption that crises are not simply a given, but a discursive attribution: they diagnose a crisis of the self

that can no longer cope with the challenges of the present and needs more leisure. This makes the demand for a resilient self plausible. Those who have more leisure in everyday life (e.g. mindfulness), it is assumed, can cope better with the demands of life. If, in this context, no sustainable solutions are sought to change these demands themselves, but only the individual way of dealing with them, then one must certainly ask whether the leisure conveyed in this way can be an adequate answer to the problems identified.

The concept of resilience inscribes responsibility in the subjects without consistently questioning the structures that make resilience appear necessary in the first place; the talk of resilience or the demand for a resilient self, therefore, powerfully stabilizes orders that can be characterized as neoliberal and address a new understanding of the subject – namely, one that differs from a preventive self by thinking of it in an even more radical and comprehensive way. As Bröckling puts it: resilience promotion can be understood both as a variant of and an alternative to preventive action. It is less negativistic and instead more defensive: if prevention should make negative futures more likely, resilience promotion should make it more likely that the feared negative futures will not turn out to be even more negative (2017: 115). If, for example, the leisure courses are to provide a remedy for experiences of overload and stress, then these experiences will by no means dissolve in the future; according to Bröckling, their effects will merely become less negative.

Resilience, similar to prevention, is always oriented towards the future. Following Bröckling, it is normative insofar as it privileges specific ideas of the future and, simultaneously, excludes others. In relation to the courses analyzed here, this means that a vision of the future is conveyed in which the course participants can cope better with the challenges of the world of work. It is precisely not a future in which actors are to be empowered to defend themselves against the structures that are interpreted as challenging by other (e.g. political) means.

Research in cultural studies has so far rarely engaged with the concept of resilience, although it would be reasonable to ask exactly how ideas of resilience take specific effect in everyday life: how does the concept change perceptions of reality or specific everyday action? How are instructions on how to manage oneself and others implemented – how does a resilient self emerge that does not appear as a social or cultural figure but as an actor who is differentiated (according to classic categories of difference, such as age, gender or class, and with individual biographical and lifeworld experiences), and who considers resilience relevant for themselves in specific lifeworld contexts? Briefly: what impact does the concept have on the way we organize our everyday lives – work, leisure, love, consumption, etc. – as well as on our interpretation of ourselves and the world?

Using the example of dealing with the consequences of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the US folklorist and cultural studies scholar Dorothy Noyes has critically discussed resilience as a “slogan-concept” (2016: 413). She emphasizes that concepts such

as resilience draw attention to themselves and distract from structural problems: “As the symptoms are treated, the disease is ignored or naturalized, such that the attendant suffering is just how things are. Slogan-concepts propose solutions for problems that have not been examined” (Noyes 2016: 413).

The concepts would continue to discipline behavior and rally supporters behind them who sometimes passionately advocated for them. Ulrich Bröckling (2017) has problematized these supporters with the figure of the resilient self, certainly thought of as an ideal type. This self also emerges in a central way in scholarly research. Psychological research on mindfulness, for example, which could be characterized as a paradigmatic field in the discussion of resilience, also constructs specific images of the human condition with the resilient self. According to Bröckling, a subject is called upon here that is a virtuoso manager of emotions and cognition. Only one thing, he writes, obviously did not occur to this subject: to resist what he has learned to endure and to override what he manages so sovereignly (Bröckling 2017: 136). Bröckling rightly concludes that one must see this as a strategy of depoliticization (2017: 137).

Other perspectives that are not oriented toward cultural or social studies are based on images of human beings that conceive of people as malleable and situate them in orders that are not critically questioned. But who exactly are resilience concepts aimed at? Bröckling writes that those who can be reached by the invocations of the resilient self are those who already fear the incalculable, disruptive and catastrophic futures for which they are supposed to prepare themselves, and that the affective resonance takes place less through argumentative plausibilization than through the unquestioning evidence of impressive images and stories (2017: 137). Participants in leisure courses, on the other hand, are less afraid of catastrophes or disruption; they have identified deficits in their own everyday worlds and, with the hope of more leisure and a form of time use that is staged and imagined as meaningful, are looking for a new attitude toward themselves or their world of work. Ideas are articulated here that are characteristic of the concept of resilience, as all the actors we interviewed are concerned with increasing their own powers of resistance.

The diagnosis of the self in the narrative interviews always includes a diagnosis of society. The interviewees, for example, consistently describe that a central motivation for taking part in the course was to achieve a better balance (e.g. between work and leisure) in their lives. They diagnose their own lives as unbalanced, sometimes deficient, which they ascribe, *inter alia*, to their attitude to their own bodies. At the same time, however, they also reflect on the social circumstances that lead to the diagnosis of an individual, lifeworld crisis.

### **Leisure as an analytical concept or an object?**

Similar to resilience, the qualification of temporal experience that could be characterized as leisure seems to be gaining in attractiveness nowadays – at least in the countries

of the Global North and for specific social and socioeconomic milieus. In any case, the courses examined here describe leisure as an attractive state and, thus, simultaneously convey goals that the term resilience also focuses on. Analogous to resilience, leisure courses look into the future. They promise a better way of coping with the challenging conditions of the present through a changed lifestyle – a more leisurely life. Leisure here is not a passive state that one simply enters in certain contexts, for instance, when going for a walk or during routinised activities; instead, it is described as a state that one can also achieve through appropriate work on the self with the corresponding tools (e.g. relaxation techniques, such as the so-called Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction). Similar to resilience, leisure in this field also requires permanent work on the self.

The fact that leisure has (re-)gained attractiveness is evident in very different fields, all of which have in common that leisure is not an end in itself but is linked to specific goals, just like resilience: In the context of gainful employment, companies set up spaces for employees to relax – but here, one could critically object, relaxation is not always the primary goal since the aim is to increase the attractiveness of the employer or the performance of the employees; it is not only trade unions that are increasingly discussing shorter working hours in terms of a work-life balance. Popular media, such as magazines and blogs, address the accelerated experience of time and contrast it with deceleration or leisure. In addition, an expansion of coaching and leisure offers can be observed which aim to help people find themselves through mindfulness training and other formats. In all of the areas mentioned above, the seemingly growing need for free and meaningful time is taken up, which goes hand in hand with the feeling of alienation through gainful employment and a continuously growing pressure to perform.

In the present, for example, the sociologist Hans Georg Soeffner points out that it is significant that in contemporary advice literature, the feeling of having lost something peculiar and, at the same time, important is expressed with the call to find this something again – to, as he emphasizes, *seek* leisure (2014: 36). The leisure that Soeffner describes here is highly purposeful. This is also related to the fact that it becomes a marketable commodity in corresponding course offers in which experiences of leisure are imparted, and sold with the promise of a successful life. In order to awaken the need for leisure in the first place, it is often linked in this context with a narrative of alienation, which Soeffner also points out: his narrative assumes that in a past that is not further specified, people would have led a more leisure-filled life. Historically, this is pure fiction and imagination, however, it leads to the present being perceived as even more deficient. At the same time, this narrative levels social differences because neither does the ideal-typical past that is invoked here exist, nor, as outlined briefly at the beginning, did all people have leisure in equal measure.

Leisure, on the other hand, is – when it is staged in this way – a well-functioning sales argument. Soeffner, who borrows from Adorno's critique of the culture industry, assumes for certain fields that are organized in the form of the market that leisure may



be promised, however, it then cannot actually materialize. He, thus, distinguishes a highly instrumental and by no means purpose-free form of what he calls a health insurance and wellness center leisure (Soeffner 2014: 40) from a 'genuine,' purpose-free form of leisure, which, as mentioned above, is described by the German word *Muße*. The latter is characterized by autonomous, temporal-free spaces in which routine everyday and work processes are also stopped, making synesthetic and, above all, purpose-free experience possible.

From the point of view of cultural studies, leisure is, first and foremost, an interpretation. It qualifies temporal experience, interprets it as positive and distinguishes it from, for example, laziness or negatively interpreted boredom. In cultural studies, leisure is not an analytical concept but an object of research. More radically, one could even say that leisure does not exist in a social constructivist perspective. What is of interest for cultural studies is rather in which historical and cultural spaces has leisure been interpreted in which way, who invokes leisure and for what reasons (today, quite intensively, for example, in debates about a universal basic income), when and why leisure becomes socially relevant, and how leisure is produced in the first place through physical and discursive practices.

The Collaborative Research Centre 1015 attempts to define leisure conceptually: it conceives of leisure, for example, as a paradoxical relation of intentional purposelessness or productive unproductivity. Leisure is defined here, as Gimmel and Keiling put it, as a self-determined and self-realizing activity (2016: 52), which is characterized by negative and positive freedom. In their words, leisure offers human freedom the opportunity to realize itself, and practices of leisure are ultimately forms of the realization of freedom (Gimmel and Keiling 2016: 61). If one understands leisure in this way, then it seems obvious to interpret it as a characteristic of being human. In this ideal form, it is not oriented towards pure unproductivity; it acquires its form by putting productivity and unproductivity, activity and inactivity into a certain relationship. What needs to be emphasized here, however, is that this ideal form has been renegotiated and sometimes differently defined again and again in cultural history, and that leisure has also been ascribed different functions. In the context of the courses discussed here, it can indeed be understood as a counterreaction to the performance imperatives of the present. In any case, on a discursive level, the connection with performance requirements is repeatedly established. However, the connection is quite paradoxical. The historian Nina Verheyen, for example, explains the success of leisure guides by saying that they simultaneously serve the interests of performance critics and performance advocates (2018: 9).

The Collaborative Research Centre 1015 assumes that leisure is characterized particularly by its transgressive potential. Experiences of leisure, it postulates, enable people to think critically about themselves and their environment. This reflection, in turn, has the potential to change social conditions based on experiences of leisure. This

transgressive potential is also expressed in the following analysis of the empirical material from the leisure courses. In this context, I am interested in asking how resilience is critically thought about in the context of leisure.

### **Leisure and resilience – discursivities and reflexive potential**

A frequently articulated interpretation in the courses which we studied ethnographically is the letting go of everyday constraints.<sup>3</sup> This letting go is described by 58-year-old Simone,<sup>4</sup> who enrolled in a course in a monastery, as extremely attractive. It was precisely this pattern of action that she all too often misses in everyday life: “I simply can never just let it be,”<sup>5</sup> she says in the interview, expressing a deficit situated in her own self that she does not attribute to external structures or constraints. Simone works in the administration of an outpatient care service and has already tried out various courses – partly due to the overload she experiences there. Simone sees herself as a perfectionist. She derives a need for learning from her own experiences: “I should do even more, learn even more techniques.” “I haven’t gotten that far yet,”<sup>6</sup> argues another participant of the course entitled “Bringing balance to the inner self.”

Not being ready yet, doing more, learning more techniques – these interpretations initially point to an identified need for learning. However, if we contextualize this with the reasons why people take part in the courses, much more comprehensive logics of optimization (Mayer and Thompson 2013) become apparent. It is usually not just about learning relaxation or mindfulness techniques, but about an optimized way of life overall.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, the demands of the meritocratic society are not fundamentally questioned, for example, by challenging alternative logics of action, as Stefan Groth (2020) has done in his work on the orientation toward mediocrity. Instead of attending courses, it would be conceivable to campaign for better working conditions; instead, the need for action is identified in changing one’s lifestyle in such a way that one is better adapted to the structures criticized and, thus, becoming resilient.

3 Cf. also Tauschek and Wilke 2021. Some of the empirical material used for analysis here has already been used in this contribution, however, not with a focus on questions of resilience but on questions of work on the self and self-optimization.

4 Names and course titles have been pseudonymized. When pseudonymizing the course titles, care was taken to retain the mostly metaphorical content as far as possible.

5 Direct quotations from the interviews have been translated from German. Interview conducted October 11, 2017.

6 Interview conducted November 2, 2017.

7 In the field presented here, self-interpretations that motivate the desire for resilience in the lifeworld meet the imperative to work on oneself conveyed in the courses. Here, the courses can be placed in the broader field of a society of counselling and therapy as described by the social sciences (cf. Maasen 2011; Rose 1991, 1998).

The relationship between work and everyday constraints and personal freedom is articulated reflexively in all the interviews we conducted. Simone, who has already been quoted above, expresses this in an exemplary way:

I now try to not be so fixated on work. In the seminar announcement it also said that we are very performance-oriented, right, in today's society anyway, and I include myself in that, for me, it's a lot about performance, I want to perform, I don't necessarily have to any more, but when the children were small, they don't ask you if you want to do something or not, or whether you felt like it or not, the children were there and things have to be done and sometimes I feel that I got out of the habit at some stage to ask myself whether I wanted to do something or not because I had to do it anyway. But now I'm in a completely different situation in life and I could turn it around a bit, but it's hard, I find it hard.<sup>8</sup>

What seems significant in these remarks is initially the biographical classification. Simone sees herself in a "completely different situation in life," which she also narratively conceives of as a turning point: Her children have moved out and started their own families. This turning point is characterized in her interpretation by a new understanding of the subject: While she interprets her life so far as thoroughly shaped by structures in which she imagines herself as a puppet ("they don't ask you if you want to do something or not"), the course offers her the opportunity to regain her own agency. What is relevant here is not only the embedding in traditionalized gender roles, but also the reflexive evaluation of the turning point, which is interpreted as a challenge. From a narrative-analytical perspective, it is certainly no coincidence that the initially depersonalized interpretation "but it's hard" is emphasized by the phrase "I find it hard," which more strongly underscores agency.

Agency is – admittedly on a completely different level – a central promise on the part of the providers. As a guiding concept, all of the providers we have studied so far claim that participants "carry the solutions within them," which can then be worked out in the course. It is precisely here that ideas of resilience are articulated which are then – as in the quote above – combined with specific lifeworld experiences.

The goal of providing course participants with solutions, on the other hand, is critically reflected in all the courses we dealt with ethnographically. Sandra, for example, a 50-year-old provider, Buddhist meditation teacher and author of a "leisure" guidebook, addresses the fundamental ambivalence of the course offers by referring to the danger of a "meditation and mindfulness performance behavior," i. e. the goal-oriented instrumentalization of mindfulness.<sup>9</sup> She interprets the appropriation of these techniques for self-management and self-optimization as a latent danger that always looms over the practice. Norbert, who is a pastor and offers courses on leisure and serenity, argues in a similar way by drawing attention to the structural social challenges:

8 Interview conducted October 11, 2017.

9 Interview conducted October 1, 2017.

The danger is always that we, to put it bluntly, stabilize this system through our offers and whether it would not be more consistent, yes, not to engage with these levels. At the beginning, in the first announcement, we still very much tried to fit into the language use of this personal development course, and then I said: 'I have the impression that we need to do this radically differently.' And then this 'let it go' came out, where it is really about entering into a different attitude towards life. If I have the impression now, and I don't have it at this seminar, not from the participants and not from the way it went, that we are just serving a system here, so to speak, and giving it a bit more of a human face or sprinkling in some humanitarian things, sprinkling in some values or something, I don't want that.<sup>10</sup>

In his interpretation, Norbert explicitly recognizes that leisure fundamentally bears the potential of being appropriated for certain goals. If Norbert does not want to stabilize the system through his understanding of leisure and its mediation, this also contains a critique of society when he refers to a 'system' against which one can position oneself. He contrasts this with a specific understanding of leisure that is characterized by ideas of a successful life, of a – as he puts it – "different attitude towards life," which he characterizes in the same interview as a rejection of the imperative of constant self-optimization. It was not necessary to always function perfectly and chase after some ideals. At the same time, he distances himself from all the offers that, in his interpretation, use leisure merely as a distinguishing façade behind which powerful ideologies operate. This shows how ambivalent leisure is in the field we are studying. It is discussed reflexively and evaluated critically in its potential for ideologization and instrumentalization. This critical evaluation then manifests ideas of leisure that are understood and imagined as a real counter-model to the challenges of the present.

Based on the empirical findings outlined here as examples, it can be summarized that the actors we interviewed often conceive of themselves as deficient – in all the interviews, for instance, the feeling was articulated that they could not (or no longer) get through everyday life well, could no longer cope with the time compression or did not have enough tools at hand to relax better or faster. The courses sometimes cater to this feeling through their titles alone: if a course advertises "Let it be for once," then the deficit is already pointedly considered. Here, too, references can be made to resilience, which also – at least implicitly – sees subjects as deficient, otherwise they would not have to become (more) resilient in order to cope better with crisis-prone constellations.

It is telling that all our interview partners are between 40 and 60 years old and belong to the middle of society. The biographical findings are particularly revealing for the connection with resilience. It seems that in our field, thinking about strengthening one's potential, the desire to activate one's own powers of resistance, to take up a prominent term in the discourse on resilience, is stimulated mainly by the fact that one's own biographical situation (usually with the completion of starting a family and

10 Interview conducted September 17, 2017.

often also facing the start of retirement) prompted reflection and repositioning. The courses seemed to articulate promises here that were interpreted as valuable in this biographical phase. This raises questions that are beneficial for further research on resilience. After all, the discourse on resilience is also constituted in specific lifeworld and biographical contexts. What role, or example, do classic categories of difference, such as age or gender, play in the discussion of resilience or regarding specific understandings of resilience? What is the significance of biographical experiences, for example, those of overload in gainful employment?

### **The leisureful body as a project**

The central object of change is one's own body, the thematization of which also articulates ideas of resilience. In the context of the courses we studied, the body is understood as a "project" in the sense of the sociologist Chris Shilling (1993), which can be shaped and formatted in a targeted way. In doing so, leisure is the target variable that is to be achieved not only through mental, cognitive work, but also particularly through specific body practices that ultimately also promise a different attitude towards the self and the world.

The anthropology of the body is largely in agreement with the sociology of the body in that the body in empirical research only becomes tangible in its representations: as a diagram in which, for example, blood pressure or cholesterol levels are recorded in translated abstractions, or as a narrativized and, thus, always reflexively turned self-image when people talk about bodily states and bodily experience. The strength of empirical research lies precisely in the fact that the body is not taken as a given, but instead, following the sociologists Bryan Turner (1996) or Sue Scott and David Morgan (1993), as the result and site of cultural and social processes. The historian Philipp Sarasin (1991) and the sociologist Gabriele Klein (2010) have also pointed out that historical processes and historical experiences are always inscribed in our individual bodies. This applies to certain postures and techniques, such as sitting or walking, and to discursivized concepts of the body. At the same time, recent studies have underlined that body knowledge also eludes reflexive attention (Keller and Meuser 2011: 10). Keller and Meuser argue that bodies function as independent carriers of knowledge that cannot be translated into cognitive processes (2011: 10). They rightly assume that the knowledge about the body is in a complex relationship to knowledge of the body. As an example, they cite the knowledge of a male body conveyed through socialization and enculturation, which they say could ultimately become incorporated into the habitus and, thus, become knowledge of the body. This perspective is also fruitful for an analysis of leisure courses, because it implies important research questions. Which bodies are up for consideration in each case? How is the body conceived of and interpreted? Is there only one imagined, almost deculturalized, at the center or are there differentiations?

One of the basic conditions of the courses is that physical experiences and the body in general are given central importance, both conceptually and practically. The providers see the body as the first place where stress and overload show themselves, which is why the courses should also take it as their starting point. The background of the courses is formed by ideas of the accelerated and rushed body, which, as Alain Ehrenberg (2004) puts it, is all too often overstrained and simultaneously forgotten in the 21st century performance society. Here, too, ideas of crisis are expressed and, vice versa, ideas of an ideal way of dealing with the body, which would be perceived more strongly without these situations of crisis and whose needs could then be responded to adequately. All the providers that we accompanied in our ethnography create the image of a better past that was not understood as being in crisis, in which people did not live so alienated from nature and, above all, from their own bodies; here, ideas of a 'natural' and, as it were, anthropological body are activated. Frank, who provides a meditation retreat lasting several days, sums it up like this: "[...] how it used to be, where people lived more in harmony with nature. In our time, with all these media and faster and faster and emails, and if you haven't replied two hours later, some already get restless, [...] so this constant acceleration results in us rushing through life and not really being able to live and enjoy life at all anymore."<sup>11</sup>

This interview passage is an example of ideas of a body that is understood as destabilized and in crisis. The interpretations that are articulated here paint a picture of an idealized, supposedly natural past in which temporal orders are still interpreted as humane. A "real" life, as the interview partner himself puts it, is characterized by enjoyment and temporal freedom. Frank's diagnosis of life and society confirms Hartmut Rosa's (2016) sociologically attested acceleration of our everyday lives. At the same time, this interview passage can be related to discourses of resilience. Frank assumes a state of equilibrium in an imagined and idealized past in which resilience is not needed; it only becomes necessary because of the destabilization of this assumed ideal state.

The idea of body oblivion through constant hectic and increasing acceleration is a core element of this diagnosis of the present which the providers articulate and transfer to the respective course. From a cultural studies point of view, one could object that this is, of course, an extremely powerful positing that sees the actors as largely powerless subjects in overpowering and inescapable structures. The concept of the accelerated body, thus, focuses on the sociocultural and particularly the economic structures, whose negative bodily effects are seen to be reflected on an individual level in the 'problematic' body.

In many cases, the participants describe precisely such experiences of a body that is perceived as problematic because it is not without friction, a body that is simultaneously broken down into individual components and specific individual practices, all of

11 Interview conducted October 23, 2017.

which have a high degree of cultural-historical significance. The course participants we interviewed feel uncomfortable, they walk around “really very tense,” especially around the stomach, the body is described as reacting to stress and causing pain, the “nervous system is a bit dented.” These are experiences in which the equally dissected body becomes the focus of perception because it causes problems and is not functioning properly.

In this perspective, the everyday body that is inextricably entangled in acceleration is not a body of leisure, it is a body in need of care and learning, permeated by experiences of the dissolution of boundaries. The deficient self constructed in this way has to practice making contact with its own body again – this is how the actors see it. The goal here is to learn to understand the body – here, ideas of the human being as a deficient being are also called upon – and ultimately to regain agency and control over it.

Frank summarizes this paradigmatically, aligning scientific arguments and scientific knowledge:

Our body is what is also called the somatic marker in psychology. So, when stress starts to accumulate, we actually feel it in our body much earlier than we might notice it in our head. And when we are more in touch with the body, we can also react much faster to it or take care of ourselves than if we don't feel ourselves at all, so to speak, and just somehow continue to function until we collapse or something.<sup>12</sup>

From this positing, which clearly privileges the body's knowledge and conceives of the body itself as having agency, follows two strategies that are pursued in parallel in the course and which can be grasped, speaking with Keller and Meuser (2011), as knowledge about the body and knowledge of the body. By conveying and acquiring knowledge about the body, providers and participants want to make bodily experiences explainable and, thus, manageable. Accordingly, the body is almost intellectualized in some statements. Fifty-year-old Beate, for example, who wants to learn how to take better care of herself because of a heart condition, paints a drastic picture: “And that's why it's so important to reduce this hectic pace or this whole firing of these survival hormones during leisure time, so that it can calm down, so that the brain can learn to think like a network again and only then can new ideas or, yes, regeneration take place in this calm phase, where no survival strategy has to be necessary.”<sup>13</sup>

The terms chosen by Beate clearly refer to ideas of resilience, in that she understands the environment, which can only be mastered with a continuous “survival strategy,” as crisis-ridden and unstable. In her interpretation, leisure and resilience are, as it were, two poles: leisure promises free space beyond the everyday, time-accelerated challenges; resilience, which I recognize in my interpretation in the term “survival strategy,” in turn, secures the functioning in everyday life. Beate's interpretation is due to her professional background – she works in a hospital emergency team and is often

12 Interview conducted October 23, 2017.

13 Interview conducted October 26, 2017.

exposed to stressful situations there. In this passage, the interviewee separates her cognitive ability (the brain should “learn to think like a network again”) from physical processes. This is precisely the differentiation that Keller and Meuser assume (2011). Beate herself articulates knowledge about the body and equally describes it as an independent actor that is difficult to control; which, for example, “fires off” survival hormones in an uncontrolled manner and, thus, reacts to social circumstances. She also describes the brain in such a detached way, as if it were detached from her self. This interpretation is based on the working conditions in the hospital, which are perceived as overload, yet Beate does not think about changing them, at least not in this interview passage. The solution here seems to be learning leisure through the activation of body knowledge, as research partner Sandra puts it: “Well, I am firmly convinced and can also say this based on my own experience that we can learn leisure. And that there are also really good ways to learn leisure, and that the best way that I know of is actually through a consciousness or mindfulness practice.”<sup>14</sup>

For her, one element of this mindfulness practice is the nonjudgmental getting in touch with the body in the present moment. A reflective introspection, guided by the question “How does my body feel right now?” Frank adds: “The body is, of course, a good possibility for this because it is always in the here and now, it is neither in the future nor in the past, but always here. And that’s why it is such a good landing place, where we can always reconnect with life as it is happening.”<sup>15</sup>

It is particularly this last metaphorically charged quotation that picks up on a separation into body and mind that has long been mediated in cultural-historical contexts. The aspect of temporality is also clearly addressed here. While the mind is seen to reflect the past and the future, the body – and this is positively marked as the state to be achieved – is radically and exclusively in the immediate present. As an anchor of perception, the body is perceived as always present, always current, and, thus, makes it possible to experience the moment itself.

As a theoretical-conceptual basis of the courses, various concepts of the body are activated and integrated into a coherent narrative by providers and participants: the accelerated body, just like the call to permanently adapt it to the accelerated performance society, becomes a problem and, thus, in need of learning and care. The providers question their courses in a system-critical way, but they, just like the participants, consistently assume a deficient body, while the latter state that the deficits are also reflected in an individual feeling of suffering. Both groups of actors focus on the social circumstances that produce these deficits in the first place.

Countermeasures, as taught in the course, start with the body, i. e. make it the medium, and are simultaneously intended to have an effect on it. The aim of the courses is to no longer ignore or forget the body but rather to make it the focus of attention.

14 Interview conducted October 1, 2017.

15 Interview conducted October 23, 2017.



The body is to be better perceived, understood and taken seriously in its needs through a combination of acquired knowledge about the body and activated knowledge of the body. This is precisely where the social system is not criticized. The symptoms are treated but not their cause. The aim of the leisure courses is to facilitate freedom from acceleration, hectic pace and body oblivion and to offer freedom to relax and get in touch with the body. This experience of leisure time as a possibility to feel the body again goes hand in hand with the possibility of getting to know the body as an instrument for leisure experiences and 'training' it so that the experiences gained in the course can potentially be transferred to everyday life.

### **Conclusion: Leisure without/through/with resilience?**

At first glance, the empirical findings briefly outlined here confirm discourse-analytical research on the entrepreneurial self and the concept of resilience: neither the courses nor the participating actors escape the idea that something must be held up against the present that is experienced as crisis-ridden by making the subjects and especially their own bodies fit and resilient again for the conditions that are perceived as challenges. First of all, this characterizes the subjects and their bodies as fundamentally deficient, and in this field, an undefined past is usually invoked in which there was once a stronger balance between work and recreation and in which there was more time for free development – at least this is what is imagined. The resilience paradigm is also not resolved by critically discussing and classifying it and by specifically not reproducing the logics of self-optimization. So what does a critique that is also grounded in cultural studies look like? The sociologist Stefanie Graefe (2019) assumes that the concept of resilience raises the right questions. If resilience is the wrong answer to the right question about the subject, she asks, then what could be a better answer? (Graefe 2019: 186).

Graefe concludes with the positive hope in the potential of human beings for change (2019). After all, she states, power relations and seemingly overpowering structures are by no means natural. This is precisely what the empirical findings outlined above point to. Although courses that focus on mindfulness, deceleration, work-life balance or leisure reproduce notions of resilience by shifting responsibility solely to the subjects and promising to call upon and activate their powers of resistance against current conditions that are interpreted as challenging, this is structurally based on the fact that the courses draw their economic benefit from the emphasis on deficits and the strengthening of the individual. They originate from the same logics for which they want to offer solutions and particularly successfully translate threatening notions of a deficient life into capital. Nevertheless, they can – whether intentionally or not – trigger reflexive moments that can hold potential for change. The decisive question is here whether specific actions are derived from the sometimes critical reflection of one's own circumstances of life which then do not only mean adaptation but also generate change. Or is the criticism of social structures more of a cosmetic nature because it

initially relieves the burden and suggests that one could change something in one's own way of life without it then leading to further steps?

Whether the experiences of leisure that are intended in the courses can indeed have a transgressive effect, on the other hand, would need to be empirically examined further. The translation of the somewhat artificial course situation into everyday life, in which experiences of acceleration perhaps inextricably radiate their power, may be associated with challenges that make it difficult to overcome habitualized orders of time and concepts of self. In any case, quite a number of our interview partners reported that they had, after all, not succeeded in anchoring what they had learned in their everyday lives. The result is then not a resilient self at all but one that conceives of itself, even more strongly than before, as deficient and largely helpless in the face of social structures.

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