How American college students understand social resilience and navigate towards the future during covid and the movement for racial justice

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis around racial injustice have generated compounded macro-level stressors for American society that negatively impact mental health and wellbeing. We contribute to understanding the impact of these crises by examining the process of developing social resilience, which we conceptualize as a temporally-embedded process of sense-making through which actors activate a sense of dignity, agency, and hope in the face of challenges to sustain wellbeing based on available resources. We interviewed 80 college students (aged 18–23) living in the American Northeast and Midwest before (September 2019–February 2020) and during (June–July 2020) the pandemic to analyze how they make sense of crises, respond to challenges, and project themselves into the future. We compare "privileged" upper-middle class youth who have families with more resources to buffer themselves against growing uncertainty, with "less privileged" youth from lower-middle and working class families. Efforts to achieve a sense of dignity, agency, and hope amidst widespread uncertainty illuminate opportunities and constraints in the process of building social resilience, which take different temporal forms across the two class groups given their experiences and resources.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis around racial injustice have generated compounded macro-level stressors for American society (Wheaton et al., 2013) – accentuating high levels of inequality and social tension, increasing unpredictability (Glynn et al., 2019), and negatively impacting mental health (Stremikis, 2020). Many young adults have found it nearly impossible to determine when, whether, and how they will pursue an education, find a footing in the labor market, search for a partner, and become autonomous adults at a time when anticipating the future is quasi-impossible; when intersubjective interpretations of reality are unstable; and when mass demonstrations lead many to think that "anything is possible" in a context of institutional paralysis. Because exposure to stressors is strongly associated with increased risk of distress among youth (McLaughlin, 2016), it is critical to understand how youth develop resilience to protect their wellbeing in the face of challenges (Höltget et al., 2020).

In contrast to individualistic approaches that view resilience as a personality trait enabling individuals to withstand adversity (e.g., grit), we build on scholarship focused on social resilience – the "capacity of groups of people to sustain and advance their wellbeing in the face of

challenges" (Hall and Lamont, 2013:2). This approach is attentive to the resources that actors have at their disposal to respond to crises. It converges with scholarship that treats resilience as a process, rather than a trait, through which "people manage their lives and make the best of dire circumstances'' (Panter-Brick, 2014:439). The focus on process considers subjective resilience – the various ways people make sense of their context and imagine forging ahead in the face of constraints (Jones, 2019).

We build on this work in two ways. First, we build on the growing focus on personal control in public health (Syme, 1989) to argue that social resilience encapsulates multiple dimensions of wellbeing: the dignity of securing the conditions essential to one's flourishing as a human being (Jacobson, 2007); the agency to exercise one's capacities to the full extent (Sayer, 2011); and the hope to aspire to alternative futures (Hitlin et al., 2015). Second, this paper extends the discussion of resilience as a process by drawing on sociological scholarship on temporal horizons and future projections – addressing calls in the mental health literature to better understand how meaning-making mediates the impact of stress on wellbeing (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010). Temporal landscapes structure how actors perceive the significance and trajectories of events (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) – shaping how actors

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identify crises, construct paths of action to respond to challenges, and project themselves into the future. Future projection is a fundamental element of human agency and hope, as actors envision possible paths of action that can alter their structural environments (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In turn, agency and hope engender a sense of dignity and wellbeing by enabling actors to fulfill their present needs and realize their future potential (Sen, 1999).

Thus, we conceptualize social resilience as a temporally-embedded process of sense-making through which actors activate dignity, agency, and hope to sustain wellbeing in the face of challenges based on available resources (Hall and Lamont, 2013). Building on the extensive literature on social position, experiences of time (Bourdieu, 1979), and mental health (McLeod, 2013), we detail how social resilience unfolds at different temporal scales depending on class background – shaping whether respondents across class perceive challenges as immediate or distant, responses as short or long-term, and alternative futures as materializing in the near or distant future.

We analyze how American college students narrate how they make sense of crises, navigate challenges, and project themselves into the future. This narrative approach complements research mobilizing objective measures of resilience (Panter-Brick et al., 2018) and helps capture how the process unfolds over time (Somers, 1994). Our empirical demonstration rests on interviews with eighty college-educated youth ages 18–23, living in the American Northeast and Midwest, conducted both before (Wave 1) and during (Wave 2) the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 demonstrations for racial justice. To examine variations in building resilience, we focus on forty middle and upper-middle class respondents (whose parents are college-educated professionals and managers) and compare this "privileged" group with a "less privileged" group of forty individuals from lower-middle and working-class families (whose parents have a high school degree or some college and occupy low status/blue collar occupations, or comprise single-parent households in lower-middle class occupations).

We find that respondents across class are deeply concerned with how to improve their personal wellbeing, as well as that of their family, community, and society amidst three interconnected crises: 1) growing inequality and the untenability of the American Dream; 2) polarization and intolerance that limit social connection; and 3) social upheaval and rapid transformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 racial reckoning. Efforts to build social resilience unfold at different temporal scales depending on class background and resources. Cross-class differences emerged in how youth located challenges in time, as well as the responses they developed. While privileged respondents can plan for long-term solutions to build resilience, growing inequality and structural constraints shrink the temporal horizons of the less privileged and focus their resilience strategies in the short-term.

The theoretical section defines social resilience in contrast to individualist approaches. We marry the literature on social resilience and future projections to build our framework of resilience as a temporally-embedded process. The data and methods section detail the empirical case of American college youth. Our findings describe temporal variations in resilience-building across class. We conclude by discussing the opportunities and constraints of resilience.

2. Social resilience as a temporally-embedded process

2.1. Social – not individual – resilience

Popular scholarship on resilience focuses on how individual dispositions – such as grit or self-reliance – allow certain individuals to bounce back in the face of adversity (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Vazsonyi et al., 2019). The emphasis on individual characteristics has been particularly prominent with the diffusion of neoliberal policies promoting self-sufficiency (Brown, 2015; Silva, 2013). Influenced by positive psychology, remedies often focus on intracranial responses (e.g., meditation, mindfulness) and promote an individual culture of healthism

(Cabanas and Illouz, 2019; Davies, 2015) – despite mixed supporting evidence (Singal, 2021). By offering "quick fix" solutions despite enduring inequalities, the individualist approach privileges individual solutions to macro-level stressors (Bourbeau, 2018). It has been criticized for "blaming the victim," as it ignores the resources that make grit possible (Credé, 2018; Ponnock et al., 2020).

A growing cross-disciplinary literature offers three key adjustments to individualistic conceptions of resilience. First, scholars have focused on *social* resilience, or the "capacity of groups of people to sustain and advance their wellbeing in the face of challenges" (Hall and Lamont, 2013:2). This work examines how actors respond to crises by mobilizing cultural, institutional, and social resources (e.g., Bourbeau, 2018; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Obrist et al., 2010; Schoon, 2006; Tierney, 2015). For example, Ungar (2004) defines resilience as the "outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse" (342). The focus on the social rather than the individual acknowledges that resources to protect wellbeing are typically produced by or associated with a group, society, or set of institutions, and that these resources are mobilized in a social context.

Second, scholars increasingly acknowledge that resilience entails multiple dimensions of social, emotional, and mental wellbeing (Höltget et al., 2020). Paradigm shifts in the study of resilience emphasize "wellbeing rather than survival … and the promotion of human dignity rather than mere alleviation of human misery" (Panter-Brick, 2014:438). We focus on three interrelated subjective dimensions of wellbeing: *dignity, agency, and hope.* Despite the important role dignity plays in wellbeing, attention to dignity in health is a recent development (Jacobson, 2007). Sayer (2011) observes that dignity is the capacity to "be in control of oneself, competently and appropriately exercising one's powers" (195), linking the concept to autonomy, agency, and self-command. Following Syme's (1989) observation that "control over one's destiny" is a key determinant of health and wellbeing, the public health literature has variously explored concepts related to agency such as "mastery," "self-efficacy," "locus of control" and others (Whitehead et al., 2016). A recent survey reveals that dignity and agency have an impact on subjective wellbeing comparable to income (Hojman and Miranda, 2018). Closely related to agency, hope also positively impacts psychosocial wellbeing (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010; Hobfoll et al., 2007). Hope is a rope (Desroche, 1979) that enables individuals to aspire to alternative possibilities and espouse a forward-looking orientation within the stress process model (Hitlin et al., 2015), while also guiding behavioral responses to challenges. Hope feeds agency and dignity by reinforcing the belief that present actions can contribute to desired outcomes (Alacovska, 2018) and construct the self as a proactive and consequential actor in conjuring and realizing a future (Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015). In contrast, a lack of resources can detract from dignity, agency, and hope, when social and cultural structures prevent individuals from exercising their capacities to realize their full potential or sustain their wellbeing (Clair et al., 2016). Sen's (1999) theories of "capabilities" similarly suggest that differences in the ability to exercise choice over daily life underly health inequalities.

Finally, rather than an individual attribute, emerging scholarship conceptualizes resilience as a "process that unfolds over the course of human development and socialization" (Panter-Brick, 2014:439) as actors pursue projects, assess challenges and opportunities, and engage with their social world (Lamont et al., 2014). The process of building resilience expresses itself through a range of responses, including creative recombination of resources, adaptation, or collective resistance (Folke, 2006; Luthar et al., 2000; Ryan, 2015). This processual approach is aligned with studies on subjective resilience that examine the different ways actors interpret their experiences, pathways, and conditions for sustaining wellbeing (Jones, 2019). Ignoring the processional quality of social resilience risks conflating people who lack material resources with those who lack social resilience. The symbolic resources necessary for social resilience are dependent on, but irreducible to, material

inequalities (Clair et al., 2016).

Bourbeau (2018) notes that conceptualizing resilience as a process unseats several deep-rooted assumptions embedded in research on the topic. Individualist approaches assume resilience is a positive quality and consequently overlook the possibility of ambiguous or undesirable sociocultural or health outcomes. In addition, individualist approaches position resilience as an individual characteristic that one has more or less of, downplaying the existence of different or gradational responses to stressors. In contrast, conceiving of resilience as a process requires examining a range of interpretations of challenges and adaptive responses that unfold over time, as well as disparities in resources to protect wellbeing – which we will explore across class in our findings. This processual approach helps answer questions such as how, when, and for whom resilience-building works. As such, it exposes the limitations of resilience, which have been overlooked in work theorizing the concept (Panter-Brick, 2021).

2.2. Temporal dimensions of resilience

Pearlin and Bierman (2013) argue that meaning-making functions as an underexplored mediator in the stress process. Intersubjective beliefs and values shape how actors "make sense" of their situation and whether stressful circumstances represent a threat to their wellbeing. Studying resilience as a *process* requires a focus on meaning-making as it unfolds in the course of everyday interactions over time (Lamont et al., 2014) – paying close attention to how actors subjectively experience the temporal dimensions of social life (Abbott, 1997). Resilience can thus be better understood by situating it within the flow of time: Actors make sense of crises that disrupt former routines and create uncertainty compared to the past; construct lines of action that enable them to respond to challenges in the present; and imagine or aspire to alternative possibilities by projecting themselves into the future. Furthermore, the capacity to advance wellbeing depends on actors' perceptions of the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Some actors may see temporal horizons expanding with new possibilities, while others may see them contracting as crises limit their opportunities (Mische, 2009). The ability to navigate towards a positive future provides a sense of agency that feeds dignity and hope (Sayer, 2011). Focusing on time highlights the scale at which actors build resilience: whether actors perceive challenges as imminent or remote, responses as short or long-term, and alternative futures as within reach or beyond one's lifetime based on the resources at their disposal (Durham forthcoming).
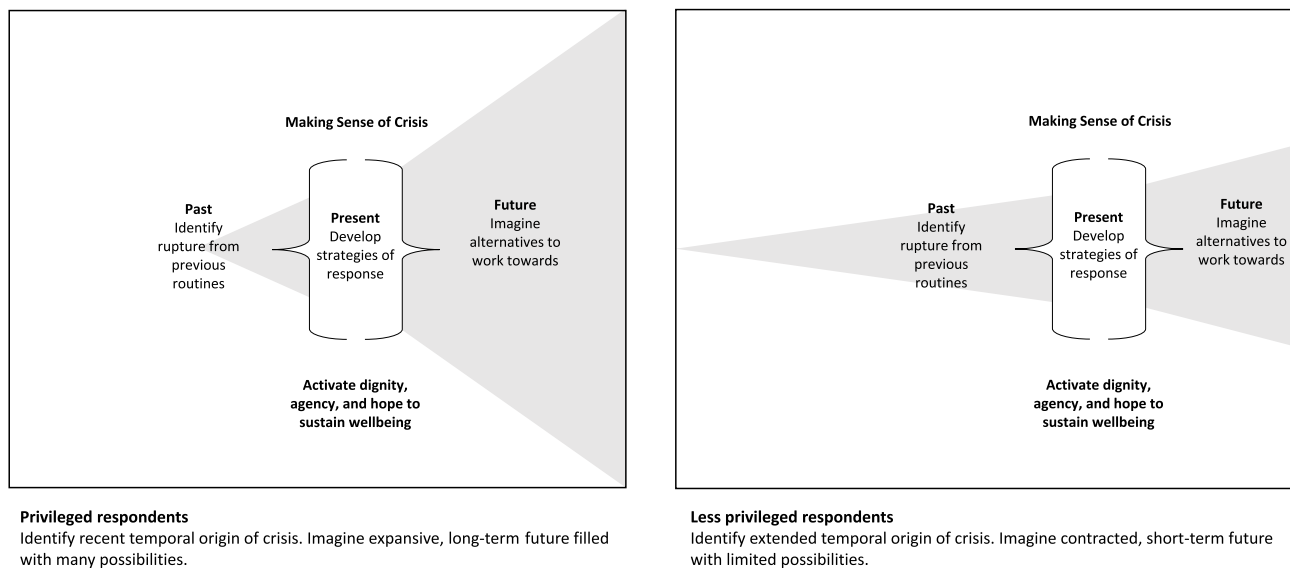
Crises – including "shock" events like the 9/11 terrorist attacks or moments of widespread uncertainty – represent contextual stressors that create rupture from the past, as former worldviews, habits, and routines are thrown into disarray (Bourdieu, 2000; Sewell, 1996; Swidler, 1986; van Dooremalen, 2021; Wagner-Pacifici, 2010). The resulting unpredictability and disruption threaten psychosocial health (Glynn et al., 2019). How actors construct and make sense of crises (Slovic, 1999) depends on where they locate the moment of rupture in time, which shapes how they define the event and imagine it unfolding (Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici, 2021; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). Temporal narratives structure how actors perceive the significance and trajectories of events, which orient their emotional and behavioral responses to stress, projected courses of actions, and imagined alternatives (Ayala-Hurtado, 2021; Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013). How actors interpret emergent crises compared to past challenges shapes how they build resilience: Sendroiu (2021) finds that businesspeople who perceived COVID-19 as similar to crises they previously overcame are more optimistic about their ability to cope than those who viewed the pandemic as completely unprecedented.

In addition to crisis identification, experiences of time also undergird the development of coping responses in the face of challenges, as well as visions of alternative futures towards which to strive. In the classical phenomenological tradition, Schutz (1967) argues that individuals construct action by retrospectively drawing on previously accumulated knowledge about possible paths of action, while prospectively imagining an array of possible future pathways. Agentic human action as a key determinant of health (Syme, 1989) is fundamentally a temporal process in which actors build on past habits, imagine future scenarios, and make judgments about possible trajectories to inform their behavioral responses (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Nonetheless, there is flexibility in how actors organize and visualize their temporal horizons, creating openings for disjuncture and disagreement among actors attempting to coordinate courses of action (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013). Mische (2009), for example, shows how there can be variation in dimensions of future projections, including reach (whether imagined futures extend into the short, middle or long-term), breadth (the range of possible trajectories and outcomes), and expandability (whether actors view future possibilities as expanding or contracting). Regardless of whether these projections actually predict the future, they often influence courses of action and behavioral responses in the present. These variations illuminate subjective differences in how actors respond to challenges and imagine future possibilities – and are thus essential to understanding the process of how people build resilience and sustain wellbeing.

Importantly, actors experience time differently based on access to varying resources. Bourdieu (1979) points to the socially stratifying nature of time – arguing that class background inculcates orientations towards the short and long-term future, which shape how actors evaluate their possibilities and strategies of action within a given context. Accordingly, Mahadeo (2019) examines temporal inequality by class and race, finding that unlike their white upper-middle class counterparts, marginalized teens of color view their temporal horizons to achieve standard benchmarks of success as compressed due to myriad structural challenges. Similarly, Weinberger et al. (2017) argues that members of the upper-middle class experience the future as expansive and full of options, causing them to delay getting married or starting a family. In contrast, working-class individuals may perceive narrower temporal horizons characterized by lack of choice and a sense that institutions do not have their best interests at heart, while adversity decreases their perception of the future as malleable (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019). Thus, the ability to estimate what the future will be and chart an appropriate course of action is heavily informed by structures of resources: Those in more privileged positions enjoy a larger breadth of options and greater ability to plan and control outcomes when navigating challenges, enhancing their ability to work towards a hopeful future in which they feel dignity and agency. These subjective experiences of temporal contraction and expansion in turn affect how actors develop social resilience and sustain wellbeing. Longitudinal studies suggest that low-perceived control in one's environment is a key pathway explaining the relation between lower social position to lessened wellbeing (Orton et al., 2019; Whitehead et al., 2016).

Thus, we conceptualize social resilience as a temporally-embedded process of sense-making that enables actors to activate a sense of dignity, agency, and hope that sustain wellbeing in the face of challenges based on available resources (Hall and Lamont, 2013). We view it as a dynamic process that unfolds across time (Abbott, 1997) as actors identify and make sense of crises (Sendroiu, 2021), develop strategies of action that increase a sense of dignity and agency (Sen, 1999), and imagine alternative futures that feed hope (Frye, 2012). This approach also allows us to examine how class positions and access to resources create different experiences of time, which in turn shape interpretations of crises, possible responses, and alternative futures. Fig. 1 offers an abstracted comparison based on our findings of the temporal interpretations of privileged respondents (who are more likely to identify short-term origins to crises and long-term solutions) and less privileged respondents (who are more likely to identify long-term origins to crises and short-term solutions).

Privileged respondents
Identify recent temporal origin of crisis. Imagine expansive, long-term future filled with many possibilities.

Less privileged respondents
Identify extended temporal origin of crisis. Imagine contracted, short-term future with limited possibilities.

Fig. 1. Comparison of temporally-embedded process of building social resilience among privileged and less privileged respondents.

3. The case study: American college students

Contemporary youth are entering adult life after decades of growing inequality, now magnified by a major economic crisis associated with COVID-19. These circumstances are compounded by increasing political polarization, a hardening of racism and xenophobia (Hout and Maggio, 2020), mobilization around racial injustice, and growing concerns about climate change. Furthermore, they face a mental health crisis associated with neoliberal pressures to engage in the rat-race of "competitive individualism" (Curran and Hill, 2019; Lamont, 2019; Warikoo, 2020). While many have experienced powerlessness and worsening mental health due to COVID-19 (Stremikis, 2020), they have also mobilized en masse against police brutality (Gergen and Cohen, 2020). Although heterogeneous, the media describes young people (colloquially dubbed "Gen Zs") as change-makers who embrace social justice (Jackson et al., 2020; Parker and Igielnik, 2020). Because of such unsettled circumstances at the crossroads of significant societal transformation, contemporary youth constitute a strategic research site (Merton, 1987) for studying social resilience.

Our strategy is not to develop a representative sample, but to engage in theoretical sampling (Small, 2009) to identify a population that helps elucidate the process of building resilience. We interviewed 18- to 23-year-old college students – a population that typically has high expectations of upward mobility associated with obtaining a college degree, which are challenged by the pandemic, growing inequality, and the decline in intergenerational mobility (Ayala-Hurtado, 2021; Chetty et al., 2017). College students represent 51% of 18–21-year-olds in 2019 (Duffin, 2021). We sampled from two regions (the Northeast and Midwest) for greater heterogeneity. Respondents were recruited using snowball sampling from multiple seeds across 32 higher education institutions (including community and liberal art colleges and public and private universities). While recruiting respondents, we did not aim to include an equal proportion of political orientations.

Instead of measuring resilience as an individual attribute, we document subjective resilience through respondent narratives of how they interpret and navigate crises, develop responses, and project themselves into the future (on interviews as a source of information, see Lamont and Swidler, 2014). Narratives capture how individuals make sense of their situation (Polletta, 1998) and are useful to study the temporally-embedded process of resilience-building, as respondents explain how they connect past, present, and future. Their stories allow them to "accomplish crucial tasks such as marking future progress,

interpreting failures and setbacks, and ascribing meaning to their lives" (Silva and Corse, 2018:217). Through narratives, respondents identify opportunities, resist constraints, and imagine alternative futures by drawing on cultural resources (Ewick and Silbey, 2003).

We compare two class groups, the "privileged" and "less privileged," to unveil how differential access to resources enable and constrain the development of social resilience (see Tables A and B in the electronic appendix). The first group includes youth from middle or upper-middle class families who have college-educated parents employed as professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs. They represent half our interviewees in Wave 1 (40 out of 80 individuals) and Wave 2 (23 out of 47 individuals). This group typically enjoys cumulative advantages that enable members to leverage institutional and cultural resources to buffer themselves against growing uncertainty (DiPrete and Eirich, 2006): They can turn to their parents for financial support, move back to their family home for extended periods, hire tutors and therapists to navigate psychological and educational challenges, access valuable internships and job opportunities, etc. (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013). They can also experience distinctive challenges tied to their position, including anxiety fed by parental pressures to succeed (Geisz and Nakashian, 2018), pessimism about their ability to compete for desirable jobs (Bandelj and Lanuza, 2018), or declining mental health due to unachieved expectations (Hitlin et al., 2015).

The second group includes children from lower-middle and working-class families (parents with a high school degree who work as low-status white or blue-collar workers or comprise single-parent households in lower-middle class occupations). They have fewer advantages than privileged youth: They typically work while in college, may not have space at home to study, contribute to paying family bills, etc. (Jack, 2019). Their lack of material resources present compounded challenges but can also make available different cultural tools, such as a sense of community among peers facing similar challenges and narratives about overcoming obstacles, which can expand aspirations for the future (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019).

White students represent slightly less than half of the sample (42%) across the Midwest and Northeast in Wave 1. Twenty-one out of 40 privileged respondents are white, compared to only 13 of the 40 less privileged. In contrast, non-white respondents represent 19 of the 40 privileged and 27 of the 40 less privileged interviewees. Out of the 47 total respondents in Wave 2, 23 were upper-middle class (13 were white); 24 were from lower-middle- and working-class families (6 were white). Since whiteness itself is a resource, less privileged non-whites

are more likely to cumulate disadvantages than their white counterparts (Hagerman, 2018). We do not analyze ethnoracial differences due to space constraints.

We interviewed in two waves: between September 2019 and February 2020 (Wave 1); and in June and July of 2020 (Wave 2), four months into the pandemic. Forty-seven of our original 80 respondents agreed to be re-interviewed. Wave 1 interviews were conducted under conditions of uncertainty associated with growing inequality and a tumultuous presidential election. Wave 2 interviews were conducted under conditions of dramatically increased uncertainty associated with the pandemic and mobilizations against racial injustice and police violence. While we did not originally anticipate conducting a second wave of interviews, we realized during the pandemic that longitudinal data would better illuminate how youth sustain wellbeing amidst uncertainty. Research ethics were approved by Harvard University's Institutional Review Board.

Wave 1 interviews lasted 90 min and explored perceived challenges, resources for navigating stress, sense of agency, and how respondents imagine their future and pathways to goals. Other topics include challenges facing society, criteria of worth and belonging, views concerning the ideal society, as well as vignettes. Wave 2 interviews averaged 20 min, comparing responses from Wave 1 and examining reactions to the pandemic and racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd. Our analysis compares responses over time before and during the pandemic; we also compare responses across class between the privileged and less privileged.

We coded interviews in Nvivo after inductively developing a coding key focused on challenges and responses based on a subset of interviews. Ten percent of interviews were double-coded for intercoder reliability. These codes capture 1) the challenges respondents believe society and their generation face; 2) sources of dignity, agency, and hope that support wellbeing; 3) dreams and objectives for the future; and 4) pathways to address society's challenges. While our analysis is primarily interpretative and draws on interviews, we include frequencies of mentions (in percentages) to identify the relative salience of specific themes over time and across classes.

4. Findings

Fig. 2 presents temporal differences in how interviewees across class say they interpret and respond to three challenges as they seek to build resilience and sustain wellbeing: 1): a "challenge of upward mobility" created by growing inequality and the unattainability of the American Dream; 2) a "challenge of connectivity" fueled by polarization and intolerance; and 2) a "challenge of rapid social change" given the

pandemic and 2020 racial reckoning. In response to the first challenge, most of the privileged value *long-term* career paths that benefit the collective over individual economic rewards, while many of the less privileged say they prioritize *immediate* financial stability to overcome insecurity and support their families. In response to the second challenge, most privileged respondents say they cultivate individual qualities of civility and kindness with the goal of improving social cohesion *over the long-term*, while over half of the less privileged favor uncomfortable learning moments to overcome intolerance *in the present*. In response to the third challenge, the majority of the privileged locate social change in the *long-term future* as they believe they can eventually affect change by occupying influential roles within institutions, while the less privileged are more likely to say they espouse an urgent personal commitment to change in the *here-and-now*.

A) Responding to the Challenge of Upward Mobility

Amidst the breakdown of intergenerational mobility (Chetty et al., 2017), 75% of interviewees criticize the American Dream as untenable and 60% believe economic success is out of reach for their generation both prior to and during the pandemic. This is in line with broader patterns documented by surveys, which find that 78% of Americans agree "it will take the next generation more effort to advance" (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2017). However, each class locates economic challenges in different temporal frames, and responds by either redefining *long-term* career paths or prioritizing *immediate* financial stability to protect their wellbeing.

Privileged respondents in Wave 1 locate the onset of the crisis in recent history, with the emergence of intense competition and growing economic insecurity that they do not expect to surmount even with a college degree (Bandelj and Lanuza, 2018). They connect concerns about soaring student debt and limited job prospects with the inaccessibility of the American Dream (Ayala-Hurtado, 2021; Zaloom, 2019). Abigail, the daughter of a lawyer in New Jersey, shares how worries about financial instability create immense pressure for her generation:

> "This financial crisis is huge. I get nervous everyday thinking about how I'm going to pay off my student loans someday. It's very hard to think about how I'm going to make ends meet … Financial pressures are definitely putting a big burden on people and causing them to work themselves to the core."

As the pandemic amplified growing inequality (Wolff, 2018), privileged respondents in Wave 2 express anxiety about the looming economic impact. Sam, an affluent Midwesterner states: "*There is a large economic crisis that's going to happen due to the pandemic. Like I'm going to*

	Challenge of Upward Mobility		Challenge of Connectivity		Challenge of Rapid Social Change	
	Crisis	*Response*	*Crisis*	*Response*	*Crisis*	*Response*
Privileged Youth *(middle and upper-middle class)*	Short-term temporal identification of crisis	Long-term temporal response	Short-term temporal identification of crisis	Long-term temporal response	Short-term temporal identification of crisis	Long-term temporal response
Less Privileged Youth *(unstable middle class, lower-middle and working class)*	Long-term temporal identification of crisis	Short-term temporal response	Short-term and long-term temporal identification of crisis	Short-term temporal response	Short-term temporal identification of crisis	Short-term temporal response

Fig. 2. Class differences in temporal perceptions of crisis and responses.

be graduating … Into a very small job market. And that does worry me a lot." The financial crisis throws a wrench in their expectations about future career prospects and economic achievement.

In response, many of the privileged advocate "choosing future career paths that benefit others" as an alternative long-term strategy to redefine criteria of achievement despite doubts about their ability to achieve standard benchmarks of economic success. Twice as many say they plan to choose a career path that benefits others compared to the less privileged. Eighty-three percent say they have a positive view of ambition and success if geared towards collective advancement. They couch prestigious and lucrative careers, such as physician, as valuable because they "help others." Before and even more so during the pandemic, in line with the post-materialist values thesis (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), many ascribe moral value to rejecting financial pursuits – 52% of the privileged embrace anti-materialism compared to 40% of the less privileged. Camille, an affluent Asian-American East Coaster explains: *"My family have instilled in me to not necessarily strive for material things in life, but strive for what you can contribute and how you feel as a person."* In the face of a mobility crisis, expanding definitions of success focused on communal contribution help privileged youth protect their mental health and cultivate dignity, agency, and hope about their future career paths.

While the privileged describe the financial crisis as recent and looming, the less privileged depict it as part of a mid-to long-term pattern of inequality and financial insecurity. When asked about society's greatest challenges in Wave 1, 89% of the less privileged mention "growing inequality" – the most frequent answer for this group – compared to 56% for the privileged respondents. Likewise, in Wave 2, 64% of the less privileged compared to only 20% of the privileged describe perceptions of growing inequality as a major challenge. Enrique, a working-class respondent from suburban Chicago, describes inequality as a *"deep-rooted issue. [The pandemic] is putting the spotlight on what we already knew was there."* For many, this challenge extends far into the future with no foreseeable end. Enrique goes on to say, *"I'd like to see [the future] being good but in reality, something like 1% of the world's population holds like 90% of its wealth. Those are definitely breeding grounds for it to get worse before it gets better."* For the less privileged, growing inequality is tied not only to a sense of struggle and distress in their personal lives, but to successive crises that progressively render the American Dream inaccessible to themselves and their family (as compared to the economic boom following World War II). Many say they observe material hardships in their kin network, neighborhood, or community. Aaron, a working-class Chicagoan, complains about the lack of dignity caused by the gap between the rich and the poor; the 2008 recession amplified this growing chasm and the country's inability to provide a more equitable economic distribution:

> *"Working-class individuals are pretty resilient people. They're able to pay bills and put food on the table …. But 2008 was a very rough year for me and my family. A lot of people were suffering, but rich people were thriving. And I thought that's messed up. Living in the richest country, we can barely take care of our own."*

In the face of blocked mobility, the less privileged stress the urgent need to overcome economic struggles. For Frank, the son of Ecuadorian immigrants: "*[Financial success] is very important. I can't be working day in and day out and not have enough for myself. I just don't want to struggle anymore."* Fewer reject materialism narratives compared to the privileged, and more describe economic stability as an important criterion of success (60% of the less privileged compared to 38% of privileged respondents). In response to long-term growing inequality, East Coaster Deja defines success as *"Being able to provide for myself and my family. Because there are times where people can't, so that means you're disappointing or letting someone down. But being stable, and being able to provide, I feel like is successful because you're giving back."* Prioritizing financial stability and the ability to support their families provides a route to agency, dignity, and hope for improved conditions.

B) Responding to the Challenge of Connectivity

Respondents identify a second crisis fed by lack of cohesion, racial tension, and political polarization. In Wave 1, 66% of interviewees identify growing polarization, atomization, and lack of social solidarity as a challenge. The increased isolation created by the pandemic (Casselman and Koeze, 2021) and negative impact on mental health heightens the importance of social embeddedness in Wave 2, with 80% of respondents expressing an appreciation for empathy, cohesion, and common purpose. While both class groups worry about growing polarization and intolerance, they identify different historical roots, future trajectories, and temporal responses for the crisis: the privileged say they cultivate individual qualities of civility and kindness to improve empathy and cohesion over the *long-term*, while the less privileged say they believe uncomfortable confrontations can eliminate intolerance in the *present*.

Prior to the pandemic, the privileged describe polarization as a recent crisis magnified by social media and the 2016 presidential election. When asked about society's current challenges, Jasmine from Connecticut responds*: "The political climate that we're at. The last four years … Just made room for a lot of division."* In Wave 1, 72% of privileged respondents list polarization as the most salient challenge facing society (compared to 60% of the less privileged, who also view polarization as a major challenge). In Wave 2, some tie polarization to racial tension and a lack of coordinated response to the pandemic, bemoaning the emergence of a "political war." In particular, privileged respondents are concerned about a recent decline in national unity and social cohesion – mentioned twice as often by the privileged as the less privileged. Gabe, from a wealthy Chicago suburb, laments the lack of cohesion but believes there is still time to intervene: "*I just don't know why we can't live in cohesion as one nation. It pains me that there's a lot of bitterness and animosity. A lot of differences can be overcome with more understanding and empathy. . . . But the jury's still out, we could fix the issue at any point."*

In general, upper-middle class respondents are optimistic about their capacity to improve tolerance and express hope in a more unified future. Like Gabe, they believe that cultivating individual qualities like understanding and empathy can improve social connection. Sixty-five percent mention focusing on kindness, empathy, and civility, compared to 45% of the less privileged. Promoting positivity through small-scale interpersonal relations is framed as a political project that may gradually reduce division and intolerance over time. Sam from Massachusetts describes his approach to social change as "*just spreading a general idea of positivity and happiness.*" Similarly, Rosie, a privileged white Midwesterner, explains how her actions radiate outward: *"I try to promote positivity, love people as they are. If I can do that on a small scale, hopefully that can spread and just be like a chain reaction."* These individualized notions of political engagement reinforce a sense of agency and hope to create change over time among privileged respondents.

The majority of the less privileged also identify polarization as a significant crisis. While some view it as a recent emergence, others describe the crisis as ever-present. Take Morgan from rural Minnesota, who sees the crisis as eternal and fed by human nature:

> *"It's been since the beginning. It's just human nature … They want what they want, and may not want what another person wants. So it's hard to find the middle ground … I feel like it's always going to be a problem that we're going to have to work on forever."*

Similarly, Sofi, a lower-middle class Northeasterner, ties the crisis to structural inequalities and views a longer-term trajectory compared to privileged respondents: "*A lot of what we're struggling with now is leftovers from the things that past generations struggled with like racism and classism. There's just a lot of big structural inequalities."*

In response, the less privileged also promote interpersonal solutions

that feed their sense of agency and dignity, but they are skeptical of civility and kindness as long-term tools for future change compared to the privileged – especially amidst the racial reckoning during Wave 2 interviews. Some recognize that while "being a kind human" lays the foundation for a better society, kindness alone cannot produce justice or collective wellbeing. Rachel, a working-class Asian-American Chicagoan, explains:

> "Love, kindness, and respect are important. But in order to solve inequities or racism, we need more than that. That can't be a message we say to each other. Everyone genuinely has to collectively speak out and do [their] part in helping [to] dismantle racism and other injustices."

Instead, 63% of the less privileged in Wave 1 (compared to 33% of the privileged) feel hopeful and agentic about increasing dignity and connectivity through "tough conversations" that challenge stereotypes. Some opt occasionally for confrontational micro-interactions ("calling out" or "speaking out") that demand more immediate ideological shifts; others derive hope from creating spaces where people can better understand each other's struggles. Richard from Massachusetts hopes to increase dignity for all by weakening social hierarchies through learning moments, "*exposure to people of different cultures and identities … it really cuts down on the stereotyping, the biases that form and makes it easier to become more accepting.*" Deja, a Black working-class Bostonian, explains how these moments often produce discomfort: "*Creating a space for these conversations to happen [requires] people to learn to be uncomfortable. If you're always [in] your comfort zone, you're not going to get out of that same mindset.*" Thus, in contrast to the long-term, gradual approach of civility espoused by the privileged, the less privileged are more likely to view uncomfortable learning moments as a necessary strategy to challenge entrenched preconceptions in the here-and-now. Note that the less privileged sample includes more non-white individuals, many of whom regularly face racism in the course of everyday life; such experiences, which came to a head during the 2020 racial reckoning, may warrant in their eyes a more confrontational approach. Likewise, the few privileged respondents who mentioned uncomfortable learning moments come from racialized or marginalized groups.

C) Responding to the Challenge of Rapid Social Change

Interviewees believe they are living in a period of intense social change: 89% of Wave 1 respondents mention a desire for social change and 45% of Wave 2 respondents spontaneously mention the "likelihood of change" in interviews. Furthermore, they repeatedly mobilize a cohort narrative of "Gen Zs as activists and change-makers" (Filipovic, 2020; Parker and Igielnik, 2020). Mentioned by 74% of all respondents (among the highest frequency codes for both sub-samples in Waves 1 and 2), this narrative shapes how they believe they can and should contribute to social change (Zilberstein et al., 2021). This conjunction of openness to social change and uncertainty caused by life-altering events is conducive to imagining alternative futures, which play an important role in building social resilience; to see the future as full of possibilities is essential to the cultivation of hope and agency that feeds wellbeing (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010). While both class groups interpret the crisis of social change as short-term, they frame their contributions to change using different temporal scales: The privileged locate social change in the *long-term future* as they believe they will eventually occupy roles of influence within institutions, while the less privileged say they promote an urgent personal commitment to participate in change in the *here-and-now*.

Privileged respondents mainly describe the crisis of social change as a present challenge of uncertainty that will run its course, but not extend into their long-term futures. Cumulative advantages help buffer the upper-middle class from the direct ramifications of overlapping crises. While the looming financial and mobility crisis threatens their hopes of economic achievement, the uncertainty of rapid social change due to the

pandemic and 2020 racial reckoning is not viewed as personally disruptive because respondents are able to develop contingency plans (Nowotny, 2015). Karolena, a privileged white East Coaster, explains: "*My way of coping is planning or over-planning for the future … so I come up with multiple cases … figuring out how I can get what I was planning for in the future just in a slightly different way.*" Multiple privileged respondents describe themselves as "lucky" and felt minimally affected by disruptions caused by the pandemic. John, a Northeasterner, reflects: "*It's been crazy. But I think I've been one of the lucky ones. Both my parents have been able to work from home and I've been able to do classes and a summer job remotely … In terms of the impact on my life, it hasn't been that bad.*" While the crisis of social change and indeterminacy is "crazy," many of the privileged experience it as temporary with minimal effects on their future hopes and goals.

The privileged voice long-term responses to the crisis of social change – describing their approaches as hopeful, progressive, and cumulative throughout their lifetimes rather than sudden, disruptive, or transformative. Dean, an upper-middle-class Black student from Massachusetts, expresses steady hope in American progress:

> "We're headed in the right direction … We as Americans are having more open discussions … and accepting one another … and appreciating the diversity of our nation. I think we're heading to a good place. It's very gradual but I think it's a good place."

The privileged emphasize changing their personal orientations towards a slowly changing world to feel optimistic and agentic. Sam from Massachusetts explains: "*Part of my personality is to stay positive. I never look at something and say 'It's all over.' I say 'How can we fix it and how can I get better from here?'*" This group is more likely to point to institutions, such as education and government, as crucial tools for social change in the long-term (mentioned by 83% and 65% respectively). The privileged feel connected to these institutions and believe they will occupy an influential social role one day. Northeasterner Christine explains her goal to eventually occupy a position of power within institutions to contribute to social change: "*You have to work within the system to change it. Sometimes I feel like I'm a participant in a system that's unequal. But at least for me, I feel I have to be in a position to make change first.*" By imagining themselves in positions of influence, they maintain a sense of agency and hope to achieve both personal and broad social goals over their lifetimes.

The less privileged also locate the crisis of uncertainty and rapid social change in the short-term, but for different reasons. On the one hand, the less privileged interpret the crisis as more acute and disruptive, as they have fewer resources at their disposal to buffer themselves from challenges. On the other hand, the less privileged situate current challenges within a personal history of hardship, as they live "among crises" (Sendroiu, 2021). Aaron, a working-class respondent, says he draws on previous experiences of uncertainty when he dropped out of high school to help him navigate stressful disruptions caused by the pandemic; he believes that his hard work and dedication will shepherd him into a better future: "*It's not my first rodeo. Things are always about to happen. But as long as you put in the work, there's always a better path.*" Past ability to overcome challenges gives the less privileged a sense of hope and agency to withstand the current moment and mitigate stressors.

Rather than waiting for uncertainty to run its course, the less privileged are more likely to express agency and hope that feeds resilience through a desire to take direct action, as many refer to an urgent sense of personal commitment to social change in the "here-and-now." Gabriella, a Black Midwesterner from a lower-middle-class family, explains this sense of urgency in reference to the activism spurred by BLM: "*People wouldn't do this work if they didn't think things would get better. You have no choice. I mean, things can't stay the same.*" In Wave 1 and even more so in Wave 2, a "sense of duty or obligation to do my part" and a "personal responsibility to speak out against racism" were mentioned most

frequently by members of this group (41% of the less privileged vs. 16% of the privileged). Accordingly, 56% of the less privileged named progressive social movements as an effective pathway for social change and 54% mentioned attending a BLM protest (compared to 30% and 40%, respectively, of the privileged). Jennifer, a Black working-class respondent from Massachusetts, reiterates that grass-roots efforts are the most effective strategy to promote a better future:

> *"Definitely [I believe in] the bottom up. The top matters in terms of overall attention of America as a whole. But I think the real change does come from the community. It's the people in the communities who care about making changes in communities."*

While the privileged also participate in social protests, they point to institutions as the most productive avenue for social change. In contrast, the less privileged more frequently mention a need to radically revolutionize and immediately overhaul institutions in Wave 2. Rada, a working-class Iraqi respondent from Michigan, describes her drastic shift in perspective amidst the racial reckoning of 2020: "*[The system] needs to be destroyed from the bottom. We need a revolution … I don't believe in new laws being passed. I truly don't trust any of it anymore.*" Rada's response, which expresses a deep skepticism of incremental change and a need for radical transformation of social structures, contrasts with the gradual approach of working within institutions promoted by privileged respondents.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper shows how differences in class position of privileged and less privileged American college students structure how they interpret crises, develop responses, and project themselves into the future. Rather than an individual attribute, we frame social resilience as the subjective, temporally-embedded process of making sense of challenges and possible courses of action to sustain wellbeing.

Both the privileged and less privileged worry about macrocontextual stressors including decreasing attainability of the American Dream, growing intolerance and division, and rapid social change. Amidst these challenges, their efforts to find dignity, agency, and hope to sustain wellbeing unfold across different temporal scales. The privileged have more resources to plan and control outcomes (Bourdieu, 2000) and more frequently adopt long-term solutions via future career plans and institutional influence. In contrast, growing inequality, disappointment in institutions (Weinberger et al., 2017), and structural constraints shrink the temporal horizons of the less privileged. They focus on the here-and-now, prioritizing short-term career stability, confronting intolerance through uncomfortable learning moments as a political strategy, and pointing to progressive social movements as a vehicle for radical social change. These findings complement work showing that privileged youth feel more efficacy engaging with formal political institutions than the less privileged (Klemenčič and Park, 2018), as well as public health research that connects social position and mental health outcomes through perceptions of control and agency (Orton et al., 2019; Whitehead et al., 2016).

Because class groups follow contrasting pathways to activate dignity, agency, and hope in the face of similar challenges, they promote solutions that may be at odds. While respondents across class say they care about empathy and diversity, the privileged favor civility and kindness as tools to overcome division and may perceive the uncomfortable, politicized micro-interactions favored by the latter as overly confrontational. Furthermore, the privileged say they promote professional projects that serve society over individual materialism – though they are more likely to end up in stable well-paid occupations than the less privileged (Cech, 2021). By not embracing the same career orientations and personal values of civility, the less privileged express their cultural distance from upper-middle class projects in which they cannot participate given their more precarious situations (Bourdieu, 1979).

Paradoxically, responses defined by the privileged as inclusive are less within reach for those with fewer resources. Future research should investigate the implications of contrasting coping strategies between groups with different resources for social resilience.

Given our focus on subjective experiences of building social resilience, we propose a general analytical framework, but do not provide evidence of a one-to-one correspondence between conditions and increases in wellbeing. Because we focus on resilience as a process rather than an attribute, we do not demonstrate how changes in orientation toward the future build in a stepwise fashion toward greater resilience. We do not make direct causal claims but focus on the temporal process of building social resilience. While this paper focuses on dignity, agency, and hope as dimensions of wellbeing, future research should examine how actors mobilize other social, cultural, and material resources to navigate adversity. Additionally, this paper only considers the impact of class on resilience; future research should explore various intersectional identities and resources. Future comparative work should consider how these conditions inform different experiences and responses across contexts.

CRediT author statement

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114890.

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