

Journal Acil of Psychological, Educational and Social Studies

Issn: 2830-8891

The journal is an international periodical issued by the Research and Studies
Laboratory in Human and Society Issues

University Center Aflou

**Learned Helplessness in a Capitalist Context: Impact on Mental Health and
Resilience Strategies**

MADI AMAZIGH*

Bejaia university (Algeria), Madiamazigh@outlook.fr

Date of send: 26 / 08 / 2024

date of acceptance: 04 / 09 /2024

Date of Publication: 20/12/2024

Madi amazigh

Abstract :

This theoretical study examines the intricate relationship between capitalism and learned helplessness, highlighting its impact on mental health and the role of resilience as a counteracting force. Capitalism, characterized by economic competition and social fragmentation, often leads to conditions that foster learned helplessness—a psychological state where individuals feel powerless to change their circumstances. This phenomenon, first conceptualized by Seligman, is exacerbated by economic precarity, intense performance pressures, and social isolation, all prevalent in capitalist societies. The study explores how these factors contribute to psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and depression, and draws parallels between the Marxist concept of alienation and learned helplessness. It also critiques the limitations of existing resilience theories when applied to structural issues inherent in capitalism. Resilience, both at the individual and community levels, is presented as a vital mechanism to combat the negative psychological effects of capitalism. The study discusses the importance of social support, community engagement, and collective efficacy in fostering resilience. However, it also acknowledges the challenges in addressing deep-seated systemic problems through individual resilience alone. Ultimately, the study calls for a more integrated approach, combining theoretical insights from psychology, sociology, and economics to better understand and address the mental health challenges posed by capitalism. It suggests that future research should focus on developing comprehensive strategies that include both individual and structural interventions to enhance psychological well-being in capitalist societies.

Key words : Capitalism ;Learned Helplessness; Mental Health; Resilience ;Alienation.

ملخص

تدرس هذه الدراسة النظرية العلاقة المعقدة بين الرأسمالية والجمود المتعلم، مسلطة الضوء على تأثيره على الصحة العقلية ودور المرونة كقوة مضادة. الرأسمالية، التي تتميز بالتنافس الاقتصادي والتفتت الاجتماعي، تؤدي غالبًا إلى ظروف تعزز الجمود المتعلم—حالة نفسية يشعر فيها الأفراد بعدم القدرة على تغيير ظروفهم. هذه الظاهرة، التي صاغها سيلجمان لأول مرة، تتفاقم بسبب التهديدات الاقتصادية والضغوط الشديدة للأداء والعزلة الاجتماعية، والتي تعتبر شائعة في المجتمعات الرأسمالية. تستكشف الدراسة كيف تسهم هذه العوامل في الضيق النفسي، بما في ذلك التوتر والقلق والاكتئاب، وتجذب أوجه التشابه بين مفهوم الاغتراب الماركسي والجمود المتعلم. كما تنتقد الدراسة قيود النظريات الحالية للمرونة عند تطبيقها على القضايا الهيكلية المتأصلة في الرأسمالية. المرونة، سواء على المستوى الفردي أو المجتمعي، تُعرض كآلية حيوية لمكافحة الآثار النفسية السلبية للرأسمالية. تناقش الدراسة أهمية الدعم الاجتماعي والمشاركة المجتمعية والفعالية الجماعية في تعزيز المرونة. ومع ذلك، تعترف الدراسة أيضًا بالتحديات في معالجة المشكلات النظامية العميقة من خلال المرونة الفردية فقط. في نهاية المطاف، تدعو الدراسة إلى نهج متكامل أكثر، يجمع بين الرؤى النظرية من علم النفس وعلم الاجتماع والاقتصاد لفهم ومعالجة التحديات الصحية النفسية التي تفرضها الرأسمالية بشكل أفضل. وتقترح أن البحث المستقبلي يجب أن يركز على تطوير استراتيجيات شاملة تشمل التدخلات الفردية والهيكلية لتعزيز الرفاهية النفسية في المجتمعات الرأسمالية.

كلمات مفتاحية : الرأسمالية ;الجمود المتعلم ;الصحة العقلية ;المرونة ;الاغتراب.

Introduction

Modern capitalism, characterized by private ownership, market-driven economies, and an overarching focus on profit maximization, shapes not only economic systems but also social interactions and individual psychology. This system thrives on competition, consumerism, and the relentless pursuit of growth, often at the expense of social cohesion and individual well-being. While it has led to technological advancements and improved living standards, capitalism has also deepened economic inequalities, fostered social fragmentation, and created psychological stress as individuals are pressured to conform to market demands and consumerist ideals (Fisher, 2009). The evolution of capitalism, from its early mercantile roots to its current neoliberal phase, has had profound implications for social structures and the psyche of individuals. During the Industrial Revolution, the rise of factories and rapid urbanization disrupted traditional community ties and imposed new forms of labor discipline, leading to a sense of alienation among workers. Karl Marx's critique highlighted the estrangement of individuals from their labor, controlled by capitalists who dictated production terms (Marx, 1867). As capitalism evolved, particularly in the 20th century, the shift toward a consumer-oriented society further altered social dynamics. Identities became increasingly tied to consumption patterns, with success measured by material acquisition rather than communal or spiritual fulfillment. The late 20th century's neoliberal turn, characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the erosion of social safety nets, intensified these trends, making economic precarity and psychological strain more pervasive (Harvey, 2005).

In this context, Martin Seligman's concept of learned helplessness becomes particularly relevant. Developed in the 1960s, learned helplessness refers to a state where individuals, after being exposed to repeated

uncontrollable adverse events, come to believe they are powerless to change their circumstances, leading to passivity and disengagement (Seligman, 1975). Initially observed in animal experiments, learned helplessness was later applied to human behavior, particularly in understanding chronic stress and depression. In humans, this phenomenon is associated with feelings of powerlessness and the internalization of the belief that actions have no impact on outcomes. Learned helplessness is applicable in various domains, including education and the workplace. In education, students who experience repeated failures may believe they are inherently incapable of success, leading to academic disengagement and diminished self-esteem. In the workplace, employees subjected to persistent stress, unclear expectations, or lack of control over their tasks may develop learned helplessness, resulting in decreased motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

The relationship between capitalism and learned helplessness is critical in contemporary psychology. Capitalism, especially in its neoliberal form, often creates environments where individuals feel trapped by economic circumstances, job insecurity, and the constant pressure to succeed in a highly competitive marketplace. Mark Fisher argues in "Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?" that the pervasive influence of capitalist ideology fosters a psychological condition akin to learned helplessness. Individuals internalize the belief that systemic change is impossible, leading to widespread resignation and passive acceptance of the status quo (Fisher, 2009). This sense of helplessness is reinforced not only by economic factors but also by cultural and ideological mechanisms that perpetuate the notion that capitalism is the only viable system. This belief, deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness, discourages individuals from imagining or striving for alternatives, thus sustaining the very system that constrains them. Understanding capitalism's impact on learned helplessness is crucial for modern psychology, as it provides insight into the broader socio-economic determinants of mental health. Examining how

capitalist structures contribute to feelings of powerlessness and disengagement allows psychologists to better address the root causes of mental health issues like depression and anxiety, which are prevalent in contemporary society (Fisher, 2009; Seligman, 1975). This understanding is essential for developing therapeutic interventions and social policies that empower individuals and promote resilience in the face of systemic challenges. Addressing the psychological effects of capitalism requires interventions at the individual level and a critical examination of the socio-economic conditions perpetuating learned helplessness on a societal scale. Only by acknowledging and confronting these underlying issues can meaningful change be achieved, both in the mental health of individuals and in the broader social structures that influence their lives.

1. Capitalisme et Santé Mentale

A. Théories sur le Capitalisme et la Psychologie

Critical theories of capitalism, particularly those from the Frankfurt School, provide an in-depth analysis of how capitalist structures influence psychological well-being. The thinkers associated with this school, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, explored the psychological implications of living in a capitalist society, focusing on the ways in which this economic system fosters alienation, conformity, and a sense of disillusionment. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) is pivotal in understanding how capitalism commodifies culture and reduces individuals to mere consumers within the "culture industry." They argued that under capitalism, cultural products are produced not for their inherent artistic value, but for their ability to generate profit. This shift leads to a passive consumption of culture, where individuals lose the capacity for critical thinking and self-reflection, essential components of psychological well-being. The commodification process fosters a sense of alienation as individuals become disconnected from the cultural products they consume and, more broadly, from

their own creative potential (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) further critiques the psychological effects of capitalism by arguing that advanced capitalist societies create a "one-dimensional" individual who is unable to think beyond the confines of consumerist ideology. Marcuse posits that the capitalist system promotes false needs—those that are artificially created by marketing and consumer culture—which distract individuals from recognizing their true needs, such as freedom, self-expression, and genuine social connections. This manufactured conformity stifles critical thought and creativity, leading to a state of psychological oppression where individuals are unaware of their own subjugation (Marcuse, 1964). Erich Fromm, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), delves into the paradox of freedom within capitalist societies. Fromm argues that while capitalism promotes the idea of individual freedom, it simultaneously creates conditions that lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety. The pressure to conform to societal norms and achieve material success can result in a loss of true autonomy and meaningful relationships. Fromm's concept of "escape mechanisms" highlights how individuals, overwhelmed by the burden of freedom, retreat into conformity, authoritarianism, or destructiveness, all of which have detrimental effects on mental health (Fromm, 1941). The Frankfurt School's critique underscores the complex relationship between capitalism, individualism, and psychological well-being. Capitalism's emphasis on competition, materialism, and individual success often leads to a deep sense of alienation and existential discontent. The systemic pressures to conform and achieve can erode individual autonomy, creativity, and genuine social connections, all of which are crucial for maintaining mental health. By revealing how economic structures shape psychological experiences, these critical theories challenge the notion that mental health issues can be understood independently of their socio-economic context.

B . theories on Capitalism and Psychology

The relationship between capitalism and psychology has been the subject of extensive analysis, particularly within the framework of critical theory. Scholars from the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Erich Fromm, have been instrumental in exploring how capitalist structures influence individual and collective psychological well-being. These theorists argue that capitalism fosters a culture of individualism and competition, which undermines social cohesion and leads to feelings of alienation and isolation.

Adorno and Horkheimer, in their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, suggest that the capitalist system commodifies all aspects of life, including human relationships and individual identity. This commodification process strips individuals of their autonomy, reducing them to mere consumers within the capitalist machine. The result is a pervasive sense of alienation, where individuals feel disconnected from themselves, others, and the broader society.

Erich Fromm, particularly in *The Sane Society*, further elaborates on this by linking capitalist individualism with psychological distress. Fromm argues that the emphasis on personal success and material wealth in capitalist societies creates a hollow sense of self, where individuals measure their worth by external standards rather than intrinsic values. This externalization of self-worth leads to anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of inadequacy, as individuals constantly strive to meet unattainable societal expectations.

The link between capitalism, individualism, and psychological well-being is also explored by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch describes how the capitalist emphasis on competition and success fosters a narcissistic culture, where individuals are obsessed with their image and status. This narcissism, however, masks deep-seated insecurities and a sense of

powerlessness, as individuals are trapped in a cycle of endless consumption and self-promotion.

Byung-Chul Han, in *The Burnout Society*, expands on these ideas by discussing how the neoliberal capitalist system not only alienates individuals but also exhausts them. Han argues that the relentless pursuit of productivity and efficiency in capitalist societies leads to burnout, a state of chronic physical and mental exhaustion. This burnout is not merely an individual issue but a systemic problem rooted in the capitalist demand for perpetual growth and self-optimization.

These theorists collectively highlight how capitalism's structural characteristics—its emphasis on competition, commodification, and individualism—undermine psychological well-being. The constant pressure to succeed and conform to capitalist ideals leads to widespread mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of alienation. This analysis provides a critical lens through which to understand the psychological impacts of capitalism and underscores the need for alternative social structures that prioritize human well-being over economic gain.

c. Psychological Impact of Capitalism

The psychological impacts of capitalism are profound and multifaceted, affecting individuals across various dimensions of their lives. One of the most significant effects is the pervasive sense of stress and anxiety that arises from the pressures of capitalist society. As Mark Fisher discusses in *Capitalist Realism*, the relentless demands for productivity, success, and economic stability in a capitalist system create an environment where individuals are constantly under stress. This stress is exacerbated by economic precarity, where individuals face insecurity in their jobs, housing, and financial situations, leading to chronic anxiety and depression.

Fisher argues that the capitalist system perpetuates a sense of hopelessness and inevitability, where individuals feel that there is no alternative to the current economic order. This sense of inevitability contributes to what Fisher terms "reflexive impotence," where individuals recognize the problems inherent in the system but feel powerless to change them. This powerlessness leads to a resignation and acceptance of the status quo, further entrenching the psychological effects of capitalism. Economic inequality, as discussed by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in *The Spirit Level*, plays a significant role in exacerbating these psychological issues. Wilkinson and Pickett demonstrate that in societies with high levels of economic inequality, there is a corresponding increase in mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. The authors argue that inequality undermines social trust and cohesion, leading to feelings of social isolation and psychological distress.

Erich Fromm's analysis in *The Sane Society* provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how capitalist structures contribute to alienation, a key psychological consequence of the system. Fromm argues that in a capitalist society, individuals are alienated from their work, their fellow human beings, and even from themselves. This alienation arises because individuals are reduced to mere cogs in the economic machine, valued only for their productivity rather than their intrinsic humanity. The result is a profound sense of disconnection and meaninglessness, which manifests in various forms of psychological distress.

Karl Marx's concept of alienation, as outlined in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, provides a critical lens through which to understand the psychological impact of capitalist labor. Marx argues that under capitalism, workers are alienated from the products of their labor, from the labor process itself, from their fellow workers, and from their own humanity. This

alienation creates a sense of powerlessness and psychological distress, as individuals are unable to find fulfillment or meaning in their work.

The concept of learned helplessness, as explored by Martin Seligman and colleagues in *Learned Helplessness: A Theory for the Age of Personal Control*, also provides a useful framework for understanding the psychological impact of capitalism. Seligman's theory suggests that when individuals perceive that they have no control over their circumstances, they develop a sense of helplessness and resignation. In a capitalist context, where economic and social forces often feel overwhelming and uncontrollable, individuals may experience learned helplessness, leading to depression and a diminished sense of agency. The psychological impacts of capitalism—stress, anxiety, depression, alienation, and learned helplessness—are deeply interconnected and rooted in the structural characteristics of the system. By understanding these impacts, we can begin to address the systemic issues that contribute to widespread psychological distress in capitalist societies and explore alternative models that prioritize human well-being.

2. Factors Contributing to Learned Helplessness in a Capitalist Context

A. Economic Precarity

Economic precarity refers to the state of financial instability, job insecurity, and uncertainty about one's economic future. In the modern capitalist context, this precarity has become increasingly pervasive, deeply impacting individuals' mental health.

Guy Standing (2011), in his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, explores the emergence of a new social class known as the "precariat," characterized by chronic insecurity and unstable employment. Standing argues that the rise in economic precarity is a result of neoliberal transformations, where labor markets have become increasingly flexible, leading to unstable

working conditions and a lack of long-term security. This financial instability fosters a sense of learned helplessness among individuals, as they feel powerless to improve their economic situation or secure a stable future. The continuous exposure to economic stressors without the means to control or mitigate them can lead to psychological distress, anxiety, and depression, ultimately contributing to a pervasive sense of helplessness.

David Harvey (2005), in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, examines the evolution of neoliberalism and its effects on economic inequalities and working conditions. Harvey discusses how the neoliberal emphasis on market deregulation and privatization has exacerbated economic instability, particularly for workers in precarious jobs. This economic precarity, according to Harvey, creates a fertile ground for learned helplessness, as individuals face increasing difficulties in achieving financial stability. The constant threat of unemployment and the erosion of social safety nets leave individuals feeling vulnerable and powerless, reinforcing the cycle of helplessness and diminishing their mental well-being.

B. Competition and Performance

The capitalist emphasis on competition and performance has significant psychological implications, particularly in fostering a culture of relentless self-optimization and achievement. This pressure to perform can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and a sense of inadequacy, all of which contribute to learned helplessness.

Alain Ehrenberg (1998), in his book *La Fatigue d'être soi: Dépression et société* (*The Weariness of the Self: Depression and Society*), explores the link between the culture of performance in modern capitalism and the rise in depressive disorders. Ehrenberg argues that the constant demand for individual success and self-improvement places immense psychological pressure on

individuals. As people struggle to meet these high expectations, they may experience feelings of failure and inadequacy, leading to a state of learned helplessness. The pervasive belief that success is solely the result of individual effort, combined with the reality of systemic barriers, creates a disconnect that fosters helplessness when individuals cannot meet societal standards.

Byung-Chul Han (2015), in *The Burnout Society*, critiques neoliberalism and the culture of performance, highlighting how the constant demand for productivity and success leads to a society of exhaustion. Han argues that this relentless pursuit of achievement pushes individuals beyond their limits, resulting in burnout and a diminished capacity for self-regulation. The psychological toll of this performance pressure is significant, as it erodes individuals' sense of agency and contributes to feelings of helplessness. As individuals become overwhelmed by the demands of continuous self-optimization, they may begin to feel that their efforts are futile, reinforcing a sense of powerlessness and contributing to a broader societal phenomenon of learned helplessness.

C. Social Fragmentation and Isolation

Social fragmentation and isolation are significant factors in the development of learned helplessness within a capitalist context. The weakening of social bonds and the decline of community participation can lead to a sense of isolation, which exacerbates feelings of helplessness and diminishes mental well-being.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000), in his book *Liquid Modernity*, examines how the fluid and ever-changing nature of modern capitalism leads to the breakdown of stable social structures and relationships. Bauman argues that this "liquid" modernity, characterized by extreme flexibility and instability in social bonds, contributes to a sense of isolation and insecurity among individuals. As traditional social networks dissolve, individuals are left to navigate complex and

uncertain environments alone, which can lead to feelings of helplessness. The lack of stable, supportive communities exacerbates the psychological impacts of economic and social pressures, leaving individuals more vulnerable to the negative effects of isolation.

Robert D. Putnam (2000), in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, explores the decline of social capital and community engagement in American society. Putnam highlights how the erosion of communal activities and the weakening of social ties have led to increased social isolation. This isolation, in turn, has a profound impact on mental health, as individuals who lack strong social support are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness. The decline in community participation diminishes individuals' sense of belonging and empowerment, contributing to a broader societal trend of learned helplessness as people feel increasingly disconnected and powerless in the face of larger social and economic forces.

3. Theories of Resilience in Response to Learned Helplessness

Psychological resilience refers to the ability of individuals to adapt, recover, and thrive in the face of adversity, stress, or trauma. It plays a crucial role in countering learned helplessness—a psychological condition where individuals feel powerless to change their circumstances due to repeated exposure to uncontrollable situations. Two significant frameworks that enhance our understanding of resilience and its application in overcoming learned helplessness are Michael Ungar's ecological model and Martin Seligman's concept of learned optimism.

Michael Ungar, in *The Social Ecology of Resilience: A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (2011), expands the notion of resilience beyond individual traits, emphasizing the critical role of environmental and social factors. Ungar's

ecological model posits that resilience is not merely an internal strength but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between individuals and their environments, including family, community, and societal contexts. This multidimensional perspective underscores that resilience is influenced by the availability and quality of external resources such as social support, education, healthcare, and community services. In contexts where these resources are scarce, individuals are more likely to experience feelings of helplessness. Additionally, Ungar's model highlights the importance of cultural and contextual sensitivity, recognizing that what constitutes resilience may vary across different social settings. Therefore, interventions aimed at fostering resilience must be culturally and contextually appropriate to be effective. Social systems, including families, schools, communities, and policies, play a significant role in reinforcing resilience by providing the necessary support structures that enable individuals to navigate and recover from adversities.

Ungar's ecological approach is particularly relevant in addressing learned helplessness, which often develops when individuals repeatedly face situations where they feel they have no control, leading to a belief that their actions are futile. In such cases, creating supportive environments that empower individuals is essential. This can be achieved by strengthening social networks, enhancing community resources, and designing culturally appropriate interventions. By fostering environments that consistently provide support and resources, Ungar's model helps individuals develop the psychological resilience needed to transform learned helplessness into a proactive and empowered stance.

Complementing Ungar's ecological perspective, Martin Seligman, in *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (1990), focuses on the internal cognitive processes that contribute to resilience. Building on his earlier work on learned helplessness, Seligman introduces the concept of learned optimism, which involves cultivating a positive and realistic outlook on life to

enhance psychological resilience. Seligman's approach centers on cognitive reframing, where individuals challenge and alter their negative thought patterns. Through the ABC model (Adversity, Belief, Consequence), Seligman encourages individuals to analyze how their beliefs about adverse events influence their emotional and behavioral responses. By disputing irrational or overly negative beliefs, individuals can change their consequent feelings and actions, leading to more adaptive outcomes. This process, known as disputation, involves actively questioning negative thoughts and gathering evidence to contradict pessimistic assumptions, fostering a mindset that promotes agency and control over one's circumstances.

Seligman's learned optimism provides a practical framework for building psychological resilience, particularly in combating learned helplessness. By helping individuals recognize and challenge their negative beliefs, learned optimism enhances self-efficacy, promotes emotional regulation, and encourages proactive behavior. Individuals who practice learned optimism are more likely to believe in their ability to influence outcomes, manage their emotional responses to adversity, and take constructive actions to address challenges.

When combined, Ungar's ecological approach and Seligman's learned optimism offer a comprehensive strategy for overcoming learned helplessness. Creating supportive environments that provide external resources and social support can reinforce the positive cognitive changes individuals make, leading to a virtuous cycle of resilience-building. By integrating insights from both Ungar and Seligman, individuals and communities are better equipped to transform feelings of powerlessness into resilience and empowerment, effectively addressing the challenges posed by learned helplessness.

4. Social and Community Resilience in the Context of Capitalism

In capitalist societies, marked by economic disparities, job insecurity, and social stratification, the risk of stress, anxiety, and learned helplessness is pronounced. Learned helplessness, a state where individuals feel powerless due to repeated exposure to uncontrollable situations, can become pervasive under these conditions. However, theories of resilience provide a framework for understanding how individuals and communities can overcome these challenges, fostering a sense of agency, empowerment, and collective efficacy.

Ann Masten, in her seminal work *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (2014), redefines resilience as a common and naturally occurring phenomenon. Contrary to the belief that resilience is an extraordinary trait found only in exceptional individuals, Masten argues that it arises from basic human adaptational systems, which she refers to as "ordinary magic." This concept highlights the inherent human capacity to adapt, recover, and thrive despite adversity. Masten identifies several key components that contribute to resilience: protective factors, adaptive systems, and contextual influences. Protective factors include supportive family environments, positive peer relationships, effective schools, and cohesive communities that provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging. Adaptive systems, such as cognitive abilities, self-regulation skills, motivation, and cultural traditions, play a crucial role in fostering resilience. The socio-economic and cultural environment also influences the availability and effectiveness of these protective factors, with robust social support networks serving as vital buffers against stress, especially in capitalist societies where economic instability and competition are prevalent.

In a similar vein, Emily Werner and Ruth Smith's longitudinal study, presented in *Journeys from Childhood to Midlife: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery* (2001), provides deep insights into how social environments and relationships

contribute to resilience over the lifespan, particularly in the face of socio-economic challenges. Their research emphasizes the importance of early supportive relationships with caring adults, such as parents, teachers, or mentors, which provide emotional support, guidance, and stability. Access to community resources like quality education, healthcare services, and recreational facilities also plays a significant role in fostering resilience. Werner and Smith observed that resilience is a dynamic process, with individuals demonstrating the capacity to recover and adapt at various life stages. Even those who experienced severe adversities early in life could achieve positive outcomes later on through supportive social networks and opportunities for meaningful engagement within their communities. The concept of collective efficacy—referring to a community's shared belief in its ability to achieve desired outcomes and support its members—emerges as a crucial factor in enhancing overall resilience.

Integrating these concepts of social and community resilience into strategies to counter learned helplessness offers a pathway to mitigate the negative effects of capitalist pressures. Community empowerment, through participatory decision-making and community-led initiatives, can foster a sense of ownership and control among community members, directly combating feelings of helplessness. Building and maintaining networks of trust and cooperation enhances social capital, providing emotional support and access to resources during times of need. Implementing inclusive social policies that address social and economic disparities ensures that all community members have access to the support and opportunities necessary for resilience. Education and awareness programs focused on mental health and resilience empower individuals with the knowledge and tools to support themselves and others, creating a more resilient community fabric. Establishing collaborative networks among community stakeholders, including non-profits, local governments, and businesses, can coordinate resources and efforts to effectively address systemic challenges. By strengthening social infrastructure and community networks, capitalist societies

can enhance resilience, enabling individuals and communities to better withstand and recover from economic and social adversities, ultimately countering the pervasive effects of learned helplessness.

C. Critiques and Limitations of Resilience Theories

The concept of resilience has become a cornerstone in discussions surrounding mental health, education, and community development. It is often celebrated as a vital characteristic that enables individuals to cope with adversity, bounce back from setbacks, and maintain psychological well-being despite challenges. However, the dominant focus on resilience as an individual trait has sparked significant debate among scholars, particularly those concerned with social justice and the structural causes of adversity. Critics argue that this emphasis on personal resilience can obscure the broader, systemic forces at play—especially those rooted in capitalist systems—that contribute to the very conditions requiring resilience.

Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy (2014), in their book *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, provide a critical analysis of how resilience is framed in contemporary discourse. They assert that the prevailing emphasis on individual resilience often fails to account for the structural nature of inequality and oppression. In this view, resilience is frequently portrayed as a personal responsibility, a trait that individuals must cultivate to navigate and survive the challenges they face. However, by focusing on the individual's capacity to endure, the systemic roots of these challenges—such as economic disparity, social marginalization, and institutionalized discrimination—are often left unexamined and unaddressed. This approach can inadvertently reinforce the status quo, as it places the onus on individuals to adapt to oppressive conditions rather than challenging and transforming the structures that perpetuate inequality.

DiAngelo and Sensoy's critique is particularly pertinent in the context of learned helplessness, a psychological condition where individuals come to believe that they have no control over the outcomes of their lives due to repeated exposure to uncontrollable events. In capitalist societies, where economic instability, job insecurity, and social inequality are prevalent, the risk of developing learned helplessness is significant. When resilience is promoted as the primary solution to these challenges, it can lead to a dangerous neglect of the need for systemic change. The emphasis on individual resilience can thus serve to maintain the existing power structures by diverting attention from the collective action needed to address the root causes of adversity.

David Chandler (2014), in *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, extends this critique by examining how the concept of resilience has been co-opted by neoliberal policies. According to Chandler, resilience has become a tool for justifying inaction on structural issues. In a neoliberal context, where market logic dominates and state intervention is minimized, resilience is often invoked to encourage individuals to adapt to adverse conditions rather than to demand changes to the systems that produce those conditions. This shift effectively transfers the responsibility for coping with adversity from society to the individual.

Chandler argues that this use of resilience serves to depoliticize the issues at hand. By framing challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion as problems that can be overcome through personal resilience, the structural conditions that create and exacerbate these problems are rendered invisible. In a capitalist system, where economic and social pressures are significant contributors to learned helplessness, relying on resilience as a solution can be particularly problematic. It suggests that individuals who fail to thrive in such an environment simply lack sufficient resilience, rather than acknowledging that the environment itself may be fundamentally unjust.

The critiques offered by DiAngelo, Sensoy, and Chandler highlight the limitations of resilience as an individualistic response to challenges that are deeply embedded in the structures of modern capitalism. They call for a more nuanced and critical approach that recognizes the importance of addressing the systemic causes of adversity. Without such an approach, the focus on resilience risks becoming a means of perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to mitigate.

5. Theoretical Synthesis and Perspectives

A. Interconnection between Capitalism, Powerlessness, and Resilience

The relationship between capitalism, powerlessness, and resilience is indeed intricate, with each influencing and reinforcing the others in ways that profoundly shape individual and collective psychological experiences. The works of Mark Fisher, David Harvey, and Alain Ehrenberg provide a rich theoretical foundation for examining these dynamics, offering insights into how capitalist structures and ideologies impact mental health and how resilience emerges both as a coping mechanism and as a form of resistance.

Mark Fisher's exploration in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* delves into how capitalism not only dominates economic and political spheres but also extends its influence into cultural and psychological realms. Fisher argues that capitalist realism, the pervasive belief that there is no viable alternative to capitalism, creates a profound sense of inevitability and resignation among individuals and communities. This psychological environment, where alternative ways of living and organizing society are perceived as impossible or unrealistic, fosters a deep sense of powerlessness. The notion that capitalism is the only conceivable system stifles imagination and discourages efforts to envision and work towards different possibilities. This state of collective powerlessness is critical in understanding the psychological impact of capitalism, as it not only affects individuals' perceptions of their

agency but also perpetuates a cycle where the lack of perceived alternatives leads to further entrenchment of capitalist ideology (Fisher, 2009).

David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* complements Fisher's analysis by tracing the historical development and consolidation of neoliberal capitalism, which has intensified feelings of powerlessness through its emphasis on market fundamentalism and deregulation. Harvey's work elucidates how neoliberal policies have systematically dismantled social safety nets, weakened labor rights, and exacerbated economic inequalities, creating an environment where individuals feel increasingly vulnerable and powerless. The psychological effects of this economic regime are profound, as the relentless pressures of competition, individualism, and self-reliance erode social cohesion and contribute to a pervasive sense of insecurity and helplessness. Harvey also explores potential forms of resistance, suggesting that resilience can emerge not only as an individual capacity but also as a collective response to the disempowering effects of neoliberalism. His analysis underscores the importance of understanding resilience in a broader social and economic context, where it serves as both a means of survival and a potential challenge to capitalist structures (Harvey, 2005).

Alain Ehrenberg's *The Weariness of the Self* offers a sociological perspective on how the demands of modern capitalism contribute to the rise of depressive disorders, further illuminating the link between powerlessness and resilience. Ehrenberg argues that the pressures of self-optimization, performance, and constant self-improvement, which are hallmarks of capitalist societies, lead to an increasing prevalence of depression and other mental health issues. The expectation to continually achieve and outperform others fosters a sense of inadequacy and helplessness, as individuals struggle to meet the ever-escalating demands placed upon them. In this context, resilience is often framed as the ability to withstand these pressures and continue to perform, but Ehrenberg also

suggests that resilience can take on a more radical form. It can be seen as a form of resistance, where individuals and communities reject the relentless demands of capitalism and seek alternative ways of living that prioritize well-being over productivity (Ehrenberg, 2009).

Together, these authors highlight the pervasive impact of capitalism on mental health, particularly through the lens of powerlessness. They show that resilience, often viewed as a positive psychological trait, is complex and multifaceted in a capitalist context. On one hand, resilience can be seen as a necessary response to the challenges imposed by capitalist systems, helping individuals and communities navigate the difficulties of economic and social life. On the other hand, resilience can also be a site of resistance, where the development of new forms of solidarity, alternative lifestyles, and collective action challenges the dominant capitalist paradigm.

Integrating these theories offers a comprehensive understanding of psychological well-being in capitalist societies. It underscores that resilience is not merely an individual trait but is deeply connected to social structures and collective experiences. Resilience, in this broader sense, involves the capacity to resist and transform the conditions that create powerlessness, offering a pathway towards greater psychological and social well-being. This perspective challenges the tendency to view psychological issues like depression or anxiety solely as personal problems, instead recognizing them as deeply embedded in the socio-economic context of capitalism. Moreover, these insights have significant implications for the fields of social and clinical psychology. They call for a shift in focus from purely individualistic approaches to mental health, which emphasize personal responsibility and adaptation, towards a more critical and socially aware perspective. This approach would consider how economic systems, social inequalities, and cultural norms contribute to mental health challenges, and how resilience can be fostered not only at the individual level

but also through collective action and systemic change. Understanding resilience as both a response to and a form of resistance against capitalist power structures opens new avenues for psychological theory and practice, advocating for a more holistic approach to mental health that is attuned to the broader socio-economic realities of life in capitalist societies.

B. Theoretical Implications for Psychology

The theories discussed have significant implications for contemporary understandings of mental health, particularly in the fields of social and clinical psychology. These implications challenge the traditional focus on individual pathology and coping mechanisms, urging a broader consideration of the socio-economic structures that shape mental health outcomes. The intersection of capitalism, social justice, and psychological well-being is a critical area for exploration, demanding that psychology expands its theoretical frameworks to address the systemic forces at play.

Nancy Fraser's work in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* provides a compelling argument for incorporating social justice and structural critiques into psychological theories. Fraser emphasizes that the psychological impact of capitalism cannot be fully understood without considering the intersectional dimensions of gender, class, and race. Capitalism does not affect all individuals equally; rather, its pressures are disproportionately borne by marginalized groups, who face unique challenges in their mental health. This perspective highlights the necessity of expanding psychological theories to include these intersectional factors, recognizing that mental health cannot be divorced from the broader social and economic context. Fraser's analysis suggests that any comprehensive understanding of mental health must account for the ways in which capitalist structures exacerbate inequalities, leading to differential impacts on psychological well-being (Fraser, 2013).

Jonathan Crary's examination of capitalism's impact on mental health in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* offers a stark illustration of how relentless economic demands can erode basic human functions, such as sleep. Crary's analysis goes beyond the individual level, revealing how the pressures of a 24/7 economy—where there is no respite from work and consumption—lead to widespread sleep deprivation and diminished well-being. This relentless pace, driven by capitalist imperatives, disrupts natural rhythms and contributes to chronic stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Crary's work underscores the need for psychology to address these systemic factors, recognizing that individual coping mechanisms are insufficient in the face of such pervasive and structural pressures. The implications for mental health are profound, suggesting that psychology must develop interventions that not only support individual resilience but also advocate for systemic change to alleviate the root causes of psychological distress (Crary, 2014).

The effects of capitalist-driven individualization on both individual and collective psychology are further explored in Zygmunt Bauman's *The Individualized Society*. Bauman critiques the emphasis on individual success and self-reliance in capitalist societies, arguing that this focus leads to increased feelings of isolation, alienation, and helplessness. The drive for individual achievement, often at the expense of communal bonds, exacerbates mental health issues by creating a social environment where people are pitted against each other in a relentless competition. This competitive ethos undermines social cohesion and contributes to the psychological burden of those who struggle to meet the high demands of success. Bauman's work calls for a reevaluation of psychological theories that have traditionally centered on the individual, advocating for a more holistic approach that considers the broader social context. By shifting the focus from individual pathology to the structural conditions that foster psychological distress, psychology can develop more

effective strategies for promoting mental health and well-being in capitalist societies (Bauman, 2001).

These theoretical perspectives collectively suggest that contemporary psychology must undergo a significant transformation to better address the realities of mental health in the modern world. The integration of structural critiques into psychological theories is essential for understanding and addressing the systemic causes of psychological distress. In particular, social and clinical psychology must move beyond traditional models that emphasize individual responsibility and resilience, and instead, consider how capitalist structures shape the social environment in ways that are detrimental to mental health. This shift requires a new theoretical orientation that places greater emphasis on social justice, inequality, and the collective dimensions of well-being. For example, therapeutic approaches might incorporate strategies for coping with systemic injustices, while also advocating for broader social changes that reduce the pressures imposed by capitalist systems. Moreover, research in psychology should focus on the ways in which economic structures, like neoliberal capitalism, contribute to mental health disparities, with the goal of informing policies that promote greater equity and well-being.

So the intersection of capitalism, powerlessness, and resilience presents a critical challenge for contemporary psychology. By expanding its theoretical frameworks to include structural critiques, psychology can develop a more comprehensive understanding of mental health that is attuned to the realities of life in capitalist societies. This approach not only enhances the field's ability to address individual distress but also positions psychology as a key player in the broader effort to create a more just and resilient society.

C. Theoretical Research Perspectives

Identifying current theoretical gaps and proposing directions for future research is essential for advancing the understanding of the interplay between capitalism, powerlessness, and resilience. The complexities of modern capitalist systems and their impact on psychological well-being are profound, yet not fully understood. This necessitates a deeper exploration of how individuals and communities navigate the pressures and challenges imposed by these systems.

The foundation for theorizing resistance to capitalist structures is critical in this context. Resistance is not just an act of defiance but a process of building resilience against the psychological impacts of neoliberalism. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis offers invaluable insights into this process. By focusing on collective actions and social movements, Bourdieu sheds light on the importance of community and solidarity in countering the pervasive influence of market forces. His work suggests that future research should explore how these collective efforts can foster resilience, not only by providing support structures but also by challenging and reshaping the social and economic conditions that contribute to feelings of powerlessness (Bourdieu, 1998).

The transformation of work and life under modern capitalism introduces another layer of complexity. Richard Sennett's work underscores the need for new theoretical frameworks to understand the psychological toll of these transformations. The shift towards precarious employment, characterized by instability and insecurity, has profound implications for mental health. Sennett highlights how the erosion of stable work and the rise of the gig economy contribute to a sense of vulnerability and anxiety. Future research should delve into how these economic conditions affect psychological resilience, examining the strategies individuals use to cope with the uncertainties of modern work life. This could include investigating the role of social networks, personal agency,

and adaptive behaviors in fostering resilience in the face of economic precarity (Sennett, 2006).

In exploring the concepts of vulnerability and resistance, Judith Butler provides a crucial perspective on how capitalist systems shape our understanding of mental health. Butler argues that societal structures often define and respond to vulnerability in ways that reinforce existing power dynamics. This has significant implications for how resilience is conceptualized and developed. By focusing on the ways in which vulnerability is constructed and managed within capitalist societies, Butler opens up new avenues for research into the intersection of mental health, social justice, and economic structures. Her work calls for a critical examination of how these dynamics influence not just individual resilience, but also collective forms of resistance that challenge the status quo (Butler, 2009).

The concept of the “precariat,” introduced by Guy Standing, is particularly relevant for understanding the psychological impacts of economic instability. The precariat, a social class characterized by insecurity and a lack of predictability in employment, faces unique challenges that traditional social classes do not. Standing’s framework is invaluable for exploring the links between economic precarity, powerlessness, and resilience. Future research could focus on how individuals within this class develop resilience in response to their unstable conditions. This might involve studying the role of community support, access to resources, and the psychological impact of living in a constant state of uncertainty. Moreover, it would be important to investigate how systemic changes could alleviate the conditions that give rise to the precariat, thereby reducing the associated psychological stress (Standing, 2011).

Developing these theoretical perspectives further, it becomes clear that the interplay between capitalism, powerlessness, and resilience is multifaceted. Future research should not only build on these foundational theories but also

seek to address the current gaps in understanding. This includes exploring how different forms of resistance—whether through social movements, changes in work practices, or new forms of community organization—can foster resilience. Additionally, there is a need to examine how these dynamics play out across different cultural and socio-economic contexts, recognizing that the impact of capitalism on psychological well-being is not uniform but varies widely depending on local conditions and individual experiences. By engaging with these complex and interrelated issues, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how capitalism affects mental health and resilience. This, in turn, can inform policies and interventions aimed at mitigating the negative psychological impacts of economic systems, ultimately fostering a more equitable and resilient society.

Conclusion

This work has synthesized key theoretical perspectives on the interconnection between capitalism, powerlessness, and resilience. Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism, David Harvey's critique of neoliberalism, and Alain Ehrenberg's exploration of depression in the context of modern capitalism provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how capitalist structures contribute to a pervasive sense of powerlessness. At the same time, these works highlight the potential for resilience, both individual and collective, as a form of resistance against these psychological pressures. The integration of these theories into a coherent framework offers valuable insights into the psychological effects of living in a capitalist society. The importance of these theoretical reflections lies in their ability to deepen our understanding of contemporary psychological dynamics. By connecting the macro-level forces of capitalism with individual and collective psychological experiences, this study underscores the need for psychological theories that go beyond the individual to include structural and societal factors. These insights are crucial for advancing

psychological research and practice in a way that acknowledges the profound impact of socio-economic systems on mental health. This theoretical work provides a foundation for developing more holistic approaches to mental health that consider the broader social and economic context.

As socio-economic conditions continue to evolve, so too must the theoretical frameworks that seek to understand their impact on psychological well-being. Future developments in these theories should account for emerging trends in the global economy, technological advancements, and shifting social dynamics. There is a need for ongoing research that explores how these changes influence feelings of powerlessness and the capacity for resilience, particularly in marginalized communities. This evolution of theory will be essential for staying relevant in a rapidly changing world and for developing effective strategies to support mental health in the face of new and emerging challenges.

Bibliography

- Abramson, L. Y., Seligman, M. E. P., & Teasdale, J. D. (1978). Learned helplessness in humans: Critique and reformulation. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 87(1), 49-74.
- Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1944). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. New York: The New Press.
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso Books.
- Chandler, D. (2014). *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*. London: Routledge.
- Crary, J. (2014). *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso Books.
- DiAngelo, R., & Sensoy, Ö. (2014). *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ehrenberg, A. (1998). *La Fatigue d'être soi: Dépression et société*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

- Ehrenberg, A. (2009). The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Fisher, M. (2009). Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? Winchester: Zero Books.
- Fraser, N. (2013). Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis. London: Verso Books.
- Fromm, E. (1941). Escape from Freedom. New York: Farrar & Rinehart.
- Fromm, E. (1955). The Sane Society. New York: Rinehart.
- Han, B.-C. (2015). The Burnout Society. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005). A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horkheimer, M. (1947). Eclipse of Reason. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jay, M. (1973). The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Lasch, C. (1979). The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marx, K. (1844). Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1867). Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meisner.
- Masten, A. (2014). Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development. New York: Guilford Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Seligman, M. (1990). Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life. New York: Vintage Books.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1975). Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Peterson, C., & Maier, S. F. (1993). Learned Helplessness: A Theory for the Age of Personal Control. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sennett, R. (2006). The Culture of the New Capitalism. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Standing, G. (2011). The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ungar, M. (2011). The Social Ecology of Resilience: A Handbook of Theory and Practice. New York: Springer.

- Werner, E., & Smith, R. (2001). Journeys from Childhood to Midlife: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone. London: Penguin Books.