Resilience in intimate relationships

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Abstract
This qualitative study researched the definition of resilience in intimate relationships. A constructivist perspective guided the theoretical framework of the study and a systemic approach to intimate relationships provided a theoretical foundation. Apart from an extensive literature review, three different sources of information were included in the study on relational resilience. Three family therapists were interviewed to gain some understanding of their experiences with couples in distress. Excerpts from five films provided information regarding couple interactions and were used as visual stimuli. Three participant couples discussed their responses and personal experiences in semi-structured interviews. Themes arising from the participants’ responses were analysed by means of thematic network analysis in order to explore their definitions of resilience in view of their own experiences. It was found that resilience in intimate relationships can be defined as the ability of the couple to endure adversity. It involves the relational capacity to adapt, grow, and recover from adversities and it includes relational processes that allow the couple as a system to rebound from shared difficulties and become more resourceful.

Key words: couples’ resilience; intimate relationships; marriage; qualitative research; relational abilities; relational resilience; relational processes; resilience; systems theory

The first author’s personal and professional journey inspired her to research the idea that some systems (individuals, couples, and families) cope better with perturbation resulting from stress, trauma and adversities. Additionally, the literature review highlighted a need for resiliency studies that focus solely on intimate relationships. The main aim was to discover what defines a resilient couple, specifically from a systemic point of view. For the purpose of this article the term ‘system’ may be defined as two or more individuals, together with relationships between these individuals, and between their attributes.
RESILIENCE

A strength-based perspective in the human sciences has facilitated a paradigm shift from pathogenesis (origins of disease), that is, preoccupation with dysfunction and pathology, stigmatisation jargon, and fix-it approaches to intervention, to salutogenesis (origins of health), which emphasises health, positive qualities, and strengths that contribute to the growth and the promotion of a system (Antonovsky, 1987; Greeff & Aspeling, 2007; Laursen, 2002).

The fundamental shift from using an at risk approach to an at promise framework to view systems implies that there is a focus on ‘teaching rather than fixing, pointing to health rather than dysfunction, turning away from limiting labels and diagnosis to wholeness and well-being’ (Marshall, 1998, p. 57). This paradigm shift from the deficits and debilitating effects of risk to a more positive perspective, including adaptation, competence and invulnerability (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995) coincided with an increasing interest in the resilience phenomenon.

Definitions of resilience

Resilience involves an active, dynamic process encompassing the capacity to endure, positively adapt to, and rebound from significant adversities, crisis, and challenges and, through this process, to grow stronger and more resourceful (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Walsh, 2006). Evidently, resilience involves two phenomena. Firstly, a system is experiencing significant threat or adversity, and secondly, the system is able to avoid negative consequences and achieve positive adaptation, which consequently promotes growth (Lietz, 2006; Luthar et al., 2000).

Resilience refers to the ability of a system to remain intact in spite of trauma or crisis, and to return to the same premorbid level (Greeff & Aspeling, 2007). Initially, resilience was considered to have a homeostatic function, whereby a system rebalanced, recovered and restored its equilibrium, but recently resilience has been recognised as moving beyond recovery (Bonanno, 2005; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995).

Therefore, the difference between resilience and competent functioning (Walsh, 2006) or recovery (Bonanno, 2004) becomes pertinent. Resilience is viewed as moving beyond recovery to actually thriving, and consequently growing and flourishing beyond the previous level of functioning (Greeff & Aspeling, 2007; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Whenever a system, including an individual, couple, family, or community, faces a stressor or experiences loss, adversity, or a traumatic event, there are a few possible responses as illustrated in Figure 1 below.
Figure 1: Possible responses to a stressful or traumatic event, or significant adversity

Some systems (A) cannot cope with the impact of the stressor and, as a result, they distance themselves or remove themselves from the stressor, the stressful event, or the system itself. The system therefore deteriorates and can no longer function. Some systems (B) are able to distance themselves from the stressor and re-establish the homeostasis of the system; however, it may be possible that there has been some damage or impaired functioning as a result of the stressor. Other systems (C) are able to recover from the stressor, re-establish the homeostasis of the system, and continue to function on the same premorbid level. Lastly, some systems (D) are able not only to re-establish homeostasis after experiencing the stressor, but also to shift to a higher level of functioning. As they appear to be more resourceful after the stressor, these systems could be described as resilient or showing resilience.

Relational resilience

Relational resilience is more than the absence of adversity, and is not simply the opposite of weakness; similarly, a satisfying relationship is not characterised by the absence of dissatisfaction, nor is it merely the inverse of a stressful relationship (Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1997).

Patterson (2002) drew an important distinction between resilience and resiliency, which Connolly (2005) adapted and applied to intimate relationships. Accordingly, the term relational resiliency or capacity-based resilience represents how couples protect their relationships from external stressors and involve ‘those strengths in couples’ functioning that protect them against stressors and challenges’ (Connolly, 2005, p. 270).

Couple resilience

As opposed to relational resiliency, Connolly (2005) referred to couple resilience or process-based resilience to highlight the processes that the couple uses to overcome adversity successfully and rebound in their relationship. Interactional processes are important in relational resilience, and include organisational patterns;
communication and problem-solving processes; it involves community resources, as well as an affirming belief system (Walsh, 1996). Therefore, in couple resilience, ‘the challenge to be mastered involves the shared coping efforts ... rather than recovery ... in pulling together through crisis, members experience a deepening of their bonds and confidence that they can weather future challenges’ (Walsh, 1996, p. 275).

Furthermore, couple resilience could be defined as ‘successful coping and cohesiveness in the face of adverse circumstances’ (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004). According to Bodenmann (2005), ‘dyadic stress and coping must be conceptualised from a systems perspective’ (p. 36). This implies that one partner’s stress appraisals or coping efforts impact on the other partner and the couple system. Consequently, one partner’s well-being and satisfaction depends on the other’s well-being and satisfaction.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

In this study, the words ‘intimate relationship’ are used interchangeably with the word ‘couple’ to signify a close connection between two people. According to the Encarta World English Dictionary (2005), the word ‘couple’ refers to two people sharing lives: two people who are married, are living together, or have an intimate relationship. Thus, the words ‘intimate relationship’ do not exclusively imply marriage and therefore do not preclude other forms of intimate relationships, including dating couples, cohabiting couples, same-sex couples, and so on.

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN A SYSTEMIC LIGHT

In general, there seems to be an illusion that, in marriage, two individuals become one (1 + 1 = 1). Alternatively, marriage (an intimate relationship) could be viewed as a complex unity made up of at least three different, but interdependent systems (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Riggs, 1978). The interdependent systems are depicted in Figure 2 below. This includes (A) the male system as a total being; (B) the female system as a total being; and (C) the marital system/intimate relationship spontaneously deriving from the interaction of the male and female systems joined together. Accordingly, it might be better to view the union in marriage or fusion in intimate relationships as 1 + 1 = 3 or A + B = C.
Resilience in Intimate Relationships

Figure 2: Relationships between systems (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p. 189)

I: Before a relationship has developed, the two systems function independently.
II: After a relationship has developed, the plain shaded areas indicate parts of the individual systems, which function independently of the marital relationship system.
III: A collaborative relationship.

Whitaker (1989) used a game metaphor to describe marriage. Accordingly, marriage is seen in terms of a doubles’ tennis game where two people have decided to team up and play doubles. Each player is responsible for the balls that land on his or her side of the tennis court, but also for representing the twosome in each decision about the game. This new team of marriage proclaims that the whole (we) has become greater than the sum of its parts (two individuals), that is, the whole consists of all the parts plus the way the parts operate in relation to each other (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Whitaker, 1989). Accordingly, both partners are part of a larger whole; a complex psychological entity. Riggs (1978) formulated a more specific model of a dyadic relationship, which he called System C.

Marriage as System C

Riggs (1978) proposed a useful way of viewing an intimate relationship, that is, to consider the couple as a system. In a dyadic system, the two autonomous individuals involved could be viewed as System A and B, but as System A and System B join in an organised way, their relationship or dyadic system forms a new suprasystem,
System C (Riggs, 1978). Accordingly, System C is regarded as a third or an emergent system of communication and is subject to study as an entity in itself.

Riggs’ (1978) System C idea fits with a systemic approach to relationships in the following ways: the organisation of the relationships between elements in a system is paramount; in System C, no communication between System A and System B has meaning unless there is organisation shared and recognised by both; equi-finality in System C implies that some unique state of communication emerges at the end of numerous contacts between System A and B; hierarchical differentiation or leadership and specialisation of function is evident in System C; System C also displays homeostatic functions, where an implicit agreement between the members to resist disruptions or interruptions is viewed as an attempt to conserve System C. This self-regulating tendency emanates from the two members and acts as a product of System C, upon each member; and in order for a system to survive, it must be in a state of constant interchange with the environment in which it functions.

DIALECTICAL PROCESS OF INDIVIDUATION AND BELONGING

As discussed above, marriage is not a complete and monolithic union (1 + 1 = 1), because both individuals involved will continue to struggle with the concepts of ‘me’ and ‘we’ as each spouse strives to remain an individual, while they attempt to make their marriage grow (Lederer & Jackson, 1968). Therefore, the process of marriage is a dialectical process that oscillates between individuation and belonging. This dialectical process takes place daily and over time, as people who stay married move from uniting to individuating, and then reuniting or remarrying. According to Whitaker (1989), this process implies that:

No partnership can be free, each loses individuation by uniting, just as each loses isolation by uniting ... growth in marriage is like growth in the individual ... it is a process of endless dialectical alternations between union, with the danger of enslavement, and individuation, with the danger of isolation. There is no resolution of this endless process, this alternation between belongingness and separateness. (p. 96)

Learning how to love and become part of a ‘we’ without destroying oneself is a long-term project, an endless compromise, and a team process. The process of evolving intimacy necessitates that an individual sacrifices his or her freedom, initiative and personalised lifestyle for the strength, freedom, security and ecstasy of belonging in a much more secure way (Whitaker, 1989).

From the aforementioned dialectical process of individuation and belonging, as well as the formulation of System C, it is clear that marriage is not just a rigid relationship between two rigid individuals. Marriage is a fluid relationship between two spouses and their two individual systems of behaviour. The totality of marriage...
is determined by how the spouses operate or behave in relation to each other and thus their behavioural patterns are influenced by each other’s behaviour (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Riggs, 1978).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Complementary to the aforementioned circular epistemology, a constructivist perspective guided the theoretical framework of this qualitative study on resilience in intimate relationships, where the first author formed part of the research process. Accordingly, the focus was on how meaning is embodied in language, and therefore, how meaning is co-created in conversations with participant couples. However, because individuals (and couples) can only offer stories about their actions and intentions, the first author used interpretive methods in the quest to make the worlds of experience studied more understandable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Participants

The aim of this study was to explore and understand what defines a resilient couple. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to identify particular types of stimuli and participants for in-depth investigation and for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of what resilience in intimate relationships is (Neuman, 1997).

The sampling and data collection of this study were conjoined and also multileveled because of the three different sources of information that were identified, namely:

- **Family therapists:** Firstly, three renowned family therapists were selected on the basis that all of them were practising therapists who specialise in working with couples and families. The therapist sample was also homogenous with respect to gender, ethnicity, age and professional status; all three therapists were male, white, middle-aged professors at three different universities across South Africa.

- **Visual aid stimuli:** Secondly, visual aids were compiled, which included excerpts from five films depicting couples who have faced various difficulties. The films included *Story of Us, Husbands & Wives, Notting Hill, Mozart & the Whale*, and *Walk the Line*. These films and specific excerpts were extracted and included in the study to facilitate the exploration of the dynamics and characteristics of couples who might show resiliency.

- **Couples:** Lastly, three couples from different life phases and diverse backgrounds were selected to participate in this study. However, due to the limited scope of this study, the couples sample was homogenous in that all the couples were married, middle class, and from the same ethnic group.
Data collection

The data collection of this study involved all three sources of information mentioned above and therefore it is divided into and discussed according to the following three sections:

• **Section A – Family therapists:** Two of the therapists were seen individually and, in semi-structured interviews, they were asked to discuss and define couples’ resilience in view of their practical experience and expertise. The third therapist was contacted via telephone, and briefly discussed his views and experience regarding resilience.

• **Section B – Couples’ stimuli responses:** Films were useful in illustrating relational resilience to elicit the participant couples’ responses and to help them to reflect on their experiences. Each couple was given a participant manual, which included visual aids, response and reflection sections. The participant couples were asked to define resilience, to watch the film excerpts, and to answer questions regarding the couples in the films.

• **Section C – Couples’ interview:** Each couple was also asked to reflect on their own relational experiences, which they included in the manual as part of their responses, but which also emerged in the semi-structured interviews that followed thereafter.

Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations of this study included all the participants consenting to participate in this study. Although the participant therapists and couples were generally open to discuss their views and experiences, it was decided to retain anonymity in order to protect all the parties involved. In addition, it is important to mention that the visual stimuli (excerpts copied from different films) were intended for research, and not for purposes of piracy.

Data analysis

Analysis of information is the process whereby order, structure, and meaning are imposed on the mass of information collected in a qualitative research study. In this study, a combination of the work of Attride-Stirling (2001) and of Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) served as a guideline in analysing the information. The first step involved becoming familiar with the data and ‘getting a feel for the overall meaning and different types of meaning in the text’ (Kelly, 1999, p. 409). After the interviews were transcribed, coding the material involved breaking up the data into manageable and meaningful text segments (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Thereafter salient, common, or significant themes were identified and induced, which helped to reframe the reading of the text, but also allowed for the themes to
be refined, making them specific enough, but also broad enough to encapsulate a set of coded ideas (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The construction of thematic networks from the induced themes involved: (a) arranging the themes into similar coherent groupings, on the basis of content or theoretical grounds, which formed part of the selection of basic themes; (b) creating clusters and rearranging the basic themes into organising themes, which also involved the identification and naming of the underlying issues; and (c) deducing global themes that represented the principal metaphors of the text (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

To take the reader deeper into the meaning of the texts, the themes that emerged had to be explored, described, and elaborated on. This included identifying the patterns that underlay the themes and playing around with ways of structuring until the researcher felt able to give a good account of the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Finally, in the interpretation and checking stage, the deductions in the summaries of the networks and the theory were brought together to explore significant themes, concepts, patterns, and structures that arose in the text (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

**SOUNDNESS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS**

In order for any study to be relevant and useful, it needs to be valid and reliable. In conducting qualitative studies, the question of how ‘reliable’ a study is, is termed credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, and trustworthiness (Maione, 1997).

**Soundness**

Validity refers to the degree to which the research conclusions are sound and trustworthy (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Stiles, 1993). Triangulation is important in the validity of qualitative research and refers to the use of multiple perspectives against which to check the researcher’s own position (Kelly, 1999), for example, using information from multiple information sources, multiple information collection and analysis methods, and/or multiple investigators (Stiles, 1993). In this study, there were multiple levels of triangulation, as illustrated in Figure 3 below:
The following strategies also formed part of the validation of the findings on this study: the quality of fit (coherence) of the interpretation; the process of making sense of the researcher’s experiences (uncovering and self-evidence); and the manner in which the researcher’s way of thinking is changed by the information (reflexive validity) (Stiles, 1993).

**Trustworthiness**

According to Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999), credible research produces findings that are convincing and believable. The credibility of qualitative research is established while the research is undertaken. The first author therefore looked for contradictory findings throughout the study. She ensured the trustworthiness of the data by using the following strategies identified by Stiles (1993): disclosing her expectations, preconceptions, and theoretical allegiance; grounding her interpretations in or linking them to the content and context of the study; asking ‘what’ and not ‘why’ questions. By grounding her expectations in context, the first author’s internal processes were included, thus describing the impact of the research on her.

In addition, reliability refers to the degree to which the results are repeatable (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). However, intimate relationships and interactions are contextual and therefore the first author could not assume that all couples across different cultures would behave the same and therefore show resiliency in similar ways. Therefore, the first author preferred to propose that the findings would be dependable. This implies that:

The reader could be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher says they did ... dependability is achieved through rich and detailed descriptions that show how certain actions and opinions are rooted in and develop out of contextual interaction. (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999, p. 64)
FINDINGS

As illustrated in Table 1 below, two overarching and global themes were extracted from the different sections. The one theme described relational resilience as a response-ability and the other highlighted that resilience in intimate relationships is a process in itself, which further involves different relational processes.

However, before discussing these two overarching themes, it is important to mention one theme that surfaced in the discussions with all the participants. Although it was not one of the global themes, it related to the aim of this study and therefore should be discussed here. In the search to define resilience in intimate relationships, it became clear that it is very difficult to find a single working definition thereof. All the participants mentioned the difficulties in defining resilience. As a result, it can be concluded that the definition of resilience is construed between people, and does not only involve various implicit negotiations, but is also punctuated differently by different people in different contexts. Accordingly, resilience is a contextually specific and culturally biased construct (Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Ungar, 2003). Therefore, relational resilience can be viewed as idiosyncratic, as unique to each relationship, and as context specific, as Therapist A explained: ‘one can not only look at the couple, you have to consider the context and what happens in context’ [‘n ou kan nie net kyk na die couple nie, jy moet kyk na die konteks en wat gebeur in die konteks’].

In the context of this study, the first author defined resilience in intimate relationships as:

The ability of the couple to endure adversity. It involves the relational capacity or response-ability to adapt to difficult circumstances, to learn and recover from them. It includes relational processes that allow the couple as a system to rebound from shared difficulties as more resourceful, enabling them to function on a higher level. Resilience in intimate relationships includes increasing each partner’s mobility (individuation) within the relationship, strengthening the relational bond (connectedness), and overall improvement in the quality of the relationship.

Resilience as response-ability

Relational resiliency or capacity-based resilience refers to the couple’s traits, capacity, ability, or strengths in their functioning that protect their relationship against stressors and challenges, and which helps them to manage their life circumstances successfully (Connolly, 2005; Luthar et al., 2000; Patterson, 2002). Following from the definitions provided above and from the themes extracted from the data, relational resilience is represented as a couple’s inherent response-ability, the couple’s ability as a system to respond to adverse circumstances that affect their relationship. Therapist C explained that ‘the characteristics they have, that help
Table 1: Integration of participants’ themes

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<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>GLOBAL THEMES</th>
<th>OVERLAPPING THEMES</th>
<th>INTEGRATION</th>
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<td>THERAPIST B</td>
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<td>THERAPIST C</td>
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<td>Resilience as Adaptive coping (ability)</td>
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<td>COUPLE 1:</td>
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<td>INTERVIEW</td>
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them to bounce back, are crucial in resilience’ [‘die kwaliteite waaroor hulle beskik om hulle te help om te “bounce back” is belangrik in resilience’]. Accordingly, relational response-ability includes the specific characteristics or the capacity of the relationship to endure and withstand adversities.

Relational resiliency includes the following: personal dedication to the relationship; innovation in creating their relationship; synchronisation of their relationship identity; relational balance; and interdependence (Connolly, 2005, 2006). In addition, couples who have the ability to make positive marital attributions usually perceive a spouse as a source of support and therefore may be more likely to utilise the relationship as a coping resource when stressful events occur (Graham & Conoley, 2006).

According to the themes discussed previously, resilience in intimate relationships is demonstrated through couples’ ability to respond to relational adversities. This response-ability includes the ability to endure these stressors (durability), but also the ability to bend back and adapt to it (contextual accommodation; adaptive coping). In addition to this response-ability, relational self-correcting ability also refers to the ability not only to endure adversities and bend back far enough, but also to absorb or redirect the pressure before it pushes the relationship too far, thereby allowing it to bounce back, to maintain relational homeostasis, to continue as before, and/or to learn from the experience. This relational buoyancy skill facilitates couples’ resilience through an ability to accommodate or adapt to adversities, relationship developmental changes (as Couple 3 explained the necessity of: ‘adapting to and accepting the changes a relationship goes through’), and life phase transitions and is reflected in the ability to establish new behavioural co-ordinations. Each couple has the ability to respond to stressors and adversity in a relationship-specific and context-specific manner. Marriage or intimate relationships involve a series of adjustments, and in order to promote resilience in the face of relational adversities and stressors, couples need to show soothing behaviours, such as sensitivity, nurturance and concern, and they have to be able constantly to negotiate, bargain and reach agreement on realistic solutions (Conger, Reuter & Elder, 1999; Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

The survival and regeneration of intimate relationships involves couples’ ability or capacity for self-repair, in the midst of overwhelming stress (Walsh, 1996). Thus, relational resilience ‘is central to couples’ ability to maximize relational strengths, mitigate external challenges, and maneuver successfully in the relationship’ (Connolly, 2005, p. 267).

Evidently, challenging circumstances provide a couple with opportunities to learn about untapped potential in their relationship, to strengthen their relationship, to grow closer, and to deepen their commitment and intimacy as they learn to rely on each other in the face of adversities (Graham & Conoley, 2006; Story & Bradbury, 2004).
Resilience as a process

From the data, it becomes clear that resilience is more than a relationship characteristic or specific trait. This implies that if one partner in the relationship is described as a resilient person, this characteristic does not necessarily result in the couple’s relationship being resilient. Although the individual partner’s characteristics can contribute to or facilitate relational resilience, the main focus of this study was the innate relational abilities and processes involved in couple resilience. Therapist B explained how the relational processes affect each partner’s abilities: ‘the processes between them may cause them not to utilise their full potential ... one wonders if those processes ... don’t maybe help to extend their abilities’ [‘die prosesse wat tussen hulle (couple) gebeur kan dalk veroorsaak dat hulle nie hul volle vermoë gebruik nie ... ’n ou wonder of daai prosesse ... nie die vermoë selfs kan uitsprei nie’].

Resilience as a dynamic and multivariate process

The participants’ themes indicate that relational resilience is a dynamic and multivariate process. This correlates with the literature, which also describes resilience as an active, dynamic process of competence, perseverance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge, which includes successfully overcoming adversity and positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Connolly, 2005, 2006; Luthar et al., 2000; Patterson, 2002; Walsh, 2006). It involves interactional or transactional processes that foster healing, recovery and resilience over time and includes coping, mediating and adaptational processes in the couple or family as a functional unit, which influence short-and long-term adaptation to hardships for both partners, enables partners or members to integrate the experience and to move beyond it (Hernández, 2002; Walsh, 1996, 2006).

Resilience includes a complex range of dynamics and processes that help to sustain a satisfying romantic relationship, to fortify relationships, and to help couples to function more effectively. These relational processes include couple unification and teamwork, determination, positive perspective, and external buffers (Connolly, 2005, 2006).

Accordingly, resilience involves many ongoing, recursive processes that influence the relationship system’s functioning (Walsh, 1996). In addition to this reciprocity, resilience is also described as context bound and therefore the processes involved in relational resilience are also influenced by the wider context. Consequently, ‘couples that do cope well aren’t successful in coping all the time’ (Yorgason, Piery, & Piery, 2007, p. 226), and therefore resilience can change and differ from one moment to the next, from one adversity to the following stressor. Therapist A described relational resilience as a dynamic, momentous process that is influenced by the context:
It is almost a momentary process ... a process that takes place as part of the moment ... and the moment is influenced by the context ... take them out of the context and in two weeks they are not resilient any longer.

Evidently, there is also a time element in relational resilience. It includes couples’ adaptive processes which unfold in response to stressful events, including sudden crises or normative life transitions (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Therapist B suggested that resilience is a possible response to normal developmental processes that destabilise the system: ‘... the normal developmental processes that one goes through; I wonder if resilience can also be defined therein ... to adapt to those normal developmental processes’ [‘... normale ontwikkelingsprosesse wat ‘n ou deurgaan; ek het gewonder of resilience nie ook binne dit gedefinieer kan word nie ... om aan te pas by daai normale ontwikkelingsprosesse’].

Some relational adversities do not just happen overnight, as explained by Couple 3: ‘it is a time thing ... it doesn’t just happen’. In addition, relational difficulties could be related to or affected by past experiences, as suggested by Couple 1: ‘[relational adversities] might be related to problems in your childhood that impact on your relationship’. Accordingly, resilience (and marital support) is a dyadic process that unfolds over time (Hawley, 2000) and is shaped by previous interactions (Coyne & Smith, 1991) or past experiences.

According to Couple 3, ‘relationships change with time’, which highlights that the timing of the relationship (including developmental changes in the relationship) and timing in the relationship (including life phase transitions such as childbearing) could also impact on the level of relational resilience. Couple 3 explained that:

Getting married at a young age did have its disadvantages ... we both perhaps felt that we had not lived our lives ... . I am glad we waited before having children ... we were ready for it.

Another aspect of resilience highlights the necessity for a period of time to pass in order to re-establish relational buoyancy, to recover, to adapt, and to adjust to life transitions, stressors, and adversities. Therapist C emphasised that a crisis has the potential to strengthen some systems, yet that the processes need time to evolve: ‘Some families or couples are stronger when they have gone through a crisis, but usually they need time for the processes to take place’ [‘Party gesinne of paartjies kom sterker uit krisisse, maar hulle het gewoonlik tyd nodig vir die prosesse om plaas te vind’]. Therefore, resilience is often discovered in retrospect. Resilience as an ongoing process is something that happens regularly over the course of a relationship’s lifetime and is aided by available resources (Greeff & Van der Merwe,
Therapist C identified the following resources as necessary for relational resilience: ‘talking to each other, religion, using money and resources that are available to them, redefining the crisis’ ['die praat met mekaar, godsdiens, benutting van geld en hulpbronne tot hulle beskikking, die herformulering van die krisis'].

Dialectical process between belonging and differentiation

The identified themes indicated that relational resilience is not only a dynamic and multivariate process, but they also highlighted the dialectical processes involved therein. These include resilience as a synergistic process, but also acknowledge that differentiation forms part of relationships and couple resilience. Relational resilience requires a balance between interdependence and autonomy (Yorgason et al., 2007). Therefore, it can be inferred that the degree of resilience and the quality of relational functioning correlates with the degree of belonging and differentiation allowed in the relationship.

On the one hand, connection and mutuality are important in relational resilience. This includes a view of intimate relationships as collaborative, as a place where shared experiences, experiences of togetherness, and mutual support reinforce the connection and belonging within the relationship. Mutuality refers to the conjoint processes of the intimate relationship (System C), which includes a conscious acceptance by both partners of the goals, modes and codes of interaction (Riggs, 1978). Couple 2 demonstrated this mutuality throughout their interview as they value a collaborative relationship characterised by communication, commitment, and acceptance:

Ultimately it is him and me ... we have to live with each other. That is how we approach everything in our lives ... it is you and me ... communication and the choice to be together and acceptance.

[Ultimate is dit ek en hy ... dit is ons wat met mekaar moet lewe. Dit is hoe ons alles approach in die lewe ... dit is ek en jy ... kommunikasie en die keuse om saam te wees en aanvaarding].

Marital support includes various interpersonal exchanges, for example, problem-solving, advice-giving, empathic listening, expressions of caring, strategic distraction, and constructive criticism (Story & Bradbury, 2004). These positive conflict resolution skills emphasise interaction, emotional connection, an increased awareness of each other’s struggles, support and encouragement, as well as a team approach to overcome problems (Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, Young Nahm, & Gottman, 2003). Both individual and relational strength can be forged through collaborative efforts to deal with a sudden crisis or prolonged adversity (Walsh, 2006). All these processes support the aforementioned response-ability inherent in resilience in intimate relationships.
Belonging implies reciprocal investment and involvement in intimate relationships. This interpersonal process or dyadic coping involves both marital partners and includes the interdependence of the spouses, their common concerns, their mutual goals (Bodenmann, 2005), and communication processes, such as clarity, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem solving (Walsh, 2006). In addition, joint problem-solving processes, shared emotion-focused coping activities, commitment, participation, proactive involvement, collaboration, and interdependence all highlight the reciprocal belonging and connectedness within intimate relationships.

Although the relational unit is important, it does not preclude individual experiences or individualised responses. Therefore, differentiation or individuation also plays an important role because each partner maintains a sense of self within the context of this partnership, with each partner having unique individual experiences, worldviews, interpersonal styles, responses to stress, and coping mechanisms.

It is important to mention that although individuation or differentiation is important in intimate relationships, it could also be viewed as a form of disconnection in the context of a relationship. As a result of disconnecting differentiation, relational deviances and adversities could lead to entropic disconnection or relational disorganisation, whereby new information is not considered and redundant patterns of interaction evolve. Accordingly, infidelity could be described as an attempt at differentiation within an intimate relationship. Therefore, the differentiation of each partner should happen within limits and in accordance with the systems’ rules to ensure that the relationship remains intimate and connected, and is characterised by a sense of belonging.

Resilience is also reflected in constant re-connection or regular re-marriage, which is established through belonging, mutuality and relational healing. Thus, it is important that partners re-connect and choreograph the endless, delicate dance between belonging and differentiation (Whitaker, 1989).

The aforementioned highlights that resilience in intimate relationships is a dialectical process which oscillates between individuation and belonging. Marriage or an intimate relationship becomes a two-person process where both individuals are involved in a continual struggle with the concepts of ‘me-ness’ and ‘we-ness’. Each spouse strives to remain an individual, each enacts a role of individuating, and each enacts a role of belonging, while they both struggle towards a kind of peership and attempt to make their marriage grow (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Whitaker, 1989). The aforementioned dialectical process takes place on a daily basis, and over time, as people who stay married move from being united to individuating, and then reuniting or remarrying.
Dialectical process between conservation and transformation

Inherent in the notion of relational resilience as a dialectical process is the idea that resilience in intimate relationships can also be viewed as either conservational or transformational. Relational resilience as an act of conservation implies that there are certain homeostatic relational processes that help to conserve the relationship as a system. Therefore, resilience can be viewed as a deviation counteracting mechanism which helps to maintain equilibrium within intimate relationships. This equilibrium and homeostasis refer to couples’ or partners’ ability to re-balance a relationship system that is in danger of changing and includes how the partners manoeuvre within the relationship in order to maintain the status quo or to conserve the relationship as a system (Elkaim, 1990).

The relational strategies of conservation that emerged from the participants’ themes included romanticising relational adversities. For example, one partner of Couple 1 explained: ‘I have a nice, cosy and wonderful marriage. If you consider everything, there were better, more good times than bad times’ [‘Ek het ’n nice, gesellige en wonderlike huwelik. As jy alles bymekaar vat was daar beter, meer goeie tye as wat ’n ou slegte tye gehad het’]. Other conservational strategies include escapism, compromising, avoidance of conflict, reconciliation, humorous interactions, respectful interactions, and so on. These strategies help to protect and safeguard relationships, thereby maintaining homeostasis. As a way of conserving the relationship both partners collaboratively establish a quid pro quo, which includes marital bargaining sessions or negotiations for the betterment of the marriage (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Alternatively, this adaptability inherent in resilience can also be considered as improvement. This process of transformation which is inherent in resilience implies that intimate relationships are able to recover (as seen in the process of conservation), but are also able to grow and move beyond difficulties as they adapt to changes and adversities. Therefore, resilience can be described as relational growth, as a process of transformation. These transformations often appear at relational turning points or at life transition phases. Relational resilience as an amplifying or transformational process perturbs the system and opens up possibilities for change within the relationship and therefore relational resilience proposes a healing alternative.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from the aforementioned themes, it is clear that resilience in intimate relationships is a multifaceted construct; it reflects a couple’s idiosyncratic responsibility and involves complex and dynamic processes that help to facilitate the dialectical process of belonging and individuation, and conservation or transformation of the intimate relationship.
The first author reconsiders relational resilience

This study has helped the first author to reframe her view of intimate relationships. Firstly, she has realised that resilience does not preclude problems and therefore relationships are not problem free. The acknowledgement that all couples have difficult times and periods in which they cannot negotiate alternative ways of relating does not preclude the possibility of relational resilience. Instead, resilience signifies that the alternatives are there, that couples have the ability to turn their troubles and challenges upside down, and that they can rebound and learn from them in order to continue their journey either together or apart (as in the case of divorce). She has learnt that resilience in intimate relationships is a dynamic process and that it does not necessarily mean the naïve ‘happily ever after’, but that realistically couples can ‘live mostly, happily ever after’ (Katie in Story of Us). Consequently, this study has brought hope by opening up relational possibilities for the researcher and reframing her previously distorted view of intimate relationships.

Limitations

The literature has shown that there is no uniform definition of resilience and therefore it is important to consider the definition of relational resilience provided within the context of this study. In addition, through researching the definition of relational resilience, certain relational abilities and processes involved therein have been identified, but these have not been discussed in detail. Apart from the limited view of relational resilience, another obvious limitation of this study was the homogeneity of the participants. As a result of this homogeneity, as well as the limited sample size, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all intimate relationships across cultures. Furthermore, the administration of the visual stimuli as well as the language was not standardised. Each couple was asked to complete the manual on their own, and therefore important interactional information was omitted. Lastly, the participants were homogenous in terms of ethnicity and class; however, the language use was not consistent in this study.

Recommendations

With the aforementioned limitations in mind, the following recommendations could be considered for future studies on resilience in intimate relationships. Firstly, with regard to research, there is an inconsistency in how terms are defined and outcomes selected, and an arbitrariness to how risk factors are determined, without sensitivity to the context in which they are measured (Ungar, 2003; Ungar, Lee, Callaghan, & Boothroyd, 2005). Therefore, further qualitative studies and an extensive literature review could be useful in consolidating a contextualised definition of relational resilience. Secondly, future studies could consider including couples from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to explore the definition and prevalence of resilience.
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in diverse intimate relationships. Thirdly, it is recommended that future studies be conducted in one language or translated before interpreting and discussing the data. Alternatively, future studies could consider the specific factors, abilities and processes that facilitate relational resilience. Finally, future studies could either focus on couples’ responses to specific areas of relational adversities (e.g., life transitions) or participant couples could be given tasks in order to assess relational abilities and processes.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Nerine Venter, after completing her undergraduate studies, worked at a Family Centre in London for two years. Upon her return to South Africa, she completed a master’s degree in clinical psychology at Unisa. During her master’s training, she underwent a shift to a circular epistemology and was fine-tuned in eco-systemic and family therapy. This study on resilience in intimate relationships formed part of her professional and personal journey. At the moment she is continuing her journey (and training) as an Intern Psychologist at Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital.

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