Resilience: A Definition in Context

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Resilience is a well researched phenomenon in the literature. The notion of 'bouncing back' has been the predominant feature of definitions of resilience. This paper examines four research studies within four different contexts to understand the concept of resilience within a broader systems view inclusive of the development of individuals and the contexts in which resilience is supported. Based upon four separate qualitative and quantitative research studies (i.e., adolescents in school, women and domestic violence, children in separated families and students adjusting to university), this paper endeavours to propose a broader understanding of resilience. In acknowledging the context and the developing nature of resilience over the lifespan the authors offer a new definition of resilience as 'the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external recourses in response to different contextual and developmental challenges'.

During the past few decades there has been a proliferation of research on resilience. This interest in resilience is not surprising as many disciplines (psychology, social work) move from a deficit, 'glass half empty' view of human nature to a positive, salutogenic, 'glass half full' approach. Contemporary psychological research has a much more semi-permeable quality with psychological researchers throwing caution to the wind and involving themselves in contexts, and with methods, that in the past were challenging. Masten and Wright (2010) present an overview of the four waves of resilience research in which they propose that initially resilience research focused on the definitions and descriptions of resilience; the second wave focused on the variables associated with resilience: the third wave sought to test resilience intervention ideas; and the fourth wave, that is current resilience research, seeks to advance resilience studies in integrative ways to "better understand the complex processes that lead to resilience" (p. 214).

In order to place our current understanding of, and position on, resilience, the authors will briefly outline the key issues in resilience research and present the most contemporary definitions in the field. This will be followed by an exploration of resilience through four separate case studies where each presents data on participants, analysis, and key findings. Key themes relevant to resilience are identified and discussed for each case study. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research, and a proposed definition of resilience.

Borrowed first from the physical sciences, early research on resilience was not initially characterised as 'resilience' research. Early resilience research focused on risk factors to chronic and acute illness for adults (Dawber, Meadors, & Moore, 1951), and for children, the focus was on vulnerability in impoverished and troubled families (Werner & Smith, 1982). Therefore the negative effects of adversity were an important focus for researchers in defining resilience outcomes. People were deemed resilient if they did not develop problems (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). Even today the vast majority of research on resilience has focused on at-risk children and adolescents (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2007; Curtis & Cicchetti, 2007; Flores, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, von Eye, & Levendosky, 2009; Ribbens McCarthy, 2006) and therefore many resilience intervention programmes have been developed for children and adolescents. However, despite numerous and significant risk factors cited in the literature, not all children and adolescents who were considered 'at-risk' developed mental health issues/problems (Ungar, 2005a; Ungar, 2005b).

In terms of defining resilience, there is

controversy in the literature as to whether resilience is a characteristic/personal quality, a process, or an outcome (Ahern, Ark, & Byers, 2008). In defining resilience as a personal quality, Ahern et al. (2008) argues that resilience is an "adaptive stress resistant personal quality" (p. 32), whereas resilience defined as a process is described as "a dynamic process that is influenced by both neural and psychological self-organisations, as well as the transaction between the ecological context and the developing organism" (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2007, p. 811). However, when defined as an outcome, resilience is thought of as "a class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). Indeed work by Rutter (2007) goes beyond the conceptualisation of resilience being about only the individual and has included recognition of the environment. Similarly, Masten and Wright (2010) argue strongly for the conceptualisation of resilience to go beyond being an individual characteristic and not bounded within an organism; instead, they view resilience as a dynamic process and interaction between the individual and their ever-changing environment.

Other authors emphasise that resilience is a phenomenon that is characterised by both outcomes and processes. For example, resilience is characterised as a phenomenon which is defined by "the success (positive developmental outcomes) of the (coping) process involved (given the circumstance)" (Leipold & Greve, 2009, p. 41). In contrast to being guided by a specific philosophical orientation, participants of qualitative studies have been asked to define the concept of resilience (Hegney et al., 2007; Schilling, 2008; Ungar et al., 2007). Interestingly one participant of Hegney et al.'s (2007) study on individual resilience in rural people in Queensland, Australia, described resilience as "a bit like a rubber ball. If it's under pressure or something it can actually spring back to its size and shape and carry on without sustaining undue damage" (p. 6). Indeed this image of resilience as a 'rubber ball' and 'bouncing back' is an expression that has dominated the understanding of resilience and the definition used in research studies and the literature generally (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2008).

Nevertheless, despite the vast range of definitions, there is some agreement in the field that to determine if someone is displaying a resilient profile/resilience, two elements must be present: namely, adversity (i.e., a high-risk situation or threat) and successful adaptation/competence (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Schilling, 2008). Adversity is evaluated according to negative life circumstances (Schilling, 2008) and adaptation is defined as successful performance on age-developmental tasks. More recently the work of Ungar through the Resilience Research Centre in Canada has galvanised much interest and discussion around resilience. Ungar (2008) outlines a new ecologically focused definition:

> *In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways (p. 225).*

Ungar's (2008) understanding and definition of resilience highlights the ideas that individual attributes, family aspects and social environment (as well as culture) all play an important role in resilience. Therefore resilience can be viewed as a multidimensional construct. In order to try and understand the multidimensionality of the resilience construct the authors undertook to investigate how resilience can be understood in four different contexts and research studies. These contexts are not unique but they do provide examples of different ages, genders, and developmental stages to better understand the importance of context and development in resilience research. The contexts explored are, adolescents in schools, domestic violence within families, separation and divorce and adjustment to university. Each of these contexts provides a unique insight into the way in which resilience is

understood.

Case Study One – Self-Efficacy, Sense of Belonging and Social Support as Predictors of Resilience in Adolescents.

Adolescence is a transitional period defined by major physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes. These changes have been identified as major stressors, although some individuals cope well with these changes, others struggle to adapt. These individual differences in coping may be due to the ability to be resilient. The degree to which a person is resilient can be influenced and determined by the presence of protective factors. Social support, sense of belonging and self-efficacy are factors that may be considered as protective against risk. The current study aimed to examine whether social support, sense of belonging and self-efficacy would significantly predict resilience. Participants were 60 grade nine and ten students who completed four self-report questionnaires: Psychological Sense of School Membership (Goodenow, 1993), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), the General Scale of Self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), and the Adolescent Resilience Scale (Hjemdal, Friborg, Stiles, Martinussen, & Rosenvinge, 2006) to measure levels of social support, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and resilience. Standard multiple regression analysis revealed that the predictor variables in combination significantly predicted resilience (25.2% variance explained). However, results indicated that only social support independently predicted resilience (Nowicki, 2008).

Case Study Two – Situational-Contextual Factors that Mediate the Impact of Exposure of Domestic Violence on Children: A Retrospective Study of Adult Women Residing in Perth, Western Australia.

Much of the existing research on children and domestic violence has focused on the negative consequences of witnessing such violence. However, in recent years several researchers (Carlson, 2000; Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002) have endeavoured to identify factors that promote resilience among children who are exposed to domestic violence. Due to the paucity of qualitative research studies examining children's experiences of domestic violence exposure as well as the factors that mediate the impact of witnessing such violence, this study aimed to address these gaps in the research. Specifically, this study aimed to explore women's experiences of witnessing domestic violence during their childhood and adolescent years as well as the factors that influenced their ability to cope with witnessing such violence. Six women who had witnessed domestic violence during childhood or adolescence were interviewed using a qualitative research design with an underlying phenomenological and resilience framework. Six dominant themes, each with a number of subthemes, emerged from the data. These were: the context of the violence, the characteristics of the violence, the impact of domestic violence, coping and survival strategies and outcomes (O'Bryan, 2008).

Case Study Three – Divorce Transitions: Identifying Risk and Understanding Resilience in Children's Adjustment to Parental Separation.

The elevated risks that divorce presents for children and the associated negative consequences have been well documented (Pike, Cohen & Pooley, 2008). However, significantly less attention has been devoted towards identifying factors that promote resilience among children of divorce. The study attempted to rectify this imbalance in the literature by exploring children's own perspectives of their adjustment to parental divorce. Specifically, the study examined how children determine what it means for parents to separate and how they understand the ways in which they survive the divorce experience. Eight children (six female and two male) from separated families were interviewed using a qualitative research design within a phenomenological framework. Six themes emerged from the research: the significance of age at time of parental separation; continuity

and flexibility in seeing dad; co-residence and closeness: mothers as important sources of support; the positive impact of the step-father; increasing responsibility and positive child attributes, and It was all for the best (Kint, 2007).

Case Study Four – Differences in Resilience and University Adjustment between School Leaver and Mature Age University Students.

Previous research has indicated that mature age and school leaver students have different experiences when transitioning to the university environment. It is suggested that the transition to university is a major life transition and may be a period of great stress. For mature age students and school leaver students, the impacts upon adjustment to university are varied during the transition to university study. It has been proposed that for successful university adjustment, high levels of resilience are needed. Three hypotheses were tested with a sample of undergraduate students ($n = 63$). All participants responded to the Resilience Scale for Adults (Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003) and the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Hypothesis one, that there is a relationship between resilience and adjustment, was supported, with 31.9 percent of the variance in adjustment can be accounted for by resilience. Hypothesis two, that there is a difference in university adjustment between school leaver and mature age students, and hypothesis three, that mature age students would exhibit higher levels of resilience than school leavers, were both not supported (Munro & Pooley, 2009).

Discussion

In this discussion we will present our findings under two major sections. The first section examines what each case study reveals about resilience in the specific contexts. The second section will provide an overall discussion of the findings of the case studies, the implications, and propose a new definition for resilience.

The Case Studies

Case study one provides support for the relationship between resilience and protective factors. The protective factors specifically examined were sense of belonging (SoB) which is defined as a

"sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others…and of feeling oneself to be an important part of …life and activity…" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25); social support (SS) refers to a transaction between one person and another, which may be about providing information, an appraisal, showing emotions or by aiding the person (Murphy, 1987); and self-efficacy (SE), developed by a number of authors, most notably, Bandura (1977, 1986), which is seen as the mediator between knowledge and action and is defined as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Self-efficacy refers a person's appraisal of their ability to act in a given situation regardless of the skill repertoire they may have (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Rutter, 1985), and is regarded as an important motivational construct (Gist & Mitchell, 1992).

In Nowicki's (2008) study, the regression model (SoB, SS and SE) accounted for 25% of the resilience score, suggesting that connection to something outside themselves (SoB), the ability to connect (SE), and external resources (SS) are important to adolescent resilience. Social support was the significant predicting factor which substantiates other research that argues that social support is a mediator for transition experiences (Stumpers, Breen, Cohen, Pooley & Pike, 2005). Previous research has reported that the positive effects of an individual's social support are derived not only from the support actually available, but also their perception of that support (Cauce, Felner, & Primavera, 1982). Therefore, within the adolescent transition processes, the ability to recognise, want and seek support, as well as having the opportunity for support, are all important interactive mechanisms which contribute to the resilience of adolescents.

For the women in Case Study Two, the recollection of their experiences is a reflection of their ability to adapt from childhood and the influence of this on their longitudinal adaptive coping process. There is recognition of supports within their childhood contexts that enabled them to survive, as well recognition for the individual

characteristics they possessed. Understanding these internal characteristics gave them the confidence to find coping strategies as a child but also as an adult.

In what is essentially a quintessential risk environment, these women articulated successful adaptation for later coping and recognise resources, both internal and external. What is also interesting is that the women described the importance of the context of the domestic violence in that they talked about their position in the family and how this impacted on their experience. Finally they also recognised the use of adaptive mechanisms for themselves as mothers with their own families.

In Case Study Three, the children articulated the adaptation to a new family world in that they reconstruct their family to include flexible access to both parents, obtain support from their mother, and include step fathers when needed. For these children, understanding the importance and flexibility of the family system supports these children to recognise the separation as a positive outcome in their situation. Further to this, these children displayed the developmental challenges of adaptation; they have moved on and their cognitive ability (memory) also creates a new reality. Developmentally, taking on new responsibilities is a positive adaptive process. Given that figures on marriage and separation indicate that less than one third of marriages go beyond 10 years it would seem that many children at sometime will have to face the challenge of family separation. Do we look at separation as a new era of transitions that children are supposed to deal with?

The final Case Study supported the relationship between resilience and adjustment in the transition to university within a student population. There were no reported differences between school leavers and mature age entry students; however other studies indicate that whilst there may be no difference quantitatively, qualitatively the experiences are different and therefore the adversities may be different (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007), and this may culminate in a similar need for resilience in adjustment to the university context. This may account for adjustment contributing 31.9% to the variation in resilience in the Munro and Pooley (2009) study.

Overall Discussion

If these case studies are examined together, a number of important considerations with respect to resilience start to emerge. There is support from previous research, the design and the outcomes of the case studies, for the role and importance of internal resources. Self efficacy, coping, and sense of belonging are important internal resources which contribute to resilience in the contexts presented in this paper. The provision and facilitation of external resources such as social support have also shown to be important by design and outcome in these different contexts. The ability and opportunity, for any of the participants in these case studies, to recognise, make use of or have the supports available is vital to a resilience process/interaction.

What is also overwhelmingly clear is the support for examining resilience in different contexts and highlighting how the context interacts with the processes of resilience. The opportunities for individuals are different, the needs are different, and the extent to which individuals can make use of these opportunities is different. All of these variables change over time; understanding that development in all of these aspects is vital to our understanding of the dynamics of resilience. The importance of context and development is that if one only considers resilience from an individual perspective, then the tendency to 'blame the victim' would become apparent, making it the individual's responsibility to work on themselves to make themselves more resilient. These case studies indicate that resilience is a multidimensional, multi-level construct.

Whilst the more current definitions of resilience do recognise the importance of context, the lifespan approach to understanding the importance of development and transitions is not a focal point. The authors therefore propose a new definition of resilience: "The potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external recourses in response to different contextual and developmental challenges", in recognition of

many of the aspects that these case studies exemplify. These aspects are presented in the literature; however, they are generally presented in isolation. Therefore we have taken the opportunity to combine the significant aspects and specifically highlight and present what the authors think is important to the resilience field.

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