Towards a process-based understanding of resilience: An investigation into post-trauma resilience in Eritrean refugees

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Overview

- Personal Background to Research
- Definitions & Rationale for the study of resilience
- Brief Literature Review
- Research Aims
- Study Sample
- Method
- Results
- Discussion & Conclusion
Definitions

- **Psychological Trauma**: the unique individual experience of objectively distressing event/s or prolonged conditions that may overwhelm one’s capacity for emotional integration. These traumatic events are understood as encompassing a subjective threat to life, sanity or integrity (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1996).

- **Resilience**: a dynamic and interactive process leading to positive adaptation within the context of significant threat, severe adversity or trauma (Masten & Powell, 2003).
Why study resilience?

- It challenges the negative traumatisation view that has been given prominence in psychology that has seen an often singular prominence afforded to vulnerability.

- Preoccupation with post-traumatic stress reactions means that positive adaptation following exposure to trauma is still under-researched.

- Further research on this phenomenon can provide a useful body of knowledge from which mental health practitioners can draw on in developing strengths-based interventions.
Resilience Research: Beginnings

- Move from initial consensus in trauma theory that all individuals exposed to a certain degree of trauma will be severely affected by it.

- More contemporary researchers (e.g. Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) view LT psychological effects on a continuum: Negative, Neutral & Positive.

- This contention is supported by research studies that have found evidence of neutral or positive psychological LT effects (e.g. Sossou, Craig, Ogren, & Schnak, 2008).
Resilience Research: Recent developments

- **First Wave**: identifying factors that seem to serve as a buffer against harmful effects of adversity e.g. social support, hardiness... (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacharez, 2006)

- **Second Wave**: focused on resilience as an interactional & transactional process (e.g. Kumpfer, 1999)

- **Third Wave**: builds on processes uncovered by second wave to develop & test interventions designed to foster resilience

*Better understanding of resilience processes are required before third wave goal can be reached* (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005)
Resilience Research

- Another important development in the resilience construct is the distinction between the three major classes of phenomena that resilience is used to refer to in literature:

1) Individuals in high-risk groups who enjoy positive outcomes
2) Positive adaptive despite a challenging event or experience of misfortune during a specific developmental period
3) Positive adaptation following exposure to traumatic events
Current Research Gaps

- Resilience as a process has till now mainly been studied in individuals from high-risk backgrounds or who have undergone particular adverse event NOT individuals exposed to trauma.

- Field necessitates studies investigating role of life-long adaptive systems (family, community, cultural belief systems...) in resilience to trauma (Klasen et al., 2010).

- Field generally deprived of culturally sensitive understanding of resilience (Ungar, 2007).
Current Study Aims

- To address current research gaps by investigating the interactive processes underlying post-trauma resilience in an adult population from an ecological, developmental and culturally-sensitive perspective.
Research Questions

1) What psychological processes do participants’ perceive to be influencing their adaptation to traumatic experiences?

2) a) How does the individual’s ecological system (family, community etc.) contribute to the development of resilience in a refugee population?

   b) How does culture, as a broad ecological system influence the development of resilience in refugees?

3) In what ways has resilience been perceived to be affected by the individual’s development and life trajectory?

4) What framework can be used to understand how these processes work starting from exposure to trauma and ending with positive adaptation?
Study Sample

- Refugee group

- Rationale:
  1) Exposed to high levels of trauma: refugee experience conceptualised as a composite, prolonged and acutely distressing experience (Watters, 2007)

  2) Substantial number of refugees do not experience LT mental health difficulties and adjust to live stable, productive lives (Schweitzer et al., 2006)
Study Sample

- Malta as selection pool: high annual influx of refugees from traumatic backgrounds, personal experience facilitating access, commonality of experience for participants

- Eritrean cultural background who have sought asylum in Malta.

Rationale:
- Eritrean is relatively understudied as a cultural background within this field of research
- High probability that participants would have been exposed to poverty, war and instability prior to flight
- Of refugees arriving in Malta, Eritreans are the second largest national group increasing the recruitment pool.
Method

- Qualitative methodology
- Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006)
- Sampling strategies: purposeful, criterion sampling
- Data collection: 6 in-depth semi-structured interviews, re-visited field in theoretical sampling stage to refine categories and their properties
- Data analysis: multiple levels of analysis starting very close to the data. Phenomena described by each line of text labelled and in subsequent coding stages those with common meanings and that made analytic sense were grouped and re-labelled. The level of abstraction increased as the coding stages progressed. Finally categories, their properties and associations formed the of theory being generated.
Constructing Data

Diagram:

- **THEME**
- **High-Order Category**
  - **Low-Order Category**
    - Code
    - Code
  - **Low-Order Category**
    - Code
    - Code
  - **Low-Order Category**
    - Code
    - Code

**Raw Data Consisting of Meaning Units**
Results

- Analysis of data from participants resulted in:
  - 7 key themes, each composed of categories that represent the main ideas that emerged from the narratives.
  - A theoretical model depicting relationships between themes and categories.
Theme 1

Engaging with an Adverse Reality

Describing resilient individual’s propensity to influence one’s environment and recognise & accept stimuli that can’t always be controlled

- High-order category 1: Sense of Agency
  ‘Valuing personal autonomy’, ‘creating and persevering to obtain personal goals’

Participants emerged as being driven by an internal compass and the belief that they could influence their environments rather than be passive recipients of it.
Goal-setting: Individuals set clear goals and their refugee experience and associated traumatic events could then be seen as a means to the end the person has chosen for himself/herself. Events are hence are appraised less negatively.

*It is a struggle for freedom...I was not looking to what I am passing through but from what I was escaping and where I am going so...it was a difficult journey but I had something I was looking for, something that after this difficult journey there is freedom...so I was not looking too much on the negative experience of the journey...I was happy... it is a journey to freedom (I.6,L.26-36).*

*Describing refugee experience*
High-order category 2: Acceptance of Adversity

‘Realisation that adversity is part of life’, ‘Acceptance of situations beyond one’s control’

Participants provided examples of situations such as harsh detention conditions that do not succumb to their control despite the persistent use of cognitive and behavioural responses.
“There are many things which are happening to us as migrants, which we are not heading towards but it comes, so what I have to do is try to accept it and try to manage somehow to cross otherwise I will end up being stuck and depressed” (I.5,L. 103-107).

Participant describing her approach to unpredictability facing migrants

Participants expressed how accepting such situations as an inherent part of life reduced negative affect.
Theme 2

Cognitive and Behavioural Response Repertoire

Collection of skills and techniques resilient individuals tend to exhibit in the face of a traumatic event.

- **High-order category 1: Cognitive Mastery**
  Cognitive techniques which appeared to instil a sense of control over traumatic experiences through their propensity to alter the outcome of an event or one’s perception of it.
  E.g. ability to deconstruct experience rather than view it at face value or employing multiple perspectives

- **High-order category 2: Action Orientation**
  Proactive stance towards adverse environment characterised by hard-working nature and an un-relentless, perseverant approach until goal is achieved
“of course there are problems you will you will find big barriers and so on.. But you have to try your best to cross this barriers and and and help yourself...this doesn't mean that you shouldn't recognise or think about the barriers or difficulties you face but you shouldn’t be discouraged by things and you have to continue and try to do anything you want in your life” (I.6,L.88-90).

Participant describing his perseverant approach to facing difficulties
Theme 3
Striving to Maintain Existential Well-Being

Points to existence of deeper layer of psychological processes underlying some of the overt processes implicated in resilience post-trauma.

- **High-order category 1: Adverse life experiences taking on a specific meaning**

  ‘Motivated by an ultimate purpose in life’, ‘Personal goals attributing meaning to one’s experience’

*Developed to highlight meaning participants’ ascribe to their lives and their ultimate reason for living. This purpose seems to be the underlying factor motivating their decision to become a refugee and spurring them on amidst traumatic events of the journey*
Theme 3

- High-order category 2: Maintaining Hope in Adversity

‘Patience’, ‘Reframing adversity using positive thinking’, ‘Expecting positive outcomes’

Modalities that result in the maintenance of hope despite the level of environmental adversity

Hope emerged as a necessary condition for positive adaptation following trauma. In an environment characterised by unpredictability and set-backs, hope seemed to allow participants to persevere towards goals even when these seemed unattainable.
“I mean you have to be very optimistic and enduring if you lose your endurance then you’ll be hopeless and the finally you’ll be nothing”. (I.2,L.290).

**Participant highlighting the centrality of hope**

“All the other things I hope...I am still hoping you know, I have not given hope, I am still struggling and wishing there is a solution or something in the future, some change in the future“ (I.5,L.39)

**Participant’s describing hope in response to setback**
Theme 4

Harnessing Social and Religious Resources in the face of Trauma

This theme describes the adaptive role of certain social and religious resources in the face of traumatic experiences.

- **High-order category: Deriving Support through Social Relationships**

  ‘Support Network’

  - Presence of a network that works by providing emotional/practical support & curbing feelings of loneliness and fulfilling needs for belonging when initial group is no longer present. E.g. through encouragement, assistance, communal problem-solving, sharing of experiences
‘Deriving Social Support’

- Not simply the presence of the network but the ability to derive benefits from it.

Narratives show how some participants were able to draw from the tenacity and positive outcomes of others and make it count for them.
“...we will be happy more than him, because we'll see even we we are going to take this chance, like in one day we don't know the day but one day we get...we hope” (I.1,L.679,683,685,689).

Participant describing her response to seeing others being released from detention
Theme 4

- **Low-order category: Religiosity as an Adaptive Resource**

Across all narratives, albeit in varying degrees

Discourse portrays religion as a multi-dimensional construct which includes beliefs, practices (private & communal), emotions and experiences which support the process leading to positive adaptation.
“unless we know there is our eternal father who takes care of us, who loves us a lot as his children and then, then this world is hard especially for people like me who have gone through a lot of difficulties and unless you have someone to rely on, see its hard”

(I.2,L.152)

Participant expressing belief in a divine presence who provides support and protection.
Theme 4

Mechanisms

- Practices e.g. prayer lessening negative emotions in times of distress

- Beliefs e.g. divine presence providing support and protection - imparts confidence and hope, increases positive affect and attenuates feelings of aloneness

- Religion providing meaning to one’s life, and in this respect a deeper meaning to adversity, that in itself can instil serenity rather than unrelenting questions and frustration in unexplainable circumstances.
“I mean everyone at the sea, was panicking a lot, very panicky, and at that time I had full peace I can tell you, but its from above you see, there is something that unless you put your trust in God in Christ then what’s the advantage of your living, or what’s the meaning of your life” (I.2,L.162).

Participant describing his journey on the rough seas
Theme 5

Impact of Participants’ Childhood Microsystem on the Development of Resilience

Central premise is the influence of participants’ earlier life on the resilience process

- **Low-order category: Family of Origin’s Role in Cultivating Resilience**
  
  *Within this category narratives highlight the following mechanisms:*
  
  1) *Direct/indirect messages from caregivers*
  2) *Modelling of caregivers’ ‘resilient’ behaviour and reinforcement of this ‘favourable’ behaviour*
  3) *Characteristics of family unit providing safe/supportive environment*
“Always my mother tell me, even if even if we have examination, she told me ‘tsenat kberi’, don't be afraid, don't be panic, be strong, you have to be relax and then you are going to jump it” (I.1,L.533-541).

Example of a direct message from participant’s mother encouraging tenacity in the face of childhood difficulties
Narratives also speak of certain child-rearing practices/upbringing that may have contributed to the development of resilience.

Self-reliance is related with family upbringing as well, I can see that in my family...I was taken care of by my mother and my father and...I was given the space to make decisions and you know to get responsibility...and I find this very important, very useful...I think helps decision making later on and that you become responsible for your actions (I.R2,L.151-155).

Participant speaking of the development of his sense of agency
Theme 6: Eritrean Culture and its Resilience-Promoting Potential

Describes the cultural context within which participants’ lived until their forced departure as young adults and related factors that seem to have had a bearing on the resilience process.


- Most mentioned by a number of participants
ERITREAN CULTURE

VALUES
- Self-reliance
- Endurance
- Persevering towards one’s goals
- Assistance
- Responsibility towards one’s community/country
- Collective Consciousness
- Family Unity

NORMS
- Being independent upon reaching adulthood
- Seeking help only within family
- Elders giving advice & assisting
- Assuming responsibility for extended family

BELIEFS
- The importance of the psychological aspect
- With self-belief one can overcome any obstacle
- “Tsenat” ideology
The following were emphasised to a great extent:

- **Tsenat ideology** – an unwavering belief in the importance of being strong and remaining firm in the face of difficulty

- **Assistance** - Great value placed on assisting the other

- **Collective Consciousness** - Tendency to seek out the group for activities and problem-solving, putting the group before oneself

- **Self-reliance** - Individuals’ tend to attempt to solve problems alone without seeking help
“...the ideologies, of resilience, of the challenges and passing through hardships...these things and they worked a lot, the leaders of the armed struggle on this...so it becomes more stronger and stronger, even these terms are much more used... because of the armed struggle as well...not retreating , not moving...if there is things like trying to push you, you stay, and we grow up in this kind of culture so it becomes part of you, so with individuals and with me to an extent, because I grow up in this culture I now say that, I have these things” (I.6,L.180-248).

Participant explaining the development of such “ideologies” in individuals growing up in Eritrea
‘Transmitting cultural messages’

Suggests that Eritrean culture impacts the resilience process through the transmission and subsequent internalisation of cultural values through:

1) direct stories/teachings and life examples from teachers and elders

2) poems, proverbs, local terminology in a given society to which individuals are constantly exposed

E.g. Participants spoke of a rich “resilience” related Tigrinyan lexicon:

*Tsenat* – resist & challenge a difficult situation

*Tetsawarnet* – related to concepts of endurance, perseverance

*Mbda* – to challenge
“...these words they are very used in the culture, and still we use them, these things like you know, and coming from this background, this culture, helps you to pass er difficulties and to cope I think, it helps” (I.6,L.488-498).

Participant explaining how this terminology is internalised by the individual
Theme 7: Responding Critically and Analytically to Messages Received

Describes how resilient individuals deconstructed messages received and selected specific resources to respond to the fluctuating demands of situations they were exposed to.

- General tendency to critically evaluate messages received from society, media, family etc.

- Participants’ overall response to their context was hence seen to be well-thought out, dynamic and complex
Theoretical Model

- Data analysis indicated themes together with the associations between them
- Model depicting the interaction between themes
- As a whole the model provides a comprehensive picture of the process leading to resilience in the context of refugee trauma
Discussion & Conclusion

Main Findings:

- Emergent themes highlight the role in resilience of a variety of psychological processes e.g. striving to maintain existential well-being, as well as the role of contextual factors e.g. religious practices and cultural norms, and indicated the presence of set of transactional processes between these 2 aspects.

- Findings thus highlight processes emanating from within, as well as from multiple systems within which the individual develops – family, culture, religion, social group.

- Theoretical model then captures how these process operate in conjunction to lead to post-trauma resilience in Eritrean refugees.
Discussion & Conclusion

- This research’s main findings can serve as a platform for discussion in the field of resilience in the following areas:

  - An inter-relationship between resilience factors clearly exists – a single resilience factor does not operate in isolation as previously thought but seems to exert influence on other relevant factors as well as the adverse context itself.

  - One’s existential well-being seems to be maintained through hope and ascribing meaning in life. This appears to provide the psychological environment appropriate for engaging with traumatic experiences in a functional and adaptive way e.g. by motivating individuals to persevere with their action despite the level of environmental threat.
Discussion & Conclusion

- The role of one’s culture cannot be overlooked when seeking to understand the individual’s resilience process. Important to consider how particular political climates and cultures impact a person psychologically.

- Religion’s role in resilience should be considered, especially through religious worldviews and notions about the divine in promoting hope and meaning in life.

- Important to consider the contribution of the individual’s earlier life in the development of resilience through various pathways

  - Some seem to give prominence to classical learning theories e.g. vicarious learning

  - For others, aspects of developmental psychology may be pertinent to explain how the pathways operate e.g. attachment theory to explain how the nurturing environment of the family would enable the individual to access & benefit from future environmental resources available to him/her.
Discussion & Conclusion

- Certain external factors e.g. tsenat ideology can be generally adaptive but are also sometimes maladaptive.

- Important to consider a method of responding to context that makes allowance for these maladaptive messages, allows sustained positive engagement with one’s environment as it prevents one succumbing to negative reactions; explains how one is more or less resilient in the face of the same messages received.
Take Home Message....

- Resilience is a process that has deep roots starting from a person’s childhood environment.

- It is best understood as a set of cumulative processes that can’t generally be unravelled.

- Resilience is a multi-faceted and valuable construct through which one can understand the possibility of idiosyncratic responses to trauma.

- For clinicians to prevent LT negative effects following traumatic events, a therapeutic focus on supporting the individual to identify certain processes (as highlighted by the model) they may possess may be a valuable course of action.
References


