

RESILIENCE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Declaration

Student number: **4244-424-1**

I declare that *Resilience in Intimate Relationships* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Mrs. N Venter

Date

Summary

This is a qualitative study that researches the definition and meaning of resilience in intimate relationships. A constructivist perspective guides the theoretical framework of this study and a systemic approach to intimate relationships provides a theoretical foundation. Apart from an extensive literature survey, three different sources of information were included in this study on relational resilience. Three family therapists were interviewed to gain some understanding of their experiences with couples in distress. Three participant couples examined visual stimuli (excerpts of couple interactions from five films) and discussed their responses and personal experiences in semi-structured interviews. The participants' themes were analysed through thematic network analysis in order to explore their definitions of resilience in light 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 terms

Resilience, relational resilience, couples' resilience, intimate relationships, marriage, relational abilities, relational processes, systemic paradigm.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	i
Summary	ii
Key terms	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	viii
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Chapter 2 – Literature Survey	4
A shift to resilience	4
Definitions of resilience	6
Individual resilience	8
Family resilience	11
Community resilience	12
Systemic resilience	13
Relational resilience	16
Couple resilience	16
Conceptualisation of intimate relationships	18
Intimate relationships in context	20
The evolution of intimate relationships	20
The shift to relational resilience	21
Relational resilience as a process	23
Resilience and couples' adaptation to stress	25
Marital quality	27
Resilience: Support, coping, and teamwork in intimate relationships	30
Sexual resiliency	33
Resilience in context	35
Economic resiliency	35
Social resilience	37
The incongruity of resilience	39
Pathways to resilience	40
Secrets to resilience	40
Principles of resilience	41
Resiliency resources	43
Resilience in therapy	45
Chapter 3 – Theoretical Foundation	48
A brief overview of Systems Theory	48
Musings and illusions of intimate relationships	52
Nonsummativity	52
Marriage as System C	54
Dialectical process of individuation and belonging	57

Interconnectedness in intimate relationships	60
Relational building blocks	63
Interdependence	63
Complementarity	63
Communication	64
Negotiations	65
Trust and honesty	66
Respect, tolerance, and acceptance	67
Sex	67
Love	68
Intimate relationships redefined	68
Chapter 4 – Research Design	70
Purpose of the research	70
Interpretive framework	71
Research context	73
Sampling	73
Data collection	76
Section A: Family therapists	76
Section B: Couples' stimuli responses	76
Section C: Couples' interviews	77
Measurement	77
Data analysis	77
Step 1: Familiarisation and immersion	79
Step 2: Coding the material	80
Step 3: Identifying and inducing themes	80
Step 4: Constructing networks	80
Step 5: Elaborate, describe, and explore	81
Step 6: Interpretation and checking	81
Soundness and trustworthiness	82
"Validity"	82
Credibility	83
"Reliability"	84
Dependability	84
Chapter 5 – Results	86
Section A: Family therapists – Therapist A	86
Background	86
Themes	87
Resilience as dynamic process	88
Resilience as response-ability	89
Intimacy as resilience	91
Section A: Family therapists – Therapist B	91
Background	91
Themes	92
Resilience as contextual accommodation	92
Resilience as relational process	95
Section A: Family therapists – Therapist C	96
Background	96
Themes	97
Resilience as observer distinction	97

Resilience as process	99
Resilience as capacity	100
Section B: Couples' response stimuli – Couple 1	100
Themes from stimuli responses	101
Resilience as durability	102
Resilience as dialectical process	103
Resilience as circularity	105
Section B: Couples' response stimuli – Couple 2	108
Themes from stimuli responses	108
Resilience as self-correcting ability	109
Resilience as dialectical process	111
Entropic disconnection	113
Section B: Couples' response stimuli – Couple 3	114
Themes from stimuli responses	114
Resilience as adaptive coping	114
Resilience as dialectical process	116
Section C: Couples' interviews – Couple 1	118
Background	118
Themes	120
Resilience as synergistic process	121
Resilience as differentiation	123
Resilience as conservational	124
Section C: Couples' interviews – Couple 2	126
Background	126
Themes	127
Dialectical process in resilience	128
Resilience as transformational	130
Resilience as conservational	132
Section C: Couples' interviews – Couple 3	133
Background	133
Themes	134
Resilience as relational response-ability	134
Resilience as dialectical process	137
Chapter 6 – Integration	141
Resilience as response-ability	144
Resilience as a process	146
Resilience as a dynamic and multivariate process	147
Dialectical process between belonging and differentiation	149
Dialectical process between conservation and transformation	151
Chapter 7 – Conclusion	154
The researcher reconsiders relational resilience	154
Limitations	155
Recommendations	155
Conclusion	156
Reference List	158

List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Antonovsky's health ↔ ill-health continuum in relation to salutogenic and pathogenic views of resilience (Almedom & Glandon, 2007, p.136)	6
Figure 2.2	Possible responses to a stressful or traumatic event, or significant adversity	10
Figure 3.1	Relationships between systems (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.189)	53
Figure 3.2	System C (Riggs, 1978, p.382)	55
Figure 3.3	Possible relationships between autonomous behaviour and the marital system (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.190)	58
Figure 4.1	Structure of a thematic network (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.388)	79
Figure 4.2	Multiple levels of triangulation	83
Figure 5.1	Therapist A: Thematic networks	87
Figure 5.2	Therapist B: Thematic networks	92
Figure 5.3	Therapist C: Thematic networks	97
Figure 5.4	Couple 1: Stimuli responses' thematic networks	101
Figure 5.5	Couple 2: Stimuli responses' thematic networks	108
Figure 5.6	Couple 3: Stimuli responses' thematic networks	114
Figure 5.7	Couple 1: Genogram	118
Figure 5.8	Couple 1: Interview thematic networks	120
Figure 5.9	Couple 2: Genogram	126
Figure 5.10	Couple 2: Interview thematic networks	127
Figure 5.11	Couple 3: Genogram	133
Figure 5.12	Couple 3: Interview thematic networks	134

List of Tables

Table 3.1	The conceptualisation of marriage from a Systems Theory perspective	51
Table 4.1	Visual aids sample	75
Table 6.1	Integration of participants' themes	142

Chapter 1

Introduction

This introductory chapter serves to introduce the reader to the researcher and to the topic to be researched, and gives a brief outline of the study to follow.

The researcher's interest in resilience stems from her undergraduate training in psychology where the concept of resilience was introduced as part of a strengths perspective and positive psychology. In further investigating the concept of resilience, the researcher found that resilience has been studied in various contexts, with a specific emphasis on resilience in individuals and families. Through her experience in studying and working with children, couples, and families, the researcher became increasingly fascinated with resilience and with the notion that certain systems are able to cope better with stress, trauma, and adversities.

With a focus on family therapy in her postgraduate training in clinical psychology, the researcher's interest in resilience shifted to that of relational resilience. Her consequent fascination with resilience in intimate relationships is twofold. Firstly, although resilience is a widely studied phenomenon, the lack of research on relational resilience provides the opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the field of psychology. Secondly, the researcher's personal experiences also played a large role in the development and execution of this study. She mentioned that:

“Divorce and disconnection seems to be part of my blueprint for life. My parents got divorced when I was very young. Although I consider myself blessed to have four loving and accepting parents, I realised that I have a distorted view of intimate relationships. Deep down inside I wonder if relationships can last and question

whether or not divorce is inevitable. I have heard people say that a multigenerational pattern of divorce is difficult to break. As I recently got married to a man whose parents are also divorced, I cannot help but wonder if this pattern of divorce is also part of my life plan. I therefore I question the “till death do us part” marriage vow.

In the process of planning this study, I considered doing a study on the impact of divorce on adults who grew up in broken families. I wanted to tell my story. I decided, however, to shift my focus. Instead of looking at what had been, I decided to look at what could be, at the alternatives to divorce and at relational possibilities. In an attempt to better understand intimate relationships, I decided to rather consider what makes relationships resilient – what makes certain relationships last’.

Evidently, experiences of parental divorce guided the researcher in her choice of research topic, and the fact that she got married during her academic training further inspired her to research the notion of resilience in intimate relationships, to help her to discover relational alternatives and to better understand the processes behind resilient relationships.

At this stage it is important to mention the researcher’s rationale for this study. Over time, all relationships are tested by stressors, adversities, and difficulties. Some couples seem to cope better with these adversities and therefore manage to adapt to the stressors or difficulties that they experience, learn from them, and move beyond them. Inherently, the researcher suggests that resilience excludes divorce; however, divorce could also be considered to be a resilient response if the couple views it as such.

The aim of this study is to define relational resilience and to explore what makes intimate relationships grow and thrive in the midst of adversities.

A building or construction metaphor will be used throughout the study to provide a storyline, but also to help lay out the study systematically and to facilitate tracking the progress of the study. This study is going to consider different definitions of resilience in diverse contexts, and various studies on resilience will be researched. As mentioned above, one of the main aims of this study is to find out what resilience in intimate relationships is, and therefore a definition of relational resilience will also be provided in Chapter 2.

In this study on resilience in intimate relationships, the relational system is the main focus or unit to be studied. A systemic understanding of intimate relationships is therefore outlined in Chapter 3. After the literature and theoretical foundations are laid, Chapter 4 will outline the basic plan or blueprint for this study. Herein, the specific methods and procedures used in this study will be discussed. The methodology chapter informs the “construction phase” of the study, where themes are built from the data that was provided by the participants. The results discussed in Chapter 5 are based on the themes mentioned above and are offered in the form of web-like presentations. Chapter 6 consists of so called “snagging”, the building term for the finishing touches of a project, and involves integrating the different themes identified from the participants’ data with the findings in the literature and theoretical chapters, and also interpreting the results. The study is concluded in Chapter 7, where the impact of the study on the researcher is inspected and further recommendations are outlined.

With all the building materials set out above, the building process of this study can commence.

Chapter 2

Literature Survey

Resilience is more than the absence of adversity

(Almedom & Glandon, 2007)

As seen in the introductory chapter, the resilience phenomenon has been very intriguing and inspiring for the researcher. The following chapter serves to explore the paradigm shift to resilience, attempts to define resilience, and to research the notion of resilience in different contexts as identified by a variety of researchers. It is important to acknowledge a variety of voices in resilience research as part of forming a solid foundation for this study on resilience in intimate relationships.

A shift to resilience

A strength-based perspective in the human sciences 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).

According to Marshall (1998, p.57), to consider individuals, especially children as:

...“at promise” rather than “at risk” is a fundamental shift that means teaching rather than fixing, pointing to health rather than dysfunction, turning away from limiting labels and diagnosis to wholeness and well-being.

This paradigmatic shift from deficits and the 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.

However, shifting from a risk to a resiliency paradigm is easier said than done (Wolin, 1998). The former is characterised by a recitation of facts about intellectual or psychological functioning and could be used to draw conclusions. The latter takes a broader perspective, looks at another part of the picture and credits people with the strengths and potential to recover and bounce back from hardship (Wolin, 1998). In an oversimplified way, the resiliency paradigm is often portrayed as the opposite of the risk paradigm, while they more accurately complement one another (Wolin, 1998).

Almedom and Glandon (2007) reviewed over 500 references in their search for the definition, meaning, and measurement of resilience. They found that the studies that contributed to the understanding of resilience as a “multifaceted construct are drawn from both the salutogenic and pathogenic camps as well as the interface between the two” (Almedom & Glandon, 2007, p.130). Figure 2.1 illustrates how resilience is achieved through multiple pathways and highlights that it develops from both adaptive (salutogenic) and maladaptive (pathogenic) states.

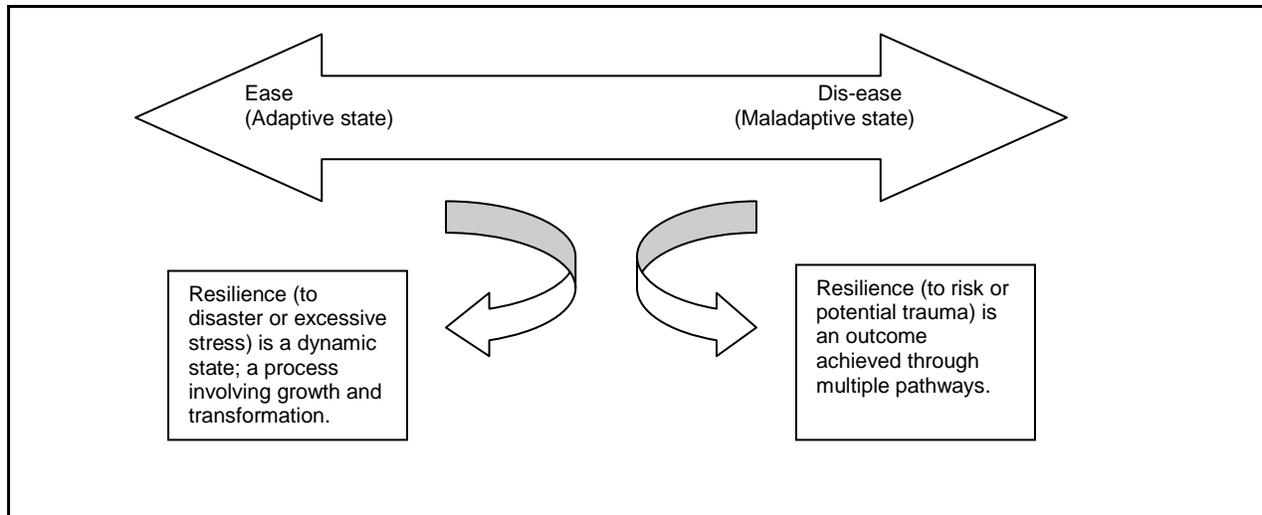


Figure 2.1 Antonovsky's health ↔ ill-health continuum in relation to salutogenic and pathogenic views of resilience (Almedom & Glandon, 2007, p.136)

Definitions of resilience

Etymologically, the word resilience derived from the Latin words *resiliens* or *resilire*, which means “to rebound”, or “to jump or bounce back” (<http://www.etymonline.com>).

According to the Encarta World English Dictionary (2005) resilience refers to a *speedy recovery from problems* (the ability to recover quickly from setbacks); the *ability to react to potential crisis* (the ability to identify, assess, and respond to a potentially disruptive situation in order to prevent it from becoming a crisis); and *elasticity* (the ability of matter to spring back quickly into shape after being bent, stretched, or deformed).

Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000, p.543) propose that “resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity”, while Walsh (2006, p.4) defines it as “...the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful.

It is an active process of endurance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge”. 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 an individual or a family to remain intact in spite of trauma or crisis, and to return to the same pre-morbid level, or even a higher level of functioning than before (Greeff & Aspelung, 2007). Initially, resilience was considered to have a homeostatic function, whereby an individual or family recovered and restored their equilibrium, but recently has been recognised as moving beyond recovery (Bonanno, 2005; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995).

The National Network for Family Resiliency in the United States (Silliman, 1994) outlined the following concepts related to resiliency:

- *Resiliency can be described on an individual, family, and community level, each interdependent and complementary of the other levels.*
- *Resiliency describes dynamic, responsive capacities fostering healthy development, interaction, and adaptation in the face of expected and non-normative challenges.*
- *Resiliency can be described in terms of values, attitudes, and behavioural dimensions, which influence the above.*

(<http://www.cyfernet.org/research/resilreview.html>)

Research on resilience explored the health-enhancing capacities, resources, and developmental pathways of those, who against all odds, manage to survive and thrive despite unhealthy environments. However, across the 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). Nonetheless, “the arbitrariness and contextual problems in resilience research can be addressed through the use of qualitative approaches” (Ungar, 2003, p.98).

Resilience has been studied from different angles, each with its own definition. The broad categories of resilience are briefly reviewed in order to form a foundation for facilitating the conceptualisation and deepening the understanding of couples’ resilience.

Individual resilience

On the individual level, “resilience may refer to either the state of well-being achieved by an at-risk individual (as in he or she is resilient) or to the characteristics and mechanisms by which that well-being is achieved (as in he or she shows resilience to a particular risk)” (Ungar *et al.*, 2005, p.6).

According to the Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms (1994, p.220), resilience is synonymous with or related to “psychological hardiness, psychological endurance, personality trait, adaptability, coping behaviour, emotional adjustment, emotional stability, and psychological stress”. Accordingly, resilience could be seen as an innate characteristic. However, Calkins, Blandon, Williford, and Keane (2007) argue for an approach to resilience factors that operate

within the individual that takes into account biological, behavioural, and relational levels of analysis.

Resilience is influenced by risk and protective factors (Greeff & Aspeling, 2007) and “is governed by a similar dynamic interaction among protective factors within the individual, their family environment, and wider social context” (Werner in Dowling, Gupta & Aldgate, 2006).

Furthermore, resilience can also be considered as a way of coping and adaptation, in response to adversities, trauma, and loss. Loss not only includes death, but also other changes, including marriage, marital separation, or divorce; job-loss or retirement; relocation or displacement from a home; diminished functioning in chronic illness; or having a sick or disabled child. All these events induce feelings of loss, including loss of dreams and expectations or altercations to relationships, roles, plans, and possibilities, which further requires a period of mourning (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). According to Bonanno (2005), most individuals will face one or more potentially traumatic events over the course of their lives which will elicit diverse individual responses and have a wide-reaching effect on the individual, including dysfunctional and maladaptive responses, recovery, and resilience. Resilience has been recognised as a common human response to disasters and potential trauma (Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Bonanno, 2005).

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 2.2 below.

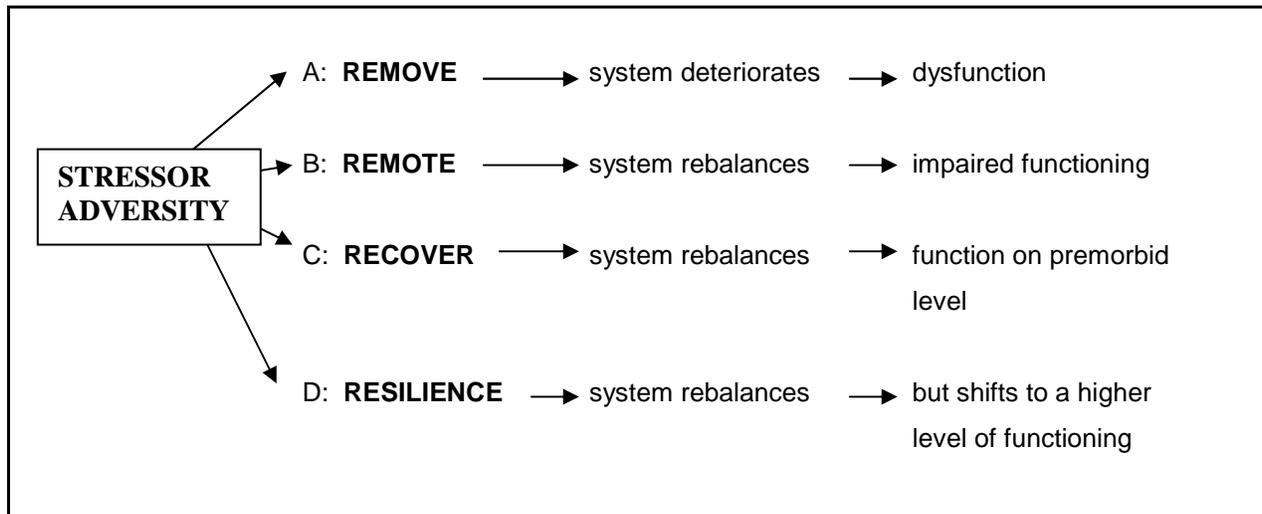


Figure 2.2 Possible responses to a stressful or traumatic event, or significant adversity

Some systems (A) cannot cope with the impact of the stressor and, as a result, they distance themselves or remove themselves from the stressor, stressful event, or from the system itself, and therefore the system deteriorates and cannot function any longer. 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 a stressor, re-establish the homeostasis, of the system and continue to function on the same pre-morbid level. Lastly, some systems (D) are able to not only re-establish homeostasis after experiencing a stressor, but also 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.

Family resilience

The National Network for Family Resiliency defines family resilience as “the family's capacity to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life”.

(<http://cyfernet.org/research/resilreview.html>).

Family resilience is referred to as “relational hardiness” (Walsh, 2006, p.15), but does not imply a problem-free family as a result. A family resilience perspective seeks to understand how families can survive and regenerate, that is, the family's capacity for self-repair in the midst of overwhelming stress (Walsh, 1996).

In their study on families dealing with the loss of a parent, Greeff and Ritman (2005) explored individual characteristics that are associated with resilience or serve as a resource to enhance resilience in these families. They identified optimism (positive attitude), perseverance (a continued effort to succeed despite difficulty), faith (any form of belief in a higher power), and expression of emotion and self-confidence as the most important characteristics contributing to family members' resilience (Greeff & Ritman, 2005). Furthermore, they suggested that clinicians “can support families by encouraging the potential of the family's most resilient member to strengthen the family's resilience after the loss of a loved one” (Greeff & Ritman, 2005, p.41).

In addition, Walsh (2006, p.26) identified the keys to family resilience as follows:

<u>Family belief systems</u>	<u>Organisational patterns</u>	<u>Communication processes</u>
- Making meaning of adversity	- Flexibility	- Clarity
- Positive outlook	- Connectedness	- Open emotional expression
- Transcendence & spirituality	- Social & economic resources	- Collaborative problem-solving

The concept of family resilience is relevant to our times since it prepares “families to meet uncertainty and future challenges with mutual support, flexibility, and innovation that will be needed for evolutionary hardiness in a rapidly changing world” (Walsh, 1996, p.262). It goes beyond a contextual view of individual resilience to a family-systems level because relational resilience focuses on the family as a functional unit (Walsh, 1996), and is related to “coping and adaptational processes in the family as a functional unit” (Walsh, 2006, p.15).

Community resilience

Another facet of resilience, community resilience, includes the wider context or macro levels of a system. In a study on resilience in families and communities, Hernández (2002) provided a systemic understanding of resilience. He analysed the stories of Colombian human rights activists who shared information regarding their coping with political persecution in the four-decade, low intensity Colombian war. The activists formed part of larger systems and complex systems of relationships with their kin and co-workers. Hernández (2002) extended Walsh’s notion of family resilience and replaced the word *family* with *community* in order to broaden the application of the aforementioned family resilience foundations to more complex systems of relationships. In the Colombian context, communities and relationships are at the heart of the social fabric, and solidarity (an essential component of each activist’s story) can only be understood in relationship to others. Hernández (2002, p.338) conceptualises “resilience as collective and ingrained within relationships in communities by illustrating the wholeness of communities and understanding how people care for each other”. Accordingly, collective resilience refers to “...the coping processes that occur in reference to and dependent on a given social context” (Hernández, 2002, p.334). “These processes aim to rebuild and sustain social

relationships to heal the wounds of trauma, the losses of war, and the reconstruction of a sense of belonging and personal identity” (Hernández, 2002, p.342).

Landau (2007, p.352) defines community resilience as “the community’s inherent capacity, hope, and faith to withstand major trauma, overcome adversity, and to prevail, with increased resources, competence, and connectedness”.

Systemic resilience

This study on resilience in intimate relationships has a systemic approach to resilience. Although the relevant theoretical part of systems theory will be discussed in the following chapter, it is important to consider what other authors found in their studies regarding resilience as a systemic concept.

Walsh (2006) advanced a systemic view of resilience with a shift from individual traits to transactional processes that foster resilience over time. Accordingly, “a systemic view of resilience is important in all efforts to help individuals, couples, and families to cope and adapt through crisis and adversity” (Walsh, 1999, p.275). By adopting a long-range, strengths-based set of lenses, a therapist or researcher could assist a couple or family in discovering successes and help them redefine themselves as a resilient system instead of a bundle of deficits (Hawley, 2000).

In studying the interactional patterns of couples under prolonged uncertainty and ongoing stressful events, Ben-David and Lavee (1996) specifically focused on the effects of the peace process in the Middle East on couples and their marital interactions. They found that the

research available on different aspects of this process, including on the mechanisms that couples use to cope with ongoing prolonged stressful situations, have resulted in linear, mechanistic, and non-systemic deterministic views or outcomes.

Burr and Klein (1994) highlighted the need for utilising systemic, recursive constructs to study coping in stressful situations (in Ben-David & Lavee, 1996). Accordingly, resilience involves multiple, recursive processes, over time. Walsh (1996, p.267) highlighted that:

Many ongoing, recursive processes involving each individual, family, and larger social environment interact to influence whether vulnerabilities give way to resilience and a successful life course or whether they intensify, resulting in dysfunction and despair.

Following on the aforementioned recursive processes, Fals-Stewart and Kelley (2005) took a systemic perspective on harm and healing. They commented on a study by Dirkzwager, Bramsen, Ader, and van der Ploeg (2005), who compared the symptom profiles, relationship difficulties, and social support of couples in which one of the spouses was a peacekeeping soldier, and had post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS). In their study, Dirkzwager *et al.*, (2005) found that the impact of a traumatic event is not limited to the traumatised person, but can also have a negative impact on the people who support and care for him or her, especially on their marital partner. Fals-Stewart and Kelley (2005) questioned the functional relationship between the aforementioned constructs and hypothesised that reciprocal causality might exist among the variables that may underlie the relationships observed. This means that, among the peacekeepers, PTSS may lead to stress in their relationships and link to isolation from social networks, and might account for secondary trauma in their partners, which exacerbates the problem further. Consequently, the couple may not be able to draw on their relational strengths

and external support which increases the stress. “This bidirectionality among the variables can spiral into a vicious cycle, leading to increasing problems in all areas over time” (Fals-Stewart & Kelley, 2005, p.235).

Therefore, in order to understand and enhance psychological resilience and protective mechanisms, it is important to consider the interplay between what occurs within couples and families, and what occurs in the political, social, and racial climates in which individuals perish or thrive (Rutter, 1987). Furthermore, although it is important to place the individual within context, and therefore consider the role that social relationships play in coping, adaptation to stress, and resilience, it is also important to maintain a contextualised view of the marital and family unit, thereby recognising other factors and systems that could influence the stress response (Coyne & Smith, 1991).

Significantly, Walsh and McGoldrick (1991) shifted individual bereavement to family adaptation processes for recovery and resilience, and thereby adopted a systemic approach to loss (including the different levels of loss discussed previously). Accordingly, individual coping response (functional or dysfunctional) affects other family members and relationships and needs to be appreciated through a systemic approach (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Examining the whole system in the case of loss is essential, thus “strengthening key interactional processes that foster healing, recovery, and resilience, enabling the family and its members to integrate the experience and move on with life” (Walsh, 1996, p.272).

Relational resilience

The aforementioned interactional processes in resilience are also important in resilience in intimate relationships. In relational resilience, these processes include organisational patterns, communication, and problem-solving processes, and also involve community resources and an affirming belief system (Walsh, 1996). Inherently,

...the challenge to be mastered involves the shared coping efforts in relational resilience 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).

Patterson (2002) made an important distinction between resilience and resiliency (which will be discussed later) which Connolly (2005) adapted and applied to intimate relationships. Accordingly, the term *relational resiliency* or capacity-based resilience represents the manner in which couples protect their relationship from external stressors and involves “those strengths in couples’ functioning that protect them against stressors and challenges” (Connolly, 2005, p.270).

Couple resilience

As opposed to relational resilience, Connolly (2005) refers to *couple resilience* or process-based resilience to highlight the processes that the couple uses to successfully overcome adversity and rebound in their relationship. According to Connolly (2005), “Resilience, or protecting against stressors and rebounding from adversity, is an important relational process for all

couples” and it “is a central factor in couples’ ability to maximize relational strengths, mitigate external challenges, and maneuver successfully in the relationship” (Connolly, 2005, p.267).

Conger, Reuter, and Elder (1999) also suggest that research on marital relations should focus on both the “specific interactional qualities and individual spouse or romantic partner characteristics that either promote resilience or increase vulnerability to difficult life conditions” (Conger *et al.*, 1999, p.69).

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

Despite the limited research on how a couple understands and accepts their situation together and the fact that the understanding of the relational process of creating meaning seems to be underdeveloped, Yorgason, Piercy, and Piercy (2007) managed to expand the framework for couple resilience in their study on hearing loss in older couples in that they examined the experiences of couples as the unit of analysis and thereby expanded the development of meanings and belief systems from individual to relational processes. The findings of this study will be discussed throughout this chapter.

However, before moving on to further exploring intimate relationships, it is important to consolidate a definition of resilience:

Resilience refers to the ability to endure adversity; it involves the capacity to adapt to difficult circumstances, to learn and rebound from them, and consequently to emerge as more resourceful and functioning on a higher level than before.

From this general definition it is possible to formulate a definition of resilience in intimate relationships or couples' resilience as applicable to this study. Couples' resilience refers to the abilities and relational processes of a couple that enables them to endure, persevere, and negotiate adversarial circumstances. Resilience in intimate relationships implies that the couple as a system is able to rebound from shared difficulties as more resourceful, thereby increasing each partner's mobility (individuation) within the relationship, strengthening the relational bond (connectedness) and improving the overall quality of their relationship.

Conceptualisation of intimate relationships

In delving deeper to build a foundation for this study on resilience in intimate relationships, it is important to also understand what is meant by the words "intimate relationship".

Etymologically, the word "intimate" means "closely acquainted" or "very familiar", and originates from the Latin word *intimus*; "inmost" or "close friend". It also relates to the Latin word *sociabilis* which means "close" or "intimate", which is derived from *sociare* "to join, unite", and from *socius* "companion" (<http://www.etymonline.com>).

The Encarta World English Dictionary (2005) defines intimate as *close*, having, involving, or resulting from a close personal relationship; *cosy*, quiet, and private or secluded, enabling people to feel relaxed with each other; *private and personal*, as to be kept secret or discussed only with a close friend or relative; *sexual*, involving or having a sexual relationship; *closely connected*, very close because of the influence of one thing on another (for example, the intimate connection between power and corruption); *innermost* nature of something.

The word relationship stems from the Latin words *relationem* “a bringing back, restoring”, or from *relatus* and its meaning evolved from a “person related by blood or marriage” (1502) to a “sense of being related” (1744) to meaning “an affair, a romantic or sexual relationship” (1944) (<http://www.etymonline.com>).

The Encarta World English Dictionary (2005) defines relationship as a *connection* or similarity between two or more things, or the state of being related to something else; *behaviour or feelings towards somebody else*; *friendship*, an emotionally close friendship, especially one involving sexual activity; *connection by family*; the way in which two or more people are related by birth, adoption, or marriage.

In this study, “intimate relationship” is used interchangeably with the word “couple” to signify a close connection between two people. According to 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. Even though this literature survey includes marital research, the reference made to intimate relationships does not preclude other forms of intimate relationships (as seen in the aforementioned definition), including dating couples, cohabiting couples, same-sex couples, and so on.

Intimate relationships in context

In South Africa, marriage seems to be on the increase. According to Statistics South Africa, the number of registered marriages has generally been increasing (up to 26%) over the last ten years (1997–2006). Apparently, 180 657 marriages were recorded in 2005, as opposed to 184 860 in 2006, which indicates a 2.3% increase in the number of registered marriages in South Africa over that year. Conversely, the divorce rate has been fluctuating over the past decade. “Despite the general fluctuations, the proportions of divorces from the mixed and the African groups have been increasing whilst that of the white group has been declining in the past ten years” (<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statskeyfindings.asp>).

Amato (2004) reflected on the changes that had occurred in the United States regarding marriage. He noted that the marriage rate had declined but that non-marital cohabitation, the number of extramarital births, and the divorce rate all increased. “American culture has become increasingly individualistic ... and people have become preoccupied with the pursuit of personal happiness” (Amato, 2004, p.960). Consequently, values of commitment and taking responsibility for others, specifically in the form of marriage, have taken a backseat.

The evolution of intimate relationships

Over the years there have been many changes in intimate relationships and, in particular, in the prevalence of marriage. On the one hand, it seems as though history is repeating itself because there is no structural change in intimate relationships, which implies no new particular practice or variation of marriage. To the contrary “the social role and mutual relationship of marriage, divorce, and singlehood in the contemporary world is qualitatively different from anything found in the past” (Coontz, 2004, p.974).

In the past, marriage was seen as nearly universal, happened at a young age, was characterised by stable partnership behaviour and was the pre-empting setting for childbearing. Recently, partnerships have become more diverse and fragile, as seen in the rise of cohabitation, decrease in marriage rates, increase in divorce, and an increase in childbearing and childrearing out of wedlock (Kiernan, 2004).

Lewin (2004) explored the future of marriage and considered that it is being replaced by cohabitation or alternative configurations. “The rise of cohabitation and the recognition of same-sex partnerships have, in effect, redrawn the boundaries of marriage-like relationships” (Kiernan, 2004, p.985). Lewin (2004) found that couples, including same-sex couples, marry to indicate their legitimacy, belonging, and authenticity and thereby portray messages about themselves, their relationship, but also about their ethnicity and specific community affiliations, or other identities. Furthermore, it seems that marriage has come to be an important expression of adult achievement. Consequently, “our understanding of “marriage” needs to stretch beyond rigid typologies. Marriage ... is both something people do and something they think – in many different and equally valuable ways...” (Lewin, 2004, p.1006). Since the increase of cohabitation, “the act of marrying has been transformed from a ceremony heralding the start of a union to one that confirms the union” (Kiernan, 2004).

The shift to relational resilience

In laying down the foundation for this study, the shift to relational resilience is emphasised. “The research on individual resilience has increasingly pointed to the importance of a relational perspective” (Walsh, 2006, p.12). According to Hernández (2002, p.335), a relational view “understands the family (couple) as a functional unit in which mediating processes influence

short- and long-term adaptation to hardships for all members (both partners)". Hawley (2000) highlighted that resilience can also be viewed as a family level construct and added that family units can show remarkable resilience in dealing with adversity.

As stated before, family resilience is also referred to as "relational hardiness" and is related to "coping and adaptational processes in the family as a functional unit" (Walsh, 2006, p.15). Similarly, in this study on intimate relationships, a couple and marital relationship is also viewed as a functional unit (as specifically seen in the study of Yorgason *et al.*, 2007).

A relational study on resilience seems to be important because nearly all people are involved in intimate relationships and/or marry in their lifetime (Bjorksten & Stewart in Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In addition, most of these couples will be faced with stress or adversities at some point in their relationship. Significantly, it is estimated that two thirds of all marriages are expected to end in separation or divorce (Castro-Martin & Bumpass in Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

In their literature survey, Whiffen and Oliver (2004) found that it was generally said that high quality relationships moderate the impact of trauma, and therefore good relationships are comparatively resilient to trauma. This implies that the marital relationship should be a resource for individuals coping with trauma. However, there is vast evidence that "traumatic stress has an adverse impact on individuals' ability to develop and maintain positive marital relationships" (Whiffen & Oliver, 2004, p.153).

To the contrary, Green (2004) considers same-sex couples who obtain civil unions, and who are able to endure these challenges, as resilient. Such couples are continually faced with a stigmatised identity (on a personal as well as societal level); there seems to be a lack of a normative, prescribed way and legal template for same-sex couplehood, as they generally

experience lower levels of family and social support. Nevertheless, they seem to bounce back from these challenges, and thereby strengthen their relationships.

A study on hearing impairment in older-couple relationships found that the traits of later life couple relationships seem to be characterised with maturity and growth in the relationship. These maturation and growth processes in older-couple relationships could facilitate mutual strengths in response to adversity (as was seen in response to hearing loss) and may result in a “reserve capacity” that has built up over the years they spent together (Yorgason *et al.*, 2007).

Relational resilience as a process

“Sustaining a satisfying romantic relationship involves a complex array of dynamics and processes that help to fortify relationships ... (and) help couples function more effectively” (Connolly, 2005, p.266).

Most researchers view resilience as a process in which there are interactions between risks and protective factors (Connolly, 2005; Patterson, 2002), and where time and development also need to be considered (Connolly, 2006). Hawley (2000) views resilience as a process that a family follows over time in response to one significant stressor or a series of stressors.

According to Rutter (1987), the term “process” is preferable, because factors, variables, or traits are all relative. In order to differentiate between resilience as a trait versus a process, Luthar *et al.*, (2000) suggest that the term *resiliency* should be used to refer to a specific personality trait, and resilience to describe the process of successfully overcoming adversity or the process of competence despite adversity.

As mentioned earlier, Patterson (2002) adapted the distinction between resiliency and resilience for use in the family field. Accordingly, the distinction can also be drawn for couple processes, with *couple resiliency* describing the capacity of the couple to successfully manage their life circumstances, and *couple resilience* describing the processes by which the couple is able to adapt and function competently following exposure to significant adversity (Connolly, 2005; Patterson, 2002).

In her qualitative exploration of resilience in lesbian couples, Connolly (2005, 2006) found two processes that helped to obstruct the effects of cultural marginalisation. Firstly, the process of relational resiliency (characteristics of the relationship), including mutuality (personal dedication to the relationship, innovation in creating their relationship, synchronisation of their lesbian identity), relational balance, and interdependence, helped to protect the couples against external stressors. Secondly, the process of couple resilience (dyadic coping), which helped the couples to overcome and rebound from adversity, included couple unification (united front against challenges), determination, positive perspective, and external buffers, and helped to reduce the impact of threat or harm.

... overcoming and rebounding from hardship and threat required a sturdy process of couple resilience through bonding together and unifying, employing determination to confront obstacles and withstand stressors and sustaining a positive perspective. These processes, along with the benefits derived from external buffers, provided buoyancy to couples. They helped couples sustain relational connection amid cultural stressors (Connolly, 2005, pp.275-276).

Consequently, instead of turning the external stress into relational distress, these processes helped the couples to work from a strength-based position, turning challenges into opportunities

for growth and bringing them closer together, which ultimately contributed to thriving and resilience (Connolly, 2005).

In exploring couple resilience processes where one spouse had hearing loss, Yorgason *et al.*, (2007) found that not only individual but also mutual acceptance and meaning making of the hearing loss was a gradual process for the couples. Each couple showed resilience processes in some way as they all exhibited successful adaptation and reported that the hearing loss did not affect the core of their marriage relationship. The relationship resilience evident in these couples seemed to develop over time, was aided by available resources, and emphasised the importance of balance between interdependence and autonomy. Accordingly, these couples' "relationships were made stronger despite the adversity" (p.225) and they "showed resilience in the ways they coped, and even thrived, in spite of their loss" (p.226).

Resilience and couples' adaptation to stress

Another important aspect of resilience in intimate relationships revolves around couples' adaptation to stress. In their study on marriage and stress, Story and Bradbury (2004) found that a focus on the spouses' personal characteristics and their interpersonal transactions often does not account for the marriage in context; the situational context in which marriages are embedded.

The term "stress" has been used to describe stressful experiences, subjective feelings of stress, and the process by which those experiences affect individual functioning (Story & Bradbury, 2004). According to Wheaton (in Story & Bradbury, 2004), stress has different meanings and therefore different terms should be used in order to distinguish between stressors and the

emotional responses they may trigger: “stressors” refers to problems or threats, “distress” refers to individual responses to those conditions, and “stress” refers to the mediating process by which stressors lead to individual distress (Wheaton in Story & Bradbury, 2004). Within the dyadic context, objective stressor characteristics and subjective appraisal independently impact on marital functioning. Therefore, Story and Bradbury (2004) prefer to use the term “marital distress” instead of “marital stress” as it highlights that marital stressors originate outside the marriage as separate phenomena. Furthermore, distinguishing between stressors and context allows for considering the interplay between specific stressors and the contexts in which they occur (Story & Bradbury, 2004).

“The process of adaptation to stress in married couples is an important part of uncovering the reasons that some marriages end in divorce or dysfunction, while others strengthen, grow, and survive the test of time” (Graham & Conoley, 2006, p.239).

Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model of marriage looks at the interaction between spouses’ enduring vulnerabilities, that is, the characteristics that are brought to the marriage; stressful events, including sudden crises or normative life transitions; and the adaptive processes of the couple. Accordingly, it was found that “couples with effective adaptive processes who encounter few stressful events and have few enduring vulnerabilities will experience a satisfying and stable marriage” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p.25).

All models of stress adaptation implicitly assume “that a couple’s adaptation to external stressful events can impact on marital quality, stability, and overall well-being of the family members” (Graham & Conoley, 2006, p.232).

Marital quality

Karney and Bradbury (1995) assessed the effects of different stressors on marital quality and stability in a longitudinal study and found that stress correlated with lower marital stability and less marital satisfaction over time. Furthermore, “the role of expectations in marriage may explain how some life stressors can divide couples, whereas others may bring couples closer together (for example, parenthood)” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p.21).

Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000, p.973) found that:

There is a growing appreciation for the view that a satisfying marriage is not merely a relationship characterised by the absence of dissatisfaction ... Factors that lead to marital distress may not be the simple inverse of the factors that lead to a satisfying relationship.

Even though marital research broadened over time, including examining the variables that predict marital outcome (degree of marital stability or satisfaction), it is still lacking in depth. Consequently, there is a need to clarify how marriage becomes more or less satisfying or stable over time and for models that specify mechanisms by which marriages change over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Graham and Conoley (2006) highlighted that marital attributions (the meaning that one attributes to one's spouse's behaviour) may be an important part of couples' adaptation to stressful events. Consequently, marital attributions play a moderating role in the relationship between life stressors and marital quality, which is also consistent with the tenets of stress adaptation theory and literature on family resilience. Furthermore, Graham and Conoley (2006)

found that couples who make positive marital attributions are expected to either maintain or experience an increase in marital quality in the face of high levels of stress. Significantly, “marriages using relationship enhancing attributions may be able to better cope with stressful life events and prevent them from having a negative impact on their relationships” (Graham & Conoley, 2006, p.238).

In their study on newly-weds, Karney and Bradbury (2000) found that previous research proposes that spouses’ attributions for specific negative events in the marriage seemed to be trait-like attributional styles, that is, a constant tendency to make a specific inference regarding spousal behaviours. To the contrary, Karney and Bradbury (2000) found that attributions are a continual cognitive reaction to the state of the marriage, and therefore may vary according to marital satisfaction. Accordingly, the meaning that each spouse attributes to their partner’s behaviour seems to relate to what they have learned from their ongoing experiences in their relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 2000).

The study of the role of marital attributions in the relationship between life stressors and marital quality found that:

Couples who make positive marital attributions may be more likely to perceive a spouse as a source of support and may be more likely to utilize the relationship as a coping resource when stressful events occur. This provides a couple with an opportunity to strengthen their relationship and grow closer, as they learn to rely on one another in the face of negative life events (Graham & Conoley, 2006, p.238).

Graham and Conoley (2006) concluded that the process of uncovering, not only what "causes" marriages to fail, but also how marriages succeed and excel, is an important contribution to the field of marital research.

In their study of hardiness in families of young asthmatic children, Svavarsdottir and Rayens (2005) found that there is a need to assess how parents' and couples' interactions affect their family's hardiness. They highlighted that this dyadic process may facilitate understanding of how family interactions are impacted in the face of a challenge, such as the chronic illness of a child.

According to Campbell and Kashy (2002), individuals in dyadic relationships, especially romantic relationships, seem to be interdependent and mutually influence each other's cognitions, emotions, and behaviours. Consequently, "the attributes and behaviours of one dyad member can impact the outcomes of the other dyad member" (Campbell & Kashy, 2002, p.327). The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) (Kashy & Kenny in Campbell and Kashy, 2002) is a model of dyadic data analysis that uses the dyad as the unit of analysis. Consequently, by understanding that outcomes may be influenced by both individuals themselves ("actor" effect) and by their partners ("partner" effect), we can increase our understanding of how couples and families function while faced with adversities, such as caring for a child with chronic illness (Svavarsdottir & Rayens, 2005).

Though stressors are often viewed as harmful to relationship functioning, it is important to recognize that challenging events and circumstances can provide couples with opportunities to learn about untapped potential in their relationship and to deepen their commitment and intimacy (Story & Bradbury, 2004, p.1145).

Resilience: Support, coping, and teamwork in intimate relationships

According to Revenson, Kayser, and Bodenmann (2005), it is important to include both partners in obtaining information regarding dyadic coping, which indicates progress in recognising the limitations of individual constructions of coping. In this study on intimate relationships, it is useful to consider the definitions that Bodenmann (2005, p. 33) supplied for dyadic stress and coping:

- *Dyadic stress and coping are parts of an interpersonal process involving both marital partners.*
- *Dyadic stress is defined as a specific stressful encounter that affects both partners, either directly or indirectly, and triggers the coping efforts of both partners within a defined time frame and a defined geographic location.*
- *Dyadic coping assumes that three elements – the interdependence of the spouses, their common concerns, and their mutual goals – stimulate a joint problem-solving process and common, emotion-focused coping activities.*

The two objectives of dyadic coping include the reduction of stress for each partner and the enhancement of relationship quality and, secondly, it fosters a feeling of “we-ness”, which includes mutual trust, reliability, commitment, and the perception that the relationship is a supportive resource in difficult circumstances (Bodenmann, 2005).

Coping strategies can either be problem-focused, emotion-focused, or relationship-focused, which highlights the interplay between individual and dyadic functioning (Story & Bradbury, 2004). Coyne and Smith (1991) identified two forms of relationship-focused coping; namely, active engagement (attempting to engage in interpersonal problem-solving or to discuss the

partner's feelings) and protective buffering (attempting to avoid disagreement or hide one's emotional distress).

Support can be viewed as a dyadic process that unfolds over time and is shaped by previous interactions (Coyne & Smith, 1991). Accordingly, "marital support is a multifaceted construct that includes a broad array of interpersonal exchanges, such as problem-solving, advice-giving, empathic listening, expressions of caring, strategic distraction, and constructive criticism" (Story & Bradbury, 2004, p.1142).

According to the family resilience approach, the focus is on interactional processes that enable families to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges and is based on the conviction that both individual and relational strength can be forged through collaborative efforts to deal with a sudden crisis or prolonged adversity (Walsh, 2006). These interactional processes are also applicable to dyadic relationships. "Happy" couples approach hardships as trials to be overcome together, and believe that these struggles make their relationship stronger (Walsh, 1998) and brings them closer together.

The research team at the Gottman Laboratory focused on the interactional patterns in marital success or failure and found that the success of marriage depends on how conflict is handled when it does occur. They drew a distinction between happy couples (that is, both partners are satisfied with the marriage) and unhappy or distressed couples (that is, one or both partners are dissatisfied with the marriage). The former are described as "masters of marriage" and are said to use positive conflict resolution skills. Accordingly, happy couples "encourage interaction and stay emotionally connected" and, when they are faced with stressors, "they are more aware of each other's struggles and use this awareness to support and encourage one another ... these

couples emphasise their teamwork in conquering the problem" (Driver, Tabares, Shapiro & Gottman, 2003, p.512).

In dealing with the manner in which global and political issues affect microsystems like the marital unit, Ben-David and Lavee (1996) found five possible interactional factors that are used when couples are dealing with ongoing stressful events. Firstly, these factors include moderating the level of communication to reduce stress and facilitate coping, for example, avoiding discussions of highly volatile issues. Secondly, they found that agreement among family members (spouses) about important issues seems to be an important factor in dealing with ongoing stress. Accordingly, "spouses feel that they are very much together, a "team" in their fight against external threats, and thus helps strengthen the relationship and better cope with the stress of uncertainty" (Ben-David & Lavee, 1996, p.354). Thirdly, the allocation of cognitive and emotional roles in these systems (families) is another factor which seems to be connected to the amount of communication and agreement between spouses about important issues. Furthermore, the factor of togetherness or cohesion seems to play an important role because most participants in this study reported that their relationship had not changed under the stress of the peace process. Lastly, the stability and cohesiveness of their relationships seem to correlate with a strong ideology and distinct worldview, which "seems to be working as a metaforce that helps couples define the ultimate reason for their facing the hardships ... and it serves as a unifying factor among spouses" (Ben-David & Lavee, 1996, p.355).

La Taillade (2006) found that there is currently a higher divorce rate and a decline in the number of African American couple marriages, which seem to be related to the stressors that they experience as an ethnic minority group. These stressors include experiences of racism and discrimination, economic instability, joblessness, poverty, and power discrepancy between partners. However, despite the higher likelihood of these stressors and adversity, many African

American couples survive and thrive in the face of such race-related oppression and adversity (La Taillade, 2006). Accordingly, "... many African Americans use coping strategies and resources that are both common across all couples and unique to their own racial and ethnic group that allows them to cope successfully with such stressors and maintain healthy relationships" (La Taillade, 2006, p.353). These culture-specific protective factors include family, kin, community and social support; spirituality and religiosity; and a positive ethnic identity.

The theories of stress and coping view coping as an individualistic response to a particular stressor. However, in their study on the effects of prostate cancer on patients' and spouses' coping and marital adjustment, Lavery and Clarke (1999, p.290) found that "coping can have both individual and interpersonal facets". Coyne and Smith (1991) added that a couple facing a mutually threatening event (for example, chronic and catastrophic health problems, such as a heart attack) might utilise relationship-focused or interpersonal coping to negotiate the emotional aspects of their shared experience. It is therefore important to "think of couples as open systems ... and to give greater attention to interpersonal processes in models of stress and coping" (Coyne & Smith, 1991, p. 410).

Sexual resiliency

Research on the impact of prostate cancer on couples' coping and marital adjustment (Gray, Fitch, Phillips, Labrecque, & Klotz, 1999; Lavery & Clarke, 1999) indicated that the illness had a great impact on the couples' relationships. Through accepting the changed situation and re-establishing their commitment to each other, most of the couples managed to frame the illness experience as a shared one (Gray *et al.*, 1999) and, through active engagement between partners, it contributed to the positive evaluations of their marital relationship and reportedly

brought them closer together (Lavery & Clarke, 1999). However, most couples who were sexually active prior to the illness reported negative changes to their sexual relationships, which included difficulties due to disturbed body image, loss of spontaneity, and sexual emotions. Interestingly, these changes did not have a profound effect on their overall perceptions of marital satisfaction (Lavery & Clarke, 1999).

In examining the relationship between advanced prostate cancer patients and their spouses, Navon and Morag (2003) found that the impact of hormonal therapy's side-effects on this relationship is wide-ranging, including effects on the spouses' sexual and leisure functioning, emotional closeness, communication patterns between them, as well as their roles within their relationship and in the family. Furthermore, Navon and Morag (2003) found that the side-effects of the hormonal therapy resulted in changes in the patient's personality and bodily appearance, which impacted negatively on half of the interviewed couples and, as a result, these couples experienced physical and emotional distance. In contrast, the other half of the interviewed couples were able to moderate these effects to some extent. Both spouses attempted to keep the pre-treatment ties unchanged by means of the female spouse displaying supportive attitudes, the couples enjoying joint leisure activities, attempting non-coital sex, and maintaining the division of roles. Despite their adversity, these couples managed to maintain their intimacy. It is, however, also important to acknowledge that these patients bore their difficulties and insecurities silently to support their spouses through a difficult time.

As seen from the above studies, another important, collaborative component of intimate relationships involves sex and sexuality, and "although each person is responsible for his or her sexuality, the couple communicates and functions as an intimate team" (McCarthy, Ginsberg & Fucito, 2006, p.63). These authors prescribed that both partners, as a couple, maintain a vital,

resilient sexual desire by integrating intimacy, non-demand pleasuring, and erotic techniques with positive, realistic sexual expectations.

Following on sexuality, the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University believes that there are several possible predictors of resilience in couples, where one partner questions his or her sexual identity. Couples seem to fare better if the partner who questions his or her sexual identity fully discloses the experiences of same-sex attraction, rather than the other partner discovering it. Furthermore, resilient couples tend to focus on their communication skills and they tend to be open to accountability or take responsibility for their actions (www.sexualidentityinstitute.org).

Resilience in context

Economic resiliency

When dealing with resilience, it is also important to take finances and economic pressures into account as they greatly impact on intimate relationships. In their study on couple resilience to economic pressure, Conger *et al.* (1999) hypothesised that marital support (supportive interactions) create a “soothing” effect for couples who are faced with economic stressors. Their findings on the measure of marital support confirmed their hypothesis that:

... the interaction between marital support and economic pressure was statistically significant, which indicates that the positive association between economic pressure and emotional distress was of greater magnitude for less supportive compared to more supportive couples (Conger et al., 1999, p.69).

Conger *et al.* (1999) highlighted that other analyses found that couple problem-solving skills did not moderate the relationship between economic pressure and emotional distress. This led them to consider that “other interactional skills would be needed to reduce the potentially adverse impact of such stressors” (Conger *et al.*, 1999, p.69). Therefore, they proposed that couples with strong problem-solving skills would be most able to effectively respond to marital conflict, reducing its impact on later marital distress. Their findings suggest that:

When faced with an internal family stressor, couples need to do more than providing sensitivity and concern. They need to be able to negotiate, bargain, and reach agreement on realistic solutions to internal family matters ... When faced with an immediate external stressor such as economic pressure, couples who engage in nurturant and soothing behaviours included within the marital support construct are likely to be more resilient than those who do not. When couples experience internal stressors such as marital conflict, however, the ability to generate and agree on realistic solutions appears to be especially important for promoting resilience (Conger et al., 1999, p.69).

This is consistent with Gottman, Coan, and Swanson (1998) who proposed that affection exchanged between partners would soothe or reduce the emotional or physiological arousal that may result from stress or tensions in couples' lives.

Social resilience

As briefly mentioned before, it is also important to consider the wider context in which the couple functions. The impact of economic pressure was discussed above; however, one should also explore the social pressures.

According to Ungar *et al.* (2005), we still lack a more contextualised and applied understanding of what resilience means and therefore it is important to acknowledge resilience as a contextually specific and culturally biased construct (Ungar, 2003). Almedom and Glandon (2007, p.140) highlighted that resilience is “a dynamic steady state that cannot be measured in isolation from its context of generalised resistance factors”.

McQuaide and Ehrenreich (1997) liken a person's strengths to resilience and highlight the fact that strength (resilience) is not simply the opposite of weakness:

... strengths are not absolute and cannot be conceptualised in isolation from the situation in which they are expressed. What represents strength in one context may constitute weakness in another and vice versa" (McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1997, p.203).

In the light of macro contexts, Bradbury *et al.* (2000) highlighted that environmental and contextual variables influence a couple's relationship, the adversities that they face, and the resources that they have available to support and maintain their relationship. Coyne and Smith (1991) also acknowledged the role of social support in the process of adapting and coping with

stress, which further extends this process as occurring in the context of interpersonal relationships.

In extending the systems approach to resilience, Feldman and Masalha (2007) studied the role of culture as moderating factor, and found that, in addition to its biological roots and social or interpersonal correlates, a study of resilience needed to include cultural aspects. They suggested that resilience needed to be studied in relation to core features of the culture and its availability to a specific child, couple, or family at important life phases and transitions.

Examples of a contextual study involve research on the impact of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States. Beitin and Allen (2005) found that in Arab American couples (who had been together for a substantial period of time and who have experienced many tribulations together), the increase in stress and trauma following the attacks made the couple spend more time together and that they had to find ways in which to communicate and deal with the stressors in their environments. Beitin and Allen (2005) asked these couples how the terrorist attacks affected their marriages and found that couples reported that their marriages were either stronger or unchanged. Additionally, “these couples not only relied on each other, but also utilised community support, their religion, and determination to help them cope and remain strong in the face of uncertainty” (Beitin & Allen, 2005, p.259). Mancini and Bonanno (2006) used the insights of people who have been directly affected by the 9/11 World Trade Centre terrorist attacks and found that after September 11, resilience was most prevalent among married as opposed to unmarried, divorced, or separated individuals.

The incongruity of resilience

In order to uncover evidence of resilience in families (and in couples), therapists and researchers must look beyond the problems that dominate their stories. Even though these are important, the notion of resilience suggests there is another side to the story (Hawley, 2000; Wolin, 1998).

Bonanno (2004) noted that most studies do not find that resilient individuals maintain a steady state of competence and high functioning through adversity. It is important to mention that “some couples do not cope in healthy ways, and couples that do cope well aren’t successful in coping all the time” (Yorgason *et al.*, 2007, p.226). Accordingly, resiliency does not imply that individuals, couples, or families glide through adversity unscathed. In actual fact, resilience involves “struggling well”; experiencing both suffering and courage, effectively working through difficulties both internally and interpersonally (Higgins, 1994). Higgins (1994) implies that adversity fosters resilience and that it is through challenging circumstances that individuals, couples, and families emerge as resilient as they grow, learn, and thrive.

Resilience is forged through adversity, not despite of it ... The quality of bouncing back, inherent in resilience, is not simply about “breezing through” a crisis, as if unscathed, and at the cost of cutting off from a painful experience ... Instead, resilience involves integrating the fullness of the experience into the fabric of the individual and family identity and how family members go on to live their lives (Walsh, 1996, p.271) ... the qualities of resilience enable people to heal from painful wounds, take charge of their lives, and go on to live fully and love well. (Walsh, 2006, p.5)

The resiliency paradigm views hardship as having a paradoxical effect, simultaneously causing strength and weakness, where our worst times can also become our best (Wolin, 1998; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). In contrast to the either/or alternative of risk versus resiliency, this paradoxical formulation is more easily accepted as well as more clinically acceptable and responsible (Wolin, 1998).

Walsh (2006) stressed the importance of distinguishing resilience from competent functioning, whereas Bonanno (2004) highlighted the difference between resilience and recovery. Previously, resilience was viewed as a homeostatic rebalancing and restoration of functioning, but more recently, resilience is viewed as moving beyond recovery and actually thriving, and consequently there is growth and flourishing beyond the previous level of functioning (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995) (see Figure 2.2).

Pathways to resilience

There are multiple pathways to resilience (Bonanno, 2004; Walsh 2006), which is highlighted by the fact that a crisis can be turned into an opportunity at any time or phase of life.

Secrets to resilience

As mentioned before, Walsh (2006) identified the keys to family resilience, which includes family belief systems, organisational patterns, and communication processes. In the process of struggling over their differences and in the midst of adversities, couples develop a set of resilient responses. Consequently, something new comes out of the struggle that enables a couple to absorb the next shocks to the marriage in their stride (Farmer, 1999).

Thurman (2006, pp.26-28) identified seven secrets to building resilience into a marriage. Accordingly, resilient couples are realistic, and are not influenced by misconceptions about marriage; they seek help when they need it; they appreciate the positives about their marriage and each other; they value differentiation by accepting the differences in their personalities, views, and ways of getting things done; they develop and maintain an internal focus of control rather than an external focus; they manage their emotions; and they reinterpret past failures and use them as growing points instead of perpetual negatives.

Principles of resilience

In considering the qualities that make marriage last, Farmer (1999) recognises that marriage is destined to struggles, disappointments, and adversity as life's demands and responsibilities increase and, consequently, spouses grow apart as they come to know their differences and weaknesses. According to Farmer (1999), a resilient response to the question of why marriages last, "is a response from the heart, a mind set, or a belief system about handling disappointment. It is a test of attitude, motivation, effort, and strength of will to prevail in spite of obstacles in one's path" (<http://www.valfarmer.com>).

In his quest for the qualities that make marriage last, Farmer (1999) acknowledges the work of Wolin and Wolin (1993), who apply the principles of resilience to the way in which couples approach their marriages. Accordingly, the principles of resilient couples include:

- ***Spirituality/morality:*** *Marriage seems to be protected by personal integrity and spiritual commitment. Couples that view their marriage as sacred extend their relationship beyond their own needs and happiness and consequently it is*

guarded and protected, nourished and cultivated. In honouring their wedding vows, they acknowledge their commitment to each other, but also their responsibility to the children, the extended family, the community, and to God. Because they regard marriage as something permanent, the couples work as a team to preserve it.

- ***Independence:*** *When spouses appreciate and accept each other's differences, they are more respectful, understanding, forgiving, and tolerant, which also allows for a sense of self, an ability to be separate, and a space for individuality within their marriage. Thereby, differences are seen as strengths and offer balance to the marriage.*
- ***Insight:*** *Marriage partners show insight into the part they play in the relationship and take personal responsibility for their particular contribution to their marital problems. Consequently, each partner is able to reconcile proactively.*
- ***Teamwork:*** *When faced with problems, setbacks, and life challenges, couples work as a team, while each person takes the initiative to make contributions to solving problems during hard times, thereby strengthening their marriage. This team approach creates a sense of competence and hope for the future and develops a sense of oneness and unity.*
- ***Humour:*** *Humour plays an important role in the relationship of resilient couples because it allows them to laugh at themselves and to break the ice when tension builds. It also minimizes the pain of disappointment and shows an ability to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, thereby not letting worries, problems, or differences detract from the overall good feeling that a couple has between them.*
- ***Creativity:*** *As couples create a shared identity and appreciate the things that they have endured together, they creatively celebrate their marriage through*

special rituals and traditions. Their positive accomplishments as a couple act to counterbalance and minimise their differences, and thus consolidate their union.

- **Relationships:** *Resilient couples value and encourage the freedom of each partner to pursue different experiences, which enriches and enlarges their marriage. By extending themselves outside the marriage, they grow as individuals, draw strength from the community, and thereby share what they learn to strengthen their marriage.*

(Wolin & Wolin in Farmer, 1999)

Resiliency resources

According to Shamai and Lev (1999), resilience involves a set of resources that must be organised and utilised so as to overcome the stressful situation and to cope with unexpected stressor demands. They identified two different kinds of resources; personal resources and systemic resources that are involved with moderating the impact of stress on couples and families. The former refers to the resources that are connected to the specific characteristics of each spouse. The latter, couples' resources, refers to those that are established within the framework of the partners' relations, including instrumental resources, for example, property and other financial assets, and resources that evolve from the partners' life together, for example, an appreciation of the spouse's coping ability (Shamai & Lev, 1999).

In their study on marital quality among couples living under the threat of forced relocation in the Golan Heights, Shamai and Lev (1999) found that coping with the threat and demands of this pending relocation depends on the accessible resources of the spouses. Furthermore,

difficulties in acquiring or managing the resources can cause psychological stress, which negatively impacts on the marital quality that is needed to maintain the stability of the marriage.

Resources that serve a protective function for couples (and families) in times of stress include social support; problem-solving behaviour moderating the effort of stress on marital satisfaction; coping behaviours; affective expression; an optimistic worldview; lack of chronic hassles; and marital attributions (Graham & Conoley, 2006).

In their study of how global and political issues affect microsystems like the marital unit, Ben-David & Lavee (1996, p.354) found a resource for coping with ongoing stress, in that “consensus between spouses seems to have an additive quality, along with togetherness and communication, and this contributes to family (relational) hardiness and ability to stand together under stressful situations”.

Greeff and van der Merwe (2004) researched the resilience factors in divorced families and found that the prominent factors include the availability of good relationships; the family's hardiness; creating meaning from the crisis; the attitude of the family members toward the crisis; work and financial security; religion; and the ability to reframe the crisis. Accordingly, in order to become buoyant after the crisis, the recovery, adaptation, and adjustment takes time and requires the utilisation of available resources.

Resilience in therapy

The focus on individual resilience, most often in surviving dysfunctional families, has blinded researchers and clinicians to the resilience that can be found in families and fostered in couple and family interventions. (Walsh, 1996, p.262)

Psychotherapists have recognised the power of resilience in aiding therapeutic progress, encouraging clients to identify ways in which they have overcome adverse circumstances, and helping them use their experiences in dealing with stressors (Hawley, 2000). Therefore, resilience-based interventions could facilitate and promote positive adaptation (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007) and discover new possibilities for growth (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991).

Couples therapists, especially of same-sex couples, need to take a cultural history from which issues are born into consideration; have awareness of ethical, research, and practice trends; and be sensitive to personal biases and assumptions that can impact on the intervention (Connolly, 2006). Furthermore, it is important that therapists create trusting relationships; encourage multiple perspectives; focus on strengths, resiliency, and coping abilities; and acknowledge power issues both inside and outside the therapy room (Long & Pietsch in Connolly, 2006). In reconceptualising and re-languaging (lesbian) couples' resilience, it creates a dialogue which can facilitate healing and growth (Connolly, 2006).

If we presume that behaviours included in the marital support construct and relevant problem-solving skills can be taught to and applied by couples, it should increase their degree of resilience to outside threats such as economic pressure as well as promote more satisfying relationships (Conger *et al.*, 1999).

Mancini and Bonanno (2006) highlighted the implications for treatment when faced with people who show the “resilient capacity”. Firstly, many people do not need formal treatment because they have the ability to cope effectively with highly adverse events on their own. This implies that there is only a subgroup of people who have endured significant or prolonged difficulties and aversive events who are appropriate candidates for treatment. Therefore, they warn us against the assumption that “all persons should experience pronounced difficulties in response to extreme events” (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006, p.979), thereby pathologising resilient responses to loss or traumatic events.

In their analysis of clients’ strengths, McQuaide and Ehrenreich (1997) concluded that clients and clinicians require awareness about clients’ potential sources of coping, resilience, and growth. However, they also acknowledged that clinicians should recognise the “vulnerable self” in clients in order to prevent personal experiences of conditional acceptance on the base of the client’s resilience and coping ability.

“If we can understand couples at their best – how they make sense of their loss and still survive and thrive – we can use this information to help those not coping so well” (Yorgason *et al.*, 2007, p.226). In order to help and enable clients, clinicians need to:

.... come to terms with our own fears of death and the limits of our control in order to detoxify issues of loss (including trauma and adversity) so that we do not continue to deny their significance or neglect them in our theory or practice. By coming to accept death as part of life, and loss as a transforming experience, we – and our field – will discover new possibilities for growth (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991, p.27).

A thorough and coherent literature review places the study in context and highlights the purpose of this study (Maione, 1997). This literature study provides a multi-dimensional view of resilience and also delves deep into the prevalence of resilience in intimate relationships. Accordingly, the preparations for laying the foundation of this study have been made. The following chapter involves the laying of the theoretical foundation, which provides a useful framework for viewing intimate relationships from a systemic paradigm.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Foundation

The literature survey focused on resilience as a researched phenomenon. It emphasised the importance of a relational view of resilience and considered a few studies on resilience in intimate relationships. The discussion on resilience forms one part of this study, while the following part further considers the notion of intimate relationships. Systems Theory is used to conceptualise an intimate relationship as a unit and therefore provide the general theoretical frame of reference for this study. The theoretical foundation in this chapter builds on and extends the former literature foundation.

A brief overview of Systems Theory

General Systems Theory was introduced into family therapy as theorists refused to see the individual as the source or locus of problems; decided to study the context in which a problem appears; called into question the linear notion of cause and effect, and mainly focused on the here and now, thereby questioning the idea that the individual was a slave of the past (Elkaïm, 1990).

According to Becvar and Becvar (2006), a systemic perspective highlights recursive organisation or reciprocal causality, which implies that people and events are seen in the context of relatedness, mutual interaction, and mutual influence. The aspect of recursion involves self-correction through the process of feedback, whereby information about past behaviours is fed back into the system in a circular manner. It refers to the impact of the behaviour on the system and the response of the system to that behaviour.

Elkaïm (1990) noted that the members of the Palo Alto group offered the most structured descriptions of General Systems Theory as applied to family systems. Accordingly, a relationship was viewed as a system, and therefore a few formal properties, which were valid for all relatively open systems, were advanced. These concepts prove to be useful in understanding dyadic relationships and therefore some will be used in this chapter and/or throughout the study.

These properties include the following:

- a) *Totality* implies that the behaviour of a partner or family member cannot be separated from the behaviour of the other partner/members, and therefore a change in one partner/member's behaviour changes the system as a whole.
- b) *Nonsummativity* implies that a system is not merely a sum of all its components. Accordingly, a couple/family cannot be reduced to the sum of its individual members.
- c) *Equifinality* means that, in the dyadic relationship/family, as in any self-regulated system, similar outcomes can arise from differing initial conditions. Therefore, early years cannot be simplistically reduced to the direct causes of later behaviour. We need to look at the structure of the human system within which the interactions manifest or the problem has arisen.
- d) *Homeostasis* refers to a partner/member's ability (or problematic behaviour) which could be construed as a homeostatic mechanism to bring back to equilibrium a relationship or family system that was in danger of changing. This homeostatic mechanism is relevant in dyadic relationships as the partners manoeuvre within the relationship in order to maintain the status quo. Often a third party is triangulated into the relationship to help to maintain the equilibrium. However, many other relational processes also serve the same purpose, that is, to conserve the system.

Within the systemic paradigm, there are different theories that fit with a circular epistemology and help to formulate the concept of marriage (intimate relationship) as a system. Table 3.1 (next page) contains a brief summary of the systemic conceptualisations of marriage from different theoretical perspectives.

Table 3.1 The conceptualisation of marriage from a Systems Theory perspective

COMMUNICATION THEORY	STRUCTURAL THEORY	FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY
<p>Mental Research Institute (MRI) major contributors include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don Jackson • Gregory Bateson • Paul Watzlawick • James Weakland • Carlos Sluzki and • Jay Haley <p>The world is organised as a series of systems and to understand how a system functions it is useful to delineate the rules that govern its functions. In considering human behaviour, and in this case marriage, communicational input and output provides useful information to describe and understand the rules that govern the behaviour or marital system.</p> <p>The MRI group believes that one cannot not behave, therefore one cannot not communicate.</p> <p>Communication includes the ways in which information is transmitted (syntax), the meaning of the communicational act (semantics), and the behavioural effects of communication (pragmatics).</p> <p>The study of marriage deals with an interactional communicational system, and therefore the partners not only send information back and forth, they also define the nature of their relationship to each other through communication. The pragmatic aspect of communication within marriage can be used to describe and define the rules of behaviour that exist within a particular marriage.</p>	<p>The family work of Minuchin highlights how the individual operates within a social context, which not only defines the constraints of behaviour but also provides structure.</p> <p>The structural dimensions of marriage:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organisational characteristics The marital dyad includes two individual subsystems, and together they form a subsystem within the family. The marital system is defined in terms of membership and function. In marriage, it is essential to have clear boundaries, as they are the rules that define who can or how-to participate. It ensures that the marital subsystem is clearly differentiated, but should also allow for inter-subsystem interaction (children, in-laws, work). 2. Patterning of transactions over time Once the repetitive patterns in transactions have been identified, the juxtaposition of different functional roles within the transaction – between context and behaviour and between the partners, provides information about the transactional structure within the marriage or serves as a measure of internal development of the system. 3. The system's response to stress Common patterns of adaptation (adjustment or increased rigidity) to stress (due to extra familial forces, developmental transition, and idiosyncratic sources) emphasise the underlying structure of the system. 	<p>Although Bowen's theory fits into the broad framework of general systems theory, he defines his as a specific theory about human relationship functioning.</p> <p>Eight concepts of Bowen's theory:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Differentiation of self 2. Triangles 3. Nuclear family emotional system 4. Family projection process 5. Emotional cut-off 6. Multigenerational transmission process 7. Sibling position 8. Societal regression <p>Often individuals who are alike or similarly differentiated marry and families rarely change. Consequentially, Bowen's theory implies that current behaviour is the result of a long process over many generations of patterned relationships that are pre-determined and self-perpetuating.</p> <p>The basic pattern of marital process is expressed in broad strokes of family themes and myths as they develop over multiple generations. Accordingly, this historical context (phylogenetic past) plays an important role within marriage, and could be useful in delineating the heritage the partners are benefiting from or struggling against.</p>

(Steinglass, 1978, pp.317-334)

The aforementioned conceptualisations provide a framework within which theoretical positions can be used in a complementary fashion. This systemic frame of reference is relevant to the present study and will be further discussed below.

Musings and illusions of intimate relationships

Nonsummativity

In general, there seems to be an illusion that, in marriage, two individuals become one ($1+1=1$). This misconception not only results in the repression of individual needs, but also highlights the emergence of (parental) functions without autonomy within the relationship. This binding quality or enslavement results when two individuals submerge (enmesh) their identities and become non-persons or functions for the sake of symbiotic togetherness in the complementarity that is marriage (Whitaker, 1989).

Alternatively, marriage (intimate relationships) 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 3.1 below and include the male system as a total being (A), the female system as a total being (B), and the marital system/relationship (C) 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 $A+B=C$.

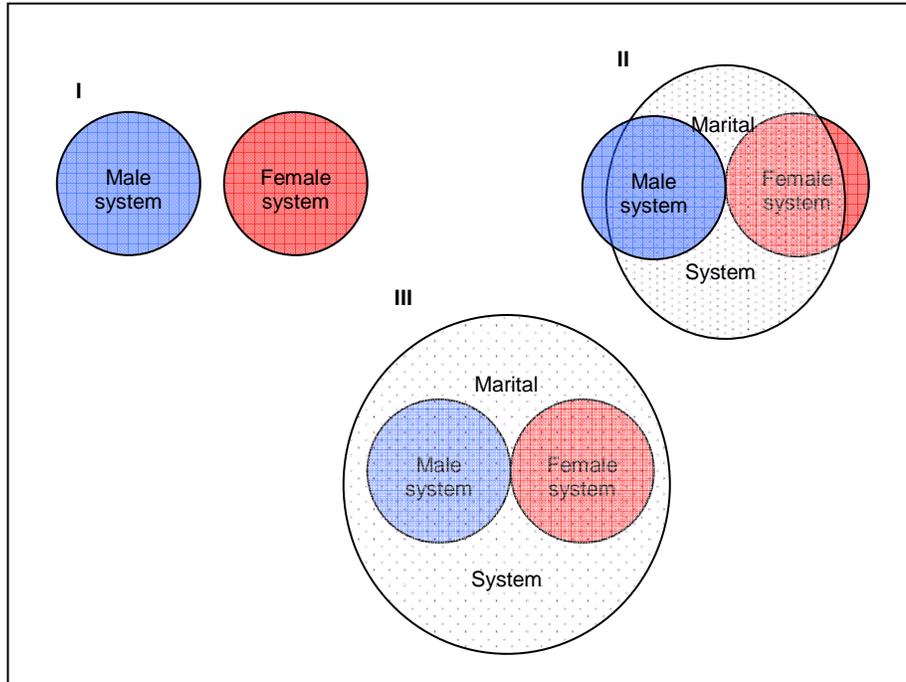


Figure 3.1 Relationships between systems (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.189)

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

Whitaker (1989) uses a game metaphor for describing 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 one another (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Whitaker, 1989).

Accordingly, both partners are part of a larger whole; a complex psychological entity (System C). Evidently, “I do” does not imply that two halves magically become a whole, that it completes us in the sense of making up for what is missing; however, two people who join together do make one relationship and in that sense two halves do make a whole (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993). Riggs (1978) formulated a more specific model of a dyadic relationship, which he called System C.

Marriage as System C

As mentioned, the focus of this study is on intimate relationships as a functional unit. Thus, a useful way of viewing an intimate relationship is to research the couple relationship as a system.

In a dyadic system, the two autonomous individuals involved could be viewed as Systems A and B, but, as System A and B join in an organised way, their relationship or dyadic system forms a new suprasystem C (Riggs, 1978). Accordingly, System C is regarded as a third or emergent system of communication and, as in this dissertation, is subject to study as an entity in itself. The formation of System C and the interchange between the different systems are illustrated in Figure 3.2 (next page).

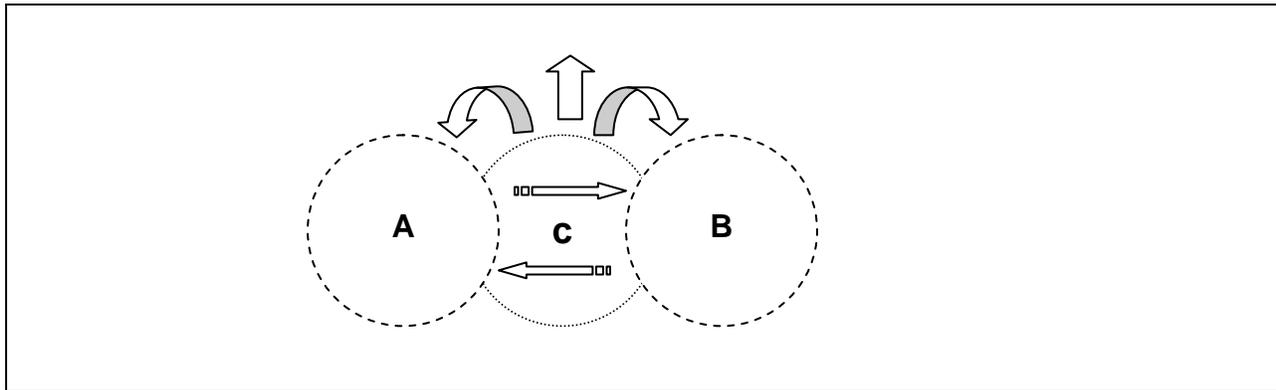


Figure 3.2 System C (Riggs, 1978, p.382)

Riggs (1978) indicated how the System C idea fits with systems criteria, which makes it relevant to this study:

- In any system, the system's *organisation* of the relations between elements is paramount. Accordingly, disorganisation implies entropy, while negentropy refers to organisation. In System C, no communication between A and B has meaning unless there is organization that is shared and recognised by both.
- In terms of *equi-finality* in System C, some unique state of communication emerges at the end of numerous contacts between System A and B.
- *Hierarchical differentiation*, that is, leadership and specialisation of function, is evident in System C.
- System C also displays *homeostatic functions*:
 - “When two people start communicating, and there is any positive return whatsoever from the process or any mutual wish for outcome, then there is combined resistance against any disturbances” (Riggs, 1978, p.382).

There seems to be an implicit agreement between the members on resisting disruptions or interruptions as an attempt to conserve System C. This self-regulating tendency emanates from the two participants and acts as a product of System C, upon each participant.

- System in context: For a system to survive, it must be in a state of *constant interchange* with the environment in which it functions. Both the maintenance input (need gratification) and informational input (adaptive challenge) is important for growth. Lack of the former leads to starvation and lack of the latter leads to boredom and entropy:
 - “... total sameness results in a gradual cut-off from the external environment, with an increasing loss in the capacity to adapt to future changes. But conversely, an overload of change and new input creates stress, then strain, and finally also disorganisation” (Riggs, 1978, p.383).

Unless both System A and System B commit to creating and maintaining the communicative relationship, System C will not continue for long. Accordingly, both A and B care about each other, but also about C, their relationship, and thus act in accordance to conserve it.

In addition, Riggs (1978) identified some dimensions that are unique to System C, including mutuality, resonance, alliance, and resistance. These dimensions will be discussed briefly as they appear to be applicable to this study of intimate relationships.

Firstly, mutuality refers to the conjoint processes of System C, which includes a conscious acceptance by both partners of the goals, modes, and codes of the interchange. In consolidating their partnership (System C), it is important to acknowledge these agreed upon “ground rules” of their relationship, as they are influenced by both A and B’s internal processes, as well as the context in which their relationship is embedded (Riggs, 1978). The second quality in the System C interchange is called resonance, which is defined as “the accuracy of match between successive contributions of A and B into C, in both cognitive and affective terms”

(Riggs, 1978, p.385). Accordingly, resonance has counterparts in common experience and expression. Although rapport, sympathy, and empathy are necessary in System C, resonance facilitates a higher degree of emotional and cognitive responses in the interchanges within this relationship. Both the third and fourth dimension of System C take place only in terms of a relationship and consequently as part of the interchange or communication system. Alliance as the third quality refers to the process where parts (the adaptive functions) of System A and B join to address problems. The last dimension, resistance, can be viewed as a homeostatic function of System C or the tendency to avoid perturbation (disturbing new data) in order to maintain the status quo (Riggs, 1978).

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. Consequently, “marriage then ideally becomes a process involving two persons, each enacting a role of individuating and each enacting a role of belonging – while they both struggle towards a kind of peership that invokes the right of each to separate” (Whitaker, 1989, p.81).

The autonomy-symbiosis dichotomy plays an important role in marriage. While autonomy refers to independence or “do it alone” activities, it does not exclusively imply physical separation. Symbiosis implies togetherness, where two organisms live attached to each other, provide

support for each other, and function efficiently together (Lederer and Jackson, 1968). Figure 3.3 below clearly depicts the different relationships between autonomy and symbiosis.

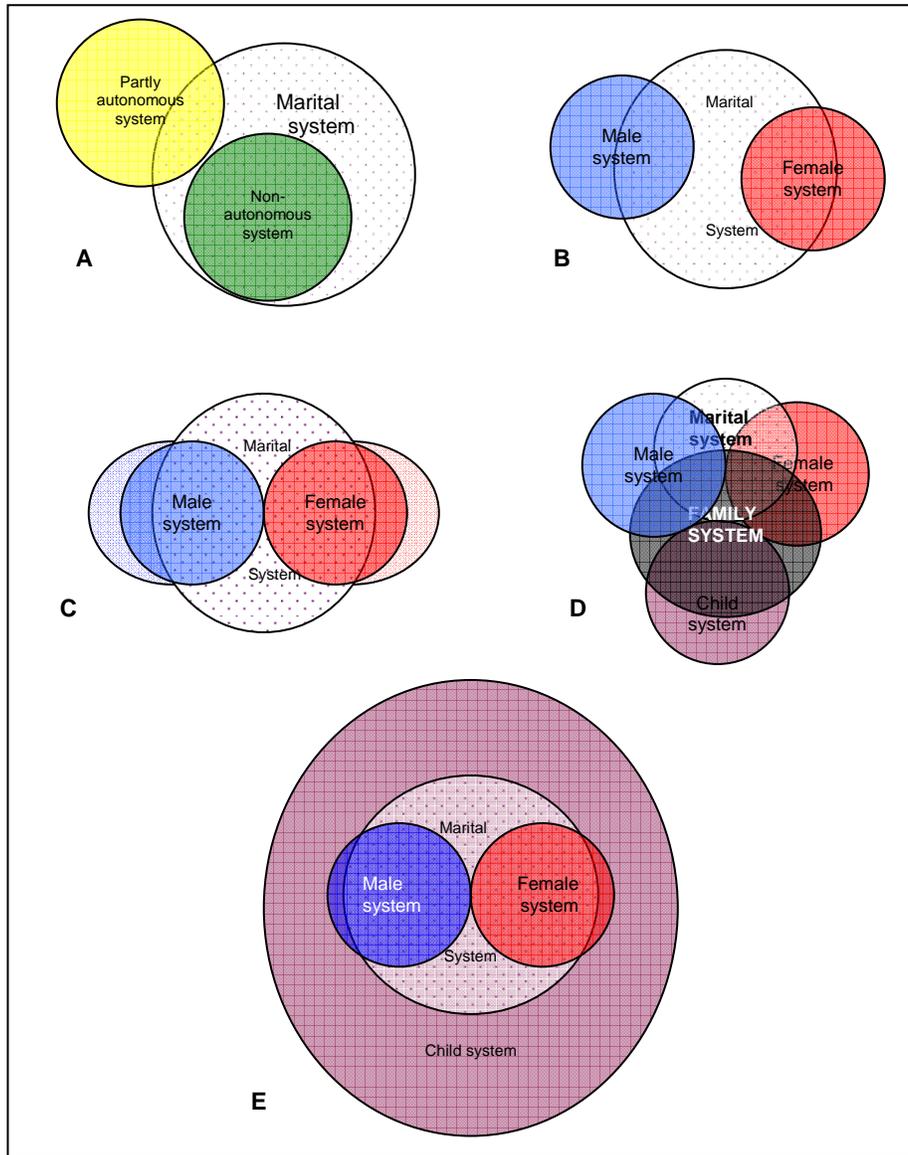


Figure 3.3 Possible relationships between autonomous behaviour and the marital system (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.190)

Figure 3.3 highlights the different possible relationships between autonomy and the marital system, which Lederer & Jackson (1968, pp.190-191) explain as follows:

- A.** Part of one spouse's system is operating autonomously (yellow area), independently of the marital system (dotted area), and the non-autonomous spouse (green area) is left at home feeling abandoned.
- B.** Part of each spouse's system is operating in symbiosis with the other (dotted area). The remainder is operating autonomously (shaded area), independently of the marital system.
- C.** A well-functioning marital system is characterised by both partners being equally autonomous (shaded areas) → in this illustration each partner's autonomy is thereby increased (lightly shaded areas).
- D.** The "egalitarian" family, where both parents and child(ren) function autonomously to some degree (shaded areas), but parts of their systems operate in symbiosis (dotted and dark areas).
- E.** The child's system engulfs both parents' systems and the marital system. Here the child dominates any autonomy that the parents have in relation to each other.

The aforementioned dialectical process takes place daily and over time as people who stay married move from being united to individuating, and then reuniting or remarrying. According to Whitaker (1989, p. 96), 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.

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 one sacrifices your freedom, initiative, and personalised lifestyle for the strength, freedom, security, and ecstasy of belonging in a much more secure way (Whitaker, 1989).

Interconnectedness in intimate relationships

From the aforementioned dialectical process of individuation and belonging as well as 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).

Marriage is therefore seen as an interlocking, self-contained system, wherein the behaviour and attitudes of one partner always stimulates some sort of reaction from the other (Lederer & Jackson, 1968) and consequently a change in one partner’s behaviour changes the system as a whole (Elkaïm, 1990). Accordingly, a change in the behaviour of one spouse is usually a reaction to changes in his or her partner’s behaviour, and, in turn, causes additional change in the partner’s behaviour. This action-reaction system operates in a circular fashion (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Nonetheless, changes in a system can also be introduced by external factors, for example, death in one of the families of origin. Lederer and Jackson (1968) explain that a unilateral change in one partner must be dealt with and incorporated into the family system, while the other spouse responds in a manner that maintains homeostasis, that is, to keep him- or herself and the system in balance.

Consequently, intimate relationships could be viewed in degrees of temperature (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Whitaker, 1989) where the couple governs each other's behaviour to maintain or regulate the expected or usual emotional temperature of their relationship. Therefore, if the one partner is cool and the other one is hot, they regulate each other's behaviour to ensure that the couple temperature remains stable. This temperature regulation is also reversible. As a result, if something happens to change the temperature of the one partner, the temperature of the other partner also changes to maintain homeostasis.

Minuchin and Nichols (1993) highlighted this complementarity as the defining principle of every relationship. Accordingly, "in any couple, one person's behaviour is yoked with the other's ... it means that a couple's actions are not independent, but codetermined, (and) subject to reciprocal forces that support or polarise – and it challenges the cherished belief in one's own Self" (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993, p.63). Lederer and Jackson (1968) refers to this system of behavioural responses as *quid pro quo*, which means "something for something", give and take, or reciprocal behaviour, and implies shared or exchanged behaviour. In marriage, partners become conditioned to this *quid pro quo* pattern; for example, if you do so-and-so, then I automatically will respond with such-and-such. They subtly inform each other of their response pattern, which suggests what must be done to balance the partnership.

In time, the *quid pro quo* pattern becomes an unwritten set of ground rules for the system. These rules consist of the characteristic relationship patterns within the system and give an indication of the relational organisation, the values of the system, and the roles that are appropriate to behaviour within the system. As a result, relationships are characterised by redundant patterns of interaction (Becvar & Becvar, 2006) and, consequently, some of the spontaneous behavioural repertoire within the marital relationship are eliminated (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

This *quid pro quo* can form the basis on which the marriage contract will be written. If it is written in broad and flexible terms, it will be useful for a long time. However, if it is too rigidly defined it might place the couple at risk when faced with stress and will ultimately require change in their communicational patterns (Steinglass, 1978).

In addition, couples are the visible part of a larger system. The larger system encompasses their families of origin, as well as broader socio-cultural and political elements, and when we study a couple's behaviour in the context of their families of origin it becomes apparent that one of the main functions of their conflict is to maintain the rules of the wider system (Elkaïm, 1990). Consequently, it is important to recognise that a marital relationship is not static. It is a process that involves constant change and requires continuous work from both partners (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Relational building blocks

Interdependence

Whitaker (1989) is of the opinion that marriage is nothing if not a partnership and that in the commitment to the marriage struggle, one finds more of one's own strength and more of oneself: "... thus, in the dialectical fashion, *I* become more and more of who *I am* by becoming more and more a part of who *we are*" (Whitaker, 1989, p.98).

As couples accept the notion of interdependence as a "truth" in their relationship, their intimate relationship can be described as a resonance box, where each partner's experience reverberates and is returned amplified, and consequently each partner's style of being and feeling is expanded (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993). As a result, being with another is not only a way of *filling* oneself but also a way of *expanding* oneself (Whitaker, 1989).

Complementarity

Minuchin and Nichols (1993) contest that a pure symmetrical or complementary relationship does not exist and that every couple has some mixture of individual autonomy, specialisation, and complementarity. Minuchin described his relationship with his wife as follows:

... we have experienced the tension between the couple and the self for forty years. We struggle, cooperate, and grow. Over the years our complementarity has grown more complex. Being alone does not mean betrayal. Giving in does not mean defeat. Dependency does not equal weakness. Initiative does not mean control ...

complementarity can be mutual enrichment. It defangs aggression, so that individuals who dance together don't hurt each other (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993, p.58).

Communication

Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain how the systemic paradigm revolves around communication and information processing. In this framework, the emphasis is on three principles: One cannot not behave; one cannot not communicate; and the meaning of a particular message or behaviour may be interpreted in many different ways. Although these principles are inherent in the patterns of interaction in intimate relationships, the two levels of communication, including the content (digital) level and the process (analogue) level, also play an important role. Accordingly, in a relationship where both partners know where they stand with each other, these two levels of communication match, and therefore their communication is congruent and effective.

Lederer and Jackson (1968) are also of the opinion that all behaviour is communicative. Accordingly, they found that communication in marriage is characterised by a mutually understood labelling or classification system, whereby certain gestures are assumed to indicate specific moods or emotions. This process of classification could limit a couple's response repertoire. As the couple's labels and accompanying assumptions form specific patterns, it is possible that they do not always consider other alternative meanings or outcomes. This could result in miscommunication and therefore it is important that they regularly revise and negotiate alternative labels or classifications.

The aggression and quarrels present in almost all marriages most likely arise out of a symmetrical struggle and breakdown in communication (Lederer & Jackson, 1968). Usually, both partners play a part in their inability to communicate in clear and workable ways. A breakdown in communication occurs because spouses often speak to each other without hearing the other (non-listening) and when the message sent is not the message received or the communication is incongruent. Consequently, it is imperative that the recipient clarifies if there is any doubt about a message meaning and that they learn to communicate in clear and completed communication sequences (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

The workability of a relationship depends on learning to communicate in order to negotiate *quid pro quos*, which facilitates agreement on and initiation of common goals.

Negotiations

In acknowledging their differences and as a way of conserving the relationship (System C) both partners sacrifice a part of their spontaneous behaviour and collaboratively establish a *quid pro quo*, also referred to as a “marital bargaining session” or “negotiations for the betterment of marriage” (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.286).

Thus, functional marriages require that spouses agree upon the roles and rules in the relationship. This mutual agreement and negotiation is essential in most aspects of marriage.

... unilateral autonomy is almost always dangerous to a marriage because it implies rejection, abandonment, or inequality. The spouses must be in accord about most of the behaviour of each, and compromises must be made. The firm hands of quid pro

quo are always at the steering wheel of the workable marriage (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.197).

Consequently, marriage is a series of adjustments, and therefore needs constant and continuing bargaining between the spouses. Bargaining is synonymous with negotiation and is best achieved through debate or communication and preferably should not be time bound (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Trust and honesty

Lederer and Jackson (1968) identified trust as an additional essential ingredient of a workable marriage and outlined the following ideas related to trust: Trust is synonymous to loyalty, fidelity, or being trustworthy and, on one level, it could be defined as confidence in or reliance on. Trust in marriage is neither static nor created by expectations as suggested by the unrealistic Christian marriage vow “love, honour, and obey ‘till death do us part’”. For trust to exist both spouses must be open and truthful. It is developed over time because of mutual shared experiences, which are clarified between the spouses. It is based on exchanges of behaviour and information, and each spouse understands and accepts the meanings of the other’s behavioural repertoire. “When two people trust one another each can relax, for he knows what kind of behaviour to expect from the other; mutual confidence develops” (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.107). Therefore, trust is the result of a flexible, developmental bargaining between spouses and endures because it is able to accommodate change.

Honesty includes saying what one believes as well as doing what one says, and therefore requires one to be congruent and consistent. When there is a match between what is said

(content) and how it is said (process/non-verbal behaviour), and these are communicated clearly, trust is possible. Furthermore, the inevitable growth and change, reversals in opinions, attitudes, and desires, need to be clarified so that changed behaviour can be understood, adjusted to, and commented on (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Respect, tolerance, and acceptance

Spouses in a workable marriage respect each other. Each spouse finds some important quality or ability to respect in the other and the more areas of respect, the more satisfactory the marriage. Spouses who are tolerant of each other see themselves as fallible, vulnerable human beings and can therefore accept each other's shortcomings. Another key ingredient in a successful marriage is the effort of the spouses to make the most of its assets and minimise its liabilities (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Sex

Sex is important in marriage and can be seen as the cement that holds the bricks of married life together. As with all the other ingredients in the marital relationship, sex involves behaviour between individuals in which the response of each partner depends on the mood, physical state, and fluctuations in the relationship. The spouses will enjoy sexual union when both are in a collaborative mood, that is, when both are adding something to the sexual act (Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

Love

If sex is the cement, love can be viewed as the brick wire used to strengthen the relationship. According to Whitaker (1989), there are different levels of love. On one level, it is an interpersonal communication game, an experience of social fun or interactional enjoyment. Yet on another level, love is also a process of being more of oneself by doing for the other. In addition, love could be an affective union between two persons, which could result in a sense of self-fulfilment and increased self-awareness. Paradoxically, this kind of love increases union as well as individuation, which seems to be characteristic of expanding marriages. Lastly, love is synonymous with the kind of friendship where “your own beingness is increased by the beingness of the other” (Whitaker, 1989, p.72) and is therefore considered an experience in which one is able to be more with oneself because of the presence of another who is with himself or herself.

These relational building blocks are interlinked and most of them are a prerequisite for the other. Because relationships are unique, it is possible that many other blocks could be identified and that each block is made to fit each individual relationship.

Intimate relationships redefined

In the context of Riggs' (1978) System C and the other authors' musings about intimate relationships, an intimate relationship unfolds as a complex, mutually agreed upon definition of relatedness. It involves an interdependent, interconnected, and collaborative negotiation process where the two individuals involved determine the rules and roles that are appropriate to their relationship (System C).

Accordingly, an intimate relationship can be described as a dance where you (System A) use and develop your own abilities, where you acknowledge and rely on your partner's (System B) abilities, and where both partners move together to form a dance routine (System C) that complements their lives' music; that fits with their lived experiences and their ecology. Alternatively, an intimate relationship can be viewed as a process of fusion where two part(ner)s fuse, to live together in symbiotic belonging, enjoying a sense of togetherness, and being completely interdependent. Lastly, an intimate relationship could also be understood in terms of a game where each partner has different roles and where the rules of System C are negotiated in a reciprocal manner in order to maintain homeostasis and conserve their relationship.

The former two chapters form the foundation on which to design the study of resilience in intimate relationships. The following chapter can be seen as the blueprint for this study as it serves to explain the methods used to conduct this study of resilience in intimate relationships.

Chapter 4

Research Design

Now that the foundation of this study has been laid and the building blocks identified it is necessary to draw up the plans or blueprints for the study in order to give it structure and to guide the reader through the research process. Although the research design (or blueprint) outlines the framework in which the research will be completed, it is also imperative to understand the researcher's way of thinking and way of interacting with the data, as well as the methods used in this study. This chapter serves to explore this plan of action.

Purpose of the research

The researcher's personal and professional journey inspired her to research the idea that some systems (individuals, couples, and families) cope better with perturbation through stress, trauma, and adversities. Additionally, the literature survey highlights a need for resiliency studies that focus solely on couple, marital, and intimate relationships.

The idea that some intimate relationships grow and thrive in the midst of, or despite of, adversities while others fall by the wayside directed the purpose of this qualitative study. The purpose of the study is to explore and better understand resilience in intimate relationships. The main aim is to discover what defines a resilient couple, specifically from a systemic point of view, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Interpretive framework

All research is interpretive; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.19)

This qualitative study involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of (or interpret) phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

From this qualitative view, and specifically in this study, it is also important to consider context to allow for different experiences, and to include the idea of multiple selves and multiple meanings. The aforementioned constitutes a postmodern philosophy which supports qualitative research and underpins this study of intimate relationships. Postmodernism involves the death of the subject and moves towards a relational self, as it defines realities in terms of relationships. According to Gergen (1994), postmodernism explains social realities as constructed through interaction and as highly dependent on the language we use to describe our experiences. Consequently, knowledge, or what we believe, is seen as “an expression of the language, values, and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts” in which we exist (Lynch, 1997, p.353).

Furthermore, the important principles that underpin this qualitative study includes a set of assumptions or beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge or the rules used to make sense of experience (epistemology), and the means for gaining knowledge

about the world including goals and aims of the research process (methodology) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Maione, 1997). These principles influence the way in which we see the world and act in it and collectively form a paradigm or interpretive framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) which could also be referred to as a research tradition (Maione, 1997).

A paradigm can be defined as a basic set of beliefs, attitudes, viewpoints, procedures, or methodologies that guide action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). According to Kuhn (cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2006), a paradigm refers to a set of presuppositions about what the world is like, about problems worthy of investigation, and about the methods that are appropriate for the investigation of these problems. Because qualitative research is open-ended, it is unlikely to impose a single umbrella-like paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) on this study.

However, the constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology which implies that there are multiple realities; a subjectivist epistemology, where the knower and respondent co-create understandings; and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The aforementioned forms the interpretive framework for this relational study. Constructivism assumes that in the process of perceiving and describing experience we construct a knowledge base about reality, and even about reality itself, and these constructions organise experiences and shape lives (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

An epistemological stance refers to a set of assumptions about the world, knowledge, and human behaviour which determines how the researcher interacts with the data. The constructivist perspective with a subjective epistemology (as in this study) “embraces the notion that meaning is constructed by an observer (researcher) and that it is context dependent” (Maione, 1997, p.4). Accordingly, objectivity is impossible because all we know are our

constructions of the world and the distinctions that we make pertain more to a revelation of where the observer stands than to an intrinsic constitution of the world which appears (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Elkaim, 1990). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.19), “there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer (researcher) and the observed (researched)” and therefore the observer (researcher) cannot exist outside the observed system (researched) (Elkaïm, 1990; Maione, 1997).

From the aforementioned, it is clear that a constructivist perspective guides the theoretical framework of this qualitative study on resilience in intimate relationships, where the researcher forms part of the research process. Accordingly, the focus is 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 researcher uses interpretive methods in the quest to make more understandable the worlds of experience studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Research context

Sampling

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

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

- *Family therapists:* Firstly, three renowned family therapists were selected on the basis that all of them are practising therapists who specialise in working with couples and families. The therapist sample was also homogenous with respect to their gender, ethnicity, age, and professional status; all three therapists were male, white, middle-aged professors at three different universities across the country.
- *Visual aid stimuli:* Secondly, visual aids were compiled which included excerpts from five films that depict couples who faced adversities. These films and specific excerpts were extracted and included in this study to facilitate the exploration of the dynamics and characteristics of couples who show resiliency. The films that were selected are briefly discussed in Table 4.1 (next page) and digital copies of the excerpts are included at the back.

Table 4.1 Visual aids sample

FILM	BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF CLIPS USED
	The movie is about Katie and Ben who have been married for about 20 years. They have two children, whom they love dearly. Over the years Katie and Ben have drifted apart, which resulted in tension, conflict and unhappiness. They decided to separate during the time their children went to summer camp. Katie and Ben got to the point where they considered divorce. The clips depict some of the moments in their relationship that were significant and reflect their style of interaction, which contributed to their interpersonal distance.
HUSBANDS & WIVES	The film is about two couples: Jack and Sally, and Gabe and Judy. The clip starts when Jack and Sally arrive at Gabe and Judy's apartment and announce their separation. When Sally discovers that Jack has met someone else, she accuses him of having an affair before the separation. Eventually Sally also met someone else. Both Jack and Sally realised that they wanted to reconcile.
NOTTING HILL	Even though the story focuses on a bookshop owner William and his relationship with a famous actress, Anna Scott, the focus of this clip is on William's friends Max and Bell. Bell is wheelchair bound and unable to conceive a child. The focus is on how Max and Bell interacts despite the disability.
MOZART & THE WHALE	This film is based on a true story. Both Donald and Isabelle have Aspergers, which affect their social and communication skills. Donald started Autism & Asperger's support group. Since Donald and Isabelle met they had a good connection, because they understood each other's peculiarities. The clip depicts the difficulties and challenges they faced as a couple.
WALK THE LINE	Johnny Cash is a well-known musician of the 1950's and 1960's. While in the army, he bought his first guitar and started to write his own music. In 1955, Johnny and his friends had their first concert, and this is where he met June Carter, a famous musician, for the first time. There seemed to be an immediate connection between Johnny and June. They often toured and performed together, and therefore grew closer. Later on Johnny struggled to cope with the pressure of fame, his father's judgement and his troubled marriage to Vivienne. He turned to substances, which affected his singing, his relationships and even got him into trouble with the law. After his divorce, Johnny's life took a turn for the worse, but June helped him. The clip focuses on Johnny and June's relationship.

- *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 dissertation, the sample was homogenous in that all the couples are married, middle class, and of the same ethnicity.

Data collection

In qualitative studies, the data is usually in written or spoken form and collected by audio/video taping interviews and/or field notes recorded by the researcher (Maione, 1997). According to Neuman (1997, p.328), qualitative data is empirical and involves concrete aspects of the world, including “documenting real events, recording what people say, observing specific behaviours, studying written documents, or examining visual images”. This study utilised all of these different aspects of data collection on some level.

The data collection of this study involved all the sources of information mentioned above and therefore it is divided into, and will also be discussed according to, the following 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

Firstly, each couple was given a participant manual, which included the visual aids, response, and reflection sections. They were asked to watch the film excerpts, to discuss them, and to answer questions regarding the couples in the films.

Section C: Couples' interviews

Secondly, 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.

Measurement

Each couple identified in the films depicts some level of resiliency and the participant couples were asked to define resilience, to list what makes each couple resilient, and to use an ordinal scale to rate each of the couples in the films according to their level of resiliency.

Although the films and accompanying resiliency scale for the couples in the clips were useful tools, they were only used as aids to illustrate differences in relational resilience and to elicit the participant couples' responses, which are going to be the main focus of analysis.

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. During data analysis, the researcher spends a lot of time with the data, takes a close look at the data gathered, and begins to make sense of it (Maione, 1997). Consequently, data analysis means a search for patterns in data, that is, recurrent behaviours, objects, or a body of knowledge (Neuman, 1997).

There are various tools of analysis available to use in qualitative research. Tools of analysis are ways of organising data into meaningful units; they help to manage the data and facilitate the

process of meaning construction (Maione, 1997). Durrheim (1999, p.47) states that “qualitative (data analysis) techniques begin by identifying themes in the data and relationships between these themes”. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data; it organises and describes the data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Importantly, thematic analysis conducted within a constructionist framework “cannot and does not seek to focus on motivation or individual psychologies, but instead seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.85).

Attride-Stirling (2001) emphasised that one of the prerequisites for useful and meaningful qualitative research is a methodical way of analysing the data. She proposed that thematic analyses can be usefully aided by and presented as thematic networks, that is, web-like illustrations (networks) that summarise the main themes constituting a piece of text (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic networks aim to explore the understanding of an issue or the signification of an idea, to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels, and to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes. Thematic network analysis therefore systematises the extraction of different levels of themes, as indicated in Figure 4.1 and as follows:

- Basic themes – Lowest-order premises evident in the text.
- Organising themes – Categories of basic themes grouped together to summarise more abstract principles
- Global themes – Super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the text as a whole.

(Attride-Stirling, 2001)

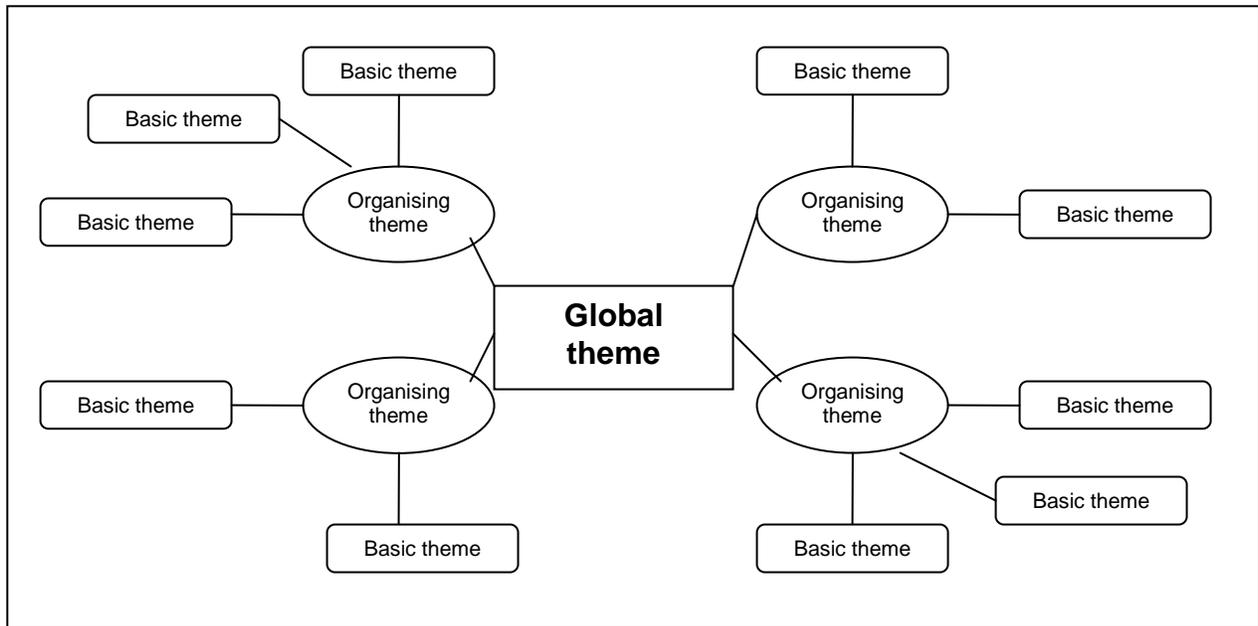


Figure 4.1 Structure of a thematic network (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.388)

In this study on resilience in intimate relationships, a combination of the work of Attride-Stirling (2001, pp.390-395) and of Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, pp.141-144) served as a guideline in analysing the information.

Step 1: Familiarisation and immersion

As mentioned before, visual aids (films) were used to facilitate the exploration, identification, and definition of resilience in intimate relationships. With regards to the images (films) used in this study, when we familiarise and immerse ourselves in the visual material, we “get a feel for them and begin to know their details and nuances” (Kelly, 1999a, p.409). In relation to written or spoken texts, in this case the literature, as well as the therapists’ contributions and the participants’ feedback, familiarisation and immersion means “becoming very familiar with the text” and “getting a feel for the overall meaning and different types of meaning in the text” (Kelly, 1999a, p.409).

Step 2: Coding the material

Coding means “breaking up the data in analytically relevant ways” (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p.143) or “dissecting the text into manageable and meaningful text segments (passages, quotations, words)” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.390). Coding could be done on the basis of the theoretical interests guiding the research, on the basis of salient issues that arise in the text itself, or on the basis of both (Attride-Stirling, 2001). After the transcription of the therapists’ and couples’ interviews, the issues discussed were extracted from the text by using coding techniques. The coding helped to break up the text and group relevant parts together.

Step 3: Identifying and inducing themes

After the initial coding of the data, the salient, common, or significant themes are abstracted. This helps to reframe the reading of the text, but also allows for the refining of themes to ensure that they are specific enough, but also broad enough to encapsulate a set of coded ideas (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Additionally, “you look at your material and try to work out what the organising principles are that “naturally” underlie the material” instead of using “ready-made categories” and simply looking “for instances fitting the categories” (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p.141).

Step 4: Constructing networks

According to Attride-Stirling (2001), the induced themes provide the source for the thematic networks, which involves:

- Arranging the themes into similar coherent groupings on the basis of content or theoretical grounds, which form part of the selection of basic themes.
- Creating clusters and rearranging the basic themes into organising themes, which also involves the identification and naming of the underlying issues.
- Deducing global themes that represent the principal metaphors of the text.

In this study, these levels of themes will be illustrated as non-hierarchical, web-like representations (similar to Figure 4.1), which should reflect the data accurately.

Step 5: Elaborate, describe, and explore

According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p.144), the purpose is to “keep playing around with ways of structuring until you feel that you can give a good account of what is going on in your data”. At this stage, the analysis is taken to a further level of abstraction, “to take the researcher deeper into the meaning of the texts, the themes that emerged have to be explored, identifying the patterns that underlie them” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.393). Here the original text is interpreted with the aid of the networks and includes describing the content of each network, supporting it with text segments and exploring the underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thereafter, a summary of the themes and patterns characterising it is provided.

Step 6: Interpretation and checking

Qualitative interpretations are constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the interpretation stage the deductions in the summaries of the networks and the theory are brought together to explore significant themes, concepts, patterns, and structures that arose in the text (Attride-Stirling,

2001). This stage also included searching for contradictions in themes and reflecting on how the researcher's frame of reference has impacted on the study.

Soundness and trustworthiness

For this research study to be relevant and useful, it needs to be “inspected” for validity and reliability. Because the last mentioned terms are commonly used in quantitative studies, based on positivist assumptions, they will be used in inverted commas to demonstrate their application to this study. Alternatively, in conducting qualitative studies, the question of how “reliable” a study is, is termed credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, and trustworthiness (Maione, 1997). These terms will be described below to illustrate their usage as pertaining to this study.

“Validity”

"Validity" refers to the degree to which the research conclusions are sound and trustworthy (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Stiles, 1993).

Stiles (1993, pp.608-613) highlighted that “validity” in qualitative research involves the following:

- “Triangulation”, which refers to using information from multiple information sources, multiple information collection and analysis methods, and/or multiple investigators. According to Kelly (1999b), triangulation refers to the use of multiple perspectives against which to check one's own position. In this study, there are multiple levels of triangulation, as illustrated in the Figure 4.2 (next page).

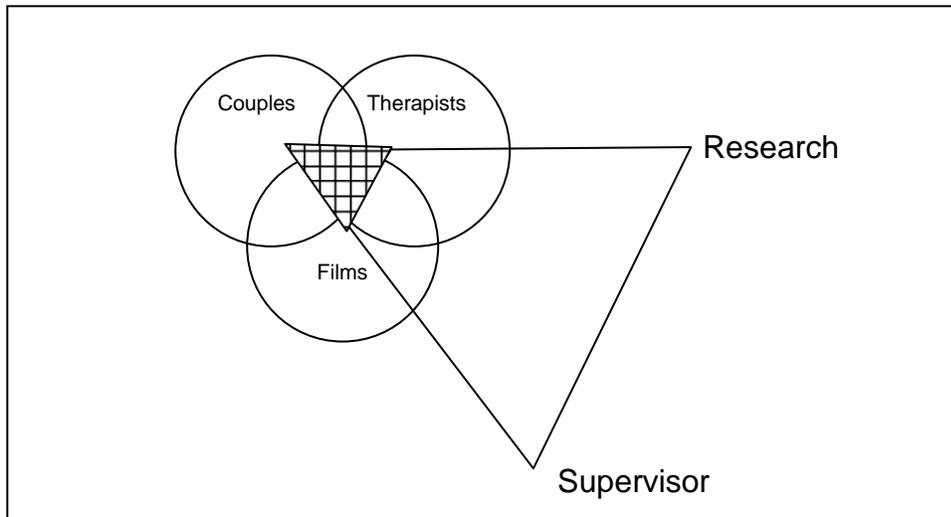


Figure 4.2 Multiple levels of triangulation

- “Coherence”, which refers to the quality of fit of the interpretation.
- “Uncovering; self-evidence” which refers to making sense of our experiences, and
- “Reflexive validity” which refers to the way in which the researcher’s way of thinking is changed by the information.

Keeping the findings and conclusions of this study in mind, the researcher therefore needs to consider possible flawed findings and also identify factors that could challenge the conclusions.

Credibility

According to Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999) credible research produces findings that are convincing and believable. Furthermore, the credibility of qualitative research is established while the research is undertaken. In attempting to produce a rich and credible account, the researcher will have to look for contradictory evidence throughout the study.

“Reliability”

According to Stiles (1993, p.601), “reliability refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data”. Furthermore, Stiles (1993, pp.602-607) identified the following strategies with regard to “reliability” which are also relevant to this study:

- “Disclosure of orientation”, which refers to the researcher’s expectations, preconceptions, and theoretical allegiance.
- “Grounding of interpretations” refers to the linking of interpretations to the content and context, which is substantiated by linking themes with examples from the excerpts.
- “Ask ‘what’ not ‘why’”, because it grounds the experiences in context.
- “Description of internal processes of investigation” which refers to the researcher’s internal processes, including the impact of the research on the researcher. When the researcher states any biases openly, these preconceptions and assumptions, which could have influenced the research process, become inherent parts of the inquiry and indispensable to meaning construction (Brody cited in Maione, 1997; Greene cited in Maione, 1997).

Dependability

According to Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999) “reliability” is the degree to which the results are repeatable. However, intimate relationships and interactions are contextual and therefore the researcher cannot assume that all couples across different cultures are going to behave in the same manner and therefore show resiliency in similar ways. The researcher therefore prefers to propose that the findings will be dependable. This implies that the reader could be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher says they did. Furthermore, “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).

At this stage of the study the foundations have been laid, the building material is ready, and the plans are drawn up. The following chapter will include the construction of the thematic networks as part of the data analysis.

Chapter 5

Results

The blueprint in Chapter 4 provides a guideline for this study on resilience in intimate relationships. The results chapter consists of the first part of the data analysis, wherein the three different sources of information and subsequent data collected will be discussed under separate headings.

This is the construction phase of the study, wherein the information from the different sources of information are grouped together to build themes. A brief background description for each participant therapist and participant couple will be provided, and the participants' responses will be presented and analysed by using thematic networks. Themes will take the form of web-like presentations, and brief discussions of each theme will follow. Addendum A provides the identified themes in table format.

Section A: Family therapists – Therapist A

Background

Therapist A qualified as a clinical psychologist in 1981 and specialises in couples and family therapy. He is currently a professor at a local university, and also invests his time in research. A systemic epistemology informs his work; however, he also acknowledges that each couple has their own epistemology that one has to work with.

Themes

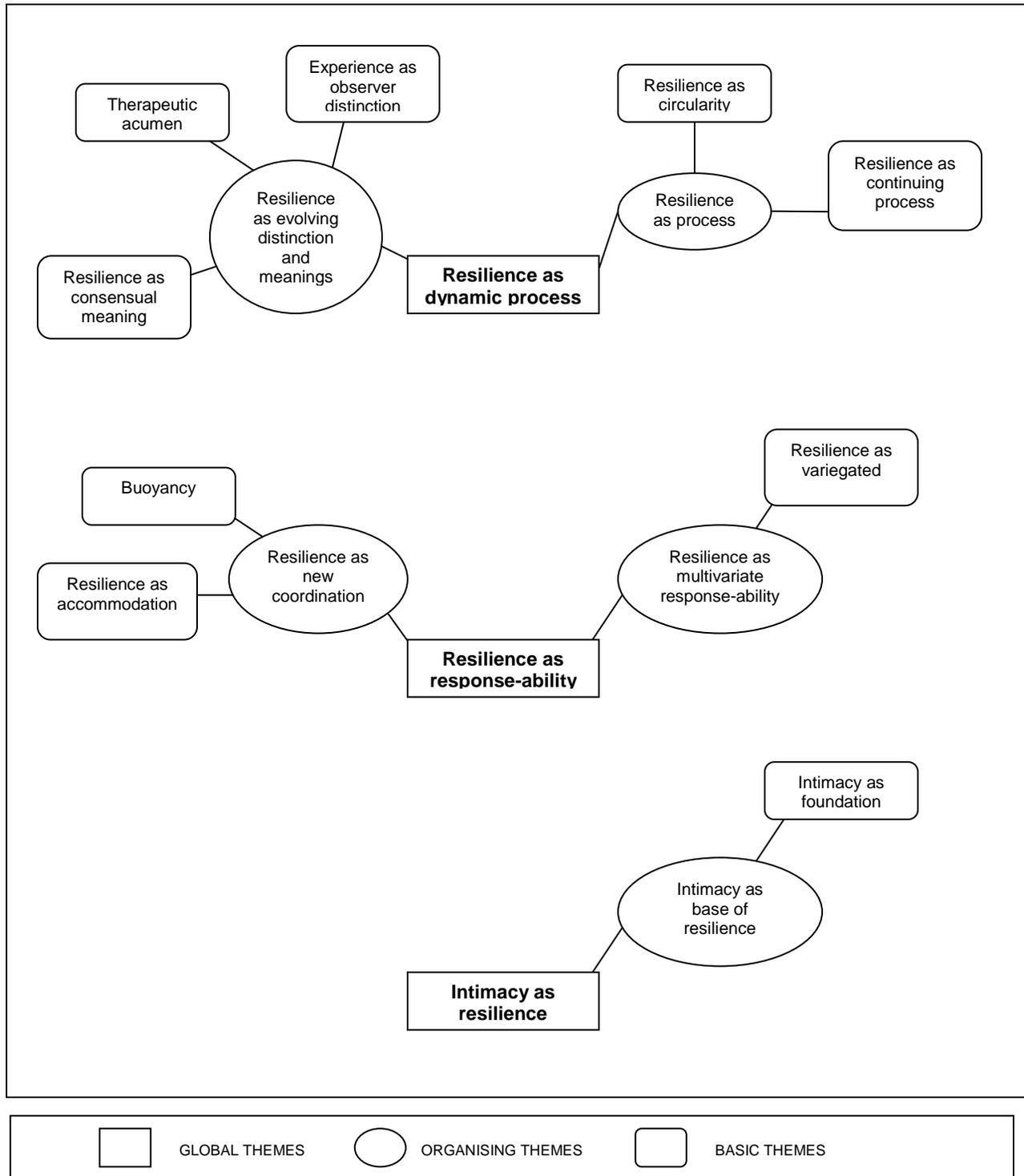


Figure 5.1 Therapist A: Thematic networks

Resilience as dynamic process

The basic theme, experience of observer, emerged as Therapist 1 reflected on his experience in the field of psychology and career in working with couples: *“Ek praktiseer al van 1981 af as sielkundige en werk sedertdien met couples”*. His therapeutic acumen assists him in allowing each couple’s own epistemology and agenda within therapy, but also to observe his role within the therapeutic system in order to maintain mobility within therapy: *“hier sit twee mense voor my, maar ek is deel daarvan (the therapeutic system), van dit wat daar gebeur ... ek probeer om van verder terug af te kyk na wat gebeur hier tussen ons....”*.

Therapist 1 views resilience as consensual meaning, which implies that the definition and meaning of resilience and intimate relationship is construed (*“ek dink mense definieer dit verskillend”*), involves implicit negotiations (*“daar is ‘n groot argument oor hoe hulle (couples) met mekaar negotiate rondom stressors ... dit hoef nie verbaal te wees nie, maar ‘n understanding, ‘n begrip van wat elkeen gaan doen”*), and that it is differently punctuated by different people, in different contexts. It is therefore important to clearly define resilience as applied to this study of intimate relationships.

As a result of his experience, acumen, and epistemology, Therapist 1 is not only aware of his internal frame of reference, but also considers other frames and meanings. At one level of meaning he describes resilience and intimate relationship as dynamic concepts, yet on an abstract level resilience is considered to be evolving distinctions and meanings.

In accordance with a systemic paradigm, the focus of this discussion is on the relationship as a system: *“resilience van die couple as ‘n stelsel, nie van die twee afsonderlike mense as individue nie”*. Because of this reciprocity in relatedness, resilience can be viewed as circularity.

Although this implies that resilience is a continuing process within a relationship, it is also context bound, “*jy moet kyk na die konteks en wat gebeur in die konteks*”. Consequently, resilience in a relationship is a recurring, ongoing process, happening in different moments, in various contexts: “*dis amper ’n momentele proses ... ’n proses wat plaasvind ... as deel van die moment ... en die moment word beïnvloed deur die konteks ... vat hulle daar uit en oor twee weke is hulle nie meer resilient nie*”.

From the aforementioned themes it becomes clear that resilience is a dynamic process, on both an empirical as well as a theoretical level. Accordingly, the definition and prevalence of resilience are evolving to suit the observer and/or relationship. However, resilience is also context-specific as it changes and differs from moment to moment. Resilience can be found in any relationship, in any circumstance.

Resilience as response-ability

According to Therapist 1, resilience can be defined as “*die vermoë om weer te begin*”, that is, the ability to start again. The basic theme of buoyancy clearly explains this ability to rebound from difficult situations and describes a possible reaction from couples when their relationship becomes more demanding. Therapist 1 is of the opinion that intimate relationships have undergone many changes: “*aan die een kant het dit meer oop geraak en aan die ander kant is daar baie meer druk*”. These changes include increased openness, accompanied by increased pressure. Consequently, resilience requires constant re-negotiation and can be viewed as accommodation to couples’ stressors and changes within the relationship.

The couple's buoyancy and ability to accommodate indicate that they are capable of adapting to adversities and therefore these themes can be grouped together to form an organising theme that describes resilience as new behavioural coordinations.

In discussing resilience in intimate relationships, Therapist 1 questioned the prevailing definition and outcomes of relational resilience. As seen above, resilience in intimate relationships is multifaceted because it includes the couple as a system (*"resilience van die couple as 'n stelsel"*) but also considers the wider context or the couple system in context (*"... 'n ou kan nie net kyk na die couple nie, jy moet kyk na die konteks en wat gebeur in die konteks"*). As part of the notion that resilience is variegated, Therapist 1 added that intimate relationships can generally be viewed as unpredictable. As seen in the excerpt below, couples often find unexpected solutions, with no specific recipe or plan: *"my gevoel met couples ... in die algemeen, is die grootste verandering verras jou. Dis nie iets wat jy vooruit kan sien nie, dis nie iets wat jy kan maak gebeur nie"*. Rather, resilience is multifaceted and involves many possible outcomes. However, respect is a prerequisite for resilience and fundamental to intimate relationships: *"ek dink as jy nie respek het nie, het jy niks ... verhoudings is gebou op respek"*. Accordingly, resilience could be described as multivariate response-ability to form an organising theme.

Each couple has a unique ability to establish new coordinations through their ability to bounce back and to accommodate adversities. Because resilience is described as a multivariate response-ability, it indicates that each couple has the ability to respond to stressors and adversity in a relationship-specific and context-specific manner.

Intimacy as resilience

Although Therapist 1 described respect as fundamental to a resilient relationship, intimacy has been noted as the foundation of relationships. Therapist 1 refers to it as a multiverse of intimacies because the term intimacy has various connotations depending on the context. He also feels that intimacy is not only restricted to marriage, as mentioned in his interview: “*ek dink nie dit is noodwendig ‘n huwelik nie, dit kan baie ander moontlike samestellings ook wees*”. He highlighted that although intimacy can take on many forms, it could imply “*emosionele kontak tussen die mense*”, it is an emotional connection, but also “... *baie wyer as seksueel*”, more than a sexual connection. He also explored the possibility of intimacy with one’s family of origin. In sum, intimacy seems to form the base of resilience and because it is described as the relational foundation, it also highlights the principle metaphor that intimacy could be viewed as resilience in itself.

Section A: Family therapists – Therapist B

Background

Therapist B has been working with couples and families for over 20 years. He has a teaching background and qualified as a family therapist in 1979. He is currently a professor at North West University and has done vast amounts of couple and family research. Therapist B was trained in family therapy and systems theory, which informs his work until today. He used structural therapy and behavioural therapy in the past and is currently working from a narrative approach. Over the last few years Therapist B has also done marital therapy. Furthermore, he has been on the board of an international family therapy association.

Themes

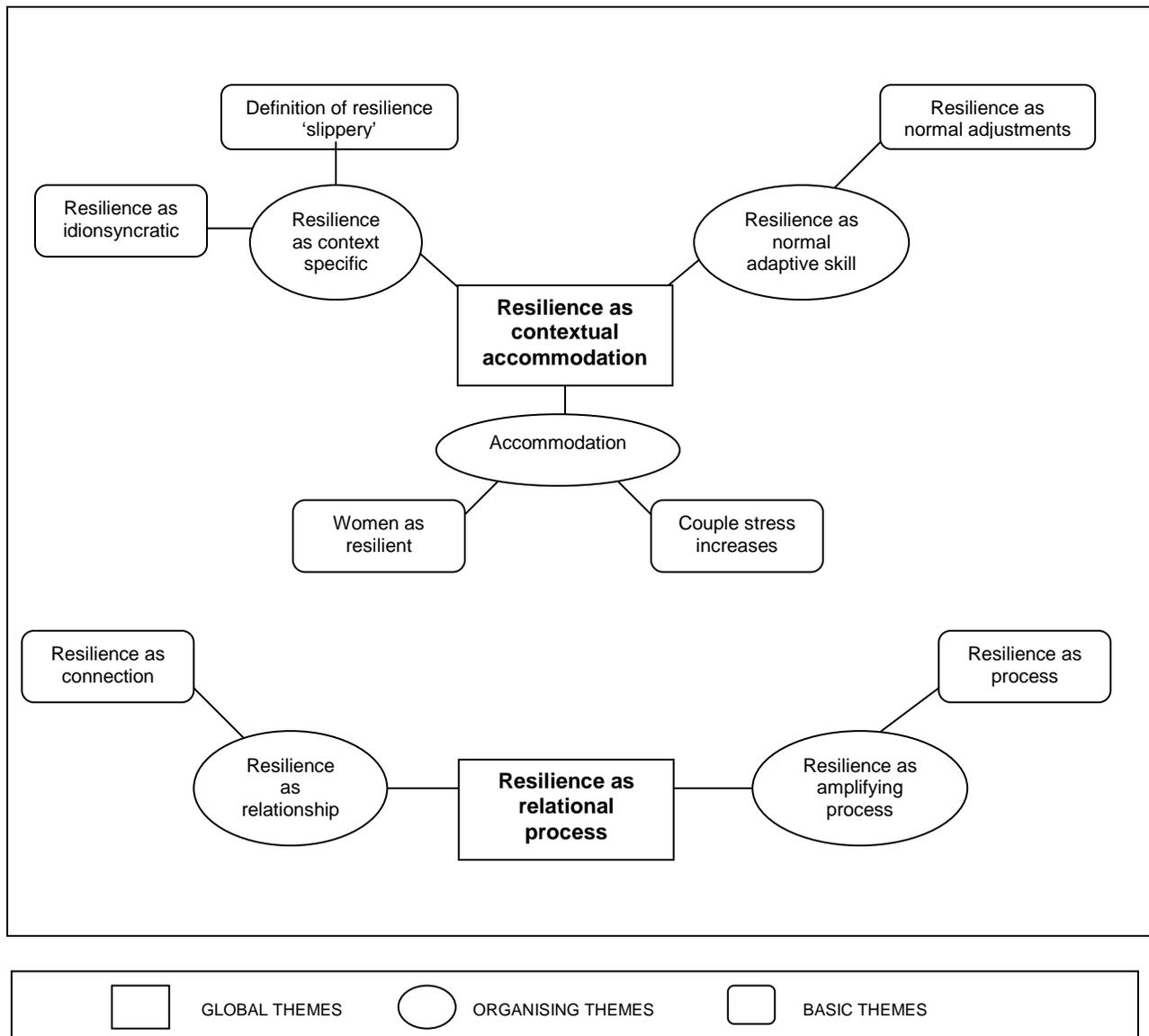


Figure 5.2 Therapist B: Thematic networks

Resilience as contextual accommodation

Firstly, Therapist B questioned the researcher about the definition of resilience, thereby emphasising the difficulties in defining resilience in intimate relationships. Consequently, it is important to view resilience as idiosyncratic or unique to each couple: “*die uniekheid van elke*

couple kom deur om te respekteer”, because each couple represents different types and definitions of intimacy and relatedness. Therapist B describes intimacy as multifaceted, and an intimate relationship as a place where two individuals feel safe and secure to share themselves. Accordingly, each couple system is unique and has mutually agreed upon rules, which impacts on their degree of resiliency.

The aforementioned two basic themes outline the ‘slippery’ and idiosyncratic nature of resilience. Together, they form an organising theme that highlights that resilience is context specific and therefore unique to each relationship and situation.

Secondly, and apart from the idea that resilience is context specific, Therapist B proposes that resilience is also inherent in ordinary developmental processes and emerges as an outcome of these adjustments to life phase transitions. The following excerpt confirms this proposition: “... *normale ontwikkelingsprosesse wat ’n ou deurgaam, ek het gewonder of resilience nie ook binne dit gedefinieer kan word nie ... om aan te pas by daai normale ontwikkelingsprosesse, dit is nie vir jou resilience nie?*”. Therapist B highlights that resilience is a possible response to normal developmental processes that destabilise the system. Consequently, he views resilience also as the ability to adjust to these developmental processes (marriage, childbearing, and so on) in order to stabilise the system again.

However, as part of the basic theme of resilience as normal adjustment, Therapist B feels that one also needs to consider the couple in context. This is important because many external stressors, including the partners’ families of origin and in-law relationships, impact on the couple’s relationship. Therapist B noted that the way in which couples deal with these supra-systems or the ecology in which they are embedded (including extended family, community, belief system, school) could also be an indication of their relational resilience, as seen in the

following excerpt: “*wat maak jy (couple) met die supra-sisteme, met die families of origin, ... met die community, ... met jou geloofsisteem, met die skoolsisteem ... dis maar wat ek as resilience sou sien*”.

In further extending the basic theme of resilience as normal adjustment, Therapist B feels that couple’s resilience can be facilitated by, “*ek dink volwassenheid ... en saam met dit kom verantwoordelikheid. Ek dink wat belangrik is, is ’n groot mate van self-kennis ... en vrywees van patologie*”. This implies that resilience can be viewed as maturity, responsibility, and health.

All the normal developments and resultant adjustments discussed above form the organising theme that describes resilience as a normal adaptive skill to life’s demands and stressors.

Thirdly, it is evident that couple stress increases as the couple is exposed to external stressors. According to Therapist B, one of the main stressors in modern relationships is the fact that working women have multiple roles. Although women need some degree of resiliency to balance their roles and responsibilities, intimate relationships have also had to adapt to the differentiation, increase in pressure, and consequent vulnerability brought about by the emancipation of women. This relational accommodation could be described as the organising theme and represents a possible response for couples who are affected by external stressors and increasing demands on women.

All three of the aforementioned organising themes indicate that resilience is contextual, but also an inherent ability to adapt to life’s transitions and accommodate the resultant changes and stressors. Therefore, one of the global themes that was predominant in the interview with Therapist B was resilience as contextual accommodation.

Resilience as relational process

From the interview with Therapist B it became clear that a resilient individual does not necessarily imply a resilient couple. Instead, Therapist B views couple's resilience as a meaningful bonding process (*"ek dink dit is prosesse van 'hou van' ... dit is sinvolle bonding"*) that is mutually satisfying and results in optimal relational functioning. Although the level of resilience and functioning correlates with the degree of belonging in the relationship, it is also linked to the degree of differentiation allowed within the relationship: *"... die couple is optimaal of dit gaan goed met hom as die sisteem goed funksioneer, maar binne die couple se funksionering moet die individu genoeg ruimte hê om homself te ontwikkel en die individue lewer ook hul volle kapasiteit"*. Accordingly, resilience is viewed as connection on the level of a basic theme, and, on the level of an organising theme, this connection is extended to describe resilience as a relationship to signify the connectedness inherent in couple's resilience.

Therapist B emphasised the importance of taking a holistic view and therefore to see an individual within a system. This holistic view includes the evolving processes within the relationship or bigger system. Resilience as a process forms the basic theme and highlights how the emanating processes within the system can either limit or increase the couple's ability to deal with stressors or adversity: *"... 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 uitbrei nie"*. It is possible that the processes within the relationship can perturb the system which could result in a shift within the relationship, thereby increasing its capacity. Here the interplay between the couple's ability and the relational processes involved in dealing with adversity are emphasised. Accordingly, relational resilience can be described as an amplifying process that perturbs the system and opens up possibilities for change within the relationship.

The aforementioned organising themes indicate that resilience signifies a relationship or interpersonal connection, and it involves processes that could shift the relatedness to consolidate the connection. Resilience as a relational process describes this interplay.

Section A: Family therapists – Therapist C

Background

Therapist C is a qualified clinical psychologist who specialises in working with couples and families. He is currently a professor at a Cape based university. He has a great interest in resilience and has undertaken many social constructionist studies on resilience. In his work with couples and families, Therapist 3 mainly uses Solution Focused Brief Therapy as the model of therapy.

Themes

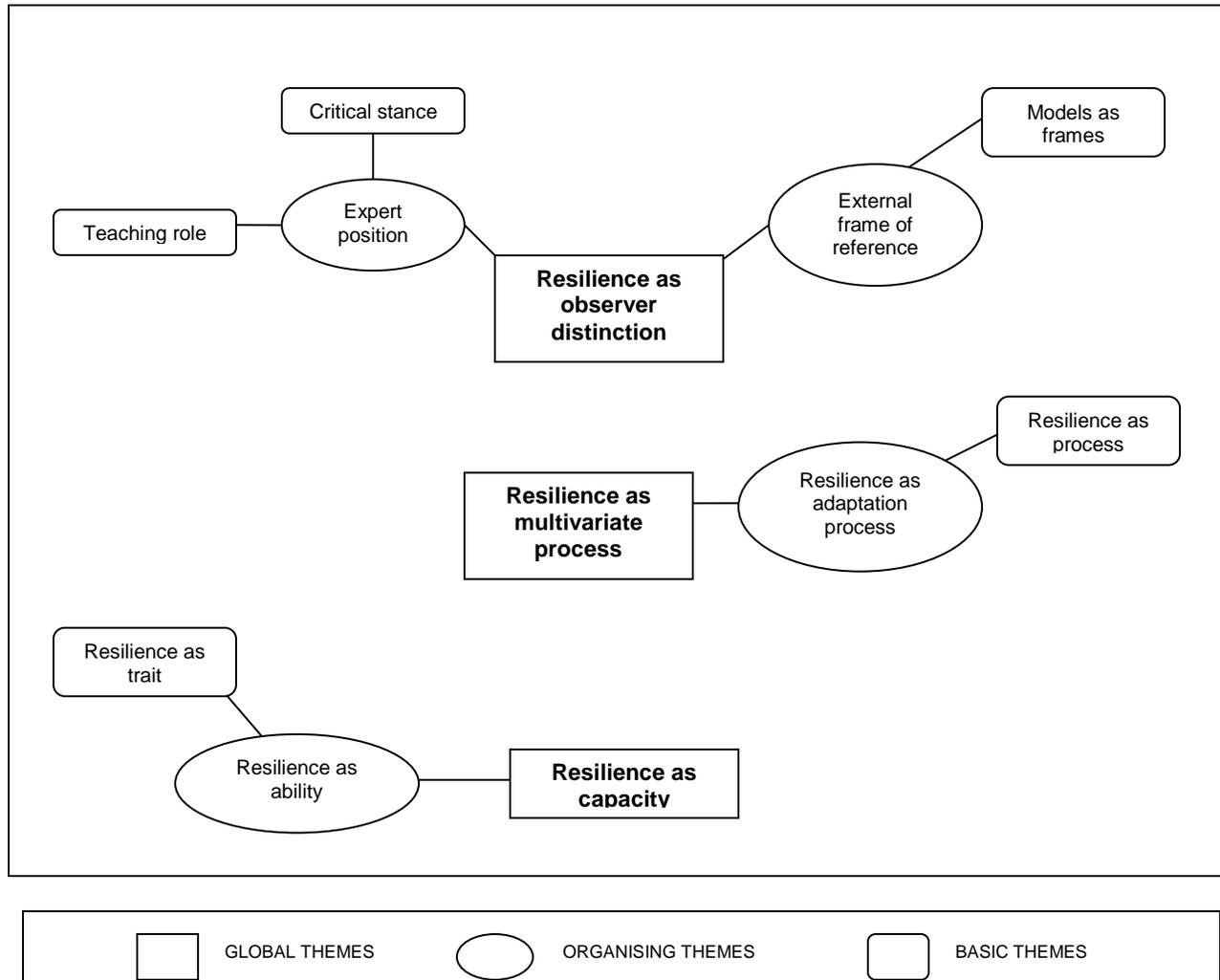


Figure 5.3 Therapist C: Thematic networks

Resilience as observer distinction

Because Therapist C is familiar with the resilience phenomenon, he interrogated the researcher about this study on resilience in intimate relationships, and also questioned the research design. He took a more critical stance in the discussion and also made suggestions, for example, “*Hoekom moet die couples na die flieks kyk? Ek sou net die paartjie gevat het, want ek wil hê hulle moet dink aan hulle eie verhouding*”. Critical stance as a basic theme links well with the

next one that highlights Therapist C's teaching role. As a teacher who is knowledgeable about resilience as a phenomenon, he added his own opinions: "*dit is belangrik dat jy 'n goeie verstaan van resilience het ... dis die 'ability to bounce back' ... wanneer 'n mens goed aangaan met die lewe, in die verhouding, na die krisis, dan is hulle resilient*". He also mentioned his own studies and articles on resilience.

As a higher order theme, Therapist C takes an expert position to indicate that he has authority in the field of resilience research. His knowledge of and insight into the resilience phenomenon and consequent critical thinking could seem overbearing. However, his input is valued because it guides the researcher's thinking and helps to consolidate the methods used in this study on resilience.

An expert inherently uses specific models as frames of reference. Therapist C uses a Solution Focused Brief Therapy model in his therapy and a social constructionist frame informs his research on resilience: "*Ek gebruik ook 'n sosiale konstruktiewe benadering en werk meestal met Steve de Shazer se Solution Focused Brief Therapy*". This implies that he works from an external frame of reference to discover the internal workings of his clients or participants.

The aforementioned basic themes and resultant organising themes indicate that resilience can be viewed as an observer distinction. If one looks through resiliency frames, you get used to seeing resilience in different contexts and therefore what we see says a lot about how we see. Resilience as an observer distinction implies that resiliency possibilities and outcomes are inferred from our observations.

Resilience as process

To further describe resilience, Therapist C uses a metaphor of a ball under water. As you push the ball under the water, it is under increasing pressure. When you release the downward pressure, it bounces back to the surface. Accordingly, resilience is a process that involves a crisis or downward pressure: *“resilience word gedemonstreer wanneer daar ‘n krisis is”*. Consequently, a crisis tests the relationship: *“wanneer daar ‘n krisis is, dan word die verhouding getoets”*.

The resiliency process also requires that time passes in order to adapt to a crisis: *“dan moet hulle dit verwerk, herformuleer”*. The processes that facilitate the adaptation and consequent resilience include communication, religion, accessing the available resources, and the ability to redefine the crisis (*“die praat met mekaar, godsdiens, benutting van geld en hulpbronne tot hulle beskikking, die herformulering van die krisis”*). Over time, the level of adaptation becomes apparent. Bon-adaptation refers to the positive outcomes and a possible higher level of functioning after a crisis and mal-adaptation refers to the inability to bounce back. The level of adaptation and resilience after a crisis could be an indication of the relational strength: *“party gesinne of paartjies kom sterker uit krisisse, maar hulle het gewoonlik tyd nodig vir die prosesse om plaas te vind”*. Therefore, resilience can be viewed as an adaptational process.

Resilience as a multivariate process signifies the complexity of resilience in intimate relationships as it considers how resilience as a process is not only multidimensional, but also involves many different variables.

Resilience as capacity

Apart from the processes in resilience it is also important to consider the specific qualities of the partners or the relationship that helps them to be resilient through difficulties: “*die kwaliteite waaroor hulle beskik om hulle te help om te 'bounce back' is belangrik in resilience*”. Accordingly, resilience is viewed as an inherent trait; an ability. This links with the aforementioned frame of reference, where Therapist C focuses on what the couple is capable of doing or their strengths, and attempts to optimise their abilities, thereby strengthening their strengths “*waar die fokus op sterktes is ... op dit wat hulle kan doen, en maak die sterktes sterker*”. We could therefore consider the resilience capacity of a couple as the traits and abilities that they have that make them capable of enduring and surpassing life’s adversities.

Section B: Couples’ response stimuli – Couple 1

The following section is an exploration of the participant couples’ responses to the clips/film stimuli. Here the couples’ responses are based on the circumstances depicted in the films and could reflect some of the couples’ attitudes about, and approaches to, intimate relationships. It could be useful to refer to the brief synopsis of each film in Chapter 4 or consult the DVDs attached at the back to better understand this section and each couple’s responses.

Themes from stimuli responses

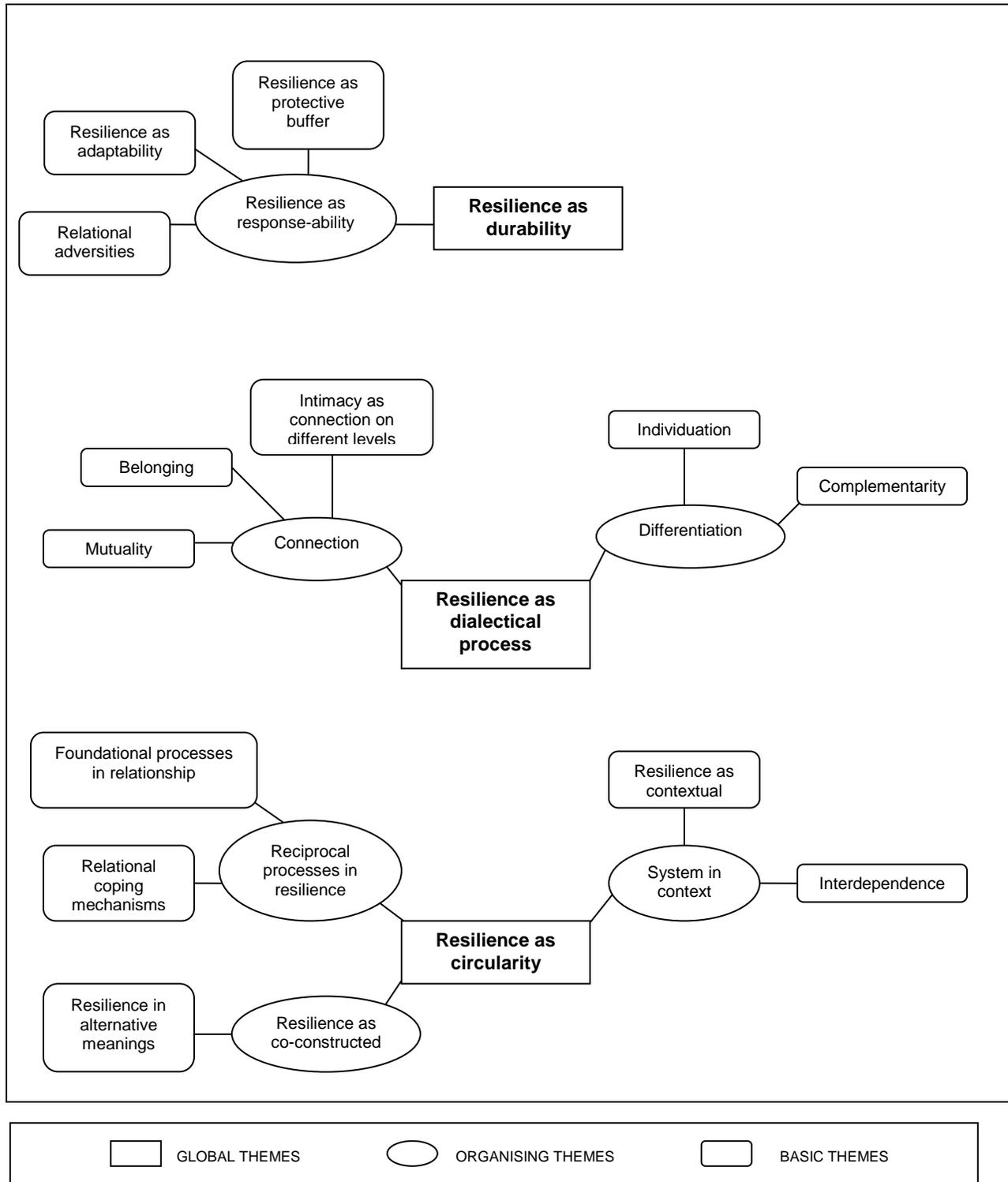


Figure 5.4 Couple 1: Stimuli responses' thematic networks

Resilience as durability

Couple 1 defines resilience as a protective buffer: “*protection against circumstances that might be a problem*”. They added that, within the context of a relationship, resilience involves conflict management, “*handling of conflict in marriage*”, and that relational resilience can also be viewed as a response to problems in the past because “*it might be related to problems in your childhood that impact on your relationship*”.

Couple 1 mentioned that acceptance and the ability to adapt (to each other and to adversities) shows resilience. Thus, accepting each other’s limitations is an important process in adaptability and relational resilience. According to Couple 1, the couple in Film 3 coped with the wife’s physical disability because “*both totally accepted their situation ... and they were well equipped for their lifestyle*”. According to Couple 1, the couple in Film 4 coped with their communicational disorder because the partners “*were in the same situation and did, after all, accept each other’s shortcomings and loved each other nonetheless ... they complemented one another*”.

Couple 1 also identified various adversities from the film stimuli that could affect intimate relationships. Apart from the overall circumstances that affect the intimate relationship, ignorance about relational adversities can be viewed as problematic. As seen in Film 2, “*the problems were ignored or not taken seriously in the beginning and got out of control*”. Furthermore, Couple 1 acknowledges that each partner’s personal inabilities also play a role in a couple’s ability to endure and overcome adversities. Couple 1 identified ineffective communication as one of the biggest relational adversities, and therefore suggested that: “*they should have communicated more openly with each other ... really listening to each other*”. Apart from the internal stressors within a relationship, external stressors also contribute to relational

adversities. These external stressors include “*stress about money; parents’ disapproval of the relationship; career pressure*”.

Through their participation in this study, Couple 1 learnt that: “*all people and couples do have their problems and differences*”, and feel that these relational adversities “*could be overcome by trust, communication, professional help, God, and love*”. They also realised that, as a couple, you have to “*identify your real problems and work together to a solution*”, and thereby have come to reassess their own relational problems.

The three basic themes discussed above portray resilience as a protective buffer, as adaptability, and as a response to relational adversities. The essence of these three basic themes indicates that resilience is not only a response to adversity, but also indicates that couples have innate abilities to help them to endure these adversities. In sum, resilience could be viewed as durability, but the principal metaphor encapsulated highlights that couples’ resilience is a manifestation of their response-ability in difficult circumstances.

Resilience as dialectical process

Couple 1 views intimacy as connection on different levels, which includes bi-directional involvement. Accordingly, Couple 1 describes an intimate relationship as “*two people in a relationship (who) are totally involved in each other’s life, including emotionally, financially, sexually, in sport, health, and leisure activities*” and it includes “*total commitment*”.

Although resilience in intimate relationships requires some level of intimacy, resilience can also be described as belonging. According to Couple 1, “*a feeling of belonging to one another,*

security, and friendship” helps relationships to last over time. In essence, mutuality is also important in intimate relationships. This implies that partners develop mutual interests (“*they should have developed a new, shared interest, sport, or hobby*”) and share similar experiences. Couple 1 reflects their own mutuality in their similar backgrounds (“*we both had difficult times*”), in the resonant theme of divorce (“*both of us were divorced*”), and their shared experiences (“*we both had successful careers*”). According to Couple 1, their mutuality helps them through difficult times.

Although the aforementioned connection and mutuality seems to be important in relational resilience, Couple 1 feels that personal space or “*space for each other*” within the relationship is also important. They acknowledged how each partner’s unique worldview and way of doing things could create difficulties within the relationship, for example in Film 1, “*differences in upbringing caused them (the couple) to have different outlooks and ways of doing things*”. Film 2 highlighted that being disconnected in a relationship could also be problematic, “*each of them was in their own world of living ... and because of not facing their problems, they drifted apart*”. This basic theme of individuation forms an important part of intimate relationships and therefore affects their level of resiliency.

In addition, the idea of complementarity links with this process of individuation because each partner in an intimate relationship has different responses to adversities. Couple 1 refers to Film 1 where “*Ben was happy going and Katie was more of a control freak*”, while in Film 4, “*Donald tried to act normal, while Isabelle was more relaxed*”. The different coping styles of the partners give an indication of the complementarities within the relationship.

Evidently, the uniqueness of each partner results in relational complementarities which support the necessity of individuation within a relationship. The abstract principle behind these basic themes implies that differentiation is also important in intimate relationships.

From the aforementioned themes it is clear that resilience can be viewed as a dialectical process between connection and differentiation within an intimate relationship.

Resilience as circularity

Couple 1 identified foundational processes in a relationship which result in relational outcomes, including “*security, friendship, and respect*” for each other. Couple 1 stressed that it is important to negotiate these relational processes and outcomes through effective communication. A solid relational foundation includes a “*beginning characterised by love, joy, and trust*”, “*solid basics and basis*” for the relationship, “*equal interests*”, and “*unconditional love and acceptance*”. In addition, a proactive approach to relational adversities (for example, “*they should have tackled the problem together and (sought) counselling*”) could reinforce these relational processes.

Other relational processes could be viewed as relational ‘coping mechanisms’. One of the main ways of coping is seen in the avoidance of confrontation within the relationship, for example, “*there was no direct confrontation of their relationship issues*”. Couples therefore tend to compromise and make sacrifices (“*life is full of sacrifices*”) in order to cope with various relational demands. Alternatively, escapism is also viewed as a ‘coping mechanism’ where partners try to escape from reality, for example, by misusing substances. This was the case in Film 5 but also for Couple 1 personally as they explain, “*we both had successful careers with plenty of stress and pressure, which led to alcohol misuse*”.

These foundational processes and relational coping mechanisms discussed above highlight the reciprocal processes in resilience, which implies that the relational processes are mutual and bi-directional.

Furthermore, relational resilience can also be viewed as contextual. Firstly, on a relationship level, partners are interdependent of each other, for example, in Film 3 “*Bella (wife) is depending on Max (husband) for everything*”. However, relational resilience is also affected by wider contextual factors. These contextual factors include external support systems, like a family or social support network. For example, in Film 1, “*their children*” helped them to cope with their relational adversities and, in Film 5, “*June’s parents were supportive*”. Part of relational resilience could also be providing support for your family and/or friends, as seen in Film 4 where “*they formed a supporting ‘team’ for their friends*”.

The aforementioned themes highlight that resilience is contextual, but also that interdependence is integral in intimate relationships. This further implies that an intimate relationship is embedded in a bigger system; it is a system in context.

Couple 1 indicated how resilience can be found in alternative meanings, which is facilitated through therapy: “*willingness to seek professional help*”. Alternative meanings are also found in the process of reframing, for example, in Film 2, where the couple “*did (sought) counselling and both of them changed their mindsets*”, they were described as fairly resilient. Through altering the meaning of relational adversities, couples show some level of resilience. However, Couple 1 added that it is important to have realistic expectations of yourself and of the relationship, as it facilitates finding alternative meanings as well as relational resiliency. Couple 1 realised that “*all people and couples do have their problems and differences ... that the grass is not greener on the other side ... and that nobody is perfect*”.

The principle metaphor portrays resilience as circularity. The interconnectedness of resilience between the partners, but also of the intimate relationship and the bigger context, is illustrated as well as the notion that resilience is co-constructed.

Section B: Couples' response stimuli – Couple 2

Themes from stimuli responses

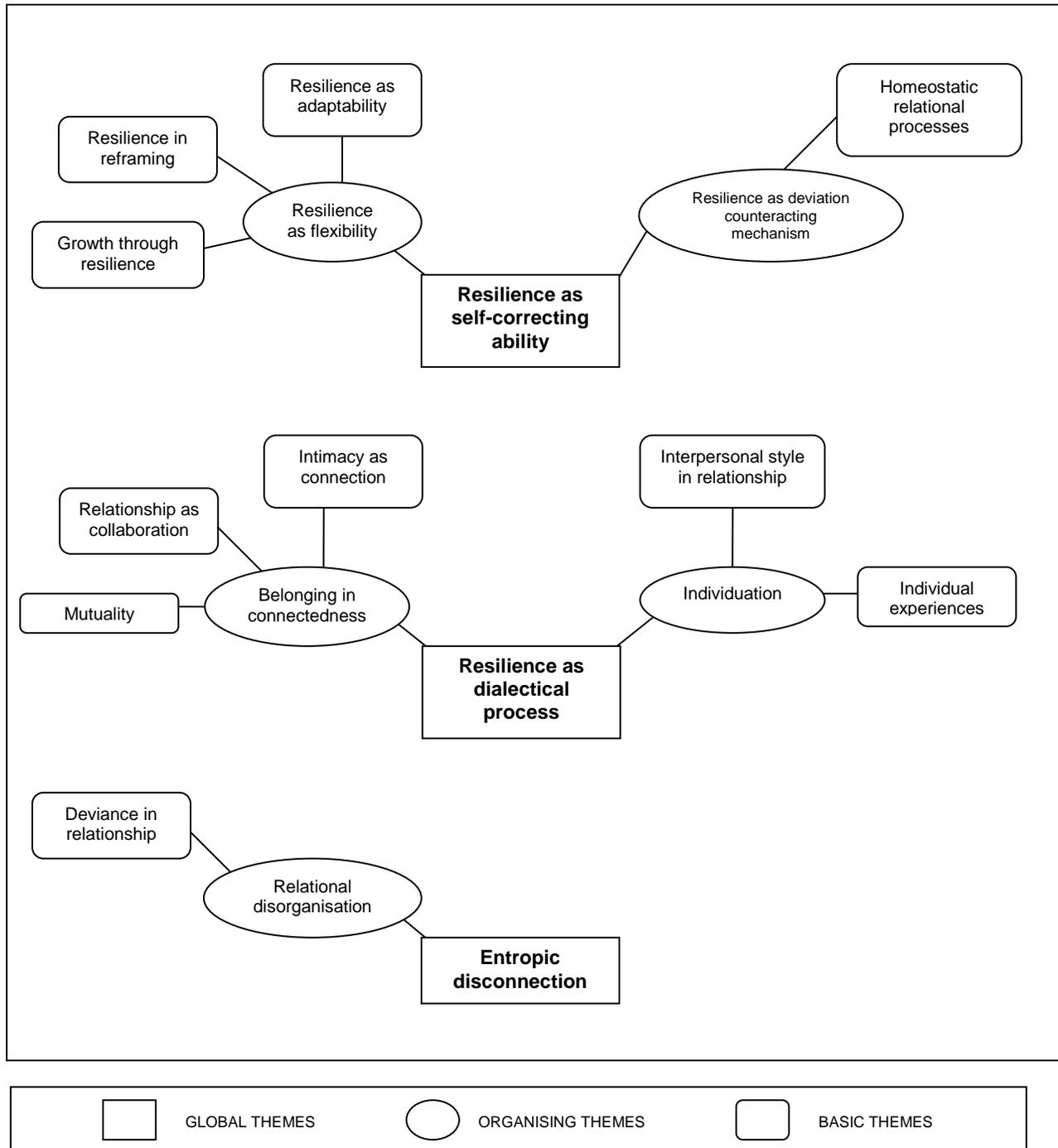


Figure 5.5 Couple 2: Stimuli responses' thematic networks

Resilience as self-correcting ability

Couple 2 describes resilience as adaptability, “*the ability to recover; flexibility; tolerance*”. According to them, resilience is also seen as accommodation or “*understanding of each other*” and therefore “*it is important to be able to make a paradigm shift and remove all your own emotions to see and understand the other party’s point of view*”.

Furthermore, resilience is also evident in the process of reframing relational issues. According to Couple 2 reframing involves the optimisation of the relationship through “*acceptance of the other*” and “*giving without expecting to receive*”. This form of relationship optimisation is evident in Film 3, where, “*accepting their circumstances and making the best of life*”, the couple was able to cope better with the physical disability of the wife. Alternatively, reframing also includes forgiveness as is the case of Film 5, where “*June was able to forgive Johnny ... and still loved him*”. Another part of resilience in reframing is established through realistic relationship expectations. In Film 1, “*they realised that life is not all happy*” or “*they will live mostly happily ever after and therefore they know (that not all is perfect), but choose to still be together*”.

Growth is inherent in the process of reframing and in resilience itself, and therefore resilience could be described as improvement, but also as learning. Couple 2 noted that the couple in Film 4 was resilient and coped well with their communicational difficulties because they not only accepted each other, but also “*learnt from their situations*”.

The three basic themes of resilience as adaptability, reframing, and growth, as discussed above, can be grouped together to describe resilience as flexibility – an ability to endure adversities, bounce back and continue as before, or learn from the experience.

Apart from this flexibility, intimate relationships also involve homeostatic relational processes that help to conserve the relationship as a system. These processes include open communication and conflict resolution. With regard to open communication, Couple 2 suggested that the couple in Film 1 “*should have talked to each other*” and that the couple in Film 2 “*could have been open and honest from the start*”. With regard to conflict management, Couple 2 feels that it is important to resolve issues and that “*irritating habits should be communicated and accepted*”.

As part of these relational processes, insight is also crucial in intimate relationships, whereby each partner acknowledges his or her role in the conflict or difficulties. Couple 2 explains that Film 1 resonated with them because, similar to Ben and Katie, “*we have irritating habits, however, on a day to day basis, we realise that it is definitely better being together, with minor issues, than being apart*”. These homeostatic relational processes highlight that resilience can be viewed as a deviation counteracting mechanism, which helps to maintain equilibrium within intimate relationships.

On the one hand, resilience is described as flexibility and on the other hand it is viewed as a deviation counteracting mechanism. Inherent in both of these aspects of resilience is a self-correcting ability. Intimate relationships therefore have the ability to bend back far enough in enduring adversities, but also have the ability to absorb or redirect the pressures before it pushes the relationship too far, thereby allowing them to bounce back and maintain relational homeostasis.

Resilience as dialectical process

For Couple 2 an intimate relationship is synonymous with “*best friends, unconditional love, and sexuality*”. Accordingly, intimacy is seen as connection and it is dependent upon commitment. Couple 2 feels that “*commitment or 100% priority, love, and attraction*” makes intimate relationships last. In Film 3 “*their true commitment and love for one another*” made the couple’s relationship resilient. In addition, reconnection could be established through quality time spent together. Couple 2 suggested that the couple in Film 1 “*needed to spend more quality time together, without the children, work, or other administrative matters ... this will remind them of the good stuff*”. Through their participation in this study on intimate relationships, Couple 2 rediscovered that “*we love spending as much time as possible together, despite little irritations*”. This “*need to be loved and to belong*”, as seen in Film 4, further emphasises the notion of intimacy as connection.

In addition to the intimate connections discussed above, a relationship could also be described as collaboration, although this could mean a friendship, which is specified by Couple 2, “*your partner should be your best friend*”. Collaboration also implies a level of selflessness in the relationship, “*giving without expecting to receive*”, but also inherently means “*teamwork*”. Couple 2 views these collaborative characteristics as crucial in making a relationship last.

Despite these relational collaborations, couples are also dependent on external support, for example, the couple in Film 2 coped better with their separation because “*Sally talked about her relationship with Jack (husband), a psychologist, and with Michael (a friend)*”, while the couple in Film 5 coped better because “*family supported Johnny through his recovery from substance abuse ... and letters from fans resulted in Johnny’s realisation and commitment to recovery*”.

The theme of relationship as collaboration links with the notion of mutuality, where shared experiences are viewed as a way of connecting and mutual support is necessary to reinforce this connection.

The basic themes of intimacy as connection, relationship as collaboration, and mutuality all share the common idea of belonging through connectedness. This belonging and connectedness is essential in relational resilience.

In addition to the aforementioned connection, partners also have different interpersonal styles in their relationship. Sally in Film 2 is described as a “*difficult person*”, while Jack seems indifferent, because “*he did not seem to care or place her (Sally) as priority*”. In Film 4, “*Isabelle comes across as attention seeking, manipulative, and controlling and Donald is shy and insecure*”. In Film 5, “*June was stubborn and Johnny was arrogant*”. Couple 2 acknowledges that interpersonal sensitivity is important. Thus, to have insight into one’s own personal style and to be aware of the impact of your interpersonal style on the relationship is crucial.

On another level, each individual partner’s experiences are also important. These individual experiences include the experience of personal dissatisfaction in the relationship, but also implies the necessity of self-acceptance, in an example from Film 4, “*Donald should have been more accepting of himself*”. These individual experiences also extend to past experiences that could influence an intimate relationship, as illustrated in Film 4 where “*Donald’s shyness and insecurities seems to come from his childhood*” and in Film 5 where each partner’s “*history as individuals – previously married, having children*” affected their current relationship.

These interpersonal styles as well as the individual experiences highlight the process of individuation inherent in intimate relationships. The principle metaphor of the aforementioned

themes, but specifically of belonging in connectedness and individuation, revolves around the notion of resilience as dialectical process. Consequently, a couple shows resilience in their connectedness, but also in their response to individuation.

Entropic disconnection

Couple 2 identified the ‘deviance’ that is present in relationships. These adversities include stress as adversity, but also possible problematic changes. The couple in Film 1 “*experience change in themselves and their relationship ... they forgot about the good and only noticed the bad*”. Furthermore, ineffective communication is also a relational deviant, as seen in Film 1, “*Katie and Ben did not say how they feel*” and in Film 5, where “*June showed care and commitment, but did not communicate it*”. A breakdown in communication could emphasise the disconnection in a relationship and result in unresolved issues, as seen in Film 2, where their “*unresolved issues made them seem content, but not necessarily happy*”.

These relationship deviances could lead to relational disorganisation, whereby new information is not considered and redundant patterns of interaction evolves. The principle metaphor that emerges is the entropic disconnection that could affect relational resilience negatively.

Section B: Couples' response stimuli – Couple 3

Themes from stimuli responses

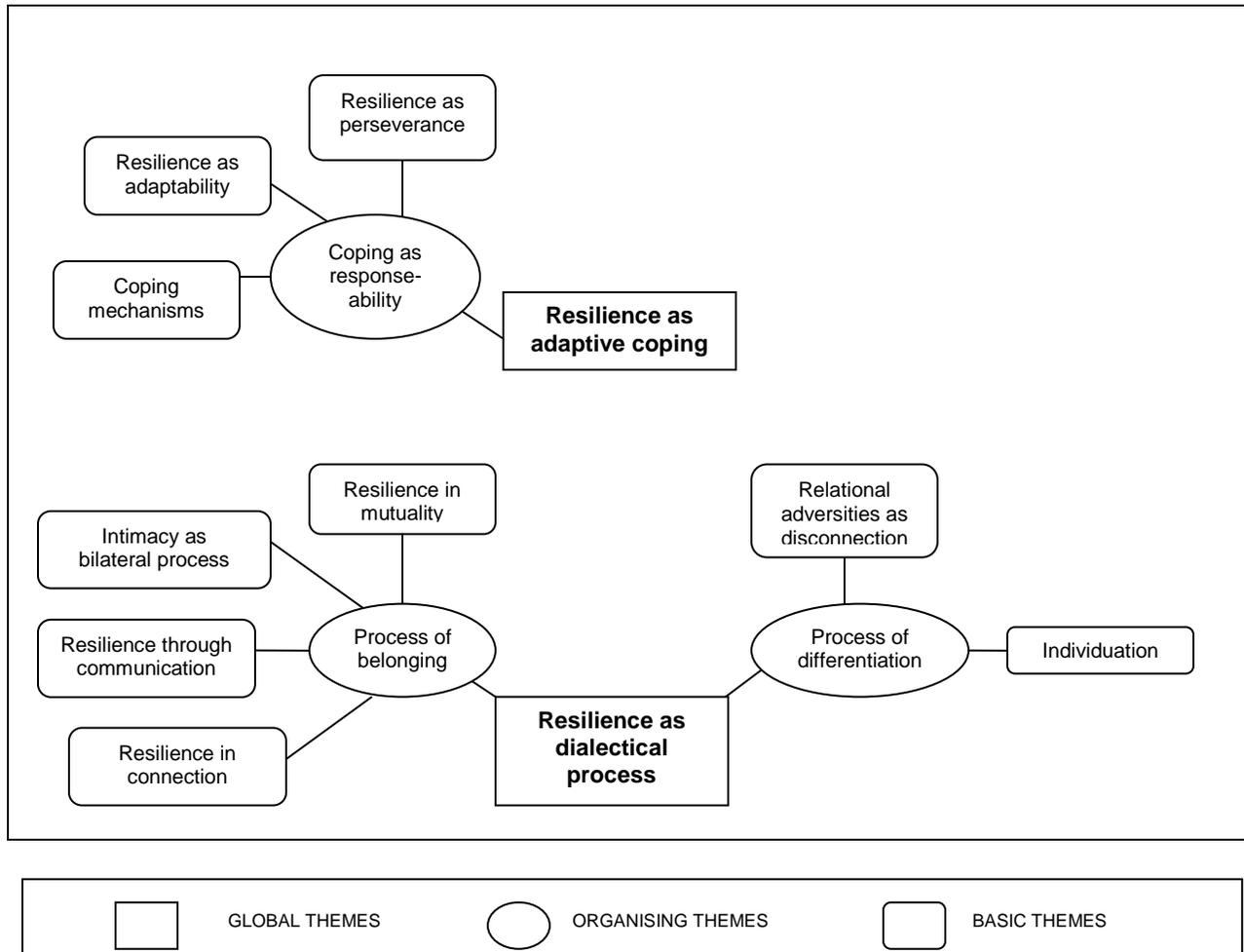


Figure 5.6 Couple 3: Stimuli responses' thematic networks

Resilience as adaptive coping

Couple 3 defines resilience as the ability to “*persevere through adversity*” and an ability to overcome difficulties. Relational resilience involves collaborative resilience or “*perseverance*

and support of each other when it feels like everything is falling apart around you". According to Couple 3, this research taught them that "*perseverance is key*".

Through their participation in this study, Couple 3 realised that "*relationships change with time*" and therefore, they view resilience as adaptability as "*adjusting to changes in their relationship*". Adaptability also involves realistic relational expectations, that is, "*adapting to and accepting the changes (that) a relationship goes through*", including developmental changes in a relationship. Couple 3 suggests that the couple in Film 2 "*could have tried more to understand themselves and be more realistic of their expectations*".

Couple 3 identified relational 'coping mechanisms', for example, denial as a resilient response to relational adversities. With regard to Film 2, Couple 3 felt that although denial and convenience helped the couple to cope with their circumstances (separation and infidelity), they were not very resilient: "*they lived in denial and resolved nothing of the past*". Convenience as a 'coping mechanism' implies that it is "*easier being married to each other than being single*". As a more effective coping strategy, Couple 3 suggests addressing issues proactively. According to Couple 3, the couple in Film 1 was more resilient because they "*addressed and overcame (some) of their issues*".

Themes of resilience as perseverance, adaptability, and 'coping mechanism' indicate that coping can be viewed as a response-ability – an ability to respond to adversity by enduring, adapting, and coping with the difficulties that they face. Therefore, resilience could be described as adaptive coping.

Resilience as dialectical process

Apart from these response-abilities, Couple 3 also identified certain processes that impact on relational resilience. On the one hand, Couple 3 considers resilience in mutuality, which means that a couple is resilient through mutual support or “*standing by each one another through thick and thin*”. Furthermore, shared experience or a history together also plays a role in resilience in intimate relationships. In Film 1, the couple’s separation was a “*catalyst in realising what they had was good based on their history together*”. For mutual understanding and reciprocal acceptance, “*understanding, loving, and accepting yourself and your partner*” is important. Accordingly, intimacy is viewed as a bilateral process.

One of the central themes for Couple 3 highlights that communication is essential in relational resilience and crucial if relationships are to last. Couple 3 mentioned that the clips resonated with them and consequently stressed “*the importance of communication*” and learning that “*communication and expressing feelings are important*” in intimate relationships.

According to Couple 3, there is resilience in connection: “*a deep commitment and meaningful relationship*”. Film 3 depicted that “*despite their problems (the wife’s physical disability), they (the couple) truly had each other ... they had a deep, meaningful relationship in difficult circumstances*”.

Resilience in mutuality, in connection and through communication as well as intimacy as a bilateral process, all indicate that resilience involves a process of belonging. Belonging implies reciprocal investment and involvement within intimate relationships.

The inverse of connection is disconnection. Couple 3 identified some relational adversities that can be viewed as disconnecting. The resultant disconnection in intimate relationships calls for re-evaluation of your relationship, as in Film 1 where their “*separation was a catalyst in realising what they had*”. According to Couple 3, the couple in Film 1 coped well with their relational uncertainties, however, they did not communicate effectively because “*they did not express their feelings*”.

Couple 3 highlighted that a lack of communication and mistrust in intimate relationships are adversarial (as seen in Film 2). However, personal limitations could also contribute to relational difficulties. Couple 3 discovered that adversity is common, “*everything has hiccups*”, and that external stressors affect intimate relationships, as illustrated in Film 5, where “*outside pressures and insecurities*” impacted on the relationship.

According to Couple 3, individuation is another form of disconnection in the context of a relationship, for example, the couple in Film 2 was “*growing apart*” as each followed their own path. Consequently, self-understanding is important in intimate relationships as it facilitates understanding of our own actions and responses in interaction with our partner, and the “*the ability to accept who we are and accepting our past*”, which makes it possible for partners to re-connect.

Deviance from social norms, as in the case with Film 4, is also a way of individuation, which could also be very stressful for the relationship. However, the couple in Film 4 was “*accepting and understanding of their differences and needs and coped well when they accepted themselves for who they were*”.

The themes of relational adversities as disconnection or individuation highlight the process of differentiation, of separation, of disconnecting from the intimate relationship. Evident in Couple 3's themes, resilience can be viewed as a dialectical process, oscillating between belonging and differentiation or “we-ness” and “me-ness”.

Section C: Couples' interviews – Couple 1

The couples' interviews are more personal and reflect the partners' experiences of their relationship and relational adversities. The participant couples also refer to the Films discussed above to illustrate their experiences and to help in the meaning making process.

Background

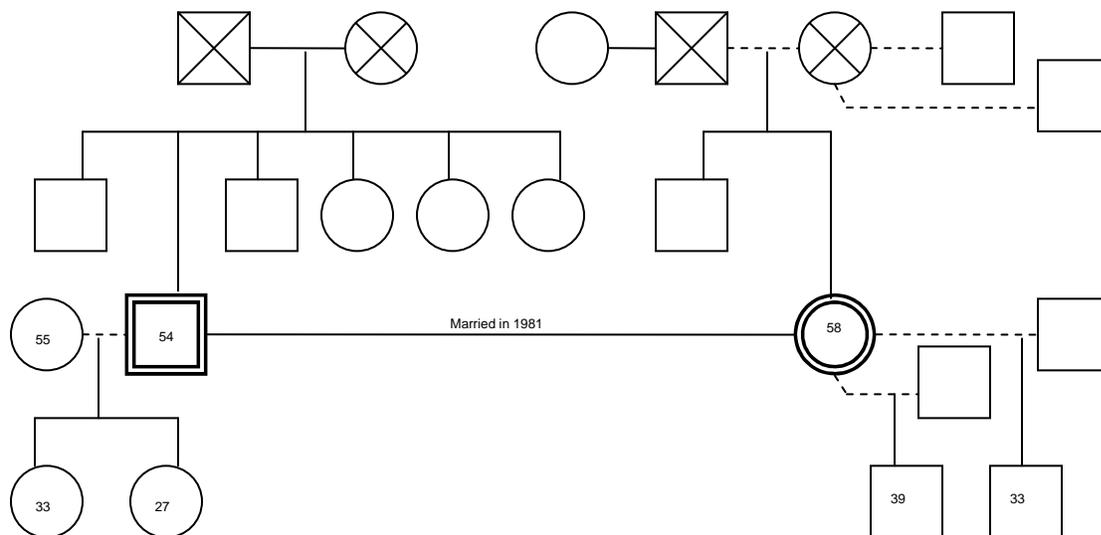


Figure 5.7 Couple 1: Genogram

The partners have known each other for 30 years and have been married for 26 years. They have diverse family backgrounds; however, both of them described their upbringing as equally

adverse. Mrs A had an unstable childhood due to parental divorce, frequent relocation, and alleged emotional abuse. She was married twice before and had a child from both of these marriages. On the other hand, Mr A's parents were both alcoholics, which not only resulted in great hurt and disruption but also resulted in the siblings being separated and put in foster care. He was also married previously and had two children from that marriage.

Mr and Mrs A met at work, started their relationship, and continued to work for the same company for over twenty years, where both of them enjoyed great success and allowed them to travel the world. Even though they do not have children of their own, they regard each other's children as their own. They have had to face many obstacles in their relationship, including health problems and alcohol misuse.

Themes

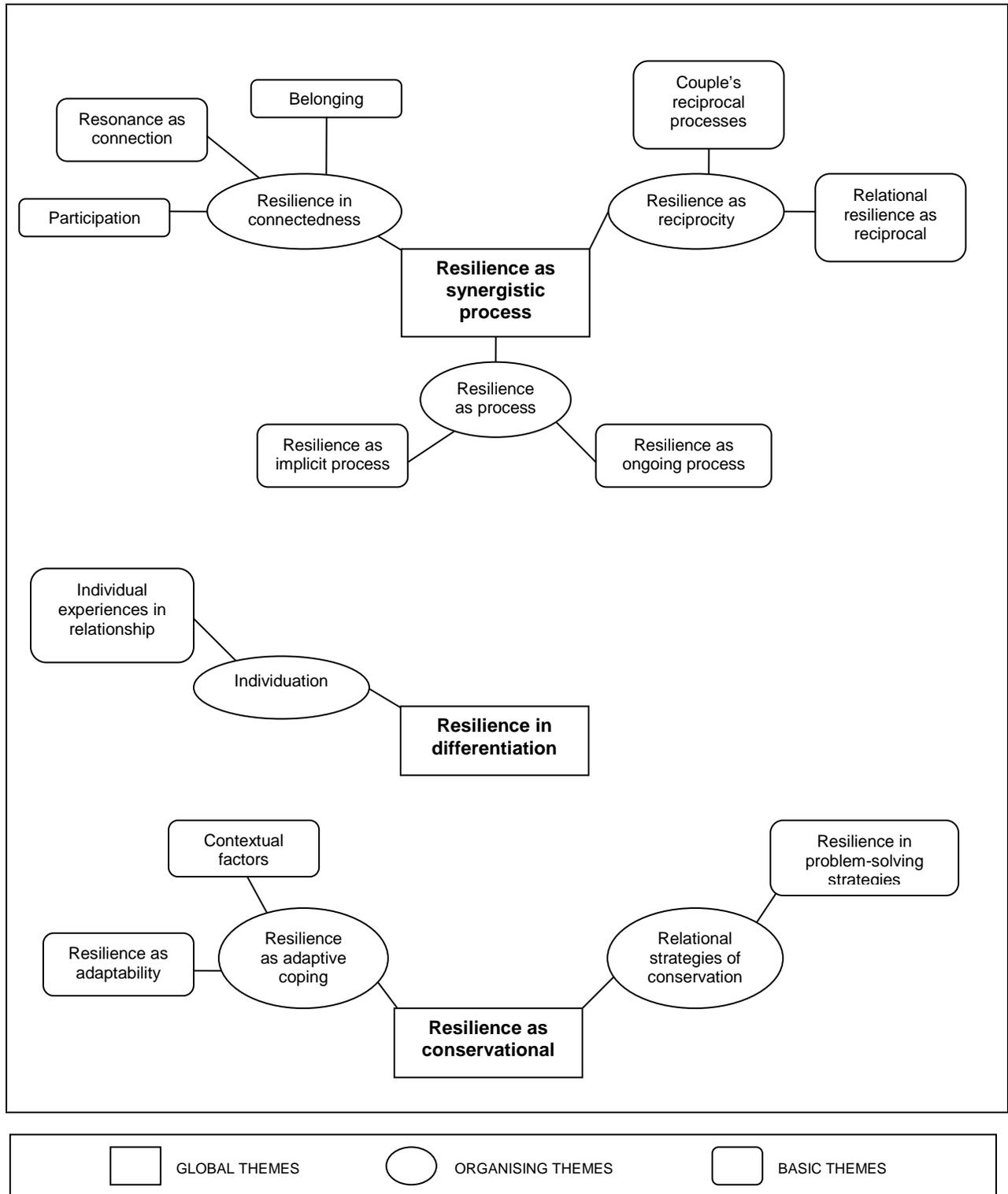


Figure 5.8 Couple 1: Interview thematic networks

Resilience as synergistic process

The basic theme of belonging is emphasised by Couple 1 as they share their experiences of togetherness and of being able to do everything together (*“ek en my vrou kan alles saam doen”*), which results in a deep connection and a lifelong partnership (*“sy is my lewensmaat ... sy is nogsteeds my beste pël in my lewe...”*). They express their enjoyment of shared experiences *“as dit goed gaan, dan geniet ons dit”* and describe their relationship as a journey, *“hierdie pad wat ons geloop het tot waar ons vandag is”*.

From the interview with Couple 1 another theme of resonance as connection emerged. Resonance refers to the mutual support that they experienced through similar experiences, *“ek dink tog regtig as jy baie uit dieselfde tipe agtergrond uit gekom het, het jy meer voeling en jy verstaan meer hoekom die ander persoon doen wat hy doen”*. This acknowledges the influence of each partner’s personal background and implicitly involves the ability to identify with other’s adversities. Consequently, partners are more inclined to show empathy in the relationship, *“ek dink jy kan meer verstaan hê vir die persoon se optrede en jy het meer empatie en simpatie daarvoor ... dan is jy meer tegemoedkomend ook”*.

In addition, Couple 1 mentioned that participation is important in relationships. Accordingly, they view an intimate relationship as voluntary, *“ons wou bymekaar bly, ons wou daaraan (relationship) werk”*. Therefore, intimate relationships also require proactive involvement from both partners, *“ek dink ons het baie saam opgestaan ... en saam daaraan gewerk”*.

The aforementioned basic themes of belonging, resonance as connection, and participation indicate that relational resilience is found in connectedness.

Apart from connection and belonging in intimate relationships, Couple 1 also identified couple's reciprocal processes as an important part of relational resilience. These relational reciprocal processes include mutual support and responsibility, co-working in the relationship, *“ons het saam daaraan gewerk ... albei opofferings gemaak”* and *“ek dink ook dit is baie belangrik dat ‘n mens daaraan werk, omdat ‘n man en vrou so verskriklik verski ... dat ‘n mens daarvan regtig ‘n intensiewe werk doen, van wat maak die ander een se hart klop”*, relational negotiations around difficulties, *“jy moet maar onderhandel, met mekaar praat ... ons doen dit gereeld”*. These reciprocal processes are also seen in relationship outcomes like security, *“ek dink sekuriteit het ‘n groot rol gespeel”*; happiness, *“ons is baie gelukkig”*; compromise and tolerance; perseverance; continual reconciliation; forgiving attitude; and unconditional love, *“dat jy vasbyt, dat jy reg maak, ‘n vergewensgesindheid het ... en lief het”*.

The reciprocity of relational resilience includes each partner's personal struggles and resultant ability to rebound which not only affects the relationship but also the capacity of the couple relationship as a whole to endure adversities. Accordingly, resilience is viewed as reciprocity, as give and take, and as a mutual process.

Resilience is also described as an implicit process because it is not necessarily a familiar concept and is generally something you discover in retrospect:

ek het gedink resilience is teenstand ... maar nadat ek die definisie gelees het en na die clips gekyk het verstaan ek resilience as ‘n ding wat, indien jou verhouding skade lei, hoe kom jy terug om te kyk wat het verkeerd gegaan in die verlede en hoe kan ek iets positiefs daaruit bou en probeer om ‘n beter lewe daarvan te maak ... hoe kan dit wat ek geleer het, my verhouding op die huidige oomblik beter maak as wat dit was?

This study was an “*eye-opener*” which provided an opportunity for Couple 1 to re-assess their relatedness, “*ek dink ook in ons huwelik was daar ook probleme ... as jy alles bymekaar vat, was daar meer goeie tye, as wat 'n ou slegte tye gehad het ... 'n ou moet net kan uitwerk, is die dinge regtig so ernstig dat 'n ou probeer ske'*”.

Resilience can also be described as an ongoing process; as something that happens regularly over the course of a relationship lifetime.

From the aforementioned themes it is clear that resilience is seen in connectedness, as reciprocity, and as a process. Inherent in all these themes is the notion that resilience can be described as a synergistic process.

Resilience as differentiation

Although the relational unit is important, it does not preclude individual experiences or individualised responses. In their relationship, Couple 1 demonstrated different approaches, for example, in social situations “*hy was baie a-sosiaal op 'n stadium ... en ek wou weer bietjie sosiaal wees*” and added that this was something they had to work on. They also have different approaches to money, “*ons grootste probleme of verskille was tog ons uitkyk oor geld, verskillende uitkyke*”. Couple 1 also highlighted the importance of individual needs within an intimate relationship, “*as jy verstaan wat die behoefte werklik van die ander party is, dan dink ek nie daar is baie kans vir ander probleme om in te kom nie, omdat albei daaraan werk om die ander ou se behoeftes te bevredig*”.

The recognition of each partner's individual needs and experiences and their different approaches in life all indicate a level of individuation within the relationship. Therefore the principle metaphor for these themes shows that resilience can be viewed as differentiation.

Resilience as conservational

Couple 1 identified contextual factors that could affect relational resilience. These contextual factors include external stressors such as money, success, and time, "*in my vroeër jare ... was geld die spil waaroor alles gedraai het. Ek het probeer sukses bereik, ek was ure lank nie by die huis nie, ek het elke aand seker half tien by die huis gekom ... dit kon ook 'n invloed gehad het op die huwelik*". Another contextual factor involves extramarital support, which reportedly helped Couple 1 to deal with stressors and adversities, "*ek voel dat professionele hulp ons geleer het om by mekaar uit te kom. En nommer twee, sal ek definitief sê is genade van die Here*".

According to Couple 1, resilience can be described as adaptability. The ability to adapt implies some level of improvement in the relationship, "*die probleme wat in die verlede gebeur het, het die verhouding net versterk ... nou is ons verhouding in 'n beter situasie of 'n baie beter posisie*". Resilience as improvement suggests that resilience is a possible response instead of divorce, "*ek dink nie regtig dat daar enige rede is dat 'n ou skei nie ... as beide partye bereid is om te werk aan die ding ... as jy kan sê ons is deur al die moeilikhede, en ek is nou nader aan my vrou as ooit tevore, dan sê ek dit is miskien die woord resilience*". Accordingly, improvement through relational resiliency also highlights that resilience can be viewed as a healing alternative. Resilience can therefore be viewed as adaptability.

Contextual factors that affect a relationship and the consequent ability to adapt to stressors and difficulties indicate that resilience can be viewed as adaptive coping. In their ability to adapt, partners cope better with adversities and therefore their relationship shows resilience.

Relational adaptability further includes specific coping strategies. Couple 1 identified and uses the following strategies: romanticising relational adversities, *“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”*; coping through escapism, *“hy kan dobbel, en ek gee uit ... sy het drank misbruik”*; compromising with regard to different social approaches, *“met die jare het ek minder sosiaal geword en hy het meer sosiaal geword, so nou is ons omtrent dieselfde”* and in compromising with regard to the one partner’s gambling preference, *“as hy elke tweede week wil gaan dobbel ... dan sê ek, ek gaan nie en naderhand sê hy ag ek weet jy gaan nou kwaad word, maar jy gaan tog saam met my gaan ... dan gaan ek maar weer saam met hom”*; humour, *“dan dobbel sy meer as ek (lag)”*; and reframing *“ek is dankbaar vir dit wat ek het”*.

The aforementioned strategies are all strategies of conservation. This means that in intimate relationships, partners use various strategies to protect their relationship from adversities, and therefore attempt to maintain the relational homeostasis to safeguard the relationship.

Resilience as adaptive coping and the relational strategies of conservation highlights resilience as conservational.

Section C: Couples' interviews – Couple 2

Background

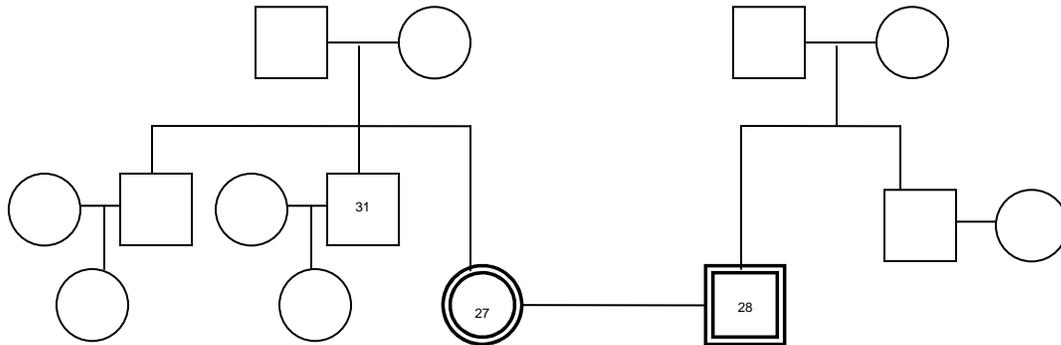


Figure 5.9 Couple 2: Genogram

The couple has been together for a total of 11 years and they have been married for one year. From the outside their family backgrounds appear to be very similar; however, from the inside they have described their backgrounds and experiences as very different. They studied together and both qualified as accountants. They seem to have a stable relationship characterised by a strong friendship, good communication skills, mutual interests, understanding, and support.

Themes

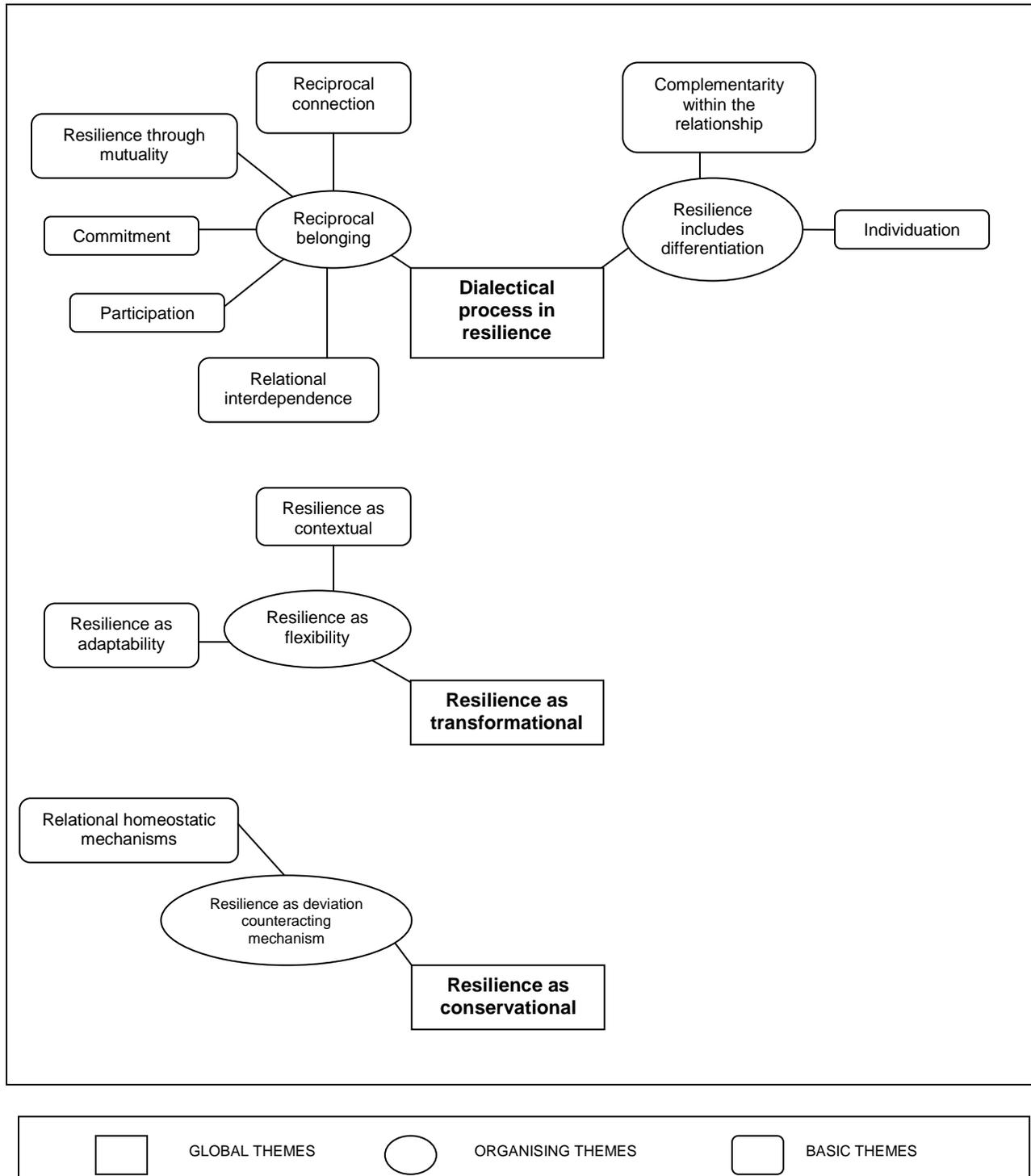


Figure 5.10 Couple 2: Interview thematic networks

Dialectical process in resilience

Couple 2 considered the reciprocal connection inherent in intimate relationships. They mentioned their own physical and emotional attraction to each other, “*ek het gedink hy is aantreklik*” and “*... ons was vriende van die begin af; het baie gedeel; het verskriklik baie tyd saam spandeer*”. This includes creating their own couple identity, “*ultimately 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*”.

Couple 2 emphasises communication as key to their connectedness and to promote relational resilience “*kommunikasie en die keuse om saam te wees en soos aanvaarding*”. As newly-weds, Couple 2 are currently in the joining phase of marriage, “*ek dink ook veral omdat ons nuut getroud is en nou baie weer besef het en nou saam bly en meer closer aan mekaar is ... en meer op mekaar rely*”.

Apart from the resilience that stems from their reciprocal connection, resilience is also established through mutuality. Mutuality includes comfort within the relationship, “*ons was baie gemaklik met mekaar gewees*”, but refers to the shared experiences as a couple, “*ons het verskriklik baie tyd saam spandeer*”. In reference to the partners studying together, “*daar was baie tye wat ons altwee baie stress gehad het ... ons was albei in dieselfde situasie ... dieselfde oomblik onder dieselfde spanning*”. The consequent mutual support also demonstrates the notion of mutuality.

According to Couple 2, commitment is essential in intimate relationships. They mentioned that after a period of separation, their relationship is a conscious decision, “*die feit dat ons opgebreek het na 5 jaar, en toe weer bymekaar gekom het, het ons verhouding sterker gemaak daarna. Ons het toe dit gekies ... toe het ons die keuse om weer te kies om bymekaar te kom*”.

This not only implies that they are certain about their relationship, “*toe weet ek verseker ek wil*”.

met jou trou”, but also that this helps them to consolidate their commitment to each other, *“ons is in hierdie ding vir lewe”* and *“there is no option out”*.

Another important facet of intimate relationships is participation. Couple 2 seems to be proactively involved in each other’s lives and in the relationship. Consequently, they have a rule that *“dat ons nie vir mekaar kwaad gaan slaap nie ... voor daai lig af gaan hou ek daarvan om issues uit te sorteer”* and *“ons praat gereeld daaroor (different backgrounds and worldviews)”*. They illustrate courage in facing their problems in this manner. However, this participation and proactive involvement also shows the importance of collaboration in intimate relationships.

Consequently, Couple 2 highlights the relational interdependence as they mentioned the dependence on each other, *“hy was altyd soos ‘n steunpilaar”* and *“ek kan nie myself sonder my partner sien lewe nie”*. They describe their relationship as irreplaceable, *“hy is so deel van my lewe ... en na soveel jare saam ... ek dink nie dit is replaceable met enige iemand anders nie”*.

All five aforementioned basic themes could be summed up in one organising theme, which captures the main idea of reciprocal belonging, evident in intimate relationships. Relational connectedness, mutuality, commitment, participation, and interdependence are all reciprocal processes which implicitly represent this notion of belonging to another within an intimate relationship or describe the sense of belongingness within a relationship.

In addition to the aforementioned reciprocal belonging, Couple 2 also identified complementarities within their relationship. They mentioned their diverse individual experiences, including different worldviews *“ek dink ons dink anderste”*, different backgrounds *“ons agtergronde is wêreld verskillend uit mekaar uit”*, different upbringing *“ons is baie verskillend groot gemaak”*, different coping styles *“ek kon op hom afpak, uitbarstings hê en huil en histeries*

raak van spanning en hy het my kalmeeer, my moed ingepraat and different problem-solving strategies, for the one partner *“ek sien ‘n probleem, ek los hom op, ek beweeg aan”*, while the other partner *“is lief daarvoor om die probleem te identifiseer en te identifiseer, en sy sal met my gesels en nog gesels, en dan draai dit uit op kla ... maar nie onmiddelik iets daaromtrent doen nie”*. This theme of complementarity is commonly found in intimate relationships. However, respect for these differences is crucial, *“ek weet van waar hy af kom en ek dink hy weet en hoop hy verstaan waar ek vandaan kom ... respek vir mekaar, en waar ons vandaan kom”*.

Although Couple 2 is presented as enmeshed, with a strong connection and interdependence, they also value autonomy *“ek verstaan jou punt, maar dit is my issue”* or *“ons redeneer gewoonlik oor verskille ... ek sê ‘n ding hoe ek dink en hy sê hoe hy dink hy voel”* and regard self-insight in the relationship *“as ek regtig dink ek is verkeerd, dan sê ek vir jou”* as key. Individuation is therefore an important process in intimate relationships.

From these themes of complementarity and individuation, one could conclude that resilience includes differentiation which allows for each partner’s experiences and worldviews.

All the aforementioned themes could be described by one principal metaphor which encapsulates the essence of the dialectical process in resilience. Accordingly, resilience includes reciprocal belonging (“we-ness”) as well as differentiation (“me-ness”).

Resilience as transformational

According to Couple 2, resilience could be seen as contextual. They mentioned internal relational stressors, like hurt in the relationship, for example, when they separated *“en die feit*

dat ons opgebreek het ... en toe weer bymekaar gekom het ... dit het lank gevat om weer daai vertrouensverhouding te hê". Couple 2 also added the internal support that portrays their relationship as supportive, *"hy was altyd soos 'n steunpilaar"*. Apart from the internal factors, Couple 2 also identified external factors that affect the way in which a couple is able to bounce back from adversities, for example, external stressors: the stress of studying, *"ons swottery, dink ek was baie swaar"*, and the in-laws, *"soms irriteer my ouers hom, en soms irriteer sy ouers my"*, but also external sources of inspiration, *"ek dink die support structure is dalk ... soos ouers wat 'n voorbeeld is en die kerk wat 'n goeie invloed het op mens se verhouding"*. Couple 2 demonstrated how the concept of resilience is applicable in different contexts, *"ek het dit nou maar net in 'n werkskonteks gesien ... resilience is soos een van ons skills en behaviours wat ons onself aan moet meet. Drive and resilience is soos om jouself te dryf, positief te wees, en dan ook van hiccups en situasies wat verander te kan verander om te kan recover en weer op 'n ander pad te gaan"*.

Couple 2 defines resilience as flexibility, as recovery, and as improvement, *"stretch en bend back in dieselfde plek ... of 'n beter posisie. Dalk nie beter nie, maar dit is soos om te recover"*. Accordingly, they describe resilience in intimate relationships as recovery, *"dis hoe jy van een punt in jou verhouding deur 'n moeilike tyd of probleem kan gaan, hoe vinnig jy weer kan recover"* and as relational growth *"oor die hobbel te kom, te re-route en op 'n beter plek te wees na die tyd in die verhouding, om te groei of net ten minste om op dieselfde plek te wees as wat julle was"*. Therefore, resilience is also described as adaptability.

From the aforementioned themes, it is clear that resilience can spring from different contexts, but also shows the ability to adapt to adversities, to bounce back. Implicitly, resilience can be described as flexibility, the ability to bounce back from adversities.

Resilience as conservational

Couple 2 described a few relational homeostatic mechanisms inherent in relational resilience. These homeostatic mechanisms include reconciliation as part of resiliency, “*as ek en sy baklei, as ek kwaad word vir haar, is dit nooit vir langer as 3 minute nie*”, avoidance of unnecessary confrontation, “*’n persoonlike argument is nie maklik nie, ek het tyd nodig om te dink oor goeters en dan skryf ek neer, en dan redeneer ek dit vir myself uit. Dis gewoonlik nie eers nodig om ’n argument te hê nie*”, humour as a resilient response (seen throughout the interview), respectful interactions, “*respek vir mekaar*”, compromising, “*ons probeer altyd ’n middeweg antwoord kry*”, and reframing “*sy het foute en ek het foute, maar ons besluit ... ek lewe liever met my partner met al haar foute, as wat ek saam met iemand anders is, en daai mens se foute*” as a way to maintain the relational equilibrium.

Resilience can be described as a deviation counteracting mechanism. It is a way to counter any deviations that could be adversarial and could unbalance the relationship system. Therefore, resilience is viewed as conservational as it helps to maintain the homeostasis in intimate relationships.

Section C: Couples' interviews – Couple 3

Background

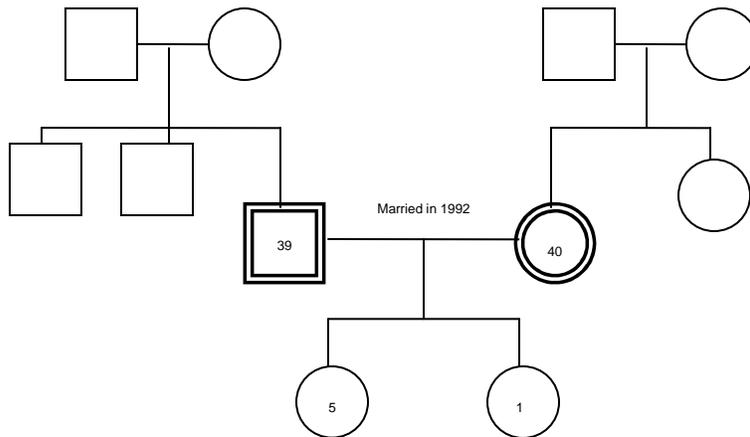


Figure 5.11 Couple 3: Genogram

Mr C was the last born of 12 brothers, and therefore almost grew up as an only child. Due to the fact that his father was dependent on alcohol, Mr C became a responsible child, often looking after the welfare of his mother. Mr C was sent to boarding school at a young age. Mrs C is the eldest of two girls. During her school years, she was a weekly boarder. The couple was in the same school, but did not know each other well. They only met after school at a reunion and their relationship started. After they dated for about five years, they got married. They were around the age of 23, which they both describe as very young. Six years into their marriage, Mr C had an affair with one of his colleagues and the couple separated while deciding on the future of their relationship. After six months they reconciled and have been growing closer ever since. They have two young children and have been married for 16 years.

Themes

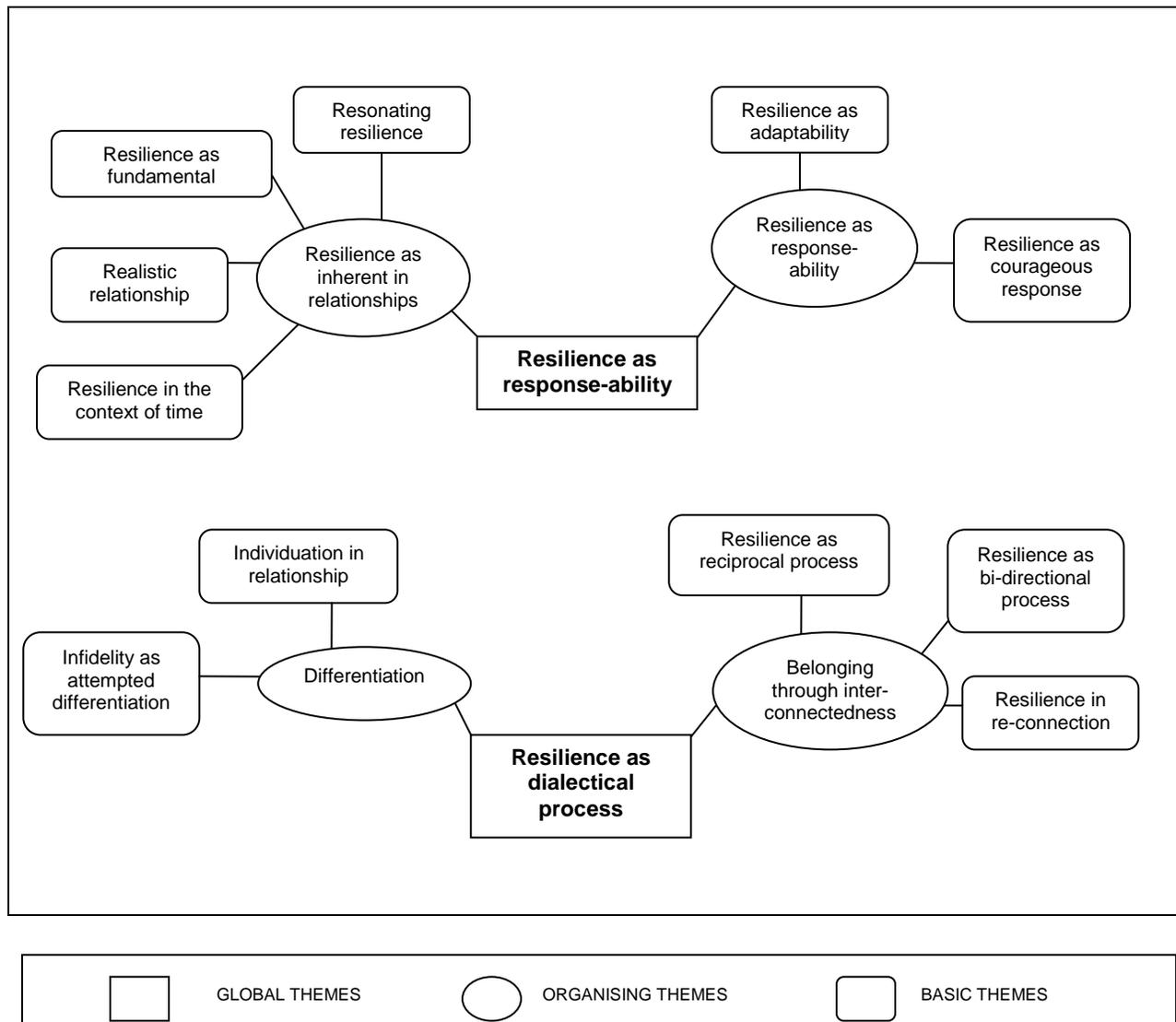


Figure 5.12 Couple 3: Interview thematic networks

Resilience as relational response-ability

The first basic theme for Couple 3 is resonating resilience, which reflects how the notion of resilience resonates with them on a personal and relational level. Consequently, they identified a few resonating themes from the films, “*some of the clips were quite nice ... some of them didn't really appeal to me*”, including a discomfort with infidelity “*I think the second clip didn't*

appear". However, they were able to relate to instances of resilience in their relationship, "*I think every marriage goes through a period of needing resilience, so I think we could both relate to that (resilience in intimate relationships)*".

Couple 3 understood and defined resilience, "*you asked for a definition and it came straight to us, the meaning of it*". Although they are unfamiliar with the concept of relational resilience, "*I never heard of it worded like that ... but I think every relationship goes through a problem patch ... whether one terms it resilience or not*", they view resilience as necessary in relationships. Because they were able to relate to the idea of relational resilience, Couple 3 suggested that resilience is a relational cornerstone, "*I think it is one of the cornerstones of a relationship*". Resilience can therefore be described as fundamental –"*persevering instead of saying 'you know what, I just had enough' ... you turn around and say we are going to work through them*".

Couple 3 highlights that resilience also requires a realistic relationship which acknowledges the universality of relational problems, "*every relationship goes through a problem patch and goes through difficult sessions*"; that marriage is flawed, "*all is not hunky-dory*"; and that realistic relational expectations are essential in intimate relationships, "*I also think one has to be realistic ... one grows up with all these wonderful fairytales ... you are going to get married and live happily ever after, and have a perfect everything. But life is not like that*" and "*as a woman, you grow up with these assumptions ... you are the woman, you are expected to cook, expected to do all these things ... and this is what the husband is expected to do ... and it is actually wrong. One shouldn't have these expectations of what you should and shouldn't do*".

According to Couple 3, it is important to put resilience in the context of time. They mentioned the time element in relational adversity, "*it is a time thing ... it (difficulties) doesn't just happen*", which includes historical influences, "*you have to be prepared for approaching the demons of*

the past”, but also indicates that difficulties often take time to process, “*it took a while (to recover from an affair) ... we were almost 6 months apart ... and it took a year to sort our issues out ... and even then, it doesn’t happen overnight*”. Another possible time factor that could affect relational resilience is the timing of the relationship, “*getting married at a young age did have its disadvantages ... we both perhaps felt that we have not lived our lives*”, as well as timing in the relationship, “*I am glad we waited before having children ... we were ready for it*”.

From the aforementioned themes, one could extrapolate that resilience is inherent in relationships. Accordingly, resilience in intimate relationships manifests over time, emerges as a fundamental characteristic of intimate relationships, and puts the relationship within a realistic framework.

Thus, resilience can also be viewed as adaptability or the ability to adapt to premature marriage, showing resilience in childbearing, and a consequent adjustment to the different life phases. Therefore, resilience can be viewed as relational growth, which usually appears at a relational turning point.

Consequently, Couple 3 describes resilience as perseverance and as a response to hardship. They also mention that this implicit process requires courage to face the past in order to move forward. Therefore, resilience can be viewed as a courageous response.

The two basic themes mentioned above describe resilience as adaptability and as a courage response. Overall, they illustrate how resilience can be seen to be a response-ability within intimate relationships.

In conclusion, resilience is described as inherent in intimate relationships, as an important relational characteristic, and as a response-ability. Therefore, the principle metaphor describes resilience as a relational response-ability. Accordingly, each intimate relationship has implicit and unique characteristics and abilities that help it to cope with and overcome difficulties.

Resilience as dialectical process

Couple 3 also discussed individuation as part of intimate relationships. Their different views regarding some of the clips showed that they are entitled to their own opinions and open to discussing these differences, for example, the one partner was of the opinion that “*the clip with the autistic people ... I actually found them disturbing ... I don't think that they were stable enough to be in a marriage*”, while the other partner felt, “*no, I thought that that one was quite sweet ... both of them were in the same situation ... neither sees the other one's fault. It's normal for them*”. As part of individuation in intimate relationships, Couple 3 agreed that self-knowledge (“*you've got to understand yourself to understand the other person*”) and insight (“*identify what you are doing wrong*” or “*you can't sit there and say 'okay, I am perfect, it is all the other person's fault' ... it is not the way it works*”) are crucial in interactions. In addition, they mentioned that self-healing precedes relational healing in that “*you heal yourself, before you can heal your relationship*”. Couple 3 discussed their parallel personal experiences, “*both were in boarding school and had some disconnection from their families*” and “*because you live a different kind of life ... you become hard and you grow up early*”. Yet, even though some of their childhood experiences were similar, each of the partners experienced it differently, for example, the one partner only saw family “*every three months for school holidays*”, while the other was “*a weekly boarder*”. Couple 3 also mentioned how past experiences impact intimate relationships, for example:

...you do everything for your mom because her marriage was a disappointment ... you almost sacrifice your life ... so, you grow up in a mother-child relationship and you can maybe compare it to your married life. So, where you sacrifice your life to make your mom happy ... it is the same type of relationship in your marriage life ... you sacrifice your life.

As a result of self-sacrifice, one could lose your own identify.

Couple 3 experienced relational difficulties a few years after they were married. One of the partners admitted that *“I had an affair”*. Infidelity can be described as an attempt at differentiating within an intimate relationship, a possible response to constant self-sacrifice and loss of identity. Couple 3 talked about the impact of infidelity on their relationship and demonstrated how resilience can be discovered beyond infidelity. The partner who was faithful explained that *“if I think back, I am glad that it happened ... it was like a wake-up call. I mean, we sorted our things out”* and later *“you are in this relationship and you are going through the motions ... and you are stuck, living past each other ... you kind of (have) to hit that phase and have this shock wake up call and actually, know what, this is not how I want to live my life”*, while the other partner agreed *“we needed it ... it was the catalyst ... catalyst to improve or carry on the way you are ... we realised that there was nothing really holding us together, but we wanted it to work”*.

The aforementioned process of individuation within an intimate relationship and infidelity as attempted differentiation can be grouped together to form the organising theme of differentiation. Differentiation is important in intimate relationships, whereby each partner maintains a sense of self within the context of a partnership that is an intimate relationship.

Apart from the aforementioned process of differentiation and self-preservation, the union and connection within a relationship is also important. The relational processes that form part of resilience and facilitate this connection include mutual support, collaboration, and empathy, *“try to put yourself in the other person’s place ... try to understand why they are reacting the way they are and, instead of criticising it, maybe be supportive”*. Therefore, resilience can be described as a reciprocal process or as a bi-directional process, *“it is a process where you have resilience for each other, but also resilience to get through what you yourself are going through ... to sort out your issues, accept the issues, and then come together with a better understanding”*. This multileveled process facilitates resilience to relational problems, *“I think that true resilience is when you both hit rock bottom”* and to relational changes, for example, having children, *“I am glad we waited before having children because it actually brought us almost closer together ... it has kind of cemented everything”*.

Resilience is reflected in re-connection (re-marriage), *“we put our past behind us, we have made a decision ... we have grown and accepted”*. Re-establishing connection often requires relational healing. This healing and reconnection can be established through communication, *“you just have to really communicate”*; taking the time to trust again, *“it took a long time for me to trust”*; getting over your guilt, *“if you are feeling guilty, try to stay an open book, otherwise you are going to resent yourself”*; reframing the adversities, *“we needed it (the affair) ... it was like a wake-up call”*; or therapy, *“I went to see somebody ... and then we went to a therapist ... it was more talking together”*.

Accordingly, belonging results from the interconnectedness mentioned above, the reciprocal and bi-directional processes, as well as re-establishing connection within intimate relationships. Thus, resilience also involves the process of belonging and connection.

In sum, the themes discussed above indicate that resilience manifests through the dialectical process that is inherent in every intimate relationship. This implies that partners have the need to differentiate in order to maintain their own identity (“me-ness”), while they also desire belonging and connectedness within the intimate relationship (“we-ness”). This dialectical process is ongoing, yet unique to each couple, as is resilience in intimate relationships.

The themes constructed and discussed in this chapter complete the first part of the data analysis. The second part of the data analysis will be completed in the following chapter and involves the integration of the themes extracted from the different sources of information in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6

Integration

In Chapter 5, various themes were identified, grouped together to form web-like presentations, and the results were discussed. By now, the reader should have a good feel for the participants' ideas and views about resilience in intimate relationships. This chapter involves the “snag work”, which includes comparing the themes constructed in the previous chapter, extracting overlapping themes, and linking these to the literature discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, the unique themes will also be considered.

As this study is coming to an end, the overlapping themes will be outlined in tabular form, integrated through discussion of the main ideas, and consolidated by grounding the findings in the theory and research discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

Table 6.1 Integration of participants' themes

PARTICIPANTS	GLOBAL THEMES	OVERLAPPING THEMES	INTEGRATION		
THERAPIST A	Resilience as a dynamic process Resilience as response-ability Intimacy as resilience	RESILIENCE AS RESPONSE-ABILITY	RESILIENCE AS RESPONSE-ABILITY		
THERAPIST B	Resilience as contextual accommodation Resilience as relational process			RESILIENCE AS A PROCESS	
THERAPIST C	Resilience as observer distinction Resilience as multivariate process Resilience as capacity				
COUPLE 1: STIMULI RESPONSES	Resilience as durability Resilience as dialectical process Resilience as circularity	RESILIENCE AS ABILITY		RESILIENCE AS DIALECTICAL PROCESS	
COUPLE 2: STIMULI RESPONSES	Resilience as self-correcting ability Resilience as dialectical process Entropic disconnection	RESILIENCE AS DIALECTICAL PROCESS			
COUPLE 3: STIMULI RESPONSES	Resilience as adaptive coping (ability) Resilience as dialectical process				
COUPLE 1: INTERVIEW	Resilience as synergistic process Resilience as differentiation Resilience as conservation *	RESILIENCE AS PROCESS (includes *)			
COUPLE 2: INTERVIEW	Dialectical process in resilience Resilience as conservation * Resilience as transformation *				
COUPLE 3: INTERVIEW	Resilience as dialectical process Resilience as relational response-ability			RESILIENCE AS RESPONSE-ABILITY	

As illustrated in the table above, two overarching and global themes were extracted from the different sections. The one theme describes relational resilience as a response-ability and the other highlights 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 is not one of the global themes, it relates to the aim of this study and therefore needs to 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, one can conclude that the definition of resilience is construed between people, and not only involves 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, unique to each relationship, and context specific.

In the context of this study, resilience in intimate relationships can be defined 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

Resilience refers to the "capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful" (Walsh, 2006, p.4); the ability to recover from setbacks; the ability to identify, assess, and respond to a potentially disruptive situation in order to prevent it from becoming a crisis; the ability to spring back into shape (World English Dictionary, 2005); and the ability to remain intact in spite of trauma or crisis, and to return to the same pre-morbid level, or even a higher level of functioning than before (Greeff & Aspelung, 2007).

Following from the definitions provided above and from the themes discussed in Chapter 5, relational resilience is represented as a couple's inherent response-ability. Although this study on resilience in intimate relationships acknowledges the resilience ability of each partner, the focus is on the ability of the couple as a system to respond to adverse circumstances that are affecting their relationship. Accordingly, relational response-ability includes the specific characteristics or the capacity of the relationship to endure and withstand adversities. *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 successfully manage their life circumstances (Connolly, 2005; Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Patterson, 2002).

Relational resiliency, that is, the characteristics of the relationship that help to protect the couple system against stressors and adversities, include the following: mutuality (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 utilize 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 the 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 refers to the ability to not only endure adversities and bend back far enough, but also to the ability to absorb or redirect the pressures before they push the relationship too far, thereby allowing it to bounce back, to maintain relational homeostasis, to continue as before and/or learn from the experience. This relational buoyancy skill facilitates couples' resilience through an ability to accommodate/adapt to adversities, relationship developmental changes, and life phase transitions, and is reflected in the ability to establish new behavioural coordinations.

Each couple has the ability to respond to stressors and adversity in a relationship-specific and context-specific manner. Marriage/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 like sensitivity, nurturance, and concern, and they have to be able to constantly negotiate, bargain, and reach agreement on realistic solutions (Conger *et al.*, 1999; Lederer & Jackson, 1968).

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 one another in the face of adversities (Graham & Conoley, 2006; Story & Bradbury, 2004).

The survival and regeneration of intimate relationships involves the 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).

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 relationship being resilient. Although the individual partners’ characteristics can contribute to or facilitate relational resilience, the main focus of this study is on the innate relational abilities and processes involved in couples’ resilience.

Relational resilience is more than the absence of adversity and is not simply the opposite of weakness as is a satisfying relationship not characterised by the absence of dissatisfaction and not merely the inverse of a stressful relationship (Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Bradbury *et al.*, 2000; McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1997).

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 perseverance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge, which includes positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Walsh, 2006).

Relational resilience, also referred to as couple's resilience, process-based resilience, or dyadic coping, describes the process of successfully overcoming adversity; the process of competence despite adversity; and the processes by which the couple is able to adapt and function competently following exposure to significant adversity (Connolly, 2005, 2006; Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Patterson, 2002).

Relational resilience involves interactional/transactional processes that foster healing, recovery, and resilience over time and includes coping, mediating, and adaptational processes in the couple/family as a functional unit, which influences short- and long-term adaptation to hardships for both partners, enables partners/members to integrate the experience and to move beyond it (Hernández, 2002; Walsh, 1996, 2006).

Resilience is an important relational process which protects against stressors and allows the couple to rebound from adversity and includes a complex range of dynamics and processes that help to sustain a satisfying romantic relationship, to fortify the relationship, 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 *et al.*, 2007, p.226), and therefore resilience can change and differ from one moment to the next; from one adversity to the following stressor.

Evidently, there is also a time element in relational resilience. It includes adaptive processes of the couple which unfold in response to stressful events, including sudden crises or normative life transitions (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Some relational adversities do not just happen overnight, they could be related to or affected by past experiences. Accordingly, resilience (and marital support) is a dyadic process that unfolds over time (Hawley, 2000) and which is shaped by previous interactions (Coyne & Smith, 1991) or past experiences. Furthermore, the timing of (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. Another aspect of resilience highlights the necessity that a period of time passes in order to re-establish relational buoyancy, to recover, to adapt, and to adjust to life transitions, stressors, and adversities. Therefore, resilience is often discovered in retrospect. Resilience as an ongoing process is something that happens regularly over the course of a relationship lifetime. In response to relational adversity, individual as well as mutual acceptance and reframing or making meaning of the difficulties is a gradual process for the couples. This relational resilience develops over time and is aided by available resources (Greeff & van der Merwe, 2004; Yorgason *et al.*, 2007).

Dialectical process between belonging and differentiation

The participants' themes indicated that relational resilience is not only a dynamic and multivariate process, but it also highlighted the dialectical processes involved therein. These include resilience as a synergistic process, but also acknowledge that differentiation forms part of relationships' and couples' resilience. Relational resilience requires a balance between interdependence and autonomy (Yorgason *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, one can infer 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 is 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). 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 *et al.*, 2003). Both individual and relational strength can be forged through collaborative efforts to deal with a sudden crisis or prolonged adversity (Walsh, 2006). All of 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, and their mutual goals (Bodenmann, 2005), communication processes, like clarity, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem-solving (Walsh, 2006). 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 play an important role as each partner has unique individual experiences, worldviews, interpersonal styles, responses to stress, and coping mechanisms.

It is important to mention that although individuation/differentiation are important in intimate relationships, because each partner maintains a sense of self within the context of this partnership; 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 system's 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 delicate dance between belonging and differentiation.

...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 (Whitaker, 1989, p. 96).

The quote above highlights that resilience in intimate relationships is a dialectical process that oscillates between individuation and belonging. Marriage 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 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'/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 (Elkaïm, 1990).

The relational strategies of conservation that emerged from the participants' themes include romanticising relational adversities, 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 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. Resilience can therefore 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/transformational process perturbs the system and opens up possibilities for change within the relationship and therefore relational resilience proposes a healing alternative.

In conclusion, from the aforementioned themes, it is clear that resilience in intimate relationships is a multifaceted construct; it reflects couple's idiosyncratic response-ability and involves complex and dynamic processes.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This chapter serves to conclude this study on resilience in intimate relationships. Here, the reader takes a step back and looks at what was built. Upon inspection, this chapter reflects on the meaning of this study and also considers the possibilities of extending future studies on resilience in intimate relationships.

The researcher reconsiders relational resilience

I sometimes think that I have a distorted view of intimate relationships. Therefore, I wanted to take off my divorce-tinted glasses and research intimate relationships from another angle. This study has helped me to look at relationships differently – more realistically. Firstly, I realised that resilience does not preclude problems and consequently relationships are not problem-free. This 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). I have 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 given me hope by opening up relational possibilities for me and my marriage, and through reframing my distorted view of intimate relationships.

Limitations

This study focused on the definition of relational resilience. The literature has shown that there is not a 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 were identified, but were not discussed in detail. Apart from the limited view of relational resilience, another obvious limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the participants. As a result of the homogeneity, as well as the limited sample size, the findings on 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. Although it was preferable to interview some participants in their first language (Afrikaans), because it made the discussions more comfortable and personal, this is an English study. The findings are discussed in English, however, the thematic analyses include both languages and this could affect the readability.

Recommendations

With the aforementioned limitations in mind, the following recommendations could be considered for future studies on resilience in intimate relationships:

- An extensive literature survey could be useful in consolidating a definition of relational resilience.
- Future studies could consider including couples from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to explore the definition and prevalence of resilience in intimate relationships from diverse backgrounds.
- It is recommended that future studies be conducted in one language or translated before interpreting and discussing the data.
- Future studies could consider the specific factors, abilities, and processes that facilitate relational resilience.
- Future studies could either focus on couples' responses to specific areas of relational adversities (for example, life transitions) or participant couples could be given frustrating tasks in order to assess the relational abilities and processes.

Conclusion

This study concludes with a revision of the traditional “till death do us part” vows which provides a more realistic approach to intimate relationships:

We have voluntarily agreed to form a marital partnership for our mutual benefit. We are human beings, and will grow and change with age and with circumstance. Neither of us is perfect. We are not afraid of being fallible and therefore we will be honest and open with each other, and reveal ourselves and our changes or failures; we will disclose the hidden things when they unexpectedly emerge from the unconscious or from the forgotten past. If what happens is joyful (as we have faith it will be most of the time), we will treasure this good fortune. But if events are painful

or harmful, we will adjust and accept the change because it is a fact. Instead of exhibiting frustration and being punitive toward each other, we will be consoling and encouraging. We will discuss realistically whatever happened and see how it relates to us mutually, and as equals, we will decide what action is required. We also will discuss, if necessary, how both of us may change or adjust for our mutual benefit. More important than ourselves as individuals is our marital compages.

(Lederer & Jackson, 1968, p.112).

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