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An exploratory study on the utilisation of resilience by middle adolescents in reconstituted families following divorce

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Every year thousands of core families disintegrate through divorce, and in the ensuing restructuring of the family system the child has to cope with various development challenges, such as divided membership of two micro family systems and complexities that result at the mesosystemic level. Achieving positive development outcomes in the presence of challenging living circumstances entails complex interactive processes. The aim of the study was to understand the concomitant, reciprocal and/or responsive dynamics of middle adolescents' use of their inherent resilience potential in their movement back and forth between their two reconstituted family systems after the parents' divorce. The study was grounded in the qualitative interpretivist paradigm, and used a multiple case study as research design and a narrative format for description. A purposive sample of four white Afrikaans-speaking middle adolescents participated in the research. Findings revealed that middle adolescents of divorced parents utilise their resilience potential in a systemic manner, which requires a solid base provided by the meso system. Hence the utilisation of resilience relies at the very minimum on a functional relationship of cooperation between the biological parents.

Keywords: bio-ecological; divorce; meso system; middle adolescent; reconstituted family; resilience; resilience potential; utilisation of resilience

Introduction

Divorce constitutes a potentially destructive and devastating reality in society. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2001) bio-ecological systemic model suggests that the reconstitution of the family after divorce implies that the development of the child (unlike in a core family) occurs within two micro family systems (Ebersohn, 2006). The micro family system of the biological parent with whom the child has his/her permanent place of residence and who has parental rights and responsibilities in respect of the child (RSA, 2005) is known is the *primary micro family system* (PMFS). The micro family system of the other biological parent who has joint parental responsibilities and rights regarding the child, and whom the child visits from time to time only, is called the *secondary micro family system* (SMFS). The child is a full member of both micro family systems. What makes the reconstituted family (RF) unique is the fact that the child is in interaction with both of these micro family systems. The two micro family systems also affect one another reciprocally.

In order to optimally support the effective development of the child, the interaction patterns within both micro family systems should be of a proximal nature. Proximal processes are recurring, face-to-face interactions of a complex nature that

occur on a regular basis, over an extended period of time (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, Bronfenbrenner, 2001). Children are active participants in their own development. As such, their unique personal qualities affect the proximal processes within their interactive educational systems. Viewed bio-ecologically, personal qualities are behavioural intentions that elicit, encourage or discourage a response from other persons, and these qualities include disposition, ecological resources and demand characteristics. Disposition pertains to the qualities of the individual's intentionality, such as impulsiveness, aggression, feelings of insecurity or inquisitiveness, a positive mind-set towards others, initiative, motivation and a willingness to make choices. Ecological resources are of a cognitive-linguistic nature, reflecting the individual's level of development and consisting of strengths and limitations that affect his/her capacity to participate effectively in the proximal processes. Demand characteristics are those qualities and behaviours that elicit or discourage reactions from the social environment, thus also from family members, for example irritability as against good nature, or openness as against resistance (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

Research on divorce focuses increasingly on protective factors that may promote proximal processes within the RF, for instance close parent-child relationships (King, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001); joint parenthood (Amato, 2000; Sobelewski & King, 2005); optimal communication within the RF (Golish, 2003), and aspects surrounding conflict resolution (Dunn, O'Connor & Cheng, 2005; Johnson & Wiechers, 2002; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007).

Following divorce, proximal processes may be restricted by risk factors that are unique to the development context of the restructured family. Such factors include difficult family circumstances and negative emotional experiences. Difficult family circumstances after divorce include the child's divided membership of two micro family systems and the ensuing complexity of the meso system (Ebersohn, 2006); inadequate management of the loss of the former core family (McGoldrick & Carter, 2005); an inactive SMFS (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; White & Gilbreth, 2001); the parents' poor insight into the unique nature and composition of the RF as a unique family structure (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; McGoldrick & Carter, 2005; Stewart, 2005); and ongoing conflict between the biological parents (Amato, 2000; Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent & Blais, 2004). Possible negative emotional experiences include a fantasy of reconciliation between and a conflict of loyalties towards the biological parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Gosselin, 2010).

Many argue that every individual is born with a natural ability to be resilient and thus to prevail over life's difficulties (Bernard, 1995; Kruger & Prinsloo, 2008; Theron & Dunn, 2010). Human resilience is assessed in terms of time and context (Masten, 2001). For a developing child to be described as resilient, an assessment is made of whether that child generally functions relatively normally (or even better) according to a given standard of age-appropriate behavioural patterns or developmental tasks, in

spite of conditions that pose a clear risk for effective development (Schoon, 2006; Wright & Masten, 2006).

Due to a paucity of research, little is known about how children in RFs manage to continue developing positively, despite challenging family circumstances. The aim of this study was to construe an explanatory account of the concomitant, reciprocal and/or responsive dynamics of middle adolescents' use of their inherent resilience potential in the face of difficult circumstances in their RFs. Prior to formulating a bio-ecological working definition of a resilient middle adolescent in the RF context, the resilience construct is discussed next in terms of the dimensions of resilience research. A description of the method and findings of the investigation follows. The paper is concluded with a discussion of the implications of the findings for resilience theory and more effective support of middle adolescents in RFs after divorce.

Dimensions of the resilience construct

The study of resilience has progressed over the past three decades within overarching "waves" of research that can be distinguished on the basis of their orientation towards the resilience construct (Richardson, 2002; Masten & Obradović, 2006). These waves are not sequentially demarcated, since studies are still being conducted within them all. The First Wave of resilience research is aimed at identifying resilient individuals and focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic protective characteristics or factors. Hence resilience is considered a static phenomenon (Masten, 2001; Wright & Masten, 2006) and the resilience of middle adolescents in the RF would be attributed to the mere presence of specific intrinsic and extrinsic protective characteristics and factors in their development context.

In the Second Wave of resilience research the focus is on dynamic interactive processes that enhance resilience (Masten, 2004). Within this wave, Richardson, Neiger, Jensen and Kumpfer (1990) developed a model to describe the occurrence of resilient development, based on the choices made by individuals while dealing with adverse circumstances. A construct that may be linguistically misleading with regard to the interpretation of the utilisation of resilience involves the term "coping", which commonly refers to the act of dealing with difficult circumstances. Whereas resilience refers to the adapted outcome following the process of dealing with a trauma or situation of adversity, "*coping*" refers to a behavioural response to reduce its physical, emotional and psychological effect (Davey, Eaker & Walters, 2003). Davidson (2008) explains that resilient individuals do not merely "cope" with difficult circumstances, but are actively involved in a process where specific choices are made regarding their manner of dealing with these circumstances. In the context of the RF, middle adolescents would be considered resilient when they deliberately choose effective coping strategies so as to deal with difficult circumstances in both micro family systems.

The Third Wave of resilience research focuses on a postmodern, multidisciplinary identification of intrinsic and extrinsic motivating forces. It is characterised by efforts

to enhance resilience by means of prevention and intervention techniques (Richardson, 2002; Masten, 2004). Thus it would be possible to guide and support middle adolescents in the RF to use their inherent powers to promote optimal development as the outcome of their utilisation of resilience.

The currently emerging Fourth Wave of resilience research attempts to integrate the behavioural sciences with life and neuro sciences so as to construe a multifaceted, holistic comprehension of resilience as a phenomenon (Masten & Obradović, 2006). Thus it is anticipated that future studies regarding resilience in the context of the RF will seek to explore the construct in greater depth.

Within the framework of the first three waves of resilience research, superimposed on the bio-ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner, we formulated the following working definition of the resilient middle adolescent in the context of the RF: *A developing resilient middle adolescent confronted with difficult family circumstances in a RF has the ability to utilise personal strengths (intrinsic properties), which include a positive disposition, ecological resources and constructive demand characteristics, as well as assets (all extrinsic resources within the interdependent systems), to optimise the proximal processes of interaction. The productive proximal interaction between the middle adolescent and the members of his/her two micro family systems generates a positive development outcome that implies resilient recovery and personal growth.*

The presence *per se* of protective factors or resilience-supporting qualities in the micro family systems of the middle adolescent does not have the same robust effect as the effective proximal interaction processes of the participant(s) in the development systems. Therefore, effective proximal interaction processes occur based on a combination of the availability of these processes in the micro family system and the middle adolescent's disposition to recognise and take advantage of these resources.

Method

The study was directed by the following research question: *How do middle adolescents of divorced parents utilise their resilience potential, despite an often dysfunctional relationship between their biological parents at the mesosystemic level, to manage to develop optimally while moving between the two micro family systems of the RF?* A qualitative study was undertaken within the interpretivist paradigm. We endeavoured to meet the quality-ensuring criteria of trustworthiness (responsible gathering, analysis, and interpretation of the data), credibility (accurate identification and description of the utilisation of resilience, based on the data), and applicability (the degree to which the findings are relevant in a comparable context) (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

A multiple case study was used as research design to construct the space for dealing with multiple RFs – each as a unique entity. The description format was defined by the narrative as a method of understanding human interaction and social behaviour from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2007). Four Afrikaans-speaking white middle adolescents – two boys and two girls between the ages of 14

and 16 – participated in the research. They were selected by means of purposive sampling from among those presenting for career guidance at a private psychology practice. The selection criteria were 'middle adolescents of divorced parents, where both biological parents had remarried at least two years previously'. With this type of sampling we acknowledged the unique context of each RF.

Various strategies were used, to obtain rich, comparable and confirmed data by means of triangulation. Four narrative conversations, which also included informal exchanges, were held with each participant over an average period of four months. A narrative technique called "FACE" (Lötter, 2007) was employed to offer participants the opportunity to identify their emotions and verbalise their narratives associated with these emotions. This assisted them better to understand and be empowered with regard to the emotions associated with events that had occurred in their lives. Observation, field notes and a reflective research journal were maintained throughout the study. Verbal and non-verbal cues were recorded before, during, and after the conversations. Observation of behaviour during qualitative research sensitises the researcher with regard to the phenomenological complexity of the participant's subjective world. Hence, the dynamics of the conversational events and the intentionality of the middle adolescent's behaviour could inform interpretation during the phase of data analysis. Field notes were made after each conversation to record what had happened in the period preceding the conversation as well as during the interaction between the researcher and the participant. These notes would ultimately contribute to an understanding of the unique context of each participant's data. The personal experience of the researcher also forms an integral part of the qualitative research process. A daily reflective research journal was used to facilitate the emerging understanding of the data and the interpretive process of this qualitative study and possibly to direct future conversations. It therefore represented an ongoing attempt to describe and understand social experiences through the eyes of the participants only, and would be carefully consulted during the data analysis.

The ethical principles on which the research was based included informed consent with regard to the participants' voluntary and safe participation, confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, adherence to the ethical principles of the professional council of psychology was essential, owing to the sensitive nature of the topic (the formation of a reconstituted family following divorce). The four participants all displayed emotional pain and insecurity during the conversations. Hence, where challenges and problems arose, the researcher intervened as a therapist. This constantly required deep reflection in the journal, in order to ensure authentic data.

In analysing the conversation data, a distinction was made between the participant's narrative perspective (subjective interpretation of events and experiences) and perspectivist narrative (our analysis). We focused on exploring the unique relationships and interactions between the individual participants and the members of their respective micro family systems to ascertain who deliberately chose and implemented

effective strategies to deal with the difficult circumstances in their two micro family systems. The data of each case were analysed separately, so as to preserve the unique nuances of the identified themes of resilience utilisation within the social context in which they occurred.

Findings

Due to space constraints, quoted remarks by participants are not included. Inevitably, the findings in respect of the proximal processes and meso system are context-specific and they are therefore preceded by a short description of the development context of each participant.

The development context of participants

Fanus

Fanus's core family comprised his mother, father, elder brother, younger brother, and himself. His parents divorced four years ago when he was eleven. His PMFS (with his mother) started off as an RF shortly after the divorce and the SMFS originated from an extra-marital relationship prior to the divorce. At the mesosystemic level, Fanus has been exposed to constant conflict between his biological parents. He visits his SMFS infrequently, and his emotional insecurity and pain due to the sense of distance between himself and his father immediately became apparent from the conversations with him.

Leon

Leon's core family comprised his mother, father, elder sister, and himself. His parents divorced ten years ago when he was four. Since the divorce and up to the time of the conversations he had been living with his mother in his PMFS, which originated as an RF shortly after the divorce. In the period between our fourth and fifth conversation with him, he decided of his own accord to go and live in his SMFS. The latter system had started off as a single-parent family for three years, and subsequently became an RF. At the mesosystemic level, Leon was from the outset exposed to sustained positive interaction and dynamic parenthood from his biological parents and he has functioned actively in both family systems ever since the divorce. During the first conversation he nevertheless showed signs of emotional insecurity with regard to his social ranking and self-value within his father's SMFS.

Sonja

Sonja's core family comprised her mother, father, half-sister from her father's earlier marriage, elder brother, younger sister, and herself. Sonja's parents divorced nine years ago when she was six. The RFs of both her parents came from a history of numerous relationships. Her PMFS (with her mother) first existed as a single-parent family for two years, subsequently as an RF for one year, then again as a single-parent family for

two years and only then, for the past three years, as the current RF. Her SMFS first existed as an RF for two years, next as a single-parent family for three years and after that, for the past five years, as the current RF. At the mesosystemic level, Sonja has been exposed to negative interaction between her biological parents ever since the divorce. However, she has functioned actively in both family systems over the past five years. During the conversations her emotional insecurity and pain regarding her self-value in the context of both her family systems emerged strongly.

Heidi

Heidi's core family comprised her mother, father, elder half-brother from her mother's earlier marriage, and herself. Her parents divorced ten years ago when she was five. Heidi's PMFS (with her mother) started off as an RF shortly after the divorce. Her SMFS originated from an extended single-parent family with her father and grandmother for eight years, then – following her father's marriage – as a reconstituted extended family for three months, and finally as an RF. At the mesosystemic level, Heidi has been exposed to constant conflict between her biological parents since the divorce. Also, over the past two years, Heidi has no longer visited her SMFS. Already in the very first conversation she expressed severe emotional insecurity and pain regarding her membership of her SMFS.

Resilience-related factors that affected the proximal processes in the participants' RFs

A comparison of each participant's risk factors (problematic family circumstances and intrinsic characteristics) and protective factors (personal strengths and assets) as well as the influence of his/her mesosystems highlighted the process of utilisation of resilience in the enhancement of proximal processes in his/her micro family systems. This indicated how the participant managed to utilise his/her resilience potential.

Risk factors: difficult family circumstances

Difficult family circumstances that became clear from our study and that were to be expected according to the literature (due to the restructuring of a family after divorce) included the following: the inadequate way in which loss of the earlier core family was dealt with; an inactive SMFS; ongoing changes as well as an unsatisfactory way of dealing with the changes within the PMFS and SMFS; different parenting styles of biological parents and ongoing conflict between them; non-supportive spouses of biological parents; and stepsibling conflict ineffectively dealt with by the parent/s. Risk factors that were identified but that did not occur specifically in the context of an RF only, included a relationship of conflict between spouses within a family system; a non-supportive mother and/or father; the job circumstances of the father; and sibling conflict ineffectively dealt with by the parent/s. Risk factors that were found with all four participants involved the inadequate management of the loss of the former core family, and changes within the SMFS.

Risk factors: intrinsic characteristics

Intrinsic risk factors identified by our study, and to be expected in accordance with the literature on divorce, included the following: a fantasy of reconciliation between biological parents; a conflict of loyalties regarding the biological parents; insecurity about membership and social position within the respective micro family systems; and uncertainty about a relationship of trust with the biological parent's spouse. Risk factors that occurred generally, i.e. also in the context of a core family, included a basic need for emotional security; acquired helplessness as an inability to act assertively; external locus of control; and poor self-value. Risk factors found with all four participants included the high degree to which the participants experienced a conflict of loyalties to their biological parents and their insecurity about their social position within the SMFS.

Protective factors: personal strengths and assets

The identification of the personal strengths and assets of every participant was linked to a therapeutic process in which each of them participated in a unique manner. It seemed that emotional security was a determining factor for the way in which the participants opened themselves up (or not) to the process during which they could discover their "well" of inherent resilience potential and draw from it. Most of the personal strengths identified with participants, *inter alia* their acceptance of authority, intellectual competence and desire for autonomy, could be linked to their level of development in both the core and reconstituted family systems. Assets that were expected in accordance with the literature, and that arose from the unique context of the RF following divorce, included the following: a stable and supportive PMFS and SMFS; a relationship of functional communication between the biological parents; and supportive spouses of the biological parents. Assets that occurred generally as well as in the context of an RF included the presence of an effective and supportive peer group micro system; an effective school environment; supportive biological parents; and supportive grandparents. The only two personal strengths revealed in some participants as unique qualities within the context of an RF after divorce were a positive disposition that emanated from a strong bond with the spouses of biological parents, and the establishment of a relationship of trust with the stepparents concerned.

Only Leon and Heidi benefited to such an extent from their "well" of personal strengths and assets that it enhanced their participation in the proximal processes in their family systems. Leon took greater advantage of his "well" and thus managed to enhance his participation in the proximal processes in both his micro family systems, whereas Heidi only managed to participate adequately in the proximal processes within her PMFS. Fanus and Sonja both proved to have a "well" of personal strengths and assets, yet neither has so far managed to gain benefit from it for their enhanced participation in the proximal processes in their family systems.

In terms of our working definition of a resilient middle adolescent in the context of a RF, only Leon is considered resilient, since he made use of his resilience potential

to enhance his participation in the proximal processes in both his family systems. This fact contributed to a positive development outcome and thus brought about an ongoing process of resilient recovery and personal growth. The fruitful proximal interaction generated between Heidi and the members of her PMFS only, contributed to a positive development outcome that promised an ongoing process of resilient recovery with personal growth. However, the lack of her father's influence in her SMFS markedly impeded her development in that family system. Fanus and Sonja are considered developing middle adolescents who displayed the potential for resilient recovery, but who have not yet recovered resiliently. Thus they could not claim adequate development.

The influence of the meso system

Unlike the other two participants, Leon and Sonja have actively moved between their two micro family systems over a period of ten and five years, respectively. However, only the meso system in Leon's development context is considered to have been sustained effectively, since positive interaction between his two micro family systems was maintained throughout. This was due to his biological parents' sustained positive parenting and their relationship of functional communication. Their strong functioning meso system likewise contributed to the enhancement of proximal processes among the family members within both family systems, as well as to Leon's adequate development towards greater independence. Interaction in the two micro family systems of Fanus, Sonja, and Heidi was affected negatively by the dysfunctional communication between all the sets of biological parents. This again contributed to the restriction of proximal processes among the family members within both their family systems and noticeably inhibited the participants' general development.

Discussion

The findings and insights gained from this study confirm various assumptions regarding the effect and consequences of divorce, especially with regard to the children from the affected family. Due to their movement between two micro family systems, the development of the middle adolescents of divorced parents is described as both complicated and complex (Ebersohn, 2011). Both the participants' own conscious decision making regarding the use of their resilience characteristics (Richardson, 2002) – a process over which they had control – and the effect of the relationship between their biological parents as also distinguished by Beaudry et al. (2004) on a mesosystemic level – a factor over which they had no control – contributed to the enhancement or limitation of their resilience. This consequently also contributed to their development being more, or less, adequate.

During the therapeutic interventions the participants were sensitised to their personal strengths (positive dispositions, ecological resources and constructive demand characteristics) and assets (extrinsic resources within the interdependent systems). The effectiveness of these interventions was notably influenced by their security and

readiness (or not) to consciously open themselves up to the process of identifying and utilising their natural resilience potential as distinguished by Wright and Masten (2006). Those participants who did not engage with the therapeutic process also found it difficult to identify their resilience characteristics. Hence they inhibited the process through which they could have utilised their resilience potential to deal more effectively with their challenging family circumstances. They continued to use their ineffective coping strategies, as postulated by Davidson (2008), to protect themselves against the emotional exposure emanating from their difficult family circumstances and especially the dysfunctional meso system in their development context. In a case of this nature, it seems difficult to facilitate a change in meaning giving on a cognitive level. This then immobilises the process whereby middle adolescents are guided to personally verbalise (and eventually fulfil) specific intentions of a change in behaviour, corroborating Lerner's (2006) finding.

Those participants who chose to engage with the therapeutic process also made a deliberate choice to use (or not to use) their resilience potential by mobilising (or negating) their resilience characteristics (Masten, 2001), though their behaviour. Participants who chose to use their resilience potential did so by substantiating and executing their verbalised intentions of effective coping strategies, posited as actualised resilience by Rutter and Rutter (2002), through their behaviour.

It was evident that the participants' emotional security was strongly influenced by the functioning of the meso system, namely, the interaction between their two micro family systems. Such interaction was determined almost exclusively by the biological parents, as Amato and Afifi (2006) also found. The implication is that divorced biological parents who uphold a relationship of effective communication and who jointly and constructively continue their parenting despite the divorce, contribute decisively to the emotional security of their middle adolescent child who has no option but to belong to two micro family systems. In the same way, ineffective interaction patterns by divorced biological parents, as researched by Dunn et al. (2005), contribute significantly to the emotional pain and insecurity of their middle adolescent child, and this was confirmed clearly by our research. Participants who did not succeed in utilising their resilience potential apparently found it difficult to actualise their identified resilience characteristics through their behaviour, even though they managed to verbalise effective coping strategies during the therapeutic process.

Only one participant's meso system was effectively maintained by the biological parents, and he was the only one able to deal effectively with the difficult circumstances within both his micro family systems. This participant implicitly contributed much to his biological parents' effective maintenance of the meso system. The obverse was also apparent: those participants who did not feel emotionally secure enough to utilise their resilience potential in both their micro family systems, greatly reinforced their biological parents' inadequate maintenance of the meso system. The manner in which the four participants of divorced parents utilised (or failed to utilise) their

resilience in their movement between two micro family systems appears essentially a systemic matter. We therefore conclude that the effectiveness of the meso system determines the concomitant, reciprocal and/or responsive dynamics generated in the use of their resilience by middle adolescents of divorced parents.

The small scale of the research, involving only four participants from the same societal context, is obviously methodologically restrictive. Thus the findings cannot simply be generalised to RF situations in other cultures. A more complete picture would furthermore have been obtained if the dynamics of interactive patterns in the respective micro family systems of the participants' parents (both biological and stepparents) had also been examined. Finally, the limited duration of the process of data gathering caused the conversations (conducted in relatively quick succession) often to touch on insights on a rational level only, and perhaps prevented the participants from pushing through towards (consistent) behaviour. If more time had been afforded for critical situations to emerge in the RFs (thus presenting opportunities for empirical investigation into new options uncovered, especially concerning a disposition or habit), the participants may well have demonstrated that they were experimenting with their resilience potential.

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that divorce is indeed a potentially devastating reality, this study has shown that the RF can also be a mosaic of positive relationships and optimal development. The outcome of our research has important implications for accountable and effective practice in all professions that are directly or indirectly concerned with divorce, *inter alia* educational and clinical psychology, pastoral guidance, social welfare, and the legal professions. If divorced biological parents can be guided to continue their parenting effectively at the mesosystemic level in spite of all the conflicts that led to the divorce, they may well succeed in supporting their middle adolescent children to optimally utilise their resilience potential, successfully overcome the difficult family circumstances within the reconstituted family, and develop adequately.

It appears correct to conclude that the utilisation of resilience as such depends on some form of solid base in the child's development context (which, in the case of divorce, would be the meso system). This phenomenon then gives rise to a new question that could add substantially to the bio-ecological perspective on resilience theory: is children's utilisation of resilience always dependent on some form of solid base in the child's development context, or is this only so in the context of RFs? The answer to this question would contribute significantly to all forms of family intervention, even as our conclusion above suggests a way forward for interventions regarding the painful experiences of divorce.

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