

**Everyday resilience: Narratives of single refugee women with children**

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**Published**

2013

**Journal Title**

Qualitative Social Work

**DOI**

[10.1177/1473325012449684](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325012449684)

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## **Everyday Resilience: Narratives of Single Refugee Women with Children.**

### **Abstract**

This paper offers a critical exploration of the concept of resilience, which is largely conceptualised in the literature as an extraordinary atypical personal ability to revert or ‘bounce back’ to a point of equilibrium despite significant adversity. While resilience has been explored in a range of contexts, there is little recognition of resilience as a social process arising from mundane practices of everyday life and situated in person-environment interactions. Based on an ethnographic study among single refugee women with children in Brisbane, Australia, the women’s stories on navigating everyday tensions and opportunities revealed how resilience was a process operating inter-subjectively in the social spaces connecting them to their environment. Far beyond the simplistic binaries of resilience versus non-resilient, we concern ourselves here with the everyday processual, person-environment nature of the concept. We argue that more attention should be paid to day-to-day pathways through which resilience outcomes are achieved, and that this has important implications for refugee mental health practice frameworks

**Keywords**

Resilience, single refugee women, person-environment, everyday life, refugee mental health, ethnography.

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## **Everyday Resilience: Narratives of Single Refugee Women with Children.**

*Creativity is piercing the mundane to find the marvelous.* – B. Moyers.

### **Introduction**

Resilience generally refers to an individual's psychological ability to overcome, learn from and adapt positively to life's adverse events (Riley and Masten, 2005). Resilience is often seen as the atypical ability to revert or 'bounce back' to a point of equilibrium despite adversity. Bonanno, Westphal and Mancini (2011: 513) define resilience as a 'stable trajectory of healthy psychological and physical functioning' as an outcome pattern of a potentially traumatic event. It is not surprising then that the resilience category has come to be regularly applied to refugee communities (see Daud, af Klinteberg and Rydelieu, 2008; Rosenfeld, Rasmussen, Keller and Hooberman, 2010), since refugees have experienced major life upheavals and are frequently attempting to rebuild individual, family and whole of community trajectories. Their achievements in moving on with life in a positive manner fit the normative causal model assumed within much of the resilience literature.

Equally, such achievements refute the pathologised discourse of refugees common within trauma studies (like Chung and Bemak, 2002). Women from refugee backgrounds who must contend with a highly gendered array of vulnerabilities (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004; McMichael and Manderson, 2004) therefore potentially

provide insight into gendered accounts of resilience, currently missing in resilience discourses (Bachay and Cingel, 1999). There is much value in applying a resilience ‘lens’ to understand the experiences of refugee women, since it affords the opportunity to de-medicalise the ‘needy victim’ status often attached to the refugee label (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou and Moussa, 2008), and provides a strengths-based starting point for understanding and working with this group.

However, there are also concerns about the non-critical application of resilience in the field. In particular, the dominating tendency to conceptualise resilience narrowly as an ‘inner’ capacity ignores or problematically reconfigures the ‘outer’ social worlds in which lives are embedded (Ungar, 2005). Outer worlds are acknowledged only insofar as they produce adversity; hence, the fundamental dynamic of the (non)resilient individual up against social adversity ignores the possibility that resilience might also itself be a social phenomenon. From the standpoint of privileged ‘first world’ lives, the question of exploring the wellbeing of refugee women is in danger of being reduced to a simplistic dichotomy of either pathologising in relation to trauma or valorising in relation to resilience. Pulvirenti and Mason (2011: 46) critiqued the resilience concept in a similar vein, arguing that refugee women are ‘more than victims’ but also ‘more than survivors’. We argue that it is in the dynamic space of everyday life-worlds of refugee women that a more complex set of possibilities become enacted, which gives meaning to the *processes* rather than the *traits* of resilience.

We draw from a qualitative account of a small number of single refugee women with children, building new lives in Australia. We focus on three interconnected aspects of resilience situated in everydayness: the ordinary nature of resilience in normal routines, the dynamic process underpinning the achievement of resilience each and every day and over time, and the social complexities of resilience and stress. These women interacted within a complex array of gendered roles, expectations and judgements, which speak to both the vulnerabilities associated with being single women with children from refugee backgrounds as well as the strengths they draw from.

Furthermore, we emphasise these matters within the context of managing everyday life, where the everyday is not simply the vessel in which lives are lived, rather it is the milieu in which the social processes of resilience are enacted daily. This *everyday* accomplishment speaks not only to the dynamic nature of resilience as an ongoing process, but also to the ordinary environments in which it is accomplished. The women's resilience embedded in daily routines challenges the focus of much of the resilience discourse on 'extraordinary' events, while the social dimension of resilience situated in person-environment interactions acknowledges resilience as an ongoing process achieved daily over time and according to contexts, rather than an atypical static inner trait.

As single refugee women adapt to new lifestyles and systems, some concurrently bear the primary responsibility for ensuring their children's successful transition to a new country. Many refugee women are isolated and experience significant emotional, financial, and physical risks post-resettlement (Pittaway, 1999). Single migrant and refugee women with children are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems than the rest of the Australian population (Office of the Status of Women, 2001). They may be unaware of healthcare services, fearful of Australian family law and may not understand their rights (National Council for Single Mothers and their Children, 2009). They may not receive any torture and trauma counselling, unlike other Australian women in similar circumstances (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2005), due to differences in help-seeking behaviours or limited access to appropriate services.

### **Resilience: Critiques and Opportunities**

In discussing resilience among women from refugee backgrounds, we acknowledge their strengths, but we also critically reflect on some of the simplistic renditions of the 'resilience' category. Like Pulvirenti and Mason (2011: 40), we worry about the dangers of the resilient/non-resilient dichotomy. Whilst the resilient are symbolically applauded for 'bouncing back', we are concerned about the negative social meanings attached to those who don't 'bounce back'. Such a stark dichotomy draws on a questionable normative logic in which resilience depends on arbitrary assumptions



about what constitutes a resilient or non-resilient response to a particular life event (Ungar, 2003: 88).

Given the experience of human rights violations among refugees, who should decide what constitutes a (non)resilient response? Is it reasonable to assign some responses to human rights violations as resilient and some not resilient? We are not disputing the diverse array of adaptive reactions to dramatic life events, but we feel uncomfortable with arbitrary ‘lines in the sand’ that separate resilient from non-resilient individuals. Further, Pulvirenti and Mason (2011: 46) have taken up the additional complexities and problems of this normativity when applied to refugee women who experience domestic violence. Noting the danger of confusing tolerance to violence with resilience, they question what a resilient refugee woman would actually ‘bounce back’ to, given life histories where violence has become normalised.

In contrast to such individualised accounts of resilience, others have stressed the social and process dimensions of resilience (Bottrell, 2009; Ungar et al., 2007; Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010). In emphasizing a socially nuanced account of resilience, we are interested in its ecological characteristics situated in person-environment interactions (Harvey, 2007). Hence, resilience in this sense is not just a measurement of the individual’s ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversity. It is also ‘the capacity of the individual’s environment to provide access to health enhancing resources in *culturally*

*relevant ways*' (Ungar et al., 2002: 88), creating a space to acknowledge resilience as an ongoing process achieved daily over time, rather than a mere static inner trait. Nguyen-Gillham et al. (2008: 296) found this to be an important aspect of resilience in their study of Palestinian youth suggesting that 'the capacity to endure has to be understood within a micro context of ordinary life'.

We suggest that everyday life-worlds are not just 'stadiums' in which we might observe resilience in action, but that '*everydayness*' is itself an achievement and a potential aspect of resilience. This has added meaning in the everyday context of refugee women who are also single mothers, since these women are vulnerable to being 'othered' on multiple levels (Deacon and Sullivan, 2009; Lamba and Krahn, 2003). The women's solid sense of wellbeing stems from interactions in the space between the individual and their social environment. A constructionist perspective is helpful here since it views resilience as an 'outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse' (Ungar, 2004: 342). The constructionist perspective challenges the false dichotomy between resilience and non-resilience and embraces the diversity in pathways to nurture and maintain resilience (Ungar, 2004).

Maintaining a focus on person-environment interactions is critical in order to resist the individualisation and de-politicisation of social problems. Whilst the capacity to

‘bounce back’ in a resettlement context with unfamiliar social and economic space potentially represents an exemplar of ‘resilience’, we ought to be wary that it might also feed the neoliberal exchange now rooted in refugee policy in many resettlement countries. Kleinman and Kleinman (1997: 10) have argued that the ‘*trauma stories*’ of refugees have become ‘the symbolic capital, with which they enter exchanges for physical resources and achieve the status of political refugee.’ Whilst the salutogenic discourse of resilience holds the potential to de-pathologise, it does not necessarily alter the underlying neoliberal dynamic to which Kleinman and Kleinman referred. The ‘deserving’ citizen of the neoliberal state must actively take on their responsibilities for self-improvement (Rose, 2006: 340). Thus, for a refugee entering such a space, they are not simply ‘adapting’ to a new community, but are engaged in an ongoing accomplishment of active citizenship. As Bottrell (2009: 334) argued, resilience theory can be readily incorporated into neoliberal policy agendas, with its capacity to emphasise the individual over the social, particularly the enterprising *resilient* citizens who free themselves from dependence on state-sponsored supports.

The well-known feminist slogan of ‘the personal is political’ is not without relevance here. Some studies have found few gender differences in resilient processes and outcomes (Morano, 2010); yet others situate gender as a critical determinant of resilience (Pulvirenti and Mason, 2011; Ungar, 2004). Such different findings perhaps reflect the varying conceptualisations of resilience at work in various study sites.

Gender is important to this study not only because participants are women, but also because the wider social environments are clearly gendered. Acknowledging the political nature of the individual within their environment is not predicated necessarily on overtly political acts of individual women, but on an appreciation of the political significance of the relationship between agency and gendered structures.

Consider, for example, Haeri's (2007) comparative study of two Pakistani women's resilient strategies following experiences of rape in police custody. One woman's resilient strategies were denial and finding solace in religious symbolism, while the other woman spoke out and advocated for gender equity. Resilience can thus take many forms among women from similar backgrounds, but both speak to the depth of gender politics. We embed our work here within a growing literature concerned with the gendered particularities of resilience in diverse social contexts (Hayward, Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Ploeg and Trollope-Kumar, 2008; Manderson and Vasey, 2009; Morano, 2010).

### **Study Overview**

These findings emerged from an ethnographic study on four single refugee women's perspectives on resilience and wellbeing in Brisbane, Australia. The researcher (first author) conducted fieldwork in 2008 and 2009 to seek contextual understandings of mental health. The ethnographic approach sought in-depth understanding of the

women's social worlds. The researcher was immersed in the women's everyday lives, to establish genuine relationships of trust. By spending time at the women's homes and attending community gatherings, the researcher gained insight into the participants' social worlds and their stories of resilience.

A combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual ethnography was used to explore the women's experiences. Participant observation is integral to ethnography and involves immersion in settings to attempt to understand experiences the same way as participants do (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Participants discussed important aspects of their everyday lives while providing insights into local community dynamics impacting on their wellbeing. The visual ethnographic phase involved reflexive photography and digital storytelling, allowing the women to explore issues in ways that honoured their ability to articulate themes, since knowledge is grounded in experiences (Wang, 1999). The purpose of this study was not simply to establish differences and similarities among single refugee women, but to appreciate how these were connected in complex and intricate ways. The small number of participants enabled in-depth exploration of plural pathways to resilience. The aim was not to generalise findings, but to look at contextualised experiences.

Participants were engaged using purposive sampling combined with the 'snowball' technique when possible. The women resided in the Brisbane area. Two participants were widows, had proficient English language skills and were in paid employment,

while two others were divorced, had very limited English language abilities and were seeking paid employment. All came from African nations and were aged from their late thirties to early fifties. Participants cared for between one and seven children on their own. Details are summarised below:

**Table 1: Information on participants.**

Participant	Country of origin	Time in Aust. (yrs.)	Marital status	English language abilities	Educational level/ employment status	Number of children / dependents	Age
#1 (Mila*)	Sudan	5	Widow	Excellent	University / part time work in community development, full time university student	5 children	Late 30s
#2 (Thara*)	Sudan	2	Widow	Excellent	University / full time work in community development	5 children	40s
#3 (Sonia*)	Burundi	2	Divorced	Limited	Vocational / unemployed, unpaid community work	7 children + 3 dependents	Mid-50s
#4 (Zora*)	Dem. Republic of Congo	2	Divorced	Very limited	Not stated / unemployed, work experience in aged care	1 child + 2 dependents	Late 30s

\* Pseudonyms.

The project was granted ‘Human Ethics Level 3’ clearance (the highest level) from a Human Research Ethics Committee in 2007, in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, given the potentially sensitive nature of information participants could share.

Data collection and in-depth analysis were ongoing and iterative. An intersectional approach was used to analyse the refugee women’s narratives on plural pathways to resilience, since complexity and embeddedness can be better understood by considering the compound effects of a range of factors, including ‘race’, class, culture, age and gender, on lived experiences (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001). Participants’ unique narratives yielded ‘thick’ ethnographic description (Geertz, 1973) of everyday life including narratives about coping with life challenges. Follow-up interviews with three participants confirming emerging findings were audio-recorded to convey verbatim expressions.

## **Findings**

### *Participants’ Daily Lives*

On a typical day, Mila wakes up at dawn to study for a couple of hours, then prepares her children for school before heading off to work for the day. In the afternoons, she

attends community meetings or classes, or does the grocery shopping. She cleans the house at night and finishes each day with prayers. She prepares meals in advance on Sunday nights and freezes them as she often misses dinnertime during the week, but wants to make sure her children eat well regardless. She organises weekly family rosters for household chores to make sure her children make a contribution, but there are often unattended chores when she gets home at night. Her weekends are full attending community events and activities. Knowing the isolation of some women in her community, Mila has taken on the responsibility of supporting them, including driving the women to community events. Sometimes, this is at the detriment of studying or spending time with her children. On a Sunday, Mila attends church services with her family.

As a single mother of five who refused to remarry after her husband's death, Thara regularly attracts the community's scrutiny on how she lives and raises her children. Men and women alike confront her with a variety of views about her children's schooling, her long work hours, or alleged involvement with male community members. She experiences a particularly gendered set of expectations within the community. She is expected to take on significant roles in organising community events, but as a single mother she can also be the target of a variety of patriarchal judgements. She feels a strong connection to her community but at the same time can feel isolated. Fortunately, her job helps reduce this sense of isolation. Her eldest children attend university and her



family remains actively engaged in community-based activities, despite intense gossip. Thara struggles to be accepted also because she is unfamiliar with some aspects of her culture and language; part of her refugee journey involved an extended separation from her homeland, living in a 'second country' situation for many years prior to settling in Australia. She does not pay heed to the community's disapproval and has a strong sense of determination to achieve her goals. She managed to travel back to her country of origin, as well as undertake tertiary studies in Australia, both of these accomplishments she found surprised many people in her local community.

Sonia lives with nine others in her home, including seven children and two grandchildren. She wakes up early each day to clean and pray before starting her day. She walks her two grandchildren and youngest children to primary school, before catching public transport to a local multicultural agency. She volunteers as a bilingual worker due to the lack of accredited interpreters in her local community, and can be called on at very short notice to interpret. While she loves her family, she also desires time to spend alone. Sonia has been unable to find employment because of her limited English proficiency. She attended all of the government-funded English classes in the early months of her settlement and sought further opportunities to practice every day. She took sponsored driving lessons, as she wanted to be independent, drive her family around, and be competitive for jobs. Sonia is responsible for buying groceries and cooking for her large family. When the landlord asked her family to leave his house, she

spent several weeks worrying about finding suitable accommodation for such a large family, until a community worker agreed to lease her property.

When Zora first arrived in Australia, she spent several weeks in Northern New South Wales picking blueberries in order to afford accommodation for herself, her daughter, younger sister and niece. When she moved to Brisbane, Queensland she then completed a vocational course in aged care. This is not her area of interest, but Zora was aware of the high demand for qualified workers in this field.

However Zora was unable to find a job in this field, perhaps she felt because of her still limited English proficiency. Now Zora stays at home most days, relying on television programs for exposure to Australian English. From this she has learnt to understand English but cannot speak it. Her teenage daughter, whom she encourages to focus on her schooling to have a better life, becomes a critical linguistic and cultural link to the outside world. Despite the language barrier, Zora is a practical and determined woman. Faced with the need to attend regular doctor's appointments to deal with significant personal health issues and with limited public transport options available, Zora drives without a licence since her limited English abilities makes sitting the driving test impossible. Despite these difficulties, Zora has a great sense of humour and maintains a positive outlook towards the future. Zora has agreed to look after her niece while her sister is

working inter-state, as they recently heard that their long lost brother was found, and the women want to sponsor him to Australia.

### *The Ordinary Nature of Resilience*

For all of the women in this study, everyday life often constituted a juggling act of meeting the multiple expectations of others, including employers and community leaders. Concurrently, the women put the wellbeing of their children ahead of their own so that children could make the most of opportunities afforded by their new environment. As refugee women living in a new social, cultural, linguistic, economic and political environment, there were numerous unfamiliar situations to contend with. To negotiate these ongoing challenges, Thara drew inspiration and confidence from past experiences:

*It was not easy to adjust to the new environment in Australia. I took some time to know how the systems function and to fit in my new environment. My past experience of struggling helped me a lot to overcome the challenges here.*  
(Thara)

Conversely, Mila was not quite sure how she juggled different responsibilities. Like others in this study, Mila expressed a strong sense that a failure to cope was simply not an option:

*Up to now I still wonder how I survived in a place where there was no safety, where anything could happen to you and your family any time, and you had no option. I still don't know how I am managing a family of five and how I am doing the triple job that is work, study and family.* (Mila)

As exemplified in Mila's quote, it can be a somewhat superfluous question as to the 'exact' source of their resilience. Certainly, not all the women could identify how they managed to cope, but what was shared was a pressing omnipresence of everyday struggles that simply had to be dealt with day in and day out.

Thara like others in the study with strong religious beliefs relied on prayer as a way to achieve the everyday goals she set for herself:

*Being a single mother with five children, life was full of ups and downs. It is hard to describe exactly how I was able to manage. But it involved sacrifice, commitment and courage to accomplish my dream. Being a Christian, my faith played a great role in my life in many ways. We always pray as a family and cast all our problems into the hands of the Lord. The hardship I overcame motivated me to be strong, struggle and never give up whatever the case might be, that was my motto. Survival was not a problem anymore because I have learnt to live with enough. With or without, life is the same. (Thara)*

Core challenges of settling in a new country such as learning the language were also described in terms of the 'everyday grind' required to achieve competency:

*A few women I've met they go to TAFE and when they are at home, there are programs for children on the TV; they watch it and sometimes they learn from their children. They try to practice it and the kids keep on correcting them. These are the ones who really have the desire to learn and some have the courage, they really have the self-esteem, even if they can't speak, but they keep on practising. (Thara)*

*The Dynamic Process of Resilience in Each and Every Day*

Resilience was an ongoing and ever-changing process in which the women were engaged every day as they faced shifting challenges and opportunities over time. For instance, within Zora's brief life snapshot, she clearly had to contend with ever-changing circumstances including raised but unrealised hopes of a job, substantial family support roles, the need to deal with her own health problems as well as a myriad of other daily life challenges. Zora's willingness to respond quickly to rapidly changing life circumstances, roles and expectations is a powerful insight into the dynamic nature of resilience as an ongoing process. An example of this dynamic process relates to the challenge common to all the women concerning the changing demands on them as parents. Particularly as children entered adolescence, the women experienced increased stress:

*Dealing with one or more teenager(s) in the house really affects a single parent's mental wellbeing. It is more difficult for those who have difficult children who don't cooperate with their parents, and huge language barrier, makes them struggle every single day of their life. (Mila)*

Such a challenge included issues related to acculturation, since children not only learnt English more quickly but were also exposed to the norms of their peers more intensively. Thus the women had to make difficult judgements about their parenting in the context of retaining their own personal and cultural values but also allowing their children to adapt to new circumstances. Thara for example took up a strong position in

relation to the transnational context of her children's upbringing and the importance of having a home, culture and sense of belonging:

*Australia is our second home, but again I told my children, we have to make sure we have a home back home. Time will come when we'll need to go back and visit back home, at least we have a land, we have shelter there. And also [the children] they have to keep communicating back home. They should not forget about home or forget about our culture because we live in Australia. (Thara)*

Equally, the women all spoke regularly about the everyday challenges of ensuring bills are paid, children are ready for school, and 'dinner is on the table' as equally challenging demands requiring substantial resilience to sustain.

#### *Social Complexities of Resilience and Stress*

Part of the normative 'neatness' often implied within the resilience discourse is the notion of separating sources of stress from sources of resilience, which assumes that social sources of resilience and stress are entirely discrete phenomena. However, the women's notions of resilience here indicate otherwise. For instance, just as 'community' was a source of support for the women, it was also a source of stress. This was not 'surprising' to the women, but simply another aspect of their everyday lives to be negotiated and managed. While the women expressed gratitude to be connected to others from their own cultural backgrounds, they also experienced a number of

community related stressors as part of their experience of ‘community’. This is exemplified in Zora’s definition of community:

*For me, a community provides social healing through sharing views and challenges, learning from one another experiences, and how to deal with challenges. Emotional support when you lose loved ones. Children would be able to stick to some good culture, as well as supporting one another in any situation.(...) Sometimes, it is so hard to understand community dynamics, there’s gossips, fighting, ignorance, and it makes it difficult with coping with day-to-day activities and challenges. (Zora)*

Furthermore, the women experienced both support and stress within the community in a highly gendered way. Thus Thara’s leadership in creating a single mothers’ group within her community speaks to both the particular life challenges experienced by refugee women with children and the way in which they collectively respond to these challenges:

*So I say, why don’t we come up with a group of women? Maybe we meet once a month, it rotates from each home, so that it keeps that connection. We can keep on learning from one another, those who have been here for longer can help us who are facing difficulties in settling in a new environment, we can support one another and be there for one another. (Thara)*

The mutual support derived from the women’s group was in part a response to community gossip and scrutiny, particularly in relation to raising children without the presence of a husband:

*It is really challenging, even in the community, they can really say something, nobody will listen to you, because they just think you are a single woman... When you are successful, you work, you educate your*

*children, like myself, I did everything, all I could to educate my children. I don't know if it is jealousy or anything, instead of appreciating as a single woman manage to do all that, now they've come up with strange stories, they don't believe that I can do that. They say, maybe there is a man behind [laughs], she can't do that by herself, it's impossible, no woman can do that. So that's what I've heard several times and some people they have even confronted me. (Thara)*

This kind of sexism also provided the basis for jealousy in the community:

*Being a single mother, maybe this is the worst part of it, when you are being seen or associating or working or communicating with other men who are married, automatically they assume that you are running after their men, particularly here in Australia. That has affected me so much to the stage that I really keep away from associating with other people's husband (...) So that has been difficult for me and most of the single mothers here. It really makes their environment very hard, and because of that, when we are at home, it makes us recall what has happened, you question yourself. You know when you start thinking why me, why does this happen to me, it really affects you emotionally. (Thara)*

Such community suspicion significantly affected the women's sense of wellbeing, yet none of the women wished to isolate themselves from their communities and forego their support, solidarity and cultural resource. This high awareness of the need to *negotiate* their lives, taking into account positives and negatives, shaped the everyday worlds of the women. In this sense resilience appears to be as much about finding productive paths through a maze of ups and downs, rather than simply being a certain kind of person with a certain set of resilient 'traits'.

## **Discussion**



Two implications emerging from this paper's findings add to critical perspectives on resilience, namely the everyday nature of the concept and the person-environment dimension of resilience. These different angles on resilience merit further attention as they receive relatively limited focus in current discourses around this concept.

### *The Everyday Processual Nature of Resilience*

Processual approaches acknowledge ambiguous and multiple perspectives situated in the everyday, and 'focus on the *processes* of everyday life, in the form of daily activities, as a frame of reference' (González, 1995: 237). Despite the upheaval caused by refugee circumstances and juggling multiple responsibilities as single women with children, everydayness in itself constituted resilient outcomes. The women aimed to lead 'normal' and meaningful lives in Australia, particularly for their children's sake. Like Nguyen-Gillham et al.'s (2008) findings on the ordinariness and 'normal' nature of resilience among Palestinian young people, the women's resilience embedded in daily routines challenges the focus of much of the resilience discourse on 'extraordinary' traits. Notions of resilience were not predefined, but conceptualised as the dynamic progression of mundane activities and the ordinary process of moving through daily life challenges and opportunities. Giving up was not an option for participants and thus, resilience was not applauded but was simply part of the women's everyday realities.

The idea of ordinary achievements in everydayness, even when perceived as relatively minor triumphs, deserves more attention.

A critical perspective on the everyday processual nature of resilience challenges the binary opposition of predefined resilient versus non-resilient outcomes. Resilience means more than overcoming past experiences and involves ‘a dynamic process of shifting, changing, building, learning and moving on’ (Pulvirenti and Mason, 2011: 46). As opposed to an individualised, static notion of resilience achieved by crossing ‘lines in the sand’, its dynamic nature was demonstrated through the women’s constant re-evaluation of life’s daily tensions. Indeed, ‘individuals or communities do not just ‘have’ resilience once and for all. Instead, it is something they strive for, that must be accomplished over and over again’ (Pulvirenti and Mason, 2011: 40). While change was a constant, resilience was apparent in the women’s ongoing commitment to move on, dealing with a series of challenges through time.

The range of feelings yielded by social support and stresses derived from family and community contexts were produced in everyday routines and encounters as women, single mothers, and community members. The women managed such tensions and maintained a strong focus on their goals, thus achieving resilient outcomes irrespective of support. Similar to Nguyen-Gillham et al.’s (2008) findings on resilience where feelings of optimism were intermingled with desperation and boredom, such

interconnectedness of feelings was integral to the women's resilience. The complexities of everyday processual resilience challenge commonly held beliefs underpinning policy and practice, that strong community presence is indispensable to successful adaptation and wellbeing, and that resilience is only present when positive attributes outweigh adversity. The multiple pathways employed in at times arduous circumstances redefined 'success' for the women; under a constructionist paradigm, resilience means 'successful negotiation by individuals for health resources, with success depending for its definition on the reciprocity individuals experience between themselves and the social constructions of well-being that shape their interpretations of their health status' (Ungar 2004: 352). The women's creativity in maintaining links with their communities while protecting themselves from detrimental aspects and pressures was ingenious.

Furthermore, the women's stories on resilience in everydayness challenge the ongoing tendency of 'othering' refugees from mainstream Australian community (Grove and Zwi, 2006). 'Othering', which is achieved by distancing and stigmatising those who are different, reinforce mainstream notions of 'normality'. The constant focus on refugees' 'extraordinary' resilience as well as notions of 'deserving' citizens integral to the neoliberal state critiqued in this paper, reinforce 'othering' processes that perpetuate 'who is in' and 'who is out' categorisations (Grove and Zwi, 2006). Thus, the focus on everyday processes of resilience to achieve a sense of normality is in fact 'de-othering' refugee women's narratives, which are no longer 'distant and strange' (Grove and Zwi,

2006: 1936) but integral to daily community life with its set of struggles and triumphs.

A perspective valuing the everyday processual nature of resilience contributes to deconstructing dominant refugee stereotypes underpinning policy and practice frameworks in the field of refugee mental health.

### *The Person-Environment Dimension of Resilience*

In applying a person-environment framework, the women's pathways to resilience reflected gendered structures shaping their realities as single refugee women with children. The women's stories revealed how resilience was a process operating inter-subjectively in the social spaces that connected them to their environment as they embraced personal resources and opportunities to deal with resettlement challenges. The person-environment perspective of resilience acknowledges the irreducible relationship between worlds usually portrayed as separate, as 'inner' or 'outer' social worlds in which lives are embedded (Ungar, 2005). The single women occupied a strong gendered position through social support roles in the community while managing households and motherhood. Expectations from community members, paired with the women's own ideas of being 'good' mothers and active contributors to the community, meant that the women had to carefully negotiate balanced positions incorporating all these expectations. They successfully managed pressures from the environment surrounding them, while resisting some expectations by asserting independent roles as

working single mothers, students, driving women, community representatives, and members of women's groups. It is in the everyday life-worlds of single refugee women, within the contexts of their homes, families, neighbourhoods and communities that person-environment interactions were apparent.

The social dimension of resilience situated in person-environment interactions acknowledges resilience as an ongoing process achieved daily over time and according to contexts, rather than an atypical static inner trait. The social formulation advanced here is critical to the area of refugee mental health that is 'vulnerable to over-emphasising the importance of internal or individual attributes to the detriment of wider institutional, structural or social influences' (Pulvirenti and Mason, 2011: 40). In fact, the women made little reference to established definitions of resilience in terms of 'bouncing back' to points of equilibrium where protective factors outweigh risks. It is unlikely and perhaps undesirable that refugee women can 'bounce back' to the way things were prior to becoming refugees (Pulvirenti and Mason, 2011). Nevertheless, resilience conceptualised in the social spaces connecting the women to their environment can inform contemporary human service policies and practice frameworks. Attention should be paid to day-to-day pathways through which resilience outcomes are achieved, using a person-environment lens. Instead of merely aiming at reducing or eliminating major 'risks', strengths-based paradigms can foster the social as inherent to

health enhancing environments (Ungar et al., 2002), and honour women's socio-cultural narratives of resilience.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the vast application of resilience constructs in diverse settings, the acknowledgement of resilience in everydayness and the use of a person-environment lens are limited. Within refugee contexts, being 'resilient' is generally evidenced through overcoming poverty and disadvantage, limited education, trauma, language barriers and being 'successful' or a 'good citizen'. There is an underlying implication that some people are simply not resilient (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011). This paper's findings show how participants were engaged in processes of resilience as they navigated challenging situations in everyday life, revealing textured dimensions pertinent to single refugee women with children. Manderson and Vasey (2009: 229) have argued that, 'to be robust, any theory has to travel across time and place and among very different groups of people...to demonstrate [its] complexity and variety of forms'. The women's notions did not constitute outstanding or extraordinary goals defined by outsiders, but were meaningful aspects embedded in the mundane accomplishment of everyday tasks. While trauma certainly constitutes a significant aspect, single refugee women's distinct depictions of resilience constructs are informative and enrich refugee mental health narratives.

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