

Beyond bouncing

Clark, Janine

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Beyond “Bouncing”: Resilience as an Expansion-Contraction Dynamic within a Holonic Frame

The concept of resilience is often discussed in relation to “bouncing”, whether bouncing back or bouncing forward. This interdisciplinary article looks beyond “bouncing” in either direction. In so doing, it offers a novel conceptualization of resilience as a dialectical process of expansion and contraction across multiple domains and levels. Drawing on fieldwork with victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, and Uganda, it uses the qualitative data both to empirically critique the notions of “bouncing back” and “bouncing forward” and to explore what expansion and contraction look like in practice. It situates the arguments within a broader holonic perspective, in order to accentuate the systemic dimensions of resilience, and ultimately it discusses what they mean for the field of transitional justice.

Keywords

contraction, expansion, holons, resilience

Introduction

Water can drip, trickle, pour, ebb. It can also bounce. When water drops fall on super-hydrophobic surfaces that repel water, they can “fully bounce, as a balloon...” (Richard and Quéré 2000, 775). However, various factors can affect the degree of bounce, including surface defects that result in energy loss (Richard and Quéré 2000, 775), liquid viscosity (Lee et al. 2012, 7660), and impact velocity (Jung and Bhushan 2008, 6266). In other words,

bouncing does not tell the entire story. When water hits super-hydrophobic surfaces, there may be “transitions between sticking and bouncing” (Richard and Quéré 2000, 774), or “bouncing, sticking, spreading, or pinning behaviors” (Lee et al. 2012, 7660). The story assumes further layers of complexity when the concept of bouncing is extended from a physical sciences to a social sciences context.

This interdisciplinary article is not about bouncing water droplets but about resilience, a wet and “slippery” concept (Davoudi 2012, 299) that is often articulated in relation to bouncing. Some authors talk about resilience as a process of ““bouncing back” *in the face of adversity*” (Windle 2001, 163; emphasis in the original). Increasingly, resilience is discussed as a process of “bouncing forward”, to emphasize the idea that positive adaptation to adversity is not simply (if at all) about returning to a former state, but about change and transformation to a new state (Scott 2013, 300; Fitzgerald and Lupton 2015, 595). This article charts a new course. Just as Bourbeau has sought to “tell a different sociopolitical story of the connections between resilience and international politics” (Bourbeau 2015, 375), this research aims to tell a different story about resilience that extends beyond “bouncing”, whether in a backward or a forward direction. In so doing, it makes two important contributions – empirical and conceptual – to extant resilience scholarship.

Firstly, while it is not the first to take issue with the idea of “bouncing”, the article offers a novel critique by drawing on interviews with victims-/survivors¹ of conflict-related sexual violence. What further enhances the value of the data in this regard is that resilience remains a surprisingly under-explored thematic within existing literature on conflict-related sexual

¹ This article uses the term “victims-/survivors” to reflect the fact that some individuals who have experienced conflict-related sexual violence primarily view themselves as victims, some regard themselves mainly as survivors and some consider themselves to be both victims and survivors.

violence (see, however, Zraly and Nyirazinyoye 2010; Barrios Suarez 2013; Zraly, Rubin, and Mukamana 2013; Koos 2018). The interview data highlight a number of issues with the notions of both “bouncing back” and “bouncing forward” – and in some cases add new empirical weight to existing critiques. Ultimately, “A story is always about change. Something happens, and as a result, somebody changes. The transformation may be subtle, but without that change there is no story” (Allende 1996, 24). If the notion of “bouncing back” often fails to capture this element of change, the notion of “bouncing forward” can deflect from the difficulties and obstacles that necessarily accompany such change.

Secondly, the article offers a novel analysis of resilience as a dialectical process of expansion and contraction across multiple levels. It argues that these concepts – which developed inductively from the interview data – are more effective at capturing the diverse interactions between individuals and their systemic environments than the ideas of “bouncing back” or “bouncing forward.” While the concept of “bouncing” has an everyday accessibility and resonance (Neal 2008; Gill and Orgad 2018), its ostensible simplicity conceals a more nuanced reality. Even if people can be described as “bouncing” (which, in some situations at least, is open to question), they do not do so in isolation, but, rather, in the context of broader systems that form part of their everyday lives and integrally shape resilience (Berkes and Ross 2013, 7; Masten 2015, 187). It is precisely in order to further accentuate the significance of complex systems – and specifically the interactions between wholes and parts – that this research ultimately situates the concepts of expansion and contraction within a broader “holonic” frame (Koestler 1970).

It is important to underline at the outset that the article is not arguing that ideas of “bouncing back” and “bouncing forward” have no place within discussions about resilience. This would

be an extremely bold claim to make. However, there are different stories that should be heard and told about resilience; and, both in the particular context of victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and more broadly, the article submits that the concepts of expansion and contraction open up a new multi-level storytelling landscape.

The article's first section discusses the underpinning fieldwork and empirical data. The second section focuses on the notion of resilience as "bouncing back" and uses the empirical data to illustrate and expand on existing critiques. The third section centres on the idea of resilience as "bouncing forward." It maintains that while this is less problematic than the notion of "bouncing back", it too simplifies and distorts complex post-trauma trajectories. Moving away from the notion of bouncing in either direction, the fourth section develops the article's novel conceptualization of resilience as a process of expansion and contraction. The final section accentuates a systemic perspective through its discussion of holons.

Empirical Backdrop

The idea for this article developed out of fieldwork conducted with victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The research was undertaken as part of a large-scale comparative project that is exploring why some victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence demonstrate high levels of resilience while others do not. Resilience is defined not in person-centric terms, but as an ecological concept entailing interactions between individuals and their environments that foster well-being. Fundamentally, resilience is "the capacity of both individuals and their environments to interact in ways that optimize developmental processes" (Ungar 2013, 256).

The research is using three case studies – namely Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia, and Uganda – that are highly diverse across multiple criteria, from cultural context to conflict dynamics and duration. This maxim variation approach is important for two key reasons. The first is that it provides valuable insights into culturally-specific factors that might hinder or foster resilience. Analysis of the quantitative data (discussed below), for example, revealed that respondents in Uganda most commonly internalized stigma-related beliefs about sexual violence. Research participants were asked to express their level of disagreement or agreement (from “Totally disagree” to “Totally agree”) with the following three statements: “Nobody who suffers sexual violence should blame themselves”, “To experience sexual violence is shameful”, and “A community has the right to exclude a person who has suffered sexual violence.” The first statement was reverse scored and the cumulative scores for all three questions were calculated for each participant, with a higher score indicating a higher propensity to embrace stigma and potentially harmful attitudes about sexual violence.

A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the group means of each country total ($F(2,444) = 92.857, p = .000$). This is demonstrated in Table 1 below. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean scores in all three countries differed significantly (see Table 2). Respondents in BiH had the lowest average score ($M = 5.6, SD = 2.5$), those in Colombia had a mid-range score ($M = 6.7, SD = 2.2$), and those in Uganda had the highest score ($M = 9.0, SD = 1.9$). Subsequent coding of the qualitative data has revealed that it was also Ugandan participants who most frequently spoke about stigma (“*cimo tok*” – pointing at the back of the head) – and more specifically about what Steward et al. have termed “enacted stigma” (Steward et al. 2008, 1226).² This

² Often, this enacted stigma in Uganda was not only related to sexual violence, but also to time spent in the “bush”; many of the interviewees were abducted as children and forced to join Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army. This had exposed some of them to additional stigma and blame.

suggests that their exposure to and experiences of verbal abuse may have affected their beliefs about sexual violence.

TABLE 1. Embrace of stigma and harmful beliefs about sexual violence; differences in group means by country

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	888.671	2	444.335	92.857	.000
Within Groups	2124.609	444	4.785		
Total	3013.280	446			

TABLE 2. Embrace of stigma and harmful beliefs about sexual violence; Tukey post-hoc test of inter-country mean differences

(I) Country	(J) Country	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Colombia	-1.06713*	.25715	.000	-1.6718	-.4624
	Uganda	-3.45249*	.26395	.000	-4.0732	-2.8318
Colombia	Bosnia-Herzegovina	1.06713*	.25715	.000	.4624	1.6718
	Uganda	-2.38535*	.24462	.000	-2.9606	-1.8101
Uganda	Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.45249*	.26395	.000	2.8318	4.0732
	Colombia	2.38535*	.24462	.000	1.8101	2.9606

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

A second reason for selecting three maximum variation case studies relates to the overall aim of the project, which is centrally about transitional justice – the process of dealing with the legacy of past human rights abuses and violations with the ultimate goal of societal

transformation (Lambourne and Rodriguez Carreon 2016, 73; Murphy 2017, 7). By deconstructing the concept of “legacy” (Clark 2020a) and identifying multi-layered ecological legacies of conflict-related sexual violence (Clark 2020b), the research will develop a new ecological reframing of transitional justice that addresses these legacies. This, in turn, will create new possibilities for transitional justice to contribute to fostering resilience in individuals and their environments, in the sense of enhancing the resources³ that these environments offer (or potentially offer). The identification from highly diverse quantitative and qualitative datasets of common ecological legacies and common factors that encourage and obstruct resilience – regardless of specific cultural, socio-economic and political contexts – will strengthen the core arguments and help to ensure that they have a broad application.

The research is a mixed-methods project and the first part involved the design of a questionnaire. After a piloting period between January and April 2018, a total of 449 respondents (of whom twenty seven were men)⁴ in BiH, Colombia and Uganda completed a questionnaire between May and November 2018. Each in-country researcher administered a batch of questionnaires. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are involved in the project in all three countries applied the remainder. The crucial part of the questionnaire was the Adult Resilience Measure (ARM), developed by Ungar and colleagues (Resilience Research Centre 2016). This measure consists of twenty eight statements, including “I have people I can respect in my life”, “I know where to get help in my community”, and “I feel

³ The term “resources” is used here to include opportunities, attitudes (see, for example, Clark 2018), and narrative space.

⁴ While this number is small, it attests to the difficulties of finding and gaining access to male victims-/survivors. They are often very reluctant to identify themselves, and in all three countries they have received considerably less attention than female victims-/survivors. In Uganda, however, this is starting to change (see, for example, Edström, Dolan, and Shahroch 2016).

secure when I am with my family.” Answers are scored from one to five, with a higher score indicating that an individual has more protective resources that are essential for resilience.

Respondents in each of the three countries were divided into four quartiles, from those with low ARM scores to those with high ARM scores. Each researcher selected five interviewees from each quartile, ensuring that the choice of interviewees reflected demographic diversity (and specifically gender, ethnic, and age diversity) within the particular quartile. For individual reasons, each researcher ultimately conducted one additional interview, meaning that sixty three women and men in total were interviewed (twenty one in each country).

The author and two postdoctoral researchers collectively designed the interview guide, and this was used for all interviews. Interviewees were asked, *inter alia*, about their war experiences, their lives today, their sources of support, their resources, and their experiences (if any) of transitional justice. The interview guide also included some intersectional questions focused on gender and culture. With the interviewees’ consent, the researchers recorded all of the interviews (using fully encrypted digital voice recorders) and made detailed post-interview notes. The average length of an interview was approximately one hour, but some were longer. Each in-country researcher conducted the interviews in the local languages, and the author undertook all of the interviews in BiH.

Interviews were coded in NVivo and a detailed codebook was developed over a period of twelve months. The majority of the interviews were double-coded, to ensure rigour and consistency, with inter-coder agreement Kappa scores averaging 0.7. Thematic analysis is being used to explore and organize the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), and a number of themes – which can be “usefully thought of as key characters in the story we are telling about

the data” (Clarke and Braun 2018, 108) – have become prominent. Employing a strongly inductive approach, this article uses the data and emergent themes to critically reflect on the notion of resilience as a process of “bouncing back” or “bouncing forward”, and to develop a novel conceptualization of resilience based around the ideas of expansion and contraction.

Resilience and “Bouncing Back”

The idea of resilience as involving a “bouncing back” after adversity is intricately linked to the word’s etymology. As Davoudi notes, “Coming from the Latin root *resi-lire*, meaning to spring back, resilience was first used by physical scientists to denote the characteristics of a spring and describe the stability of materials and their resistance to external shocks” (Davoudi 2012, 300). This notion of bouncing or springing back to a previous state is also central to what Holling termed “engineering resilience.” According to his definition, engineering resilience “concentrates on stability near an equilibrium steady state, where resistance to disturbance and speed of return to the equilibrium are used to measure the property” (Holling 1996, 33).

An idea that describes how different materials and systems behave does not necessarily work well when applied to human beings who have experienced difficult life events and significant traumas. However, this is less an indictment or criticism of resilience per se, and more a reminder of the imperative to think critically about the concept and its application to different contexts. Highlighting this point, Bourbeau has underlined that “The genealogical tree of resilience does not have a single branch but rather possesses several branches” (Bourbeau 2018, 34). This, he argues, means that “Expressions of resilience in world politics need to be studied not only within an overdrawn eco-systems-politics frame of inference, but in terms of

its multiple relations with other disciplines, concepts and approaches” (Bourbeau 2018, 34). “Bouncing” constitutes one conceptual “branch” of resilience and one that has attracted substantial critique. This section and the next both engage with some of these arguments and empirically add to them, as the first step in identifying and exploring a new “branch.”

One of the main issues with framing resilience as a process of “bouncing back” is the inherent assumption that this is in fact something positive and desirable (see, for example, Tugade and Fredrickson 2004; Netuveli et al. 2008). Yet, such an assumption is weak on at least three key grounds, which together can be termed the *desirability critique*. Firstly, it is necessary to ask the fundamental question: “bouncing back to what?” In this regard, Walker and Salt draw an important distinction between two types of resilience, namely “resilience to disturbances that you are aware of (specified resilience), and resilience to disturbances that you haven’t even thought of (general resilience)” (Walker and Salt 2006, 124). Specified resilience might include “bouncing back” to a situation marked by danger, risk, or structural violence. In their work with refugee women who had suffered domestic violence, for example, Pulvirenti and Mason pose the question: “if refugee women in Australia ‘bounced back’ from the experience of domestic violence during resettlement, what is it that they would be bouncing back to: the violence of armed conflict, sexual assault, border crossings, refugee camps?” (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011, 46–47). They accordingly prefer the terminology of “moving on” rather than “bouncing back” (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011, 47). Furthermore, an emphasis on “bouncing back” in the sense of resilience to known threats and adversities, such as poverty and hunger, can potentially compromise resilience to unknown dangers and risks, by encouraging a false sense of security – however tenuous. As Walker and Salt underline, “optimizing anything, including specified resilience, comes at the cost of limiting your capacity to respond to unforeseen shocks and disturbances” (Walker and Salt

2006, 121). In other words, promoting the notion of “bouncing back” from adversity can foster broader resilience gaps.

Secondly, and linked to the previous point, five of the Colombian interviewees and one Ugandan interviewee spoke about “empowerment.” For them, empowerment was not just about dealing with the past, but also about dealing with new challenges. In the words of one Colombian interviewee, who was also a women’s leader:

I am an empowered woman. I’m bringing with me other women who were victims of sexual violence. Even though they were raped too, I’m getting these women who were victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict and taking them away from the conflict. This is a woman [referring to herself] who hasn’t stayed there in the past. This is a woman who wants to move forward in her studies, so that she can do more in the leadership role she has taken on (researcher interview, Colombia, 30 March 2019).

A second Colombian interviewee, also a women’s leader, stressed that: “...if I’m not me, if I don’t empower myself, if I don’t love myself, then there’s nothing.” For her, this empowerment was about both helping herself and helping others. In her words, “I want to *be* that water flowing, that life and I want... The other thing is that there are more people, others apart from me who need – using a differential approach – some kind of help. So, there’s also the space where I do that” (researcher interview, Colombia, 4 February 2019).

It could be argued that empowerment facilitates, or is partly a consequence of, “bouncing back.” The above examples, however, underscore the broader point that “bouncing back” to an earlier state might constitute a significant step backwards in an individual’s development. Focusing on survivors of the Holocaust, for example, Ayalon underlines that because many of them suffered trauma over a period of several years and were relatively young at the time, “return to premorbid functioning can be considered as a regression and not necessarily as a

sign of adaptation” (Ayalon 2005, 354). The desirability of “bouncing back” can thus be questioned from a developmental perspective.

Thirdly, in contrast to engineering-based definitions of resilience with their emphasis on “bouncing back”, ecological definitions have a strong transformative focus through their accent on systems and system behaviour; and specifically on “how far a system could be perturbed before shifting to a wholly different system regime” (Leach, Scoones, and Stirling 2010, 34). The concept of “bouncing back” cannot be discussed without reference to systems, however; and the essence of resilience as human-environment interactions across different systemic levels necessarily raises important questions about the desirability of systems “bouncing back.” Desirability, in turn, is critically linked to the nature of the system itself. Highlighting this, Scott points out that “the so-called ‘normal system’ may itself produce risks (e.g. the global financial system) or may be underpinned by socio-spatial inequities...” (Scott 2012, 599). He uses the example of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, emphasizing that vulnerability to this 2005 disaster “was defined on the basis of class and race” (Scott 2012, 600).

Beyond the question of the desirability of system “bounce back”, a person’s ability to “bounce back” might – far from being something positive – simply reflect systemic injustices and inequalities. Hazard events and natural disasters, for example, will often heavily affect marginalized communities living in poor conditions and challenging environments. Yet, these same communities “may actually be the first to ‘bounce back to their normal state’ since their simply constructed homes are much easier to rebuild than more sophisticated ones, in addition to having experience and knowledge about recovery” (Sudmeier-Rieux 2014, 68). In other words, resilience can stem from people’s vulnerability

within the context of a broader systemic whole that requires them to be resilient and to “bounce back”, precisely because it gives them no other options. This means that “poor households may be highly resilient but continue to be highly vulnerable and highly at risk” (Sudmeier-Rieux 2014, 68).

A second main critique of “bouncing back” can be termed the *change critique*. Resilience is a process rather than an outcome, and, as such, it is in a continual state of flux (Waller 2001, 295). At the start of the interviews discussed in the previous section, for example, each researcher re-ran the ARM section of the questionnaire. As most of the interviews took place several months after interviewees had participated in the quantitative part of the project, the purpose of repeating the ARM was to assess the stability of individual ARM scores. Some scores increased the second time around and some decreased. Often there was no obvious reason for these changes,⁵ but in some cases interviewees – when asked whether anything significant had happened in their lives since they first completed the ARM – provided information that subsequently helped to shed light on their new ARM scores.

In Colombia, for example, one participant’s ARM score increased from 133 to 140 (the maximum possible ARM score). She explained that since she first answered the ARM eight months earlier, she had become a member of the *Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales* (Network of Women Victims and Professionals) and was feeling much stronger. The first time around, for example, she had answered “Not at all” to the statement “I cooperate with people around me.” When she completed the ARM the second time, she answered “A lot” (researcher interview, Colombia, 12 March 2019).

⁵ It is possible, for example, that some participants gave more honest answers the second time around and felt less need to give the “socially desirable” answers that they felt they were “supposed” to give (see, for example, Sjöström and Holste 2002).

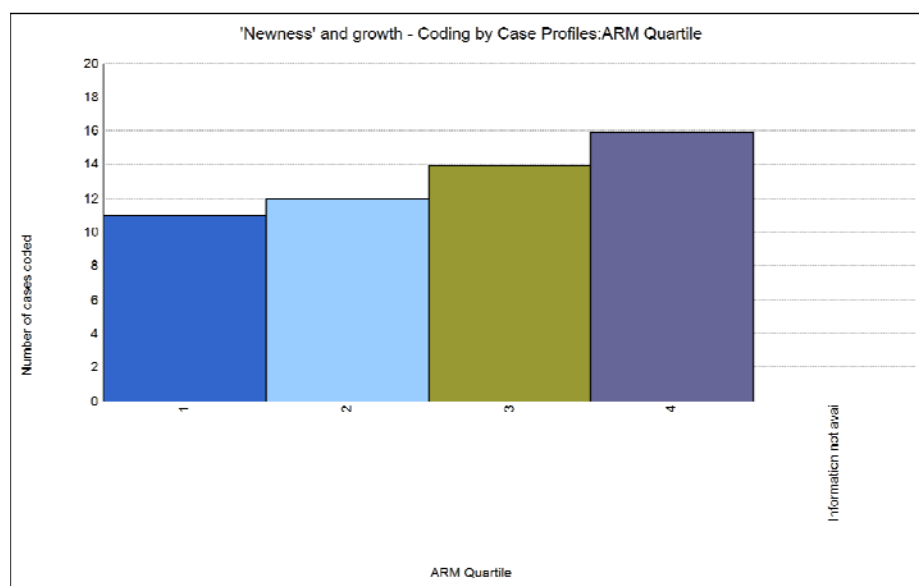
In BiH, one participant's ARM score dropped from 121 to 94. When asked whether anything notable had happened in her life during the intervening nine months since she had first completed the ARM, she recounted how her 80-year-old mother had suffered a severe epileptic fit two months earlier. The interviewee, who is her mother's carer, explained that this had been a hugely stressful event and had caused her to lose weight (she looked noticeably thinner). She now had even less time for herself or for socializing. Her original response to the statement "I feel supported by my friends", for example, had been "Quite a bit." When the ARM was repeated nine months later, she answered "Somewhat." Similarly, her answer to the statement "I can solve problems without harming myself or others" changed from "A lot" to "Quite a bit" (author interview, BiH, 2 June 2019).

If a person's resilience levels can change, vary, and fluctuate, the broader point is that adversity can effect significant change. Manyena et al. underscore this point in relation to disasters. They note, for example, that "In Sri Lanka, the 2004 tsunami had a major impact on the fishing community. Some 90% of the surviving fishing community lost their boats, fishing nets and homes; this transformed their lives and livelihoods..." (Manyena et al. 2011, 418). In a similar vein, Ajduković underlines that "...people, communities and nations who overcome disasters or mass violence do not remain the same as before. Crises generate changes that may increase resilience to future adversities" (Ajduković 2015, 6).

Consistent with the concept of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996; Janoff-Bulman 2004; Westphal and Bonanno 2007; Calhoun and Tedeschi 2014), one of the themes that has strongly emerged from the interview data is "'newness' and growth". Interviewees have talked, *inter alia*, about being a new/stronger person, gaining a new perspective/dealing with situations in new ways and learning new skills. Some Ugandan interviewees, moreover,

have used the word “*roco*” or “*roc*” (renewal) to describe their lives. When asked what title she would give her life story, for example, one interviewee answered: “I have already left the old life” (researcher interview, Uganda, 21 February 2019). In the Luo language, “*roco*” or “*roc*” literally denotes the shedding of old skin and the growing of a new one, in the same way that a snake sheds its epidermis during its renewal phases (Alibardi 2002). In other words, the old life (skin) is left behind. Significantly, more interviewees in quartile 4 (i.e. those with the highest ARM scores) spoke directly to the theme of “‘newness’ and growth” (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. Cases coded to the “newness” and growth nodes by ARM quartile



As a further illustration of post-traumatic change, a Mann-Whitney non-parametric test on the questionnaire data revealed that those research participants who held leadership roles⁶ had higher average ARM scores (median = 112) than those who did not (median = 108), $U =$

⁶ These roles included NGO leaders (BiH), social or community leaders (Colombia), and leaders of village savings and loan associations (Uganda).

19490, $p = .011$ (see Table 4). The interview data help to shed light on this. Rather than “bouncing back”, interviewees with leadership roles had grown and moved forward in new ways. In BiH, an interviewee explained that as a result of everything that had happened, she is now the president of an entity-level organization. “I have found fulfilment in all aspects of my life”, she emphasized, and her role as an NGO leader was part of this (author interview, BiH, 20 February 2019). A Colombian interviewee spoke about the work that she does helping other victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and how she has positively benefitted from this. In her words,

I’ve started again with my life in the community. Before, I’d abandoned everything [laughs], for a while I abandoned it all. I’ve come back into society because I want to help other women in my community. Above all, I want to support the women, right? The main thing [long pause] I wanted to do was to set up a women’s association – and I did it – with the goal of supporting them and to give them information. Well, to support them in everything...Because of the work I’m doing in the community, I’ve come to realise...or, I’ve become stronger (researcher interview, Colombia, 4 February 2019).

Table 4: Mann Whitney test of the relationship between leadership and ARM scores

	ARM score
Mann-Whitney U	19490.500
Wilcoxon W	53420.500
Z	-2.536
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.011

If the boundaries of “bouncing back” are extended beyond the very literal meaning of returning to a previous state, the concept might be interpreted as “bouncing back” only so far as to enable new growth and development. It might be argued that had the interviewees not “bounced back”, they would not have been able to grow. Yet, if this is the case, arguably

“bouncing back” is not the right term. It implies that it is necessary to go backwards in order to go forwards, and this idea sits uncomfortably with the reality that victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence – or indeed any trauma – often want simply to go forward. In the words of a Bosnian interviewee, “Thank God, we got out of it, came to the safe {area}, to where peace was. I don’t want to go back, to remember that” (author interview, BiH, 3 May 2019). For her part, a Ugandan interviewee reflected: “Things passed through my body in the past and so if I keep thinking a lot about it, it can bring problems to the body. It brings worries, it brings illnesses, it brings death to your body. So, for me, I let it go” (researcher interview, Uganda, 29 May 2019).

Bourbeau’s concept of “resiliencism” potentially addresses these issues. Defining resilience as “a process of patterned adjustments adopted by a society or an individual in the face of endogenous or exogenous shocks”, he presents resiliencism as “a conceptual framework for understanding how continuity and transformation take place under these circumstances” (Bourbeau 2013, 10). In other words, resilience is not only about change; and indeed too much change can feel overwhelming. Rather, it is about utilizing continuity to foster transformation, and using transformation to bring new changes that create new continuity and stability.

The interview data additionally highlight a third critique of resilience as “bouncing back” and one that is closely linked to the above *change critique*. It can be called the *plausibility critique*. Quintessentially, the notion of “bouncing back” assumes that such a process is not only desirable, but also possible. Challenging this, and questioning the appropriateness of the term “bouncing back”, Sleijpen et al. stress that “For young refugees a return to ‘normal’ life is impossible” (Sleijpen et al. 2013). Similarly, some of the interviewees spoke about their

experiences during the war/armed conflict in terms of breakage and rupture; for them, there was a distinct before and after. In BiH, for example, one interviewee emphasized that: “Until 1992, I lived a normal life... Normal. I was happy with my life. From 1992, it became... A disaster. I don’t know what to, to, to say. And this, now, this is some kind of truce, something I am living.” Her life, she stressed, made a 360 degree turn during the Bosnian war (author interview, BiH, 20 March 2019).

Similarly, some of the consequences of conflict-related sexual violence – such as giving birth to children born of rape and being infected with the HIV virus (this was specific to Uganda) – further add to the fact that lives have been irreversibly changed. A Ugandan interviewee who was abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army when she was ten years old, and sexually abused for the first time when she was aged eleven, spoke about the painfulness of the sexual violence in terms of its impact on her life. She explained: “It is now a fact that I got a stomach [became pregnant] before my time. I found pain in that. Because if it was possible, I would have done something for my future, but it never was” (researcher interview, Uganda, 19 March 2019).

People change, their lives change, and so too do their environments. Some interviewees spoke, *inter alia*, about how their communities and the people within them had changed (for example, due to demographic shifts, displacement, or psychological legacies of war). Wiebelhaus-Brahm notes that “Resilient societies may adapt to or absorb shocks, but this does not mean they are necessarily unchanged by them, or that they will ever return to their pre-shock condition” (Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2017, 142). Indeed, systemic changes can be highly positive, even necessary. Without them, some of the issues that contributed to events such as war, armed conflict, and instability may be left unaddressed. As Norris et al. point

out, “The resilience of systems...depends upon one component of the system being able to change or adapt in response to changes in other components; and thus the system would fail to function if that component remained stable” (Norris et al. 2008, 130). This is one of the reasons why lustration and institutional reforms are such important aspects of transitional justice (see, for example, Horne 2014). If members of a former regime, including those who ordered or condoned the commission of war crimes and human rights violations, remain in power, this will have detrimental effects on the system as a whole, including on levels of trust (Choi and David 2012, 1174).

The wider point is that in the context of multi-layered ecological systems, the notion of “bouncing back” has little meaning (Goldstein et al. 2015, 1286). Complex ecological systems consist of inter-connected sub-systems that behave in different ways. Within the complex systemic whole, thus, there are “multiple states or domains of attraction and multiple equilibria” (Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2003, 15). This, in turn, problematizes the notion of ecological stability; “resilience cannot be defined as bouncing back to equilibrium – there is no equilibrium to bounce back to” (Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2003, 15). Complex systems can recover, adapt, and transform, and this is precisely what makes them resilient. They do not “bounce.”

In sum, the changes that inevitably occur following adversity, trauma, and disasters – from the micro to the macro level – mean that “bouncing back” may not be possible or feasible. The road back to “what was” may now fork in an entirely new direction. At the systemic level, moreover, an absence of change may be similarly implausible, whether due to international pressures for reforms or simply because a return to the status quo would keep the system in a restrictive state of equilibrium that limited positive adaption and learning

across interconnected systems. This underscores that “bouncing back” can indeed be antithetical to resilience.

Given that the idea of “bouncing back” can – and has – been critiqued on multiple grounds, some scholars are increasingly speaking about resilience as a process of “bouncing forward.” There is a quintessential conceptual and systemic difference between the two ideas. As Grinberger and Felsenstein summarize in their work on urban resilience, “‘Bouncing back’ denotes the traditional occupation with regaining predisaster conditions... ‘Bouncing forward’ observes how much disturbance the urban system can endure before it changes its structure” (Grinberger and Felsenstein 2014, 115–116). The latter, thus, has a strong transformative element; “bouncing forward” is crucially about change. While this change-oriented dynamic better captures the processual core of resilience – it is “always in a process of remaking or becoming” (Arranda et al. 2012, 555) – the concept of “bouncing forward” has its own flaws.

Resilience and “Bouncing Forward”

Linked to the plausibility critique of “bouncing back” discussed in the previous section, Walsh reflects on the concept of resilience in relation to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. She underlines that when such momentous and far-reaching events occur, it is impossible to return to “normal” life as we once knew it; “[o]ur world has changed and we must change with it. There is no going back”. For her, therefore, a more suitable metaphor for thinking about resilience might be “‘bouncing forward,’ to face an uncertain future”. This, she argues, “involves constructing a new sense of normality as we recalibrate our lives to face unanticipated challenges ahead” (Walsh 2002, 35).

While this very macro view of “bouncing forward” essentially focuses on the “fit” between individuals and their environments, Manyena et al. link “bouncing forward” with the new developmental opportunities that may arise from disaster situations. According to them, “The notion of bounce forward is to see disaster as an opportunity for local livelihood enhancement rather than as a simple return to status quo ante” (Manyena et al. 2011, 423). Focused on a specific population group, Sleijpen et al. use the term “bounce forward” as a way of challenging stereotypes about young refugees. They maintain that “It is of great social importance to see refugee youth not as passive victims without capacities but as survivors with social potential who can inspire with their ability to ‘bounce forward’” (Sleijpen et al. 2013). In short, contrary to the idea of “bouncing back”, which is mainly about “what was”, the forward-looking notion of “bouncing forward” is much more about what “might be.” Highlighting this, Scott underscores “the rationale for a more radical or progressive ‘bounce forward’ resilience approach, based on adaptability and transformation...” (Scott 2013, 606).

There are, however, three particular issues with the notion of “bouncing forward.” The first can be referred to as the *difficulty critique*. Because the term “bouncing forward” has very positive connotations, it arguably masks – or at least deflects from – the enormous difficulties and challenges that are actually involved in any process of going forward. While interviewees overwhelmingly underscored the importance of “moving forward”, they also made it very clear that this was far from easy or straightforward. In this regard, significant “temporal friction” (Stewart 2012, 320) emerged from the data – in the sense of tensions between people’s desire to move forward and the factors that were pulling them backwards.

Some interviewees, and particularly those in BiH, spoke about intrusive memories and thoughts that came to them in different situations and in different forms, including dreams

and flashbacks. One interviewee explained: “I mean, believe me, I jump at night. They are coming towards me, I know what awaits me. This is, this is... I can never forget that image. I mean, they grab your breasts... They say bad words, like “*Četnikuša*” [a derogatory term for referring to a Serb woman]’ (author interview, BiH, 2 June 2019). Another interviewee talked about her fear of enclosed spaces, which she linked to her time detained in a camp in 1992. In her words,

I have feared closed spaces since the imprisonment. For example, at work, I should enter the elevator, but {instead} I walk up four to five flights of stairs. I get more tired and everything, but, well, I am afraid of that, because, err, when I am in a closed space, these thoughts start... I don’t know, they start getting in my head and I cannot control myself (author interview, BiH, 3 February 2019).

Other factors that were contributing to pulling people backwards, whether frequently or episodically, included health problems, stigma from members of the community, anniversaries, and everyday reminders of what they had lost (including homes, land, and loved-ones). On the issue of health, the idea of the “physically wounded/altered body” emerged strongly from the Ugandan interviews, with 19 of the 21 interviewees speaking about this. One of them, for example, mused: “Instead of remaining with a light [healthy] body, I gave birth to a child with HIV.” This, she explained, had left significant pain in her heart (researcher interview, Uganda, 12 June 2019). Furthermore, because many of the Ugandan interviewees were raped as children, they frequently stressed that they had suffered injuries – lasting reminders of the past – because their bodies were not physically ready to be penetrated. Illustrating this, one interviewee emphasized:

Sexual violence made me give birth when I was not ready... Sometimes I get unbearable pain here in my lower abdomen. When I go to the hospital to check, they find that there is no problem but they find that... but they ask me that...the doctor

asked me: ‘Did you not sleep with a man when you were young?’ (researcher interview, Uganda, 1 February 2019).

What had also made it extremely difficult for some interviewees to move forward was a host of unresolved issues about the past. This meant that their meaning-making processes – an important part of dealing with adversity and trauma (Park and George 2013, 483) – were inchoate or unfinished. These unresolved issues fell into three main groups, namely: “where are they?” (relating to questions about missing loved-ones), “how did it happen?” (referring to questions about how so many terrible things happened), and “why me?” (reflecting interviewees’ struggles to make sense of why they themselves were targeted). Some interviewees, moreover, posed different combinations of questions. A Colombian interviewee, for example, reflected:

...for me, it is an absurd thing to be in some place, to have to go through something like that when you never did anything to get involved – you never upset anyone so they’d have a reason to go after you – and you see your friends disappearing and it’s not that they’re leaving the *vereda* [a type of administrative unit] but that they’re dying, they’re being killed, and you’re there and there’s nothing you can do about it. You can’t help and you have no right to ask what’s happening. That’s something totally illogical for me. Still, now, I don’t know why it happened. Why did it happen? Why did anyone let it happen? (researcher interview, Colombia, 29 March 2019).

Turning to the second problem with “bouncing forward”, the concept – like “bouncing back” – suggests a strong linear element. Yet, in what can be termed the *linearity critique*, some scholars have stressed that resilience follows a more complex and irregular trajectory. Krause’s development of a “resilience lens”, for example, “emphasizes adaptation as a complex and non-linear process within the context of adversity” (Krause 2018, 51–52).⁷ Broadly, there are two key aspects of the linearity critique. The first, which is linked to the

⁷ Some scholars have also questioned the practical utility of linearity, including in the area of disaster management. Blackman, Nakanishi, and Benson, for example, suggest that “adopting linear conceptions of disaster recovery might actually inhibit, rather than effectively support, long-term, disaster recovery” (Blackman, Nakanishi, and Benson 2017, 91).

aforementioned *difficulty critique*, is that the “meshing parameters” (Vaishya and Singh 2001, 675) between messy post-adversity lives and systems, on one hand, and neat notions of linearity, on the other, are not necessarily aligned. As an illustration of this, some interviewees spoke about their lives in very cyclical terms. As they saw it, they had faced ongoing cycles of adversity, in some cases from a young age. Using “sadness” as one of three words to describe herself, for example, a Colombian interviewee explained: “...since I was fifteen, which is when a person really starts their life and becomes responsible for themselves, I’ve had problem after problem. Misery on top of misery. Trial after trial” (researcher interview, Colombia, 29 January 2019). For her part, a Bosnian interviewee lamented: “The horrors and everything that I have been through, this was... [long pause] Well, it is, like they say, since I was a little girl, well, as I lost my mother, my father, everything... I mean, I have never had anything nice, something for me to... [long pause] How do I put it? Well, life is... [long pause] Nothing, that’s it” (author interview, BiH, 19 March 2019). Movement forward, in other words, can be halting, jerky, bi-directional, even absent, and in this sense it is more appropriate to speak about “a nonsmooth non-linearity” (Hinrichs, Oestreich, and Popp 1998, 435).

The second – and systemic – aspect of the *linearity critique* is that complex systems do not behave in a linear way (Leach, Scoones, and Stirling 2010, 16; Krause 2018, 66; Foot and Goh 2019, 402). It is the very complexity of these systems that creates uncertainty (Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2003, 5), which, in turn, sits uneasily with the idea of linearity. As Folke et al. underline, “The earlier world-view of nature and society as systems near equilibrium is being replaced by a dynamic view, which emphasizes complex non-linear relations between entities under continuous change and facing discontinuities and uncertainty from suites of synergistic stresses and shocks” (Folke et al. 2002, 438). As to whether the idea of “bouncing

forward” can adequately accommodate this non-linearity, a crucial distinction can be drawn between the everyday notion of “bouncing forward” – as a largely individual process – and the reality of what such a process actually entails within the context of complex systems and “dynamic ecologies” (Leach, Scoones, and Stirling 2010, 26).

A third issue with “bouncing forward”, which will be called the *context critique*, is that there are certain circumstances in which the use of the term may not be appropriate. In their research on the grieving and meaning-making processes of black mothers who had lost their children to gun violence, for example, Bailey et al. conclude that “Social workers should be sensitive to the impact of racism on black mothers’ lived experiences and develop a critical understanding of how race, culture and context interact to shape the processes of meaning-making and resilience” (Bailey et al. 2013, 350). In a very different context, and discussing Palestinians living under occupation, Bourbeau and Ryan argue that “...resilience is used by ‘ordinary’ Palestinians to sustain daily life” (Bourbeau and Ryan 2018, 230). More specifically, this means that “In the context of the unpredictable and ever-changing occupation of the Palestinian territories, Palestinians must be flexible and adaptive in their daily lives, such as when crossing new ‘flying’ checkpoints or finding ways to access economic opportunity amid closure and restriction” (Bourbeau and Ryan 2018, 230). This is a powerful illustration of how context gives resilience both its *raison d’être* and its possibilities.

Although none of the interviewees used the word resilience, finding ways to get on with life and to go forward was also intrinsically about survival for many of them. Some, for example, spoke about periods in their lives when they had felt unable to go on and had contemplated or attempted suicide. A Ugandan interviewee described how a neighbour had found her

preparing to poison herself. When the neighbour asked her why she wanted to take her own life, she explained:

...the only thing bleeding my heart [causing feelings of sadness and hurt] is when I start thinking about how my future has been wasted. Whenever I go and find my sister very actively engaged in the hospital, while I am here suffering, always on the sewing machine with my leg that is constantly hurting. When I turn my eyes this way, it settles only on problems. It is better that I leave the world (researcher interview, Uganda, 1 February 2020).

Furthermore, the powerful psychological and emotional legacies that many interviewees continue to deal with as a result of their experiences constitute a recurrent theme running through the interview data. These legacies include feelings of hurt and pain, shame and humiliation, loss of trust, and the sense of being emotionally scarred. In the words of a Bosnian interviewee, referring specifically to the sexual violence she experienced, “This is deeply etched into me, as if I am scarred. This is how I feel, and...” (author interview, BiH, 3 May 2019).

A related dimension of the *context critique*, Sleijpen et al. assert that “Researchers must specify the particular areas to which their data apply and must clarify that success in these domains by no means implies positive adaptation across all functional areas...” (Sleijpen et al. 2013). The concept of “bouncing”, however, arguably does not take sufficient account of the fact that progress may occur in one domain but not in another, thus taking a “compartmentalised” form (Wilson 2014, 9). Because of its particular directional emphasis, “bouncing forward” can easily become an agglomerative concept that risks neglecting or overlooking that which gets left behind – or which does not “bounce forward” to the same extent. A community may “bounce forward” economically, for example, but not in terms of underlying inter-ethnic relationships and trust. An individual may “bounce forward” in the

sense of gaining new strength and having new goals in life, yet be constrained by an environment that restricts the possibilities for actual “bouncing forward” in any practical sense. In this regard, it is helpful to view the concept of “bouncing forward” in the context of a fuzzy relational system. According to Scherer, “The power of fuzzy systems stems from their ability to process natural language expressions. We can model nearly any term using different shapes of fuzzy sets and various modifiers, i.e. fuzzy hedges” (Scherer 2009, 1422). Thinking about “bouncing forward” in such “fuzzy” terms is an important way of disaggregating the concept and its cross-domain complexity and variation (O’Dougherty Wright, Fopma-Loy, and Fischer 2005, 1186).

It is important to reiterate that the article’s detailed critique of “bouncing back” and “bouncing forward” should not be interpreted as an attempt to render these notions redundant. Its arguments are simply intended to demonstrate, with the aid of a unique empirical dataset, that both ideas suffer from a number of issues and limitations, particularly when applied to the issue of conflict-related sexual violence. As a first step in addressing these problems, it is helpful to think of “bouncing back” and “bouncing forward” not as alternatives – as constituting either/or dynamics – but rather as part of a continuum. Yet, this does not go far enough for two reasons. Firstly, using two particular examples from the interview data, the next section will show that some victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence “move” in ways that extend beyond either “bouncing back” or “bouncing forward.” Hence, the article’s overall goal of telling a different story about resilience requires new concepts. Secondly, even if “bouncing back” and “bouncing forward” are viewed as part of a continuum, both of them arguably lack systemic depth, leaving unanswered many questions about how the concepts translate across multiple system levels – and what they tell us about the interactions between individuals and their environments. Underscoring that resilience is

“an inherently dynamic and complex process” (Bourbeau 2013, 10), the final two sections develop a novel conceptualization focused around the core notions of expansion and contraction – and how they operate within a broader holonic frame.

Resilience as Expansion and Contraction

In BiH, “Marija” (not her real name) called her life story “Life is a vortex” (*Život je vrtlog*). When asked to explain, she reflected that “You never know when you might get caught in it” and emphasized the importance of being ready for anything. This interviewee repeatedly talked about her three daughters, describing them as her “loadstar” and source of support. She also spoke warmly about her husband; she had overcome her distrust of men and allowed herself to fall in love. Asked to give three words to describe herself, she said “persistent” to accentuate her tenacity in pursuing her goals, “outgoing” to underline her sociable nature, and “proud” in the sense of what she had overcome while managing to stay “normal.”

Marija had utilized the resources around her, including medical and psychological support, and had greatly benefitted. Her talks with professionals, which for her were both necessary and therapeutic, had been especially important in helping her to realize that: “I am not alone. I am not the only one.” Living in a large city meant that she had continued access to psychological support and she took advantage of these resources. City life had also given her the feeling that she blended in; hardly anyone knew her story and so no one was judging her. A few kilometres outside of the city, she had a small plot of land where she frequently spent long hours during the spring and summer months. She proudly showed off some of the fruits of her labour; plump tomatoes, piles of beans, and juicy plums that she had photographed with her mobile phone. She talked about ultimately wanting to move her family into the

house on the land. Some outstanding issues relating to the house meant that she had needed to make regular visits to the local *opština* (essentially the equivalent of a local council) with a folder full of various papers and documents, in an effort to satisfy Bosnian bureaucracy. She did not know how long the process would take, but expressed her determination to see it through.

During the interview, this softly-spoken woman barely talked about the past and her account of her war story was brief. Instead, she focused overwhelmingly on the present and future, and on what she wanted in life for her and her daughters. In her words, “I am not afraid of challenges now because I am... [long pause] Err [long pause] I want to go forward, really. I want to fight for my family, for myself in the first place” (author interview, BiH, 30 January 2019).

“Daniela”, also in BiH, called her life story “Broken childhood of a girl” (*Prekinuto djetinjstvo jedne djevojčice*). Three years younger than Marija, Daniela was just fifteen years old when she was raped – a point that she emphasized three times during the interview. She lost her father and sister in the Bosnian war. Both of them were still missing, fostering aforementioned processes of inchoate meaning-making. She stressed that she needed the perpetrators to be held to account and expressed her desperation to learn the truth; she had spent long nights on the internet trying to find out information. One night, her sister had come to her in her dreams; “My sister, like, came here and turned me over and is asking something from me, wearing the blue t-shirt she had on there. And then I understood that she wants something from me.”

Throughout the interview, Daniela talked about fear. She was scared that something bad might happen to her children. She was worried that if she were ever to testify in court, the perpetrators might send someone to come after her. She was afraid that when she walks home at night after working the second shift, someone might attack her; and she was fearful that she would kill her assailant out of fear. She talked about the sense of trepidation she feels every time she goes back to the place where she had lived before the war; “You maybe know what the forests around X [name of pre-war home town] are like. I sometimes go up there, to my mother’s grave, to our house. They can wait for me.” She no longer trusted anyone, especially men; she saw a “bit of aggression” in all of them.

Daniela explained that her husband spends his money on alcohol and cigarettes. Describing him as “rough”, she reflected: “I just needed a sensitive, caring husband, so that at least he would give me the attention no one has ever given me. Only torture and shouting.” Her husband did nothing to help her, she complained, and she had taken out a loan in order to ensure that she and her family had their own home. Describing how she did two cleaning jobs, she stressed that the house would not be standing were it not for her efforts and hard work.

When asked about her sources of support, Daniela mentioned a local NGO and a health centre. She had also received support from a psychologist linked to another NGO. Living in a town that has a disproportionately high number of NGOs working on the issue of sexual violence, she nevertheless felt unsupported and rarely used the resources available to her. There was no help or social protection from the State, she maintained, and her husband and family did not support her. Local NGOs should have done more to help her, so that she was never in the position of needing to take out a loan. She rarely socialized and did not feel part

of the community. Alluding to the fact that the Bosnian war displaced her from her home in Republika Srpska, so that she is now internally displaced within the BiH Federation,⁸ she claimed that locals still look down on her and view her as a “refugee.”⁹ She explained: “We thought, when we arrived from the Serb territories, that we would be welcomed with full hearts, but you saw immediately the rejection and... Even today, they say ‘refugees’. If something is stolen, it was the ‘refugees’. If anything, the ‘refugees’”.

Daniela did not speak about the future at all and focused solely on the past and the drudgeries of the present. She was deeply unsatisfied with her life, but saw no way to change it. Instead, she hoped that someone else would do it for her. “If I could, Janine dear”, she mused, “I would leave all this and go somewhere, if only someone would come and say: ‘You are going to another country’. If doesn’t matter which country...” (author interview, BiH, 3 February 2019).

Marija had one of the highest ARM scores in the BiH dataset (131 out of a possible 140). Daniela had one of the lowest (78). However, neither woman had “bounced”, whether forward or back. Marija exhibited important elements of personal growth and learning,¹⁰ but she had not done so in isolation. She had used vital resources around her, above all her family, her psychologist, and her land. This foregrounds an important systemic aspect that is

⁸ The 1995 Dayton Peace Accords ended the Bosnian war and left the country divided into two entities, the BiH Federation and Republika Srpska (see Gaeta 1996).

⁹ In BiH, ordinary people widely use the term “refugee” when what they are actually referring to is internal displacement. “Refugee” is a legal term that only applies to someone who has crossed an international border.

¹⁰ Regarding her aforementioned issues with men, for example, which she had overcome, Marija explained: “For a long time, for many years, I hated... I hated men. [short pause] But, but, err, with the help [long pause] of some people, who were my friends then, with, with, with talks... [short pause] I have tried not to hate any more... And... talking to the doctors made me and, and, and moved me forward to, to, to start to [long pause], err, see this differently.”

often missing from discussions – predominantly psychology-based – about post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Jayawickreme and Blackie 2014; Jirek 2017). Marija had “expanded”, through the interactions with her environment and the expansive opportunities that it offered, but this had not been an easy process. This speaks directly to the aforementioned *difficulty critique*. “I have always thought it [the sexual violence] was my fault”, she revealed, and at one stage she had become addicted to anti-depressants. Moreover, she continued to face many challenges. She lived in an over-crowded apartment with her husband and three daughters; the family’s income was tight; one of her daughters had suffered a serious injury (a fractured pelvis) which had ended her dreams of having a sporting career.

Daniela, in contrast, had primarily contracted. Her multiple fears, mistrust, and sense of being an outsider within her community meant that she socially withdrawn. These contraction dynamics, moreover, had intersected with a contractive environment; she did not have the help that she wanted, she was living in a town where she did not feel at home, and the political system was not giving her the answers that she needed in relation to her missing sister and father. “I would like to ask”, she stressed, “if this, what I am saying, can reach anyone, any important people in Brussels or wherever. I would just like to... Because I see that here, in this State, things are just being delayed, delayed, delayed... Well, how can it be that for twenty something years, well...”.

While expansion and contraction have important lateral dimensions, they are also multi-dimensional concepts. In their work on riverine floodplains, Doering et al. explore how these complex ecosystems undergo cycles of expansion and contraction (and indeed fragmentation) “along longitudinal, lateral, and vertical dimensions” (Doering et al. 2007, 1693). As a novel

way of conceptualizing resilience, thinking about expansion and contraction along different dimensions is extremely useful for three key reasons.

Firstly, it facilitates a more disaggregated analysis of resilience across multiple domains. Infurna and Jayawickreme, for example, underline that “Because of the substantial variation in adjustment across outcomes, researchers should not ‘diagnose’ resilience on the basis of a single outcome” (Infurna and Jayawickreme 2019, 153). This is very pertinent to the *context critique* discussed in the previous section. The authors accordingly underscore “the need for a multidimensional operationalization of resilience...” (Infurna and Jayawickreme 2019, 153). Illustrating this, Daniela had primarily contracted on a social dimension; her fear and mistrust, and her experiences of displacement, had strongly affected how she engaged with others and her environment. On a personal dimension, however, there were elements of expansion. When asked which three words she would use to describe herself, she answered “strong”, “smart”, and “capable.” Elaborating on why, for example, she chose the first of these words, she explained:

God has given me, err... Things I have survived, I often think about my brain, I am good, my thinking is good. A strong, smart person. I don’t know how to explain. And, all this has strengthened me. Maybe I would not have been like this. All these experiences... Because I just think of my children. I have to. I think I have to protect them, so that tomorrow they do not experience what I did (author interview, BiH, 3 February 2019).

Secondly, and closely related to the previous point, Infurna and Luthar object to describing people as “being resilient.” According to them, “the central focus of resilience research should, arguably, not be to declare what proportion of people are resilient, but to better understand what contributes to their manifest resilience, toward ultimately helping those who struggle in the wake of significant adversities” (Infurna and Luthar 2017, 944–945). Part of

the utility of thinking about resilience as a process of degrees of expansion and contraction along different dimensions – which particularly addresses the previously discussed *linearity critique* – is precisely that it can help to facilitate such understanding. In Marija’s story, for example, there were elements of social contraction, but these were primarily past rather than present. In particular, she spoke about how – because of the sexual violence – she used to worry about what others might think of her. In her own words, “Well... [short pause] I was afraid, afraid of how the community, neighbourhood, family would look at me. I simply always had some kind of fear...” (author interview, BiH, 30 January 2019). She had engaged in self-stigmatization and grappled with negative thoughts (“I felt unwanted, humiliated, err, err, err, not needed in this world, err...”) that had caused her to contract and withdraw. The resources that she had accessed and utilized, however, had helped her to overcome these challenges. The fact that Daniela was facing ongoing community-related issues, albeit not related to the sexual violence, and was far more “visible” in a relatively tight-knit community than Marija was in a large city, made it more difficult for her to expand on this social dimension. In other words, the interviews with the two women point to different relational dimensions of a post-war environment that can essentially have a protective or stress-based function.

Thirdly, and relatedly, the conceptualization of resilience as a dialectic process of expansion and contraction creates new possibilities for effectively integrating systemic dynamics into the analysis, as highlighted in Table 5 below. As one illustration, Walsh – emphasizing that resilience involves transformation and growth – maintains that “Forged in the cauldron of crisis and challenge, new strengths, untapped potential, and creative efforts can emerge as we reach more deeply within ourselves and reach out to connect with others” (Walsh 2002, 35). The dynamics of this connectivity, however, are not purely internal-external. They are also

external-internal, in the sense that the environment itself needs to encourage reaching out and connectivity (Betancourt 2018). This is an important ecological aspect of peacebuilding and transitional justice work that has often been overlooked and neglected in practice.¹¹ The broader point is that to think about resilience in terms of expansion and contraction across different domains where expansion and contraction can co-exist, and which themselves are necessarily linked to different inter-related systems that expand and contract through learning and adaptation (Adger 2003, 2), represents a more inclusionary and holistic way of framing resilience. It also helps to address the *desirability*, *change* and *plausibility critiques*.

Table 5. Expansion and contraction across intersecting levels

Individual		Environment	
Expansion (and contraction)	↔	Expansion (and contraction)	
Contraction (and expansion)	↔	Contraction (and expansion)	
Expansion (and contraction)	↔	Contraction (and expansion)	
Contraction (and expansion)	↔	Expansion (and contraction)	

Systems and Holons

To further accentuate the importance of systems and systemic influence, this article ultimately situates the concepts of expansion and contraction within a holonic frame. A corrective to dualistic ways of theorizing the relationship between wholes and parts (Koestler

¹¹ While the concept of “environmental peacebuilding” is gaining ground, the focus is on natural resources and environmental issues (see, for example, Ide 2017; Evans Ogden 2018). Within the field of transitional justice, limited attention has been given to environmental injustices that accompany large-scale human rights abuses, or to natural disasters that involve gross violations of human rights (see, for example, Bradley 2017). Particularly striking is the dearth of attention given to attitudinal environments that can impede processes of building peace and fostering reconciliation (see Clark 2018).

1970, 136), the concept of holon is fundamentally about the connectedness between them (Gill 2015, 191). Reflecting the hierarchies of which they form an intrinsic part, holons can behave as both self-dependent (independent) parts and dependent parts. A human heart, for example, is part of a broader whole, yet “capable of functioning in vitro as a quasi-independent whole, even though isolated from the organism or transplanted into another organism” (Koestler 1970, 135). This relationship between wholes and parts points to a significant Janus-faced dimension of holons: “the face turned towards the subordinate levels is that of a self-contained whole; the face turned towards the apex, that of a dependent part” (Gill 2015, 191).

Within the organismic hierarchy, individuals constitute holons that demonstrate the same Janus-faced dynamics. Quintessentially, a person’s “self-assertive tendency is the dynamic manifestation of his unique wholeness as an individual; his integrative tendency expresses his dependence on the larger whole to which he belongs, his partness” (Koestler 1970, 147). This, by extension, points to an important relationship between individual and social holons. Accentuating the dynamic interplay between the two, Schwartz underscores that “Individual and social holons are the within and the without of one another” (Schwartz 2013, 167). In noting the ease with which one can flip from a social holonic frame back into an individual holonic frame, he points out that: “What results is a more and more fluid sense of the within and without – of being an individual holon and being a member of that social holon – actualizing the chiasm of the integral flesh of the world” (Schwartz 2013, 167). In times of stress and adversity, however, movement between these two frames may become more difficult. That is to say that in normal circumstances, inward and outward tendencies are generally balanced. In contrast, “Under conditions of stress, the equilibrium is upset...” (Koestler 1970, 148). In such situations, in other words, the relationship between individual

and social holons may become less fluid, as individual holons turn inwards and remain in individual holonic mode. This is essentially a contraction dynamic, while easy movement between individual and social holons is consistent with an expansion dynamic.

More broadly, holons exist within a wider ecology of contexts, and “[t]hese contexts collectively form the situation in which the holon functions” (Bland and Bell 2007, 286). The fact that the holon is an identifiable entity, yet also “a nexus of many contexts” (Bland and Bell 2007, 286), draws attention to ecological dimensions of resilience across different systems that form a “wonderfully rich and interwoven tapestry” (Wilber 1997, 91). The holonic concept, thus, is useful not only for thinking about resilience in terms of expansion and contraction, but also for inclusively illuminating the various systems across which these expansion and contraction processes may occur at different levels of the systemic whole. For example, “...resilience is demonstrated when disruptions are responded to by micro systems rapidly and dynamically, leaving the next level holons to overcome any constraints in the macro system – the system adopts successfully to the new metastable state” (Rahimi and Madni 2014, 814). Conversely, if irreparable damage is done to lower level holons, the effects are passed upwards to the next level (Rahimi and Madni 2014, 814).

Some existing analyses of resilience display elements of holonic thinking. Particularly illustrative in this regard is the concept of panarchy and its accent on different scales within a system. Fundamentally, “panarchy theory emphasizes cross-scale linkages whereby processes at one scale affect those at other scales to influence the overall dynamics of the system” (Allen et al. 2014, 578). While there are obvious overlaps between holarchy and panarchy, the former remains significantly under-discussed in relation to resilience. Furthermore, it is “looser” in the sense that it does not replicate panarchy’s emphasis on “adaptive cycles”

(Gotts 2007). As Walker and Salt point out, “The adaptive cycle is a useful concept for understanding why a system is behaving in a certain way at a certain time, but it’s only half the story. Self-organizing systems operate over a range of different scales of space and time, and each one is going through its own adaptive cycle” (Walker and Salt 2012, 15). Where panarchy – and by extension holarchy – is particularly useful is in giving additional meaning to the notions of expansion and contraction within the context of complex intersecting systems. To cite Holling and Gunderson, “The purpose of theories such as panarchy is not to explain what it; it is to give sense to what might be. We cannot predict the specifics of future possibilities, but we might be able to define the conditions that limit or expand those future possibilities” (Holling and Gunderson 2002, 32).

Thinking about ways to expand people’s future possibilities – including the men and women who participated in this research – represent important challenges for transitional justice. As part of “dealing with the past”, it is essential that transitional justice processes – which often have a strong individual focus – give more attention to different systems (beyond those implicated in past atrocities) and to how developments in one part of a system can critically affect other parts. Some scholars have identified the existence of “victim hierarchies” within transitional justice practice (see, for example, McEvoy and McConnaghie 2012; Moffett 2015; Jankowitz 2018). According to Koestler, however, “Hierarchies can be regarded as ‘vertically’ arborizing structures whose branches interlock with those of other hierarchies at a multiplicity of levels and form ‘horizontal’ networks: arborization and reticulation are complementary principles in the architecture of organisms and societies” (Koestler 1970, 51). Ultimately, therefore, hierarchies do not necessarily compromise the operationalization of transitional justice, with consequent implications for resilience. If they are given more attention in the way that Koestler conceptualizes them, they can also facilitate a crucial

expansion of transitional justice itself, holonically widening its purview in a way that takes account not only of “local realities” (Hinton 2010, 6), but also of broader systemic realities that shape and interact with them. The result is a new ecological reframing of transitional justice, a new “branch”, which, in turn, opens up uncharted possibilities for exploring how processes of dealing with the past can contribute to resilience in post-conflict and transitioning societies; and for assessing transitional justice outcomes against the criteria of contraction and expansion.

Conclusion

In their counselling work, Pearson and Wilson note that they have received “substantial in-session feedback indicating clients have a felt sense of their emotions, their body, and their energy oscillating between contraction and expansion, control and expression” (Pearson and Wilson 2008, 11). Problematizing the notion of resilience as involving a process of “bouncing back” or “bouncing forward”, and empirically exploring six particular critiques (which it has termed *desirability*, *change*, *plausibility*, *difficulty*, *linearity*, and *context critiques*), this article has used the core concepts of expansion and contraction to develop a novel way of thinking about resilience. Using data from fieldwork with victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and utilizing the stories of “Marija” and “Daniela” to illustrate what expansion and contraction dynamics look like in practice, it has argued that these processes occur across multiple domains within complex systems.

It has accordingly argued the case for situating and exploring resilience within a holonic frame, as a way of capturing complex inter-connectivities that might otherwise be overlooked or missed. As Pitt et al. maintain, “A holonic approach is required to address critical complex

system issues, such as scalability, elasticity, adaptability, robustness, resilience, and support for multiscale, multi-objective policies, via recursive coordination of micro and macro processes” (Pitt et al. 2014, 7). If transitional justice processes are to contribute to resilience, such a “recursive coordination” needs to occur in the sense that more attention should be given to the systems and ecologies within which individuals live and move. Pitt et al. note that “a user is a holon in a flat; a flat is a holon in a building; a building is a holon in a district, and so on” (Pitt et al. 2014, 9). In a similar vein, a transitional justice process such as a criminal trial is a holon in a criminal justice system; a criminal justice system is a holon in a political system; a political system is a holon in a broader State system, and so on.

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