

A widow, a victim, a mother: rethinking resilience and wellbeing within the complexities of women's lives in Kashmir

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Using a case study, this paper describes initial results from qualitative research with women widowed as a result of conflict in Kashmir. Recognising resilience as a process that contributes to a sense of wellbeing, this paper highlights how this process also often involves experiencing and exercising overlapping identities of being a 'victim', 'widow, and a 'mother' for women within conflict contexts. Further, the paper questions simplistic readings of resilience and wellbeing that classify people as resilient or not resilient, and classify relationships, identities, and feelings in terms of 'good' or 'bad' by reflecting on questions such as: 'is belief or portrayal of oneself as a victim unhelpful or negative? Or, is worrying bad?' The case study included here is one of the fifty qualitative interviews conducted as part of PhD research on resilience among women widowed due to conflict in Kashmir.

Keywords: conflict, identities, resilience, widow

Introduction

Increased focus on health and wellbeing has contributed to a shift from the *disease* model to the resilience and strengths based model of understanding individuals and communities. It is now acknowledged that health is more than simply the absence of illness, that risks or stress need not automatically lead to *dysfunction* or *illness*, that wellbeing is not only about economic resources and resilience is more than simple recovery. The resilience paradigm challenges the perspective that oppressive and corrosive environments

Key implications for practice:

- Recognises multiple methods used to cope with adversity.
- Encourages moving beyond predefined parameters and labels in understanding coping mechanisms.
- Highlights the importance of person–environment interaction within a specific context.

will always have negative impacts on people (Waller, 2001).

This paper begins with an overview of perspectives on resilience and wellbeing, including perspectives that challenge the resilient/non resilient dichotomy and emphasises recognition of the multiple coping methods employed to deal with adversity. Further, this paper encourages moving away from labelling strategies in terms of adaptive or maladaptive. This is followed by a description of the specific context of Kashmir, where this research was conducted. The section on methodology includes an overview of ways in which resilience can be studied, followed by a brief description of the data collection and data analysis process of this research. Some of the themes that emerged through analysis are then presented through a case study. This is followed by a discussion on the themes presented in the case study and link with other studies on resilience.

Perspectives of resilience

Resilience has generally been understood as: a *trait or characteristic* (of those who show competence or grow up successfully despite adversity); a *process* (of how people deal with adversity); and as an *outcome* of successful adaptation or positive functioning in adversity (McCubbin, 2001; Ungar, 2008; Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2010). Differentiating between responses to chronic adversity and single incident adversity or trauma, resilience has been recently also conceptualised as *'emergent'* or *'minimal impact'* (Bonnano & Diminich, 2013). Research on emergent resilience focuses on understanding gradual adaptation in chronic adversity (e.g. poverty), while minimal impact resilience involves understanding proximal patterns of adaptation following acute life events such as loss and trauma. This conceptualisation suggests the need to further recognise multiple ways that resilience is demonstrated and understood.

While early researchers considered resilience as something extraordinary, it has now been recognised as a fundamental and ordinary human adaptation system (Masten, 2001). Using the term *'ordinary magic'*, Masten emphasises that resilience is a very common phenomena, consisting of ordinary processes. As a result, identifying *'resilience'* in terms of a predefined positive outcome or trait at an individual level is now considered narrow and inadequate for the study of resilience (Ungar, 2008; Secombe, 2002; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Instead, resilience can be better understood as a process of navigation and negotiation that is linked to a subjective experience of wellbeing.

'Where there is potential for exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their wellbeing, and their individual and collective capacity to negotiate for these resources to

be provided and experienced in culturally meaning ways. These dual processes of navigation and negotiation are important. They emphasize that individuals engage in processes that demonstrate resilience when they take advantage of opportunities they have and do better when they exercise influence over what those opportunities are and how they are provided' (Ungar, 2012, p. 17).

This conceptualisation of resilience as process of navigation and negotiation is similar to Panter-Brick's view of resilience as a process to harness resources in order to sustain wellbeing (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). Whether people succeed in this process of negotiation, navigation and harnessing of resources is something they decide for themselves. The definition of this success is based on a *'reciprocity'* that one experiences *'between themselves and social constructions of wellbeing that shape their interpretations of their health status'* (Ungar, 2004, p. 352). While wellbeing can be defined in a variety of ways, for the purposes of this paper and this discussion on resilience, the focus will be on subjective wellbeing.

Perspectives of subjective wellbeing in the context of resilience

When examining what constitutes wellbeing or contributes to it, White (2010, p. 171) cautioned that there are *'serious politics in the ways in which wellbeing is understood'*. Some institutions and scientists link physical, mental and social wellbeing with health (for example, WHO) and some focus more on the concept of functioning and capabilities, i.e., what one is able to do or be (Sen, 1989). In either case, wellbeing is now conceptualised as something dynamic, and not merely a static state that one has to achieve (PADHI, 2009; White, 2010). Therefore, wellbeing can be viewed as a set of processes that involve material, subjective and relational dimensions (White, 2010). Subjective

wellbeing is generally defined as an evaluation of one's own life in terms of how good one feels about it, and how well one is functioning (Keyes, 2013). In terms of this evaluation, one can also think in terms of time, i.e. the prospect (future), present and past (Durayappah, 2011). Inner wellbeing may be defined in terms of *'what people think and feel they are able to be and do'* (White, Gaines, Jr, & Jha, 2013, p. 22). Further, inner wellbeing is associated with what an individual thinks and feels about: economic confidence, agency and participation, social connections, close relationships, physical and mental health, competence and self-worth and values and meaning. For the purposes of this paper, the term *'subjective wellbeing'* represents both subjective and inner wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing can be seen an outcome of the process of resilience. As stated in Ungar's definition above, subjective wellbeing and resilience can be viewed as connected within a circular process; probably chaotic, with various factors influencing the process. During the process of navigation and negotiation, one can choose multiple pathways to try and attain a sense of inner wellbeing and peace. At the same time, subjective wellbeing could be one of the factors that contribute to the process of resilience. This means, if one experiences a sense of wellbeing, one is more likely to succeed in the process of navigation and negotiation to access different resources and opportunities. Or, as stated by Ungar (ibid.), resilience is demonstrated by people taking advantage of, and influencing the availability of, resources and opportunities.

Accessibility and availability of various opportunities, resources and experiences are influenced by socio economic and political scenarios, and by meanings attached to these opportunities, resources and experiences (Ungar, 2012). Therefore, meanings attached to experiences, contexts and behaviours are integral to, and should not be ignored in, the study of resilience.

Moving away from a resilient/not resilient dichotomy

Viewing resilience as a characteristic or trait, as well as a positive outcome in situations of trauma and/or adversity creates a dichotomy, i.e. people are judged to be either *'resilient'* or *'not resilient'*. This dichotomy is questionable on a variety of levels (Lenette, Brough, & Cox, 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011) and is similar to the approach where *'we'* (researchers and development practitioners), view individuals as *'doing well'* or *'not doing well'*. The French philosopher Foucault reminds us that knowledge and truth is often defined by those in power. Therefore, a healthy caution should be employed when examining the potential dominance of one perspective or definition in any discourse on health, illness, adaptation and resilience. It is important to question: what is healthy adaptation and who defines it as *'healthy'*? In our quest to always be objective and to categorise, we may overlook what people may think and feel about themselves. This is an important consideration, especially in working with women, who are often perceived to be either vulnerable or marginal. Yet, they are also often seen as symbolic resources for their communities, expected to fit such labels as: caring, nurturing, pious or sacrificing. Moving away from predefined perspectives gains significance in trying to ascertain the applicability of western definitions, which may be assumed to be universal. Each context and every population group (e.g. men, women, ethnic groups, etc.) may have its own specific factors and processes influencing how individuals respond to adversity.

Additionally, the relationship between risks, outcomes and protective factors is likely to be chaotic, complex and contextual instead of predictable (Ungar, 2004). As a result, Southwick emphasises replacing a binary approach to resilience (i.e. presence or absence) with a continuum approach, which recognises that resilience may be present in varying degrees across various domains of

life (Southwick et al., 2014). I concur with the view that everyone *'with adverse life circumstances struggles to overcome obstacles in their paths to meaningful lives'* (Teram & Ungar, 2009, p. 118). This struggle includes the decision to keep moving forward, a perspective that Yehuda emphasises when talking about resilience (Southwick et al., 2014). Therefore, it is clear that resilience is more than simple survival. It is influenced by culture and context. There is a form of heterogeneity in how people respond to their environment and how they use various, alternative paths to access resources and address limitations (Saarthak, 2006).

Resilience and wellbeing of women within the context of conflict in

Kashmir

The conflict in Kashmir has generally been associated with the unresolved dispute between India and Pakistan. Since 1989, outbreaks of armed insurgency, counter insurgency measures by the government, the impact of heavy militarisation and years of socio-economic difficulties have been faced by the people of Kashmir. Authoritarian measures were imposed, not only on individuals and families, but also collectively throughout society through prolonged curfews and *'crackdowns'* (Kazi, 2009, p. 100). Over this long period of conflict, large scale deaths have led to a significant rise in the number of widows in Kashmir. Further, many men are still missing, creating ongoing uncertainty for their families. While there is no reliable data available on number of deaths or disappearances in Kashmir, one estimate suggests that 46,581 persons (including security force personnel) were killed during the period 1999–2004 in the Kashmir Valley (Public Commission on Human Rights, n.d.). Additionally, the number of women widowed due to conflict (including women with missing husbands) is estimated to be more than 15,000 (Butalia, 2002). However, Shekhawat (2014, p. 90) places this number at 33,000 women.

Peace in Kashmir has been repeatedly interrupted due to conflicts arising between India and Pakistan, as well as anger and disillusionment among Kashmiri people as a result of the conflicts in the region over past three decades. During any conflict, women face additional economic hardship, loss of family members, displacement, sexual violence and increased responsibilities for the family. Within the context of conflict, the identity of a woman is generally *'bracketed as a 'martyr's widow', 'bereaved mother', 'war widow' . . .'* by the media, human rights activists and communities involved in local movements (Chenoy, 2007, p. 188).

This appears to also be true in Kashmir, with some women further labelled as *'half-widows'*; a term meaning their husbands have disappeared due to the conflict and remain missing. In various studies focused on impacts of conflict, life conditions for women were found to have deteriorated after death or disappearance of their husband. Widows face severe problems financially, psychologically, legally and socially (Dabla, 2010; Chenoy, 2007; Shafi, 2002; Suri, 2011).

However, far too many studies focus on these widows as victims and few on coping mechanisms. It has long been accepted in the field that people are more than victims or survivors (Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011). Therefore, the victimhood discourse is being challenged (Manchanda, 2001), along with the stereotype of women as passive victims (Chenoy, 2007).

With this challenge in mind, this research focused on increasing our understanding of how women widowed due to conflict, negotiated risks and adversities, and how these multiple pathways of navigation and negotiation can involve experiencing and exercising overlapping and intersecting identities of being a *'victim', 'widow',* and a *'mother'*. This process is also associated with what one thinks about present and future. In this paper, initial reflections arising from a case study of woman from a rural area of Kashmir are shared.

Methodology

Review of the approaches used in resilience science suggest that the research dominantly falls into one of the following two categories: either *person focused* or *variable focused* (Masten, 2001, 2014a, 2014b). Variable focused approaches generally use quantitative studies with statistics to test for association/linkages and patterns of variation among individuals. Person focused approaches examine *'whole individuals rather than variables'*, and attempt to capture *'patterns of adaptation that naturally occur'* (Masten, 2001, p. 232). Therefore, person focused approaches aim to understand specific processes or characteristics in life of individuals (who meet the criteria) in terms of facing risk and demonstrating adaptation (Masten, 2014a). Person focused research may use single case studies or group approaches. Researchers can also use a *'combined method'* (using both variable focused and person focused), as well as *'pathways model'*, which focuses on understanding patterns or characteristics across life trajectories of individuals, with specific attention to the turning points in their lives. Drawing from this review of approaches, a combination of *'person focused'* and pathways approach was selected in alignment with the key objectives of this research: to understand patterns of resilience among conflict widows in Kashmir; to understand factors that contribute to resilience; and to document mental health and psychosocial support systems utilised by this group of women. Assuming that aspects can be described at four different levels: a phenomenon, a process, a mechanism and in terms of parameters or variables, resilience can be better understood at the level of phenomenon or a process (Trzesniak, Liborio, & Koller, 2012). Qualitative methodology was selected for this research as it acknowledges multiple realities, and is suitable for a rich and in-depth understanding of processes (Nakkeeran, 2006; Ungar, 2003).

Following the interpretive paradigm, this research began with the assumption that

there are multiple realities and understanding of meanings that people give to their life experiences, and behaviour is more significant than attempts to assess whether people conform to a set of predefined behaviours and outcomes (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Potential pitfalls of this research included research in another culture and context than the author's own, in terms of a contested history *vis a vis* its location and relationship with India. Also, as suggested by Smith (2012, p. 178), it was important to be mindful of the power that researchers have *'to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate, and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings.'* Additionally, assumptions about *'western ideas'* being primary or fundamental in order to *'make sense of the world, of reality'*, of social life and of human beings had to be avoided as much as possible, what Smith (2012, p. 58) believed to be a sign of research *'through imperial eyes.'*

Data collection

In-depth interview, with audio recording, was selected as it allows more space to explore and for the respondents to share their experiences and opinions. To ensure variation in the sample, three local organisations were identified, which provided access to the field and the respondents within a rural district (Kupwara, bordering Pakistan) and an urban district (Srinagar).

The interview guide was prepared after literature review and initial field visits. It included the following themes: demographic information; aspects of current life (including: living arrangements; access to government schemes; work/ source of income if any; difficulties and how they were being dealt with; support systems; relationships; childhood experiences, in terms of family, friends and education; experiences after marriage; death/disappearance of husband; experiences as a parent; perception of the

context for self and other women widowed due to conflict).

Interviews were completed with 50 women from Kupwara (n = 25) and Srinagar (n = 25) in the period of November 2011 to February 2012. Location for each interview was decided on the basis of respondent's convenience. Hence, most of the interviews were held either at the respondent's home, or at an NGO run centre or office. Most of the interviews were conducted in Kashmiri, with help of a female translator who had been oriented in basic skills of listening and interviewing, so that expressions and meanings were not lost in translation. Out of the 50 interviews, six were conducted in Urdu-Hindi. In these interviews, although the translator was present to support, the respondents chose to speak in Urdu-Hindi. Participants had the choice of ending the conversation at any time. To ensure confidentiality, the recording did not contain any identifying information. Transcription and translation was followed by checking of each transcript, either by the author or another member of the transcription team familiar with the research objectives and the quality of transcription required for analysis.

Data analysis

The process of analysis was informed and influenced by two methods of inquiry: constant comparison (based on grounded theory¹) and phenomenological². That a combination of these approaches can be used, has been demonstrated by Annells (2006). Constant comparison inquiry and phenomenological inquiry have a similarity that both focus on '*reducing field texts to reveal some common features of shared understandings across experiences*' (Butler-Kisber, 2010b). Drawing from interpretative or hermeneutic phenomenology focuses this research on individuals' meanings of *being in the world*. This perspective also recognises description as a form of interpretation and as a result, rejects separation of description and interpretation (Willig, 2013). Constant

comparison inquiry uses categorising (through comparing and contrasting units of data or field texts) to construct themes in order to understand a phenomena (Butler-Kisber, 2010a). Using this approach, codes or labels were applied to the text that were descriptive or analytic. After manual coding of few transcripts, coding was completed through Atlas.ti (a qualitative data analysis programme), followed by further categorisation of interrelated codes. Open coding allowed a focus on what seemed to emerge from the data, instead of imposing pre-existing theory. This was followed by axial coding (where categories were developed out of initial codes) and selective coding (where the central categories were identified and related to other categories) (Gibbs, 2007).

Several patterns of resilience were identified through analysis of the interviews. The case study below presents some of the themes that emerged in the initial analysis. With this respondent, the interview was completed in 7 hours 45 minutes, through six visits. While this case study is not representative of all women who participated in the research, it does, however, have the capacity to represent the themes or patterns that are being presented in this paper.

All names have been changed in the narratives. In addition, the term 'NGO' is used here, instead of naming the nongovernmental organisation involved.

Case study: Shaheen

Shaheen was about 33 years old at the time of her interview. She lives with her mother-in-law, a daughter and two sons in a village in the Kupwara District of Kashmir. Her daughter was in 11th class, one son was studying in fifth class and the other in the fourth class. Her husband passed away 11 years ago. She had studied until the fifth class. Her assets included 4–5 hens and a cow given to her by her family. The house, vegetable garden and land are shared with her mother-in-law, with whom she has a strained relationship. She did not have a bank

account, nor any regular source of income. Her mother and brother were also living in the same village and provided additional support, as did an NGO for her household expenses and daughter's education. Shaheen grew up in poverty. She had lost her father when young, so her mother took on all responsibilities of raising her and her siblings. Shaheen considered her childhood to be good, at least while her father was alive. She was the youngest child, with two elder sisters and one elder brother. Like many others, she received advice on faith and being patient.

'...at times my mother used to say me that we should always be patient and should be thankful to ALLAH. Gods always rewards the patient. When you go to your marital home, be patient enough there as well.' (Pl:568)

The context (as understood from Shaheen and other participants in this study) prepares one to face problems with faith and patience through messages such as the one that follows:

*'This is a test by God. . .
Be thankful/grateful to God. . .
Have faith, God rewards the patient. . .
This was destined...
Be tolerant and patient. . .
Pray and you will receive. . .
Face the issues/problems.'*

These ideas seem to have become a part of the way Shaheen and other women widowed due to conflict view and deal with their difficulties.

Shaheen as a widow and a victim

'... that time [when her husband was present], I was not as worried as I am today, because now I have to bear everything alone. He was the one to look after the home. . . whatever the need.' (Pl:648)

As a widow, Shaheen saw herself as alone. Widowhood had brought not only financial problems, but also a change in how some people treated or perceived her. This seemed to add to her perception of self as a victim of circumstance. She realised things would have been different if her husband was still present.

'They [neighbours] call me beggar and so many other things. . . 'Look what God has done to them, they deserved this. Now they are dependent on us. They have to beg now.' (Pl:374)

When people called her 'beggar', or said other hurtful things, she did not always respond to them.

'...what can I say? If this had not happened to me, they could not have said this. They are rich people and they can say anything. I cannot, as I am poor.' (Pl:197)

Shaheen is aware that any difficulty is likely to affect her more as she is poor.

'... people who are rich do not face problems. When there is drought, they buy [water] from the market. It is basically a problem for us as there is no one to earn for us. Like those who are rich don't go to the forest [to collect firewood] . . . only poor like me need to.' (Pl:1041)

The absence of her husband, having 'no one to earn' for her caused problems, but sometimes, people also helped her because of her situation. For example, a neighbour who was rebuilding his home offered old wood to Shaheen.

'They are constructing a house. He told other women that 'your husbands can bring wood for you ... so she [Shaheen] should take all this.' (Pl:986)

Apart from such assistance, she also receives a few hundred rupees occasionally and that has helped her manage. In addition, payment of her electricity bill was waived

when she shared her situation with an inspector from the government department concerned who had visited regarding unpaid bills.

‘. . . I came out and explained the matter to him. The inspector felt very sympathetic towards me and seeing that I have little kids, he waived the whole fee. . . and told me that ‘while I am alive, nobody will charge you any fee.’ (PI:1056)

In spite of such occasional support, Shaheen has had mixed thoughts and feelings about seeking help from neighbours or others in the village. Several times in the interview, she stated how she could not seek help from others (except siblings and the NGO), as she would be taunted later.

‘I won’t ask people for things like soap or shoes or clothes as they will tease me later.’ (PI:195)

At times, her dignity was hurt when people refused to help.

‘Once I asked for help from my next-door neighbour, she is a teacher. She refused to help me and said that I can get help from anywhere. She meant to say that I could beg. All this hurt me a lot. She bought two pairs of shoes for her children and refused to help me even with one pair.’ (PI: 873)

Her experience with her siblings, however, was different.

‘Yesterday he [brother] bought kangris³ for himself and sent me one of those. Siblings never taunt me as others do. . . My brother has always helped me. . .’ (PI:706)

Nevertheless, Shaheen did not stop seeking help, nor negotiating for resources for her children or home. She tried to seek help from others now and then.

‘Today I have been asking everyone for 200 rupees so that I could buy spices to

make pickles, but no one has helped me.’ (PI: 853)

Shaheen’s perception of self as a victim seemed linked with her experiences of being poor, the changed scenario due to her identity as a widow, being called a beggar, and not being helped by some when she approached them. However, such experiences of being a victim have also made Shaheen navigate towards supportive relationships and to seek refuge there. For example, in sharing about the strained relationship with mother in-law, Shaheen said,

‘She [mother in-law] fights with me every now and then. Last time, I went to my sister in Shatpora for three days. Then I went to Anjad sahab (NGO worker) and he gave me socks for my children and me. He consoled me there.’ (PI:638)

Shaheen also shared,

‘I go by foot if I don’t have money, and if we tell them this while coming back from there, they pay me for the bus. I have travelled hundred of times by foot to the NGO. I take money from them because they will not taunt or criticise me, but the neighbours will.’ (PI:288)

These narratives suggest that as women navigate towards and negotiate with resources (such as, relationships or NGO), they prefer those situations where they are respected and cared for, and not victimised further. Sometimes, women cope by just being with themselves or focusing on the tasks that they can accomplish. For example, Shaheen tries to structure her day and manage a routine

‘I move into my orchards [vegetable garden] and spend 2–3 hours there because I just want to pass the time. . . no matter what way. After that, I start cooking for lunch and also

for dinner. I spend my days with my children.'
(Pl:48)

When upset, she tried to use social connections to distract herself.

'I just leave that place and go to the neighbours' house, but when my children come and call me, I have to go back.' (Pl:142)

Even with use of coping strategies and occasional support available, there were still difficulties. Shaheen felt that remarriage would have made her life circumstances better, but she had not done so for sake of her children.

'I would have been happy if I would have remarried. Now I become happy seeing my children growing up.' (Pl:497)

As a mother, children became more important than other aspects of her life for Shaheen, as reflected in the next section.

Shaheen as a mother

'I was widowed six years after my marriage. . . . I did not marry again for such reasons... as I was concerned about my children. I told you that I have begged for my kids. My kids were very small then. My son was one year old and my daughter was in nursery class. I sacrificed my life for my kids. I thought whatever happened with me had to happen. . . . but now I cannot destroy the life of my kids. God will be happy with me. . . . Other women remarried in our village a few months after their husband's death...' (Pl:201)

Shaheen, here, demonstrates her use of faith (*God will be happy with me. . . .*), as well as belief in destiny (*. . . whatever happened with me had to happen*), both influences of her context. As reflected above, her performing her role as a concerned and sacrificing mother has become a significant part of her life. That

being a mother and looking after children is considered honourable in her context is clear in the comment below.

'Villagers also told her [mother in-law] that 'she is very young. So take care of her. She has saved the honour of your son by looking after the children.' (Pl:386)

Her ability to fulfil the everyday needs of her children makes her worry.

'Winter is approaching and my children don't have sweaters, shoes, socks, etc. All other children have these facilities, but mine do not have anything. My daughter is mature now and she socialises with many other girls, so she should have all the things that a girl needs. All these things keep going in my mind, always.'
(Pl:158)

Even though she may try to do everything possible, Shaheen does not always view herself as someone who can do everything, especially when she felt that some of her responsibilities should have been shouldered by her husband, had he been alive.

'I have done every possible thing for them [children]. Even today, I went to forest [to collect wood^A] for them. I tried to keep them happy always. But I cannot fulfil all their demands. When children demand something, then a mother asks her husband to fulfil their demands, but I cannot do anything like that. Sometimes I tell them, 'we will also have comforts of life if you study well!'
(Pl:890)

While she chose to remain single and focus on children, managing everything alone has become difficult for her. She, like many other women who participated in this study, hope for a better future through her children.

'My children say when we grow up you will not have to face all these problems. We will earn for

you. But my children are young today. So I have to look after them. (P1:377)

Until her children grow up, she has to continue in her role as a nurturing, caring and sacrificing mother and move forward.

'Children are the priority for me. I have to manage many things for them.' (P1: 776)

Discussion

Shifting away from the dichotomy of resilient/non resilient, this case study focused on Shaheen's experiences as a woman widowed due to conflict and as a single parent. Some of the initial findings from analysis of interviews with 50 women, widowed due to conflict, are presented through Shaheen's narratives of how she experiences overlapping identities of being a widow, a victim and a mother.

Understanding resilience in Shaheen's life

Shaheen's story may seem to focus only on her problems, however, it also demonstrates her resilience. As Shaheen has attempted to experience a sense of dignity, purpose and control, she has navigated towards different resources, support systems and opportunities, depending on what she has perceived to be valuable, helpful or strategic. For example, as she perceived that her siblings and the NGO were unlikely to refuse help if she approached them, and were more likely to respect her in the process of giving support, she valued these relationships more. As a result, she did approach them when needed. During difficult moments, she coped by structuring her time, keeping herself busy, using faith and social connections, and accessing supportive relationships. Moreover, resources became available to Shaheen according to the perception of her context, for example, in terms of perceptions of her as more needy, or vulnerable. This explains occasional support in form of money, food, or a waiver in payment. Therefore, it could

be framed as: people negotiate with different systems and resources depending on their perception of what works and what does not, and in what circumstances. Experiencing and exercising one's different identities is part of this navigation and negotiation as defined by Ungar (2012). She was taking advantage of, as well as being influenced by, the availability of resources. For example, she sought support for payment of her electricity bill by exercising her identity as a widow and a single mother. When she felt victimised, she sometimes approached supportive relationships. These examples show Shaheen harnessing resources, which is understood as an aspect of resilience by Panter-Brick (Southwick et al. 2014).

Shaheen also seemed to gain a sense of purpose by performing role as a mother and taking care of the needs of her children. This demonstrates not only her identity as a mother, but also her decision to keep moving forward, an aspect of resilience emphasised by Yehuda (Southwick et al. 2014). Exercising the identity of being a mother itself seems to contribute to moments of well-being, even though it is overwhelming for her to do everything alone. At the same time, she carries hope of a better future through her children. This shows how subjective well-being involves thinking in terms of time, i.e. present, past and future (Durayappah, 2011). Along with a sense of being alone, there is also a sense of hope. While thinking about the future (i.e. when the children would study well and grow up) provides Shaheen with hope, as well as suggests the influence of an intergenerational contract inherent in the mother/child relationship. Intergenerational contracts between parents and children revolve around obligations and dependency, i.e., parents will look after the children when they are young and expect that the children will look after them in their old age. This factor influences the level of resources and efforts invested by parents in their children (Kabeer, 2000). Within an Asian context, familial contracts are more

relevant to individual wellbeing in comparison to social contracts (Croll, 2006).

Linking with other research on pathways of resilience

Some of the findings from Shaheen's case study align with findings of others. For example, use of faith. Based on her work with groups in Kashmir, Sonpar (2002, p. 56) also stated that, *the dominant socially approved narrative of coping was one that emphasized fortitude (sabar karna) and prayer*. A study by MSF also found religion among the helpful sources of support for people coping with impacts of conflict in Kashmir (de Jong, van de Kam, Ford, Lokuge, Fromm, van Galen, Reilley, Rolf, & Kleber, 2008). Additionally, resilience processes are also found integrated with coping strategies. An ethnographic research on resilience among genocide/rape survivors (from 1994) in southern Rwanda found several processes during interviews and observations of 44 research participants, including, but not limited to: expressing problems; meaning making (making sense of life experiences); accepting (i.e. acknowledging problems), and reflecting on self and one's life (Zraly & Nyirazinyoye, 2010). Similar strategies are clearly present in Shaheen's narratives. In terms of community, Shaheen's story highlighted how it was both a source of support as well as stress (for example by refusing to help or taunting her). The same had emerged from an ethnographic study conducted in 2008 and 2009 focusing on contextual understanding of mental health and plural pathways of resilience in lives of four single refugee women (with children) in Australia (Lenette et al. 2013). Therefore, interaction of person and environment does play an important role in the process of resilience.

Emerging questions

Some questions emerge from Shaheen's story. Is belief or portrayal of oneself as a victim unhelpful or negative? If performing one's role as a mother becomes primary, does it

suggest the loss of herself as a *person*? Who can be someone else beyond a *mother*?

Drawing from literature on identity theory and social identity theory, Stets and Burke (2000) emphasise that what one does and who one is, doing and being, agency and reflection, behaviours and perception are all central features of one's identity. In this study, all these were interwoven as parts of Shaheen's life: being a victim, being a mother, being a widow, believer in faith and destiny, negotiator, and navigator.

We understand a person's identities through her stories, as we did through Shaheen's narratives. As an individual constructs stories integrating her past and her imagined future, what is seen is her narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Narrative identity of a person is an internalised and evolving life story reconstructed in a way that it provides some degree of unity, purpose and meaning (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013). For example, drawing on her experiences as a widow, as a victim and as a mother, Shaheen sought control of her situation through different pathways: sometimes through faith, sometimes through hope for the future, sometimes by reminding herself of her role as a mother, sometimes by seeking refuge in supportive relationships, and sometimes by negotiating support from an NGO. Therefore, it can be said that having or using these identities is not always negative. This perspective encourages moving away from labelling strategies of individuals as adaptive or maladaptive.

Another question that arises here is: is worrying bad?²⁵ If someone worries every day, does this mean that we need to plan interventions for that person? As noticed in Shaheen's story, worrying about children and their future, or how home is run, is part of her everyday life. Worrying seemed to move her forward, harness resources and keep her focused on the goal of a better future for her children and herself. Therefore, worry cannot be a primary reason for professionals and researchers to

evaluate someone as having low or no sense of wellbeing.

Interviews with Shaheen and other women suggest that a sense of wellbeing is not consistently present in life. Wellbeing is actually in those moments when one thinks and feels that one has a sense of dignity, purpose, control and hope. The need to attain these moments of wellbeing guides the process of navigation and negotiation every day, influenced by the cultural context. We need to remember that one may not seem happy all the time and may not be satisfied with how life is, yet, when one thinks in terms of time, if there is hope for a better future then one can move towards it gradually. Thinking in terms of the future offers hope. Thinking in terms of the past and present may evoke distress, but also affirms women's abilities to face the difficulties, whether these difficulties are eventually eliminated or not.

Limitations of the study

Being a non-Kashmiri, and with an Indian identity, research in Kashmir not only meant a language barrier, but also dealing with potential dynamics or assumptions that could have influenced the researcher's questions, as well as responses of the research participants and their families. To deal with these two aspects, the researcher familiarised herself with the field through three visits before the launch of the data collection phase. To minimise the impact of language barrier, the same translator was present in all interviews after orienting her on basic skills. In addition, all transcripts and their translations were passed through a process of checking to capture meanings and expressions as much as possible. The researcher, in her introduction and during the course of interaction with the respondent and their families, communicated on confidentiality, the purpose of the research and at no stage attempted to be a spokesperson on behalf of India on any issue. Another aspect of this research was the focus only

on information shared by the respondents. The researcher did not attempt to verify the information shared by the participants in their interviews. For this research, it was more important to understand and capture the meanings and perceptions of respondents, as these influence what they think about themselves, their context, their future and their current life.

Conclusion

How does one demonstrate resilience and negotiate with different resources or systems? What would indicate that a person does not have a sense of wellbeing? The answer to questions such as these cannot be same for every individual. An individual can use various strategies of navigation and negotiation, and experience a subjective sense of wellbeing at any moment, even in the midst of adversity. Wellbeing is not something that we all must feel, every day, at every moment. Additionally, wellbeing does not mean that we will not feel worried, angry or helpless, or that we will not have problems. Instead of using labels such as: resilient, non resilient, adaptive, maladaptive, *doing well*, or *not doing well*, we must acknowledge that people deal with difficulties through multiple ways in different contexts. Working within context, changing it to become more enabling, and increasing availability and accessibility of resources and opportunities is also important. We have to continue to work towards changing the odds, instead of only focusing on helping people beat the odds (Seccombe, 2002).

Acknowledgements and notes

This paper is based on presentation entitled "*Understanding patterns of Resilience: recognizing multiple pathways to well being*", at Wellbeing and Subjectivity in International Development Conference, 8–9 January 2014, Regent's Park College, Oxford, organised by Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways Project, University of Bath, UK. The presentation is available through

a link at: <http://www.wellbeingpathways.org/resources/project-papers/182-wellbeing-and-subjectivity-conference-resources>. It should be noted that apart from the aspects presented in this paper, there are other processes that are also part of resilience in life of women. There is not enough space here to include all of these processes.

I would like to thank my PhD supervisors, Dr Neelam Sukhrmani and Dr Achal Bhagat, for their encouragement and support. I am grateful to Iqra for her consistent support of my research, and to Zahida for her hard work as my translator in the interviews. While writing the reflections presented in this paper, I have benefited from the other presentations at the conference on *Well-being and Subjectivity*, January 2014. I thank Well-being and Poverty Pathways Project Team for providing me an opportunity to present my paper at the conference. I am also deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers who helped me to improve this paper.

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¹ Grounded theory is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of process, action or interaction grounded in the views of participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

² Phenomenology was initiated by Edmund Husserl as a philosophy (Cerbone, 2006). 'Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method. . . .' (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Phenomenological research has the following two key approaches: descriptive and interpretive/ hermeneutic (Willig, 2013; Creswell, 2007).

³ Kangri is an earthen pot that contains coal or wood for warmth in the winter season.

⁴ Before peak winter starts, women in rural areas need to collect adequate wood for heating.

⁵ This reflection is based on my discussion with Dr Achal Bhagat, Chairperson, Saarthak and a co-supervisor for my PhD along with Dr Neelam Sukhramani.

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