



MULTISYSTEMIC RESILIENCE

ADAPTATION AND TRANSFORMATION
IN CONTEXTS OF CHANGE

EDITED BY

MICHAEL UNGAR

OXFORD

Multisystemic Resilience

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*Adaptation and Transformation in
Contexts of Change*

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Michael Ungar

What Does It Take for Early Relationships to Remain Secure in the Face of Adversity?

Attachment as a Unit of Resilience

Ana Berástegui and Carlos Pitillas

Introduction

It has been at least four decades since the term *resilience* was established within psychology, serving as a lever for overcoming, or complementing deficit models of human development and offering a lens for understanding trauma with a focus on healing mechanisms (Walsh, 2003, 2015; Windle, 2011). Despite the lack of consensus on the definition and scope of resilience, there seems to be some agreement with respect to three dimensions of the concept: the presence of adversity or relative risk, the deployment of resources to face the effects of adversity, and a positive adaptation as a result (including the avoidance of an expected negative result; Windle, 2011).

Our goal in this chapter is to explore resilience as it pertains to attachment relationships. We view early attachment relationships not only as a mediating factor between adversity and its impact or as a source of protection in the face of hardship, but also as a resilient mechanism in itself. This is to say that caregiver–child dyads, as bipersonal, dynamic systems of interaction and meaning-making, may themselves show resilience when exposed to adversity. In our view, a resilient early attachment relationship would be able to maintain a constant level of felt security within these dyadic interactions to regain such security when conflict or harm arises and/or to protect a circuit of connection and mutual recognition. As will be developed throughout this chapter, we believe that resilient attachment relationships may facilitate resilience across development, and promote healthier, more resilient societies

at different levels (extended families, schools, neighborhoods, cultures). The first part of this paper will be devoted to a review of attachment relationships in the resilience literature. In its second part, we will develop our concept of attachment resilience and its constituent factors. In the third part, we will delve into the ecological nature of attachment resilience. In the fourth part of this chapter, a set of four principles for the study and enhancement of attachment resilience will be presented. We will conclude with a discussion of the implications of these ideas for family intervention.

Resilience and Early Attachment Relationships

Researches have approached the relationship between attachment and resilience from three different viewpoints: the absence or distortion of attachment as a source of adversity for the child, attachment security as an adaptive result, and attachment as a resource for coping in the face of adversity.

The Absence of Attachment as Adversity: Attachment as Cause

From the beginning of the study of attachment, with Bowlby's (1951) or Spitz's (1945) research on the deleterious consequences of abandonment and loss, a marked relationship between the absence of attachment and experiences of trauma has been established. The absence of attachment figures, the breakdown of early relationships, or abuse and neglect within early attachment relationships have been highlighted from very diverse perspectives as a specific and relevant source of adversity in childhood, with a long-term impact at different levels (physiological, neurological, cognitive, emotional, social) on a child's development. The results of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, which followed children who were under institutional care during their early years and were subsequently fostered or adopted, point toward changes in brain development, significant cognitive and physical growth delays, and increased risk for psychological disorders, among other negative outcomes when early attachments are compromised (Nelson, Fox, & Zeanah, 2014; Zeanah, Smyke, Koga, Carlson, & Bucharest Early Intervention Project Core Group, 2005).

If we define trauma as any event that entails danger to life or threatens the physical integrity of the person (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), neglect or toxicity in early relationships with caregivers entails a stressful event and a threat to the physical and psychological well-being of a child, as well as a loss of the central mechanism (attachment with a caregiver), which enables a child to face other sources of threat. Thus, we can consider the absence, loss, or the abusive or neglectful nature of early attachment relationships as traumatic events in themselves, which, when marked by chronicity, may function as an antecedent of complex trauma (Cook et al., 2005).

Attachment Security as a Resilient Result: Attachment as Outcome

Attachment and internal working models of attachment are sensitive to conditions of adversity. A greater tendency to develop insecure working models of attachment has been found under adverse conditions, such as chronic illness or disability, migration, poverty, and

especially in situations of cumulative risk (Cerezo, Trenado, & Pons-Salvador, 2006; Diener, Nievar, & Wright, 2003). Therefore, security of attachment can be seen as an outcome that indicates whether resilience mechanisms have been activated and successful in preserving a level of health despite risk. For example, one common research finding is the higher prevalence of insecure attachment patterns among children with intellectual disabilities. This can be attributed to a negative impact of disability on the transition to parenthood, which would reduce the capacity of parents to bond securely with their child (Rubio, 2015).

Attachment as a Factor of Resilience: Attachment as Process

Attachment security has also been considered a condition for individual resilience. This can be assessed across the ecological spectrum, from mental health, school adaptation, well-being in adult relationships, or social inclusion. The family in particular, though, has been posed as a protective agent against contextual adversity and as a facilitator for the development of resilient individuals (see Walsh, this volume; Werner, 1992). A set of studies conducted in situations of accumulated risk suggest that the impact of multiple adversities on cognitive and socioemotional development is mediated by the quality of relationships in the family (Treyvaud et al., 2012) or, more specifically, by the quality of parental responsiveness (Wade, Moore, Astington, Frampton, & Jenkins, 2015). On the other hand, much of the research on adoption has been undertaken from this vantage point and has tried to ascertain how the establishment of new family relationships and the development of secure attachments, can mitigate the impact of early psychosocial adversity (Berástegui, 2012; Haugaard & Hazan, 2003; McGuinness & Dyer, 2006; McGoron et al., 2012; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010).

Attachment Resilience

Beyond this triple perspective, we believe that early attachment relationships may be considered, in themselves, a subject of resilience. Thus, we conceptualize attachment resilience as the processes by which the attachment relationship between a child and its primary caregivers is capable, when subjected to a certain degree of adversity, of preserving enough levels of affective connection, and of maintaining its functions as a safe and secure base for exploration. Attachment resilience also entails the relationship's capacity to recover such functions after their suspension, and even to see these functions enhanced following exposure to adversity. Therefore, attachment resilience requires a deepening or specification of theories about family resilience (Walsh, 2003), although it is not identical to it. We understand it as a nested dyadic component, an intermediate level between individual and family resilience.

Characteristics of Attachment Resilience

As with all aspects of human resilience, attachment resilience is characterized by a number of qualities evident in a range of studies.

Activation under adversity. At the most basic level, every attachment relationship develops in a context of some adversity, as it is a system that evolves to maintain the child's

safety under situations of stress, dysregulation, and potential danger common to all children (Bowlby, 1973; Crittenden, 2016). Thus, by its very definition, the attachment system is set in motion in the face of perceived adversity and must show some capacity to facilitate the child's development. We will, however, refer to attachment resilience when these processes of care and protection take place under circumstances of special adversity that, by their nature (unexpected) and/or their degree (accumulated), interact with or overwhelm the daily strains and challenges associated with natural processes of transition to parenthood and child development. This extraordinary and potentially traumatic adversity can affect attachment by directly impacting upon the child, impacting upon the caregiver (and, through her or him, upon the relationship; Scheeringa & Zeanah, 2001), or impacting upon the family system as a whole. Trauma in the family puts attachment to the test: attachment relationships may amplify suffering or serve as a buffer and a growth-promoting factor in the face of adversity. These "tests" take place in different ways:

- When stress and/or trauma affects the child, it challenges the caregivers' ability to provide security. This would be the case, for example, when a child is diagnosed with a serious, life-threatening illness. Diagnosis not only affects the experience of the family members involved, but may also compromise the parents' capacity to show emotional availability, support the child or read his/her emotional signals accurately during the illness and subsequent treatment (Kazak et al., 2006; Pitillas, 2014).
- When stress and/or trauma affects the family, or one of its members, and compromises security within the child-caregiver relationship. This would be the case, for example, of the impact of maternal depression on attachment (Martins & Gaffan, 2000) or the impact of gender violence on the security of a mother-child relationship (Levendosky, Bogat, & Huth-Bocks, 2011).
- When stress and/or trauma affects the whole family, compromising its natural protective components. Such would be the case of poverty, migration, or displacement (Betancourt et al., 2012; Villaceros, 2017) which distorts availability, communication and regulation within the family, and can affect children more strongly than adults.
- When the source of the trauma is the very deterioration of attachment relationships, their absence, or their character as negligent or abusive.

Connection and security. Attachment is not only resilient when it maintains security, but also when it is capable of restoring security after damage or rupture (see following discussion for more details). In daily situations and, more specifically, under adversity, there are many episodes of disconnection, of insensitivity, or intrusion. An attachment relationship is resilient when it is capable of re-establishing connection after disconnection, restoring security when it feels loss, or reactivating the ability to give meaning to the interaction, after a time of misunderstanding or inability to mentalize.

Finally, beyond seeking homeostasis through interactive repair, attachment resilience can also be associated with growth (Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012), which would entail a more solid sense of interpersonal connection, a reinforcement of the experience of safety and effective interactions.

Procedural character. One of the common debates in the resilience literature is whether it can be thought of as a trait or a set of processes. We believe it is best described as a dynamic mechanism, although we are aware that the practice and success of attachment resilience processes may generate a disposition to respond “resiliently” to new challenges. A relationship’s capacity to respond supportively will be put to test repeatedly, depending on the character, the degree, the temporality, and the accumulation of demands that characterize each episode of adversity (Berástegui, 2013; Smith & Pollack, 2020; see our case analysis later in the chapter for reflection on the influence of time on the evolution of attachment resilience in a mother–child dyad). For these reasons, attachment resilience is not only linked to parental responsiveness or caregivers’ working models of attachment, nor to the child’s working model of a successful relationship, but is an emerging property of each relationship (e.g., attachment can be more secure toward the mother than the father at a particular point in time).

Components of Attachment Resilience

What does it take for early attachment relationships to maintain security in the face of hardship? The following is a list of the most important processes associated with attachment resilience.

Responsiveness and mutual regulation. The concept of parental responsiveness¹ refers to the caregivers’ ability to detect, understand, and adequately respond to the child’s emotional signals and needs (Ainsworth, 1979). Responsivity is of great importance, since infants and young children are unable to satisfy their physiological and psychological needs autonomously. Caregivers promote security by meeting their children’s need for attachment and exploration. Attachment needs are those activated by experiences of distress or vulnerability in the child, who seeks the adult to soothe, protect, and provide emotional containment. Exploration needs relate to the child’s tendencies toward growth and differentiation: the child needs a responsive adult to promote separation, offer stimulation, support the child within her zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), and celebrate her achievements (Powell, Cooper, Hoffman, & Marvin, 2013). Shifts between both systems may take place rapidly, and the child’s attachment and exploration signals are usually expressed nonverbally and within a microscopic time frame (seconds and split seconds). This means that caregivers’ responsiveness is often a matter of sensitivity to rapid, subtle changes in the child’s needs and the child’s cues. An immigrant child, for example, who has recently arrived at a new country may show signs of curiosity toward new stimuli and a tendency to explore his physical space (exploration) and, within seconds, shift to a stance of cautiousness and needing his parents to regulate his feelings of uncertainty and fear in the face of novelty (attachment). A resilient attachment relationship would involve the parents’ capacity to dynamically perceive and respond to these shifts in the child’s motivation. Parental responsiveness may contribute to attachment resilience by generating dynamics of mutual regulation and adjustment between parent and child: “Caregiver and infant learn the rhythmic structure of the other and modify their behavior to fit that structure” (Schore, 2010, p. 20). When this occurs, mutual regulation can be a basic source of agency for both caregiver and child. When involved in this circuit of mutual transformation and adjustment, both participants in the relationship develop a sense of basic

trust in their own ability to modify contingencies within the relationship and, extensively, within the social world. This may be especially valuable for the child's emerging experience of self and her future ability to respond to hardship with hope and a sense of self-efficacy.

It is important to note that, despite the interactive, co-constructed dimension of regulation within the attachment dyad, this relationship is also defined by asymmetry: one participant (the caregiver) has a more mature organism and is more powerful than the other (the child). As Bowlby explained, attachment figures are "stronger and wiser" (see Powell et al., 2013) than children, something that enables the first to protect and nurture the second. Attachment relationships are somewhat the seat of a creative tension between mutual influence/reciprocity and the regulating influence provided by a caregiver who is in charge. Part of what characterizes attachment resilience is an ability of the relationship to maintain a balance between both dimensions when the relationship is facing adversity.

Representations and interaction. Attachment relationships are also the result of the relation between two dimensions: interactions (events) and representations (meanings). The interactive dimension of attachment includes the constant exchange of signals and responses between both partners in the relationship and the co-constructive, evolving nature of mutual influence between partners. The representational dimension includes interpretations, expectancies, feelings, reenactments from the past, and mental images that give meaning to interactions. Each aspect of attachment relationships has the potential to exert a transformative power upon the other as the two of them co-evolve. Traditionally, parenting programs and cultural views around infancy have mostly dealt with the behavioral, interactive dimension of attachment. This has brought issues such as behavior and needs management, limit-setting, feeding, sleeping, and toilet training to the fore. Additionally, the preverbal nature of the infant's psychological functioning may contribute to the relative neglect of the mental, representational side of attachment during the first years of life.

We believe, however, that a genuine psychosocial approach to parenting and attachment must include a consideration of the meanings that define, direct, influence, and are influenced by child-parent interactions. In this sense, our consideration of factors related to attachment resilience has a strong focus upon parental representations. Researchers have taken the exploration of attachment security to the realm of parental *states of mind* regarding attachment and parental *reflective functioning* (e.g., see Luyten, Nijssens, Fonagy, & Mayes, 2017; Slade, 2005). How do parents represent the world of affective relationships? What do they expect from significant others? Are they able to retrieve memories of their early attachment experiences and organize them in narratives that promote understanding of the social world of their own child? What do they expect from close relationships, and how do they proceed to minimize relational anxiety and have their emotional needs met while remaining responsive to the emotional needs of their children? These questions pertain to parental mental states regarding attachment. Likewise, are parents able to understand behaviors (especially, the child's behaviors) in terms of underlying mental states? This question is related to parental reflective functioning. A well-known study showed that these dimensions of maternal subjectivity, when measured during pregnancy, strongly predict a child's level of security at one year of age (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991). Such findings highlight the fact that the resilience of attachment relationships may not only be influenced by what happens between caregiver and child (interactions) but also by what the caregiver

feels, thinks, and expects; his capacity to reflect upon his relational history; and his capacity to *read* his child's states of mind.²

This ability to read the child's behavior as a sign of mental states involves a dynamic state of parental attunement with the child, since the meaning of behaviors and signals is not predefined, but related to their place in the interactive sequence. Reflecting upon mother-baby interactions, Tronick (2018) explained:

Their unique ways of being together cannot be transferred to being with others. No one else shares their configuration of meanings. During feeding, mother and infant implicitly know that a glance with a small smile means "I am ready for more," but at bedtime it means "Don't go yet." No one else could possibly know the meaning of these affects and relational intentions. (p. 36)

Intersubjectivity. The discovery of the influence that mental states and mentalization have upon security shows us that attachment relationships are also a matter of intersubjectivity (Tronick, 2018). From early on, children are able to share mental states with adults and derive a sense of joy and security from experiences of emotional attunement with the adult (Jurist, Slade, & Bergner, 2008). Research shows that children are able to know that they are seen and felt by others while interacting and that when this experience of mental sharing is not achieved (e.g., in cases where parents become emotionally disengaged), children protest and make efforts to regain a sense of intersubjectivity (Beebe & Lachman, 2014). Child-parent intersubjective attunement is highly dependent upon parental states of mind regarding attachment and reflective functioning. For a child to be seen and to feel intersubjectively connected, parental subjectivity must be free of unresolved trauma and excessive levels of anxiety (states of mind regarding attachment need to be secure) and open to have the baby's mind considered (Miller, Kim, Boldt, Goffin, & Kochanska, 2019). Early intersubjectivity is an important source of security for the child and, probably, of flexibility and strength within the attachment relationship. A continuous experience of mutual recognition may help both participants of the interaction to adjust to each other's state of mind, to anticipate each other's responses, to collaborate, and to efficiently absorb interactional conflict. This last point is closely related to the following factor involved in attachment resilience.

Rupture and repair. Decades ago, when thinking about the dynamics of maternal "devotion" and adaptation to a child's needs, Winnicott (1949) advocated for a "good-enough mother", that is, a caregiver who may be imperfect or fail sometimes and who, by this very imperfection, leads a child toward security and growth. Infant research shows that secure mother-infant dyads, far from demonstrating perfect (or even high) levels of attunement, are constantly involved in sequences of interactive rupture and repair (Beebe & Lachmann, 2014). Often, the child's needs or mental states are not evident, or when they are, the caregiver's capacity to adjust her responses in intensity, rhythm, and quality is imperfect. Moments of synchronicity are believed to occur as little as 30% of the time between secure mothers and their children (Tronick, 2018):

"Thus, a more accurate characterization of the normal interaction, and a better basis for assessment, is that it frequently moves from affectively positive mutually coordinated states to affectively negative, miscoordinated states and back again on a frequent basis" (p. 45)

Early attachment security, and the ability of early relationships to be resilient in the face of adversity, is also a matter of flexibility and the capacity of the dyad to recover from mismatches, by means of interactive repair. In the face of adversity, caregiver–child dyads accustomed to interactive repair may be able to maintain connection and feel a basic sense of competence when misunderstandings or conflicts take place. Rupture-and-repair sequences push the child toward the acquisition and development of communication skills that are increasingly efficient. This may help the child stay connected to the caregiver and maintain trust (vs. withdrawing and/or deploying unregulated demands; Beebe & Lachmann, 2014). Concomitantly, caregivers may maintain a sense of affective connection to a communicative, present child who makes herself progressively more understandable. A virtuous circle of feelings of security in the child and competency in the caregiver may ensue.

The Ecological Construction of Attachment Resilience

When considering attachment relationships as a subject of resilience, we come across several variables that interact to pose a risk to such relationships. Resilience processes are complex, and often, they resist a reduction in terms of linear, simple relationships between protective processes and predictable outcomes (Ungar, 2011).

First, these risks are present across all the ecological levels, although with variable weight (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, the impact of hardship upon attachment relationships will presumably be stronger when risk factors accumulate (e.g., as happens with the cumulative loss of migration; Achotegui, 2009) but also depends largely on the transversal nature of risk or its ability to cross ecological layers. Individuals, as well as caregiver–child dyads, continually interact with their contexts across multiple levels (Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018).

As has been already advanced, a second characteristic of attachment resilience consists of its double dimension: an empirical dimension and a semantic dimension, one linked to interactive events and the other to how events are understood or represented. Decades ago, Bronfenbrenner (1979) stressed the importance of addressing both action and perception as a way to promote human development. Cyrulnik (2002) refers to this characteristic as the double dimension of trauma (real and narrative). With regard to attachment resilience, we conceptualize it as the circular and recursive relationship between interaction and representation for family interaction (Pitillas & Berástegui, 2018). This double lens is pertinent across all ecological levels. Thus, children and their parents attribute multiple meanings to their interactions. Institutions create narratives to understand their functioning and the events that have an impact upon them. Finally, large groups (societies, countries, or ethnic groups) use myths and historical narratives to understand their history, interpret their present, and guide adaptation for the foreseeable future (see Volkan, 2013, 2014, for a thorough review of large-group psychology in the face of collective trauma, transition, and loss). Therefore, attention to the dimension of events and interactions should not impede attention to the representational and meaning-making processes, which lead to complex responses to trauma within attachment relationships. In the same way, understanding the representational processes of children and their attachment figures should not keep us away from the observable dynamics that take place between them.

A third characteristic of attachment resilience is its processual nature: time is a key variable in understanding attachment resilience. This pertains to the interaction of different temporal levels of experience, the recursion of the processes, and the impact of the child's and the caregivers' developmental cycle. First, a transversal analysis allows us to see how temporal planes overlap, linking in the past with the present with what is expected in the future (see the following discussion for details). For instance, traumatic experiences of the past, such as situations of loss or impacts that are difficult to overcome, become recursively present (re-edited) within current family life (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975; Walsh, 2003). A similar pattern of influence takes place between anticipations and prophecies related to the future and the current sense of security within attachment relationships. Second, a longitudinal view enables us to see how processes of risk and protection tend to interact and feed back into each other, so that vicious or virtuous cycles emerge in the mid- to long-term (see Wachtel, 2017, for a more detailed version of this phenomena in relation to attachment patterns across the life cycle). Negative impacts are expected to be stronger when adversity is persistent (Pynoos, 1994). Besides, adversity may set in motion the use of defensive strategies that, despite being useful in diminishing threat in the short-term, may become personality traits in the mid- to long-term, reducing the child's ability to process social-affective information (Perry, Pollard, Blaicley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) and compromising the dyad's ability to engage in cooperative, affective dialogues, which would promote adaptive narratives in the face of stress (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Getzler-Yosef, 2008).³

Finally, attachment relationships go through different stages, as a function of the child's and the caregivers' developmental transitions, requiring adjustments that interact with adversity. Vulnerability takes different forms across the different stages of the life cycle, so a family response can be useful at one time and not at another. For example, Rolland (1994) has shown how families facing illness and disability may adapt well to diagnosis by means of repressive adaptation (being practical and avoiding emotional expression), whereas this kind of response could lead to difficulties in the mid- to long term (e.g., children may struggle to express their emotional needs clearly and develop adaptation or behavior problems). Thus, a change from repressive adaptation to more open ways of communicating and collaborative meaning-making within the family may enhance resilience. At the same time, each developmental crisis introduces new opportunities for attachment relationships to reorganize and to reactivate processes linked to resilience. In this sense, early attachment relationships are forged at a very sensitive moment both for the infant and young child (who is extremely vulnerable and laying the foundations for its psychological development; Evangelou, Sylva & Kyriacou, 2009) and for attachment figures (who are in transition to parenthood; Saxbe, Rossin-Slater, & Goldenberg, 2018).

The combination of these four characteristics of attachment relationships yields a complex, rich framework of analysis that allows us to better organize research and practice centered upon resilience during the early years. For example, research that focuses on medical illness in the child as a risk factor for early attachment must consider how the impact of diagnosis is mediated by the meanings given by the child himself (which is partly received from the family), and those "negotiated" with general social views and with health systems. Thus, from the perspective of attachment relationships, an event can work as a risk factor in some contexts and a protective factor in others. For example, research conducted by

García-Sanjuán (2017) found that a diagnosis of disability for an adopted child functioned as a protective factor for those families in which this disability was chosen and accepted before adoption and a risk factor for those families that were surprised by the disability, even though levels of disability were milder in the second group.

Some variables that have shown a relation to early attachment security across different ecological levels, the interaction-representation system, and time are synthesized in Table 15.1.⁴

TABLE 15.1 Most Frequently Studied Variables Involved in Attachment Resilience, Across the Different Levels of Human Ecology of Development

		Interaction (Events)	Representation (Meanings)	Time
Child	Individual resilience	Temperament Chronic illness Disability	Developing internal working models of attachment	Attachment phase Developmental history
Dyad	Attachment resilience	Parental responsiveness Parental stress Parenting skills	Mentalization Parental self-efficacy Representations about the child	Intergenerational transmission of care or trauma
Microsystem ^a	Family resilience	Parental physical and mental health Support between spouses Domestic/gender violence Communication Family organization and structure	Positive perspective Sense of coherence (predictability, controllability, worth) Meaning Transcendence Stigma	Family history Family's developmental cycle Family members' developmental cycle Stressful life events
Mesosystem		Attachment networks	Attachment networks	
Exosystem	Community resilience	Institutional environment (prison, hospital protection system, etc.) Instrumental and economic support versus poverty Social support and community bonds versus exclusion Professional and formal support Accumulated risk	Sense of belonging Rituals Racism and stigmatization	Community development History of the community
Macrosystem	Cultural resilience	Laws for the promotion/protection of parenthood Cultural practices and views on parenting Migration	Acculturation/ Inculturation Stigma Parental ethnotheories ^b	Historical moment Political and social moment

^aWe consider in this table the family microsystem, although other microsystems of care outside the home and the interaction of these with the family through the attachment networks (Lamb, 2005; Lewis, 2005) constitute a relevant area of analysis. Childcare practices within the zero-to-three period (homecare, group care, kindergarten, nanny, mother, shared mother–father care) vary widely, according to the cultural context in which early development takes place.

^bThe term *parental ethnotheories* refers to internalized cultural theories on parenting (Harkness & Super, 2005).

Principles for Study and Intervention

The following is a set of principles that, we believe, should guide researchers and practitioners in their consideration of attachment resilience and the promotion of it.

Chains of Security

Attachment security is a systemic phenomenon: it takes place and develops within a set of interactive sources of influence. In a very concrete sense, the security that a child is provided with by a caregiver is, to some extent, dependent upon the security the caregiver is provided within his or her couple, family, and social relationships. Those relationships are a source of security to the caregiver as long as they are embedded in wider relational domains defined by basic trust. At the same time, the circulation of trust between individuals and groups across several domains is supported by the structural security that stems from institutions, laws, and culture, among others. Elsewhere (Pitillas & Berástegui, 2018), we have used the concept of “chains of security” to designate the fact that security is, in a sense, a descending phenomenon: it flows down from the wider structures of society (the macrosystem) to its constituent social networks (the exosystem) and, ultimately, to child–caregiver dyads and individuals (microsystem). Inversely, security within attachment dyads may ascend toward the whole society by propelling dynamics of trust within the nuclear family, the extended family, neighborhoods, schools, and communities, a pattern that may finally lead to security-based cultures and social policies. As a result, studies on attachment resilience should be able to move from a dyadic to a multisystems lens. On the other hand, interventions aimed at enhancing attachment security should not only be able to promote safer interactions between caregiver and child but also to promote more effective chains of security between the caregiver–child dyad and the social and educational milieu that envelops the dyad. Finally, relationships between different levels of influence upon the dyad (e.g., the relationship of culture with educational models in schools, with teacher–parent relationships, and with parent–child relationships) should be considered as an essential component of a comprehensive map for the understanding of attachment resilience. As systemic and complex thinking may suggest, solutions to insecurity at a given level may be pursued at a superior logical level. Personal insecurity may be approached by working with the attachment dyad; dyadic insecurity may be approached at the family level; family insecurity may be approached at the extended family and/or community level; and so on. The space where understanding of problems (and their possible solutions) is found is an intermediate space between ecological levels.

From Harm to Resources (and the Other Way Around)

The study of human responses to adversity has traditionally been undertaken from a perspective centered upon *harm*: deficits, risk, and psychopathology. Despite the undeniable usefulness of a vision that considers risks, the study of attachment relationships as a potential unit of resilience adds a focus upon the *resources* that can be found within the dyad and that may be enhanced by intervention. Maintaining a double lens that recognizes harms and resources may be a difficult task for professionals who work within protection systems, where families are prone to display an array of risks and harmful parenting practices. However,

dynamics of adjustment, responsiveness, and repair are almost always detectable at the microscopic level of interactions. We may not only move toward a recognition of positive, secure parenting practices but, very importantly, in the direction of questions that are sensitive to the ecological dimension of attachment resilience: *Under what conditions* are positive, secure parenting practices more likely to appear?

Intervention models that integrate harm and resources as essential aspects of attachment relationships incorporate a diversity of ingredients, which involve, among others, corrective/educational approaches, the recognition and support of idiosyncratic parenting practices, clinical strategies, deliberation, and problem-solving. Professional flexibility and a diversity in intervention tools seem especially well-tailored to working in contexts of adversity, where families are under pressure to adapt to complex circumstances.

Detecting and celebrating family resources may help break cycles of insecure interactions: caregivers may feel secure within their relationship with professionals, something that prevents many families from disengaging from treatment. Most important, it may promote the progressive transformation of the parent's view of himself- or herself-as-caregiver. As Stern (1995) brilliantly discussed more than two decades ago, an essential therapeutic ingredient within child-parent treatment is the opportunity that parents are granted to see themselves as caregivers in a different, more positive light in the eyes of the professional. This may push the whole set of ingredients that define the attachment relationship (i.e., parental representations of the child, interactions around attachment and exploration, the child's representation of herself and her caregiver, etc.) in the direction of positive, systemic change.

From Past to Present (and the Other Way Around)

Far from being the result of random, or purely pathological processes, insecure parenting practices are forms of adaptation to a specific history and circumstances. Conducting research and practice around attachment resilience entails the recognition of the history of adaptations that underlies parenting practices (Crittenden, 2016). Parents develop ways of caring that are congruent with the environment in which they grew up and that, somehow, they expect will also be present to the child. A recent proposal for the understanding of mental suffering and adaptation, the Power, Threat, Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) has put forth the idea that "dysfunction" is the result of threats that were experienced by the individual within a set of power relationships (with their caregivers, teachers, spouses, and/or wider systems of power or production) and that stimulated processes of meaning-making (e.g., I am trapped in situation of danger without escape; people should not be trusted; intimacy brings pain; etc.), something that ultimately puts adaptation strategies in motion (fight, flight, paralysis, victimization, etc.). According to this perspective, instead of diagnosing people (or families), we may ask: "What happened to you?" (power), "How did it affect you?" (threat), "What did you make of it?" (meaning), and "What have you learned to do, to survive under those circumstances?" (adaptation). This last question may be formulated in terms of caregiving strategies: "What have you learned to do *as a caregiver* to help your child adapt to the threats that you experienced?" Threat-related learnings among parents, and the adaptations derived from them, may be enduring despite changes in external conditions (Crittenden, 2016). In this sense, coercive/corrective approaches in

the face of parenting practices may sometimes be misdirected. Conversely, secure parenting practices may have at their core a set of positive meanings that stem from parental history. We should integrate these into our view of attachment relationships if we want to consolidate those strengths when they are present in families.⁵ In short, we cannot understand and promote change in parenting practices unless we understand (and honor) the meanings and adaptations that underlie such practices.

Sanata and Badou: A Case Study

Sanata is a 27-year old immigrant woman from Mali, recently arrived in Spain with her husband, Aziz, and her infant son, Badou. Sanata's attachment history is one of severe neglect and abuse. When she was born, she was taken away from her birthmother's hands and secretly delivered to one of her father's wives who, at that time, was not able to conceive. She was raised under strong physical abuse by her adoptive mother, who became pregnant when Sanata was 11. This led to Sanata being informed that her biological mother was another woman and being rejected by her adoptive mother. Sanata was delivered back to her birthmother, who showed an extreme difficulty bonding to her after 11 years of separation.

Years later, Sanata married, became pregnant with Badou, and then migrated with her husband and son to Spain. The marriage between Sanata and Aziz was unsatisfactory, marked by conflict. Even though Aziz provided for Sanata and Badou, he provided no support with child-rearing. Shortly after their arrival in Spain, Sanata was diagnosed with an acute medical condition that led to a three-month hospitalization. During this time, Badou (a toddler) was separated from her mother without explanation or any contact. Also around Badou's toddlerhood, and during a significant part of his preschool years, Sanata suffered from severe depression and posttraumatic symptoms such as dissociation and affective numbing. These symptoms alternated with sudden outbursts of rage directed at Badou. Within this context, Badou developed attachment strategies characterized by inhibition, the absence of affective expression, and self-sufficiency regarding his needs for protection and comfort. When Badou was four-years old, Sanata started receiving help from a community-based nongovernmental organization.

In Figure 15.1 we apply our ecological model to develop a map of processes that define the development of resilience within Sanata and Badou's relationship under the dialectical tension between events and meanings, harms and resources, across different ecological contexts and levels, and, very importantly, across time.

First, we can observe adversity factors that operate across the ecological systems, characterizing the mother's and the dyad's experience with insecurity, disconnection, and isolation, both in the past and in the present, both in Mali and Spain and from microsystems to macrosystems.

For example, poverty forces the family to illegal immigration, which implies an illegal status at arrival, which increases the probability of being employed in informal jobs (e.g., domestic work) that prevent the creation of social networks and acquisition of the language. Sanata and Badou's attachment relationship struggles within a framework of disconnection,

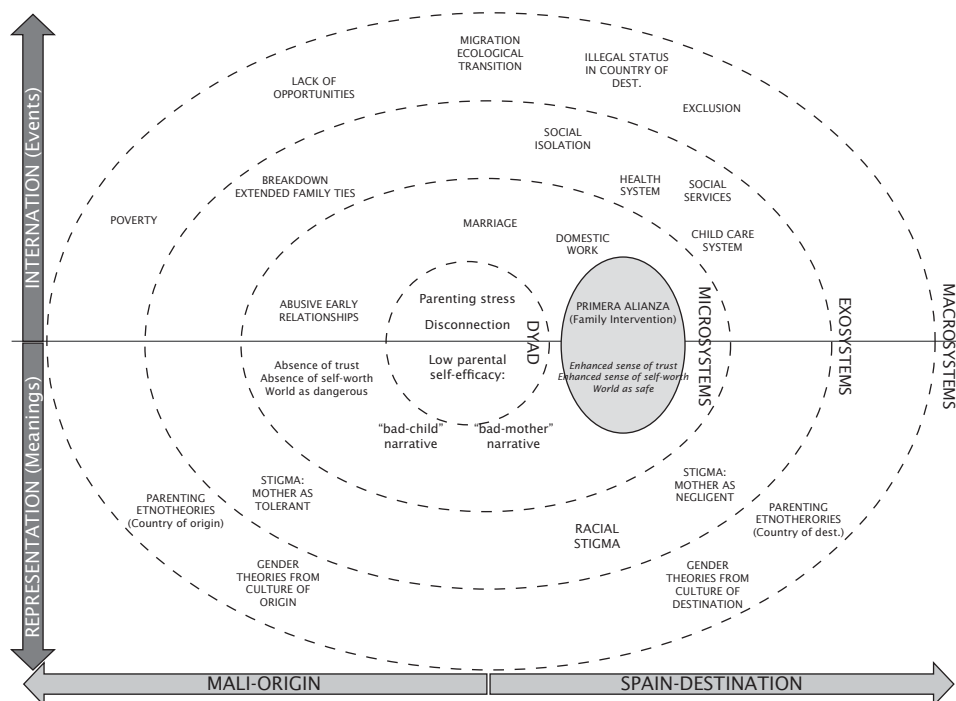


FIGURE 15.1 An ecological map of factors involved in Sanata and Badou's resilience process.

mistrust, resource overwhelm, and absence of support. All this provokes a relative inability to “see” the child and his emotional needs.

Second, on the horizontal axis we find a conflict between pre- and postmigration narratives. This exacerbates the problems that compromise Sanata and Badou's attachment relationship.

1. On the one hand, from Mali's culture, we find the idea of women as the sole providers of care and a *parental ethnotheory* (Harkness & Super, 2005) focused on raising strong children for a difficult world and neglecting emotional signals because they are considered a sign of fragility. The cultural sanctioning of early trauma (abandonment and abuse) has led to Sanata's inability to process early experience as harm, and to mourn. This idea has marked Sanata's upbringing and how she understands herself and lives her suffering and also her son's behavior. This results in the idea that she has been a bad daughter and that her son is a bad child whenever he cries or is unable to fend for himself. The stigmatization of mothers who are too tolerant of the demands of their children influences the way in which both are seen by Sanata's husband and Badou's father.
2. On the other hand, Spanish parental ethnotheories punish the lack of affection and protection. This idea of parenthood leads to the stigmatization of Sanata as a “typically African negligent mother,” as she is evaluated by the health system, the social services system, and specially by the child care system. This results in the idea that she is a bad mother.

Both the bad child and the bad mother narratives feed into parenting-related stress, the sense of disconnection, the lack of self-efficacy, and both Sanata's and Badou's self-esteem. Besides, the tension between pre-/postmigration parenting models, as well as the stigma related to Sanata's African ways of managing behavior and affect expression, provoke confusion related to child-rearing: what is the appropriate way to care for my child and educate him? All of these processes make it hard for Sanata and Badou to attach securely.

In this context, she participated in *Primera Alianza*, an attachment-centered intervention program developed by the authors (Pitillas & Berástegui, 2018; see the following discussion for details). During this participation in the program, Sanata was provided with

1. *A short but strong experience of security, trust, and connection and a new way of understanding herself and her son.* This corrective emotional experience enabled Sanata to reconstruct her image of herself as caregiver and to see her child under a new, more positive light.
2. *New attachments within the community and a sense of belonging to a social network.* Thus, the previous sense of overwhelm was buffered by social support.
3. *A decrease in the cultural tension between parenting models.* The intervention process helped Sanata build a more integrated, complex model of parenting. Some processes that led to this result were the participation in new cultural beliefs and images about childhood, an opportunity to reconstruct meanings about herself and her child, the detection and validation the meaning and the project that underlay her parenting practices, and the invitation and support in testing new practices and perceptions around attachment.

Sanata's affective state, accompanied by great difficulty with language, led to a mild level of success in this intervention but the change, although discretely, had begun. Five years later, Sanata participated again in *Primera Alianza*, this time with a focus on her relationship with her 18-month-old son Cheikh. Her use of Spanish had greatly improved, she had developed some important relationships within her community, and, generally, she seemed better acculturated. Her affective state was one of general well-being despite the daily struggles of being an immigrant woman in a low-income family. As a consequence of ongoing tensions within the marriage, Aziz is forced to get more involved in parenting now that they have two children. Badou's avoidant strategies stabilized over the years. Despite important costs to his affective balance, these strategies made him a manageable, "easy" child, thus reducing the former levels of aggression that defined Sanata's relationship with him during his first few years of life.

Sanata's participation on the program this second time activated processes that enhanced her attachment relationship with Cheikh, her image of herself as caregiver, and, significantly, led to a better relationship with Badou. This was expressed as an enhanced ability to understand her eldest son's early traumatic experiences (related to separations, emotional neglect, and intermittent abuse) and a wish to reestablish stronger affective availability.

Conclusion

Historically, attachment has been related to resilience in different ways (as a source of adversity in itself, as a factor of protection against adversity, and as the outcome of resilience/

adaptation processes). But attachment can also be studied as a unit of resilience, as a subject of processes of adaptation, repair, and growth that take place under conditions of hardship. Attachment resilience is characterized by the capacity of an attachment relationship to maintain adequate levels of emotional regulation, connection and intersubjectivity and to enter-ain processes of rupture and repair in the face of hardship.

A fundamental aspect of this level of resilience is its ecological nature, which entails a processual interaction between different types of impact across ecological levels, events and the meanings that are built upon them, and time as a source of change, recurrence, accumulation of harm, or new developmental opportunities. Our case description was intended to illustrate the complex interaction of these dimensions within a real attachment relationship over a period of years.

Our systemic perspective would entail that, if the caregiver–child relationship is resilient, this would positively impact on other levels of individual and family functioning. Thus, the child would grow with a wider set of resources for adaptation; the parent see his/her sense of competency and purpose reinforced; more positive interactions may take place at the family level; the child may show higher levels of social-affective adjustment at school, something that would bring forth secure relationships with teachers and peers and better acquisition of knowledge; families and children who are adapted and feel well may be more prosocial; and prosocial families may build secure neighborhoods. We believe that incorporating this level of analysis in the work of psychosocial intervention agents may enhance precision, efficacy, and, ultimately, social justice within preventive and therapeutic systems.

Key Messages

1. The study of attachment has been closely linked to that of resilience. Although attachment has been placed at different points in the resilient process (as trigger, mediator, and result), early attachment relationships can be a system or subject of resilience in themselves.
2. Attachment resilience is defined as the processes by which the child-caregiver attachment relationship is capable, when under adversity, of preserving a sense of interpersonal connection, maintaining the relationship's function as a safe haven (for regulating stress) and secure base (for stimulating exploration), to recover those functions after their suspension, and even to grow in the wake of adversity.
3. Attachment resilience is built and develops ecologically. Therefore, to understand attachment resilience processes, a complex view that integrates different ecological levels, the interaction of events and meanings, and time is warranted.
4. Including this level of analysis in the work of psychosocial intervention agents may enhance precision, complexity, and effectiveness.

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Notes

1. Research concerning the precursors of attachment security is somewhat inconsistent when using terms that deal with quality of parental care. Concepts such as parental *availability*, *responsiveness*, *sensitivity*, *involvement*, *warmth*, *interactional synchrony*, and others, have been used to highlight aspects of the parental response both to the child's attachment and exploration needs. Here, we have opted for *responsiveness* to designate caregivers' ability to provide care that is consistent and sensitive to different needs in the child.
2. The child's emerging representations of the social world may also play an important role in the determination of attachment security and resilience processes within relationships. Nevertheless, the difficulty of accessing the young child's representational world and the fact that parents are usually the "stronger" part of the relationship have directed researchers and practitioners to focus most of their attention on the parents' representational world.
3. The issue of defenses, their costs and benefits, and their positive or negative effect upon resilience is complex, and warrants a close study of each attachment relationship as well as the circumstances under which each develops. In some cases, the assimilation of defenses into the individual's personality may be helpful in adapting to chronic threats, thus promoting physical/psychological survival. As will be shown in our final case study, the early consolidation of defensive maneuvers, despite their costs, sometimes set the stage for the profiting of new developmental opportunities.
4. See Halty (2017) for a recent revision of this issue in Spanish.
5. Terms such as *angels in the nursery* (Lieberman, Padron, Van Horn, & Harris, 2005) or *kind memories* (Pitillas & Berástegui, 2018) have been coined to designate positive aspects of the caregivers' relational history that sustain positive meanings within the dyad as well as the intergenerational transmission of care.

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