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Clark, Janine

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Resilience, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice: An Interdisciplinary Framing

Janine Natalya Clark

Introduction

The existence of a wealth of scholarship exploring and analysing resilience reflects a huge interest in the concept from across multiple disciplines (Adger et al. 2005; Bargués-Pedreny and Martin de Almagro 2020; Masten 2021; Walker and Cooper 2011). Alongside this diversity of perspectives, what is also prominent is the shift from psychology-based explanations towards multi-layered approaches focused on the relations between individuals and their broader environments, particularly reflected in the concept of social-ecological systems (SES) (Berkes et al. 2003; Folke 2006; Walker et al. 2004). According to Cretney (2014, 628), 'In socio-ecological resilience frameworks, social and ecological systems are considered linked and interdependent on one another through the connections between well-being, economic activities and environmental conditions'. These SES, however, remain under-explored in the context of post-conflict and transitional societies (Ingalls and Mansfield 2017, 127). This is significant because the shocks and stressors of war and large-scale violence can negatively affect how the different parts of SES interact with each other.

Recognizing resilience as a 'boundary object' in the sense that it 'facilitates communication across disciplinary borders' (Brand and Jax 2007), this article engages in its own communication across disciplinary borders by drawing on two neurological processes – demyelination and remyelination. The former refers to loss of myelin, a fatty substance that insulates nerve cell axons in the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) and enables optimal conductivity of nerve signals (Drenthem et al. 2019, 334). Remyelination is a

process that entails the regeneration and repair of myelin. It is important to be clear from the outset that this research is not proposing a neurobiological account of resilience. Rather, it utilizes the concepts of demyelination and remyelination as an analogy.

It is fully acknowledged that just as some scholars have criticized the application of ecological principles to study complex social systems (Barrios 2016, 29–30; Béné et al. 2012, 12), similar criticisms might be made about discussing neurological concepts in a social science context. The purpose of the demyelination/remyelination analogy is not, however, to compare neurological processes to social processes, but rather, to demonstrate that the former 'are "good to think" with' (Panter-Brick 2014, 433) in a heuristic sense. If the usual reason for employing an analogy is 'to transfer a system of relationships from a familiar domain to one that is less familiar' (Orgill and Bodner 2004, 15), this research does precisely the opposite. It utilizes the analogy with the explicit aim of developing a novel conceptual framework for thinking about what conflict and violence do to SES and the communication dynamics within these systems – and what this means for resilience and, ultimately, transitional justice. This systemic focus is not intended in any way to detract from what violence does to human lives, but rather, to situate the legacies of violence – and in particular conflict-related sexual violence – within a broader social-ecological framework.

Scholars have discussed some of the many ways that sexual violence in conflict can affect communication; these include social stigmatization and marginalization of victims-/survivors[1] (Kelly et al. 2012; Oliveira and Baines 2020), altered intra-family communication and relationships (Koos 2017) and imposed silences (Davies and True 2017; Schulz 2018). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with female and male victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in three diverse countries – Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia and

Uganda – the article explores how such violence can 'demyelinate' channels of communication between individuals and their social ecologies (including families and communities) in the sense of weakening or altering them. This, in turn, affects resilience, as 'the capacity of both individuals and their environments to interact in ways that optimize developmental processes' (Ungar 2013, 256). It is significant in this regard that extant scholarship on sexual violence in conflict has largely overlooked resilience (see, however, Clark 2020a; Edström et al. 2016; Koos 2018; Zraly et al. 2013). To develop the second part of the analogy, the article argues that transitional justice processes can play an important 'remyelinating' role in the sense of helping to restore the velocity and flow of communication within SES, thereby potentially contributing to resilience. In so doing, it addresses the fact that the field of transitional justice has, to date, 'remained relatively indifferent to the concept of resilience' (Kastner 2020, 369).

The article's first section demonstrates the analytical value of the demyelination/remyelination analogy. It provides an overview of existing scholarship on resilience and communication, and discusses how the analogy adds to it. The second section is methodological and outlines the fieldwork that informs the conceptual analysis. The third section draws on the interview data to empirically build the argument that conflict-related sexual violence can have important 'demyelinating' effects, reflected in the interactions between victims-/survivors and their wider social ecologies. The final section focuses on 'remyelination' as a way of thinking about the largely unexplored relationship between transitional justice and resilience (Kastner, 2020; Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2017). One of the criticisms of resilience is that 'it turns the international community away from the responsibility for large scale intervention, placing the responsibility for resilience on local communities themselves' (Joseph and Juncos 2020, 291). The remyelination analogy

challenges this; far from turning the international community away from intervention, it raises broader questions about how transitional justice interventions might themselves contribute to resilience, in the sense of giving greater attention to the interactions between individuals and their social ecologies.

Resilience and communication

Existing scholarship

Extant scholarship primarily discusses resilience as a process rather than an outcome. Norris et al. (2008, 130), for example, define it as 'a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance'; Luthar et al. (2000, 543) frame it as 'a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity'; and Yehuda (in Southwick et al. 2014, 5) emphasizes that 'when we think about resilience as a process, then we are talking about an organism that is actively interacting with an environment'. As a process, moreover, resilience has no fixed form. Rather, it is inherently fluid, meaning that it can assume different shapes and manifest itself in varied ways (Lee 2020). Underlining this, Lenette et al. (2012, 640) draw attention to 'the diversity in pathways to nurture and maintain resilience'; and, similarly, Bonanno et al. (2015, 160) refer to 'myriad routes that might lead toward or away from resilient outcomes'.

In different ways, the notions of positive adaptation, interaction with one's environment and pathways/routes all convey notions of communication. Indeed, in their literature review of concepts of resilience, Castleden et al. (2011, 373) observe that 'The importance of "communication" was stressed in most articles, whether in the form of physical

telecommunication systems, organizational lines of communication between people and agencies involved in disaster recovery, or in the social networks that promote community cohesion'. Fundamentally, resilience – theorized as a social-ecological concept – is about more than just individuals and their capacity to 'bounce back' after adversity. It is also about the wider social ecologies and SES with which they interact in their daily lives (Berkes and Ross 2013, 7; Bottrell 2009, 323; Jowkar et al. 2010, 418; Leibenberg and Moore 2016, 4; Walklate et al. 2014, 413–419). To cite Afifi et al. (2016, 663–664), 'Individuals are part of a larger communicative, perceptual, and biological stress infrastructure, with each part of the system simultaneously affecting, and being affected by, the other'.

In this regard, and highlighting 'how resilience is cultivated communicatively and often collectively' (Buzzanell and Houston 2018, 2), resilience requires communication *with* systems and *between* systems. To cite Ungar (2013, 256), 'The personal agency of individuals to navigate and negotiate for what they need is dependent upon the capacity and willingness of people's social ecologies to meet those needs'. Yet, social ecologies cannot meet these needs unless they know what they are – and know how to respond to them. This, in turn, points to the critical importance of interaction and dialogue between 'outside' and 'inside', in the sense that 'The external environmental conditions (natural and social) of existence…frame, in a movement to the inside, the body's accessibility to material and spiritual resources needed for development (food, shelter, and care as well as ideas)' (Campos 2007, 398).

Communication is therefore a key dimension of the wider relationships and social networks that are crucial for building and sustaining resilience (Buzzanell 2010; Hahn et al. 2019; Hartling 2008; Moore and Westley 2011). Carr and Kellas (2018, 70) point out that

'individuals' abilities to manage stressful events in their family [are] likely affected by the way members of their family of origin communicate about those events' (see also Walsh 2016). In their Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (TRRL), Afifi et al. (2016, 665) underscore the importance of emotional investment in relationships, including through 'communicative maintenance strategies'; and they argue that 'Effective social support, communication competence, affection, and other affirming communicative behaviors often act as stress buffers' (Afifi 2016, 672). Focusing on community resilience, Houston (2018, 19) comments on the need for 'dynamic and robust interconnections' within and between different levels of community. Similarly from a community perspective, but with a particular focus on disaster management, Burnside-Lawry and Akama (2013, 33) assert that simply distributing information to the public is not sufficient to make people more prepared in relation to fire risks. There is, they maintain, 'also a need for an improved understanding of how different "communities" are composed – especially the content and form of "communication capacity" in different locations' (Burnside-Lawry and Akama 2013, 33).

Existing scholarship thus posits a strong linkage between resilience and communication. This linkage, however, tells only part of the story. While resilience is a response to shocks and stressors, these same shocks and stressors can affect the way that SES interact and communicate with each other, thereby undermining resilience. In other words, a critical gap within the literature is the relative lack of attention given to the crucial thematic of damaged or altered communication channels. Juncos and Joseph (2020, 293), for example, argue that '…resilience can be seen as the ability of a community or society to cope with or adapt to external violent shocks in order to foster a more sustainable peace'. While they are not writing specifically about resilience and communication, the crucial point is that 'external

violent shocks' may significantly affect how the different parts of a community or society communicate with each other – and the 'feedbacks' between them (Folke 2006, 256).

Terrorist attacks, as one illustration, can 'weaken the role of societal resilience as they directly disrupt the social cohesion within the community or society' (Oksanen et al. 2020, 1051). This disrupted social cohesion, in turn, both reflects and fuels disrupted communication. Focused on the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, Oksanen et al.'s (2020, 1059) research highlights that 'hateful online communication in the aftermath of tragic societal events may contribute to a social climate of fear and exacerbate societal uncertainty'.

While building on existing scholarship, this article takes a different approach. Focusing on two processes that occur within the central nervous system – demyelination and remyelination – it seeks to demonstrate their utility in relation to SES by using them to develop a new theorization of resilience that captures the significance of both communication and communication breakdown.

A new angle

Nerve cell axons within the central nervous system are wrapped in an insulating layer of myelin, 'one of the most abundant membrane structures in the vertebrate nervous system' (Simons and Trajkovic 2006, 4381). Myelin is crucial for ensuring optimal nerve conduction velocity (Coman et al. 2006, 3186) and thus has a core communicative function. Indeed, the communication that occurs between neurons and oligodendrocytes – the cells that produce and maintain myelin sheath – 'is fundamental to the development of the nervous system'

(Simons and Trajkovic 2006, 4387). In chronic diseases such as multiple sclerosis, inflammation within the central nervous system damages the protective myelin sheath, impairing nerve conduction. The speed with which messages travel along the axons slows down and axons themselves start to deteriorate and degenerate (Rainone et al. 2017, 728). Franklin and ffrench-Constant (2008, 839) note that demyelination is typically the result of a direct attack on oligodendrocyte cells.

The generation of new oligodendrocytes, in turn, produces new myelin sheath (Chang et al. 2002, 165), resulting in remyelination – 'the best example of a regenerative process in the mammalian CNS [central nervous system]' (Franklin and ffrench-Constant 2008, 851). This regenerative process, however, has limitations. In particular, the new myelin sheath is different from the original (i.e. pre-demyelination) sheath, in the sense that it is usually thinner and shorter (McDonald and Belegu 2006, 350). Moreover, remyelination is not always successful. Factors including the number of demyelinated axons (Franklin and Gallo 2014, 1907), as well as a person's age, gender and genetic profile (Franklin and ffrench-Constant 2008, 846), can affect the remyelination process.

As an illustration of Brand and Jax's (2007) aforementioned argument that resilience can 'foster communication across boundaries', this article maintains that societal shocks and stressors such as war and large-scale human rights abuses can themselves have significant 'demyelinating' effects, by altering how different elements of SES communicate with each other. It thus directly draws attention to the issue of damaged communication channels, which, as previously noted, has received little attention within extant scholarship on resilience and communication; and, in so doing, it creates a 'backstory' against which to contextualize the idea of resilience as a 'remyelinating' process of repair.

This demyelination/remyelination analogy, in turn, offers a different way of thinking about the interactions between individuals and their environments that are central to social-ecological approaches to resilience. For example, Ungar and Liebenberg (2011, 142) 'support an understanding of resilience as the capacity of individuals to navigate toward resources and negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally relevant ways that reflect their availability and accessibility within the social and physical ecologies of the individuals'. Hayward (2013) maintains that 'human resilience is best understood as the interrelationships among…individuals and their community, environment, and social institutions'. Such arguments, however, assume that channels of communication are intact and working. They might not be, and this raises a broader reparative issue. In her work with families, Walsh (1999, 11) maintains that 'The concept of family resilience affirms the reparative potential in all families and offers a valuable framework for research and clinical practice'. What this article is underscoring is a potential reparative dimension of resilience that remains unexplored and is highly pertinent to societies that have experienced conflict, violence and human rights abuses.

The functioning of communication channels has a broader relevance to the concept of complex adaptive systems; these are systems, of which SES are an example, 'that have a large number of components, often called agents, that interact and adapt or learn' (Holland 2006, 1). Just as the neural process of remyelination (and demyelination) – as a regenerative and adaptive process of repair – takes place within a complex adaptive system (Holden 2005, 654), so too does the 'remyelination' of damaged communication channels. However, while the concept of complex adaptive systems operates 'at a very high level of abstraction' (Lansing 2003, 184), this article offers a more 'grounded' approach. It is not about 'great numbers of parts undergoing a kaleidoscopic array of simultaneous interactions' (Holland

2006, 19), but, rather, about the interactions and communication between *individuals* and their social ecologies (including family, community and institutions) in response to 'demyelinating' shocks and stressors – and specifically conflict-related sexual violence.

Methodology and fieldwork

This article is based on fieldwork undertaken in the context of an ongoing five-year research project. Using the case studies of BiH, Colombia and Uganda, the research is examining how victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence demonstrate resilience in their daily lives, how their particular environments shape and enable expressions of resilience and how cross-contextual protective resources function (and are utilized) across the three case studies.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a growing body of critical resilience scholarship (Brassett and Vaughan-Williams 2015; Chandler 2020; Garrett 2016; Joseph 2013; Reid 2010). Howell and Voronka (2012, 4), for example, argue that 'getting citizens to be resilient in the face of challenges is not only cheap (in that it diverts patients out of public health care systems, in favour of self-help and positive thinking), it is also about aspiring to create a resilient citizenry, able to cope with uncertainty'. The research project that informs this article is not about 'getting citizens' – and more specifically victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence – 'to be resilient' outside of systems. It is also not about erasing 'structural constraints and power relations from the picture' (Chandler 2013, 284). Its overall aim is to develop transitional justice in a new direction, by emphasizing the wider social ecologies (including structural factors) that contribute to shaping the legacies of violence – and the key resources within these social ecologies that might be developed and strengthened to minimize the impact of shocks and stressors at the micro, meso and macro levels. In short,

it is seeking to demonstrate that developing more social-ecological ways of doing transitional justice can contribute to promoting resilience across interconnected SES (Clark 2020b).

This article draws specifically on the qualitative part of the project, which involved one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 63 female and male victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (21 in each of the three case study countries). The interviewees were selected from a larger sample of 449 male and female victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (BiH n = 126, Colombia n = 171 and Uganda n = 152), all of whom completed a project questionnaire between May and December 2018. While the quantitative part of the project is not the focus of this article, a brief summary is important for explaining how the 63 interviewees were selected.

The key section of the questionnaire was the Adult Resilience Measure (ARM), developed by Ungar and colleagues (Resilience Research Centre 2016). Approaching resilience as a social-ecological construct, the ARM – divided into individual, relational and contextual sub-scales – specifically measures the protective resources that an individual has within his/her social ecology. The 28 statements (including 'I share/cooperate with people around me' and 'My family is supportive towards me') are scored from one to five, and a higher overall ARM score is indicative of a greater number of protective resources that support resilience. The questionnaires were administered either by a member of the research team (one based in each country)[2] or by one of the in-country non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in the project, each of which received training in how to apply the questionnaire.

In the qualitative stage of the research, ARM scores from the questionnaires were used to divide respondents within each country into four quartiles, ranging from low to high ARM

scores. Each in-country researcher selected interviewees from each quartile, in order to explore whether and how differences in ARM scores translated into the qualitative data. Selection choices were also guided by the need to ensure heterogeneous interview samples for each country that adequately reflected demographic variation and diversity (including gender,[3] ethnic and age diversity) within the quartiles.

The interview guide was designed to give interviewees the space to speak broadly about their lives (beyond their experiences of sexual violence) and their resources. Interview questions included: 'What resources do you have that help you deal with the challenges that you face – e.g. your own inner resources, services within your community, government institutions?' 'After everything that you have gone through, what are the factors that have been most important in helping you to rebuild/start to rebuild your life?' 'Has the place where you grew up, or the place where you currently live – if different – affected how you deal with challenges and adversity in your life?'

All interviews took place between January and July 2019 and were conducted by the researchers in the local language/s (the author undertook all of the interviews in BiH). The author's host institution and the European Research Council (the research funder) granted ethics approval for the fieldwork. As required by the research funder, in-country ethics approvals were also sought and obtained. Interviews were recorded using encrypted digital voice recorders, transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The transcripts were subsequently uploaded into NVivo, and the majority were separately coded by two people (including the author) to ensure consistency and rigour of coding. The author developed the codebook over a period of 12 months and used thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2018) to identify and build the eight core themes.

During the interviews, communication emerged as a prominent theme in a variety of ways. Interviewees' experiences of sexual violence – always intertwined with other traumas related to war and armed conflict – had often affected how they communicated with others, but also how their social ecologies (including people in their community) communicated with them. The next section draws on the project's qualitative data to develop the argument that major shocks and stressors can 'demyelinate' channels of communication within complex SES, thereby potentially undermining resilience. It is possible that 'a lot gets lost in the course of interdisciplinary translation' and 'borowing' (Byford and Tileagă 2014, 356). On this point, it is important to stress that the empirical analysis does not compress the experiences and stories of victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence to make them fit the analogy. Rather, it uses them – and seeks to capture some of their richness – in order to illustrate the analogy and its relevance in a social science context.

An empirical exploration of 'demyelinated' communication in the context of conflict-related sexual violence

During interviews conducted in BiH, Colombia and Uganda in 2019, research participants frequently emphasized the difficulties of telling their stories and speaking about their experiences. More specifically, they described how the sexual violence they had suffered had affected their communication with others, including close family members. Talking about her husband, for example, a Bosnian interviewee reflected: 'He did not know for a long time. Well…I did not, even with him, well, you know, open up. Not that I am afraid or scared of him. He will do nothing to me, but somehow I can't talk about that, openly say it…Not even in front of him' (author interview, BiH, 6 March 2019). Also speaking about her husband, one of the Colombian interviewees noted:

> I had a husband, a *costeño* [a man from the coast]…Anyway, I arrived in XXX and everything was worse because I…I mean, I don't have children and I said: "God! What happens if I'm pregnant [from the rape], what am I going to say, that man [husband] is going to say that I was out there working as a prostitute – a slut – he'll never believe me." I didn't tell him what happened. I didn't tell anyone where I lived what happened. I kept quiet, but it was like a nail inside me. I wanted to unburden myself, but I didn't know who to. I wasn't with anyone I trusted, I had no friends, I didn't have my mother. Nobody in my entire family knew about it – they've only just found out… just last year, in fact (researcher interview, Colombia, 14 March 2019).

In Uganda, where research participants often made euphemistic rather than direct references to the sexual violence that they had suffered – including 'that thing', 'forced sleep' and being forced to 'sit' with soldiers[4] – one female interviewee reflected:

> The problems that I never told my parent was what I experienced when I was abducted and given to a man. It was not easy. I was nearly killed because of it, because of the issue of, what? Of sitting by force because I had refused it…So, that thing…the issue of forceful sleep, I couldn't tell my parent. Yes. I couldn't tell my natal people [family] (researcher interview, Uganda, 19 March 2019).

The range of potential emotional and psychological legacies of conflict-related sexual violence – which emerged prominently from the interviews – can greatly affect how victims-/survivors interact with their environments (Graybill 2013, 40). In this regard, these legacies are an important part of the 'demyelinating' process that makes communication more difficult. In addition to commonly expressed feelings of fear and distrust, in some cases feelings of shame had also affected individuals' ability to speak about their experiences.

According to George and Kent (2017, 521), 'the common assumption that survivor shame explains survivor silence may…mask deeper levels of complexity'. Based on research on conflict-related sexual violence in Timor Leste and Bougainville, they underline that '[t]he relationship between gender, silence, and shame is multilayered and multifaceted' (George and Kent 2017, 531). In the fieldwork that underpins this article, the Bosnian interviewees

spoke the most about shame (and humiliation); and some scholars have suggested that sexual violence was particularly shameful for Bosniak victims-/survivors because of their 'Muslim culture'. Writing while the war was still ongoing, Bresnick (1995, 126), for example, commented: 'Muslims view rape victims as particularly shameful…If the victim is raped in her home or village, she may refuse to return home'.

It is precisely such claims that 'mask deeper levels of complexity'. It was not only (female) Bosniak interviewees who talked about shame. A Croat interviewee reflected: 'They [referring to her family] were always asking, but you cannot say everything. It is a disgrace and you can't say everything. This [rape] will go to the grave with me' (author interview, BiH, 21 May 2019). A male Bosniak interviewee, for his part, disclosed: 'Well, what can you do, you have to come to terms with it. Like, you are ashamed, of course. It is embarrassing talking about it [very long pause]. I am telling you, I have never said anything to my wife and especially not to my children' (author interview, BiH, 10 April 2019).

It is also significant that Bosnian interviewees, additionally, were the most likely to engage in self-blame and to question their own behaviour (not only in relation to the sexual violence they had suffered but also more broadly). One of the reasons is that they were still struggling to create meaning from everything that had happened, and arguably part of the explanation lies in the fact that the Bosnian war (1992–1995) itself contributed to the political demyelination of communication channels, thereby highlighting that different types of demyelination can occur within SES at different levels. Fundamentally, in a country where ethnic divisions are now institutionalized (David 2019, 216), systemic elements communicate with each other on ethnic terms, impeding the development of a common meta framework that individuals might use to make sense of their experiences.

In other words, the demyelinating effects of conflict-related sexual violence necessarily intersect, more broadly, with the demyelinating effects of war and armed conflict. One of the female Colombian interviewees, for example, explained: 'We saw them [paramilitaries] take our relatives and they never came back, or, if they did come back, you'd see your child, your brother, chopped into pieces[5] and put in a body bag…'. Describing how this had affected her, she continued: 'It makes you into…like you're a rag being shaken out…going this way and that way, but never being able to know which way to choose. The dreadful thing is that you keep all of this inside you, you hide it inside, here…' (researcher interview, Colombia, 4 February 2019). Demyelinated communication is thus a two-way process, affecting how individuals communicate with their social ecologies, but also how these social ecologies communicate with them.

Particularly in the case of Uganda, broader socio-cultural factors were also involved in these demyelinating dynamics. More concretely, cultural beliefs about sexual violence can contribute to the stigmatization of those who suffer these crimes, further affecting how victims-/survivors and their communities communicate with each other. A female interviewee, for example, lamented: 'People insult me, yet it [sexual violence] was never my wish' (researcher interview, Uganda, 11 June 2019). A male interviewee similarly spoke about suffering verbal abuse within the community; people had told him: '"You stupid person, you allowed your fellow men to sleep with you"' (researcher interview, Uganda, 13 June 2019).

Additionally, Ugandan interviewees had often faced 'a layering or double burden of stigma' (Mill et al. 2009, 170). Some of them had contracted the HIV virus as a consequence of being raped and had faced stigma because of this (Nabulime and McEwan 2010, 276), which made

it hard for them to speak about their experiences. Furthermore, many interviewees had suffered (and often continued to suffer) stigma because of their time in the 'bush' with Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels. One interviewee, for example, maintained that she no longer had any marriage prospects. In her words, 'Even if I get into a new relationship, it never lasts because of the bad things said about me. They say I am *olum* [meaning the LRA], and to my suitor {they say} that "you are actually getting married to *olum*"' (researcher interview, Uganda, 10 June 2019).

Based on her work with female victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan, Tankink emphasizes that the socio-cultural environment encourages silence; '…personal experiences of sexual violence are kept private and society has limited cultural forums or public opportunities to talk about, remember or commemorate women's experiences' (Tankink 2013, 394). She further notes that women in South Sudan are seemingly not culturally permitted to remember the sexual violence; 'Most of the time, people do not want to listen to traumatic narratives – there is no receptive audience' (Tankink 2013, 394). The bigger point is that while sexual violence, war and armed conflict can have important demyelinating effects, socio-cultural norms and the narrative space that these norms allow can shape how much 'myelin' exists in the first place within particular social ecologies – and, hence, the openness of pre-demyelination communication channels.

That the demyelinating dynamics discussed in this section are necessarily socially and culturally located implicates issues of power. Sonderling (2014, 163) argues that 'the dominant party in any communication will produce the meaning and the definition of reality that will prevail over any competing meaning…Whoever has social power therefore legitimises and imposes meaning'. Similarly, the 'inflammation' that causes demyelinated

communication may reflect larger structural issues and inequalities of power. The demyelination analogy thus addresses one of the criticisms of resilience, namely that the focus on positive adaptation to adversity can neglect deeper structural causes of vulnerability (Chandler 2020, 210).

Notwithstanding its emphasis on demyelinated communication channels, it is important to be clear that this article is not seeking to argue that victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence *must* speak about their experiences. Just as they may have various reasons – imposed and/or chosen – for remaining silent, silence itself can be pregnant with meaning and serve multiple purposes. It might become, inter alia, 'a mode of "expression" that can protect, challenge or protest' (George and Kent 2017, 520) and a 'key method for dealing with complex, difficult and often dangerous circumstances' (Parpart and Parashar 2019, 7; see also Clark 2020c). Discussing violence (including sexual violence) committed against women's bodies during the Partition of India in 1947, Das (1996, 84) notes that she found a 'zone of silence around the event' when she asked women to speak about their experiences. According to her, this 'code of silence' had a protective function by ensuring that their experiences were not made public (Das 1996, 84). In other words, silence can be both a reflection of, and an adaptive response to, broader cultural, systemic and structural issues that have their own demyelinating dynamics.

Despite the challenges that interviewees in all three countries faced in speaking about their experiences, many of them also stressed the importance of communication. Only two of the 63 interviewees – both of them Colombian – actually used the term resilience, and one of them explicitly linked resilience and communication. She maintained: 'I'm very resilient and I've resisted. I've resisted against the pain, of keeping quiet about it, keeping it to myself'

(researcher interview, Colombia, 6 March 2019). More broadly, while other interviewees did not directly mention resilience, they frequently spoke about communication – and particularly about communication with other victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence – as something that helped them in dealing with their experiences. In this regard, NGOs and women's associations were crucial. One of the Bosnian interviewees who had her own organization, for example, told the author:

> We help each other by talking, this is all. If any of us is missing something, let's try to help among ourselves. I mean, between us. You cannot {help} financially, because no one has money today, but we can {help} with words. Words. I value words a lot, to be listened to, to have someone listen to me, to be helped. If they see me fall, to, let's say, lift me back up (author interview, BiH, 6 June 2019).

Speaking about her involvement with a local association and the workshops it had organized, a Colombian interviewee recounted: 'I come away from every single one of those workshops with something new and it helps me so much – especially from a psychological point of view'. She added: 'I mean, I feel good…it's so wonderful to share with other women who've lived through the same situation and to discover how they cope, how they are doing now. It helps…makes you want to do even better than you're doing at the moment' (researcher interview, Colombia, 11 February 2019). A male Ugandan interviewee explained how, through a local NGO, he had become involved in a performing arts group, playing the *nanga* (harp). In addition to having the opportunity to creatively express himself through music, this man also stressed that 'what helped me was being among group members' (researcher interview, Uganda, 26 March 2019).

In a neurological context, demyelination 'can cause problems with feeling, moving, seeing, hearing, and thinking clearly' (Rainone et al. 2017, 728). Similarly, demyelination within

SES can affect how these systems ‘speak to’ and ‘listen’ to each other. What the above examples demonstrate is that individuals, in interaction with these systems – and as an expression of resilience – may actively look for and develop new communication opportunities (see, for example, Koos 2018, 216). There is a broader issue, however, about how interventions in conflict-affected societies themselves can foster such opportunities and contribute to repairing damaged communication channels. The final section reflects on the ‘remyelinating’ role of transitional justice processes.

Transitional justice, ‘remyelination’ and resilience

Remyelination entails ‘the restoration of nerve conduction to affected fibers’ (Duncan et al. 2009, 6832), thereby improving how the central nervous system communicates with the rest of the body. While not explicitly articulated as such, some core transitional justice goals – including giving victims a voice, establishing/documenting the truth and aiding reconciliation – are also about communication. Some scholars, moreover, have looked at particular communication challenges that may arise in the context of transitional justice processes. Writing about the Special Court for Sierra Leone (2002–2013), for example, January (2009, 220) notes that ‘Postconflict Sierra Leone and the public’s “will to truth” require those who communicate theories of international humanitarian law to leap over a trust–information gap created by culture, conflict and violence’. More recently, a special edition of the *International Journal of Transitional Justice* indirectly addressed the issue of communication through a focus on technology and its possible contributions to the field. In it, Pham and Aronson (2019, 2), for example, argued that ‘Technology provides transitional justice practitioners with an opportunity to engage more broadly and directly with affected populations and to educate societies about past and current injustices’.

While building on this implicit communication thematic, this section develops it in a new direction by extending the remyelination analogy to transitional justice. Its argument is that transitional justice processes have an important role to play in 'remyelinating' damaged communication channels within conflict-affected societies, which themselves constitute complex SES. To cite Shefik (2018, 318), 'If the aim of transitional justice is genuinely to help a society repair its social bonds and promulgate social change, then transitional justice measures need to find new and creative ways of communicating directly with the local people, as well as allowing people to find new and creative ways of communicating with each other'. Utilizing the analogy of remyelination in this context is not about treating transitional justice as a neurobiological process, or likening it to one. Rather, the analogy serves a two-fold purpose.

First, resilience remains a largely unexplored concept within the area of transitional justice. One possible explanation is that if resilience is narrowly construed as a cultural construct that is 'both deeply romantic and idealistic' (Baraitser and Noack 2007, 176), there would seem to be little place for it in a field that is concerned with gross human rights violations and their legacies (Clark 2021a, 533). Moreover, if resilience is understood as 'placing the onus on communities to get on with the business of adapting' (Mackinnon and Driscoll Derickson 2012, 259), this might be seen as detracting from the political responsibilities of leaders to deal with the legacies of the past. Yet, there are important synergies between transitional justice and resilience (Clark 2021a, 535–536). Kastner (2020, 369), for example, notes that:

> …several defining elements associated with resilience are also prominent in the context of transitional justice: individuals and communities undergo significant changes in conflict and post-conflict situations; they need to adapt, find strategies to cope with various forms of violence and develop the ability to survive through and after periods of significant stress.

Wiebelhaus-Brahm (2017, 143), moreover, points out that transitional justice 'holds the potential to promote or undermine the resilience of post-conflict societies'. Remyelination offers a novel way of thinking about the relationship between resilience and transitional justice through a communication lens – and, relatedly, about the significance of 'demyelinated' communication channels vis-à-vis core transitional justice goals. The key point is that while there has been little direct discussion about communication and its significance in relation to transitional justice, communication – and hence remyelination – is crucial for developing 'resilient infrastructures' that 'promote societal well-being' (Doorn et al. 2013, 113). At the same time, however, the previously-noted fact that remyelination within the central nervous system is not always successful is useful for bringing to the fore the enormous challenges of 'repair' in post-conflict and transitioning societies, potentially giving a more realistic sense of what 'transition' entails. The issue is not simply about 'what it is that is being transitioned *to*' (Quinn 2014–2015, 65), but also about what it is that individuals and societies are transitioning *with*.

Second, and relatedly, the common denominator linking transitional justice, remyelination and resilience is that all of them are complex processes that have a crucial systemic dimension. In different ways, they illustrate that 'contingent interactions among causal agents are at the heart of how living systems work' (Sapolsky 2004, 1789). As a living system, transitional justice necessarily interacts with other systems, including justice and political systems. Too often, however, it is piecemeal in its approach (Aiken 2010, 173; Bell 2009, 20; Hamber and Kelly 2016, 29), focusing on individual parts (such as victims' needs) rather than on the inter-relationships between parts and the wholes (and in particular the dialectics between victims and their wider social ecologies).

Hall et al. (2018, 348) maintain that 'the literature of transitional justice has greatly benefited from a more recent qualitative turn towards "victim-centered" studies'. This 'victim-centred' turn, however, can marginalize broader social-ecological factors that shape individuals' needs and affect how they deal with the past – and that themselves may contribute to remyelinating channels of communication. The previous section, for example, highlighted the support that some of the interviewees had received/were receiving from NGOs or women's associations. These organizations – a significant social-ecological resource and protective factor – had helped interviewees, inter alia, to realize that they were not alone and offered them important story-sharing – and story-building (Clark 2021b) – spaces.

The larger point is that while McAuliffe (2017, 250) asserts that 'The vigorously contested process of expanding the interdisciplinary spaces within transitional justice (and hence its ultimate goals) has taken precedence over study of actual post-conflict ecologies', what this article ultimately demonstrates is that the expansion of these interdisciplinary spaces can in fact illuminate these ecologies. Fundamentally, thinking about how transitional justice can remyelinate communication in societies that have experienced large-scale violence, in ways that benefit not just individuals but entire SES, offers an alternative framing that extends beyond 'victim-centrism'. In this regard, a key practical challenge for transitional justice is to strengthen the resources within people's wider social ecologies that can help to encourage remyelination and, more broadly, resilience.

Conclusion

In an article about the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue, Connors (1990, 461) notes that 'At first glance, mathematics and anthropology would appear to have little in common'.

She goes on, however, to point out that 'anthropology is a useful tool for understanding the transmission of mathematical knowledge in today's culture' (Connors 1990, 461). At first glance, similarly, the neurological processes of demyelination and remyelination would appear to have little in common with resilience and transitional justice. This interdisciplinary article has sought to demonstrate – focusing on conflict-related sexual violence and drawing on interviews with victims-/survivors in BiH, Colombia and Uganda – that the transposition of the basic ideas of demyelination and remyelination to a social science context provides new ways of thinking about resilience and transitional justice.

Both conceptually and empirically, it has developed the argument that conflict-related sexual violence can 'demyelinate' channels of communication within SES. While this demyelination process undermines resilience, by disrupting interactions between individuals and their social ecologies, 'remyelination' is essential for enhancing and repairing these interactions – and thus for fostering resilience as a quintessentially social-ecological process. Likening resilience to a remyelination process, it has also utilized the analogy as a way of thinking more systemically about transitional justice and its largely unexplored relationship with resilience.

Byford and Tileagă (2014, 361) argue that 'interdisciplinary analysis, if it is to transcend some of the problems of "borrowing," needs to be transformative rather than confirmatory'. In 'borrowing' from the field of neurology, this article has ultimately sought to offer a transformative interdisciplinary analysis that not only brings something new to extant scholarship on resilience, conflict-related sexual violence and transitional justice, respectively, but also has practical and potential transformative implications for lives and relationships affected by violence.

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Notes

[1] This article uses the terminology of 'victim-/survivor', to underscore that women and men who have suffered conflict-related sexual violence may identify with one term rather than (or more than) the other – or indeed with both. It is also important to stress, however, that the men and women who participated in this research were not *only* victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. All of them had experienced multiple forms of violence, direct and indirect. Some of them had also suffered violence and abuse from family members and spouses/partners; and everyday forms of structural violence were for many an ongoing reality.

[2] The author was based in BiH.

[3] It should be noted that only 27 of the 449 respondents were men, a fact that highlights the difficulties of locating male victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (see, for example, Schulz 2018, 584).

[4] In her work on Peru, Leiby (2018, 141) notes that 'The norms and laws regulating gender roles and sexual behaviour not only affect *whether* a survivor reports sexual violence, but also *how* they talk about it' (emphasis in the original).

[5] While paramilitaries in Colombia officially demobilized in 2005, some of them subsequently joined criminal gangs known as BACRIM. Sanabria-Medina and Restrepo (2019, 7) note that 'In 2012 the practice of dismemberment increased due to the actions of "organized criminal gangs" or BACRIM who adopted this practice reaching levels of concern, to the point of creating the so-called *casas de pique* or chop houses, which are physical spaces where victims are taken to be tortured, dismembered, and assassinated'.

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