Enhancing prosilience through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

Theoretical master thesis – 10th semester, Psychology

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Abstract

The inherent theoretical master thesis aims to solve the dividing nature of psychological resilience and provide a direction for future application in practice by investigating the research questions: *"How can resilience be re-conceptualized and re-defined?"* and *"How can prosilience be enhanced through application of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?"*. This master thesis contains two parts: Part A is a research article aimed at re-defining psychological resilience, and in the elaborative part B, principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy are applied to the newly advocated concept of *Prosilience.*

To answer the first research question, it is necessary to review the contemporary perspectives of resilience to address the limitations they contain. Theories of resilience predominantly define resilience as either a trait, a buffer, or a process. It is claimed that these perspectives are limited in terms of their inferred discursive properties, omission of the context of adversity, and the tautological nature of their definitions. To combat these limitations, it is argued that resilience should be replaced with the word "prosilience" as it encompasses forward movement in irreversible time towards a desirable future. Prosilience is defined as: *"The reciprocally influenced, negotiating act of an individual with umwelt that enables flexible adaptations"*. The re-definition is built upon a theoretical foundation of cultural psychology of semiotic processes. *Reciprocally influenced* points to the reciprocal relationship between an individual and the umwelt, which is consolidated through the processes of internalization and externalization. *Negotiating act* refers to the individual's negotiation of strategies with the umwelt during adversity, through which they actively seek out specific strategies to deal with adversity and move towards their desirable future.

To answer the second research questions, principles from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy are summarized to provide the foundation of how prosilience can be enhanced in therapy. The six processes of psychological flexibility are linked with the theoretic implications of prosilience in a discussion on how each flexibility process fosters prosilience in adversity situations. Firstly, it is argued that acceptance and cognitive defusion enables individuals to accept and defuse from the negative thoughts and feelings that can occur during uncontrollable adversity situations. In adversity situations where the circumstances are outside the control of the individual, acceptance

and defusion can be considered acts of prosilience as they entail active regulation of thoughts and behavior.

As adversity situations are complex in their nature, being in contact with the present moment and having one's self as context, enables the individual to fully perceive, observe, experience, and interpret the pleromatic signs present during adversity. This enables individuals to gather the needed information to negotiate strategies of acts of prosilience. Values are argued to provide a sense of direction from which individuals can do committed and acts of prosilience during adversity situations. Values provide a foundation wherefrom negotiations are enhanced by inducing concise options of acts of prosilience to guide the individual towards a desirable future. Contrary to the claim in ACT, it is argued that therapists should explore the reasoning behind chosen values to avoid culturally ingrained values and steer clients towards solidifying their personally preferred values. To combat the domain-transcendent potential inherent in adversity situations, it is proposed that individuals should choose values in the domain of self that provide coherency between all other life-domains.

Finally, the conclusion in part B answers both research questions by summarizing the central points made throughout the present thesis. It is argued that the combination of ACT and prosilience can provide a direction for future therapists to aid clients in their aspiration towards a desirable future by utilization of ACT principles that enable acts of prosilience during adversity.

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Introduction to the master thesis

Elite athletes encounter adversity situations often in their everyday life: Defeats; Moving to foreign countries; Language barriers; Not being selected for their teams; Not performing; Personal issues; Dealing with the high expectations associated with their sport; Being scrutinized; Criticism from the media, colleagues, coaches and on social media; Constant pressure (by themselves and others); Costs on their personal life. Coping with the different types of adversity is at the center of performing as an elite athlete, but not all athletes thrive in adversity.

In an interview[1] with the German paper, *Der Spiegel*, the former football player, Per Mertesacker, describes his bodily reaction to the pressure of performing at the highest level. Before every game, his nervousness would lead to diarrhea and nausea, symptoms that persisted throughout his career. He never sought out help for his issues either from a psychologist or his family.

The consequences of adversity are apparent in sports: From deeply serious cases like Aaron Lennon, who was placed in a mental hospital, and Robert Enke, who committed suicide following years of struggle with depression to stories like Mertesacker's. Coping with adversity is therefore a necessary asset for operating and performing in high-pressure environments and avoiding mental health issues. Being able to handle failure and adversity is consequently a central aspect of elite sports, wherefore it is important that practitioners like psychologists, coaches, players, and everybody in sport environments understand how to aid the athletes in adversity situations.

The examples included in this introduction are focused on elite athletes as they face much adversity in their career, but adversity extends to all parts of life and to all human beings, and as such the findings in the present master thesis also transcends to other contexts. Coping with adversity is exactly where psychological resilience has its relevance.

Resilience has for long been synonymous with the ability to deal with adversity: A person, who possesses the traits associated with resilience, should be able to deal with almost any

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[1]Windmann, A. (16-03-2018). Why Arsenal Star Per Mertesacker is Happy to Leave Football, *Der Spiegel*. https://www.spiegel.de/international/business/interview-with-mertesacker-about-exit-from-arsenal-football-a-1198260.html

type of adversity (Maltby et al., 2016; Maltby et al., 2019). This simplistic view of human resilience has pervaded the field of sports and has become an intricate part of the discourse on athlete resilience among the public and the media. If the definition of resilience provided above is applied to cases like Mertesacker's and Robert Enke's, it will seem like they did not have the traits of a resilient person. This was the exact mindset that pervaded my own thinking when I initially started looking into resilience.

Why resilience?

My journey in resilience research started in 2018, when I - as an elite football coach and upcoming psychologist - wondered why danish expropriate footballers struggled abroad. Being affected by the discourse in the media and among my colleagues, I suspected that a lack of resilience was to blame: Players were used to a warm atmosphere in the danish clubs, and due to them being nurtured and growing up in safe environments, they struggled with adapting to the harsh environments that exist in the clubs outside Denmark. I hypothesized that the danish players were "mentally weak" unlike people stemming from harsher environments.

To investigate this hypothesis, I looked at the danish football players abroad, their playing time for their clubs, and found that surprisingly few played regularly for their teams (See attachment A). From the small amount of data I collected, I then proceeded to research literature on resilience with the aim of writing a critical research article on the topic of danish expropriates.

In the process of researching the literature, I found that their limitations were apparent. By asking myself simple questions like "Am I a resilient person?", "Which traits of a resilient person do I have?" and "How do I become more resilient?", I started to wonder about the conceptualization of the concept of resilience. What I found was that the answer to those questions often was: "it depends on the context": In some contexts, I am a resilient person. I can endure many things, but some things I cannot endure. By looking to my own experiences of adversity, I started to think of resilience as something other than a trait. Meanwhile these thoughts started to appear, I started studying the master's program, Cultural Psychology, at Aalborg University.

While studying cultural psychology, I found the epistemological and ontological ground upon which my theorizing of resilience could be built. According to Valsiner (2014, p.

31), culture is: *"... in between the active minds ("culture bearers") and their environment ("socio-cultural system"). In that relationship, different "products of the mind" – meanings, tools, symbols – emerge that further re-vamp both the "socio-cultural system" and the "minds of the culture-bearers"* (Valsiner (2014, p. 31). This entails that human beings are co-constructing the socio-cultural system and their own, wherefore I found that viewing a person as "mentally weak", would not adequately explain the complex processes that occur between an individual and their environment.

To answer my own curiosity about resilience, and guide the thesis, two research questions will be included and answered through the two-part master thesis:

1: How can resilience be re-conceptualized and re-defined?

2: How can prosilience be enhanced through application of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?

The first questions will be answered in the research article (part A), which will provide an introduction to the concept and theory of prosilience. The change from "re" to "pro" in link with "silience" indicates the forward coping needs of the person under challenge. Thereafter, the elaborative part (part B) will include a discussion of principles from ACT, and why those principles are coherent with prosilience.

Structure and research questions

This theoretical master thesis will be the summary of 3 years of researching, discussing, and writing about resilience. My initial questions and thoughts have led to my own theorizing on the topic, and that theory will be argued for and laid out in the research article (part A). To provide a framework from which the re-conceptualization of resilience is distinguished, part A will initiate with a review of the contemporary research and theorizing in psychological resilience, along with a discussion of their limitations. From there a discussion of the word, resilience, and its implicit qualities, will provide the foundations for the re-conceptualization and re-definition of resilience to *prosilience*. The specifics of prosilience will be laid out in the following sections along with a conclusion of the article.

In part B, the thesis will go more into depths about the role of prosilience in adversity, and how the usage of principles from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy can provide

practitioners with the tools to help clients with psychological prosilience. Part B will initiate with an introduction to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and why this therapeutic approach is relevant in the context of prosilience. From there a summary of the six processes that constitute psychological flexibility will conducted, followed by an insight into skepticism towards ACT. Afterwards, the claims and qualities of prosilience provided in part A, will be included in a discussion on the prosilience enhancing qualities of the six processes of psychological flexibility.

The conclusion in part B will seek to convey a link between the two parts that summarizes the arguments made.

Concept clarification and the scope of the master thesis

This project seeks to clarify the difference between traditional theories of resilience and the theory of prosilience. The concepts resilience and prosilience will be used at their appropriate places: *Resilience* will be used when discussing theories, articles, or discourses that utilize the traditional concept of psychological resilience. Different conceptualizations of resilience will be proposed in part A. Definitions of resilience include resilience as a *trait, buffer,* and *dynamic process. Prosilience* will be included, when discussing or using the ideas from theory of prosilience and as such prosilience will pervade most of the project. Prosilience will be introduced in part A.

This master thesis seeks to elaborate on the theory of prosilience by including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to guide practitioners towards a framework that can aid individuals with their prosilience. As inclusion of collective resilience will be too broad, the project will not include this parameter, and will remain focused on individual resilience/prosilience. To clarify, collective resilience can be understood as resilience within a group (e.g., a workplace, team, or family). Likewise, the present master thesis does not include resilience in the context of individuals with disorders or diagnosis' as inclusion of such parameters, is beyond the purpose.

Part A: The background of the issue: Resilience in contexts

Introduction

Discussions on psychological resilience have pervaded the field of psychology since the 1970's (Dræby Sørensen, 2018, p.46). The concept of psychological resilience gained popularity within the framework of developmental psychopathology, where it was used in studies (e.g., Garmezy, 1971) to describe resilient children, who emanate from a high-risk environment. Despite their environmental dispositions and genetical pre-dispositions, several children were able to thrive in adversity, which caused researchers to point to resilience as an inherent personal resource that could be utilized to positively adapt to adversity (Dræby Sørensen, 2018, p. 48). Since the 1970's theories and research on resilience have developed from the individualized view of resilience as an inherent trait to multi-dimensional perspectives of resilience that regard resilience as a complex process. The individualized view of resilience still pervades the political and public discourse (Dræby Sørensen, 2018, pp. 58-59).

Despite attempts of researchers to provide definitions that encapsulate the different aspects of the concept, there is not one widely accepted universal definition of resilience (Van der Werff et al., 2013, p.1; Johnston et al., 2015, p.169; Stainton et al., 2019, p.726).

To combat the individualized view of resilience and address the gap in the currently dominating resilience perspectives, this article will at first summarize some of the dominant resilience perspectives, which will provide a basis for a discussion on their limitations. To address the gap in resilience literature an introduction to the theory of *prosilience* will be accounted for, followed by a discussion on the theoretical implications of the theory. Prosilience is a two-part theory based around the concept of irreversible time, and the theory of semiotic mediation. The main argument of the theory is that people negotiate with their umwelt as they *move forward* in irreversible time. The term prosilience itself, encapsulates the complex semiotic relations of an individual with their umwelt, and as such distances itself from the traditional concept of resilience by inducing a forward movement.

Dominant definitions of resilience

Since the 1970's multiple theories and definitions of resilience have been proposed within psychology. Several of these theories fall within one of the following three perspectives:

Theories viewing resilience as a *trait*; Theories viewing resilience as a *buffer*; and theories viewing resilience as a *process*. The following will contain a summary of key ideas within those three perspectives of resilience.

Trait-resilience

The perspective that regards resilience as a trait originates from and share similarities with the studies on resilience that was conducted by Werner (1971). Werner (1971) found that some Hawaiian children possessed a psychological ability that protected against adversity, and enabled positive adaptation (Werner, 1971). In accordance with the studies conducted by Werner, Block & Block (1980) introduced the term ego-resiliency as a concept for the personality trait that reflects the individual's ability to adapt (Dræby Sørensen, 2018, p. 48). Based on psychoanalytic theory, Block & Block (1980) defined ego-resiliency as: *"the dynamic capacity of an individual to modify his/her modal level of ego-control, in either direction as a function of the demand characteristics of the environmental context"* (Block & Block, 1980, p. 48).

This notion of resilience as an individual capacity is continuously used within resilience theorizing: Hu, Zhang & Wang (2015) conducted a study based around the concept of trait-resilience, and strongly emphasize the importance of operationalizing resilience as a trait or ability to cope with adversity (Hu, Zhang & Wang, 2015, p. 23). Their claim that resilience is a personality trait (Hu, Zhang & Wang, 2015, p. 24) is supported by Kimura, Bande & Fernandez-Ferrin (2018), who goes on to claim that a resilient person effectively copes with stressors (Kimura, Bande & Fernandez-Ferrin, 2018, p. 743). Maltby et al., (2016) further emphasizes the role of trait resilience in research by claiming that "*the assessment of trait resilience examines how people characteristically respond to and approach negative events*" (Maltby et al., 2016, p. 3). Thus, the trait perspective investigates what characterizes resilient individuals, and their approach to adversity.

The buffer approach to resilience

The buffering approach to resilience differs from the trait-perspective in its claim that internal psychological processes buffer the effects of adversity/risk to lessen its impact (Maltby et al., 2016; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Johnson et al (2009) claims that the buffering approach to resilience describes three main aspects of the concept: Firstly, that

resilience should be viewed as an alternate dimension to risk, that act to moderate the impact of adversity. Secondly, that resilience and risk are bipolar dimensions, wherein each risk factor has an inverse resilience factor, that is protective, and that each resilience factor has an inverse risk factor that amplifies the effect of risk. Thirdly, resilience factors should be seen as internal psychological construct that are consistent with the existing definitions (Johnson et al., 2009, 564).

According to Luthar & Cicchetti (2000), the resilience researcher utilizing principles of the buffering approach searches for risk and protective factors that modify the negative effects of adversity and identify the psychological processes that might underlie those effects (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Hopkins, Taylor & Zubrick, 2017)

Much research has been conducted on the psychological factors that confer resilience. Among these Szymanski (2009) found that a high self-esteem moderates the link between psychological distress and heterosexist events; An optimistic explanatory style was by Hirsh et al., (2009) found to mitigate the influence of negative life events on thoughts of suicide; Cowden, Fuller & Anshel (2014) found a significant relationship between learned resourcefulness and mental toughness; Siegmann et al (2018) conducted a cross-cultural study and found that positive mental health confers resilience.

Processual theories of resilience

The processual theories of resilience are characterized by their conceptualization of resilience as a dynamic process of social and psychological adaptation, transformation (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 85), and as an interactive directional process (Downes, 2017, p. 116). Theories within the processual framework propose a conceptualization of resilience as an active process that is distinctive from risk (Stainton et al., 2019). One of these conceptualizations that pervades the resilience research is provided by Ungar (2008): *"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways"* (Ungar, 2008, p. 225). This conceptualization is utilized in studies such as Truter, Theron & Fouché (2017)

Following this definition, the individual resilience process occurs when individuals steer towards (navigate in Ungar's terminology) available resources and/or negotiate for additional resources to be provided. By means of conceptualizing resilience as navigation, Ungar's (2008) definition implies that the resilience process entails agency by the individual in their search for resources to sustain their well-being.

Discussion of limitations within the currently pervading perspectives

The limitations of the trait perspective of resilience have been critiqued in previous literature (e.g., Rutter, 2006; Ungar, 2011) for its lack of inclusion of the context of the adversity situation, and more specifically the role of contextual factors (Lamp, 2013). As assessment of resilience as an individual trait, concentrates on what characterizes resilient individuals (Maltby et al., 2016), the assessment bypasses the role of the umwelt in resilience. This limitation is shared with the buffering approach, where the relevance of the umwelt is primarily in its role of enforcing risk factors, and as such it could be deduced that the perspectives place much emphasis on the internal properties of resilience.

Another issue with defining resilience as a trait is the discursive consequence it infers: By claiming that individuals are either 'resilient' or 'non-resilient' (e.g., Grafton, Gillespie & Henderson, 2010, p.699; Kimura, Bande & Fernandez-Ferrin, 2018, p. 743), a risk of categorizing individuals in fallacious groups occur. Dræby Sørensen (2018) argue that as resilience is continuously proposed as an individual phenomenon, life-problems are allocated within the individual instead of the social and cultural structures, which implicitly leads to a shift of focus on the individual's resilience or lack of such (Dræby Sørensen, 2018). This critique is shared by Ungar (2011), who argue that responsibility for resilience is placed on the victim (Ungar, 2011, p. 5). Albeit being definitionally different, the buffering approach to resilience also coincides with this fallacy as psychological factors are viewed as internal psychological constructs (Johnson et al., 2009), whereby it could be deduced that both perspectives are highly individual-centered.

According to Ungar (2011) successful adaptation is often attributed post hoc to processes labeled as resilient despite the accountability of other factors for the outcome variance

(Ungar, 2011, p.1). As such the individual factors are not necessarily a buffering factor, as other aspects of the constructs might account for the perceived factor.

The processual perspective of resilience provided by Ungar (2011), distances itself from the other perspectives as it neither disregards the importance of the individually anchored psychological processes or the socially embedded protective factors. This theoretical stance is highly inclusive of both parameters, but lacks in its specificity: For researchers and practitioners looking to aid clients or research resilience, who follow Ungar's (2008) definition of the concept, they will need to look at *what* constitutes 'significant adversity' to the individual; *How (*and *if)* they navigate towards *which* psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources; *how* those resources sustain their well-being; *How* (and *if*) they negotiate for resources; *Whether* and *how* those resources are provided for them. The comprehensiveness and length of the definition makes it almost tautological in its nature as it contains elements of extra-, intra-, and interpsychological processes, which can hardly be dismissed nor applied.

While it is difficult to conceptualize resilience without inclusion of extra-, intra-, and inter-psychological processes, this article will outline a definition of resilience that includes these processes in a concise conceptualization and definition of resilience.

From "bouncing back" to "bouncing forward": Resilience in moving towards the future

The ability to cope with the psychological complexity of the surrounding world is an important part of the human E*infühlung*[2]. The ability to feel into an environment or someone else is an intricate part of the complexity of the human mind (Ganczarek, Hünefeldt & Belardinelli 2018). As humans develop, they start to evolve a theory of mind, which enables individuals to perceive and interpret not-present subjects and objects (Berk, 2013).

Another important aspect of human complexity is the possibility to create the semiosphere around the natural world (Lotman, 1990). According to Juri Lotman (1990), a

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[2] *Einfühlung* refers to the act of projecting oneself into an environment or person and translates to "feeling into". As people feel into something outside themselves, they can understand what it feels like to be that person or be present in an environment outside themselves (Ganczarek, Hünefeldt & Belardinelli (2018).

semiosphere is a sphere of semiosis (sign processes) in which signs operate interconnectedly and as a sphere has boundaries, so does the semiosphere (Valsiner, 2014, p. 37). There is a difference between clearly defined borders (what is "mine" and what is "yours") and the liminal spaces in-between islands of clearly defined borders (e.g., "ja" in Danish and in German means yes). Psychological resilience thus, needs to encompass the complexity of the human mind and indicate that humans feel into their surrounding environment.

According to Kirmayer et al. (2011) and Downes (2017), the term resilience as bouncing back, suggests staleness and lack of transformation. Resilience has its etymological root in the Latin word resiliere, which translates to "bounce back", "rebound", "recoil" etc., which induces that individuals bounce back to the state they were in before the presence of adversity. This infuses a logical deduction that entails lack of change following adversity: If the reader reminisces about the adversity they have met in their own life, they will discover that often the adversity changed something within them. Losing my father has changed me into another person than I was before. As such I cannot say that I have bounced back from his death, but rather that I have bounced forward into someone different than who I was before his death.

Theoretically, individuals cannot "bounce back" to a pre-adversity state, as they are constantly moving forward. Humans are meaning-making beings as we make meaning of different experienced situations based on our personal past, available signs in the present moment, and in anticipation of a desirable future (Branco & Valsiner, 2010, p. 244).
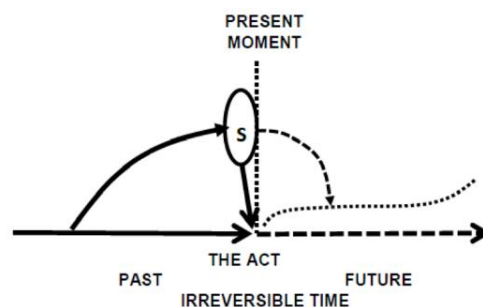

Figure 1 – the process of semiotic mediation

Figure 1 demonstrates how the process of semiotic mediation occurs: Semiotic mediation entails that in the present moment, individuals draw upon their personal past, signs available in the present moment, and in anticipation of a desirable future to make meaning

and act upon the world. The sign (s in figure 1) is created in and emerges from the flow of experiencing and provides literal meaning to the present moment situation (Valsiner, 2014). A sign is a cultural resource that is actively used, modified, and abandoned to interpret present moment sensations. The specific interpretation of the signs affects the individuals' actions (Valsiner, 2014, p. 91). Signs are actively interpreted, used, reproduced, or abandoned by individuals, wherefore the sign is constantly changing.

The specific interpretation of signs is what differs between individuals: The process of sign interpretation (semiotic mediation) is based on an individual's personal past, the signs available in the present moment, their movement towards their desirable future, and the immediate future moment. Therefore, the human psyche operates in irreversible time as no "here-and-now" can exist without the "there-and-then" of the next moment (Valsiner, 2019, p. 20). By taking the above provided arguments into consideration, an individual will never be able to "bounce back" as that movement, requires that time is *reversible.* To illustrate the bouncing back movement in reversible time, the reader can examine figure 2.
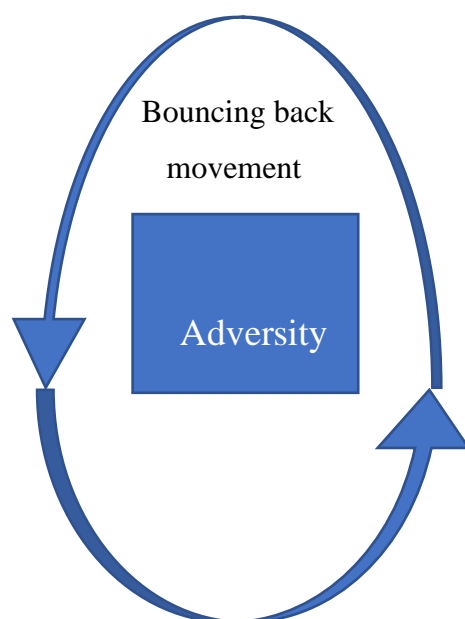
The movement of an individual in reversible time

Figure 2 – Movement in reversible time

Criticism of resilience as "bouncing back" is already manifested within the field of psychology. In a paper discussing disaster resilience in communities, Manyena et al. (2011), argue that natural objects might show resilience, but disasters inevitably lead to

changes within social, economic, and physical environments. Likewise, Manyena et al., (2011) argue that resilience implies recovery within the shortest possible time frame (Manyena et al., 2011). Paton & Johnson (2006) similarly argue that examples of disasters show that resilience as "bouncing back" neither capture the changed reality or the new possibilities caused by a disaster. Therefore, Manyena et al., (2011, p. 419) proposes that resilience should instead be viewed as the ability to "bounce forward" following a disaster.

To circumstantiate the difficulties of conceptualizing a theory of resilience as a forward movement in irreversible time, while the word suggests a backwards movement, the word *Prosilience* will be utilized instead. Prosilience stems from the Latin verbum, prosilio and translates to "leaping forth". Thus, Prosilience is a word that should be used instead of resilience as it suggests a movement forward in irreversible time in anticipation of a desirable future, while taking the previous failure as a basis of further action.

Within the field of psychology, prosilience is not a new term. Hoopes (2017) wrote a book on the topic wherein she claims that prosilience is "*the ability of a person to be intentionally prepared to face disruption*" (Hoopes, 2017; Gkanatsas & Krikke, 2020). In Hoopes, terminology prosilience is distinct from resilience in its properties, a skill utilized *prior* to adversity that strengthens resilience. Therefore, the conceptualization, definition and usage of prosilience presented in the present article as a replacement for resilience remains a novel idea.

Prosilience as a vehicle to one's future: A dynamic semiotic perspective

As presented earlier, the existence of multiple different theories of resilience, has pervaded the field, and lead to a construct that is difficult to universally agree upon. This multiplicity in resilience conceptualizations, leave practitioners without specific guidelines on how to enhance a client's resilience. Thus, questions can arise on how to specifically work with resilience or otherwise help people in dealing with the inevitable adversities of life. Therefore, the lack of a universal conception of resilience, leads to an un-unified direction for resilience as a practical tool and theoretical idea.

To combat these dilemmas this article will present an alternative theory of resilience. This theory moves away from the traditional mindset of resilience as "bouncing back", and instead proposes that through the process of semiotic mediation people constantly move forward in constructing their life courses, overcoming adversities, and creating new problems that they solve.

In this theory, prosilience is defined as: *the reciprocally influenced, negotiating act of an individual with the umwelt that enables flexible adaptation.* Whereas other theories contain a notion of "bouncing back", this definition instead suggests that prosilience is an act that enables flexible adaptation (bounce forward movement) through a process of reciprocally influenced, negotiations with the umwelt. Thereby, prosilience becomes something every individual has the potential to do, but not necessarily can do. To understand how this specifically works, the two parts (reciprocal influence and negotiation) of the definition will be discussed, followed by a proposal of the liminal space where prosilience occurs.

Reciprocity and prosilience

The reciprocity of acts of prosilience, stems from the notions that firstly, human beings are *open systems* and secondly, that signs exist in the flow of experiencing. An open system is a system that exists due to the exchange relationship it has with its umwelt, which is characterized in terms of its own inner organization. Open systems have self-organizing capacities and can reproduce and develop their organization (Valsiner & Salvatore, 2010). Building on from the proposals of Maruyama[3] (1963), Valsiner (2019) argues for a third cybernetic: *"where the control systems created operate across the past-future boundary to anticipate potential future events and signify it by meanings of various complexity. The 'third cybernetics' would deal with future-oriented intentional regulatory systems that operate under necessary uncertainty – given the reality of irreversible time"* (Valsiner, 2019, p. 34). As such the reciprocity of individuals with their umwelt, should contain *change* as open systems can reproduce and develop their organization with the emergence of novelties.

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[3] Second cybernetics: An open system involves constant emergence of novelty, where some novelties are amplified while others are attenuated (Maruyama, 1963).

Furthermore, the influence of signs in the meaning-making process is a key principle of the reciprocity between an individual and their umwelt. Human beings actively abandon, create, reproduce, and use signs as they interact with their umwelt (Valsiner, 2014, p. 91).

Through the processes of internalization and externalization signs reciprocally affect individuals and the umwelt: When an individual internalizes a sign, they alter/use/reproduce it, after which the changed sign is externalized to the sphere of availability to others. Specifically, this entails that the constructive processes of internalization and externalization work by transforming the perceived outer messages (signs) into new forms (internalization) and re-compose the messages into new intra-psychic patterns (Valsiner, 2014).

Valsiner (2014) proposes that four infinities exist: An intra-personal infinity, an extra-personal infinity, and the infinities of the past and the future (Valsiner, 2014). Therefore, psychological phenomena such as prosilience are proximal phenomena as they occur at the boundary of the intra- and extra-personal worlds, and at the boundary of the past and future – thereby occur in the present moment (Valsiner, 2014, p. 66). As individuals imagine the future and re-imagines the past (process of semiotic mediation) between the inner and outer infinity, the constructive process of internalization and externalization makes it possible to perform that coordination of psychological work. Figure 3 is built upon the model of internalization-externalization as proposed by Valsiner (2014, p.71):
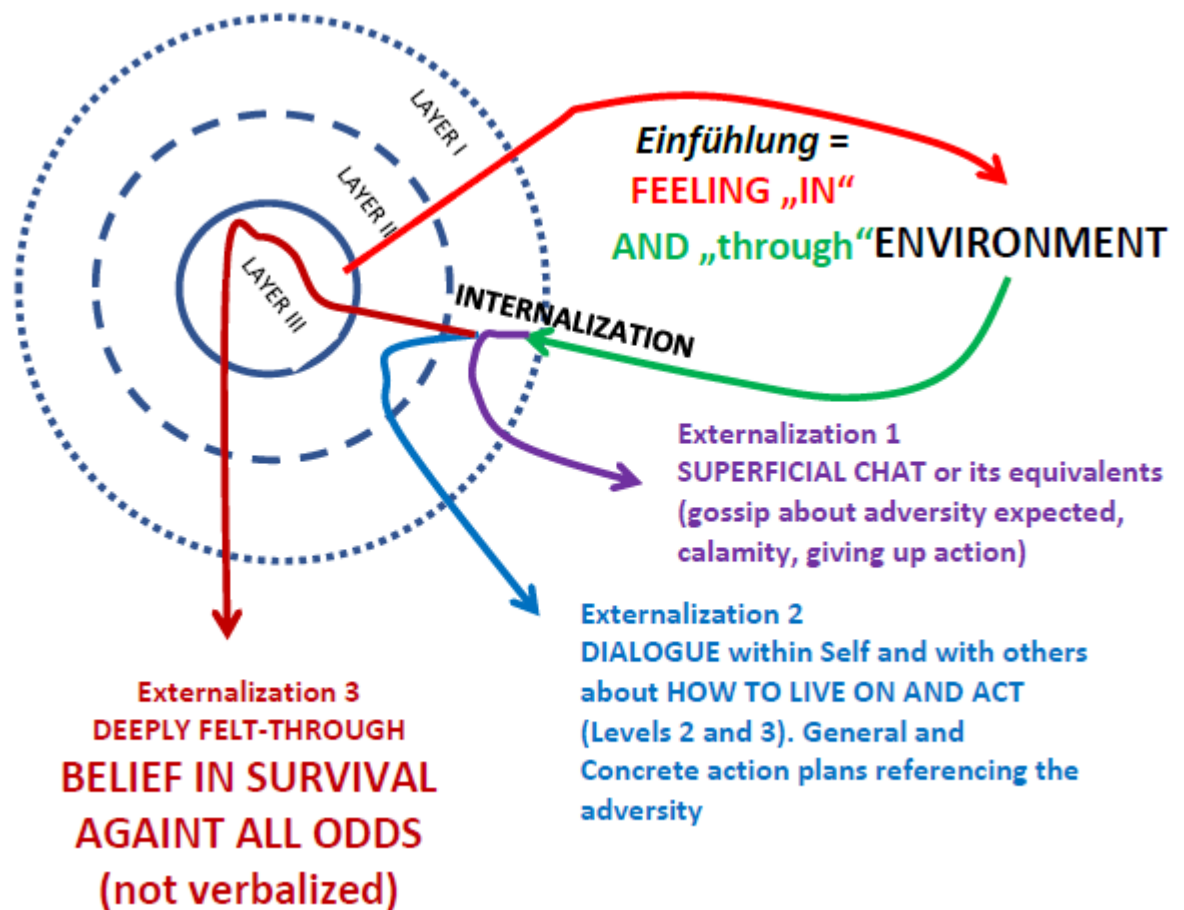
Figure 3 – Internalization and externalization processes in adversity

In figure 3, the boundaries distance the infinity of the intra-personal world from the infinity of the outer world. Before entering the "inner sphere" (layer III), messages go through layers I and II, through which they are transformed in each layer into generalized and integrated messages, and then re-externalized to the availability of others. The process of externalization utilizes the same transformative process as messages become transcribed into meaningful actions, moved through the layers, and outside the individual through transformative contextualization (Valsiner, 2014). Therefore, human beings are actively affecting and simultaneously affected by their umwelt (Valsiner, 2014, pp. 69-73). Prosilience thus should be considered as a proximal phenomenon, that does not exclude the inner and outer infinities from each other, but rather integrates these in meaningful ways. To illustrate this point, Valsiner's (2014) model of internalization/externalization is integrated into a model of an adversity situation (Figure 4).

Present moment
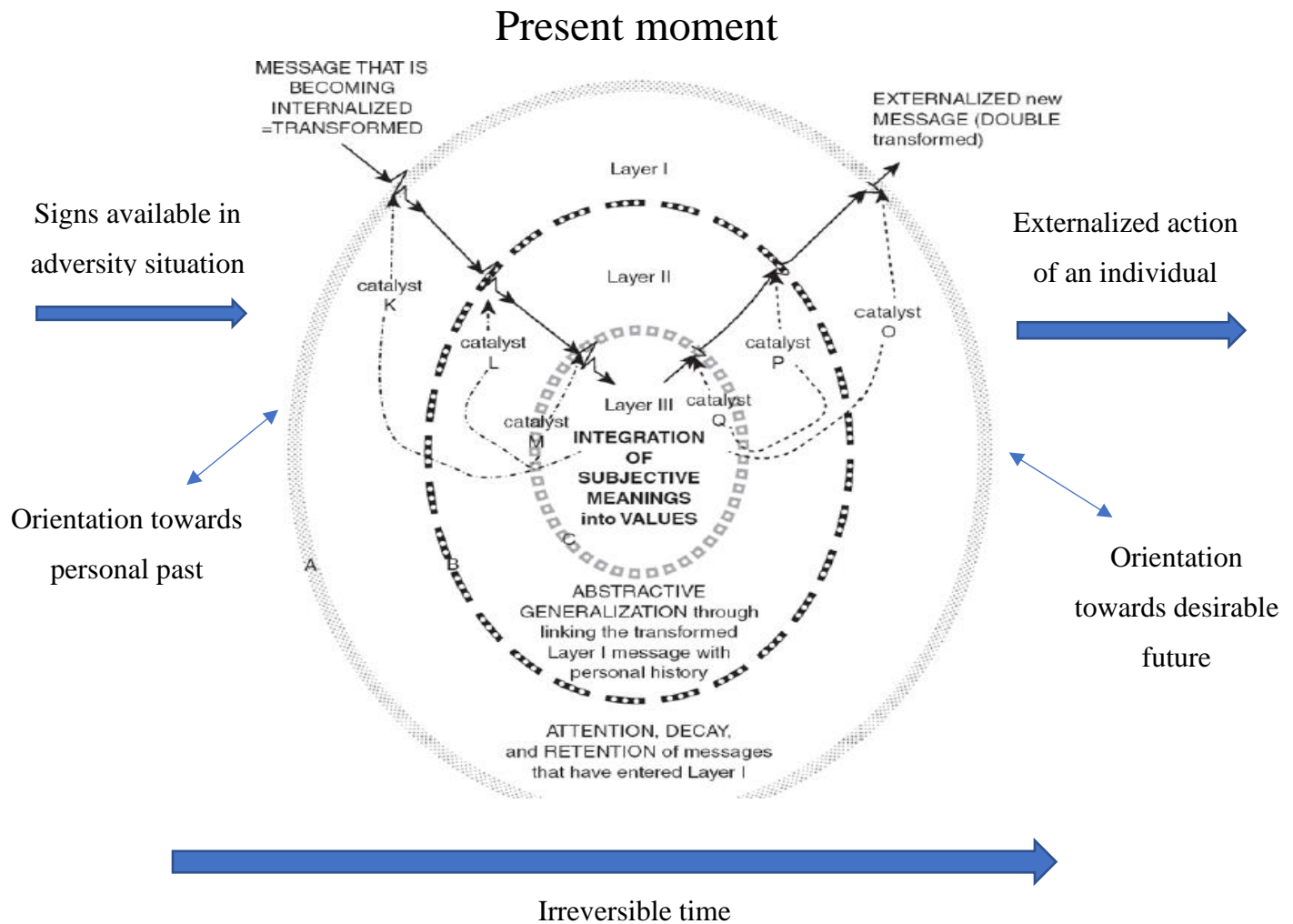
Figure 4 – The reciprocal influence on prosilient actions

As visual from figure 4, one cannot exclude the umwelt from the individual and vice versa, as the umwelt affects the individual and the individual affects the umwelt. This is a fundamental assumption in the theory of prosilience, wherein individuals are not viewed as passive recipients of stimuli from the outer world, but rather act prosiliently through and in their interaction with the umwelt. This also entails that while individuals have the potential to act prosiliently, the umwelt might constrain their ability to do so. As the signs available to the individual emerge from the outer world, there is a possibility for the outer world to constrain the individual acts of prosilience – leading to feelings of anger, anxiety, meaningless etc. Parents that lose their children, soldiers suffering from PTSD and adolescents that have been mistreated as children, may struggle to recover from their traumas as the umwelt have induced great pain on their inner world. It is not impossible,

but the umwelt has constrained their ability to act prosiliently towards the adversity experienced.

Prosilience as negotiations

The second part of the definition builds upon the notion of reciprocal influence and suggests that individuals *negotiate* acts of prosilience with the umwelt. As people strive towards their desirable future, they pro-actively anticipate the future and search for possibilities to fulfill that future (Valsiner, 2019). Through the processes of internalization and externalization, individuals decompose messages that are communicated through signs, and re-compose them into new messages that are then externalized into the umwelt (Valsiner, 2014).

Negotiations occur in the processes of internalization and externalization, through which strategies for acting are tested. As the present moment occurs between the infinities of the Inner><Outer and the Past><Future, individuals re-imagine their lived-through-past and imagine the future to find specific strategies for action. The processes of internalization and externalization are related to, and extent from Lotman's (1990) notion of the semiosphere as the processes confer a link between the infinity of the inner world and the infinity of the outer world, which is parts of the overarching (macro-social) notion of the semiosphere (Valsiner, 2014). As such the negotiation occurs on the border of the individual's inner world and the infinity of the umwelt.

Strategies for acting prosiliently towards a situation are negotiated through tests towards the outer world. Successful tests provide the individual with a direction that leads to a context specific way of acting. If the negotiation fails, individuals will either stop negotiating (give up) or re-initiate their negotiations with the umwelt - that may provide alternative strategies for acting prosiliently towards the adversity situation. The testing of strategies occurs on the premise that individuals look to their personal past to find similarities with earlier experiences (and draw upon already made hyper-generalizations) in acting towards the future, based on the signs available in the present moment. To illustrate these points, figure 5 integrates the model of reciprocal influencing (figure 4) into a context of negotiation:

Negotiation with the umwelt
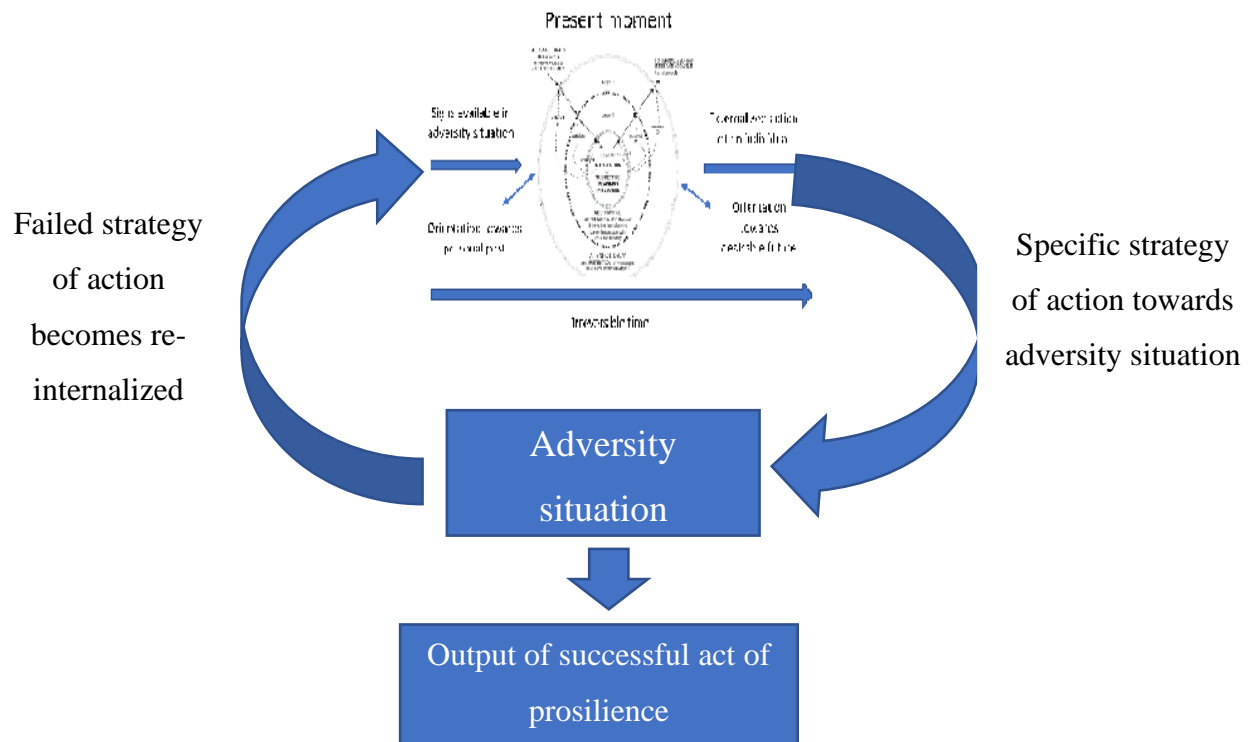
Figure 5 – Reciprocal negotiations with the umwelt

As an example of how this process of negotiation works, I had an experience some time ago: I was very sad as I tried to call my father only to realize it was no longer possible as he had passed away. To cope with (negotiate an act of prosilience) the sadness (specific adversity situation), I called my brother to talk with him about how I felt. Unfortunately, he did not pick up the phone, and I instead tried to go out for a walk to get some fresh air (re-negotiate a new strategy of acting resiliently). I decided to walk to the cemetery to "talk to my father". While I was walking home, I felt that the sadness had lessened.

In the above example, I negotiated with the environment to find the resources and strategy to accomplish my desirable future (short term: Relief of sadness, long term: Be happy). It is also important to note that as the processes of semiotic mediation and affective relating occur on both conscious (verbal) and unconscious (preverbal and post-verbal) levels, so does the negotiations of strategies to act prosiliently towards an adversity situation. In the case of my example, the decision to walk towards the cemetery was a

conscious decision, while in other situations, the immediate reaction to and strategy towards adversity can unconscious.

The conscious and unconscious negotiations that occur can be understood through Branco and Valsiner's (2010), 5-level model of the process of affective regulation.

At level 0 (the undifferentiated fields) the physiological reactions to present moment events occur. This entails development of pre-verbal generalized, non-mediated affective states that do not require semiotic mediation. Therefore, the usage of signs (semiotic mediation) is not necessary at this level as it entails physiological reactions and feeling forward into the present moment situation (Branco & Valsiner, 2010, p. 246). Semiotic mediation begins at the shift from pre-verbal generalizations at level 0 to level 1, where the physiological arousal begins to be differentiated.

At level 2, categorization, naming and descriptions of physiological arousal appear, and verbal articulation is possible. By assigning categories, descriptions, and names to an undifferentiated field of directional qualities (such as an emotion), a quality to the physiological arousal is provided and perceived by the individual (e.g., being sad). Level 2 and level 3 are verbal levels where the specific naming of a quality instigate a generalized category of feelings in level 3 (Branco & Valsiner, 2010, p. 247).

Whereas levels 0-1 are pre-verbal, levels 2-3 are verbal, then level 4 entails a higher post-language level, wherein human beings can no longer name the specific emotions, but rather feels itself and the umwelt. Feelings become indescribable and overwhelming. At level 4, hyper-generalizations[4] are created and become an established part of the individual's inner world and becomes the foundation for their acting and knowing. This leads to a semiotically mediated new de-differentiated state that consequently affects level 0, 1, 2 and 3 and shape the individual's future meaning-making (Branco & Valsiner, 2010).

As individuals internalize the signs available during an adversity situation, negotiations and interpretations of the signs occur. As signs enter the parameters of the inner sphere (internalizations) they are interpreted and decomposed through the process of semiotic mediation, and the 5 levels of affective regulation.

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[4] A hyper-generalization is a sign reservoir that operates on the highest level of the semiotic process (Branco & Valsiner, 2010).

Change: The by-product of adversity

As open systems can reproduce and develop their organizations, and due to the multifaceted nature of signs, the significance of a situation has the potential to demand change. This implies that prosilience can change if the significance of the situation experienced affects it by either being inherently overwhelming (Stainton et al., 2019, p. 737) or alter current hyper-generalizations or demand new hyper-generalizations.

Firstly, this suggests that psychological phenomena such as prosilience are *context dependent:* An individual, who has acted prosiliently towards an adversity situation (resilient in traditional terminology) may not be able to act prosiliently towards other situations. This is due to hyper-generalizations that are created throughout life as individuals feel into the world. Based on hyper-generalizations individuals intuitively know how to act in certain situations if they have experienced a similar situation before.

An individual, who has experienced a situation (e.g., a breakup), might draw on already established hyper-generalizations in dealing with a seemingly similar situation (a second breakup). But due to the principle of irreversible time, every present moment is unique, and as such all occurrences happen only once. The two situations share some qualities but are inherently distinct, wherefore the established hyper-generalizations might not be adequate in dealing with the second situation. Thus, the second situation might require the creation of new hyper-generalizations to cope with its qualities. Practically, this implies that an individual cannot necessarily act prosiliently towards novel situations despite their similarity with already experienced situations. This induces a view of prosilience as context dependent and fluid.

Secondly, a potential for situational significance to alter prosilience exist: Shastri (2013) and Stainton et al., (2019) argue that resilience can be changed with the emergence of new perils and in the presence of an overwhelming level of adversity and risk. Pairing this claim with the proposal by Branco & Valsiner (2010, p. 248) that signs can potentially alter, break down and create new generalizations (Branco and Valsiner, 2010, p. 248), implies the potentially significant effect of adversity situations to prosilience. To visualize how situational significance can significantly alter prosilience, figure 6 can be examined. In the figure, hyper-generalizations (matter between dots) of experienced situations (the dots) are symbolized to be within the border of the vapor. The frame of the vapor is the scope of all experiences perceived (personal past) within which already experienced

situations are stored. Spatially close dots share more similarities than distant dots and symbolizes how e.g., a break-up is different from breaking a leg.
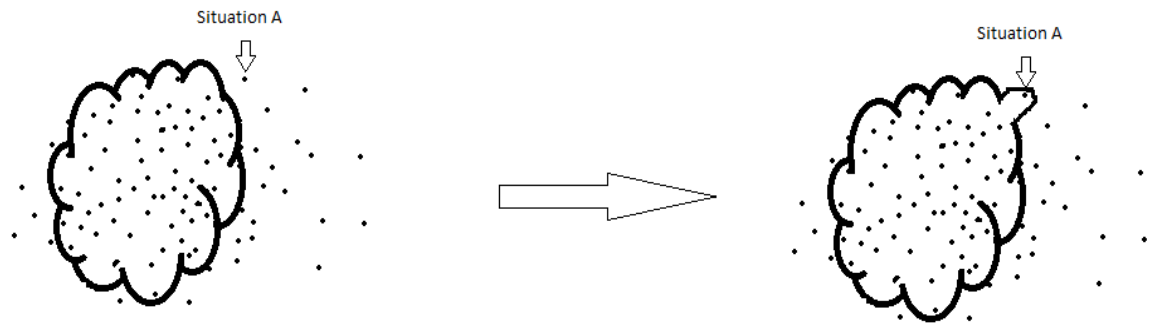
Figure 6 – Positively altered prosilience

In figure 6 a situation is shown in which the person was able to successfully act prosiliently towards it. Reversely, figure 7 illustrates the how the significance of a situation breaks down and alters the existing hyper-generalizations:
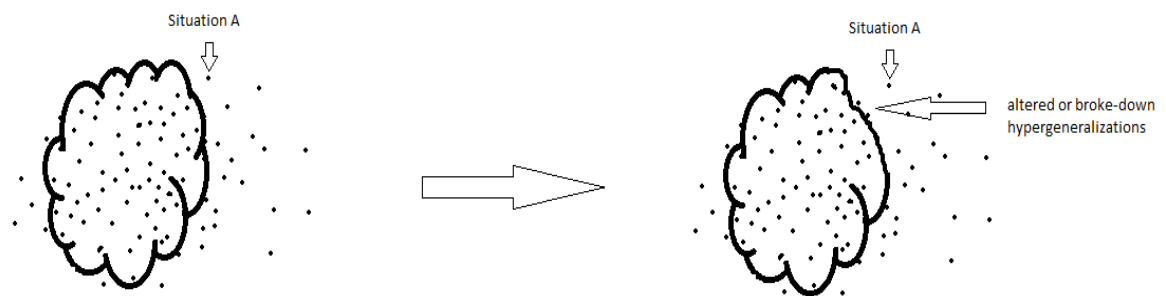
Figure 7 – negatively altered prosilience

As visualized in figure 7, situation A influenced the vapor (sum of all experiences and hyper-generalizations), and due to its significance altered two other situational hyper-generalizations that were included in the pre-adversity vapor. The model is limited in the exact specification of number of dots inside and outside of the vapor, and as the significance every experienced situation has for an individual is difficult to encapsulate. Therefore, the model is merely a visual representation of hyper-generalizations, and how adversity can change already existing hyper-generalizations.

The liminal spaces were prosilience occurs

By claiming that prosilience works in this manner, resilience is moved away from being an inherent part of a person, and instead becomes a border phenomenon. According to

Marsico (2016), a border is "*the developmental conceptual place that accounts for processes of continuity and discontinuity, conflict and negotiation, innovation and reproduction of living open systems*" (Marsico, 2016, p. 208). As such the border in terms of prosilience becomes the focal point of contact between the individual and the umwelt. A border is not definable by only one part, but instead is dialogical and belongs to one part (individual), the other part (environment) or none of the parts (Marsico, 2016, p. 210). Examining prosilience through the lenses of Marsico's perception of a border, the limitation of the traditional approach becomes apparent. If resilience is only defined through the part of the individual, the essentiality of the umwelt is excluded, and only looking at the umwelt, excludes the importance of the individual.

To further establish this claim, it is relevant to bring in the concept of liminality as proposed by Greco & Stenner (2017). Liminality is conceptualized based on form-of-process[5] and is defined as *"pertaining to events that occur between given forms-of-process… & refers to a condition of ontological indeterminacy that is at play in occasions of transition…"* (Greco & Stenner, 2017, p. 152). Due to the notion of irreversible time, humans are constantly moving forward and the constant transitions that occur, becomes the focal point of how prosilience works. As such prosilience occurs exactly in the liminal spot on the border between the individual and the umwelt.

Intermediate conclusions

The main aim of this part of my thesis was to answer the research question: *"How can resilience be re-conceptualized and re-defined?"*. By addressing the gaps in the contemporarily dominating perspectives of resilience literature, and by providing a theoretical foundation in theory of semiotic mediation, an alternative definition of resilience was argued for. In that definition prosilience was defined as *"the reciprocally influenced, negotiating acts of an individual that enables flexible adaptation"*. Re-conceptualizing resilience to prosilience, makes it possible to better understand the complex semiotic relations of an individual with its umwelt.

While the whole concept of "acts of prosilience" could suggest that individuals, who fail to flexibly adapt to adversity, are to blame for their actions, it is not the case. As already

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[5] *"A mode of unity/order/organization/pattern that is exhibited by some composition existing in the actual historical world"* Whitehead (1938/1968 according to Greco & Stenner, 2017)

proposed earlier, the processes of internalization-externalization and *signs* means that an individual is not necessarily responsible for their own acts of prosilience. As signs are made available to the individual in the present moment and later internalized and externalized, there is a potential for the environment to constrain and limit the individual's acts of prosilience. If a person experiences overwhelming adversity, the environment negatively influences him/her in a way it may not be able to fully recover from. But as prosilience entails reciprocal influencing, there exists a potential for the person to recover from adversity experienced. This potential is central in understanding how helpers, psychologists and the environment can support and help clients that face adversity.

The potential itself exists in the liminal spaces between the individual and the environment: As an individual might be in a position of helplessness, the environment (e.g., family, friends, helpers) needs to be fully supportive and present. An interesting metaphor of this could be traffic lights: When the lights are green the driver of a car can drive and if timed correctly and if some luck exists, the driver will be able to drive through multiple traffic lights without stopping. When the lights turn yellow, the flow of driving is slowed down until a complete hold occurs when the lights turn red. While everything else keeps moving, the driver of the car is momentarily stopped, and needs the traffic lights to change to move forward again – something they do not themselves control. There is a possibility for the driver to drive despite the red lights, but this involves a risk of being hurt if hit by another car. Much like in the metaphor, people who struggle with acting prosiliently in an adversity situation, sometimes need the environment to help them change the red lights to green.

Furthermore, it should be clarified that acts of prosilience might be more demanding and spanning than following traditional research methods on the concept of resilience. For a research method that follows this conceptualization of prosilience to function, it is necessary to be present in the *exact moment* that individuals experience adversity – either through physical presence or video recordings. As an example of this, a researcher might wish to investigate the role of acts of prosilience in dealing with loneliness among expropriates. The accumulated negative experiences might lead to an outburst of anger or sadness in a specific moment, but it is important for future researchers to take note of the negotiations in the present moments leading up to that outburst. As such any research projects should contain longevity as that enables contextualization of the adversity experienced.

Therefore, for a research project that bases itself on the theory of prosilience to be epistemologically and ontologically coherent, it is necessary to include the individual's personal past, the specific present-moment and the individual's desirable future. Once again, the example of loneliness among expropriates could be drawn in as an example: Who is the person, what is their background, how was their upbringing, what dreams and values do they have etc.? To investigate the acts of prosilience of that person, usage of diaries from when they leave their native country until the moment where a researcher can follow them might be of relevance.

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Declaration of conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Part B: Applying principles of Acceptance and Commitment therapy on prosilience and adversity

Introduction

In Part A prosilience was defined as the "*reciprocally influenced, negotiating act of an individual with the umwelt that enables flexible adaptation*". It was argued that in adversity situations and life in general, individuals and the umwelt reciprocally influence each other. Adversity and the individual's actions in those situations occur on the liminal spot between the individual and their umwelt. When individuals find themselves in adversity situations, they negotiate strategies to act prosiliently towards the specific situation with the umwelt. If the negotiations fail, individuals will either stop negotiating (give up) or continuously negotiate strategies that thus enable them to act differently towards the perceived adversity situation.

In this second part of the present master thesis, the main topic will be the therapeutic implications that derive from the theory of prosilience. Despite the relevance of other therapeutic approaches (e.g., existential psychotherapy or gestalt therapy), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is the main perspective that will be examined and utilized for the purpose of this master thesis.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (henceforth, called ACT) is an action-based behavioral therapy developed by Steven Hayes, and built upon Relational Frame Theory (Harris, 2011, pp. 11-12). It is a part of the third wave of behavior therapies (acceptance and mindfulness approaches), wherein the fundamental idea is that mental ill-being stems from one's own thoughts (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 3). Consequently, trying to control one's thoughts and emotions is not the solution (unlike in traditional behavioral therapies), but rather the essence of the issue (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 3). Even if psychological events are formally negative, ACT has a posture of acceptance and openness towards those events. It is not the presence of negative psychological events that is problematic, but in their contextually established meanings and functions (Hayes, 2016, p. 874).

The purpose of ACT is not to aid clients by reducing symptoms or removing negative thoughts, but instead to change their relationship with their symptoms or thoughts (Harris, 2011, p. 15). As clarified by Hayes (2016): "*The key goal of ACT is to support the client in feeling and thinking what they directly feel and think already, as it is, not as what it says it is, and to help the client move in a valued direction, with all their history and*

automatic reactions" (Hayes, 2016, p. 877). Therefore, ACT aspires to aid clients in being mindful towards their feelings and thoughts and supports clients in creating a meaningful and satisfying life (Harris, 2011, pp. 19-21). This contradicts the traditional perceptions on the role of therapy as many therapy approaches assume a causal link between symptom reduction and well-being (Harris, 2011, p. 15).

A key concept within ACT is *workability*, which is at the core of all ACT interventions (Harris, 2011, pp. 38-39). Workability is a term that covers the functionality of actions: If actions guide the client towards a richer, more meaningful, and satisfying life, then those actions contain workability (Harris, 2011, p. 39). Therefore, workability examines whether a thought helps or hinders a client in their aspiration towards a meaningful life (Harris, 2011, p. 39). As such workability is neither aimed at evaluating whether a client's behavior is "bad" or "good", "right" or "wrong" or judging whether thoughts are rational or irrational, true or false (Harris, 2011, p. 40).

Another key concept within ACT is *psychological flexibility*, which is defined as*: "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends"* (Hayes et al., 2006, p.7). A main purpose of ACT is to aid the clients in developing psychological flexibility (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 4). The six processes of psychological flexibility will be outlined in the summary of ACT principles.

Why ACT?

While theorizing on prosilience, I kept thinking about the theoretical implications of the theory: How could it be translated to a practical setting? Which therapeutic approaches are relevant, when working with prosilience? I found that the theoretical assumptions of the theory of prosilience, might limit the methods used in enhancing it: If therapeutic approaches were too internally oriented and less focused on the context of the exterior world, then they would not provide a sufficient context of the role of the environment; If a therapeutic approach was non-action based, then the role of negotiations were neglected; If a therapeutic approach did not include a parameter of flexibility, then the purpose of prosilience was diminished as prosilience is acts that enable flexible adaptation.

By coincidence, my girlfriend gifted me the book Mindfulness and Acceptance in Sports (Henriksen, Hansen & Larsen, 2020) for my birthday. Therein, I found similarities

between ACT, the theory of semiotic mediation, and the theory of prosilience. How the six flexibility processes cohere with prosilience will be elaborated explicitly and implicitly throughout the discussion on ACT and prosilience, but briefly I will post a few of the similarities:

- ACT is an action-based therapy. This supports the claim that individuals *act* prosiliently towards adversity situations.
- ACT aims to enhance psychological flexibility. This shares similarity with the purpose of prosilience – to enable flexible adaptation.
- ACT recognizes the importance of the present moment and strives to aid clients in being present. This claim shares similarities with the notion of irreversible time.
- ACT includes a parameter of past and future. This claim shares similarities with semiotic mediation and irreversible time.
- Processes within ACT can be translated to all 5 levels of affective relating and semiotic mediation.
- ACT is context specific as behavior, feelings, and thoughts are viewed in the context they occur in. This coincides with the claim of reciprocal influencing, semiotic mediation, and negotiations.

These similarities came to me, when reading through Henriksen, Hansen & Larsen (2020), and as I started reading more into ACT, I found support for those proposedly hypothetical similarities.

The structure of part B

To answer the research question: "*How can prosilience be enhanced through application of Acceptance and Commitment therapy?",* Acceptance and Commitment therapy will be included to assess the therapeutic implications of the theory of prosilience.

Initially, part B will entail a summary of the theoretical foundation upon which ACT is built. In the summary, the basic principles of Relational Frame Theory and Functional Contextualism will be laid out. Thereafter, a summary of the six processes that enable psychological flexibility will be provided along with the inflexibility processes paired with those flexibility processes. Following each summary of a flexibility process and its adverse inflexibility process, the therapeutic tools used to foster psychological flexibility is presented. Thereafter, a discussion on how to implement ACT in enhancing prosilience

and the reasoning behind it, will be conducted. The discussion contains four sections that provide the theoretical and practical foundation for practitioners to utilize ACT in working with prosilience. After the discussion, part A and part B will be linked in a conclusion that answers the two research questions.

Key principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy it is hypothesized that the root of psychological pain is inherent in human language (Harris, 2011, p. 17). This hypothesis stems from the foundations on which ACT is built upon: Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Functional Contextualism.

Relational Frame Theory & Functional Contextualism

RFT is a behavioral theory on human language and cognition, wherein the core claim is that: *"... humans learn to relate events mutually and in combination, without being limited by their form"* (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 318). As such, human beings can relate a word with an object, and an object with a word. This process of learning to relate events, extends to other verbal relations such as deictic, temporal, evaluative, comparative, and hierarchical relations (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 318). Similarly, Hayes (2016) claims that: *"the core of human language and cognition is the ability to learn to relate events under arbitrary contextual control. Nonarbitrary stimulus relations are those defined by formal properties of related events"* (Hayes, 2016, p. 874). This entails that human beings can relate events and contextualize them in the context of their properties. For example: The danish 5-crown coin (5 DKK) is in a sense bigger and smaller than the danish 10-crown coin. It is the physically largest coin of the danish valuta, the danish crown (DKK). Even though its numerical properties are smaller than that of a 10-crown coin (10 DKK), it is simultaneously "bigger" and "smaller" than a 10-crown.

This stems from the three main properties of relational learning: *"first, such relations show mutual entailment or "bidirectionality" ... Second, such relations show combinatorial entailment: If a person learns in a particular context that A relates in a particular way to B, and B relates in a particular way to C, then this must entail some kind of mutual relation between A and C in that context ... Finally, such relations enable*

a transformation of stimulus functions among related stimuli." (Hayes, 2016, pp. 874-875). These properties of relational learning are relevant within ACT as the relational frames are the foundation for cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance to occur (Hayes, 2016, p. 875).

The properties can be examined in the case of a friend of mine, who has suffered from anxiety attacks following a stressful period during his studies: His first panic attack 6 years ago, occurred while he was sitting at his desk in his apartment and was preparing for a very demanding exam at law school. Even though he eventually decided to drop out of Law School and study another profession, the repercussions of that initial panic attack have multiple times hindered him from working at his home desk. Initially, going outside of his home aided him in being able to focus on his studies, but slowly, his fear of panic attacks from working at his home desk, turned into fear of panic attacks working at any desk. As it reminded him of the stressful times in law school. Therefore, these properties of relational learning are relevant within ACT as the relational frames makes transformation of stimulus to other contexts possible (Hayes, 2016, p. 875).

RFT is built upon the philosophy of *functional contextualism* (Törneke, 2010, p. 9; Harris, 2011, p. 55). In functional contextualism, things (e.g., verbal expressions, psychological events) are looked at with the specific context in mind (Harris, 2011, p. 56). As such behavior needs to be understood in the context, it takes place in, and the function it has (Törneke, 2010, pp. 9-10). In functional contextualism the main point of interest is in the function of a certain behavior rather than its form (Harris, 2011, p. 61). Therefore, behavior, thoughts and feelings are not necessarily regarded as dysfunctional, pathological, or problematic – only in the context of cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance (Harris, 2011, p. 56).

The six processes of psychological flexibility and their counterparts

Psychological flexibility is defined by Hayes et al. (2006) as "*the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends*" (Hayes et al., 2006, p.7). Similarly, Harris (2011, p. 24) conceptualizes psychological flexibility as being present with consciousness and openness towards one's experiences and to act in accordance with one's chosen

values. Thus, according to principles of ACT, psychological flexibility entails being present, being open and doing what is important (Harris, 2011, p. 24). The greater an individual's ability to be psychologically flexible is, the higher their quality of life becomes, as they grow capable of reacting more efficiently towards the adversities that life inevitably brings (Harris, 2011, p. 24).

Psychological flexibility is established through ACT by focusing on six interrelated, core processes that enable individuals to act with psychological flexibility (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 4). The six processes are *Cognitive Defusion, Acceptance, Contact with the Present Moment, Self as Context, Values,* and *Committed action* (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, pp. 28-35; Harris, 2011, p. 21). These six core processes can be put together into three functional units, where defusion and accept entail distancing oneself from one's thoughts and feelings, see thoughts and feelings for what they really are, make room for them and allow them to surface and disappear again; Self as context and contact with the present moment entail making contact with non-verbal and verbal aspects of one's present moment experiences and thus, change how events are known; Values and committed action involves efficient usage of language in promoting life-improving actions (Harris, 2011, p. 25).

The flexibility processes are conceptualized in the ACT 'hexaflex' model (figure 1), wherein psychological flexibility is at the core (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 5).
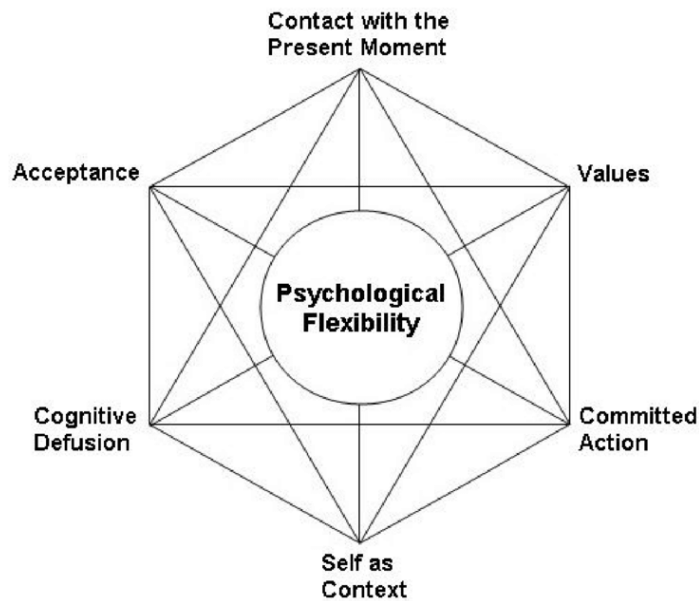
Figure 1 – The ACT Hexaflex of psychological flexibility
(Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 5)

Each flexibility process is paired with an opposite inflexibility process, which can be viewed as the negative equivalent to each flexibility process. The six inflexibility processes are: *Cognitive Fusion*; *Experiential avoidance; The harmful domination of the conceptualized past and/or feared future; Domination of a conceptualized self; lack of/clarity over values; Dysfunctional action* (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, pp. 28-35; Harris, 2011, p. 46).

It is important to emphasize that it is highly unlikely that individuals are fully inflexible in all domains of life (Harris, 2011, p. 50). As such therapists should seek to clarify in which domains an individual exhibits psychological flexibility, and which elements of psychological flexibility that are already in usage.

In the upcoming sections each flexibility process will be explained along with the equivalent inflexibility process and the methods used in therapeutic sessions for each process. As multiple methods are used by practitioners, only one method will be included in each section.

Cognitive Defusion

Cognitive defusion is the process of observing and relating to one's thoughts in a non-literal way (Krafft, Butcher, Levin & Twohig, 2020, p. 9; Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 5).

Thereby, it becomes possible to deliberately reduce the harmful behavioral transformation of different stimulus functions (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562). Individuals should notice their occurring thoughts and emotions and consider them as internal events that are noticeable from a third-person perspective (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 63). By stepping back psychologically and observing one's thoughts as merely mental processes rather than truths, individuals learn to not identify with their thoughts (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 63).

The purpose of utilizing exercises, metaphors and methods from ACT is to help individuals with engaging fully in their experiences by guiding them towards defusion from painful thoughts and memories (Harris, 2011, pp. 140, 154). By transforming a client's relationship with their painful thoughts and feelings, the impact of negative thoughts is lessened.

As an example of how this process operates, we can examine the following: An underweight teenage girl comes into therapy with symptoms of anorexia. She explains to the therapist that when she sees herself in the mirror, she regards herself as overweight, and her thoughts continuously circle around the notion of her apparent overweight. "I am so fat" is what she keeps telling herself. In this case, it could be argued that she is cognitively fused with the negative thoughts that pervade her mind, which leads her to over-exercise and barely eat. By utilizing methods of ACT, it is possible to help her towards cognitive defusion: Through transforming her thought of "I am so fat" into the thought of "I am a person, who thinks I am fat", she distances herself from the negative statement that was stuck in her head. As such, she IS no longer fat but understands that it is something she BELIEVES, thus defusing herself from identifying with the negative thoughts.

Defusion is promoted informally in every ACT session in three ways: By asking the client to notice their thoughts; By asking the client to investigate the functionality (coherence with values) of their thoughts; and by asking the client to notice, when they are fused or defused from their thoughts (Harris, 2011, p. 140).

Cognitive Fusion

In the above-given example, the principles of cognitive fusion were briefly introduced, but further exploration is needed. Inverse to cognitive defusion, cognitive fusion is defined as: "*the domination of verbal stimuli in the regulation of behavior, to the*

detriment of other needed sources of behavioral regulation, based on the failure to notice on-going, contextually controlled relational processes that give rise to these dominant verbal stimuli" (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, p. 28). As such, cognitive fusion entails that private experiences and thoughts are entangled in the individuals' actions and self-conception. As a result, individuals struggle to distance themselves from these thoughts. When cognitive fusion is dominating, people's thoughts become inseparable from their self: They relate to and are trapped by their thoughts in a manner they might not be conscious about (Harris, 2011, pp. 35-36).

According to Harris (2011, p. 36), this stems from the notion of the two different worlds people live through: From birth, a child lives in 'the world of direct experiences', which is the world of the senses, wherein one can hear, taste, touch, smell and see. As human beings grow older, they learn to think and as that capability develops, we gradually start living through the 'world of the language'. Cognitive fusion suggests that individuals are stuck in the world of the language as they are trapped by the words and pictures in their heads, and therefore lose contact with the world of direct experiences (Harris, 2011, p. 36). Being trapped in one's thoughts, the relatedness with the here-and-now experiences is lost, and one's ability to act efficiently (in accordance with values) is diminished due to the impact of thoughts on behavior (Harris, 2011, pp. 37-38).

Identifying fusion is one of the key roles of the therapist, when listening to client stories (Harris, 2011, p. 141). Specifically, therapists look for fusion in six key areas: Rules, causal explanations, assessments, past, future, and the self. With rules therapists observe which types of rigid rules on life, work, relations etc., the clients impose on themselves. Noticeable are rules on how to feel before one can act, and therapists should keep an eye on words such as "must; have to; can't; right; wrong; should". These words often precede sentences that constrain individuals and their fusion with these thoughts lead to psychological pain (Harris, 2011, p. 141).

With causal explanations therapists should keep in mind, which reasons clients provide on why change is impossible, impractical, or unwanted. Statements such as "I've always been this way" or "I shouldn't have to do this" are abstaining clients from conducting necessary changes (Harris, 2011, pp. 141-142).

Assessments stem from the inherent nature of human beings as we assess the usefulness and importance of our conduct. Reliability of others, healthiness of foods, and looking

into a home before we buy it, are all examples of human assessments. Problematically some assessments are non-usable and if one fuses with those assessments, it leads to suffering and struggle (Harris, 2011, p. 142). Practitioners should investigate which types of judgmental and evaluative thinking a client fuses with.

With the past, therapists should investigate whether clients fuse with ruminations of prior defeats, mistakes, loss of opportunities etc., that might constrain the efficiency of their actions (Harris, 2011, p. 142). Likewise, therapists should take note of how and whether a client fuses with their future (Harris, 2011, p. 142). Thoughts of worry about the future such as job loss, fantasies of a better life, or being non-present by constantly focusing on tasks in the future, are examples of fusion with the future.

From fusion to defusion: Examples of methods utilized in ACT

In ACT, defusion is promoted through experience-oriented exercises and metaphors. It is important to note that defusion techniques are nothing but techniques that aid clients in learning defusion (Harris, 2011, p. 154). While Harris (2011 – see chapters 7-10) provides a comprehensive overview on how to aid the client towards defusion, only one example on how to conduct defusion work is provided for in the present master thesis. There are multiple different defusion techniques that are used and written down in books and articles (Harris, 2011, p. 154). Harris (2011, p. 174) provides an overview of the many different defusion techniques from classics such as 'saying a thought with a silly voice, singing it or saying it slowly' to "stepping back and watching a thought with one's "observing self". Many exercises in ACT implicitly include defusion work, but defusion can be emphasized by using metaphors on 'letting go' such as letting one's thoughts come and go much like "clouds drifting by" or "cars passing by one's house". (Harris, 2011, p. 163).

One of the techniques that can be utilized in defusion work is "leaves on a stream", which is a mindfulness and visualization exercise (Harris, 2011, pp. 159-161.). During the exercise, the therapist asks the client to lie down and close or fixate their eyes. The therapist then guides the client towards imagining themselves sitting by a stream bank with leaves floating by on the stream. The client is then instructed to place their thoughts and feelings – positive or negative - on the leaves and watch them drift away with the stream (Harris, 2011, pp. 159-160). The purpose of the exercise is to watch the natural flow of the thoughts come and go.

Acceptance

Acceptance entails opening and making room for painful feelings, sensations, and incentives (Harris, 2011, p. 23). By accepting private experiences an individual is actively embracing thoughts, emotions, urges and memories without trying to change, minimize, remove, or fight them (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 5; Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, p. 30; Hayes et al., 2006, p. 7). Practicing acceptance is a key component of mindfulness as the practice of accepting thoughts and emotions that rise to consciousness in a non-judgmental, open, and non-avoidant way, helps individuals endure unpleasant experiences (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 63).

When individuals accept, open towards, and let the painful feelings and thoughts be, they stop fighting, resisting, running from, or being overthrown by their thoughts and feelings (Harris, 2011, p. 23). That notion is supported by Fletcher & Hayes (2005), who argue that acceptance is a present moment process, wherein a person actively embraces emerging private events without trying to change their form or frequency (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, 319). As such, acceptance is not tolerance, but rather something an individual actively does (Hayes, 2016, p. 879). Hayes (2016) argues that defusion makes acceptance possible (Hayes, 2016, p. 879). As such a feeling should be felt as what it is – a feeling, and thoughts should be thought of as thoughts. If this is not possible, then the client likely needs further help with defusion.

Before delving into the realm of experiential avoidance, it is necessary to stress a point made by Harris (2011) that ACT advocates acceptance under the circumstances that 1) Control with thoughts and feelings are limited or impossible, 2) Control with thoughts and feelings is possible, but the utilized methods reduce the quality of life. As such control with one's thoughts and feelings are supported *if* said thoughts and feelings support a value-based life (Harris, 2011, p. 45).

Experiential Avoidance

Regardless of the toxicity of private experiences, the experiences themselves will not directly lead to mental illness. Instead, the harmful effect on their well-being occurs when individuals either cognitively fuses with or avoids the experiences (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, pp. 30-31). The latter part stems from the notion of experiential avoidance, which is defined by Dixon et al., (2020) as "*Active attempts to avoid or escape private events even when these attempts interfere with functional behavioral repertoires*

..." (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562). Experiential avoidance encapsulates the ongoing struggle with avoidance, suppression or disposing of unwanted feelings, memories, thoughts, or other private events (Harris, 2011, p. 32).

Human beings have an innate tendency to aspiring to get rid of any problems – as they suggest something unwanted (Harris, 2011, p. 41). In the short term, this strategy might be successful in getting rid of one's feelings and thoughts: If one feels depressive thoughts, maybe playing video games might help; If feelings of boredom pervade the mind, then doing drugs might provide some excitement. Constantly avoiding or releasing the feelings experienced can have long term consequences (Harris, 2011, p. 42).

In the examples given above addiction might become a long-term consequence of avoiding one's feelings and thoughts. If an individual with social anxiety constantly stays away from others, he/she gains short term reward by lessening their anxiety symptoms. The consequences, in the long term, may be severe as he/she becomes isolated and might struggle to maintain relationships with others. Research suggests that a high level of experiential avoidance is associated with anxiety disorders, higher levels of drug intake, depression, poor work performance etc. (Harris, 2011, p.43).

Targeting experiential avoidance through ACT is only necessary, when it prohibits the client from living a content-rich, satisfying, and meaningful life (Harris, 2011, p. 44). As such, when experiential avoidance is functionally viable (in accordance with one's values), it will not be the target for treatment (Harris, 2011, p. 44). As an example of how experiential avoidance might be functionally viable, the evening ritual of Frank and Claire Underwood from the series "House of Cards" is relevant. Every night, the couple shares one cigarette as they de-stress and talk about their day, well-being, and future. As neither smokes more than that one cigarette, and as it is a central part of their de-stressing together from a workday, the functionality of the ritual is apparent. Smoking two packs of cigarettes on the other hand to handle the stressors in one's life is experiential avoidance without functionality due to the long-term consequences of the action.

From experiential avoidance to acceptance: Tools utilized in ACT

Promoting acceptance skills can lead to increasing capacity to sense, feel, think, and remember events without experiential avoidance (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562). In ACT, acceptance-work is conducted by asking clients to notice their feelings as a feeling, fully and without defense (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 7). Making the client aware of the costs and

purposelessness of experiential avoidance undermines the control agenda, which makes room for acceptance (Harris, 2011, pp. 43-44).

Apart from mindfulness exercises such as body-scans and breathing exercises, metaphors are highly impactful, when illustrating and improving acceptance skills with clients (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 64). One such metaphor is the "tug of war". In the exercise clients either imagine or themselves pulling a rope or physically pull a rope with a "monster" (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 64; Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 328). The client is instructed to imagine the monster as the experiences, feelings, thoughts, situations etc. in his/her life that are difficult to accept. The client is told that between themself and the monster is a giant abyss that they should not fall into. As they pull and feel the pain and struggle of fighting the monster, they are instructed to release the rope and observe how they feel (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 64; Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 328). Helping the client to observe how ending the tug of war might not make the monster fade away, but rather allows them to focus their resources on valued goals (Birrer, Diment, & Schmid, 2020, p. 64).

Contact with the Present Moment

The ability to direct attention towards present internal and external events in a flexible, committed, and voluntary manner is what constitutes the third process of psychological flexibility (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 6; Harris, 2011, p. 21). Being in contact with either the internal psychological world or external physical world, suggests keeping one's attention fixated on either or both worlds simultaneously (Harris, 2011, p. 21). Contacting the present moment also suggests shifting one's attention towards present moment sensations such as bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts etc., as well as external stimuli such as smells, touch, sounds (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, pp. 320-321).

When an individual is in contact with the present moment, they experience a sense of self as a process, wherein their feelings, bodily sensations, and thoughts change continuously through a process of knowing themselves (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 321). Sense of self as process suggests: *The defused, non-judgmental ongoing description of thoughts, feelings, and other private events*." (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9). Therefore, defusion is necessary for being present since fusion entails non-presence (Harris, 2011, p. 217; Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9).

By being fully attentive towards the present moment, individuals can increase their conscious awareness of present moment events and information, which enables them to collect information on how to either change or continue their behavior (Harris, 2011, p. 217). This allows individuals to live a value-congruent life, as they can act efficiently on the present moment, and evaluate when their actions are not in accordance with their values (Harris, 2011, p. 218). As such being in contact with the present moment is also important for self-awareness and self-insight. The higher attention is directed towards one's behavior, the easier it is to regulate the behavior and conduct decisions based on one's valued direction (Harris, 2011, p. 218).

Dominance of the Conceptualized Past and Feared future

The inflexibility process paired with contact with the present moment suggests that individuals are predominantly aware of a conceptualized past and/or feared future. Dominance of the conceptualized past or feared future is defined as: "*the harmful domination of the verbally constructed past or future resulting in diminished or rigid contact with the present internal or external environment*" (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562). This inflexibility process therefore has coherence with cognitive fusion as fusion – with a conceptualized past or feared future - makes contact with the present moment less possible (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 322). Inverse to contact with the present moment, the domination of the conceptualized past or feared future leads to inflexibility as individuals are not attentive towards present moment sensations.

Attention towards a conceptualized past or feared future is an automatic mechanism in individuals: Athletes are often attentive of their past or future (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 6). Often, they either focus on what they could have done in the past (e.g., "the game would have been different if I had won that point") or something that fears them in the future (E.g., missing out on the Olympics). Consequently, they are not aware of present moment sensations that might aid them in their road to success.

Moving towards presence in the present moment

One goal in ACT is to help clients towards contact with the present moments as it aids them in experiencing their world more directly. Furthermore, present moment awareness allows clients to act more consistently in accordance with the values they hold (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9). According to Harris (2011) contact with the present moment should be emphasized, when clients are either: Occupied by the past or future; their actions are

impulsive or without consideration; detached from their relations; or otherwise out of contact with their current experiences (Harris, 2011, p. 217).

Self as context

In ACT, a common distinction is made between three senses of self: *The conceptualized self*, which is all the perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, assessments, imaginations, etc., that creates the idea of "who I am" as a person. *Self as consciousness* refers to the ceaseless noticing of one's experiences and being in contact with the present moment. *Self as context* is the position or space from where observations take place. It is the "I" that notices whatever is noticed in a certain moment (Harris, 2011, p. 240). In other sources this sense of self is referred to as "transcendent sense of self" (E.g., Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006; Fletcher & Hayes, 2005). While the terminology differs, the meaning is similar.

Self as context suggests that individuals are encouraged to e*xperience* their own feelings and thoughts instead of fusion with a conceptualized self (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 321). Experiencing one's sense of self as transcendent is possible due to the: "… *limits of this deictic repertoire cannot be consciously contacted by the individual engaging in it*" (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, p. 33). Consciously contacting refers to the context of contacting the "I/Here/Now" position in the present moment and underscores the importance of it in being psychologically flexible.

Due to the deictic relations (e.g., Here-there, Us-Them, Now-Then) inherent in human language, a sense of self is inferred as a perspective or position, which can be taken (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 321; Harris, 2011, p. 239): "*This sense of perspective can itself not be fully experienced as a thing … Thus, based on direct conscious experience it appears that the self as context has always been present, transcending roles, thoughts, emotions, and the experience of the body. Said in another way, this sense of self is experientially transcendent and formless …*" (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 321). The position of "I-Here-Now" has importance in the context of sense of self as it provides a stable and secure perspective that guides individuals in experiencing difficult cognitive events (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, p. 33). While people can observe events, physical objects etc., what differs is that objects "out there" continuously change, while the perspective "I-Here-Now" is never changing throughout life – it always present (Harris, 2011, p. 241).

Harris (2011) argues that self as context also contains a "space", wherein emotions and thoughts can move. Access to this space is gained by observing one's own observations or by being consciously aware of one's own consciousness (Harris, 2011, p. 239).

From the position of self as context, individuals can pay attention to their own flow of experiences without being attached to or invested in them (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9; Harris, 2011, p. 239). A transcendent sense of self provides individuals with a safe position from which they can experience troublesome psychological events with reduced concern on the potentially negative psychological impact of said events (Hayes, 2016, p. 879).

Attachment to the Conceptualized Self

This inflexibility process entails the domination of and attachment to a conceptualized self even if it hinders the acquisition and implementation of healthy behaviors (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562). As such, the conceptualized self does not entail inflexibility, but rather the fusion with the conceptualized self is what hinders flexibility. Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes (2006) propose a definition of conceptualized self as: "*The rigid network of verbal relations that are about an individual, particularly those events that are evaluative, dispositional or predictive. A conceptualized self is something to be right about and so the verbal network must change before flexibility is possible*" (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, p. 33). Specifically, verbal relations are the perceptions, thoughts, facts, conceptions, memories etc. of "who I am" (Harris, 2011, p. 254).

If an individual is fused with a conceptualized self – negative or positive – most likely the fusion will be problematic: Fusion with a negative self can lead to severe issues such as feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, or depression (Harris, 2011, p. 254). If a person fused with a negative conceptualized self is fired from their work, they might state that "I am not good enough" or "I am nothing without my job". Conversely, fusion with a positive conceptualized self can quickly lead to intolerance towards others, rejection of negative feedback, arrogance, narcissism etc. (Harris, 2011, p. 254).

From conceptualized self to the self as context

ACT practitioners aim to help clients with getting into contact with a transcendent sense of self that constitutes a safe and constant observation point. From that observation point clients can observe and accept their thoughts and feelings (Harris, 2011, p. 239). Self as context has relevance when clients are either scared to be hurt by their inner experiences, excessively attached to a conceptualized self, or when enhancement of conscious choices

and efficient actions is necessary (Harris, 2011, p. 239). Defusion is important as it enhances the individual's contact with a transcendent sense of self by undermining attachment to a conceptualized self (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, p. 33; Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 325).

Working towards self as context is implicit in all practices in conscious awareness such as mindfulness practices (Harris, 2011, pp. 239-241). A central instruction in mindfulness exercises is "Pay attention to". Through this people are instructed to notice how e.g., their feet touch the floor, their thoughts, or their breath (Harris, 2011, p. 243). Simple instructions such as "pay attention to, who it is that observes X" (observing self) or "be conscious about you noticing X", are utilized to enhance self as context, while doing mindfulness exercises in ACT (Harris, 2011, p. 243). Self as context is further developed through exercises and metaphors specifically aimed at enhancing the attention towards one's own consciousness. Multiple examples of these exercises and metaphors are provided in Harris (2011, pp. 239-259).

One of these exercises is "the continuous you". The exercise contains 4 basic instructions: 1) "Observe X" (E.g., your breath), 2) "There is X – and there is you, observing X". 3) "If you can observe X, then you can't be X", 4) X is continuously changing, that part of you that observes X, does not change (Harris, 2011, p. 246). The exercise helps individuals understand the difference between their *Self* and the observing self.

Values

Values are an intricate part of psychological flexibility as they are the direction one's actions are guided toward (Harris, 2011, p. 249). The role of values in ACT is what distinguishes the perspective from many other therapeutic directions (Hayes, 2016, p. 879). Hayes (2016) proposes that "*It is only within the context of values that action, acceptance, and defusion come together into a sensible whole*" (Hayes, 2016, p. 879). Therefore, clarifying values is an important step towards living a meaningful life as they provide the direction towards which we strive to move (Harris, 2011, p. 23). Values integrate continuous patterns of deliberate action and infers coherence in one's actions (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 321).

Wilson & Dufresne (2009) define values as: "*freely chosen verbally constructed consequences of ongoing, dynamic, evolving patterns of activity, which establish pre-dominant reinforcers for that activity that are intrinsic in engagement in the valued*

behavioral pattern" (Wilson & Dufresne, 2009, p. 66). As such values are chosen and constructed by the individual to guide their actions and reinforce their actions. According to Chase et al. (2013, p. 79), values can be instantiated but never obtained or completed. Therefore, values differ from goals as goals can be finished or obtained (Chase et al., 2013, p. 79; Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9).

Within ACT, values are often described through the metaphor of an internal compass or lighthouse as these guides the direction of an individual (Reinebo, Henriksen & Lundgren, 2020, p. 23). This infers that values are statements that motivate the actions of a person in their everyday life (Reinebo, Henriksen & Lundgren, 2020, p. 23).

Harris (2011) proposes five key aspects of values that are important to bring forward in therapy:

- *Values are here and now* as an individual can freely choose to act upon or neglect their values – in every moment – since they are always available. When living a value-based life, an individual is living in coherence with his/her values in every moment (Harris, 2011, pp. 268-269).
- *Values never need to be justified* as they are merely statements on what is important to ourselves. Justification for our actions is naturally needed even if they follow our values (Harris, 2011, pp. 268-270). E.g., if an individual has freedom as a value, but their actions lead to them resigning their jobs, leaving their family etc.
- *Values frequently need to be prioritized* as all values are always accessible, a prioritization of which values to act upon can be necessary. Situational contexts might make it necessary to down-prioritize certain values and up-prioritize others to act according to the situational demands (Harris, 2011, pp. 270-271).
- *Values should be held lightly* as pursuing one's values rigidly might lead to fusion. When fused with our values, they will resemble commandments and feel suppressive and limiting. (Harris, 2011, p. 271)
- *Values are freely chosen* refers to the fact that an individual chooses their own values and consciously infuses their actions with those values. We choose values because they mean something to us (Harris, 2011, p. 271).

The aspects above provided by Harris (2011) are important to regard, when implementing values in a therapeutic context.

Lack of values

As values provide a direction for one's life and guides behaviors, logically, the lack of values leads to inconsistencies in one's actions. Because fusion leads to unhelpful thoughts or experiential avoidance, values are often lost, forgotten, or neglected (Harris, 2011, p. 48). By lacking clarity over one's values or not being psychologically in contact with one's values, committed actions are not possible to conduct (Harris, 2011, p. 48).

Furthermore, lack of clarity over values might lead to confusion on the specifics and timing of committed actions (Hvid Larsen, Reinebo, Lundgren, 2020, p. 35). E.g., being a supportive colleague might have a different meaning to different persons: For one, it might infer emotional support of colleagues by listening to their home and work issues in the breaks; To another, being a supportive colleague might suggest aspiring to help colleagues with practicalities such as technical issues; To a third, it might even suggest finishing one's own work-tasks quickly, and then helping colleagues afterwards to lessen their burden. Thus, clarifying the specifics of values with the client is important (Hvid Larsen, Reinebo, Lundgren, 2020, pp. 35-36).

While the intentions of "being supportive colleague" are noble, fusing with and pursuing the value rigidly might lead to negative outcomes. In the case of the first person, listening to the colleagues' issues overabundantly in every work-break can hypothetically infer negativity in their own mind. Likewise, they are not able to mentally rest in the breaks as they must listen to others. With the second person, helping with practicalities, they are at risk of excessively usage of work time on other things than their work tasks, which ultimately might cost them their job. In the case of the third person, the risk of becoming psychologically burnt-out or stressed is high.

From lack of values to constructing values to guide oneself

The purpose of values-work in ACT is to teach clients to differ between goals and values, and to aid them in their quest for and contact with their values (Harris, 2011, p. 261). This is done through acceptance, contact with the present moment, defusions, and self as context, which enables the clients to identify valued life domains (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005, p. 321). Some therapists do not work explicitly with values prior to going through the other flexibility processes, while others start with clarifying values before working on the other processes (Harris, 2011, p. 262). Harris (2011) claims that both perspectives have their merits and disadvantages:

As clarifying values can lead to fusion and unwillingness, some clients might not be capable of or willing to explore values in the early stages of the therapeutic process (Harris, 2011, p. 262). Others might lack motivation for the therapy until they clarify and contact with their values (Harris, 2011, p. 262).

There are multiple tools that can be used, when working with values, but generally there are two different approaches to values-work: The first approach is discussions and theorizing about values with the clients, which entails working with values on an intellectual level (speaking and thinking about values) (Harris, 2011, pp. 271-272). The second approach is utilizing principles from ACT and promote deep, experience-based contact with values (Harris, 2011, p. 278). By using metaphors to present and clarify values and experienced-based exercises, the client becomes more engaged in values-work (Harris, 2011, p. 278).

Committed action

When individuals have clarified their values, they can commence the process of committed action. Committed actions entails that individuals commit to actions that bring them closer to their valued ends (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 6). Committed actions is defined by Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson (2012) as: *"Values-based action that occurs at a particular moment in time and that is deliberately linked to creating a pattern of action that serves the value"* (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson., 2012, p. 328). This definition entails that the action takes place at a specific moment in time, which is the present moment. This point refers to the processes, *self as context* and *contact with the present moment*, wherein it is argued that the position "I/Here/Now" and being present are key elements of psychological flexibility. Therefore, committed actions are distinguished from goals as goals lie in the future (Aoyagi & Bartley, 2020, p. 72). Reinebo, Henriksen & Lundgren (2020) argue that committed actions are guided by both short-term and long-term consequences, and committed actions are regarded as successful, when they bring the individual towards their valued ends (Reinebo, Henriksen & Lundgren, 2020, p. 23).

Furthermore, the definition proposed by Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson (2012) infer that committed actions are patterns of actions linked to the values chosen by the client. As such, committed actions are effectuating more comprehensive patterns of effective actions that are motivated and guided by one's values (Harris, 2011, p. 287). Actions should be adapted to the specifics of the situational challenges and either alter or sustain

behavior depending on what the situation demands. Thereby, individuals can do what must be done to live in coherence with their values (Harris, 2011, p. 287). Harris (2011) proposes four fundamental steps to committed actions: 1) Choose a life domain that is highly prioritized as an area of change. 2) Choose the values you wish to pursue within this domain. 3) Set up goals that are guided by the chosen values. 4) Launch actions of conscious presence (Harris, 2011, p. 288). When setting up goals, they should be: Specific, Meaningful, Adaptive, Realistic, and Time-defined (Harris, 2011, pp. 289-290).

Following the above-provided definitions and theoretical points on committed actions it can be deduced that values and committed action are almost theoretically inseparable: Without values, committed actions are merely actions without direction and guidance. Practically, there are times, where the separation of values and commitment, may lead to advantages – albeit only strategically and temporarily (Wilson & Dufresne, 2009, p. 70). Cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance can be high, in clients who have either neglected or violated their values. In such cases, disregarding the commitment part of the behavior and working with acceptance, defusion, and values might aid in increasing the likelihood of minor, committed actions (Wilson & Dufresne, 2009, p. 70).

Inaction and dysfunctional actions

The inflexibility process paired with committed actions is defined as: *"The inability to build larger, more probable, and more integrated patterns of value-linked overt behavior."* (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562). Contrary to committed actions, the inability to build integrated patterns of value-linked behavior, can be interpreted as leading to impulsiveness and inaction. As behavior is not in accordance with values, the directional properties of the behavior are missing, and actions and behavior become impulsive.

Harris (2011) argues that psychological barriers hinder the possibility to conduct committed actions. Those barriers can typically be summarized in the acronym FEAR: Fusion, Excessive goals, Avoidance of discomfort, Remoteness (Harris, 2011, p. 297). Fusion regarding changes to behavior (committed actions), entails fusion with the negative thoughts that hinder forward movement. Excessive goals entail that goals can exceed our resources and subsequently lead to failure or giving up. Avoidance of discomfort embraces the notion that changes can contain discomfort. If one is not willing to accept the discomfort, forward movement is hindered. Remoteness encompasses distance from values. If the contact with one's values is lost, motivation is lost. Harris,

(2012) claims that distance from values becomes apparent in four ways: Firstly, clients cannot or will not get into contact with their values. Secondly, they confuse values with rules and morals. Thirdly, they claim certain values, but do not commit to them. Fourthly, they provide the values of others, religion, culture etc., instead of their own (Harris, 2011, pp. 297-298).

From inaction to committed action

As ACT originates from the tradition of Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (CBT), an important aspect of the method is to promote and aid clients conduct behavioral change: "*Like in all behavioral therapies, helping clients take committed actions requires setting clear behavior change goals and translating values to specific behaviors*". (Henriksen, 2020, p. 6).

Behavioral changes through the methodology used within ACT, entails development of value-based goals in specific areas, and breaking those goals down to actions that are broader and long term (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006, pp. 34-35; Harris 2012, p. 287). Typically, committed actions are not explicitly involved in consultations until after clarification of values has been conducted (Aoyagi & Bartley, 2020, pp. 72-73; Harris, 2011, pp. 287-288). As committed actions are per definition value-based actions, they are introduced after clarification of values (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson., 2012, p. 328). Due to the psychological barriers people encounter, while doing committed actions, the other five flexibility processes are central in handling those psychological barriers (Aoyagi & Bartley, 2020, p. 73).

To deal with those barriers, Harris (2011) proposes the acronym DARE, which entails: Defusion, Acceptance of discomfort, Realistic goals, Embracing (Harris, 2011, p. 298-299). Through defusion, clients can identify and defuse from the thoughts that hinder their actions; Through acceptance of discomfort, clients make room for the painful thoughts and feelings that pervade their minds, which enables value-based actions; Through realistic goals, clients are faced with two options, when they don't have adequate resources in a given situation: Either they set-up new goals to gain those resources (e.g., learning how to get them) or they accept that it is not possible to obtain those resources, adapt their goals to the limitations of reality; Through embracing it is suggested that clients should inspect why they lack motivation to do committed actions by asking questions like: Why is this action important/meaningful? Does it really matter? And if it

does, then why? (Harris, 2011, pp. 298-299). Thus, by utilizing the principles of DARE, clients can aid themselves outside of sessions, when they face different psychological barriers.

Traditional behavioral interventions (e.g., exposure, skills training, desensitization, and goal setting) can be used when working with committed actions in therapy (Aoyagi & Bartley, 2020, p. 73; Harris, 2011, p. 288). This entails teaching clients communication skills, problem-solving skills, crisis management, assertiveness etc. as these skills might serve to enhance a value-based life to some clients (Harris, 2011, p. 288). Likewise, nutrition, sleep, exercise etc., are all actions that enrich a client's life, and aid them towards living in accordance with their values (Aoyagi & Bartley, 2020, p. 73).

Discussion of critical insights to ACT

Much critique of ACT stems from the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) community, who disagree with some of the core statements in ACT on CBT (Gaudiano, 2011a). Hofmann & Asmundson (2008) compared critical claims from ACT on CBT and argued that the critical points raised by ACT practitioners contained an over-simplistic view of CBT (Gaudiano, 2011a, p. 55). Gaudiano (2011a) provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of Hofmann's & Asmundson's (2008) rebuttal to the critique of CBT raised by ACT practitioners. In the article it is concluded that Hofmann's & Asmundson's criticism of ACT, stems from a misunderstanding by the authors of ACT principles (Gaudiano, 2011a, p. 64).

Similarly, the critique point presented in a meta-analysis of 18 clinical trials of ACT by Powers, Zum Vörde Sive Vörding, and Emmelkamp (2009), claim that ACT is not significantly more effective than established treatments as the effect size was found to be 0.18, and the p-value was 0.13 (Powers, Zum Vörde Sive Vörding & Emmelkamp, 2009, pp. 77-79). Likewise, they conclude that ACT was not found to be significantly more effective in controlling conditions for the distress problems as the effect size was 0.03, and p-value 0.84 (Powers, Zum Vörde Sive Vörding & Emmelkamp, 2009, p. 73).

Interestingly, much of the critical insight into ACT is often dismissed as incoherent and misinterpretations. As mentioned earlier Gaudiano (2011a) outlined the misinterpretations of ACT by Hofmann's & Asmundson's (2008). Likewise, the data in the critique raised by Powers, Zum Vörde Sive Vörding & Emmelkamp (2009) was re-

analyzed by Levin & Hayes (2009), who found that ACT was significantly more effective than traditional treatments. Similarly, Öst's (2008) criticism of ACT contains methodological errors and general inconsistencies that lead to incoherent conclusions (Gaudiano, 2011a, pp. 13-14). According to Gaudiano (2011b), ACT research is limited to minor studies that have methodological limitations, and consequently ACT research needs larger samples and changed designs to confirm their findings (Gaudiano, 2011b, p. 13). Specifically, Gaudiano proposes that ACT research should include traditional features of research that are appreciated by much of the scientific community, while simultaneously collecting data that supports their differentiated methods for testing and treatment development (Gaudiano, 2011b, pp. 14-15).

Enhancing Prosilience through psychological flexibility

In this section, principles from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy will be included in a discussion on how to enhance Prosilience. The section seeks to link together Part A and Part B by applying principles from psychological flexibility to the theory of prosilience. Initially, the discussion will investigate the role of acceptance and defusion in uncontrollable adversity situations and during failed negotiations of prosilient actions. Thereafter, the discussion will zoom in on negotiations of prosilient actions, and how utilizing principles from the flexibility processes - contact with the present moment and self of self - can enhance prosilience. Lastly, the roles of values, committed actions and value clarification will be discussed in the context of severe and transcendental adversity situations.

Two cases will be drawn in to contextualize valuable points. The cases are based on two elite footballers, who I have supported and aided during the last two years. As no interviews were conducted, there exists no physical "evidence" of the cases. It is therefore necessary to view these cases as loosely based on reality. I met both players through my work as an elite football coach, and I have talked with them ever since. Not as a therapist, as I was not fully educated, but rather as an advisor and "coach".

The first person is a young footballer, who played at the very highest level. Let us call him Anders. During the summer of 2020, Anders chose to cancel his contract with his club with the purpose of finding a new club, which suited him better. The consequences

of that decision have led Anders into a one-year search for a club, where he met much adversity along the way.

The second person is another footballer, who still plays at the highest level. Let us call him Morten. Morten was one of the brightest talents of his generation, but different hindrances (mentally and physically), have led to a downward spiraling career.

Acceptance of what you cannot change and defusion from associated thoughts and feelings

In adversity situations, the umwelt can potentially limit how an individual is able to act prosiliently. As human beings are open systems, they are in an exchange relationship with the umwelt. The exchange relationship occurs through signs, which can limit or expand what an individual can perceive in the flow of experience. Likewise, the relationship occurs through the processes of internalization and externalization processes whereby individuals transform outer messages (signs) into new forms and re-externalize those transformed signs into new messages. Thus, individuals are affected by and affect the umwelt (Valsiner, 2014, pp. 69-73). As such, when an individual strives towards a desirable future, they try to (negotiate) possibilities to fulfill that future even in adversity situations.

If the negotiations fail, and the individual is unable to act prosiliently in the adversity situation, then he/she will either stop negotiating or negotiate new strategies to act prosiliently. In one conversation I had with Anders, I observed how he gave up on his negotiations:

For context, Anders went through the summer till October, without any signs of his agent being able to find him a club. He contacted some of his old coaches (negotiation of strategy), but they all rejected him. His agent was not able to find him a new club either. Following a long period of multiple rejections, Anders stated the following in one of our conversations: "I am so sick of it. I cannot do anything, and my agent does not do anything. No clubs reach out to me! This is going to cost me my career, and I cannot do anything about it myself. I feel hopeless, and I do not want to do this anymore. Every time I call him (the agent), he has no news, and I am never going to call that fool again".

What I then observed was that Anders' feeling of hopelessness turned into anger, as he exteriorized his feelings towards his agent by calling and yelling at him. This pattern of

rejection was ongoing since the summer, as with every call to his agent, he received no news, and eventually he stopped calling him.

In this case, Anders's possibility to act prosiliently towards the adversity situation, was limited by the umwelt: His possibilities to sign a contract were out of his own controllability, which eventually led to feelings of hopelessness and anger. Anders avoided these unpleasant experiences by not calling his agent to receive updates on the situation.

In the situation Anders went through, the umwelt constrained and controlled his possibility to act prosiliently. His feelings of hopelessness presumably came from his lack of ability to change his circumstances, and the anger shown towards the agent, showed signs of frustration and non-acceptance. To aid this, I challenged Anders' perception of the situation, he was in by asking him questions like: "What can you do to change things?", "Are you in a position to change it yourself?", "How does the situation make you feel?", "How does the situation affect your daily life?".

Given the circumstances he was in, I found that he was not able to change his situation himself. He relied on the agent, coincidence, and the clubs that were contacted to aid him in this specific adversity situation. Therefore, I asked him, "Is there anything you can do to be ready, when an opportunity arises?", "Isn't it 'normal' to be upset with your situation?", to guide him towards what was possible for him to do: Preparation, and acceptance of his circumstances and feelings.

Acceptance works primarily on levels 0-3 of the 5 levels of affective relating: It is verbal and conscious in that it demands active acceptance and embracing of private experiences. As acceptance demands defusion (Hayes, 2016, p. 879), individuals need to be able to observe their thoughts without taking them for literal meaning. Listening to the inner voice, which is called "observing self" in ACT terminology is a necessary part of acceptance, and therefore it is argued that acceptance is verbal and conscious.

Thus, as individuals feel into and perceive an adversity situation, they initially physiologically react to the situation (level 0). In level 1, the physiological reaction begins to be differentiated, but is still not verbalized and conscious. Acceptance enters the stage, when individuals can actively describe the physiological reaction and articulate their feelings both internally and externally (level 2-3). As acceptance and defusion can potentially change how individuals feel, think, and sense events, fully accepting one's

thoughts and feelings has an innate potential to alter already existing hyper-generalizations. To clarify, hyper-generalized affective field cannot be fully verbalized, but is instead felt in its totality, which leads to action or avoidance (Valsiner, 2019, p. 14). This induces that acceptance and defusion can potentially affect the hyper-generalized affective field by means of their internally verbalized action-orientation and changeable characteristics.

Acceptance and defusion during failed negotiations

Acceptance and defusion are acts of prosilience by their nature: In some adversity situations, individuals are constrained by the umwelt, and are therefore unable to successfully negotiate strategies for acting prosiliently towards the adversity. When other strategies have failed, and individuals instead accept the circumstances and defuse from the negative private events associated with the adversity, they are actively adapting to the specific adversity situation. Once again, we can include the case of Anders, and fictionally propose how the process could have occurred in the context of acceptance and defusion in figure 2:

Re-negotiation with the umwelt

1st & 2nd action and strategy

Failed strategy of
action becomes
re-internalized

Adversity: *No contract*

Actions:
1: Call agent for update
2: Give up

Outcome
1: Anger. 2: Hopelessness

Alternative actions and strategy

Successful strategy of
action becomes re-
internalized for future
use (generalized)

Adversity: *No contract*

Actions:
Acceptance and
defusion

Outcome:
Acceptance of umwelt control & defusion from negative private
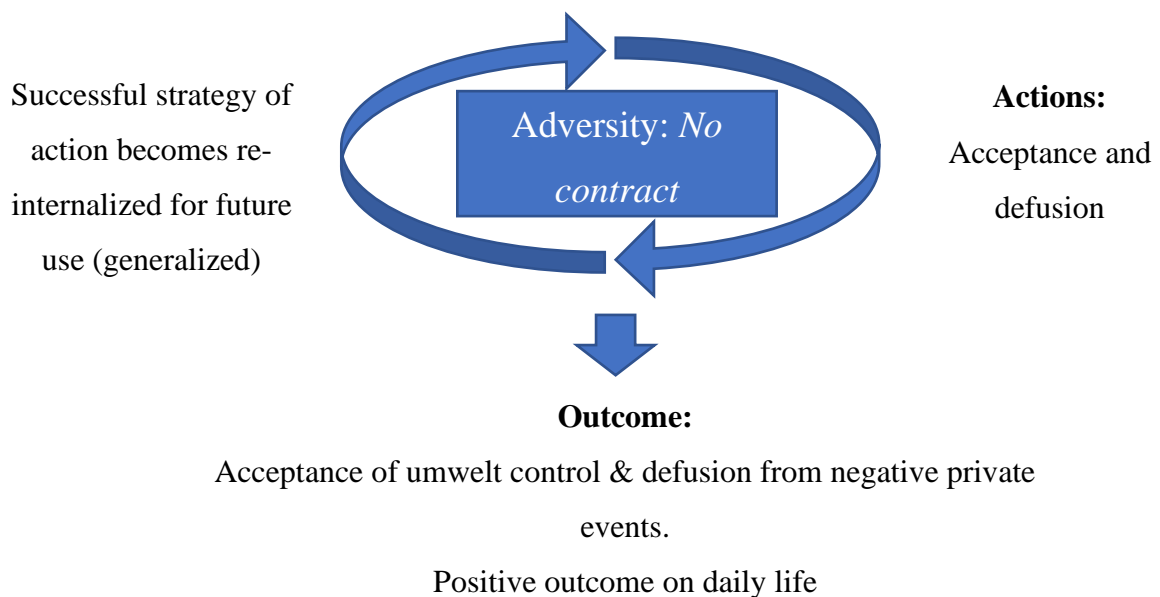events.
Positive outcome on daily life

*Figure 2 – Including acceptance and defusion in the
case of Anders*

In the circumstances Anders were in, an alternative action and strategy, could be
acceptance and defusion. By accepting that the circumstances are unchangeable, and by
defusing from negative private events associated with the adversity, an efficient outcome
for Anders daily life could have been achieved. As the situation influences his daily life,
acceptance and defusion might guide Anders towards being present, focused and living a
meaningful life.

I would like to reiterate and clarify a claim made earlier in the present section, namely that acceptance and defusion are acts of prosilience. This claim draws upon four propositions that collectively support the claim: 1) An action is *doing something*[6]. Therefore, inaction is not regarded as a prosilient action as it does not infer flexible adaptation. Inaction is instead a sign of experiential avoidance and lack of committed actions. 2) As acceptance entails action by an individual (Harris, 2011, p. 23; Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 5; Hayes et al., 2006, p. 7), it can be considered an act of prosilience as individuals are *doing something* to flexibly adapt to adversity. 3) Similarly, cognitive defusion entails deliberately relating to one's thoughts (Kraft, Butcher, Levin & Twohig, 2020), wherefore its active properties can be regarded as an act of prosilience. 4) Both acceptance and defusion enable flexible adaptation through their behavioral adaptational qualities.

As such, actively accepting and defusing from one's thoughts can be considered acts of prosilience in adversity as they aim at regulating one's own behavior and thoughts. Actively *choosing* to accept and defuse, can be considered as acts of prosilience *if* doing so enables flexible adaptation. This induces that acceptance and defusion, are two specific acts of prosilience that an individual can utilize, when faced with an adversity situation in which they do not have control.

For practitioners working with clients, who are in such a situation, utilizing principles from defusion-techniques and acceptance skills, can raise the clients' awareness of their situation. Teaching clients to observe their thoughts through exercises such as 'leaves on a stream' can help clients in distancing themselves from their thoughts. In the Anders case, cognitive fusion was apparent: He was fused with the negative thoughts and feelings associated with his situation, which was displayed in his anger towards his agent, and his feeling of hopelessness. As such, Anders was stuck in the 'world of language', unable to act prosiliently towards the situation, and eventually ceased to negotiate with the umwelt.

Furthermore, mindfulness exercises might also aid clients in accepting their circumstances and undermine the control agenda. I therefore advised Anders to do mindfulness, as an aid to his general well-being, and current circumstances. Eventually, he downloaded the personalized mindfulness app, Balance, which is a personalized mindfulness app with multiple exercises ingrained spanning from body-scans, breathing

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[6] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/action Action, Cambridge Dictionary

exercises and even relaxing sounds. The usage of metaphors and experiential exercises such as 'tug of war' can aid clients in accepting the presence of a thought, feeling, situation, and to re-focus on valued goals even if these are seemingly unattainable in the present moment.

Optimizing negotiations through contact with the present moment and self as context

In part A, it was argued that negotiations occur on the border between the infinity of the inner and outer world through the processes of internalization and externalization. Individuals internalize, perceive, decompose, re-compose, and externalize messages conveyed through signs. Therefore, they actively negotiate for strategies to fulfill their goal-directed future despite the presence of adversity.

To efficiently (in accordance with values) negotiate strategies to act prosiliently, it is key to fully perceive and experience the adversity situations. The multifaceted nature of signs and complex sign fields can seem overwhelmingly unstructured to the non-present mind. Therefore, an individual in an adversity situation, can potentially misinterpret signs and messages (e.g., verbal, and non-verbal expressions from others), and cognitively fuse with such misinterpretations.

Valsiner (2014) proposes that semiotic mediation works along two lines: *schematization* and *pleromatization* (Valsiner, 2014, p. 240). Through schematization individuals categorize objects, thereby reducing the complexity of the complex sign-fields of experiences into categories. This lessens the detail-richness of the perception of an object, but provides stability (Valsiner, 2014, p. 240). Through pleromatization individuals increase the richness of an object by using pleromata, which are "*hyper rich depictions of reality that stand for some other reality (or set up irrealities)*" (Valsiner, 2014, p. 240). Therefore, pleromatic signs are presentations of a generalized concept that transcends beyond the object depicted by the sign (Valsiner, 2014, p. 242). Therefore, pleromatization unfolds why interpretations are unique to every human being – due to the complexity of the pleromatic signs that guides thinking and feelings (Valsiner, 2014, p. 242). While the definition of an object in Valsiner's terminology is not apparent in the book (Valsiner, 2014), I propose that objects can be understood as having physical (e.g., chairs), verbal (e.g., statements), cultural (e.g., discourses), or psychological (e.g., thoughts) properties.

In adversity situations, the implication of schematization and pleromatization suggests that the meaning-making of an individual can either be *more* or *less* rich in detail. While the flexibility processes, self as context and being present in the present moment appear intuitive and non-verbal, it could be argued that they provide a possibility to dialectically interpret and act upon adversity. Using the position of "I-Here-Now" can help individuals in fully experiencing and observing their feelings and thoughts. Thus, the position itself aids individuals towards not attaching or investing themselves in experiences that occur.

Due to the complexity of adversity situations, individuals are at risk of fusing with the negative feelings and thoughts associated with adversity and be dominated by and attached to a conceptualized self. Taking the position of "I-Here-Now" provides a perspective from which individuals can detach from the thoughts and feelings associated with the adversity situation. Doing so enables them to fully experience the adversity situation and all its characteristics, wherefore they can schematically and pleromatically make meaning of it.

Contrary, it could be argued that attachment to a conceptualized self to experientially avoid discomfort can lead an individual away from pleromatization: Attaching oneself to a conceptualized self, can lead to inflexibility as it is pervaded by the verbal relations about oneself (positive or negative). In adversity situations, individuals can attach themselves to a conceptualized self to avoid the pain of their inner experiences.

As an example, we can draw upon two statements I heard from Morten, who rarely plays, but still claims that "I am the best in the team" (fusion with conceptualized self) and "The coach has not told me, why I am not playing. It's because he doesn't like me!". By fusing with a positive conceptualized self, he may not see the adversity for what it might be: An expression of him needing to improve to get back on the team. In the given example, the coach communicates through pleromata: By not giving Morten playing time and not explaining why, the coach sends signals that transcends from his thoughts to his actions towards the player. Instead of pleromatically make meaning of the signals communicated to him – see through the signals - Morten categorizes the signals as expressions of the coach attitude towards him. Signals that do not cohere with his conceptualized self. The example shows how important self as context is in adversity situations as it allows individuals to fully experience events.

Another important consideration that underlies the necessity of fully perceiving and experiencing adversity, is directing one's attention towards the present moment. Fletcher & Hayes (2005) propose that by contacting the present moment non-judgmentally, individuals shift their attention towards the present moment's exterior stimuli (e.g., smells, sounds), and internal sensations (feelings, thoughts). This provides individuals with the opportunity to be consciously aware of the events that occur in the present moment and collect necessary information that allows them to alter or resume their behavior (Harris, 2011, p. 217).

This implicates that present moment awareness allows individuals to fully perceive occurring events, thereby expanding the foundation for negotiations. Fully perceiving an adversity situation and all the sensations and information associated with it, allows human beings to collect the necessary information to act prosiliently towards the adversity situation. Being present enables individuals to internalize the richness of information communicated to them through signs and makes both schematization and pleromatization possible.

Adversely, the domination of a conceptualized past or feared future inhibits individuals from accessing the present moment. Fusion with a conceptualized past or feared future, results in rigid contact with the present external and internal environments (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 562), that affects the negotiations conducted in adversity situations.

In the Anders case, it was apparent how his feared future ("it's going to cost me my career") leads to feelings of hopelessness and frustration. In Anders' case, many things went wrong simultaneously: His career was off-track, his girlfriend left him, and his older brother was sentenced to four years of prison. Through our conversations I understood that Anders' career frustrations (and fusion with feared future), made it difficult for him to present with his family, when they needed each other. Being mentally absent from the present moment complicated Anders' possibility to negotiate acts of prosilience towards the adversity situations he went through.

Therefore, being in contact with the present moment and self as context, enables individuals to fully make-meaning of the detail-richness of the adversity they experience. This gives them full accessibility to the information necessary to guide their negotiations of acts of prosilience with the umwelt. Utilizing methods that teach the individual to be

present in the present moment and self as context, can therefore be assumed to enhance an individual's negotiations.

Values as constants in adversity

Adversity situations are characterized by their seemingly destructive nature: They often occur, when we are not ready for them; They occur in an ill-timed manner; They might bring unhappiness, misfortune, anger, frustration, hopelessness etc.; And they have the potential to change us. The frequency of adversity fluctuates through life and varies between individuals, but all adversity situations occur on the liminal spot between the infinities of inner and outer world. The claim that adversity has the potential to constrain an individual in acting prosiliently, stems from the concept of signs and the processes of internalization and externalization. Importantly, the constraining nature does not characterize the multiplicity of adversity situations experienced, wherefore individuals will in some situations be able to act prosiliently without much negotiation of strategies.

Acting prosiliently towards adversity situations, gives us a tool to combat their destructive nature. The reason to act prosiliently and which actions to commit to, can be found through clarifying one's values as actions, acceptance, and defusion need the context of values to congregate (Hayes, 2016, p. 879). Ladner & Palasik (2010; Palasik & Michise, 2015) provide an interesting symbolic representation of values as a tree, wherein the roots are one's chosen values; The trunk is one's thoughts on who we want to and should be; and the leaves are what is available for others to see. Building on from this metaphor, adversity can metaphorically be seen as stormy weather. Heavy wind, rain, snow, and lightning can affect the tree and all its parts, but only rarely destroy it. Utilizing this metaphor with clients in adversity situations, can help clarify the importance of values: The deeper the roots, the more solidly the tree stands. The more solidified their values are, and the more they commit to them, the more solidly they stand during adversity.

Are values freely chosen?
The link between negotiations and values is multi-faceted, as individuals clarify and choose their values in the context of the exterior world. Despite the seemingly intrinsic nature of values (personally preferred and chosen), their area of affection is intra- and extra-psychologically mediated, influenced and negotiated: In relational frame theory, things (e.g., values, psychological events) are looked within the context, they take place

in, and the function they have in that context (Harris, 2011, p. 56; Törneke, 2010, pp. 9-10).

This assumption induces a view of values as contextually created and dependent: Despite the intrinsically mediated choice of preferred values, they are relevant in the context of the domains they are chosen for. Therefore, therapists guide individuals towards choosing domain-specific values (Harris, 2011, p. 288), which stems from the differentiation between life-domains (e.g., different values in work-domain vs. family domain). This implies that values are constructed on the border of the individual and the umwelt (values constructed in relation to something social e.g., work, friends), and become internally established (chosen). While conducting committed actions the chosen values once again re-surfaces to the border of the individual and the person.

While values in ACT are viewed as freely chosen personalized statements that direct one's behavior towards a meaningful life, the question is then whether anybody can freely choose any values they prefer? Aren't there some culturally mediated (and constraining) morals and values that are induced upon an individual? To answer these questions, consider one the classic values of an elite athlete, "Work hard*"*. Working hard is not merely working, but entails working above the average level. There is different interesting dilemma if that specific value is inspected:

Firstly, it could be argued that working hard is a product of the capitalistic discourse as, presumably, only few people would enjoy working hard just for the sake of it. The reader could ask themselves whether they would prefer to work 30 hours per week and get paid the same as they are now, while working 50 hours per week. Secondly, this value is ingrained into the societal structures: If nobody were working hard, but instead just worked ordinary hours and with ordinary intensity, then presumably society would not evolve as quickly. Therefore, societies have an interest in inducing such a value into the minds of its citizens. Thirdly, consider the context that any elite athlete is in: They are engrained from parents, coaches, idols, fans, and the media to work hard to fulfill their potential. This mindset has been induced on them since they started in their profession. This line of argumentation could be further explored, but for the purpose of the present master thesis, the practical implications of a proposed value will be examined.

In contrast to the argumentation in ACT, "*that values never need to be justified*" (Harris, 2011, pp. 268-270), practitioners could explore the background of and reason why a

certain value is chosen by a client. This is not to confuse with skepticism towards a certain value: Clarifying why a value is important to a person can solidify a value or aid a client towards values that are more personal to them. If a client refers to the values of others (e.g., "My parents always told me that humbleness is one of the most important things in life), the client is at risk of not taking ownership of the value.

The key to understanding why this line of argumentation is valid, lies in the theory of semiotic mediation. The multifaceted nature of signs, affects and potentially limit what an individual can/will choose as their preferred values. As the semiotic process occurs through life, individuals are affected by their umwelt in the process of internalization from childhood. Therefore, hyper-generalizations are unavoidably conformed to the influence of the umwelt. Thus, as individuals clarify their values, they look to and negotiate with their personal past, the present moment, and their goals in the future to clarify which values to choose. This does not imply that utilizing values work in a therapeutic setting is disregarded, and that all values are "bad" because they are culturally created. On the contrary, it implies the importance of clarifying the specifics of a certain value to a client.

When individuals feel into and negotiate strategies for acting prosiliently towards an adversity situation, they draw upon signs available in the present moment, their personal past, desirable future, and already made hyper-generalizations. The intrinsically embedded parameters in negotiations (personal past, desirable future, and hyper-generalizations), can be considered as the areas of control that are available to an individual. While the process of semiotic mediation entails verbal, pre-verbal, and post-verbal affective processes, values are consciously chosen and establishes pre-dominant reinforcers (Wilson & Dufresne, 2009, p. 66). It was argued by Harris (2011) that values are not to be regarded as rigid rules, but individuals can freely choose to act upon or abandon their values at any moment. This argument – along with the claim that values work is an explicit process (Harris, 2011) – supports the notion that values and clarification of values, operate primarily on the verbal levels of semiotic mediation.

Values in the domain of *self*

While negotiating acts of prosilience in adversity situations, values have multiple relevant functions that can affect the negotiation process. One of these functions is the potential for values to provide a point of reference from which individuals can choose different

lines of committed actions. Instead of assessing a situation and act spontaneously towards it, values can provide the framework from which individuals can strategically choose their acts of prosilience.

If an individual tests strategies that are coherent with their values, the directional properties of the negotiations with the umwelt will be changed. This is another function of values in adversity. Instead of grasping for strategies from their personal past, values give the individual limited but concise accessibility to strategies that transcends the specifics of the adversity situation experienced. While negotiations are still socially embedded and reciprocally influenced, values guide the negotiation process towards the individual, instead of the individual adapting to the adversity situation without consideration of the short-term and long-term consequences.

Reinebo, Henriksen & Lundgren (2020) makes the distinction between a values-driven path and an avoidance-driven path. The latter path entails that actions, decisions and choices are driven by avoidance of negative consequences (Reinebo, Henriksen & Lundgren, 2020, p. 21). The avoidance driven path provides a person with short-term reward (e.g., removal of unpleasantness), but consequently leads to long-term consequences.

Without values, the testing of strategies occurs without transcending context, and clients run the risk of going down the avoidance-driven path. However, it is important to note that clients should not rigidly follow their values if the values are not adapted to the circumstances. The claim from ACT that *"values need to be prioritized"* (Harris, 2011, pp. 270-271), should be emphasized in this regard. Since certain values are not applicable in all contexts, and as values are always accessible (Harris, 2011, pp. 270-271), following them rigorously in every adversity situation might counteract prosilience. Therefore, clients need to adapt their values (down-prioritize some, and up-prioritize others) depending on the context of the adversity situation.

Another key consideration is that adversity can potentially transcend to multiple areas. To consolidate this claim, consider once again the Anders case: The adversity he experienced was oriented towards his career, but not limited towards this domain as it affected other life-domains. Instead, the adversity transcended to another area of his life (private life) due to the domination of the feared future that affected his ability to be present with his family. If Anders went to school, it could have transcended to his

performance there too. Imagine alternatively, that he had a contract with a team, but was not chosen for one game. Surely, some frustration could transcend into private life, but the severity and specifics of the situation would presumably not have the same profound impact.

ACT proposes that values should be domain specific, but then the question is how one should act prosiliently towards transcending adversity situations? ACT puts much emphasis on choosing domain-specific values that are concretely adapted to the specific domains (Harris, 2011, p. 288). An alternative proposition could be values in the domain of *self* that transcend to and fuse with (not cognitively fuse with) the values chosen in other domains. Figure 3 sheds light on and visualizes how this concept could function theoretically:
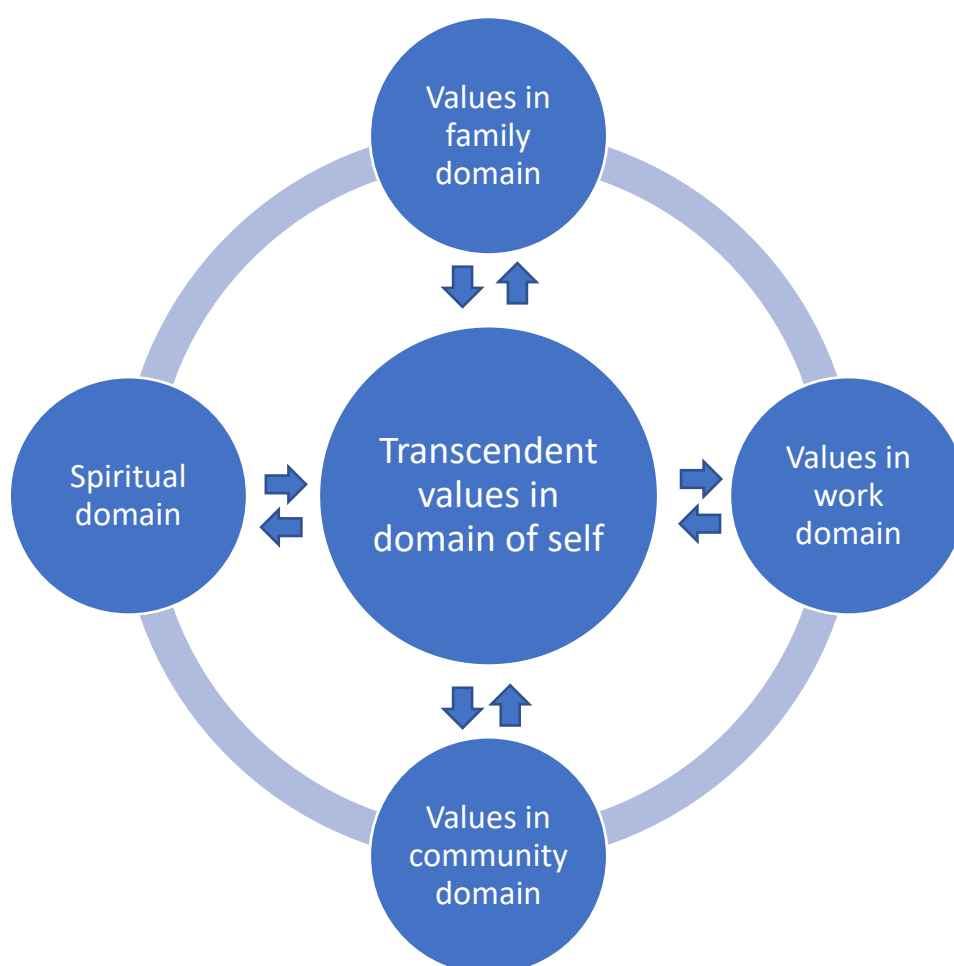

Figure 3 - Transcendent values in domain of self

Transcendent values are values that transcend into and provide coherency between the domains occupied by domain-specific values. Any values that are not domain specific (e.g., teamwork, hard-work, innovation) can serve to guide other values chosen in other

domains. An example of such a value is respect (for others and self). Respect in the family domain can entail giving family members space, listening to their issues, helping them in any way possible; In the work domain, respect can induce that persons do not overstep hierarchical boundaries, boundaries of others, criticize colleagues; Respect as a value in the community domain can suggest not calling friends during work time, not criticizing their parenting style, and showing them the support needed during adversity; Spiritually, respect can refer to being respectful towards the traditions of one's religion, and respect of one's own beliefs. Transcendentally, respect can be towards one's self, dreams, and life.

Ultimately, what a certain value infers differentiates between individuals. Transcendental values have an innate potential to provide coherency between life-domains and the *self* when the consequences of adversity spread to other domains.

Conclusion

This theoretical two-part master thesis aspired to re-conceptualize and re-define the concept, psychological resilience, and discuss how the alternative theory, prosilience, could be enhanced by practitioners. The thesis processed the research questions: *1) "How can resilience be re-conceptualized and re-defined?"* 2) *"How can prosilience be enhanced through application of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?"* To answer the first research question, Part A was constructed as a research article, wherein the contemporary perspectives of resilience were summarized and critiqued. The contemporary perspectives are limited by means of their discursive propositions; their lack of inclusion of the context of adversity; and their tautological nature, which can hardly be dismissed nor applied.

To address the gaps in the contemporary perspectives of resilience, and to combat the non-viable verbal inference that individuals "bounce back", when faced with adversity, the word prosilience was proposed. Prosilience translates to "leaping forth", which implies that when experiencing adversity situations, people move forward in irreversible time in anticipation of their desirable future. Prosilience is defined as *"the reciprocally influenced, negotiating act of an individual with umwelt that enables flexible adaptations"*. This conceptualization draws upon the theory of cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics. Specifically, prosilience utilizes multiple principles from Valsiner's

theorizing: The processes of internalization and externalization, the semiotic process, the notions of irreversible time and hyper-generalizations, the constructive process of pleromatization and schematization.

The reciprocity between individuals and the umwelt occurs through the processes of internalization and externalization. Through internalization individuals perceive, internalize, and transform the signs made accessible by the umwelt. The changed sign is then externalized to the availability of others, wherein the potential lies for the individual to affect the umwelt. The reciprocal relationship between individual and umwelt suggests that the umwelt can potentially inhibit the individual from acting prosiliently towards adversity.

The second part of the definition suggests that individuals negotiate for strategies to act prosiliently towards adversity. These negotiations of strategies occur in the processes of internalization and externalization, whereby individuals semiotically mediate present moment signs, re-imagine their personal past (and searches for similarities) and imagine their immediate and desirable future. In adversity situations, strategies are negotiated through tests towards the adversity. Successful negotiation of strategies provides individuals with a direction of their context-specific actions. Failed negotiation of strategies will inversely lead to either ceased or re-initiation of negotiations.

Furthermore, it was proposed that due to the notion of irreversible time, all situations are unique despite their apparent similarities. This induces that while individuals could draw upon already made hyper-generalizations in adversity, the specifics of the situation can hinder successful negotiation of strategies.

Part B sought to link the notion of prosilience presented in Part A with principles from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to answer the second research question: *"How can prosilience be enhanced through application of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?"*. Adversity situations have the characteristics to potentially constrain an individual's opportunity to act prosiliently towards it. In such cases, experiential avoidance of and cognitive fusion with the negative feelings and thoughts associated with the adversity, are possible outcomes.

Acceptance and cognitive defusion are processes that can be used to combat fusion and avoidance. Those flexibility processes operate on the first 4 levels of affective relating and can potentially change already existing hyper-generalizations. Through acceptance

of and cognitive defusing from the negative feelings and thoughts associated with constraining circumstances, individuals can live through the experienced adversity. It was claimed that acceptance and cognitive defusion can be viewed as acts of prosilience as they both entail activity by means of regulating one's behavior and thoughts during adversity.

The complexity and uniqueness of adversity situations stems from the multifaceted nature of signs and complex characteristics of pleromatic signs that guides thinking and feeling. Through the processes of schematization and pleromatization, individuals' meaning-making can either be poor or rich in detail. Therefore, it was argued that being in contact with the present moment and taking the position of "I-Here-Now", provides the individual with the optimal opportunity to fully experience, observe, and perceive the detail-richness of adversity situations.

By being attentive towards all present moment sensations (feelings) and stimuli (signs), individuals become capable of collecting the information needed for negotiation of acts of prosilience. Having one's self as context provides a position for individuals to defuse from the feelings and thoughts associated with the experienced adversity situation. Reversely, attachment to or fusion with a conceptualized self, conceptualized past or feared future inhibits individuals from accessing the pleromatic signs available in the present moment. These inflexibility processes inhibit the opportunity to efficiently negotiate acts of prosilience with the umwelt as the individuals' meaning-making is constrained to the process of schematization and assessing the information available in the present moment.

Values provides a constant sense of direction that allows individuals to do committed and prosilient actions in adversity situations. Contrary to the claims in ACT – that values are freely chosen and never need to be justified - practitioners could explore the background of and reason why a certain value is chosen. As individuals go through life, certain values are induced on them by the umwelt. Therefore, practitioners can aid in solidifying a value by exploring the reasoning behind it. Furthermore, values can enhance prosilience as they provide a point of reference from which acts of prosilience are possible. This moves much of the negotiations towards the individuals as values provide a limited but concise option of domain specific strategies and acts of prosilience.

While some adversity situations are limited to a specific domain, others transcend into other life-domains. To combat this issue, it is proposed that individuals should choose values in the domain of *self* that transcend beyond a specific domain and provides coherency between life-domains.

In sum, it can be concluded that principles from ACT can theoretically enhance prosilience. Acceptance and cognitive defusion enables individuals to act prosiliently towards adversity situations, wherein they have little control. Contact with the present moment and self as context provides awareness of the experienced adversity, and a position for individuals to fully experience all associated sensations of the experienced adversity. Values provide the individuals' acts of prosilience with a specific purpose and direction from which they can act prosiliently. Values in the domain of self can be chosen to counter the transcendental potential in adversity, and thereby enhance prosilience.

Combining ACT and prosilience allows us to understand how future therapists can utilize principles from ACT to guide clients towards acts of prosilience - that empower the client in their pursuit of a desirable future despite the presence of adversity.

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