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# Children's discursive constructions of the 'self'

Elizabeth Benninger and Shazly Savahl

**Abstract**
The ways in which children construct and assign meaning to the 'self' could have an impact on their social and emotional well-being, including their coping skills, relationship formation, and behaviour. Furthermore, a child's understanding of the 'self' could influence the way in which they make meaning out of their experiences and internalize these experiences as a means of understanding one's abilities and self-worth. Conditions of poverty and oppression could negatively impact the development of the self-concept and a child's overall well-being. Such conditions exist in South Africa, where the aftermath of apartheid's system of structural racism continues in the form of social inequity, poverty, and violence. This study utilized a child participation framework to explore children's discursive constructions of and meanings assigned to the 'self' within two urban communities of the Western Cape, South Africa. Eight focus group discussions were conducted amongst fifty-four children between the ages of nine to twelve. Thematic and discourse analysis were used to analyse the findings. The themes of childhood, social connectedness, and children's spaces were identified as key influences on a child's self-concept. Four underlying discourses emerged within the themes as central to the participant's self-constructions. These included; (1) '*forfeited childhood*,' (2) '*vulnerability and helplessness*,' (3) '*preserving the integrity of the self*,' and (4) *opportunitiwes for escape*.'

## 1 Background and Rationale

The ways in which children assign meaning to the 'self' could have an impact on their social and emotional well-being, including their coping skills, relationship formation, and behaviour. Furthermore, a child's understanding of the 'self' could influence the way in which they make meaning out of their experiences and internalize these experiences as a means of understanding one's abilities and self-worth. In the field of Social Psychology the conscious component of the 'self' is commonly referred to as the self-concept (Egan and Perry 1998) or self-identity (Rogers 2012). Conditions of poverty and oppression could negatively impact the development of the self-concept and a child's overall well-being (see Noble-Carr et al. 2013, Parkes 2007, Savahl et al. 2013. Schimmack and Diener 2002). Such conditions are seen within post-apartheid South Africa, where the aftermath of a system of structural racism remains in the form of social inequity, poverty, and community violence.

The history of systematic violence and oppression in South Africa can be traced back to the era of colonisation in the 1600s on the premise of colonial expansion, conquest, and slavery (Stevens et al. 2003). Since this time period, violence in the form of structural racism became increasingly institutionalised to enable 'White' privilege through the social, economic, and psychological exploitation of the 'Black' residents (Stevens et al. 2003). This was made especially explicit during the apartheid era in South Africa (1948–1994), where state policies controlled the spaces where people could reside and access based on their classification within the four racial groups of Indian, and White/Indian, and White (Moses 2006). With a growing concern of the integration of people of colour with the white population, the 1950's Group Areas Act was implemented to separate the residents of colour from the 'White' residents (Mabin 1992). Along with distinct residential areas, government services, education, medical care, beaches, and parks were all segregated with the superior services and systems provided for the people classified as 'White' (Moses 2006). With little opportunities to essential resources, including adequate healthcare, education, social services, housing, or employment opportunities, poverty flourished within the townships along with its associated challenges of community violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and the spread of infectious disease.

Post-apartheid South Africa is faced with a growing struggle of social, health, and economic inequity, with over half of South Africa's children living in conditions of poverty (World 2013). In addition to poverty, violence continues to permeate the everyday lives of South Africans, shifting from its overt institutionalisation to intra-personal and inter-personal forms of violence (Stevens et al. 2003). Due to the high exposure to adverse social and environmental influences on mental health, protective influences are crucial for the optimal development of South African children (Petersen et al. 2010). It is therefore necessary for communities to be exposed to promotional activities focused on improving children's well-being. When referring to children's subjective well-being, this study specifically focuses on subjective well-being, defined as the cognitive and affective evaluations that children make about their lives and circumstances within a specific social environment (Diener 2006). Research has identified the self-concept to have a strong influence on children's subjective well-being (see Fattore et al. 2007, McLean et al. 2007, Schimmack and Diener 2002), for example, Schimmack and Diener (2002) found explicit self-esteem to be a predictor of subjective well-being. In a previous addition of *Child Indicators Research*, Savahl et al. (2014) have noted children's perceptions that a '*stable self*' is critical to a positive self-identity and their overall well-being. Although the 'self' has been a long-standing topic in psychological research, the understanding of what contributes towards the development of children's self-concept needs to be further explored. Additionally, there are limited studies on how messages of oppression, violence, and threat impact the subjective understanding of the self-concept with young children. This specific study explores how children conceptualise the 'self' within two urban communities of the Western Cape challenged by high levels of community poverty and violence. This is achieved through an analysis of the discourses which children use to make meaning of the 'self.'



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## 2 Aims

The aim of the study was to explore how children construct and assign meaning to the 'self' within two urban impoverished communities of the Western Cape. Within this process the study aimed to explore how these constructions and meaning assignations were manifested within children's discourses. The study further aimed to provide recommendations to inform further research and practice aimed at improving children's self-concept and its influence on children's well-being.

## 3 Children's Conceptualisation of the Self

Social psychology has a strong influence on the current knowledge and scientific understanding of the self. The way in which individuals perceive, think, and feel about themselves in relation to their abilities, characteristics, and attributes is commonly referred to as the self-concept or self-identity (Marsh and Craven 2006). Psychologists such as George Mead (1934), Erikson (1959), Stryker and Burke (2000) have looked towards understanding the components of the 'self' which are more easily accessible in a person's awareness and which can be looked at with objectivity. Mead's self-object theory (1934) conceives all social experiences to be identified and integrated with the self. Through interactions with multiple social contexts, a person's self is divided into a variety of different selves which are communicated to others or to the self. Erikson (1959) theorized a healthy self to be characterized by cultural relativity, with identities formed in relationship to one's social and cultural contexts. Erikson's psychosocial self theory (1959) explains the concept of the self to be in continuity throughout various life domains, rooted in early childhood experiences of trust. Healthy development is marked by the integration of the self in adulthood.

Identity theory (Stryker and Burke 2000) seeks to describe the reciprocal relationship between the self and society. Identity is defined as the parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies (Stryker and Burke 2000, p.284).^ Stryker and Burke (2000) conceptualize the self to be partially a structure of multiple identities. Social structures are composed of interconnected social roles linked through activities, resources, and meanings, all of which influence the self-identity. People adopt as many selves as there are distinct social groups with which the person interacts, occupies a position, and plays a role (Stryker and Burke 2000).

For Vygotsky (1933 [1994]), Luria (1994), and Stephens and colleagues (Stephens et al. 2012), culture is central to the development of the child, their self-concept, and their behaviour. Luria theorized the development of the child to take place in a series of transformations which are influenced by the cultural environment. In other words, a child changes in order to adapt oneself to the conditions of the community. Likewise, the subject matter of the cultural experience influences the beliefs about oneself and one's abilities. Vygotsky's theory of learning and identity looks to the specific cultural influences on identity, learning, and behaviour (Vygotsky 1933 [1994]). Culture influences our daily experience and therefore shapes the selves which make up the culture. Child development is the process of mastering items of the cultural experience along with cultural behaviours and cultural ways of reasoning. As a



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child constructs an internal process following the mastery of an external method, these internal schemas are used to influence decision-making.

**Oppression and self-identity** In accordance with the theories of Vygotsky (1933) and Luria (1994), the 'sociocultural self model' explains the interdependence of both individual characteristics and culture on behaviour outcomes, while further acknowledging the influence which structural conditions could have on an individual's self-concept and identity development (Stephens et al. 2012). This model takes into consideration the variety of contextual and cognitive variables which influence the development of an individual and collective self. When individuals participate in a certain environment, their self-concept changes accordingly, thus adopting a culturally-congruent self (Adams and Markus 2004). While the self is shaped by cultural experiences, new sub-cultures can simultaneously arise in the form of the interactions of the individual selves within them (Adams and Markus 2004). In order for an individual to adapt to a more desired behaviour, the current selves must be congruent with the behaviour change.

Social constructionism looks to the historical, material, and ideological impact of violence and oppression on the self, with the understanding that oppression in itself is a violent act. Within social constructionism, the sociogenetic theory argues that social conditions of structural, vertical violence give rise to the generation of intra-personal, inter-personal, and collective counter violence, which permeates into social institutions, community structures, and relationships (Stevens et al. 2003). This theory is reflected in the writings of Frantz Fanon, which investigated the psychology of colonialism, understood not only by the historical events which took place, but the psychological response and the internalized factors of those events (Hook 2003). According to Fanon (1967), black inferiority continues not only through the external economic exploitation of black people but additionally through the internalized meaning of this experience. Fanon describes this as the impact of systemic vertical violence aimed at reproducing racial domination which produces a collective unconsciousness of racism. After a prolonged period of time, the ideology of the dominant group becomes internalised by the dominated group, leading to intense internal distress and damaging the identity (Hook 2003). In an attempt to defend the self from the psychological distress, oppressed individuals may turn inward on the self and outwards on the members of their own community and race.

**Coping and resilience** Although suboptimal environments, such as communities with high levels of poverty, may result in an increased risk for negative social and emotional outcomes, these are not inevitable and often depend on a young person's ability to understand, respond and cope, and gain the resources for support and protection (Margolin and Gordis 2000). According to Malindi and Theron (2010), resilience occurs when young people who reside within suboptimal environments and their ecologies work together to maximise existing resources. For example, Malindi and Theron (2010) found resilience to be a product of a socio-cultural context and personal activism amongst street youth in South Africa. Examples of personal and environmental assets which assisted the youth to build



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resilience included stoicism, reflexivity, local role-models, enabling adults, schooling, and cultural heritage. Studies related to the self-concept have shown children to exhibit resilience through adopting a strong identification with one domain of self-concept in which they are good at, while minimising the others in order to protect their sense of self (De Haan et al. 2010, Whitesell et al. 2006). Further research has identified social networks, including family, peers, adults in the community, mentors, coaches, and social service providers, to have a key influence on a healthy self-concept in the face of adversity (see Moss 2009, Noble-Carr et al. 2013).

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Design

The design of the study is located in Child Participatory Research Framework. This framework locates the child centrally in the research process in order to gain a detailed understanding of their subjective experiences and meaning-making processes while taking into consideration the social, cultural, and historical context (Fattore et al. 2007). Through meaningful and collaborative participation, children and adults are able learn new things, find new solutions and achieve new outcomes (Moore et al. 2016). There is a growing acceptance in participatory research with children, which recognizes children as key and competent informants on their own lives (Casas 2016). Furthermore, there is a growing body of academic literature which seeks to understand children's perspectives on issues related to poverty (Redmond 2009). This is influenced by social constructionism and contemporary childhood studies, which challenge the way psychology and the social sciences have marginalised and excluded children through the construction of the child as a 'becoming adult.' Social constructionism and contemporary childhood studies rather views children as social actors and knowledgeable subjects (Mason and Watson 2014). Child participation, especially amongst children in poverty, is additionally influenced by current international children's rights legislation which grants children the right to freely express their opinion, to be heard, and for their opinions to be taken seriously on all matters which affect them (United Nations General United Nations General Assembly 1989).

Central to the child participation process was the use of a child reference group who served as co-researchers and consultants throughout the study. The use of a child reference group is further supported by the research by Moore et al. (2016), which points to the need for further research around how children may meaningfully participate in co-reflexive activities such as reference groups, and how reference groups can be used as an important strategy for participation as well as a site for co-reflexivity.

### 4.2 Research context

The research took place within the two communities of Lavender Hill and Khayelitsha located in the Cape Flats region of Cape Town, South Africa. Although faced with similar challenges of violence and poverty, the communities are diverse in their spatial, cultural, and historical make-up, all of which may have an influence on the local children's experiences and resources within their sociocultural environment which they draw upon for self-construction and meaning.



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Lavender Hill Lavender Hill is a predominantly Coloured community which was developed after the passing of the 1950's Group Areas Act, when residents classified as 'Coloured' were restricted to live in the area which was under-resourced in terms of infrastructure, social services and educational and employment opportunities. Due to the high rates of poverty within the community, it is faced with a number of challenges which compromise the mental health and well-being of the residents. According to recent statistics, 32,598 people reside in the community, 29.1 % of the residents are children under the age of 14 (9503), and 95 % of which identify as coloured (City of Cape Town 2011). Fifty-nine percent of households have a monthly income of R3,200 (approximately 200 USD) or less, only 18.2 % of those aged 20 years and older have completed grade 12 and less than 1 % have completed a higher education (City of Cape Town 2011). This lack of financial and educational capital contributes towards a variety of other prevalent social issues, including high crime rates, gang activity, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS, high rates of teenage pregnancy, and substandard mental health. This daily exposure to crime and violence could have a detrimental impact on the psychological well-being and healthy self-concept of the children within the community, who live within a perpetual environment of danger and threat (Crime stats SA 2012). Children in the community are especially at-risk to both forced involvements in gang activity and gang-related victimisation. For example, Knoetze (2013) reported seven children to be killed and six injured in the crossfire of gang warfare in Lavender Hill between February and June 2012.

Despite the high rates of underemployment and crime, the community possesses a variety of local assets. A significant amount of community members are taking action towards improving the well-being of the local children. There are over 20 child and youth community organisations, non-profit organisations, and non-governmental organisations operating within the community to assist with addressing the community's needs. Primary and secondary schools are also working towards providing a safe and nurturing environment for its learners and work to collaborate with local organizations, law enforcement, and service providers on matters affecting the community's children.

**Khayelitsha** Khayelitsha is a community which was established in 1983 as a township for 'Black' residents as a result of apartheid's system of racial segregation (SA History Online 2014). Khayelitsha, meaning "new home" in isiXhosa, was originally developed to accommodate an overflow of informal settlement dwellers. The area continued to grow rapidly with migrants from the Eastern Cape arriving in search of work (SA History Online 2014). The population of Khayelitsha is estimated to have 391, 749 residents, with 28.1 % (110,330) children under the age of 14 (City of Cape Town 2011). The township is currently the second biggest township in South Africa and is characterised by a complexity of economic and social challenges which limit the availability of resources for the optimal health and well-being of the local children. This is reflected in the low levels of economic and educational opportunities. According to recent statistics, only 36 % of those aged 20 years and older have completed Grade 12 or higher. Thirty-eight percent of the labour force (aged 15 to 64) is



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unemployed and 74 % of households have a monthly income of R3 200 (approximately 200 USD) or less. The structural living conditions have an additional negative impact on the well-being of the residents. Only 45 % of households live in formal dwellings, with the majority of the residents living in shacks in informal settlements. The majority of the homes lack access to basic indemnities such as access to piped water or a flush toilet in their dwelling and 19 % lack electricity for lighting in their dwelling (City of Cape Town 2011).

Children in the community are faced with the ongoing struggle of community violence, with the community possessing the highest national murder, attempted murder and aggravated robbery figures (De Kock 2012) There are a number of residents, community based organisations, and schools taking action towards the improvement of child-well-being in the community, including programmes which target building healthy and safe neighbourhoods. The *Ubuntu* culture within the community, which promotes human connectedness and kindness, additionally provides a strong support network for many of the children who are treated as family by other community members.

### 4.3 Participants and Sampling

The study included 54 participants from the two participating communities ages 9–12 (26 girls and 28 boys). This age group was selected due to the limited research available on the 'self' and meaning amongst middle childhood aged children (Benninger and Savahl 2016). This is further supported by recent developmental research which supports their ability for meaningful engagement in the social sphere and in decision-making and meaning-making processes (Langhout and Thomas 2010). Purposive sampling was utilised to select four groups of participants [two groups from each community] from the local primary schools and community organisations. Purposive sampling "involves selecting participants who share particular characteristics and have the potential to provide rich, relevant and diverse data pertinent to the research question (Tong et al. 2007, p.352)." The criteria for participation included; (1) participants were between the ages of 9 to 12, (2) participants resided in one of the participating communities, (3) participants had a willingness and time to participate. The use of multiple child environments (schools and community organisations) was chosen in order to capture important perspectives from children within various community settings and also allowed the researcher to reach more difficult-to-reach children within the community.

A child reference group was selected from each community which consisted of five child co-researchers, males and females, who were self-identified from the partnering organisations due to an interest in engaging in the research process and in meeting the age criteria. The child reference group participants were trained in research methodology and participated in the development of the focus group questions, facilitation of the focus group discussions, and data analysis.

## 5 Data collection

Data were collected by the means of eight focus groups, with each of the four groups attending two focus group sessions. Focus group discussion is the data collection technique which



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was implemented with the child participants. Focus groups enable children to articulate their perceptions and experiences related to an issue or phenomenon, which in this study was the self (Darbyshire et al. 2005). Focus groups are particularly useful with children due to the emphasis on creating an environment in which children feel comfortable to engage with the material. This opens up the opportunity to generate interactive conversations among children that can assist with the clarification and conceptualisation of the topic (Darbyshire et al. 2005). A semi-structured interview schedule was followed, with four core questions which focused on various factors which influence the 'self.' These questions were developed in collaboration with the child reference group. The questions included; *How do you describe yourself*? *How do children think and feel about themselves in our community*? *What makes them think or feel that way*? *How do different places within the community and outside of the community make you feel*?

## 6 Data analysis

The analysis proceeded by means of a thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The key motivation for using the thematic analysis was to facilitate a thematic grounding wherein the discourses could be interpreted. Thereafter, discourse analysis was then used to draw out the participants' emerging meanings of the self as expressed within their language use. Discourse analysis was chosen due to its strength in the in-depth exploration of individual subjectivity which is critical in addressing the key aim of the study. In the current study, the discourse analysis approach recommended by Potter and Wetherell (1987/1992) was used. Their approach looks at the functional use of language whereby speakers draw on various forms of discursive resources to construct particular realities and to achieve certain aims (Potter and Wetherell 1987/1992). Discourse from this perspective is viewed to be an action, going beyond its function to *describe* things, to also *do* things (Potter and Wetherell 1987/1992). Discursive meaning overtime can create a sense of self, which is in the process of being continuously constructed and reconstructed, with its meaning negotiated through social interactions (Willig 2000). The discourse must therefore be contextually located, taking into account the cultural, social, and political practices which are being reflected within it. This includes a focus on not only the dominant discourses within a context, but additionally the ways in which individual's resist the dominant discourses and create alternative subjective positions (Willig 2000).

## 7 Procedures and ethics

The research was approved by the Senate Research Committee at the university where the researchers are based. The researcher partnered with two local non-governmental organisations, Waves for Change and Philisa Abafazi Bethu who assisted with the process of participant recruitment. An initial session was held with the selected participants, introducing the aims of the study, expectations of participation and included a discussion of the key ethics principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, the freedom to withdraw without consequence, permission to audio record the sessions, and the academic use of the data. The participants and their guardians were provided with an information sheet with the details of the study and a signed consent form for both the guardian and the participant. The focus group discussions were conducted in the school hall



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and a local community centre after school hours. The sessions were conducted in the home language of the participants by the primary researcher with the assistance of a local community youth care worker. The participants were provided with food and refreshments during the sessions, received age-appropriate skills training as a part of the research programme, and a closing party with their families where they received a meal and a certificate in acknowledgement of their participation. Given the intense nature of the study and the data collection process, counselling was available for any of the participants who experienced emotional discomfort and the referral protocols with the social workers from the two participating organisations were put in place to ensure the protection of the children. The audio recordings were transcribed and translated by an external transcriber, verified by a member of the supervisory team, and securely stored. The data collection and analysis was verified by the participants throughout the research process.

## 8 Findings

Several themes emerged as central components of the participants' self-constructions and meaning assignations. These included childhood, children's spaces, and social connectedness. Within the themes, four underlying discourses emerged as central to the participant's self-constructions. These included; (1) '*forfeited childhood*,' (2) '*vulnerability and helplessness*,' (3) '*preserving the integrity of the self*,' and (4) *opportunities for escape*'.

### 8.1 Childhood

The first significant theme which will be discussed is childhood. The overall responses of the participants showed the complex and contradictory nature of the self-identity of the child in comparison to their ideological notion of childhood. The discourse of a '*forfeited childhood*' emerged throughout the group discussions. The way in which the children were treated within the communities was largely related to the history of structural racism, where children classified as 'Black' and 'Coloured' remained marginalised in terms of access to social services, education, and basic needs. Additionally, adult-child power structures within the community further marginalised the children, where they felt they were not taken seriously or protected by the adults. While their ideological notion of childhood focused on obtaining safety, care, play, education, and basic needs, this definition was in contradiction to the reality of many of the participants, who were forced to forfeit their child identity within an environment where poverty and violence posed a barrier to acquiring their needs and limited their opportunities for learning and safety. An example is seen in the following account:

Facilitator: Do you see yourself as children?

Background: No! [several children yell out simultaneously]

Facilitator: Why not?

Male participant: Because you can't even go out to play



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Facilitator: …so, you called maybe a child, but you're not living like a child? [pause]. If you think of the word children or child, what does that mean to you?

Female participant: It means that I have a good life and that I can go play also. And also it could mean that I follow my parents and stuff and get a lot of time…to go to school

(Lavender Hill, Group 1)

In the above excerpt the children immediately and with consensus responded that they did not see themselves as children. This was forcefully expressed throughout the discussions demonstrated by their views on the ideal nature of childhood which they felt they were forced to forfeit. Amongst these characteristics was an underlying need for protection and safety which was in contrast to their reality of violence. These contrasting interpretive repertoires were apparent throughout the participants' discourse of a '*forfeited childhood*' as they collaboratively constructed their self-identity aligned with or in contrast to being a child. Their notion of childhood was tied to a *good life* where children had their needs met, could play safely, and where every child could go to school.

Although the loss of childhood was described by the participants from both of the participating communities, it was notable how the participants in Khayelitsha could more easily associate themselves with a child identity. This could be influenced by the 'elder' system which formed a part of the community's Xhosa culture. Within the system each age group possesses distinct roles and responsibilities with the closure of childhood marked by an initiation ceremony into adulthood. This system made it difficult for the participants to deny their position as children within their community. The elders within both of the communities were described in the form of two contrasting interpretive repertoires; that of the protector and the abuser. This was especially seen as the topic of the elder was approached from a different angle or point within the discussion. For the participants who received protection from the adults in the community, such as their parents, teachers, and older youth, being a child was viewed in a more positive manner. However, the self-concept as a 'child' was still constructed around a need for safety within the contextual reality of violence:

Female Participant: To be a child to me is nice because you have parents looking after you, and keep you away from dangerous things like the gangsters, for example when they fight they tell us to come inside at home. So it's nice to be a child and you don't have to wake up and go to work [giggles] you just have to wake up, wash and go to school, eat before and take your backpack and go.

(Khayelitsha, group 1)

This account further emphasizes a third discourse which emerged around the child identity of '*vulnerability and helplessness*'. The participant specifically referred to the danger of the gangsters and fighting as posing a risk to her safety. Additionally, she



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mentions having her needs met and being cared for to be an important component of her child identity. This sense of protection and care allowed her to live the carefree lifestyle which she felt was an essential component of childhood. Victimisation as a result of physical characteristics such as size and being a part of a minority ethnic group in the community were also identified to be a reality of the childhood experience which posed a negative influence on the self-concept:

Community worker: How do you feel when people call you a child?

Male participant: It hurts (begins to cry)

Facilitator: Is there space to be a child in Khayelitsha?

Male participant: It's not so nice to be a child because the older ones always beat you up and make fun of you in the class and laugh at you, also say bad stuff like you stink in the class why don't you shower?

(Khayelitsha, Group 1)

This account further emphasizes the meanings constructed around a child identity which emerged within the discourse of '*vulnerability and helplessness*.' As the participant responded to the concept of being a child, he immediately began to cry. His immediate response of *it hurts* reflected the underlying sense of vulnerability which arose as the participant assigned meaning to his self-identity as a child. The participant continued to emphasize this vulnerability as he constructed an account of his experience of being teased by the older children. The discourses of '*vulnerability and helplessness*' was also evident within the discussion of the gangsters, to whom the children helplessly '*forfeited their childhood*:'

Male participant: In our community there is children, small my age, who are selling drugs to people. The gangster leaders who threaten them to sell the stuff.

Facilitator: I see, so they are being threatened. So they don't even have a choice because they have to sell it. What else can they do?

Male participant: They kill them

Facilitator: They kill them if they don't do it. Wow. How do you think those kids feel about themselves?

Male participant: It make them feel nervous

Facilitator: They feel nervous. And how does this make you feel?

Male participant: I feel sad for them



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(Lavender Hill, Group 2)

While the participant tried to make sense of the child identity as vulnerable, a sense of empathy emerged as he placed himself in the situation of the other children who were being used by the gangsters, empathizing with their feelings of nervousness and feeling sad about the overall situation. The identification of various feelings, as seen above, was also a common practice which the participants used for self-understanding.

Furthermore, the participants' connection to various social groups also influenced their self-identity. Through presenting the selves of others within the discussions, the participants conceptualized their own selves. This further resonates with Stryker and Burke's (2000) identity theory, which describes social structures to be composed of interconnected social roles which influence the self-identity. Therefore, as a person interacts with various social groups, they adopt multiple selves in connection to those groups. Due to the heavy gang presence in their communities, it was evident how the participants constructed a self either in opposition to, or alignment with, the behaviours and roles assigned to the 'gangster.' The discussions around the gangster identity were composed of fear, humour, and a fascination with the gangs and were used as a means of justifying specific behaviours. In other instances, the gangs were mentioned with admiration of their strength due to their use of violence. The participants further elaborated on their '*forfeited childhood*' to be a result of the adult-centric reality where children were unprotected, unacknowledged, and used not only by the gangsters, but other adults in the community as well:

Facilitator: and what does it feel like to be a child?

Male participant 1: It's not nice

Female participant 1: They send you up and down

Facilitator: They send you up and down, can you tell me more about that? Who sends you up and down?

Female participant 1: my mommy

Male participant 1: to the shop

Female participant 2: my daddy

Female participant 3: my auntie

Facilitator: And what do they make you do when they send you up and down

Female participant 1: They send you to the shop to go buy chips!



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Male participant 2: bread!………

Male participant 2: And they sit in front of the TV and send you and they don't want to give for you

Female participant 4: Then you must clean the house.

Through the collaborative exchange, the participants build common knowledge around the local reality of children. Although the participants were expressing their frustration with adults who they perceived to use them arbitrarily, they do this in a playful and humorous way, finding solidarity in the responses of their peers while constructing a sense of self around their common experience. For these participants, their '*forfeited childhood*' was represented in the struggle between the expectations that they fulfil adult responsibilities while not being provided with the respect and privileges of adulthood. Although for some of the participants, being forced to take on adult responsibilities was portrayed in a negative way, for others this responsibility gave them a sense of pride and self-efficacy:

Female participant: Sometimes, when I am at home alone, like on a Saturday. Like this Saturday, I would come in the afternoon. I will go do my own washing and all the small stuff. Sometimes, my mommy will do it… but if she is not there. I will do it.

Facilitator: and how does that make you feel when you taking on all that responsibility?

Female participant: I feel like a big woman (Lavender Hill, group 1)

For this participant, the ability to help around the house provided her with a sense of pride and accomplishment seen in her relation to herself as a *big woman*. This also provides an example of the agency which many of the participants exhibited in order to rise above the adverse conditions within the community and to preserve their self- integrity. The excerpt additionally shows how gender posed an influence on the participant's self-concept. The female participants from both of the communities commonly discussed their identity in association with the roles which were prescribed to the females within the community, such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning. For the males, however, their identity was more often linked with the groups within the community which they commonly associated (i.e. soccer team, peer group, or gang) rather than their prescribed roles or responsibilities. This could be a result of the socioeconomic and historical situation of the communities, where the policies created during Apartheid limited the educational and vocational opportunities available for men of colour. This continues to manifest itself in the form of high unemployment amongst young men who, without a clear role and identity within the community and with limited access to employment opportunities, are drawn into antisocial activities as a means of obtaining social and financial capital.

Other participants struggled between the idealised freedom of adulthood and the need for protection and dependence associated with being a child:



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Facilitator: Ok, you don't see yourself as a child, because you go places by yourself, you have to get to places by yourself and children they have people doing it for them, right?

Female participant: But, I don't want people doing it for me!

Facilitator: You don't want people doing it for you?

Female participant: Because then I have to buy for that person. [laughing]

Facilitator: [Laughing] Ja! Cause you have to buy for that person. I also think…

Female participant: if I want to spend the day alone with myself and take off my sandals, then ja!

Facilitator: Ja! [giggles] and right now is that something you can do? Because you're not a child? You can do that for yourself?

Female participant: No!

Facilitator: No! You can't do that for yourself? [pause] Why not?

Female participant: I am scared of getting into taxis

(Lavender Hill, Group 1)

The above dialogue further contributed to the participants' discourse of a '*forfeited childhood*.' The variability in her discourse emphasized the participant's struggle between her needs as a child and the adult responsibilities which were forced upon her. While she expressed her desire to do things for herself and its associated freedoms, she later admitted that she was unable to do this because she was afraid of using the public transport alone. Although many of the participants were forced to '*forfeit their childhood*' the expectations of adulthood. This could be further explained in relation to the participants' agency, which is often utilised by children to overcome adverse environments, while at the same time limited by the adult power structures (Redmond 2009). The participants additionally described their psychological processes and feelings associated with their experiences as children. This manifested itself within the discourses of '*preserving the integrity of the self*.' These included the coping strategies and defence mechanisms utilized in the face of difficult circumstances such as playing with friends and with animals, talking with someone, drawing, sewing, praying, surfing and running, using drugs, and smoking. The common defence mechanisms expressed by the participants included desensitization, distraction, fantasy, and adjustment. These discourses elaborated on the participants' self-constructions to not only draw upon the experiences within their sociocultural environment, but additionally their individual characteristics, such as their coping skills and defence mechanisms. This further supports



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the 'sociocultural self model' as described by Adams and Markus (2004) and Stephens et al. (2012) which explains the interdependence of both individual characteristics, culture, and structural conditions on behaviour outcomes. While the structural conditions limited the resources available for the participants, these did not inevitably hinder the participants' self-constructions. Their ability to cope and adjust within a threatening environment played a crucial role in preserving the integrity of the self. An example is seen in the following account:

Female participant: I feel bad in this area, it's like when you sleeping at night. It's almost as if you hear the bullets go over your head the whole time. It gives me bad dreams and then I can't sleep at night and am awake the whole night. Some nights I even get black outs because I am not use to this. Where I come from, is a farm. It is so quiet there with no shooting and stuff. The first time I came here, I heard the bullets. Then I asked my mother, what is that bullets? She replied; they shooting outside and I just started crying and then I fainted in front of my mother. They called the ambulance. I have heart problems since I was small. Now I feel like I just want to get out of this area. I want to go there…I used to enjoy myself there. I did not know of this of what I know now (Afrikaans translation).

Facilitator: So you had a lot of nightmares, because you were so afraid. Do you still have the nightmares?

Female participant: No, because I am now used to it.

(Lavender Hill, Group 1)

The account above shows the participant's initial psychological response to the violence when she moved into the area from a safer community where she had never experienced shootings. At first the participant experienced severe psychological distress such as sleeplessness, anxiety, and blackouts, symptoms commonly associated with Post-traumatic stress disorder. Overtime the distress minimized as the participant attempted to adjust and desensitize herself to the violence. Additionally, the account was used as a means of '*preserving the integrity of the self* 'and reconstructing the self as brave and strong. Despite her ability to *get used to*the violence she continued to identify with her peaceful home town, where she was able to enjoy herself and to experience safety, and therefore could be a child.
The participants additionally used fantasy as a means of adjusting and preserving the self-integrity within a threatening environment. Some of the participants fantasized about leaving the community to a place which was safer. For one boy the fantasy of him and his sister running away to another city gave him a strong sense of hope. The participants additionally used fantasy as a means of making themselves feel safe within unsafe conditions:

Male participant: When I go to school, then I also feel very well, because when I am at school I learn also lots of things like playing soccer with my friends and everything. And there is a lot of stuff at school, like a bullet proof fence, at least that is what my friends say. I'm not sure if it is bullet proof, but my friends say it is bullet proof. I feel quite good knowing that it is bullet proof because if the shooting happens it won't come through and if I am in school and



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there is shooting the teachers will really look out for us. They call us and shout out to us to come to class and run to class.

(Lavender Hill, Group 1)

Although the participant is aware of the notion of fantasy related to the school fence being bulletproof, he clings to the idea in order to make himself feel more secure. The energy of the participants appeared to be constantly expended on maintaining safety. In order to '*preserve their self-integrity*' and to function within an environment of on-going threat, the participants utilized various defence mechanisms, however, these were not always consistent or easy to maintain. The participants' accounts of the shootings were often contradictory as they grappled with *getting used to* the shooting and actually being terrified of its presence. For example: "I am kinda now am use to it, actually. But I still, I actually get scared and stuff…" (Lavender Hill, male, group 1). These varying accounts around the shootings were used to perform a variety of functions. For example, dissociative tendencies, such as derealisation or numbing, are often utilised with children when an event is too threatening or overwhelming to process, especially when exposed to on-going violence in the home or community (Saxe et al. 2007). Such exposure could lead to a lack of a predictable or consistent sense of self (Cook et al. 2005). On the other hand, the chronic violence within the environment, made it very difficult to block out. This resulted in the various forms of distraction utilised by the participants to prevent themselves from becoming emotionally overwhelmed by the on-going threat. The variability in the discourse around the shooting could also have been a means of self-presentation due to the social expectations of the participants, where showing emotion and fear could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. The coping mechanisms exhibited by the participants could also be understood in relation to the concept of agency, defined by Redmond (2009) as "the capacity to act" (p.544). Redmond (2009) further describes the agency of children to support the notion of children as active agents who creatively endure economic adversity through the various means of coping with their situation, and improving their own lives.

**8.2 Children's spaces**

A multiple and transient self-concept was apparent as the participants discussed the various physical spaces where they normally engaged. Proshansky et al. (1983) describe this as place-identity, which includes the subjective sense of self which is conceptualized through the various physical spaces that define a person's daily life. The discourse around these spaces was largely constructed around their '*vulnerability and helplessness*' within an unsafe space versus their '*opportunities for escape*.' These spaces of escape were described to be the places of both physical and emotional safety both within and outside of the communities where the children could retreat from the spaces which were dominated by violence. However, this positive sense of self and behaviour did not always carry over into other areas of the participants' lives:



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Male participant: When I leave the house I come mostly here, I feel quite good because I am playing the Marimba's and when I go back home I don't feel so good because of the fighting and stuff. But once I come back here and then I feel so good and maybe like am going to the shop or somewhere even if its near here as long as I am away from the house I feel good.

Facilitator: Ah okay! So different environments make you feel different ways. Depending on who is surrounding you?

Background: Yes!

Male participant #2: When I leave my house then I feel happy. Like at school my friends make me feel happy, they play games like soccer and I will play with and just enjoy myself.

(Lavender Hill, Group 1)

In alignment with current research on the self-concept, the participants in this account exhibit a multiple and fluid self which shifted across environments (see McMurray et al. 2011, Purdie et al. 2000). For the first participant, seeking out spaces outside of the home provided him with a greater sense of self-worth and safety which buffered the negative influences of the home environment. The second participant responded in an exploratory manner, linking the ideas of the first respondent to his own experience within spaces outside of the home which made him feel happy. The account also showed how the spaces of safety were closely tied to the social support connected to the space. The environments especially identified to have a positive influence on their sense of self included the school, home, and after-school programmes:

Male participant: My name is (boy's name) and I feel happy when I surf

Facilitator: Who else is feeling happy right now [pause]. Only two people?

Male participant 2: I feel happy and I feel sad. I feel happy when I surf

Facilitator: It sounds like when you're surfing you are feeling really good about yourself......How are you feeling when you are not at Waves for Change?

Male participant 1: Sad

Male participant 2: Sad

Male participant 3: Sad



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Female participant: Happy………

Male participant 6: I feel angry, because when you don't surf you feel angry

(Khayelitsha, Group 2)

Although the children mentioned the immediate happiness felt while surfing, this often shifted when they were not attending the surfing programme. This was also evident as the participants discussed their struggle between the positive behaviours they adopted while attending a programme and the pressure from their peers in the community to engage in substances, crime, and violence.

School was identified to be a place of refuge, safety, and an opportunity for learning, all of which contributed positively towards their self constructions. For other participants, school became a place of further victimisation, especially from peers and older youth:

Female participant: what I don't like is being teased about my head and discriminated because the other thing is that I'm fat and some kids say am finishing the school's food, I don't like this and it's not their problem if my head looks so square, it's not their problem.

(Khayelitsha, Group 1)

The above account further emphasized the discourse of '*vulnerability and helplessness*' attached to the participant's spatial environment as it is reflected in her self-concept. The school environment for this participant was a place of victimisation, rather than one of self-nurturance portrayed in her description of the bullying which took place while she was on the school grounds. Resonating with Mead's self-object theory, the social experience of the participant, where she was regarded as *fat* and *square headed*, became incorporated into a means of understanding the self.

A third space which was expressed to have a mixed influence on the participant's sense of self was the home environment. The two contrasting repertoires of security and imprisonment emerged within the '*opportunities for escape*' discourse. For the participants who received love and adequate care from their caregivers, the home was identified to be a place of safety and self-nurturance. Siblings were also identified to be a source of nurturance and comfort for the participants, even for those who did not receive adequate support from their parents. Within the security repertoire, the home was identified to be a place of refuge from the shooting and violence on the street. An example is seen in the following account:

Facilitator: What about when you're at home, how do you feel at home?



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Male participant: I feel happy there at home, because there is my mother, no one can bully me or hit me.

Facilitator: You're happy because you have the love from your mother…

Female participant: I'm feeling safety because my mother is always bringing me candies…so I'm very happy when I'm with my mother and father. .

(Khayelitsha, group 1)

The notion of care and safety was central to a positive experience in the home environment and of the group's idealized child identity. For the participants in the above account, feeling safe, having fun, and having things provided for them all contributed towards a positive sense of self in association with their home. In contrast, the imprisonment repertoire was also apparent within the discourse of '*vulnerability and helplessness*,' even for the participant who received care at home:

Male participant: Sometimes I am happy and sometimes I am unhappy because, the people in our road. yoh! There are a lot of gangsters and you can't stay out late, because they shooting in the road and you can't do nothing.

Although the home was viewed by the participant to be a place of safety from the shooting, it was also one of imprisonment and a symbol of his vulnerability. While he wanted to stay outside and play, the gang violence in the community prevented this, leaving him with a sense of helplessness because *you can't do nothing*. For the participants who had abusive or neglectful parents, the home environment was a space of further victimisation which posed a challenge to the participants' sense of self-worth. For these participants, their *opportunities for escape* existed outside of the home where they showed a tendency to construct a sense of self around other relationships and activities. This included both pro-social and anti-social activities such as attending an after-school programme or engaging in substance use and gang activity.

Another space identified by the participants to have an influence on the self was the community. This is in alignment with the cultural identity theory of Luria (1994), where changes in the self occur in order to adapt to the conditions of the community. The participants spoke about the communities in terms of its social challenges with additional comments surrounding the physical environment and infrastructure. Peace appeared to be a fundamental factor in the composition of a 'real' community, while the spreading of fear within their community inhibited the development of a positive identity as a community member:

Female participant: The thing that makes me not like my community is because there are people eating drugs because drugs are wrong, so I don't like drugs. And when I'm older I don't want to smoke drugs



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Facilitator: It sounds like there are a lot of bad things that you see in your community, so I'm curious about how that makes you feel about yourself. What are you thinking about yourself?

Female participant: I feel that I'm not very safe at all. I'm not safe at all.

(Khayelitsha, Group 1)

The above account further emphasizes the underlying discourse around '*vulnerability and helplessness*.' For this participant the community was identified to be a space of danger, which influenced her ability to form a secure sense of self. She recognized the inevitable reality of the drugs and its violent impact on the children in the community, who adapted a sense of self around such behaviour. Consistent with their notion of childhood, the ability to play safely outside and to have fun were non-negotiable terms which also defined a community. The inability of their community to meet these needs resulted in a forfeited sense of self not only as a child but also as a member of a c ommunity.

**8.3 Social connectedness**

There was a strong emphasis on the participants' connection to various social groups as influencing their self-identity. Through presenting the selves of others within the discussions, the participants conceptualized their own selves. Additionally, the participants' responses illuminated the multiple and changing identities which they adopted within different social situations:

Male participant: There is children who is looking at the people and they are smoking and stuff and when they are big they also want to do it.

Facilitator: So you can see that there are children in the area and they are watching guys smoking and it also makes them want to smoke. Do they want to do it while they are still children or do they want to do it when they are bigger?

Male participant: No. They want to do it when they are bigger

Facilitator: So that's what they see themselves becoming? Someone who is drinking and smoking and things like that.

Female participant: There is some children in our community that sees the junky funkys (gang name). They are smoking and they are doing…

Female participant 2: [Giggles] gangsters!

(Lavender Hill, Group 2)



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The discussions around the gangster identity were composed of fear, humour, and a fascination with the gangs and were used as a means of justifying specific behaviours. In other instances, the gangs were mentioned with admiration of their strength due to their use of violence. In addition to the influence of the gangster identity, the participants categorised the 'elders' as posing an additional negative influence on the behaviour of the local children:

Facilitator: So do you think kids have good self-esteem in Lavender Hill?

Male participant: No

Facilitator: No, why not?

Female participant: They violent children

Male participant: They smoking too much

Male participant: They use their money for the wrong things

Facilitator: They use their money for the wrong things, they're violent [pause] what do you think makes kids smoke so much?

Male participant: They look at the elders doing it

Facilitator: oh, they look at the elders and they want to do it like the elders.

Female participant 2: They see someone else doing it and they want to do it

(Lavender Hill, Group 2)

In the participants' accounts they blame those who fit into the category of the 'elders' for the negative behaviours of the local children. This further supports the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky (1933 [1994]), Luria (1994), and Stephens and colleagues (Stephens et al. 2012) where the self (or multiple selves) is formed in accordance to the experiences and resources within the sociocultural environment. As the participants interacted within a social environment where the elders engaged in anti-social behaviours, they often adapted such behaviours.

The majority of the participants mentioned their peers, including the activities which they engaged in together to be linked to their identity. Engaging with peers through the use of activities such as gang membership, violence, and drug use had a mixed impact on the constructions of the self. For some of the participants, reacting with violence was a necessity for gaining the respect of their peers. Additionally, the use of violence was believed to be a representation of their strength and a form of protection. In this sense as used as a means of building one's social support and providing the participants with a sense of agency in an



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environment where they often felt '*vulnerable and helpless*'. The continuity of violence amongst the young people could further be explained through Fanon's theory of racial domination, which explains the continuity of violence within a community to be an internalised psychological response to racial domination and oppression (Hook 2003). According to Fanon (1967) the use of violence is used as a means of re-creating the self and promoting individual self-respect.

Engaging in play, sports, and the arts with peers contributed positively to the participants' self-constructions and consequently more prosocial behaviour. They especially focused on their self-identity connected to the activities which they excelled in or found to be exciting. This further supports current research on the multidimensional self-concept which demonstrated the tendency of children to cling to the domains of the self which they are good at while minimizing the other aspects of the self (see De Haan et al. 2010, Timberlake 1994). These activities also provided the participants with '*opportunities for escape*' from the violence which were necessary for the preservation of their self-integrity:

Male participant: I play five instruments, now 6 with this.

Facilitator: Wow! Six instruments, so how do you feel when you playing your instruments?

Male participant: Sometimes I feel emotional and sometimes I feel happy

Facilitator: Emotional. Ahhhh so it brings out all different feelings.

Male participant: Hmmm, it's like it takes my sight also sometimes.

(Lavender Hill, Group 1)

The participant in the above account described music to be the means through which he escaped the negative feelings within an insecure home environment. While using music as an escape he simultaneously constructed a self-concept as a musician while *preserving his self-integrity* despite his negative experiences within the home. This additionally emphasises the importance of having access to positive opportunities, such as playing instruments, to contribute towards a healthy self-concept and well-being.

The socialization into particular religious and racial groups contributed towards a prescribed self-identity around specific roles and behaviours. These identifications were also used as a means of self-construction as the participants distinguished their sense of self connected to their cultural or religious identity as separate from the 'other' group. The participants from Khayelitsha spoke about being proud to be black, and of black being beautiful. Religion for the participants in Lavender Hill was identified to be a part of their self-constructions:

Facilitator: ......Do you like being Christian?



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Female participant: Yes it's nice

Male participant 1: We get Easter and all this stuff

Facilitator: Ah you get some fun holidays.

Male participant 2: The Muslims eat strong stuff

Facilitator: How do you think kids who are Muslim feel living here?

Male participant 2: Very rich. Yoh.

Facilitator: Oh are Muslim kids more rich?……

Female participant 1: Yes but the Christian kids also can afford it

Male participant 2: But not as good as they [Giggles]

(Lavender Hill, Group 2)

The categorization of religious groups was used as a means of making sense of their social world, where there existed two specific and at times perceived opposing groups; the Christians and the Muslims. Religion in this sense was also used as a means of distinguishing themselves from others, mostly associated with dietary restrictions, special holidays, and wealth. The self-concept as Christian was greatly constructed around the things they could do which were *not like them*. The Christian participants portrayed the Muslim children through agreed-upon stereotypes, such as being rich and eating strong food, creating a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' as a means of understanding the self.

Another significant component of the participants' social identity was revealed through the accounts of themselves in relationship to their future. This has been referred to in prior research as the *possible selves theory* (Markus and Nurius 1986). Possible selves are identified to be cognitive structures of the self which represent what a person would like to become versus who he or she is avoiding becoming (Markus and Nurius 1986). The 'possible selves' theory describes the relationship between optimal psychosocial functioning and an individual's future self-concept, especially when there is a clear understanding of a pathway towards the future self. The research by Abrams and Aguilar (2005) and Clinkinbeard and Murray (2012) further supports this theory amongst youth. Within their research, the participants who were able to produce a clear picture of their future self and had a realistic plan for achieving this showed greater psychosocial outcomes in the face of adversity. Although the majority of the participants in this study presented a clear picture of their desired future self, they did not consistently show an understanding of the pathway towards the desired self. Many recognized the importance of school, education, and practice in assisting them to achieve their future goals. Their choice of professional aspiration was



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linked to a current strength, interest, parental influence, or desire for money. This choice was additionally aligned with the culturally prescribed gender identities, with the females aspiring to be fashion designers, beauticians and mothers, while the males aspired to be the higher paid professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and fathers who must support their families with nice things. It was interesting to note how many of the participants constructed a future self as being that of a higher paid professional – especially due to the current socioeconomic situation of the community where the oppressive conditions created during apartheid still continued to constrain the educational and professional opportunities for the local 'Black' and 'Coloured' adults.

Their possible selves also appeared to be closely tied to their notion of the idealized child, the child who has nice things, a supportive family, and opportunities towards educational and vocational success. These selves were also constructed in opposition to the selves which they did not want to become, such as a gangster or an alcoholic. For several of the participants, the pathway towards the future self was constructed around the '*opportunity to escape*' from the community to a place where they could achieve their ideal possible self.

**9. Discussion**

This study emphasizes the unique ways in which children construct and assign meaning to the self. In accordance with Stryker & Burkes's identity theory, Mead's self-object theory (1934), and the social cultural self theories (see Luria 1994, Vygotsky ([1933] 1994, Adams and Markus 2004), the responses of the participants reveal the self to be multidimensional, dynamic, and fluid. According to Mead, this dynamic nature of the self is explained to occur through interactions with multiple social contexts, where our selves are divided into a variety of different selves. Similarly, Stryker & Burke (Stryker and Burke 2000) describe this to occur as an individual assigns meaning to his or her various roles within the particular society. Adams and Markus (2004) likewise explain the multidimensional and fluid nature of the self to form in adaptation to an individual's socio-cultural environment.

Within the themes of childhood, children's spaces, and social connectedness, four underlying discourses emerged as central to the participant's self-constructions. These included; (1) '*forfeited childhood*,' (2) '*vulnerability and helplessness*,' (3) '*preserving the integrity of the self,*' and (4) '*opportunities for escape*'. Conditions of poverty, especially where there were limited spaces for safety, were revealed to have an adverse impact on the way in which children constructed and assigned meaning to the self. In support of Fanon (1967), the oppressive and violent conditions of apartheid continued to affect the communities and limited the opportunities of the participants to the essential resources to nurture a healthy and stable self-concept. The responses show how structural conditions and power structures placed constraints on the participants' self-development. For the participants in this study, safety was revealed to be a non-negotiable aspect of a stable self. This is in accordance with prior research amongst adolescents in the Western Cape, where the discourse around safety emerged as a '*non-negotiable*' component of their well-being (Savahl et al. 2014). Issues around safety were also evident in relation to the self-concept of the child participants in the studies by



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Moses (2006) and Whitesell et al. (2006), however this was buffered by the access to positive and supportive social networks within the community.

The discourses of '*forfeited childhood*' and '*vulnerability and helplessness*' also formed central components to the participants' cumulative notion of the child-identity.

The lack of safety in their community and at times the home forced the participants to forfeit their childhood in order to adjust to their reality of violence. This was reflected in an ambivalent sense of self where their age and environmental conditions restricted their engagement in both of the conceptual worlds of childhood and adulthood and reinforced an underlying sense of helplessness connected to their self-identity as children.

There were however a notable amount of participants who maintained a positive sense of self and future in the face of adversity. This could be a result of the participants' ability to exercise agency within adverse circumstances, such as economic adversity and experiences of violence. According to Redmond (2009), while economic disadvantage constrains well-being, through agency children are able to creatively and actively adapt to and manage these constraints. This was especially seen as they identified themselves with the activities which they were especially good at or excited about, such as specific school subjects, sports, and music. Within the discourse of '*preserving the integrity of the self*' there emerged a variety of defence mechanisms including over-identification, desensitization, adjustment, and fantasy. These defence mechanisms provided '*opportunities for escape*' which allowed them to cope with the on-going violence. The participants additionally showed a significant amount of self-efficacy and agency apparent in their ability to seek out safe spaces, local resources, and opportunities for learning and for self-growth. Although a sense of '*vulnerability and helplessness*' was an underlying discourse, hope seemed to play a role in assisting the participants to maintain a positive view of the self and a sense of future which stretched beyond their immediate circumstances.

The various self-identities which an individual possessed were largely influenced by the various social groups and environments where they engaged. It was through the participants' connectedness to others that the discourse of '*vulnerability and helplessness*' further emerged. This was revealed through the first-hand accounts of their experiences with other children in the community, especially those who were victims of violence and abuse. The availability of positive and supportive friends and adults in the participants' lives had a crucial influence on their self-concept. This support helped to create a sense of safety within an insecure environment while additionally nurturing a healthy self-development. Loving and supportive parents were especially influential to the participants' perceptions of self-worth and capabilities. In contrast, abusive and neglectful parenting styles were discussed to have a negative impact on the participant's self-constructions. However, the participants who experienced abuse and neglect in the home tended to seek out other supportive adults in the community and other social environments which promoted a positive self-image. Supportive and encouraging adults outside of the home, such as teachers, community



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members, and youth care workers played a role in nurturing a positive self-concept. This was achieved through the provision of opportunities for physical and emotional safety, learning new skills, coping with conflict, and setting goals for the future.

While the participants' participation in pro-social activities such as music and sport was connected to their positive self-constructions, the participants' engagement in anti-social activities, such as the use of drugs and violence, did not necessarily result in a negative view of the self. This was especially apparent if the children felt supported by those with whom they were participating or if the participation resulted in a higher social status. For other participants, their engagement in violent or other anti-social behaviours was reflected upon with feelings of self-blame and guilt because of their perceived feelings of others.

For the participants who attended an after-school programme, there was a struggle between their self-concept associated with the programme and that which they adopted outside of the programme. These identities and behaviours did not always carry over across environments. Other participants mentioned their struggle between the consistency of their desired versus their undesired behaviours such as keeping calm while attending the after-school surfing programme while losing their temper at school or in the community. Stryker (1980) described this as identity salience, or the ability of an identity to carry over across social situations. According to Stryker, the greater the connectedness a person has to an identity within a certain social group, the more likely it is for a person to experience the salience of that identity, meaning a greater likelihood the identity will be drawn upon in various situations. Fanon (1967) explains this in terms of cognitive dissonance:

"Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief."

In other words, a child's experience within his or her social environment influences the establishment of core self-beliefs and self-congruent behaviours, which become difficult to change. For example, if a child establishes a core belief about the self as violent, aggressive, or inferior, which has been reinforced by their social and structural environment, it would be difficult for this self-belief or self-related behaviours to change, even if the child is exposed to new healthy experiences and ways of thinking about the self.

## 10 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study advances the use of a participatory approach with children for increasing knowledge and understanding of the ways in which children construct and assign meaning to the 'self' within two impoverished communities of the Western Cape, South Africa. The discourses which emerged throughout the focus group discussions revealed the self-concept to be closely connected to the participants' experiences within their sociocultural environment. For example, the discourses of a '*forfeited childhood*' and '*vulnerability and helplessness*'



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reflected the potentially detrimental influence which structural and social inequalities could have on the participants' self-concept, especially regarding how structural inequities limit the resources available for a healthy self-construction. This further highlights a need for further research and practice to work towards understanding and addressing the impact of structural and social inequities. The discourses of '*preserving the integrity of the self*' and '*opportunities for escape*' shed light on the individual characteristics and community resources which allowed children to cope and maintain a positive self-concept within suboptimal circumstances. Although the small sample size was valuable in providing in-depth knowledge of the participants' self-constructions, it is limited in its ability to broaden the findings as a representative sample of the community or of children residing within other contexts. It is recommended that further research be conducted on how children construct and assign meaning to the 'self' within other social contexts and across age groups. Finally, it is recommended that further research exploring the relationship between children's self-concept, and its influence on subjective well-being across various sociocultural contexts be conducted.

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