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South African, urban youth narratives: resilience within community

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South African youth in low-income, urbanised communities are exposed to high levels of daily stressors, which increase their risk to negative outcomes. Resiliency can provide avenues for youth to transcend adversity and may contribute to their positive development. To provide a deeper understanding of the pathways that adolescents use to overcome adversity, this paper examined future aspirations of South African youth and how these aspirations were connected to resiliency factors framed by their lived context. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the perceptions of high school students. Fourteen focus groups with girls and boys ($N = 112$) were conducted. Data were analysed using a thematic approach. Discussions of the harsh conditions undermining the community's future highlighted opportunities for improvement. Community connectedness, hope and altruism were prevalent in youth's responses and could be used to facilitate community and individual resiliency. Our overall findings have important implications for positive youth development efforts.

Keywords: aspirations; dreams; resilience; adolescents; South Africa; youth development

Poverty, deprivation and violence, factors characteristic of low-income, urbanised, South African communities, present challenges to adolescent health and well-being (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). For many South African youth, exposure to high levels of daily stressors in a post-apartheid context have made negotiating adolescence difficult, increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes including delinquency, drug use and unprotected sex (Nurmi, 1991; Nyamai, Njenga, Vythilingum, & Stein, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992). Consequently, addressing risk factors has been prevalent in the development of interventions aimed at assisting at-risk youth in South Africa (Dawes, 1994). However, identifying risk factors for at-risk youth does not provide us with a complete picture of how youth transcend adversity in their environments where they may have limited control. Moreover, the continued increase in risk behaviours among South African youth suggests that current explanatory models may need more critical scrutiny (Aronowitz, Rennells, & Todd, 2005), and a shift of focus to the interplay of protective mechanisms that counteract risk, such as resiliency, is needed.

Resiliency is the concept that despite many negative factors within his or her lived context, an individual can withstand destructive environments, develop resistance and thrive (Rutter, 1987; Walsh, 2006). Resiliency researchers focus on the assets or protective

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factors that contribute to an individual's positive response to risk factors. Risk factors, such as poverty and violence, increase the likelihood of negative cognitive, behavioural and health outcomes (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Wise & Meyers, 1988). On the other hand, protective factors, such as self-esteem, humour and hope, can help mediate risk and even prevent negative results (Gilgun, 1999). Rutter's (1987) definition of resilience remains one of the most useful, noting that resilience is concerned with individual variations in people's response to stress and adversity. There is a dynamic interaction between risk factors and protective processes, which may operate differently at various periods in an individual's development.

A wealth of research supports that protective factors contribute to resilient psychosocial outcomes including health, well-being and quality of life (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; King & Madsen, 2007; Werner & Smith, 1992; Windle, 2011). Many studies have attributed resilient outcomes to individual protective factors (e.g. personality characteristics). However, a growing body of research suggests that considerations of the individual's sociocultural context are equally important because this context frames the individual experience of adverse events (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010). Carrey and Ungar (2007) defined resilience as the measure of an individual's strength, as well as the physical and social capital of an individual's family and community. Their definition highlights the importance of taking a more holistic approach to the study of resiliency, where we seek not only to understand individual-level factors, but also how one's community shapes these factors, experiences and perceptions of the future.

Several studies suggest that resilience can, and does, operate at the community level (Ahmed, Seedat, Van Niekerk, & Bulbulia, 2004; Kimhi & Shamai, 2004; Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Community resilience encompasses material, psychosocial and sociocultural resources (Ahmed et al., 2004; Breton, 2001; Clauss-Ehlers & Lopez-Levi, 2002; Kimhi & Shamai, 2004; Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998; Sonn & Fisher, 1998), including access to knowledge (Simons-Morton & Crump, 1996), communal coping, solidarity and hope (Hernandez, 2002). These resources at the community level promote the safety of its residents, allow them to recover after exposure to general adversity and serve as a buffer to injury and violence risks (Ahmed et al., 2004). Community resiliency provides a framework for understanding youth within their community contexts and identifies numerous protective factors that operate at this level (Ahmed et al., 2004; Kimhi & Shamai, 2004; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Community connectedness and hope are two dimensions of community resilience that are particularly important to this study.

Community connectedness recognises that adversity is not only an individual issue but a shared issue requiring a cooperative, collective response in order to foster resilience (Lyons et al., 1998). Community connectedness provides members with a collective process through which to make sense of their group identity and associated negative experiences. Therefore, it may also serve to lessen the negative effects of adverse events, providing a pathway to resiliency and positive outcomes (DiFulvio, 2011; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). Community hope links well-being with social structures and illustrates the ability to remain optimistic in the face of adversity, while envisioning a different future for the community (Ahmed et al., 2004). Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) reported that social hope encourages upward social mobility. In communities where there is a lack of hope, youth tend to abandon long-term approaches to success in favour of short-term gratification and engage in various risky behaviours (Anderson, 1999; Bolland, 2003; Peterson, 1991). Community coping and hope are particularly evident for many South

African youth who, despite widespread racism, poverty and violence, are still hopeful (Barbarin & Richter, 2001).

It remains unclear how South African youth perceive resiliency factors, as well as how the context of low-income, urbanised, South African communities shapes these factors. To date, resiliency studies have focused on higher resource settings in Europe and the USA, and little information is available on these processes in lower resource settings (Betancourt et al., 2011). Researchers interested in positive youth development in South Africa should understand the extent to which community factors shape individual perceptions, which may facilitate or impede the ability of some to have a protective response against risk factors. By studying youth resilience holistically, we can provide a foreground of protective factors at the individual and community level, which may mediate negative outcomes and help us to understand how adolescents transcend adversity. With the goal of understanding the context of South African youth, this study focused on the future aspirations of young people in South Africa, the challenges in their community and how they would make life better for themselves and others.

Method

Setting

This study was conducted in a community referred to as Masidaal (a pseudonym). Masidaal is an urban community consisting of approximately 60,667 people, according to the 2001 South African census; however, the actual population size may be significantly higher due to underreporting and ongoing immigration (Statistics South Africa, 2005). The community's residents are mostly Coloureds of mixed race (59%) and Blacks (41%). Our use of these racial categories reflects the historical background of participants, their continued attempts at self-identification and the remaining legacy of apartheid. Our usage of these terms does not imply support for the classifications. Masidaal has recently been declared one of the most crime-ridden areas of South Africa (SAPA, 2007).

Sample

This project was part of a larger study that examined the factors affecting young people's health and well-being in a mixed Black and Coloured community outside Cape Town, South Africa, with the goal of developing a cancer intervention. For the original project, we conducted 27 focus groups ($N = 183$) with community members from various demographics (Mosavel et al., 2005). For the purposes of this paper, we report on findings from the 14 focus groups ($N = 112$) that included adolescents. Nine focus groups were conducted with girls ($N = 76$) and five with boys ($N = 36$). Based on a request from the schools not to include their 11th and 12th graders due to their class schedules, we only included girls and boys in grades eight through ten.

Process

We identified four local high schools from which we randomly recruited participants. We conducted informational meetings at each of the schools, and informed youth about the study's goals, the risks and benefits of participating, the right not to participate and the need for parental consent. We provided interested youth with consent and assent forms and a letter from the school principal to take to their parents. Community members served as outreach workers to visit the homes of interested youth to provide clarification and to

answer any questions parents might have. Seventy-five per cent of parents consented to their child's participation.

This study used a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and understanding the phenomenon through the reflections of the participant (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The research team, including community outreach workers, collectively decided that focus groups would be the most appropriate method to facilitate discussions about participants' communities in a non-threatening environment. Given the tradition of oral history in South Africa, we believed that focus groups would foster a collective spirit among participants who would not feel singled-out and who would be more open to sharing their experiences. Two moderators, an experienced member of the research team and a hired and trained young adult from the community, jointly conducted the focus groups. Both moderators matched the participants' ethnic and linguistic background. We conducted focus groups in English, Afrikaans or Xhosa depending on the preferred language of the focus group participants. We conducted the focus groups after school in a classroom. Moderators followed a structured interview guide and asked additional probes when necessary. Guides were developed with input from South African community outreach workers. We pretested the guide and refined it to be clearer and more culturally appropriate. We translated the Xhosa focus group discussions into English, and a professional interpreter verified the translations. We did not translate the Afrikaans focus group discussions, as the first author is familiar with the language.

Data analysis

For this paper, we analysed responses to the following focus group questions: 'How do you see the future of young people in this community?', 'What are the dreams of the young people?' and 'If you had all the power, how would you make life better for young people in this community?'

We used thematic analysis to analyse the data based on the focus group questions. We employed multiple actions to ensure the validity of the analyses. Throughout the data collection and analyses processes, we maintained audit trails. We analysed the data in both South Africa and the USA. Under the supervision of the principal investigators, research assistants (RAs) in the USA analysed the translated Xhosa and English focus groups, and Afrikaans-speaking RAs in South Africa analysed the Afrikaans transcriptions. Every research team member read the full transcripts for each focus group and independently prepared a detailed thematic summary for each question. In team meetings, two coders collectively discussed the focus group data to assess inter-coder agreement. Discrepancies were handled by a third coder who reviewed the response and chose an appropriate category without prior knowledge of the two coders' choices.

Results

From analyses of these data, themes regarding daily stress and adversity caused by the structural conditions in the community, dreams and aspirations for the future and suggestions for ways to improve the community for others emerged. We discuss the main themes in detail below, beginning with themes that address participants' personal experiences and leading up to themes that address society-level issues, including visions for a better future. There were no particular differences between the responses of boys and girls.

Daily stress and adversity

One of the strongest themes in the data was the structural condition of the community and the impact this had on all aspects of the participants' lives.

Participants' discussions of the future were filled with references to various daily struggles endemic to this community, including high rates of poverty and unemployment, drug use, poor education, overcrowded housing, lack of recreational facilities and ubiquitous violence and crime. The lack of police intervention, influx of refugees from other African nations and community-level violence were some of the main concerns. In response to these adversities, many of the youth's dreams of the future focused on fundamentals such as food, housing and security. For example, as one participant stated, 'I dream to live safe'.

Lack of safety as a daily stressor was a prominent theme the youth encountered. As one participant expressed simply, 'There's no safety here for a person'. The perceived inability of law enforcement agencies to keep the community safe was seen as a major hurdle to a better future. Some youth described home, school and communities specifically as threatening or unsafe, while many viewed these places as resources. One male participant wanted 'to be safe at home, where we live, and in our school'. He continued, 'You don't know if someone can kill maybe, you did a wrong thing a long time ago, but that person still thinks about you, then he can kill you'. Participants indicated that schools lacked adequate security measures. Other safety concerns related to rape, for example 'Grown men have sex with small children'. Many also expressed despair at the level of personal violence and the need for divine intervention to reduce crime and risky behaviours. One female said, 'I was thinking if I could be Cinderella or God I would change all the minds of the people so that they could be saved instead, and I know that they wouldn't rob people if they are saved'. Some participants also noted the prevalence of gun violence.

Choosing to rise above adversity

Despite seeing their future as dismal, participants appeared to have a proactive attitude. One female participant said,

I see the future as bleak. But if people want to rise above it, then they can . . . You have to go and study if you want to work. So we must plan for the future. We don't have money to go and study, so we must get a bursary. Or else, you won't be able to rise above where you want to be.

One male said that youth are able to exercise a great deal of agency in overcoming structural barriers, 'I'd say sometimes it's all about choice . . . you know that your background is bad, but it's up to you to make it not bad by going to school, and make something of yourself someday'. Some males hoped to become athletes or sportsmen. One male explained, 'You know my dream is just to become a cricket player, not to be famous . . . just to get a life you know, just to live somewhere, just to be in an environment where the people don't fight, you know?'

Altruistic propensities

A sense of altruism pervaded many of the participants' responses. One female expressed, 'There is a lot of people that need help. And one must not refuse anyone that needs help'. Another female reported, 'If I had the power or the money . . . I'd be able to use it for the children who live in the streets, who don't go to school'. Many of the male participants expressed a desire for future careers that would enable them to combat community

violence and gangsters. For example, one male participant said he wanted to be a policeman, so 'I can beat the gangsters'. Another participant agreed, 'I want to be a policeman because I want to make life easier for people who come home late from work'. Other responses about future dreams included becoming a doctor or lawyer [to help others].

Making life better for young people

The majority of participants were easily able to identify changes that would improve the lives of young people in the community. We identified five main categories across all focus groups.

Laws and regulations

This category had the greatest number of responses. Many participants envisioned stricter laws and regulations as a means to bring order and control to chaotic, distressing circumstances. The regulation or abolition of jukeboxes was an important issue that emerged. Jukeboxes are essentially giant music boxes located in the community, and are sometimes found inside 'shebeens' (neighbourhood bars). According to participants, jukeboxes promote teen pregnancy, rape, substance use and violence. The jukeboxes were almost unanimously seen as places where young girls become 'victims of the jukebox'.

In order to feel protected, one male participant was willing to relinquish his current liberties for tighter community regulation. He offered the following:

... Ask the people in the community to be volunteers and patrol, maybe it would be decided that no one can walk the streets maybe after 10 o'clock, because there's nothing else they do after 10, it's robbing people only. If they find the children who do those things then they can be punished, that would reduce the crime in [our community] maybe.

Community facilities and activities

Participants in all focus groups indicated a desire for more recreational facilities and activities. Several offered creative suggestions about how to make better use of community spaces by creating youth centres and having computers available as well as other fun activities. Other ideas included athletic facilities, music lessons, self-defense classes and dancing.

Social services

Most of the participants discussed high rates of substance abuse, the plight of street children in South Africa and the HIV/AIDS epidemic as social issues requiring drastic intervention. Twenty-six responses emphasised the need for 'social services' in the community. Suggestions included creating rehabilitation centres for drug users, providing refuge for orphans and rape victims and developing educational dramas. Many also indicated a desire for services to help cure the diseases affecting their community, particularly AIDS, and assist those affected.

Alleviating poverty

Participants offered several suggestions for alleviating poverty, including providing better housing, food and employment. One male explained,

... if I was God you know maybe for a day or two, you know most of us living in small houses, and everyone's dream is just to rebuild their house into a big house. You know, the community people, most of the children would go to the clinic because they say the children get asthma from these houses. So I would rebuild the houses into big houses you know....

Many participants suggested that youth get tangled up in violence, crime and drugs because they lack legitimate opportunities for economic gain. One female participant said she would, 'Open job places so that the youth could work, some of them do these things because they can't get jobs'.

Education

Some participants viewed education as the key to future success because it enabled upward social and economic mobility. One male participant said, 'Without education you can't go anywhere'. A female participant suggested, 'You see that a child is young and should be in school to have a future'. Others pointed out that education is meaningless without an increase in employment opportunities, perhaps explaining why only nine responses belonged to the 'education' category. For example, 'And my father got a – he has a degree, he has a degree but he doesn't get a job, employment is one of the problems'.

Discussion

The research questions explored in this study focused on the aspirations and dreams of youth living in a low-income, urbanised, South African community and how these dreams are connected, if at all, to community-level factors related to resiliency. The findings suggest that youth are clearly able to identify concerns about the many risk factors in their community. What emerged strongly from these data was the need to transform community-level risks. Participants focused on legislation, the provision of services and addressing poverty. What is perhaps most significant is the extent to which youth visualised a transformed community as one free of risk. These findings perhaps reflect an acknowledgement of the magnitude of the risk, the systemic and societal influences on community structures, and the desire to exercise control over these forces. Two other factors, namely personal choice and altruism, emerged and focused on constructively overcoming personal adversity to promote resilience. Despite local hardship and many barriers to health and well-being, youth suggested that there were still opportunities for self-advancement and offered constructive strategies for improvement.

At the community level, studies in impoverished communities attest to the fact that community members often find their best support networks in each other (Henly et al., 2005; Linares, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). In this regard, the strong desire for greater social support services by the focus group participants is an interesting finding. The young people's desire to develop formal social networks rather than informal social networks (such as interest clubs) can be interpreted in two ways. It could be an indication of the existing presence of strong informal social support networks and a need to complement this with more formal social support networks. Alternatively, it could reflect a desire for a stronger sense of community cohesion (Ahmed et al., 2004). Our data did not permit us to examine these differences, but given the sense of connection of these youth to their community, we suggest that the former interpretation is more likely.

Although we did not directly assess community resilience, participants' responses were marked by references to various dimensions of community resilience. The need to transform structural conditions (like safety) speaks to the absence of resources; yet, there were numerous indications that participants were tapping sociocultural and psychosocial

community resources. The youths' narratives were rooted within their community and there was a strong sense of both individual and community responsibility to transform social conditions. The presence of the collective 'we' (Lyons et al., 1998) was striking. This collective could be reflective of a sense of neighbourhood cohesion (Ahmed et al., 2004), as well as of South African cultural values that reflect a collectivist orientation. Ahmed et al. (2004) identify two cultural ideals which may be relevant to community resilience, namely 'ubuntu', spirit of togetherness, and 'ukhungawano', support in times of crises.

Many of the youths' responses reflected a propensity towards altruism. Altruism is an important element of adaptive social behaviours and accounts, in part, for the character traits that relate to resiliency (Charney, 2004). Altruism generally refers to behaviour that benefits another person, and is performed voluntarily and intentionally without expectation of external reward for the good of others (Piliavin & Charng, 1990). There is, however, a paucity of literature on this particular subject as it relates to resiliency. Nevertheless, it is evident that young people's altruistic actions and perceptions of the future are critical components of resiliency and represent two protective factors that may be useful tools when targeting youth for health interventions.

These findings have several implications for the study of resiliency. Although the system of institutionalised racism practiced in South Africa until 1994 holds particular interest for understanding resiliency, such hardships are by no means unique to South Africa. Globally, many communities have experienced a great deal adversity, but have produced resilient individuals, despite these conditions. Understanding the extent to which personal resiliency is interconnected with the perceived strengths and weaknesses of a community is integral to the knowledge base of professionals who want to assist young people. The focus groups' discussions of their insidious adversity and harsh conditions, alongside their hopes and dreams for their community's future as well as their own, highlighted the vast opportunities for contributing to the conceptual framework of community resilience. Discussion of the magnitude and consequences of the risk factors present in the community was accompanied by a strong sense of the need to transform risk and build resilience at both the individual and the community level.

Furthermore, these findings have implications for the development of health interventions. In order for youth to play a constructive role in the transformation of South Africa, Freeman (1993) argues that interventions must first help youth develop identities that focus on community, cooperation and democratic organisation, as opposed to resistance and political struggle. Our data suggest that youth have begun to cultivate the characteristics (i.e., community connectedness) that Freeman identifies as necessary for positive social development or community resilience. Although psychological characteristics of resilient children are of interest, the ecological factors, such as environmental conditions that constrain or enable resilience, are often more amenable to intervention efforts (Osborn, 1970). Despite the strong presence of risk, only a very small number of participants mentioned wanting to leave their community. Whether this reflects the possibility that participants do not want to leave or are unable to leave is unclear. Social class normally confines people into geopolitical spaces, which may be one reason why participants placed so much emphasis on the community.

This study is not without limitations. First, youth participants may have had difficulty envisioning the answers to the study questions themselves. Although several youth had initial difficulty with envisioning the future without focusing on individual and communal risk factors, this finding itself suggests that, in their minds, there is a strong negative association between being able to focus on the future and disregarding their present

community-level factors. Second, the questions examined in this study were part of a larger study, and therefore not the main focus of the group discussions. Nonetheless, the extensive discussion about these questions is another indication of the saliency of these issues and that overall health and well-being is situated in the broader issues of community well-being. Third, the focus group methodology has disadvantages in that participants mostly constructed general scenarios. However, given the exploratory nature of the study and the importance of making participants, who may be new to research, feel comfortable, this method was appropriate.

Future research needs to have a stronger focus on altruism as a source of resilience (Mrazek & Mrazek, 1987). Cross-cultural differences between adolescents (Gillipsie & Allport, 1955) may account for its presence in our study. There was a strong sense of altruism in youth responses as reflected not only in their desire to transform their communities but also in the desire to be in helping professions. Rather than just focusing on personal attainment to overcome adversity, altruism may serve as a protective factor that balances individual needs with the more collectivist orientation present in many African societies (Mkhize, 2004). Further research is warranted in terms of how individual and community resiliency is affected by the cultural values of a society. The view of the future as embedded in community development may be different from the sense of future among middle-class children in Western countries. Future orientation in Western countries often emphasises individualistic, non-communitarian values such as educating oneself, moving ahead and moving out (Nurmi, 1987). Finally, a focus on resilience must be complemented by social justice concerns about the conditions that produce risk.

Notes on contributors

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Christian Simon conducts interview, focus group, and ethnographic research on ethical dilemmas facing clinical, translational, and genetic researchers, research participants, and affected communities.

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