

**Parent-figures and adolescent resilience: An African perspective**

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**Abstract**

This article's purpose is directed by three, previously unanswered questions. First, which parent-figures (i.e., biological and social parents), if any, do adolescents from two disadvantaged communities in South Africa identify when they explain the process of their personal resilience? Second, do rural and urban adolescents report the same parent-figures? Third, how do these parent-figures champion resilience and in what ways (if any) does context influence this championship? To answer these questions, we (the authors) conducted a deductive, secondary data analysis of visual and narrative data generated by two samples of adolescents. The rural sample (n = 133; average age 16) included 82 girls and 51 boys. The urban sample (n = 385; average age 14) included 225 girls and 160 boys. More rural adolescents included parent-figures in their resilience accounts, but rural and urban adolescents reported the same parent-figures. In general, parent-figures facilitated adolescent access to material resources; co-regulated adolescent behavior in culturally- and contextually-relevant ways; and offered comfort. Rural/urban locality and the sex of the adolescent nuanced how parent-figures co-regulated adolescent behavior. These results compel attention to the resilience of parent-figures and prompt three practice-related implications for educational/school psychologists who wish to champion the resilience of African adolescents.

**Keywords:** Black South African adolescent; father-figure; mother-figure; resilience

Resilience studies have long valorised relationships as pivotal to why and how young people adjust well to chronic hardships (such as structural disadvantage) (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2001, 2014, 2018). Similarly, reviews of the studies that account for the resilience of children and adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa foreground the importance of adolescent-caregiver relationships (Theron & Theron, 2010; van Breda & Theron, 2018). These caregivers are often biological parents. However, they are also often social parents (i.e., someone who parents a child even though she/he has no blood ties with the child; see van den Berg & Mukasha, 2018). Social parents could include other relatives, or “fictive kin” (Mouzon, 2014, p. 32) such as peers and/or adults in the local community who take on a parent role in the life of an adolescent (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2011; Camfield, 2012). This implies that parent-figures (i.e., biological and social parents) – and not just parents, *per se* – potentially matter for adolescent resilience.

However, despite increasing understanding that social support systems (such as adolescent-caregiver relationships) are contextually and culturally diverse (Borja, Nastasi, & Sarkar, 2017), little attention has been given to African adolescents' first-hand accounts of which parent-figures champion their resilience, or how these parent-figures do so. This could explain why Berckmoes, De Jong, and Reis (2017) advocated for closer scrutiny to which caregivers African adolescents identify as pivotal to their resilience and how these persons apparently champion adolescent resilience. Such scrutiny should preferably be informed by young people's personal explanations, given the historic marginalisation of youth voices in accounts of their social support systems (Borja et al., 2017), and/or resilience (Bottrell, 2009; Li, Bottrell, & Armstrong, 2018). Thus, the aim of this article is to draw on the personal resilience accounts of African adolescents from two disadvantaged communities in South Africa in order to identify the parent-figures who championed these adolescents' resilience and better understand how they did so. Given that resilience processes are sensitive to

contextual determinants (Masten, 2014) and that contextual determinants (such as neighbourhood/community density or cultural values) affect caregiving (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002), a secondary aim is to investigate whether rural and urban adolescents report the same parent-figures (or not) and if the ways in which these parent-figures champion resilience differ.

The aforementioned aims should not imply that parent-figures are generally more important to the resilience of African adolescents than any other resilience-enabling resource. Whilst other resilience-enabling resources matter too, the parent-figure focus is a purposeful response to the prominence of relational supports to the resilience of people (Luthar, 2006), including African adolescents (van Breda & Theron, 2018), and the currently limited understanding of caregiver contributions to the resilience of African adolescents (Berckmoes et al., 2017). In the absence of a deeper understanding of which parent-figures play a salient role in the resilience processes of African adolescents from disadvantaged South African communities, and how they do so, educational/school psychologists and other helping professionals may be tempted to champion the resilience of all adolescents in stereotypical ways (e.g., by emphasizing the importance of a supportive nuclear family above other relational supports).

Championing resilience is a fundamental part of the praxis of educational/school psychologists (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013; Toland & Carrigan, 2011). This article's interest in whether/how context shapes which parent-figures adolescents identify as resilience-enabling is likely to be instructive to the praxis of any psychologist and/or other helping professional working with adolescents because it prompts sensitivity to how context could shape the resilience process. Last, but by no means least, this article's attention to parent-figures will hopefully expand the scope of existing calls for greater attention to the resilience of parents (see Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015) to encompass the resilience of parent-figures. To this end, the

practice-related implications for educational/school psychologists (with which this article concludes) argue that parent-figure resilience – and enablement/maintenance of parent-figure resilience – is a crucial pathway of adolescent resilience.

### **Resilience and parent-child relationships**

Risk, which is significant enough to predict negative outcomes, is a precondition for resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). Definitions of human resilience have advanced from ones that explain resilience as a better-than-expected outcome which is predicated on specific human strengths to ones that explain resilience as a dynamic phenomenon that facilitates better-than-expected outcomes in the face or aftermath of significant risk (Van Breda & Theron, 2018). The latter is evident in Masten's (2014) often-cited definition of resilience. Applied to adolescents at-risk, Masten defines resilience as a process that facilitates an adolescent's capacity to adapt well to any risk that has the potential to disrupt her/his functioning or development. This complex process draws on resources within adolescents and their social ecologies (Ungar, 2011). A pivotal social ecological resource is close relationships (Luthar, 2006). In particular, positive parent-child relationships have the potential to enable adolescent resilience, especially when they scaffold physical care, emotional security, and opportunities for learning (Masten, 2018).

Parents (and families) promote resilience in three primary ways (Masten, 2014). The first relates to the prevention and/or moderation of exposure to adversity. In this regard, parental monitoring (particularly by mothers) is highlighted (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003). For example, Becerra and Castillo's (2011) work with a sample of low-income Mexican adolescents showed that parental monitoring served as a protective factor against substance abuse. Similar protective effects were reported in a study with 2134 adolescents from Bosnia and Herzegovina who had experienced various forms of

victimisation. Parental monitoring moderated the effects of victimisation on adolescent enactment of offending behaviour (Nash, Mujanovic, & Winfree, 2011).

Second, parents promote resilience by mitigating the impacts of adversity. Emotionally supportive parents may not be able to prevent adversity, but they can offer comfort and/or support children to adjust to/make meaning of experiences of adversity (Romero, Hall, Cluver, & Meinck, 2018). For example, higher levels of emotional support from parents showed protective effects in a study with a sample of American adolescents who had experienced either physical or relational peer victimisation (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). Emotionally supportive fathers were associated with lower levels of emotional and behavioural problems. Emotionally supportive mothers were associated with lower levels of emotional problems.

Third, parents' efforts to foster competence and adaptability in children facilitates resilience. Amongst others, facilitating access to basic resources, supporting children to regulate their behaviour and emotion (i.e., co-regulating; see Masten, 2014, p. 152), and encouraging investment in education are all ways in which competence and adaptability are advanced (Ungar, 2004). For example, adults who were successful in life despite having been challenged by learning difficulties as children described their families as "extraordinarily supportive" (Ofiesh & Mather, 2013, p. 339). This support included parents who continued to encourage academic progress, provided financial resources, and facilitated access to relevant services.

Despite the robust attention to the salience of child-parent relationships in the resilience of young people, there has been little consideration of what enables the resilience of these parents/caregivers who, arguably, are challenged by the same contextual stressors as their children (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015; Sim et al., 2019). There is some understanding that

social support (e.g., from co-parents or other adults) and/or social connectedness enables caregivers, whose wellbeing is challenged by structural and other risks, to parent competently (Ajduković et al., 2018; Sim et al., 2019). Likewise, personal strengths (e.g., a caregiver's sense of self-efficacy) and positive family functioning are associated with the capacity of caregivers to parent competently in the face of hardship (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015; Newland, 2015), as are personal strengths.

### **Resilience and parent-child relationships in the African context**

Although sub-Saharan African is comprised of multiple countries, including South Africa, the people of these countries share traditional African ways-of-being (Molefe, 2018). In traditional African contexts – including traditional African families and communities in South Africa – a parent is not necessarily a child's biological mother/father. Because African children are likely to be raised in what Mkhize (2006, p. 187) calls a “family community” (i.e., a collective of immediate and extended relatives), any member of this community can take on a parent role to any of the community's children. Additionally, because African people typically value interdependence, they have a flexible, inclusive understanding of relatedness that prompts parent- or family-like connections that transcend the usual relationships ties (i.e., ties relating to ancestry or marriage). Accordingly, any adult (e.g., a neighbour, teacher, or elder), or even a peer, can take on a parent-like role (i.e., provide physical care, emotional security, and opportunities for learning). In doing so, they demonstrate respect for fellow human beings and live up to the norms of respectful, generous interdependence (Molefe, 2018).

Studies that have focused on the resilience of children and adolescents from countries in sub-Saharan Africa – e.g., Betancourt et al., 2011; Camfield, 2012 – confirm that biological parents enable resilience by protecting their children from adversity or mitigating

the impacts of unavoidable adversity, and promoting the development of competence. The same applies to the resilience of South African children and adolescents (van Breda & Theron, 2018). For instance, the capacity of biological parents to communicate effectively and be co-involved in raising their children in the face of divorce and disrupted household functioning, supported the resilience of a sample of vulnerable South African adolescents (Ebersöhn & Bouwer, 2013).

However, African studies of resilience show that biological parents are not the only parent-figures who prevent/moderate exposure to adversity, mitigate the effects of adversity, or facilitate competence and adaptability. For example, a study that specifically investigated the resilience of Black South African university students with histories of disadvantage pointed to the parent-like contributions of extended family and teachers (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). These parent-figures provided essential tangible supports (e.g., food, clothing, finances). Moreover, they role-modelled and/or encouraged self-regulation, self and cultural pride, and tenacity. Similarly, grandparents and/or peers are integral to the resilience of African children who have been orphaned (Casale, 2011; Skovdal & Ogutu, 2012).

Women parent-figures are prominent in accounts of the resilience of African adolescents (e.g., Block, 2016; Casale, 2011; Zulu, 2018). This prominence could, potentially, be explained by contextual realities. In South Africa women head 28.6% of nuclear households and 49.9% of extended family households (Ratele & Nduna, 2018). Often, fathers are absent from these households because they are migrant workers, deceased, unwelcome, or unknown (Padi, Nduna, Khunou, & Kholopane, 2014). Women's prominence could also be explained by traditional African families' perpetuation of gender stereotypes (i.e., women are expected to take on subservient and caregiving roles) (Block, 2016). In this regard, Hatch and Posel (2018) reported that African women are disproportionately responsible for physical and financial childcare in South Africa. Furthermore, many of these

African women caregivers appear to have embraced the Strong Black Woman stereotype (Casale, 2011; Ramphele, 2012; Theron, 2016a). This stereotype expects women caregivers to be 'resilient, self-contained, and self-sacrificing' (Donovan & West, 2015, p. 384) in order that the wellbeing of children and other family members might be championed. It is possible that the emotional rewards which Black mother-figures associate with being 'strong' for the children in their care sustains their resilience (Casale, 2011). Although endorsement of this stereotype appears to explain the resilience of many African women caregivers (Jefferis & Theron, 2018), its endorsement is associated with poor health and wellbeing outcomes for women (Donovan & West, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2016).

### **African adolescent accounts of how 'parent'-child relationships inform adolescent resilience**

There are concerns that documented understandings of child and adolescent resilience undervalue youth perspectives and instead reflect researchers' foci and/or how these foci are measured (Bottrell, 2009; Li et al., 2018). Either aspect could bias the protective factors that are investigated and reported. For instance, although the study by Ebersöhn and colleagues (2012) provided valuable insights about HIV-affected families and the resilience of children, it is possible that the method used (i.e., asking children to make a kinetic family drawing) precluded children's inclusion of connections to caring non-family members. Accordingly, we wondered how adolescents would account for their resilience if their response was not directed by a narrow or focused research question. In particular, we were curious as to whether parents' commitment to protecting their children from adversity, or mitigating the impacts of unavoidable adversity, and/or promoting the development of competence would be confirmed by a qualitative data set that was prompted by a broad research question that did not bias African adolescents towards the mention of any specific protective resource. Given our prior resilience work we assumed that it would, but that the emphasis on biological



parents might be diluted. We also assumed that such evidence would provide a compelling rationale for future attention to the resilience of parent-figures. These assumptions encouraged the secondary data analysis that we detail next.

## METHODS

We conducted a secondary analysis of visual and narrative datasets that were generated in two South African resilience studies: The Pathways to Resilience Study (i) (2009-2014) and the Pathways to Resilience Study (ii) (2015-2018). Our choice to focus on qualitative data relates to the under-reporting of young people's personal explanations of their social supports (including support from caregivers) (Borja et al., 2017). Qualitative work foregrounds personal explanations (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015).

### **The Pathways to Resilience Studies**

Both of the South African Pathways to Resilience (P2R) studies have been documented (e.g., Theron, 2016a, b, 2017; Theron, Liebenberg, & Malindi, 2014; Theron & Van Rensburg, 2018; Van Rensburg, Theron, & Ungar, 2017; Van Rensburg, Theron, Rothmann, 2018). These previous publications detailed the methodology used. Suffice it here to say that the studies received ethical clearance from the relevant university review boards (NWU-00006-09-A2) and departments of education. The first P2R study took place in the rural district of Thabo Mofutsanyana in the Free State province. The second was conducted in the urban municipality of Emfuleni in the Gauteng province. Both research sites were characterised by structural disadvantage that translated as rampant unemployment and poverty, overcrowded living conditions, poor infrastructure and limited access to health and welfare services, under-resourced and/or over-crowded public schools, and exposure to communicable disease. Even though violent crime is predominant in South Africa's densely populated urban areas (Anon., 2018), the rural research site was not crime-free. In short, participating adolescents from the

rural and urban research sites were similarly exposed to the aforementioned risks. This is worrying, not least because the Family Stress Model predicts that such risks are likely to disrupt parenting (Conger, Wallace, Sun, Simons, McLoyd, & Brody, 2002).

### *Participants*

In the first P2R study 133 adolescents (82 girls and 51 boys) voluntarily generated the qualitative data informing the current article. They were identified as 'resilient' by the community-based gatekeepers for the P2R study. Amongst others, the gatekeepers considered making progress at school (e.g., transitioning to high school) to be a marker of resilience. The emphasis on academic progress is characteristic of resilience studies in Africa (e.g., Kabiru et al., 2012), given the pervasively low likelihood that African children challenged by structural disadvantage will matriculate (i.e., complete high school successfully). On average, the adolescent participants were 16 years old (SD 1.64). They self-identified as Black (mostly Sesotho-speaking) and attended English-medium schools. The majority (39.8%) lived with a single parent (33.83% reported that this parent was their mother). In comparison, 30.07% lived with both parents and 20.3% with a guardian/guardians (identity undisclosed). The remainder either lived on their own, or in a child-headed household, or preferred not to disclose their living arrangements.

In the second P2R study the qualitative data (relevant to the current article) was voluntarily generated by 385 urban adolescents (225 girls and 160 boys) who were also judged to be 'resilient' because they had progressed to high school, despite relentless structural barriers. Their average age was 13.83 (SD = 0.89). They too self-identified as Black (mostly Sesotho-speaking) and attended English-medium high schools. Most (36%) lived with co-resident parents, closely followed by those living with only their mother (32%). Similar to the first P2R study, 17% reported living with a guardian. The remainder either

lived on their own, in a child-headed household, or preferred not to disclose their living arrangements.

### ***Data generation***

The data relevant to the current article were generated using the Draw-and-write method (Guillemin, 2004). Accordingly, in both studies the P2R team invited adolescents to use the paper and HB pencils provided to produce drawings of what, in their experience, had enabled their resilience and to write an explanation of what their drawings meant. The prompt that informed the activity was purposefully broad to avoid biasing participant responses. It read: “What has helped you to do well in your life so far (even though life is difficult)? Please draw what helped you to do well in your life so far? Then please help us to understand what your drawing means by writing a couple of sentences explaining it.” The prompt, which was in English because all the participants were being schooled in English, used the African phrase for resilience (i.e., do well in life; Theron et al., 2013). With the exception of four participants from the first P2R study, participants’ written explanations of their drawings were in English. Inviting participant explanation of her/his drawing was an attempt to limit researcher bias from shaping subsequent analyses of the drawing.

### **Secondary data analysis**

The drawings and explanations that were generated in the P2R studies have been previously analysed and these analyses reported (Theron, 2016a, 2017; Theron & van Rensburg, 2018). These previous publications reported the resilience-supporting value of personal resources (e.g., education-related aspirations), relational resources (e.g., warm caregivers), and contextual resources (e.g., cultural heritage such as spirituality or Ubuntu-values). Although these previous publications reported the value of biological parents and other caregivers to the resilience of Sesotho-speaking adolescents, they neither focused on the identity of these

people nor explored rural/urban patterns relating to the parent-figures that adolescents include in their accounts of resilience. They also did not detail how parent-figures enable adolescent resilience. Accordingly, our secondary data analysis was guided by three questions. First, which parent-figures do adolescents from two disadvantaged communities in South Africa identify when they explain the process of their personal resilience? Second, do rural and urban adolescents report the same parent-figures (or not)? Third, how do these parent-figures champion resilience and in what ways (if any) does context influence this championship?

To answer these questions we conducted a deductive content analysis of the data. Even though we are white South Africans, we were comfortable working with the data. This comfort related to our extensive experience of working with Black adolescents and our preceding involvement in repeated discussions of the meaning of the data sets with Black researchers, Sesotho-speaking research assistants and community-based Sesotho-speaking advisors (Theron, 2016b). As a first step in the analysis, we excluded any drawings/explanations that made no mention of a parent-figure. We defined parent-figure broadly as any person who protected the participant from adversity, mitigated its impacts, or promoted the development of the adolescent's competence. This left us with 72 drawings for the first P2R study and 149 for the second. Next we counted the frequency of the parent-figures that adolescents reported in each dataset and then deductively coded how these parent-figures championed resilience. The codes were based on Masten's (2014, 2018) summary that parents/families enable resilience by (i) preventing adversity (e.g., by monitoring adolescents), (ii) mitigating the effects of adversity (e.g., by soothing or providing emotional comfort), and/or (iii) by developing competence (e.g., by providing access to resources, co-regulating behaviour, encouraging investment in education). Following Borja et al. (2017), we considered convergences and divergences in the frequencies and coding of each data-set.

To heighten trustworthiness, we invited an independent resilience researcher to audit our coding.

## FINDINGS

Our first question asked which parent-figures adolescent participants identified when they explained the process of their personal resilience. As summarised in Table 1, there was high convergence: when participants accounted for their personal resilience they included mother-figures (i.e., biological mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and/or aunts), parents (i.e., both the biological mother and father), fictive kin (teachers, peers, elders and/or neighbours who parented participants in one/more of the ways described later on), and father-figures (biological fathers, grandfathers, brothers and/or uncles). Participants' sex did not appear to influence which parent-figure/s they included in how they accounted for their resilience. For instance, Participant 202 (urban sample), who lived with her mother at the time of the study, specified how her father had supported her resilience. She said, "My father used to help me with my school work and he used to help me with my personal issue. So we made me achieve my goal". Similarly, Participant 207 (rural sample) who lived with his mother at the time of the study, emphasized the father-like role that his brother played in his resilience. He said:

When I [am] sick, my brother takes me to the clinic or the doctor. When it is the meeting at school, my brother goes to the meeting. When someone wants to fight me I can tell my brother and he tells them not to

As intimated in the above excerpts, the living arrangements of the adolescents (i.e., whether they lived with co-resident parents, a single parent/caregiver, or alternative) did not appear to influence which parent-figure/s adolescents included in their resilience accounts. To illustrate this point further, Participant 633 (urban sample), who lived with her mother only, explained that both her parents contributed to her resilience. They provided:

Good food on my table and where I'm going to sleep and a roof over my head. I'm richer than I think. So, I want to thank my mother, father, about the good things they [have] done for me as the parents.

In contrast, Participant 115 (urban sample) reported that her biological mother was central to how she adapted to hardship. Participant 115 lived with co-resident parents at the time of the study. She said:

My mother helps me by supporting me in difficult times. My mother helps me when I am hurt. My mother buys some clothes for me. ... My mother feeds me. ... My mother does anything for me.

Table 1 *Summary of parent-figures included in adolescent accounts*

Parent-figure		% of rural sample [n = 133] that reported the parent-figure	% of urban sample [n = 385] that reported the parent-figure
<b>Mother-figure</b>	Biological mother	27%	10%
	Grandmother	4%	1%
	Sister	2%	2%
	Woman cousin	1%	-
	Aunt	-	0.25%
<b>Both parents/family</b>		17%	8%
<b>Fictive kin</b>	Friend	9%	0.75%
	Teacher	5%	3%
	Elder/neighbour	2%	0.5
<b>Father-figure</b>	Biological father	0.25%	2%
	Brother	2%	-
	Grandfather	-	1%
	Uncle	1%	-

Our second question was concerned with whether rural and urban adolescents reported the same parent-figures (or not). Table 1 shows that both samples reported the same parent-figures, but that a higher percentage of rural adolescents (compared with urban ones) included parent-figures in how they accounted for their resilience. Further, a frequency count (see Table 1) provided unambiguous evidence that mother-figures (i.e., biological mothers

and women-relatives who played a mothering role) were particularly important to the resilience of both rural and urban adolescents. Biological mothers were most prominently included by both rural and urban adolescents (see Table 1). Participant 218 (urban sample) foregrounded this centrality of mothers when she said:

My mother is the one helping me to do well in life. For my future, my mother encourages me to not give up so early, to learn to solve my problems, and to stand for myself. That makes me see that my mother wants the best for me. My mother wants her children to do well in life and she helps them no matter what is happening. She is always there for her children.

However, as intimated by Participant 631 (urban sample), the identity of the mother-figure was not sacrosanct as various mother-figures enabled resilience similarly. She (Participant 631) reported that her mother and grandmother were similarly integral to her resilience: “They’re like my friends, my mothers, and my providers.”

References to parents were less frequent than references to mother-figures in rural and urban adolescents’ accounts of caregivers that facilitated resilience (see Table 1). Participants who referred to parents (plural) seldom differentiated how each parent facilitated resilience. Most referred to ‘they’ or ‘my parents’. Social parent-figures (e.g., teachers, peers, and/or neighbours) were more popular than father-figures in the accounts of both rural and urban adolescents. Father-figures (i.e., biological fathers, grandfathers, brothers and/or uncles) were least prominent in how rural and urban adolescents accounted for their resilience (see Table 1). Interestingly, urban adolescents were more likely to identify biological fathers in their accounts of resilience than rural adolescents. In comparison, rural adolescents were more likely to identify a father-figure (typically a brother).

Our third question was directed at understanding how, according to the adolescents in question, the identified parent-figures championed adolescent resilience and in what ways (if any) context influenced this championship. As detailed below, we learned that parent-figures provided access to material resources, supported adolescents to regulate their behaviour in

culturally- and contextually-relevant ways, and offered comfort. Interestingly, no adolescents reported that any parent-figure championed resilience by preventing adversity (e.g., by monitoring the whereabouts of the adolescent to prevent exposure to crime or violence).

### **Resilience-enabling parent-figures provide access to material resources**

Mother-figures, parents, fictive kin, and/or father-figures supported adolescent access to material resources, including food, shelter/protection, clothing and education. This process appeared to be similar regardless of context (i.e., whether the participants were located in a rural or urban community). For instance, Participant 140 (rural sample) who lived with co-resident parents at the time of the study reported that his biological mother had helped him to adjust to everyday adversities. In this regard, he singled out her capacity to provide for his everyday needs (e.g., “My mother buys me clothes”). Participant 102 (a boy from the rural sample), said “My parents make sure that I eat, my parents encourage me to attend school”. Participant 629 (urban sample) recalled how a neighbour was parent-like when he provided them with food and financial support. She explained:

My mother, she didn't have money anymore and we slept without eating. My neighbour came and took my brother to McDonald to buy hamburgers and coke. He bought two for me and my brother, and he gave my brother money [for us] to buy food.

Although Participant 128 (urban sample) lived with both parents at the time of the study, he foregrounded his father's financial and educational support when he explained his resilience:

My dad helped me achieve more in life. He bought me an Apple Macbook laptop which I can use to do schoolwork ... My dad loves me so much and he invested money which I can use for University and maybe buy a second hand car to travel to North-West University to get my own education. He is the one who made passionate about being a doctor who can heal people and maybe I can find a cure for HIV/Aids.

Participants explained that without the above everyday resources, their development would be constrained. For instance, Participant 158 (a boy from the rural sample) said that



without basic resources “you can’t live and you will never grow or develop”. The adolescents also commented that everyday material resources (such as a school uniform) camouflaged markers of disadvantage. In doing so the potential for social marginalisation was diminished because material resources supported participants to “look just like other children” (Participant 124, girl, rural sample).

### **Resilience-enabling parent-figures co-regulate adolescent behaviour**

Mothers and mother-figures (grandmothers, sisters, and aunts) and/or fathers and father-figures (grandfathers, brothers, and uncles) supported rural and urban adolescents to regulate their behaviour. For instance, Participant 30 (a girl from the urban sample) said: “My parents teach me how to live and treat other people.” Similarly, Participant 159 (rural sample) attributed his resilience to his grandmother’s capacity to shape his behaviour: “I love my grandmother, she helped me to grow well”. Fictive kin (peers, teachers, elders) also shaped adolescent behaviour constructively. For instance, Participant 83 (a girl from the urban sample, living with both parents) reported “my teacher helped me from when I was a kid and showed me how to help people and to write ... She’s like a mother to me.” As detailed next, parent-figures helped adolescents to regulate their behaviour by socialising adolescents to invest in education and value principled living.

***Parent-figures encourage commitment to education.*** They did so in three ways.

First, relatives and teachers regulated adolescent behaviour by enforcing school attendance. For instance, Participant 194 (rural sample) lived with a woman relative. He identified her as “my mother” and appreciated how she co-regulated his regular attendance (“My mother makes me get to school”). Similarly, a girl from the rural sample (Participant 162) reported that her mother made sure she did not miss school and that she engaged in her lessons (“She sends me to school to learn hard, to be clever”). The father of Participant 154 (a boy from the

urban sample) did likewise (“He made me go to school even I didn’t want to go to school. He made me realise the importance of school.”)

Second, the above-mentioned parent-figures emphasized education’s potential to facilitate independence and upward life trajectories. For instance, Participant 106 (a boy from the rural sample) reported, “When I was young my parents will always say to me I must go to school because education is the key to success... Now I can stand on my feet.” Similarly, a girl from the rural sample (Participant 320) reported, “I drew my teacher because he helped many children understand that we won’t always rely on our parents and our parents won’t always be there to take care of us, so education is one way now to secure our future.” Another girl (Participant 554 from the urban sample) explained that her mother was “always advising” her about the “importance of education”. Similarly, Participant 18 (urban sample) said that her sister “inspires me to be educated and be what I wanna be when I grow up”.

Finally, the above-mentioned parent-figures underscored the importance of reading. For instance, Participant 181 (a girl from the rural sample, living with her mother) reported: “My uncle speaks to me to read books”. Participant 10 (a boy from the urban sample) said: “My father pushed me to read each and every day ... I am a role model to my peers because of my father.”

***Parent-figures inspire principled living.*** Interestingly, urban adolescents reported how parent-figures encouraged a principled and/or health-promoting lifestyle more often than rural adolescents did. Of further interest was that with a single exception (i.e., Participant 648, a boy from the urban sample, “Parents show you the way that is right”), only girls reported that relatives instructed them to be devout, respectfully interdependent, and make health- and wellbeing-promoting choices. For instance, Participant 203 (rural sample) linked her resilience to the ethics that her mother inspired: “My mother told me to read the Bible and

to respect everyone.” Participant 7 (urban sample) reported that her resilience related to her capacity to “stay away from things that will take you nowhere” and this related to what her “big sister” taught her. Similarly Participant 120 (urban sample) reported that it was her “grandmom who inspired [her] to do all the right things in life”. Participant 347 (urban sample) also emphasized that her resilience related to her mother teaching her “to do to some things and not to do others ... not to do wrong things”. These ‘wrong things’ often related to promiscuity/risky sexual practices. For instance, Participant 646 (urban sample) said: “She [mother] tries to protect me from boys. She [teaches me to] avoid boys and have fun with her. She pushes me to go to church.”

In comparison, fictive kin supported both male and female adolescents to adopt principled lifestyles. For instance, Participant 471 (urban sample, living with guardian) referred to an elder who taught him to discern “what is wrong and what is right”. He added: “when I do something that is wrong, he helped me by telling me. And now I know what I have to do, that it will be right to me and my parents. If I do something wrong I know that is wrong.” Similarly Participant 111 (rural sample, living with both parents) appreciated his elders’ guidance. He said, “They encourage me, with all living matters, helping me how to respect older persons.” Peers passed these lessons on to other peers that they were closely connected to. For example Participant 107 (rural sample), who lived with her mother, reported that her friends regulated her behaviour by passing on how to avoid ‘wrong things’. She said, “At home and at school my friends talk with me about life, what way we must take to have a bright future.” Similarly, Participant 180 (a boy from the rural sample who lived with a guardian) noted, “My friends have helped me a lot since the first day we met. It is because of them that I don’t do silly things like smoking and drinking.”

Interestingly, fathers/father-figures were not explicitly mentioned when adolescents commented on the resilience-enabling value of being guided towards principled living. The

closest that fathers/father-figures came to being included in this theme was when Participant 322 (urban sample) explained how his father had facilitated his resilience. His explanation hinted that his father modelled a moral code. He said:

I thank my father because he is the one who made me to be in this world, I thank him for caring for me from my youngest age ... I love him because he understands what is right and what is wrong and he loves the games that I love.

### **Resilience-enabling parent-figures soothe**

Rural and urban participants valued the affection and comfort that parent-figures provided in the face of hardships that seemed immutable and credited their resilience to this emotional support. For instance, Participant 135 (rural sample) foregrounded her sister's resilience-enabling capacity to comfort her: "My sister helped me to cope in life because she is always there for me, and even when I have problems in life she is so helpful, and she is the one who understands me very well." Similarly, Participant 103 (a boy from the rural sample who lived with both parents) explained, "So many problems chased away by my friends who understand my problems." Likewise, Participant 158 (urban sample) believed her aunt was an "extraordinary woman" because:

She treated me like her own child. She is my shoulder to cry on and she raises me up when I am down. She is my everything. She gave me the love and warmth I needed in life. The only thing that made me to be here today is her mother heart, her kindness, and her help. She wanted to see me being a better person in life.

Participants' accounts of how their teachers comforted them, suggested that teacher acts of caring and support went beyond what teachers are routinely expected to do for their students. For instance, Participant 204 (a girl from the rural sample who lived with her mother) explained that her teacher could be depended on to 'help me about everything'. Similarly, Participant 15 (a boy from the urban sample who lived with a guardian) reported:

My maths teacher is the only one that can make me understand the world better. She's the one that is my role model and inspiration to my life and the person that I look up to as a mother figure. And, I understand her subject even if my life has troubles. I can always count on her. I love her with all my heart.

Although soothing, loving fathers were implied in participants' references to caring parents (e.g., Participant 89 [a girl from the rural sample] said: "My parents give me love and tender care"), no participant explicitly mentioned a loving or comforting father/father-figure when explaining how a parent-figure enabled resilience.

## DISCUSSION

In part, the purpose of this paper was to identify which parent-figures are included by adolescents who are challenged by chronic structural adversity when they account for their personal resilience. It was also concerned with whether rural and urban adolescents would identify the same parent-figures (or not). Both these foci are important to educational/school psychologists, given the discipline's understanding that resilience relies on contextually relevant interactions between adolescents and their families, schools, and communities (Noltmeyer & Bush, 2013; Toland & Carrigan, 2011). Essentially, the findings demonstrate that an array of parent-figures (inclusive of biological and social parents) matter for the resilience of African adolescents growing up in structurally disadvantaged South African communities, be they rural or urban. This array confirmed our working assumption and fits well with conventional African valuing of what Mkhize (2006, p. 187) called a "family community" (i.e., relatives in the immediate and extended family) and related traditions of flexible kinship connections (i.e., family-like connections to non-relatives) (Molefe, 2018; Ramphele, 2012).

Although there is literature that suggests that adolescent development is associated with attenuating caregiver-adolescent ties (e.g., Collins & Steinberg, 2008), our study

suggests that parent-figures continue to matter for adolescent resilience, more especially the resilience of African adolescents in a rural South African community. Even so, and as reported previously (e.g., Theron, 2017), many of the adolescent participants (particularly the urban ones) did not attribute their resilience to a parent-figure. This led us to think that the chronic and compound nature of the structural disadvantage that characterises both research sites might account for the relatively low numbers of adolescents who reported resilience-enabling parent-figures. Put differently, it is plausible that the relentless stress of structural disadvantage has depleted the capacity of many adults and peers to take on resilience-enabling parent roles. This would certainly fit with the theories of Conger and colleagues (2002) and empirical results that show that income shapes how parents support their children's development (e.g., Chen, 2019). It would also compel future attention to the facilitation of parent-figure resilience to structural disadvantage, particularly by educational/school psychologists who work in disadvantaged school communities. We theorise further that the rural-urban differences in how frequently parent-figures were identified could reflect Ramphela's (2012) observation that rural and/or traditional African communities are more likely to value interdependence and socialise young people accordingly. In contrast urban (i.e., rapidly westernising) ones are less likely to socialise adolescents to value human ties.

We were unsurprised that mother-figures dominated the parent-figures whom adolescents identified. This dominance fits with preceding qualitative studies of the resilience of South African children and adolescents (e.g., Casale, 2011; Malindi, 2014; Odendaal & Moletsane, 2011; Phasha, 2010; Zulu, 2018) and with the extent of women-headed households in South Africa (Ratele & Nduna, 2018). It also fits with traditional African families' perpetuation of gender stereotypes and caregiving roles (Block, 2016). It was, therefore, also unsurprising that adolescent explanations of how parent-figures enable

adolescent resilience confirmed the limited contributions associated with men in pre-existing African studies of adolescent resilience. As in our case, these studies typically described fathers and/or father-figures as making material/financial and/or educational/instructive contributions (e.g., Block, 2016). As noted previously (e.g., Casale, 2011; Theron & Ungar, 2019), such findings call for greater researcher attention to what enables women parent-figures to champion adolescent resilience, particularly as these women are also challenged by structural disadvantage. Educational/school psychologists would benefit from doing the same.

The purpose of this paper was also to explore adolescent experiences of how parent-figures support adolescent resilience. Their experiences (i.e., that resilience-enabling parent-figures provide access to material resources, co-regulate behaviour, and soothe) were generally convergent across sites and fit with prevailing understandings of how parents and families enable resilience (e.g., Masten, 2014, 2018). Even though this implies that these resilience-enabling parent-figures did nothing out of the ordinary, their ability to parent in resilience-enabling ways in the face of chronic structural disadvantage is extraordinary, given that structural disadvantage predicts disrupted parenting (Conger et al., 2002). The limited understanding of what enables the resilience of parents elsewhere (e.g., Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015) implies that these South African parent-figures drew on personal strengths and/or social supports. Similarly, Casale's (2011) study with South African grandmothers suggests that emotional rewards (e.g., a sense of pride or joy) might have supported the resilience of these parent-figures. Because of the adolescent-focus of our study we cannot confirm these implications, but like Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) we recognise that caregiver resilience is a crucial construct that requires further investigation. Given their frequent interaction with caregivers, educational/school psychologists are well positioned to

lead such investigation. In particular, it will be important to attend to how context and culture shape parent-figure resilience.

As in studies outside of South Africa (e.g., Borja et al., 2017; Chen, 2019), culture and context certainly shaped how parent-figures supported the adolescents in our study to regulate their behaviour. In South Africa, African families and disadvantaged communities valorise educational qualifications as a potential pathway out of penury and a means of advancing collective pride (Phasha, 2010). Similarly, African communities traditionally socialise young people to value respectful interdependence and spirituality (Molefe, 2018; Phasha, 2010). Thus, encouraging commitment to education and a principled lifestyle fit with what Africans traditionally value. It also fit with contextual realities. Being diligent and principled typically prompts lifestyle choices (e.g., abstinence from substance abuse or risky sexual behaviour) that are likely to facilitate physical and mental wellbeing. It is possible, therefore, that the context of our study (i.e., communities characterised by poverty, violent crime, and communicable disease) strengthened parent-figure promotion of education and principled living. Allied to this, the fact that incidences of violent crime in South Africa are highest in densely populated urban areas (Anon., 2018) and more likely to affect girls and woman (Pelo, 2018), probably explains why urban parent-figures emphasized principled living more than rural parent-figures did and why boys were less often encouraged to adopt a principled or devout lifestyle.

Another convergence across the data-sets was that neither rural nor urban adolescents mentioned that parent-figures prevented their possible exposure to risk by monitoring their movementscommunities (Keijsers, 2016). We theorise that this might relate to the demands that surviving structural disadvantage make on parent-figure time and energy (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002). Alternatively, the adolescent silence on monitoring might also have



reflected the interdependent nature of traditional African communities where adults monitor children's movement collectively and informally (Ramphela, 2012). Aligned with this, it is possible that parent-figures promotion of principled living – and adolescents' enactment thereof – pre-empted the need for monitoring.

All of the above need to be understood in the light of the study's limitations. The two data-sets were not generated at the same time. It is, however, worth noting that various pre-existing reports of African adolescents' resilience have included multiple qualitative datasets generated at different points in time by different samples (e.g., Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011). Also, following Borja et al. (2017), the fact that the Pathways data-sets generally shared thematic convergence, despite being generated at different points in time by different samples, encourages belief in the credibility of the reported findings. This convergence could perhaps be explained by the apparent intractability – often across generations, let alone shorter periods of time such as that of the Pathways studies – of structural disadvantage in South Africa (Patel, Hochfeld, & Chiba, 2019). The mean-age of the participants (i.e. 16 vs 14) was also different. Nevertheless, multiple qualitative studies of the resilience of African young people have reported results for samples that include adolescents whose ages varied (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2011; Skovdal & Ogutu, 2012; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). This pre-existing work motivated our comparison of data generated by differently-aged adolescents and the thematic and other convergences vindicated it. Further, even though participants attended English-medium schools, it is possible that they may have explained their drawings differently/more fully had they communicated in their mother-tongue. Despite these limitations our study is the first African study to compare rural and urban parent-figure contributions to adolescent resilience and to theorise how contextual realities and cultural values shaped these parent-figure contributions.

### **Conclusion: Lessons for educational/school psychologists**

Our study has three specific take-home lessons for educational/school psychologists. It is probable that the application of these lessons will vary across contexts and so it would be useful if future studies considered how educational/school psychologists across diverse contexts operationalised the recommended lessons. Regardless of how the lessons are implemented, they should remind educational/school psychologists to guard against pre-determined understandings of how adolescent resilience can be nurtured. More exactly, educational/school psychologists need to be receptive to contextually- and culturally-sensitive adolescent pathways of resilience that can potentially be facilitated by biological and social parent-figures (including peers and teachers). Allied to this, educational/school psychologists need to understand and nurture the resilience of these biological and social parent-figures (including peers and teachers). In other words, the take-home lessons do not emphasize interventions at the level of the adolescent. Instead, they respond to recent calls to “maximize nurturance in children’s socialising contexts, targeting the most important, malleable processes in their everyday environments” (Luthar & Eisenberg, 2017, p. 345). In short, the lessons signal that it would be hard to nurture young people’s resilience if the resilience of their parent-figures is not systematically investigated, enabled or replenished, and sustained.

**Lesson 1.** As recommended elsewhere (e.g., Kumpulainen et al., 2016), it would be helpful to anticipate that multiple parent-figures (biological and social) might be contributing to the resilience of adolescents and to learn the identity of these parent-figures from adolescents themselves. Given the potential threat of structural disadvantage to parenting (Conger et al., 2002), educational/school psychologists need to support these parent-figures to sustain their resilience-enabling actions in contextually- and culturally-relevant ways. In the course of doing so, they need to celebrate some parent-figures’ resistance of the prediction (see Conger et al., 2002) that structural disadvantage disrupts parenting. They also need to

better understand what has supported these parent-figures to be resilience champions in the face of relentless odd (i.e., to be resilient parent-figures) and to use this understanding to enable, replenish, or sustain parent-figure capacity to champion adolescent resilience. Given the perpetuation of the Strong Black Woman stereotype and associated costs to women's resilience (Donovan & West, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2016), educational/school psychologists need to be particularly mindful to replenish the health and wellbeing of woman parent-figures who endorse the stereotype (Theron & Ungar, 2019). As suggested by studies with women outside of Africa (e.g., Watson, 2017) and with South African grandmothers who are raising orphaned kin (Casale, 2011), access to social support could potentially scaffold woman parent-figure's resilience. However, given how contextual realities and cultural values shape what constitutes social supports in a specific social ecology (Panter-Brick, 2015), woman parent-figures should guide how educational/school psychologists operationalise social support.

**Lesson 2.** Educational/school psychologists need to work toward dismantling gender stereotypes that appear to limit how fathers and father-figures support adolescent resilience. Greater involvement of fathers and father-figures is likely to support the resilience of woman parent-figures in that caregiving responsibilities would be shared. Additionally, because it is probable that educational/school psychologists will have little power to change contextual realities (e.g., woman-headed households) that are associated with the absence of father-figures, they will need to find ways to involve absent men in adolescent resilience. To this end, educational/school psychologists need to educate fathers and father-figures to understand that physical absence need not preclude championship of adolescent resilience (Van den Berg & Mukasha, 2018). For instance, physically absent men can maintain a resilience-enabling virtual presence in adolescents' lives. Additionally, they need to alert local men that are already involved with adolescents (e.g., those who teach, or coach sport, or

direct choirs) to the resilience-enabling potential of fictive kin in the lives of adolescents and encourage them to take on father-roles. Following Casale (2011) and her attention to the emotional rewards that sustain grandmothers' capacity to be resilient parent-figures, educational/school psychologists may want to explore – and then apply – the rewards that father-figures associate with biological and social parenting.

**Lesson 3.** Whilst it is true that girls (particularly African girls) are more vulnerable to risk (Jefferis & Theron, 2018), boys are not immune to risk. It would, therefore, be helpful if educational/school psychologists could educate adults to be equally encouraging of boys' adherence to a lifestyle that has the potential to promote health and wellbeing. In short, educational psychologists need to support adult understanding that the well-being of all young people is important (Asamsama et al., 2014). Simultaneously, in their interaction with adolescent clients, educational/school psychologists can themselves provide gender-neutral encouragement of a health-promoting lifestyle. In doing so, educational/school psychologists will be laying the foundation for the next generation of resilient parent-figures.

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