African emerging adult resilience: Insights from a sample of township youth

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Abstract

What enables the resilience of African emerging adults who live in sub-Saharan Africa and must contend with an everyday reality that is characterised by structural disadvantage and related hardship? This question directed the exploratory qualitative research that we report in this article. Its genesis was the relative inattention to the resilience of African emerging adults – i.e., young people living in sub-Saharan Africa and aged 18 to 29. To answer this question, 16 South African participants (average age 21) from a significantly stressed community participated in group interviews and generated digital stories. A deductive analysis of the content yielded the understanding that the self is central to emerging adult resilience. Family members mattered too, but there was scant reference to any other social or ecological resource. These findings urge attention to the dangers to resilience if social ecologies are not resourced to better co-facilitate positive outcomes for disadvantaged emerging adults.

Keywords: African emerging adults; digital stories; resilience-enabling resources; social ecology of resilience; South Africa

The resilience of emerging adults has begun to enjoy explicit attention (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Madewell & Ponce-Garcia, 2016). This attention has included specific interest in the risks and resilience of African American emerging adults (e.g., Arnett & Brody, 2008; Cleveland et al., 2018; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2012; Harper et al., 2019; Hood et al., 2013; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Miller & Bowen, 2019). Such specific interest likely relates to the fact that emerging adulthood (i.e., ages 18 to 29) and associated shifts in personal, relational and occupational identity could be significantly stressful (Arnett, 2014; Arnett & Mitra, 2018), more particularly when young people face concurrent stressors such as structural disadvantage, marginalisation, or chronic poverty (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006; Refaeli, Eyal-Lubling, & Komem, 2019). Even though African emerging adults living in sub-Saharan Africa are typically exposed to these same stressors, attention to their resilience has been scant. This prompted the question directing the current study: What enables the resilience of African emerging adults who live in sub-Saharan Africa and must contend with an everyday reality that is characterised by structural disadvantage and related hardship?

Whilst multiple studies have documented the risks and resilience of youth living in sub-Saharan Africa (for systematic reviews of these studies see Theron, in press; Van Breda & Theron, 2018), few delimited the youth samples to emerging adults (i.e., worked exclusively with young people in the age range 18 to 29 or with samples with a mean age within that range). The exceptions include a handful of sub-Saharan studies that focused on emerging adult resilience in the face or aftermath of care-leaving (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017; Van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019), communicable disease (Harper et al., 2015), or armed conflict (Gustavsson Oruut, & Rubenson, 2017), as well as studies that reported the resilience of residential university students challenged by structural disadvantage (Theron & Theron, 2013, 2014; Van Breda, 2018; Zulu, 2019). However, these

studies (including the care-leaving ones; see Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2020) were inattentive to the participants in question being emerging adults and, as such, engaged in a unique phase of development characterised by specific developmental tasks. Further, because resilience is a contextually and developmentally sensitive phenomenon (Masten, 2014; Yoon et al., 2019), the prominence of care-leavers and university students in those studies with African emerging adult samples raises questions about the applicability of their findings to African emerging adults who are neither care-leavers nor students. The same concern applies to the studies of sub-Saharan youth resilience that included a range of youth participants (i.e., adolescents and young adults) without indicating which findings – if any – were specific to the emerging adults in the samples.

There are at least two other reasons why the relative inattention to the resilience of African emerging adults living in sub-Saharan Africa is problematic. First, because the size of the sub-Saharan youth population is substantial it is hoped that these young people will contribute meaningfully to the social and economic capital of Africa (Kabiru, Izugbara, & Beguy, 2013; O'Malley et al., 2014). However, the likelihood of this contribution being realised depends in part on the health and wellbeing of this young population and how well they transition from adolescence to adulthood. The transition from adolescence to adulthood (i.e., the period of emerging adulthood) requires the fulfilment of developmental tasks such as establishing a personal identity, committing to a life partner, and gaining employment (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). Although successful engagement with these tasks has been associated with resilience (Burt & Paysnick, 2012), less successful engagement is associated with elevated stress and declines in mental health and wellbeing (Arnett et al., 2014; Newcomb-Anjo, Barker, & Howard, 2017). Second, when the transition to adulthood is complicated by exposure to adversity – such as is typical in sub-Saharan Africa (Kabiru et al., 2013) – the challenges to emerging adult mental health and wellbeing are compounded (Burt

& Paysnick, 2012). Amongst other risks, sub-Saharan young people contend with various forms of violence, a high burden of communicable and non-communicable disease, intergenerational poverty, and loss (Omigbodun, Kusi-Mensah, Bella-Awusah, & Ani, 2017; Ssewanyana, Mwangala, van Baar, Newton, & Abubakar, 2018; UNICEF, 2015). These risks are common when people are structurally disadvantaged (i.e., subjected to resource constraints and insufficient sociocultural and other capital; Johnson & Kane, 2018). Consequently, a better understanding of what might support the resilience of this challenged population, particularly during emerging adulthood, is key to their empowerment.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to advance an understanding of what supports the resilience of African emerging adults who live in sub-Saharan Africa and are exposed to structural disadvantage and associated risks. To do so, we report findings from a qualitative study with 16 African emerging adults (aged 18-24) who participated in the Resilient Youth in Stressed Environments (RYSE) study, South Africa. We anticipate that these findings will be useful to all those interested in understanding and enabling the resilience of African emerging adults. In particular, the findings invite interrogation of the resources commonly associated with social-ecological explanations of resilience and those explanations' call to decentre personal capabilities in accounts of human resilience (Ungar, 2011). They also speak to concerns about the generalisability of the theory of emerging adulthood, given its roots in work with American college students and inattention to how social categories, such as race and class, intersect with the dynamics of emerging adulthood (Furstenberg, 2016; Syed & Mitchell, 2013).

A social-ecological approach to human resilience

Resilience is the capacity to develop or function successfully despite exposure to adversity that is significant enough to disrupt development or impair functioning (Masten, 2014).

Although some explanations of resilience accentuate individual assets and skills, individual capabilities are only part of what enables resilience (Luthar, 2006; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Rutter, 2007, 2012, 2013). For this reason, social-ecological explanations also account for the social and ecological systems and associated resources that are important to human resilience, including supportive relationships, quality education opportunities, meaningful employment, wellbeing-promoting built and natural environments, and enabling cultural heritage (Masten, 2001, 2014; Ungar, 2011, 2012, Ungar & Theron, 2019). In other words, a social-ecological approach is unequivocal that positive adjustment to significant challenges is co-facilitated by individuals *and* the systems of which individuals are part (Wright & Masten, 2015). Some have even suggested that the systems of which individuals are part play the decisive role in human resilience (Ungar, 2012). To this end, there are continued calls for clinicians and service providers to adopt "a systemic perspective on understanding resilience and its mechanisms, instead of focusing exclusively on children's own (and real) contributions to thriving" (Matsopoulos & Luthar, 2020, p. 75).

Reviews of the studies accounting for the resilience of children and youth living in sub-Saharan Africa confirm the relevance of social-ecological explanations of resilience to African populations (Theron & Theron, 2010; Theron, in press; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). Interestingly, these reviews found that personal and relational resources are the most prominently reported resources (compared to contextual or structural resources and cultural ones). Also, these reviews noted that personal and relational resources are reported with about equal frequency.

A social-ecological explanation of emerging adult resilience

Arnett's (2000, 2014, 2016) theory of emerging adulthood includes five distinctive developmental features. First is a search for identity, including who the young person is/will

be professionally, relationally, and ideologically. To this end, emerging adults are likely to experiment with related roles. The second feature speaks to the instability of this developmental period. Instability is mostly associated with various and varying relational commitments as well as vocational fluctuation (e.g., changing jobs or careers, or being unemployed for periods). The third feature relates to a focus on the self. Most emerging adults will not yet have committed to a life partner or career and can therefore prioritise their personal needs or desires. Fourth, the period of emerging adulthood is an in-between period. Although there are commonalities, it is not quite adolescence or adulthood. For example, most emerging adults would no longer be attending secondary school, but neither would they be paying off a mortgage. Still, despite emerging adults being inclined towards independence, family remains an important support system (Fingerman & Yahirun, 2016). Finally, emerging adulthood is distinguished as a time of opportunity and so emerging adults will typically report positive expectations of the future.

The first four features have the potential to stimulate negative affect, advance self-censure, and reduce social support (Arnett et al., 2014). Although the fifth feature is more readily associated with positive mental health, positive expectations can be harmful when they are mismatched with life circumstances. For instance, structural disadvantage could obstruct the realisation of aspirations for an upward life trajectory (Arnett et al., 2014). In short, the features linked to emerging adulthood can be detrimental to emerging adults' mental health; this negative potential is exacerbated when emerging adults are also exposed to adversity (Masten et al., 2006; O'Conner et al., 2016; Tanner, 2016).

Burt and Paysnick (2012) reviewed multiple longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of emerging adult resilience to diverse adversity (e.g., structural disadvantage, abuse, chronic illness). They found that emerging adult resilience drew on individual assets (including planfulness, future orientation and autonomy) and social-ecological resources (including

opportunities for education and employment). In particular, and as presaged by other resilience scholars such as Luthar (2006), relational resources were key. These included resources associated with young people's families (e.g., nurturing parenting), community (e.g., being connected to a supportive adult), and peers (e.g., quality romantic bonds).

To date, the 2012 review by Burt and Paysnick has not been updated. However, various recent studies of emerging adult resilience have reinforced the understanding that it is part personal capacity and part social-ecological. For instance, emerging adult resilience was associated with the capacity to plan as well as with support systems and social interaction (e.g., Harper et al., 2019; Miller & Bowen, 2019). However, a 2019 review of the social-ecological resources associated with resilience across the lifespan found that the resilience of emerging adults was most frequently conceptualised as a personal response or set of personal strengths (Yoon et al., 2019).

The two sub-Saharan studies that included emerging adults that were neither university students nor care-leavers also fit with social-ecological explanations of resilience. Harper and colleagues (2015) investigated the resilience of 511 Kenyan men (aged 18 -29; average age, 22) who identify as gay or bi-sexual. Essentially, higher levels of social support and higher self-esteem and self-acceptance were associated with this sample's resilience. Likewise, Gustavsson and colleagues' (2017) account of the resilience of 16 young Ugandan women (19-28 years old) who had served as child soldiers with the Lord's Resistance Army included personal resources (e.g., belief in a better future and capacity to make constructive meaning) and social-ecological ones (e.g., social support from trusted friends and/or family, religious belonging, and cultural rites that facilitated reintegration into the community). The same intra- and interpersonal resource patterns were broadly evident in the sub-Saharan studies with emerging adults challenged by care-leaving (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017; Van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019) and with residential university students

challenged by structural disadvantage (Theron & Theron, 2013, 2014; Van Breda, 2018; Zulu, 2019). For instance, Zulu (2019) found that the resilience of African university students without fathers could be attributed to relational resources (especially strong mothers) and to self-reliance and undeterred personal agency. Similarly, Frimpong-Manso's (2018) study of care-leavers in Ghana showed that their resilience lay in social support (particularly pragmatic support from their peers) and in self-reliance.

Finally, adult resilience is often associated with "turning point effects" (Rutter, 2013, p. 478) or social-ecological opportunities during emerging adulthood that support improved trajectories. For instance, connecting to a supportive life-partner or taking advantage of opportunities for education or employment were shown to have protective value for emerging adults who functioned poorly in preceding developmental phases (Werner & Smith, 2001; Masten, 2014). These fit well with the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood (e.g., establishing a personal identity, finding a life partner, and gaining employment; Arnett, 2000, 2014). Put differently, there is resilience-enabling potential in the fulfilment of the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood (Burt & Paysnick, 2012). This potential has not been explicated in the relevant sub-Saharan studies.

METHODOLOGY

As detailed in the sub-sections that follow, we conducted exploratory qualitative research with young people involved in the RYSE study. The RYSE study is primarily concerned with explaining the biopsychosocial determinants of resilience for young people from South African and Canadian communities that are stressed by exposure to extractive industries and associated health, economic, and psychosocial risks (see Cox et al., 2017). As is typical of exploratory research (i.e., research that explores a phenomenon that is relatively under-researched; Creswell, 2014), the research reported in this article responds to the pre-existing

inattention to what enables the resilience of African emerging adults who live in sub-Saharan Africa and must contend with an everyday reality that is characterised by structural disadvantage and related hardship. Given this focus, the article does not report data from the research with Canadian young people.

Context

The context for the study was a township in Mpumalanga, one of the poorer provinces of South Africa. Townships date from South Africa's Apartheid era. They were designed to separate race groups and disadvantage those who were not classified as white. In townships, residents are generally subjected to second-rate infrastructure and service delivery, congested living spaces, violence and crime, and transmittable illnesses (Pretorius & Theron, 2019). The township where the RYSE study was implemented has a transient population. Its transient nature relates to high numbers of Africans migrating there in the hope of securing employment (often temporary) at an adjacent coal liquefaction plant and neighbouring coal mines. Official statistics report 6050 persons per square kilometre and 35404 households (32,7% of which are woman-headed; StatsSA, n.d.). Just over two thirds (i.e., 66.7%) of households have a refrigerator, 22.3% a car, and 14.1% a computer (StatsSA, n.d.).

Local newspapers (e.g., the Ridge Times) frequently report riots in this township that relate to residents' distress about unemployment, corruption, hand-to-mouth subsistence, and ineffective, erratic service delivery. Emerging adults are particularly vulnerable to these risks. For instance, StatsSA (2019) reported a 55.2% unemployment rate for South Africans aged 15 to 24 and voiced concern that the "burden of unemployment is concentrated amongst the youth (aged 15–34 years) as they account for 63,4% of the total number of unemployed persons". In addition to the above risks, the RYSE study identified this specific township

because of its exposure to high levels of pollution that emanate from the adjacent coal liquefaction plant and neighbouring coal mines.

Participants

The RYSE study is served by a panel of African youth advisors all of whom are emerging adults that live in the township in question. This panel was asked to recruit emerging adults to participate in the qualitative work reported on in this article. Young people with impaired decision-making capacity (e.g., substance abusers) were ineligible. Specifically, advisors were asked to recruit peers whom they were confident could explain what facilitates functional outcomes (e.g., health or wellbeing) in the face of structural disadvantage. To this end they recruited peers who were local (i.e., members of the structurally disadvantaged community where the RYSE study was conducted), self-reported being affected by their residence of said community, and comfortable sharing what they believed (as per their personal experience or observation) enabled resilience in this context. This strategy fit with the encouragement to researchers to respect community-based advisors' knowledge of their context and people (McCubbin & Moniz2015), and to elicit and value youth insights about which resources are protective (Li, Bottrell, & Armstrong, 2017; Phillips, Reipas, & Zelek, 2019). All 18 young people whom they nominated accepted the invitation to participate. They confirmed that they perceived themselves as 'doing OK' (i.e., functional) at the time of the study, despite exposure to chronic adversity. Of these 18, 16 were available to participate in the two sessions (July and October 2018) during which data were generated.

Fewer young women (n = 7) than young men (n = 9) participated. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 (average age: 21.6). They all self-identified as African and mostly spoke isiZulu or Sesotho at home. All the participants had attended English-medium secondary schools and most had matriculated (i.e., passed the final year of secondary schooling). At the

time of the study, most of the participants were neither involved in tertiary studies nor employed.

Ethics

The (IRB blinded for review) granted ethical approval to the RYSE study (clearance number blinded for review). Prior to participation, all participants provided written consent. Each participant could choose to be known by their first name or a pseudonym. Their preferences for each were about equal. Each participant received a supermarket voucher with modest monetary value as a token of appreciation for their participation in the qualitative work reported in this article.

Data generation

The two day-long sessions were held in a venue that was on the border of the township. It provided a secure space and reliable access to electricity and Wi-Fi. On both occasions, the empirical work was facilitated by the first and second authors and a team of four facilitators who were trained by the authors to use the data generation methods competently. The facilitators, all of whom were post-graduate psychology students, were themselves young adults and spoke isiZulu and Sesotho. Each facilitated a group of participants using the methods detailed later.

The difference between the two day-long sessions was that the first invited young people to individually narrate a story that illustrated emerging adult resilience in the face of structural disadvantage and related hardship, before inviting them to work in their self-assigned groups to generate a group-created digital story that did the same. In contrast, during the second session we invited young people to make an individual digital story that illustrated emerging adult resilience in the face of structural disadvantage and related hardship. The reasons for the differences between the first and second iterations are reported elsewhere

(Authors, under review). Suffice it here to say that the invitation to generate a group-created story related to the research team's sensitivity to the traditional African preference for interconnected ways-of-being and -doing (Ratele, 2019). However, because the group-created digital stories were thin versions of the individually narrated ones, the research team added the second day-long session to facilitate individual digital stories.

Group interviews. The participants self-divided into four groups. The facilitator invited group members to reflect on and then respond to the following prompt: "Please tell us a real/true story about how you, or someone you know, is strong/does okay when life is hard." When all the group members had told their story, the facilitator probed what the stories revealed about resilience. They initiated this exploration by asking: "From the stories we have heard, what ideas do we get about what helps young people in [name of township] to be strong/ do okay when life is hard?" The stories and discussion were audio-recorded and transcribed. All participants responded in a mixture of English and their mother tongue (isiZulu or Sesotho). When participants spoke in their mother tongue, this was translated and then independently verified (e.g., by one of the facilitators). Almost all the participants told self-referent stories. In the two exceptions, the participants told stories about peers that they are well acquainted with and whose resilience has inspired their own.

Digital stories. Essentially, the creation of a digital story offered participants a second opportunity to narrate their story of resilience but via a different medium. It also responded to the understanding that resilience research with young people should involve innovative data generation methods in order to better elicit young people's insights (Liebenberg & Theron, 2015). To define a digital story, we followed the definition reported by de Jager et al. (2017, p. 2548) of a "2 to 5-minute audio-visual clip combining photographs with voice-over narration (and other audio if desired)". We hired tablets for the participants to use and downloaded easy-to-navigate digital story software (FilmoraGo[TM]) onto them. We invited

participants to bring personal photographs of anything that they associated with risk and resilience to the research sessions (or to store electronic versions on social media platforms where they could access them during the research sessions).

On the first occasion, facilitators used the following prompt to guide the creation of the digital stories: "Building on what we just heard, let us now make a short story as a group about what helps young people in [name of township] to be strong/ do okay when life is hard". This was followed with explanations and demonstrations about what 'making' a digital story entailed (e.g., how to use FilmoraGo^{TM}). On the second occasion, the prompt was changed to: "Today we would like you to work on your own story. Your group will still be here to help and support you, but we are interested in your individual story about what helps you/someone like you living in [name of township] to be strong/ do okay when life is hard". Participants were reminded how to use the software required for producing a digital story.

In most instances, the individual digital stories repeated the content of the individual stories that were narrated during the group interviews. Like the group interviews, the digital stories were transcribed. All participants used a mixture of English and their mother tongue (isiZulu or Sesotho). When participants spoke in their mother tongue, this was translated and then independently verified (e.g., by one of the facilitators). The research team compared the transcriptions with the digital stories to confirm their accuracy.

Data analysis

The first author and an independent researcher with a resilience-focused PhD used deductive content analysis to analyse the transcripts. Deductive content analysis uses pre-established (i.e., *a priori*) codes, taken from relevant literature or an existing codebook, to make sense of a data set (Stuckey, 2015). The *a priori* codes were from the RYSE codebook. The codebook was iteratively established by members of the Canadian and South African RYSE teams,

following inductive analyses of prior qualitative data generated by 2017 RYSE participants.

The codes were informed by a social-ecological understanding of resilience. Accordingly,

there were codes relating to personal, relational, contextual/structural, and cultural resources.

A comparison of the coding by the first author and the independent researcher showed

negligible differences, thereby obviating the need for a consensus discussion (as

recommended by Saldana, 2009). Following Braun and Clark (2006), codes that cohered

were grouped to form themes. The trustworthiness of each theme was advanced by careful

checks for evidence to the contrary and by inviting member checking (Morse, 2015).

FINDINGS

We found that individual capabilities were pronounced in young people's accounts of

resilience. Family supports were frequently mentioned too, but not as prominently as personal

capabilities. In contrast, inclusion of other social ecological supports (e.g., peers or faith-

based resources) seemed almost incidental. These findings are detailed next.

The prominence of the self

All 16 participants referred explicitly to the resilience-enabling role of individual capabilities

(i.e., to the self). One young woman (Minkie) argued that individual capabilities were only

part of what explained youth resilience: "We all need a support system, even if it's not a

family member like a parent because some don't have parents. We all need a helping hand".

However, the others were disinclined to agree. For instance, another young woman said:

> It is all about *in* you, what you want tomorrow, what are your plans, your future, etc.
> The thing is people can be raised well, they come from good families … etc. but they
> end up being under peer pressure, some of them. You need to choose for yourself, you
> need to be good in order to have a better future tomorrow. So, it is all in your hands,
> not in the community or family. It is all about you individually (Mathapelo)

Given this emphasis on the capacity of the self to determine outcomes, it was not surprising that the pronoun 'I' predominated accounts of what supported resilience:

> As an individual I have been through a lot, tough situations, but here I am today, able to do things … someday I will be a better person. So, I know, as I always tell myself, I am not a quitter, I will never give up in life. As long as I am still alive, I will always do things to be a better person (Siyanda)

In short, the opportunity for a second chance at life (e.g., Siyanda's becoming 'a better person' or Mathapelo's achieving 'a better future') was generally considered 'a personal responsibility' (Simphiwe). In this regard, mention of the personal capacity to make enabling meaning recurred. Doing so typically entailed interpreting hardship as temporary, believing in the self, or questioning previous ways of being and doing:

> I have strong beliefs and that gave me a lot of self-actualisation and self-realisation. I believe I'm on my journey to success (Simphiwe)

> That mentality helped me go and improve myself and make better choices in life. Now instead of being around the clubs and the taverns with the gents drinking alcohol, smoking dagga, I'd rather go to the gym, do sports, exercise my mind, exercise my body, keep my mind away from all that stuff. (Thabiso)

> And, come to think of it, people become what they like and they become whatever is in their minds. I looked in the mirror and saw that I was different, and in this difference, do I choose to stay the same or grow? That's when you realise that you are lit, brother! (Thulane)

The capacity to realise future aspirations typically also required that participants regulate self-harming behaviour (e.g., stop engaging in risky behaviour or detach from anti-social peers). As Ashley explained:

> Things that make life hard here: it simply starts with not knowing yourself. The friends I used to have made my life fun and miserable at the same time. No one pointed me with a gun and said, 'do this and don't do that'. I felt so stupid not doing what my friends were doing. So, I did it. But as time went on, guilty conscience came along. I started beating myself up to stop doing unholy things. I started thinking about my

future, where I want to be in the next coming few years. When I arrived in Matric [final year of high school], that's when I realised that life is not fun when drugs are involved. I put my dreams and goals first … stay true to yourself even when life is hard.

In instances where participants did not recount self-harming behaviours that needed to be regulated, their resilience accounts still made mention of the capacity to self-regulate in order to achieve aspirations. Frequently, this related to sustaining enabling behaviours (e.g., not quitting positive behaviours when life was particularly trying). Mathapelo's description of the resilience of one of her peers is a case-in-point:

> She [friend] is so strong … Grade 12, her grandma [dominant caregiver] just abandoned her. She had to go and live in [different town a distance away]. She survived. She had so many tough things, she didn't have food and stuff, but she did pass her matric. That was good. That was the beginning of her life, she wanted to pass her matric, that's all she wanted .... Today she is doing her second year at university, and she is so happy. Her grandma wants her back as her grandchild, of course. So, she said, 'this is not fair, not good; why would she want me back? She didn't want to raise me, she didn't want to care when my mom died'.

Relatives matter too

Eleven participants' resilience accounts mentioned relatives. In almost all these instances (i.e., 9 of the 11), the relatives were women. For instance, like Mataphelo, Mello described the resilience of a friend. She believed his resilience related to "his sisters; they always had his back. They always supported him in everything that he wanted to do". Similarly, Nhlanhla included his adoptive grandmother in how he explained his resilience: "I got someone who adopted me. So, through that process she has always been with me – that was my grandmother. She helped me through a lot". Minkie's source of inspiration was her mother and her sister. Regarding her sister, she explained:

> She is a motivation to me because she went to university while my family didn't have money, but she managed to get her degree. So, every time when I look at her I get motivated; and she inspires me to be a better person, to know that even if we don't have money where we come from we can still get where we want to be one day.

The resilience-enabling role of relatives was varied. In addition to relatives being a source of support and inspiration (as illustrated in the preceding quotes), they provided access to basic resources and/or contributed to participants' processes of self-regulation. The following excerpts illustrate this:

> Such things were coming back into my mind: the person my grandmother was and the way they raised me and the way they wanted me to be, to grow and become … I also learnt that from my grandfather. He is still alive, I still live with him. He is a father to almost everyone in our street because of the character he chose to have, the person he chose to be. He always motivates me about life. He always says that if there is no door to knock on, build one. … He did it with all my siblings because all four of us lived with them, we were raised by them... His story motivates me because he is not originally from here, he is from the Free State, but he came and fought and hustled in such a way that we have a home now. When my parents got evicted, I remember I was coming back from school, we had nowhere to go, but we also had somewhere to go because of him, because of the choices he made. (Simphiwe)

> I started drinking and having bad friends and unprotected sexual intercourse, thinking I had it all. My life was taking a very bad turn, and smoking weed was a very big substance that really ruined my life, but that's when my mum came through for me. God, I thank her for coming through for me, I really thank her. She didn't fight with me, but sat me down and showed me pictures of when I was young and reminded me of the things I valued. That paved the way for me to realise the lifestyle I'm living. So those pictures and words from her and most importantly, her love and support, made me realise there's more to life. Now I'm working in a construction company, perfecting my skills in that field, saving money so that I can be more financially independent in myself… (Busi)

Scant mention of other social ecological resources

In comparison to the prominence of the self and frequent inclusion of family in accounts of resilience, participants' mention of other social ecological resources (e.g., formal and informal opportunities for employment or education, faith-based resources, mental health services or self-help resources, friends or a cohesive community) was infrequent. Of these, faith-based resources and friends were more common.

Five participants mentioned that friends play a resilience-enabling role. For Nthomdi, her family and friends provided her with "all the support" that she needed when she was raped at age 15. For the others, friends were a source of inspiration and/or motivation to be true to their aspirations for an improved future:

> Seeing him [friend] being successful and able to take care of his family, that's how I realised that I can also do it. (Thabiso)

> Share the same mission and vision as a friend and have a similar goal so that it will be easy to achieve it. (Thuto)

> If it wasn't for her [friend] I wouldn't go back to school [university]. … She is the inspirer. She is my role model. (Mataphelo)

> That's how we help each other as the youth because we are all broke, we don't have money, but if you come to me with a problem and your problem maybe is similar to what I went through, even if I won't help you financially but I will help you mentally and to face the situation and to not think of the negative things (Minkie)

Four reported resources that they associated with their membership of a faith-based community. In three instances, this mention was specifically linked to opportunities that supported enabling meaning-making and emotional support:

> There was this pastor, who is still my pastor, Pastor [name]. He said he needed one-on-one sessions with me twice a week – I am still attending those sessions. I started to open up to him. He gives me different ways of how to deal with it [pain of losing both parents]. Slowly I reduced all that stress and how I was feeling inside. (Mtho)

> In my church we have what we call 'youth conferences' and 'youth seminars', maybe every week. This is where we as the youth talk about our problems. Any problem that you have… Church is the only place, except school, that has a positive feedback towards life. They only teach us positive things and how to face things (Minkie)

> Even at church … He [the friend whose resilience was being described] also takes all the people there as his parents because they always support him. They don't really know everything that he went through but they know some of the things that he went through, so they are supportive towards everything that he wants to do. (Mello)

In the remaining two, faith-based resources were associated with pragmatic support. For

instance, Nhlanhla explained:

> The church helped me ... they put me in a school where I learnt to play the piano. That
> was a solution in order for me to survive and get some pocket money. Each and every
> Sunday when I went to church, I would get the money through playing the piano. That's
> how I managed. … Also, the church helped me in such a way that I now know how to
> choose good friends from bad friends.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article was to advance an understanding of what enables the resilience of

African emerging adults who live in sub-Saharan Africa and must contend with an everyday

reality that is characterised by structural disadvantage and related hardship. The self was

unanimously prominent across the participants' multiple accounts of what enables resilience.

Whilst not unanimously prominent, family members (with emphasis on woman relatives)

were important too. References to other commonly reported resilience-enablers (e.g., peers or

community supports) were scarce. We make sense of these findings in two ways. First, we

situate them within the five features typically associated with emerging adulthood. Second,

we consider them from a social-ecological resilience perspective. In both instances, we

consider caveats implicit in these interpretations.

African emerging adults' resilience-enablers are developmentally apposite

Emerging adults are typically engaged in identity explorations, self-focused, and optimistic

(Arnett, 2000, 2014, 2016; Arnett & Mitra, 2018; Arnett et al., 2014). Accordingly, the

prominence of the self, specifically an optimistic or prospectively successful self, in how

African participants accounted for resilience is a good fit with the developmental features of

emerging adulthood. Likewise, participants' regulation of their thoughts and behaviours

aligned with the pursuit of a more positive identity. This match with developmental theory

adds to others' contention (Arnett, 2016; Landberg, Lee, & Noack, 2019) that the features of

emerging adulthood are not narrowly applicable to American college students. The match also corresponds to Yoon and colleagues' (2019) finding that young adult resilience to abuse is typically conceptualised as a personal construct and subsequent conclusion that this conceptualisation makes developmental sense.

At the same time, the emphasis on an optimistic or prospectively successful self is disquieting when viewed against the reality of structural disadvantage and limited opportunities that characterise the community in which we conducted our research. Like Silva's (2016, p. 240) concerns about the optimism of American emerging adults with backgrounds of disadvantage, the African emerging adults' chances of realising their hopes for success are jeopardised by "… the stark inequality of opportunity and vulnerability that characterizes every aspect of their lives". In short, whilst the prominence of a successful self is developmentally apposite and self-reported as resilience-enabling, it could also imply that personal capabilities are a default resource that reflects a lack of social and ecological resources. Understood in that way, the self as resilience-enabler has the potential to miscarry. As argued by Ungar (2011, 2012), it is important not to venerate personal capabilities above all other resources in accounts of human resilience because social-ecological contributions matter equally (if not more) to human resilience. Continued emphasis on the individual preserves the myth of the rugged individual (Ungar, 2019), exonerates the social ecology in explanations of why people fail to do well in life, and sets young people up for censure (Masten, 2014). In South Africa, it has the added danger of perpetuating race and class stereotypes and maintaining the inadequate attention to structural disadvantage and its threat to youth resilience.

African emerging adults' resilience-enablers are contextually responsive

Despite the self being central in emerging adulthood, family typically continues to play a supportive role in emerging adulthood (Fingerman & Yahirun, 2016). The frequent references to the supportive role of family members in participants' accounts of resilience fit with the broader literature on protective resources in emerging adulthood (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Fingerman & Yahirun, 2016). The references to family also fit with the studies of sub-Saharan youth resilience that reported samples exclusively comprised of emerging adults and the importance of family to these samples (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Gustavsson et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2015; Theron & Theron, 2013; Van Breda, 2018; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017; Van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019; Zulu, 2019). More particularly, our participants' references to a variety of immediate and/or extended family members fit with the notion of 'multiple caregiving' (Keller, 2017, p. 703) or patterns of flexible kinship that are traditionally valued by African people (Gustavsson et al., 2017; Theron & Theron, 2013). The enabling contributions of grandparents corresponds to the intergenerational composition of many African households, and the parenting role that many African grandparents assume along with associated wellbeing outcomes for the grandchildren (Casale, 2011; Wild, 2018). Likewise, the emphasis on woman relatives aligns with the centrality of mothers and mother-figures in African families and communities (Pretorius & Theron, 2019; Zulu, 2019), and reflects the reality of multiple woman-headed households in the township were the participants were resident (32,7% woman-headed households; StatsSA, n.d.). In short, the recurrent mention of family and related emphasis on woman relatives was responsive to the context of sub-Saharan Africa with its traditional appreciation of extended family ties and woman caregivers, and its elevated numbers of woman-headed households. This contextual alignment fits well with notions of development being socio-culturally patterned (Rogoff, Dahl, & Callanan, 2018).

In comparison, the under-reporting of peers and other forms of relational resilience-enablers does not align well with the understanding that emerging adulthood resilience typically also draws on relational resources at the level of the community (e.g., being connected to a supportive adult) and peers (e.g., quality romantic bonds) (Burt & Paysnick, 2012). Our participants' irregular mention of such forms of relational support probably reflects the contextual reality of a township inhabited by a transient, multi-ethnic population, as well as their community's recurrent discord over corruption and other injustices. In contrast, where African communities have purposefully advanced community cohesion (e.g., the facilitation of cultural rites to support the reintegration of 16 emerging adult women into Ugandan communities, Gustavsson et al., 2017), emerging adults experience the subsequent social cohesion as enabling. We theorise that when community cohesion is low and/or community residency temporary, and there is no organised effort to facilitate cohesion and a sense of collective belonging, family resources might well be the only trustworthy and/or predictable form of relational support for emerging adults.

There was also negligible reference to other social and ecological resources, such as employment, education opportunities, or access to services. Such resources are regularly reported in studies of emerging adult resilience (e.g., Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Theron & Theron, 2014; Van Breda, 2018). Again, this pattern fits with the contextual reality of limited employment opportunities, particularly for emerging adults (StatsSA, 2019), and with the resource-constrained nature of the township that was home to the participants. As with the dangers of a fragmented community, participants' under-reporting of social and ecological resources should alert practitioners, service providers and policy makers to the need to better resource and better support the communities that are home to African emerging adults, especially when these communities are structurally disadvantaged and peopled by a transient population. Put differently, advancing emerging adult resilience should be less about building

their personal strengths (as is often the case with resilience interventions; Ungar &Theron, 2019) and more about building enabling communities. Should this not happen, we question the likelihood of "turning point effects" (Rutter, 2013, p. 478) for African emerging adults in structurally disadvantaged communities.

Limitations

As with all studies of resilience, longitudinal accounts of what enables positive adjustment to ongoing stressors are important (Masten, 2014). Although we engaged the same participants on two distinct occasions, these occasions were only three months apart (July and October 2018). Similarly, the data were limited to narrative and digitised accounts of resilience. Mixed methods would have provided an opportunity to survey resilience and emerging adulthood features, thereby further advancing the extent of our understanding of the resources that matter for African emerging adult resilience. This limitation could be addressed in a follow-up study with a large sample of African emerging adults drawn from various disadvantaged sub-Saharan communities. Further, the inclusion of mixed methods, or even multiple qualitative methods, would shed light on whether the methods (i.e., the invitation to tell a real/true story about the resilience of the self, or someone like the self) biased a focus on the self. Finally, our sample was limited to 18 to 24-year olds, with a high school education, from one township. We wonder how 25 to 29-year olds or emerging adults with no high school education might have shaped the findings differently? We are less concerned about the fact that all our participants came from one township community, as the risks associated with township communities are generally not unique to specific townships (Pretorius & Theron, 2019), or South Africa (Kabiru et al., 2013).

It is also important to recognise that the participants' mother tongue responses were translated verbatim by research assistants who were all post-graduate psychology students.

Although the translations were verified, it is possible the students' language and knowledge of psychology shaped the language of the translated transcription. Whilst the qualitative literature acknowledges the complexity of translating mother-tongue translations (Caretta, 2015; Dhillon & Thomas, 2018), inviting participants to use their language of choice remains meaningful in the pursuit of rich data. It is further possible that participants' interest in informal educational resources (e.g., Simphiwe: 'Reading makes me strong, informs me and gives me the right knowledge'; Mataphelo: 'I want to add television …there are so many educational shows ... you learn a lot in those shows. And listening to radio – there are so many motivational speakers that are out there speaking') and English-medium schooling exposed them to psychological jargon (as in the case of Simphiwe's use of the term 'self-actualisation').

Lastly, the emphasis on self-sufficiency is congruent with a trend that has been reported in the attachment and related developmental psychology literature about mothers' increased tendency, across nations, to encourage their children to be psychologically self-sufficient and function autonomously (Keller, 2017). This begs the question whether participants' emphasis on their personal capacity perhaps reflected their socialisation. Whilst African culture and child-rearing practices are traditionally appreciative of interconnected rather than individualistic ways-of-being (Ratele, 2019), it is equally true that socialisation practices evolve in response to socio-historical and economic drivers (Koops & Kessel, 2017; Vicedo, 2017). We encourage a follow-up study to better understand if/how socialisation practices promote self-sufficiency in structurally disadvantaged contexts such as the one we worked in.

Conclusion

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, our study offers insight into what enables resilience for African emerging adults challenged by an everyday reality characterised by structural disadvantage and related hardship. In respecting the experiences and observations of 16 emerging adults, we contribute much needed youth-directed accounts of resilience (Li et al., 2016; Liebenberg & Theron, 2015). In drawing attention to the developmental appropriateness of personal capabilities and explaining the contextual responsiveness of the popularity of family members relative to peers or other social and ecological resources, we advance previous understandings that emerging adult resilience is part personal and part social-ecological. Most importantly, perhaps, our findings challenge unquestioning acceptance of the resilience-enabling value of the self in contexts that lack the social and ecological resources needed to complement personal capabilities. Ultimately, emerging adult resilience requires a social ecology that is well enough resourced with relevant supports to co-facilitate the developmentally appropriate and potentially resilience-enabling focus on the self. We are hopeful that practitioners, service-providers, and policy makers will act on this insight.

Acknowledgement

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